

## For miners' wives

# Quilting helps hike incomes

By MARY CONNELLY

One woman in Cabin Creek, W. Va., improved her standard of living by installing indoor plumbing in her home.

Another ordered her first phone hook-up.

The women are among 150 primarily middle-aged widows of Appalachian coal miners who have added to meager incomes by selling hand-made quilts throughout the country.

Originated by a VISTA volunteer in 1970, the marketing of the traditionally-patterned quilts has taken a new turn in Birmingham.

When VISTA worker Jamie Thibault first hit upon the idea of selling the crafts of the hand-quilters, he outletted them at fairs and women's groups meetings. Scattered retailers, including Lord & Taylor in New York, also purchased the Cabin Creek quilts.

Now, Wendy Blau, a former member of the VISTA trio which launched the project, has made the quilts a full-time business. In July, Miss Blau opened the Cabin Creek company, in downtown Birmingham. The store stocks only quilts, pillows, mountain toys and other Appalachian crafts turned out by residents of Cabin Creek.

"ITS PROVIDED additional income for women who are living either on welfare or living on payments from dead husbands," Miss Blau said of the Cabin Creek project. "It's provided them with income and also social gatherings. It's added a little something to their lives they didn't have before."

Miss Blau worked with two other VISTA volunteers in Cabin Creek during 1970 to establish the traditional quilting activity as a source of income for the women.

"If there were an archives of successful projects started by VISTA volunteers, Cabin Creek Quilts would be among the top five," said the 24-year-old woman.

"The average quilter today is a woman 55 or 60 years old," Ms. Blau said. The patterns have been passed from mother to daughter in families within the community of 500.

In former times, coal mining supported a population of more than 4,000 in the country surrounding the 25-mile long Cabin Creek.

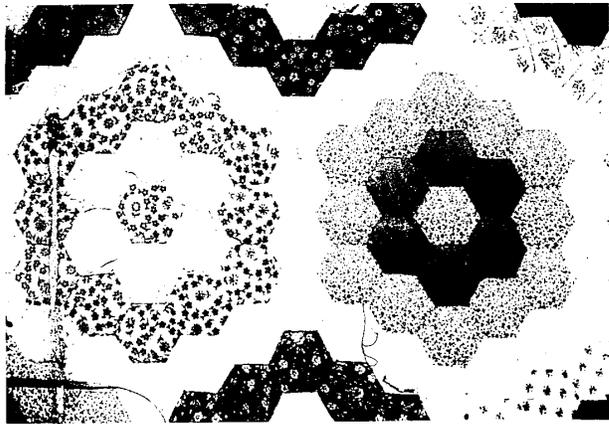
With their husbands working lengthy hours in the mines and their homes subject to cold Appalachian temperatures, the women began quilting.

WHEN THIBEAULT moved into the region, the quilts produced on old-fashioned quilting frames during 100 hours of labor were selling at church bazaars for \$10.

VISTA's non-profit Cabin Creek Quilt cooperative began marketing the coverlets for prices averaging \$100 to \$400 dollars.

"A woman makes about 50 or 60 cents an hour when you consider basic costs and time, even if you sell the quilts for \$300," said Miss Blau, a former Oak Park resident.

Among the crafts produced from the West Virginia poverty belts are flower garden and double wedding ring patterned quilts, quilted pillows and purses, patchwork stuffed animals, dolls, aprons, tablecloths and ties and corn husk dolls.



Hand-quilted flower garden pattern from Appalachia



Mixed patterns of the Cabin Creek patchwork design. (Photographed by Patricia A. Beck)

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