

# THE QUILTING SCRAPS AND STORIES of Erlinda Gonzales

by Aurelia C. Scott

**Above: Detail of Erlinda Gonzales's Bandanna Strip quilt, made in 1962 and sewn as her grandmother had taught her.**

*Photograph by Willi Wood.*

**Far right: Erlinda Gonzales and her granddaughter, Antonia Gallegos, also a quilter, hold two of the many quilt tops that Gonzales will next back and stitch. Many of her quilts are made from old clothing, sheets, and tablecloths.**

*Photograph by Aurelia C. Scott.*

**S**ITTING AT A TABLE in the corner of her kitchen in Las Vegas, New Mexico, Erlinda Gonzales smooths out a sheet of pink tablet paper and folds it, matching the edges precisely. She presses each crease firmly, turns the paper, folds, and presses again. "You see?" She looks up as she works. "With any piece of paper you can make a quilting pattern."

Running her right hand along the last crease, Gonzales releases the paper to reveal four triangles inside a small square surrounded by larger squares. Then she smooths the paper as flat as she can and begins again to fold.

Within a half hour, the sheet of paper is covered in creases—new patterns created, examined, smoothed away. Gonzales doesn't think of tossing out the paper and taking a new one from the tablet, just as she wouldn't think of throwing away the worn-out sheets, blouses, shirts, dresses, and suits piled neatly in a back bedroom. Those clothes are the material from which she sews her quilts—and the fabric of her life.

## "CUT WITH THE SAME SCISSORS"

Erlinda Gonzales, sixty-six, has been quilting since she was five years old. She lives with her husband, Pete, in the college town of Las Vegas, nestled in the eastern foothills of the northern Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Gonzales was born not far from Las Vegas in Chupadero, a tiny place that to this day does not consistently appear on state maps. Before World War II, New Mexico's northern mountain towns like Chupadero relied on barter rather than cash; self-sufficiency was a necessity. Gonzales's family tended gardens rich in chiles and tomatoes and an orchard whose fruit, each autumn, they dried and canned for winter. Her grandfather, Juan Arguello, herded six cows, eighteen angora goats, and an

abundance of chickens. Her grandmother, Teodorita, made rugs on a 6-foot-wide loom and sewed clothes on a treadle machine. She also worked as a midwife, birthing a generation of Chupadero's babies, including her own grandchildren. "We cousins like to say that we were all cut with the same scissors," Gonzales says. "It's made us as close as brothers and sisters."

Growing up in Chupadero in the 1930s, the eldest of Bences and Evanista Baca's six children, Erlinda Gonzales was surrounded by aunts, uncles, first and second cousins, and grandparents, who all lived nearby. She spent afternoons with her grandparents, evenings with sisters and brothers, weekends playing with the cousins.

Grandmother Teodorita Arguello was one of the first to teach Gonzales what she knew. In addition to weaving, sewing, and midwifery, Arguello made quilts. "Times were hard then and people paid my grandmother [for midwifery services] in what they had—food, sometimes chickens, sheep, men's suits. The cloth back then, you know, it was really strong. So we used the men's suits to make quilts."

Gonzales's first job, as her grandmother's five-year-old assistant, was to cut squares from wool suits. She cut carefully, making the squares the same size and avoiding the worn places near the knees. Gonzales learned to arrange and piece the squares, placing them side by side so that the fabrics were aligned along the straight of the grain. She checked her accuracy by smoothing her hand over the squares as she placed them. At the end of a day of placing, piecing, and checking, says Gonzales, your palm tingles.

Gonzales's grandmother and many other women in northern New Mexico quilted from necessity: to keep their large families warm during subzero winters. Their quilts were usually "utility" quilts, which, depending on the skills of

the quilter and the material available, might or might not be beautiful. Most often, the quilts were pieced and tied, not quilted. One of the most frequently used quilt patterns was plain blocks of cloth placed one beside the next, like the quilts that Gonzales helped her grandmother cut and sew from men's suits. The complexities of Grandmother's Fan or Dresden Plate—and the time required to piece them—would belong to the next generation.

When old clothes were scarce, the women washed and cut flour and seed sacks into quilt squares. Gonzales's grandmother used the "prettiest pictures" on her seed-sack quilts. Gonzales cut out squares of flowers and vegetables from the sack fronts. The women of Chupadero, including Teodorita Arguello, recycled string from the sacks into quilt ties, and they filled their quilts with whatever batting was available: fraying blankets, older quilts, worn-out winter coats. "They were poor," says Gonzales. "They didn't waste anything."



A WHOLE CLOTH

After they were married, Erlinda and Pete Gonzales lived all over northern New Mexico. Everywhere they went, Erlinda Gonzales quilted, perfecting the techniques taught by her grandmother and taking courses to learn new methods. One Bandanna Strip quilt grew larger with each move. She didn't finish it until she and her husband finally moved back home to Las Vegas in 1968.

Today, the Gonzaleses live in a stone house at the end of a quiet street on one of Las Vegas's several hills. They built the house themselves—

### *The* NEW MEXICO QUILTING PROJECT

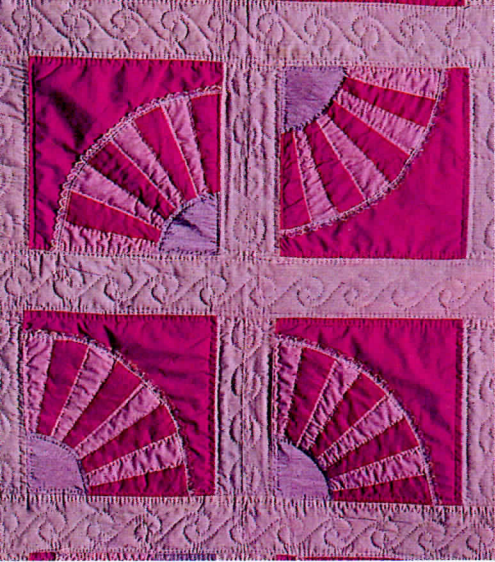
**I** MET ERLINDA Gonzales at a "quilting day" hosted by the New Mexico Quilting Project in Las Vegas, New Mexico. The project was founded in 1991 by Dorothy Zopf, a professional quilter and retired Ohio art teacher. Zopf works with a staff of volunteers to collect information about New Mexico quilts and the women who make them. Working through the state's Cooperative Extension Service (CES) or through personal contacts, the project arranges quilting days in several towns in each county. Local women bring their own or family quilts to a central place to be photographed and documented. Each woman who brings a quilt is paid \$6.

In addition to recording the name, date, size, materials, and method used to make each quilt, the quilters who bring

in their work are asked how and when they learned to quilt, and why they continue quilting. They are asked to talk about what quilting means in their lives.

The stories and the photographs collected in each county are made into a softcover book, and the central library of each county receives a copy. If a county has no library, the book is given to the largest town library or community center in the county or to the senior citizens' centers.

The New Mexico Quilting Project runs on a shoestring. Volunteers work simply for the pleasure of helping the women, hearing their stories, and seeing their quilts. To make a donation or for further information, contact Dorothy Zopf, PO Box 424, Arroyo Seco, NM 87514. (505) 776-2449.



**Detail of Grandmother's Fan by Erlinda Gonzales, made from pieces of the shirt her son wore when he made his First Holy Communion.**

*Photograph by Willi Wood.*

block by block. "See that one there?" Gonzales points out a massive blond stone. "It's more than a foot wide and over 12 feet long. I ran the winch, my husband guided it. We brought it all the way down from the mountains. Oh, you should have seen us. We did it all by ourselves, this house."

All of it: stone walls keep the house cool in summer and warm in winter; Pete's handmade cedar cabinets glow on the kitchen walls; Erlinda's rag rugs color the floors; her quilts cover the beds.

Gonzales says that she is "always making something." She crochets afghans, tablecloths, and bedspreads of filigree lace. During World War II, when crochet cotton was scarce, she made bedspreads from thread that friends in the parachute factory saved for her from the ends of their shuttles; today she uses the finest cotton thread that she can find in the stores. Gonzales embroiders pillowcases and kitchen towels with a different design for each day of the week. She sews clothes. She braids rag rugs. She quilts.

#### STORIES IN QUILTS

Gonzales lays an unfinished Grandmother's Fan quilt onto the bed. "See the white pieces in the fans?" She traces her right index finger across the one opaque, pure white ray in each fan. "My son's Holy Communion shirt."

She unfolds a Bandanna Strip across Grandmother's Fan. "I sewed the strips for this just the way my grandmother taught me." Narrow strips of brightly patterned cotton are sewn into long ribbons, then pieced onto a muslin sheet that forms the backing. The challenge is to sew and piece the strips composed of so many patterns in a way that is pleasing, not jarring, to the eye.

Gonzales layers a Drunkard's Path on top of a Bandanna Strip. "I wore that fiesta shirt just once; it didn't suit me. But it makes a pretty quilt, don't you think?"

Next she shows me Four Doves in a Window, made from some of the first store-bought ma-

terial she ever used. "We drove to Clovis in 1950 to visit a cousin and I saw this cotton. . . ." She bought a different floral pattern for each dove.

These days, Gonzales shops at fabric and secondhand stores for the pure cotton that she prefers. The big stores are convenient, she says, and the material is not too expensive. But the habit of thrift is hard to lose: Gonzales still saves old clothes and sheets and tablecloths with one stain that can be cut away. Laundered and stacked on a chair in the back bedroom, they wait, full of memories and the promise of new creation.

In 1982, Gonzales made a Bear Paw quilt for her son, Staff Sergeant Manuel Gonzales. Quilted blue diamond blocks alternate with stylized bear paws made of different-colored cloth set on a white background. The quilt is 68 inches wide and 80 inches long. "I wanted him to take it back to Germany with him after his month of leave. But he said 'No,' that it would be stolen for sure." Sergeant Gonzales died in an accident in 1987, still serving in Germany. "So, he only got to use it for that one month." She pauses, turning away from the colorful mass of quilts on the bed, and says, "I thought that was the end."

"But then I was born," Granddaughter Antonia Raes Gonzales Gallegos, age seven, says as she sets down her practice sewing and leans against her grandmother. She was born the year that her uncle died.

Antonia lives with her parents, the Gonzaleses' daughter and son-in-law, just two houses away. She visits daily, just as the child Erlinda once visited Teodorita Arguello. At the moment, Antonia is learning to cut and stitch pieces of fabric. She cuts carefully, making all the squares the same size. Sewing the squares together is harder than cutting them, Antonia explains, because her grandmother insists that the stitches be both small and even. Despite the needle pricks in her fingers, Antonia is impatient to make her first quilt.

"Oh yes," she says, she knows that she can do it. "My grandmother will help me." ❖

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR.** *Aurelia C. Scott is a freelance writer in Arroyo Seco, New Mexico.*