

# "In Her Memory and in the Spirit of Our Ancestors"

by Alice Olsen Williams

I am Alice Olsen Williams. My home, for the past eighteen years, has been Curve Lake, an Ojibwe Reserve twelve miles northwest of Lakefield. It is also the place where both my husband and our four children were born and raised. I was born of an Ojibwe mother and a Norwegian father in Trout Lake, which is Crown Land and is a part of the hunting, fishing and gathering territory of my mother's people from time immemorial. Trout Lake is "in the bush," in North-western Ontario; the nearest town is Red Lake, twenty-seven air miles southwest of us. I received my schooling by boarding in private white homes in Kenora and also by taking the first three years of high school by correspondence courses while living at home to help my parents in their commercial fishing enterprise. After I completed high school in Kenora, I moved on to Thunder Bay (then known as Port Arthur) to attend one year of Teachers' College.

During my second year of teaching in Thunder Bay, I met and married Doug. We moved to Mobert, a reserve not far from White River, where I spent my third year of teaching. Then we moved to Doug's home, Curve Lake Reserve, where we settled down and made a permanent home. Four children were born to us. While "keeping house" (and doing what all that entails), and looking after a husband and four children, I also got by B.A. and did a lot of beadwork and sewing. It was the sewing

that really turned me on.

It was only eight years ago that I started to do quilting. I had taken several interest courses in quilting. These courses gave me confidence and a firm background in the skills I needed in order to make good quilts and wall-hangings. For several

there must be some way I could come up with something new, something different. As I looked at and studied quilt magazines and quilts and wall-hangings, I was fearful that everything that was innovative had already been discovered and done.

While I kept harbouring thoughts of originating my own design, a small crack appeared in the doorway: somehow I must use my double heritage in my quilts. I sat on that idea a long time, wondering *how could I do that?* As more time passed, the crack in the doorway got wider and it occurred to me that, *yes, I could do that.* I could have my quilts represent my double heritage. What I would do is have the centre of my work done in an Ojibwe art form and have that surrounded by a North American art form.

The Ojibwe part would be in the centre because, symbolically, it represents the Ojibwe culture in which I was born and in which my mother socialized me. As I grew older and went to school, I put on a white veneer. This part of my quilts is represented by the traditional North American quilting blocks which border or surround the central theme. This also symbolizes that part of my life which my father made possible for me to have.

However, in reality, I ran into a snag: I cannot draw — certainly not to the point where I am pleased with what I produce. I felt all my pictures were out of proportion and everyone would ridicule my sketches. Thus the next hurdle to over-



Quilt Alice Williams made for Norman Knott

years I made traditional quilts and wall-hangings, using blocks developed and perfected by quilters throughout the last several generations. In the past three years, as I spent hours making these quilts and wall-hangings, I kept thinking that

come: *how could I get Ojibwe art forms in the centre?* I came upon an answer by saying that I could ask Ojibwe artists to help me out somehow. I finally zeroed in on a hunting and fishing partner of my husband's.

Norman Knott was born of Ojibwe parents on the Curve Lake Reserve. He has lived here all his life, hunting, fishing, trapping, guiding and doing his art work. He is married and has three children. Norman's intimate knowledge of nature, his familiarity with Ojibwe myths, legends and history are executed in his artwork in an Ojibwe art form, a style that differs from that of other aboriginal Nations and that of the dominant culture. This person I had come to respect and admire, and I also found him cordial and kind. Thus, I was not too afraid to approach him.

After I had explained to him how I envisioned depicting my double heritage in my quilts and wall-hangings, I proceeded to explain to him how I wanted him to help me. I told him that if he would give me some of his designs, I would be able to carry out my idea. I explained how I could transfer these onto templates and then onto fabric. Being the generous and supportive person that he is, he, of course, gave me several sketches which I now use in my work. In exchange for his giving me these designs I made him a quilt. It has his two geese in the centre. Around that central picture is the traditional quilting block "Goose Tracks." Forming a final frame around that is "Geese in Flight."

In order that the role which Norman Knott played in the development of my quilts be remembered, I have him sign them. I also sign them and date them; then I embroider the signatures and the dates.

With each quilt I make, however, I am gradually sensing and seeing ways in which I can evolve and draw my own central pictures. I also am growing towards creating my own Life Symbol (Norman's is the yellow circle with the radiating lines) which will encompass the teachings of our Anishinabe Elders. I want these teachings represented in each of my pieces as it is a constant reminder of the Creation and of our humble beginnings, and it keeps in our vision that it is a good thing in Life to be thankful, to always

strive to live a Good Life as set out by the message of the Creator, the mother of us all.

During the time that I was working up the courage to approach Norman and talk to him, plus the time I was putting the "Geese Quilt" together, I was very unsure of myself and was wondering if what I was doing was good enough. It was especially during this period that Margaret Laurence was so helpful to me. I used to let her know my doubts and fears, but she'd encourage me and be very supportive — as were, indeed, my family and friends. She'd tell me, "Yes, that's beautiful," "Yes, try it," "Go ahead," etc. When in April 1986 I completed my first "Norman Knott quilt" top, she was so enthralled with it that she wanted to buy the finished product. I told her I was going to keep that one because it was my first attempt and as I was working on it, I could see where, with succeeding ones, I could do a better job. So I told her that, yes, I would one day make her a "Norman Knott quilt." (She, also, was impressed with Norman. She had met him several years previously at a Lakefield Days celebration where she autographed her books and he painted. Their booths were side-by-side). She especially appreciated the fact that I had incorporated my double heritage in the quilts I was making. She stressed that this quilt would be *her* quilt as she had already bought a quilt made by me for each of her two children. (When I had made their quilts I was doing what's called "Strip Quilting." Jocelyn's quilt is

around to doing it that I will be *really* good at it. I hope I will be able to set aside time to do it." I even thought: "What if I get arthritis and can no longer quilt?" I wanted to do this for Margaret as a friend and as a way of saying "Thank you Margaret for encouraging me and gently pulling me along the way." While it was my "geese quilts" that she had seen, it was a loon quilt she had wanted. (She speaks about loons and how they affect her in her memoirs). When I finally decided that I would be able to do the quilt for her, I told her, "Yes, I'll do a loon quilt for you." In the back of my mind, I was saying to myself, "Even tho' I've decided that, come hell or high water, my biggest obstacle is time. I do have a long time to finish it since I don't have a deadline. So why am I so worried about getting it done?" This was in May 1985.

Though I never forgot my commitment, I dallied for over a year. In fact, I completed three loon centres in that time, plus made a few baby quilts and quilted wall-hangings. I had intended to choose one of the loon centres for Margaret's quilt. I kept thinking, "Oh, I have all the time in the world to finish her quilt. I don't have any deadlines." It was as if once I had decided that I would do it, I got careless and reckless about actually making myself sit down and get on with it. It seemed as if once I was convinced I could do it, all was well with the world.

Besides being shocked and dismayed at the news of Margaret's terminal illness last August, I was also struck with the failure and anxiety of not having completed a quilt for her. As we lived through September I knew that we'd have to broach the topic of the unfinished loon quilt some day soon. I thought and thought; I wondered and worried. "How am I going to bring up the subject?" It had to be discussed as I felt, "I cannot now do the quilt, knowing she is terminally ill. I cannot take her money for something that will cost so much and for something she can't use but for a few more

months. And I *know* she'd never take it without paying me for it." It was like she'd be wasting her money. All these practical and pragmatic thoughts at such a time as this somehow seemed so incongruous and somehow sacrilegious. And



*Quilt Alice Williams made for Jocelyn Laurence*

in black, greys, and whites, while David's is in blues, reds, and whites).

Even as Margaret and I were talking about how I could do this quilt for her, I was doubting my self. I wondered: "Oh I hope I *can* do it. I hope by the time I get

yet it was all there and had to be faced.

One day in October she called me. As she began the topic about her quilt, my mind started spinning and I felt my heart beat quicken. It seemed so terrible and terrifying to be face-to-face, talking about the beautiful quilt and at the same time talking about her imminent death. I was so busy trying to keep calm that I don't remember how she began the subject. All I remember is she was trying to comfort me; she must have known it would be most difficult for me to talk about her going away; she must have known that there'd be disappointment of some kind that I'd been deprived of making a quilt for someone I loved; she must have known how difficult it is to worry about saying the right thing. It was as if she was apologizing and making excuses for having to cancel the order — all so as I

wouldn't feel rotten.

Then it was my turn to try to tell her to not feel badly about that — that, from my point of view, that was not the issue. Certainly I understood her concern that I'd be doing it for nought if I did it for her — even though that's not the way I felt about it.

As we talked, however, an idea came to me, a sort of compromise whereby she could get what she wanted — sort of — and I could get what I wanted — sort of. I reminded her that I had kept the first "Geese Quilt" which I had made. (The second one I had given to Norman). What I wanted was for her to use my quilt. She could use it on her bed, hang it on a wall, enjoy it in any way she wanted. When she felt she had "used it up" or when she wanted to give it back to me, she could. It was like, while she was alive she could

enjoy it, and when she could no longer enjoy it, I could have it back.

This compromise suited her. We made a date when I'd come for a visit and bring the quilt over.

As it turned out, she kept it for 2-1/2 months. Towards the end of November she phoned me to set a date for another visit. By now her illness was draining her of her spunk and energy. She handed me the quilt, neatly folded. We were both feeling very pleased that the spirit of the quilt had been fulfilled, but we were both saddened by the fact that she would soon have to leave us.

I continue to make quilts, inspired and spirited by the encouragement and support that Margaret so lovingly gave me. It is in her memory and in the spirit of our ancestors that I continue to quilt.

**Editor's Note:** Readers who are interested in obtaining information about how they can get a quilt by Alice Olsen Williams can write to her at Curve Lake, Ontario K0L 1R0; telephone (705) 657-3319. Mrs. Williams charges \$40.00/square foot and invites discussion about what designs and colours one would like to have on the quilt.

## HEATHER KIRK

### Fish Poem

In the river here the brown sad waters  
run heavy with gain and loss  
swollen and ugly.

On the bank,  
the grub-men are selling fish  
alive in jars.

The drunk has a fish  
like a thick tongue  
and the murky water's sloshing.

the quick greedy  
little man  
has a quick greedy little fish.

I am a fish.  
Sometimes I float bloated and ugly  
on the tormented surface.

Today I dart like a crystal sliver  
through waters cold and clear  
of my own making.

For the one I love,  
my flesh will be white and cool  
and sweet.

I am a trout  
just caught in a distant mountain stream,  
disappearing as I am tasted.

### Wolf Berries

Wolf berries in an autumn bouquet  
where northern female oranges and  
lemons  
bleed scent and colour heavily, guiltily,

Dull eyes of the shy brown rabbit's  
child,  
shot, slit and slung  
limp-stretched in the yuletide pantry,

Rotted fairies of an ancient folklore  
forest  
gathered by outcast hags  
and dispensed with cackled prophesis—

Why were you waiting for me at the  
station  
where the stained-red iron trains  
go back and forth on iron pleasantries,

In the midst of a city where states of  
body,  
mind and soul and decorations  
are bought and sold as gay commodi-  
ties,

On an evening chosen from the shelf  
like any other, going or coming back  
again  
from some, or any other, activities?

If I should swallow you, pill  
by living-vooodoo precious pill, will I  
awaken  
in a better place, dark and sad and holy?

Or was the wolf-woman from whom I  
bought you  
to grace my heavy-laden table,  
only saving for the train-conductor's  
fee?