

INSPIRED TO
Sew

*A glimpse into the creative heart of today's
most talented sewing & quilting artists.*

*Marianne
Fons*

#74

Onward!



Rhonda surveying a recent 6.5 ton shipment of SCHMETZ needles.

Prepare to be wowed! Marianne Fons has immense energy, focus and interests. Marianne is a quilting icon. The recent reissue of her popular 1993 book coauthored with Liz Porter, **Quilter's Complete Guide**, further cements her legacy in today's quilt world.

As Rita Farro reveals, Marianne's impact reaches beyond the world of quilts. As a business woman her interests and acumen serve others in numerous ways: Quilts of Valor Foundation, and more intimately in her immediate community by founding The Iowa Quilt Museum and restoring The Iowa Theatre. As a mom, Marianne is the biggest cheerleader of her three kids.

What's next for Marianne? With a twinkle in her eye, she has novel ideas already in place. I can hardly wait! Sew SCHMETZ & Grabbit® Too!

Rhonda

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Sewing
Star 

Marianne Fons

Issue #74





Marianne Fons

Many know Fons & Porter as a how-to show on public television and a wildly popular magazine. But before Fons & Porter became a well-known brand in the quilt world, they were two young women living in rural Iowa, learning how to make quilts.

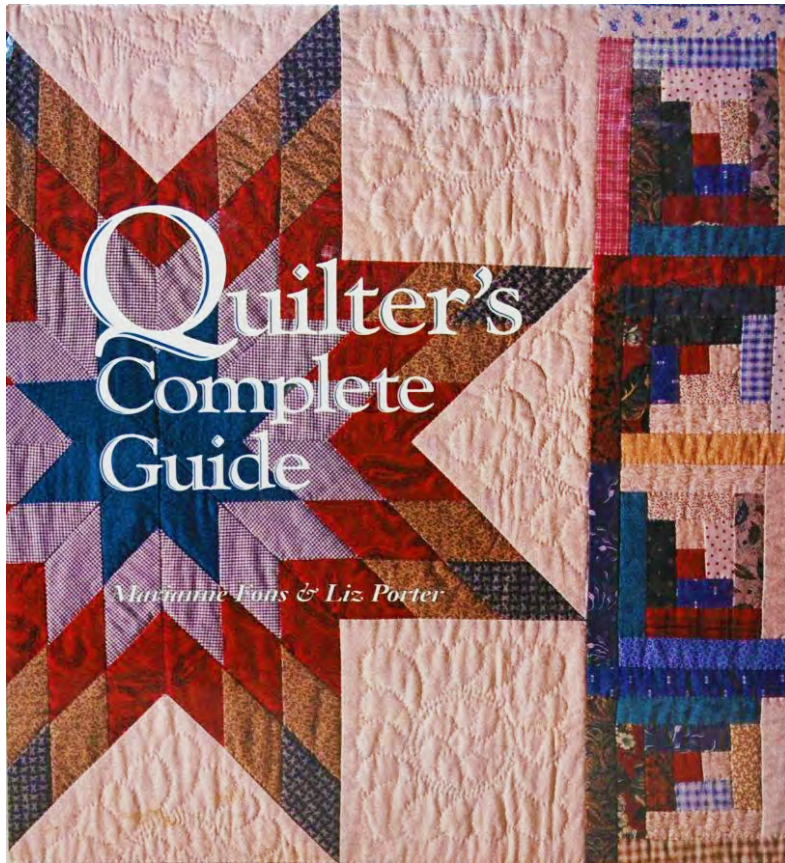
We asked Marianne Fons to go back to the beginning . . .

When Liz and I met in our mid-twenties, we were two college-educated young women living in an area without many jobs. We met in a beginners quilting class and sort of accidentally wound up team teaching. We both had young kids and were both married to husbands less ambitious than ourselves. We needed diaper and milk money and were thrilled to able to bring in cash

doing something we liked. From the beginning, our personalities complemented each other. We were both list makers, both very conscientious.

*We published a first book in 1982, **CLASSIC QUILTED VESTS**, but got a huge break with the opportunity to write **QUILTER'S COMPLETE GUIDE** for Oxmoor House (1993), just reissued by Dover in November of 2019. At over half a million copies sold, QCG is one of the best-selling quilting books of all time.*

In the mid-1990s, we had the idea for a different kind of public television quilting show, two buddies sewing together instead of a guest-host format. The show was instantly popular, picked up by PTV stations nationwide. In 2001, we bought our magazine,



Best-selling quilting book of all time!



Marianne and Mary on the set of Iowa Public Television.

Purchase an autographed copy of QCG from the Iowa Quilt Museum:

https://iowa-quilt-museum.square.site/product/quilter-s-complete-guide/382?cp=true&sa=false&sbp=false&q=false&category_id=6

Fons & Porter's *Love of Quilting*, from Oxmoor House. We grew the circulation from 40K to 300K, making it the most widely circulated quilting magazine in the world.

We sold Fons & Porter in 2006, when it was at its most successful and most visible. The sale required us to do TV for three years. After that, Liz was totally burned out and shortly moved from Iowa to Texas. She loves it there! My daughter Mary Fons had dipped her toe into quilting and was convinced to join me on TV, so I continued, hosting with her.

Mary was a true beginner, and some people complained. As she will be first to say, learning to quilt in front of millions of people on TV is not fun, but she did it, and I had the joy of watching her

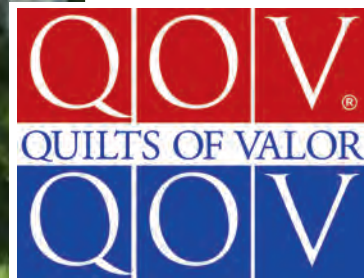
become a fantastic quilter. As a designer, she's far more original than I am.

Mary Fons is now a quilt world celebrity in her own right, editor in chief of *Quiltfolk* magazine. I'm so proud of her!

Marianne Fons has to feel pretty good about what she's accomplished. But, she is a woman who does not rest on her laurels. Maybe the word rest is not in her vocabulary, as she is most happy when working twelve hours a day. When asked to name her favorite quilt, she says, *I always think of my latest as my greatest*. . . She prefers big quilts, and calls herself a *serial monogamous quilter*, because she makes one quilt at a time. Each quilt is like a love affair with fabric and design.



On Memorial Day 2017, Marianne's older brother Jim Graham (center) received his Quilt of Valor, made by Marianne's twin brother David Graham (right) and David's wife Barb. Marianne (left) posed with her brothers following the ceremony, which took place at the cemetery in Winterset, Iowa, where the siblings' parents are buried.



She's doing a similar thing with *retirement*, moving from the for-profit business world into the make-the-world-a-better-place one following the sale of Fons & Porter.

And she has tackled some very big projects, not exactly one at a time, but sequentially.

First, **Quilts of Valor Foundation**. She had met and clicked with the founder, Catherine Roberts, and wanted to help fulfill Catherine's dream of making QOVF a household word. Many would say she did, producing two public television specials that continue to air nationwide. When she got involved, about 40,000 awards had been recorded. That number is now over 240,000. *My work with QOVF was my personal National Service Project.*

After awarding her twin brother, David Graham (a Navy veteran who lives in Florida), a QOV she helped make, he called Marianne to see if she had an extra sewing machine lying around (she did) because he wanted to learn how to quilt.

Never in a million years could I have predicted my twin (younger than I by six minutes) and his wife Barbara, would become active members of QOVF, even more, that David would make and award our Army-veteran older brother Jim Graham his QOV.

Was serving on the QOVF national board of directors for seven years enough to give Marianne permission to retire, take it easy, sleep late?





In 2019, the Iowa Quilt Museum displayed 25 quilts made by Fons and Porter in recognition of their induction earlier in the year into the Quilters Hall of Fame. The quilt in the background is Marianne's "Lady Liberty Medallion," her entry (and Iowa winner) in the Great American Quilt Contest of 1976. In the foreground is "Checkboxes." Also shown is Marianne's "Snow White" costume, a hand quilted garment she made to finally erase the sting of being cast as the Wicked Witch (instead of Snow White) in second grade.



No way. Next up? The Iowa Quilt Museum (IQM), established in the former JC Penney storefront on the Winterset town square in 2016. The quilt museum was the brainchild of Pat and Nancy Corkrean, local boosters also instrumental in founding Winterset's John Wayne Birthplace Museum. The quilt museum made Marianne, now IQM board chair, re-fall in love with her own community, the little town she spent so many years leaving during her years deep in the quilting industry. From IQM's website: *The museum offers changing exhibits, three to four per year, of American quilts both vintage and new. Our mission is to promote appreciation of the American quilt and the art of quilting through displays of quilts and information about quilt history.*

Mission accomplished! Well done, Marianne Fons! Certainly, now she can sit back and relax, right? WRONG!

Next, she led the charge in the renovation of Winterset's Iowa Theater, known locally as The Iowa, an entertainment destination on the Winterset city square for over 100 years. The building had fallen into disrepair and was closed in 2015.

Renovating the abandoned, unsafe building, bringing it up to code, and installing 21st century digital technology was a daunting task that would require fundraising of over \$1 million.

Crazy, right?



One of Winterset, Iowa's citizens often says, "The Iowa Theater, its marquee aglow, is the heartbeat of our community." Marianne, assisted by daughter Rebecca, led the charge in renovating her hometown's (formerly Vaudeville) theater. She personally unscrewed the marquee's 540 lightbulbs so they could be replaced with LEDs.

Except that Marianne's youngest daughter, Rebecca, graduated in Film from the University of Iowa and worked for the Chicago Film Festival for ten years. Maybe they could tackle it together?

Marianne says, *The Iowa Theater is as lovely a single-screen small town movie theater as anyone could find anywhere. My husband and I live just a block and a half away. What's better than walking uptown and settling in with a glass of local wine and a tub of Iowa-grown popcorn with real butter, watching either a classic film, or current one? Nothing! Sometimes I'm so happy there, I cry.*

The rebirth of The Iowa is just another example of how, in her own quiet way, Marianne Fons GETS THINGS DONE.

After that herculean achievement, most people would think to themselves, *Whew! I'm 70 years old. I should quit working so hard. I've made a difference in the world, and I'm proud of my accomplishments. It's time to buy a La-Z-Boy and give this retirement thing a chance.*

But that thought never crossed her mind. Marianne's latest and greatest passion is perhaps her most ambitious endeavor to date. Her dream as a kid was to be a writer. She has a master's degree in literature and has loved stories all her life. So, naturally, now that she has the time, she decided to write a novel.



Marianne in Florida with twin brother David Graham. David's Quilt of Valor was made by Marianne's former sister-in-law Valerie Fons during an annual QOV sewing session at Sievers School of Fiber Arts on Washington Island, WI, where Marianne and husband, Mark, have a vacation cottage.



"Our Home Sweet Home" is one of several medallion quilts Marianne has made. All were inspired by British "frame quilts," a genre that has a smaller center starting place than American medallions generally do.



Marianne stands outside the Iowa Quilt Museum in Winterset, Iowa, holding the recently-reissued **QUILTER'S COMPLETE GUIDE**, originally published by Oxmoor House in 1993. The reprint is by Dover Publications, released in late 2019.

Marianne, on her encore career as a novelist . . .

I thought writing fiction would come easily to me, having majored in English and read avidly all my life. Wrong! My children are all graduates of the University of Iowa, but I had never heard of the Iowa Summer Writing Festival until I wanted to become a novelist. I've been a student each summer now for several years. Many classes are taught by graduates of the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop.

My first novel, MY LIFE WITH SHELLEY, tells the amazing story of Mary Shelley, author of FRANKENSTEIN. Although MLWS hasn't found a publisher yet, I have representation at a very reputable New York literary agency.

*I'm deep into a second work and am in a yearlong writing class in Chicago called Novel in A Year, through StoryStudio Chicago. My teacher is Rebecca Makkai, author of **THE GREAT BELIEVERS** and a wonderful instructor. Applicants submitted ten pages of a work in progress to be considered. Thirteen of the 55 applicants got in, one of them me. The novel I'm working on is set in Winterset in the 1950s. I write for several hours early every morning.*

Marianne Fons is guided by the credo DO WHAT YOU LOVE, THE MONEY WILL FOLLOW. She has a reputation of being a hard worker who never gives up. Daughter Mary says, *When my mom wants something she gets this twinkle, like this gleam in her eye.*



Iowa Theater Grand Reopening
 (left to right: Mary Fons, Marianne Fons, Rebecca Fons, Hannah Fons)
 (Photo Credit: Stacy Z Photography)

Her happy place is wherever she's sitting, whether she's sewing or writing. With her laptop always at hand, she has her manuscript with her, in Winterset, Chicago, New York, where her oldest lives, or at the Fons family cottage on Washington Island, Wisconsin.

"I guess when I embrace a project I go all the way. I love to make things, good things, happen. I'm a striver and a doer. I love to connect people who can benefit from each other. Some describe people who accomplish a lot as "driven." I think of myself as "drawn." I'm drawn to the positive, to improving things. When I was working daily on behalf of Quilts of Valor Foundation, I always signed my emails with, 'Onward!'"

####

— written by Rita Farro

When she was creating and building Fons & Porter, she was also raising up three little girls. On her own. In a small town in the middle of the country. Read what was it like to have Marianne Fons as a mother on the following pages.

There is no question that Marianne Fons has made the world a better place. And if you could only use one word to describe Marianne, that word would be . . . Onward.

I think her daughters would agree. You go, girls!

www.mariannefons.com



Hannah Fons

"I am an editor, public speaker/educator, and martial arts strength coach in New York City, where I've been living since the summer of 2000. Even as a little kid in Iowa, I always dreamed of living in NYC when I 'grew up,' but that dream turned into a full-on game plan after my mom and I visited the city for the first time when I was about 13. We went to the Metropolitan Museum, the Guggenheim, and Saks Fifth Avenue. We saw CATS on Broadway, and had dinner at the Russian Tea Room, all the classic tourist stuff. My rural-kid mind was blown, of course, but more importantly, coming here with my mom just reinforced something she had always stressed to me and my younger sisters: that there was a whole lot going on in the world beyond our little town, and that with a little courage and planning, it was accessible. I moved here with like \$2,000 (my life savings at the time), a duffel bag full of clothes, and my mom's blessing and encouragement, and I've never regretted it for a moment.

That parental support and affirmation also saw me through another transition, this time having to do with my gender presentation. That's a longer story for another time, but I can say without reservation that my mom's commitment to open-mindedness, even when she had legit concerns, born not of prejudice, but purely out of love of her kid, made what is often a traumatic, disruptive experience, frankly kind of a breeze. To this day, I feel like my mom is my biggest fan. I love hanging out with her, introducing her to my friends and partners, walking around the city, looking at art, geeking out about fashion, and just enjoying each other's company. As I've gotten older, it only becomes clearer to me how fortunate I am to have that kind of parent-kid relationship."



Mary Fons

Quilt Celebrity in her own right, now Editor-in-Chief of **Quiltfolk** magazine.

"Most people assume Mom would've taught me how to sew from an early age. If I had shown more interest, she most certainly would have, but my creative pursuits took me to writing stories, putting on plays, singing, and creating a magazine for my junior high school..."

I didn't start making quilts until 2008. In my lectures to quilters, I talk about the reasons why:

- *I realized I didn't have to make quilts that looked like what I saw in contemporary magazines or books; my quilts could look like ME, with solid black fabric, and teeny-tiny prints, and washed out shirting prints, and zero rick-rack.*
- *It was no longer uncool to be like my mom, in fact, it struck me as the coolest thing ever to be a part of my family's place in the world.*
- *I got really, really sick and I needed non-medicinal healing (hello, patchwork).*
- *The timing was right, age-wise. I was in my late twenties and ready to sit down for five seconds.*

So I became a quilter and making quilts has brought me untold joy ever since. I'm not sure how many quilts I've made; it's dozens, and they're all kinda huge. Mom has always told me to make quilts that cover people, since that's what quilts are for. The Fons women don't do table toppers, though we support anyone who does. We support quilters, period.

Anywhere I hang my hat for more than about four minutes simply ain't a home unless I've got a sewing machine nearby. Making patchwork and making quilts isn't just something I do: it's something I am. The craft, the gesture, the sense-memory of the process is in my DNA, now. I quilt, therefore I am a whole person.

It's nice to be loved by my mom. It's even nicer to know that I delight and amuse her. My sisters do that for her, too, and this makes me deeply, indelibly content. I speak for us all when I say we don't take this particular contentment for granted."



Iowa Theater Grand Reopening
(left: Rebecca Fons; right: Marianne Fons)
(Photo Credit: Teddi Yaeger Photography)

Rebecca Fons

"No one has influenced me, motivated me, inspired me and supported me more than my mother. I'm 37 now, and I was recently struck by the fact that at just a couple of years older than that my mother had three school-aged children, who she was raising on her own, with no additional financial support, as she worked on building her career. That is incredible. I don't have children and I call my husband to help me bring in the groceries! My mother is a fearless warrior. She is the American Dream, the super mom, the powerful woman. She's also goofy, a dreamer and full of surprises. Her 'anything is possible, why not try?' energy is the reason we took on the Iowa Theater challenge. She looked at me with magic in her eyes when we learned the theater had closed, and the rest is history. Working on that project has been one of my greatest achievements, and working on it with her brought us even closer.

There were moments that 'my mom is Quilt World Famous' came into focus. I remember being at Olive Garden (I was in junior high) and a woman shyly approached our table. 'I never do this kind of thing, but I just have to ask, are you Marianne Fons?' My mom popped up and said, 'Yes I am! Are you a quilter?' And the woman just lost it, nearly crying as she hugged my mom and asked for an autograph. That was a big moment for me, when I realized that my mom's impact on people was huge. She was a friend and a mentor and a teacher, and really part of their lives."

Needle Points with Rhonda



An expert once told me you should install a fresh needle after about three full bobbins. I'm not sure I follow that advice perfectly, but I always change my needle and clean the bobbin and throat plate areas with my lint brush before I start a new project. I've gone through hundreds of SCHMETZ 80/12s — my favorite patchwork needle — during my long quilting career. One of the best tips sent in by a "Love of Quilting" TV viewer was to position a white plastic spoon behind the needle when threading. The bowl reflects light and makes that hole easier to see.

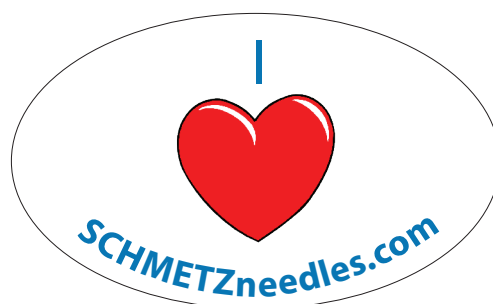
— Marianne Fons



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the sewing machine performs
better with a new needle!*



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