

Bertha Abernathy's cross-stitching threads life with wisdom



Whenever Bertha Abernathy sits down, her hands reach for the piece of cross-stitching she always carries with her. “I never sit down and don’t pick up something,” she says with a country twang. Her hands learned what they know from her grandmother, who taught her how to crochet with tobacco twine. Grandma Nunnally died at 94 working on a quilt.

“My husband says I’m the only person he knows who can read, watch TV, talk to him and do cross-stitching at the same time,” she said with a hearty laugh tacked on to the end of her words. Without her handwork, there was no peace in the family. Witness the vacation when her family spent every effort finding some knitting needles to replace the ones she left at home.

Her favorite piece is a wall hanging of a group of owls with the words ALWAYS ROOM FOR ONE MORE stitched underneath. Nothing could be a more appropriate description of her life. Mrs. Abernathy always has a room for one more, whether it’s more time for family or the pre-schoolers she helps at Blackstone Primary School, or whether it’s wall space for another cross-stitch...or whether it’s space for another owl. Mrs. Abernathy’s real love is collecting owls.

She is not sure when the first owl came to her house, but people kept giving them to her, and now she can count 500 in just one section of her house. There are owls in every form imaginable, and she knows where each one came from and who gave it to her. "I just like them," was all she could say about them. They didn't seem to have any special meaning to her.

But in the context of her cross-stitching, you can see the connection. Owls are associated with wisdom. The wise owl sits on a limb with eyes large enough to see the truth, even in the darkness, and offers those below insight into the human predicament. If owls could cross-stitch, they might put their wisdom to needle and thread.

Mrs. Abernathy has been selling her cross-stitching at the Blackstone Arts and Crafts Festival for about 15 years. It's the only craft show she enters because with her work as a school aid, she doesn't have time for any more. "But if I ever retire, I'll enter more shows," she says. Mrs. Abernathy will be 70 in a few months.

Started in 1975 for local people to show their crafts, the Blackstone Arts and Crafts Festival has grown up around Mrs. Abernathy. To her, the show is no a way to make a living but a place to sell some wall hangings so she'll have room for more in her already overcrowded house. "You have to enjoy it to do it. I only make about a dollar an hour doing this," she said, holding up a hanging of the Crewe railroad station. "That is a job to do...I ought to charge more than I do," she told herself. A cross-stitch that might take two days to do she gets, at the most, \$35.00.

To her, doing a craft is snot about making money but making f riends. Being able to make something with your hands mean being able to give something of value to others. And if they get a little wisdom along the way, so much the better.

That's why "owls are off limits...No, I don't sell owls," she said emphatically. Owls and wisdom are two things you can always have room for more.