

The Hidden Role of Electric Co-ops in the Barn Quilt Trail Movement

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Blazing Star” is one of 12 barn quilts hung by crews of Maquoketa Valley Electric Co-op on a trail loop near its Anamosa, Iowa, headquarters. (Photo (Courtesy of MVEC)

Electric cooperatives are the hidden stars in an award-winning documentary on a series of “quilt” trails that now snakes across 43 states, boasting some 7,000 quilts on display at 260 routes and byways.

“Pieced Together” tells the story of the movement’s founder, Donna Sue Groves, an Adams County, Ohio, resident, and how her idea to hang a plywood quilt on her mother’s barn caught on in rural communities as a way to attract tourists.

While co-ops don’t appear in the 53-minute film, it’s clear they had “an invaluable impact all over the nation,” said filmmaker Julianne Donofrio, a former ABC producer who was in Washington, D.C., recently to promote her film.

“The phenomenon that followed the first square’s dedication [in 2001] could not and would not have happened without the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association’s participation,” said Donofrio.

In the documentary, Groves credits electric co-ops for helping spread the word about the quilts, painted plywood quilt pattern squares on barns and other structures. As more people heard about the quilts, they wanted one. With the

movement spreading, quilting clubs and arts councils needed to find an inexpensive, safe way to attach the eight-square-foot or four-square-foot painted boards, which could weigh as much as 250 pounds each.

“It has been done with a couple of ladders and a lot of grunting,” Groves said. Or, “you could ask your friends at the local rural cooperative” to do the job.

Since 2008, line crews at Maquoketa Valley Electric Cooperative have hung, free of charge, some 60 quilts on the five trails maintained by Barn Quilts of Delaware County in Iowa. Each trail has a different name, including the “Wind Turbine Loop,” a 74-mile driving route inspired by Elk Wind Farm, a facility that provides power to Iowa co-ops.

“I don’t think we could have it done without the electric cooperatives,” said Dean Sherman, a Barn Quilts volunteer. “We could have found a building contractor, but the co-ops made it a lot easier for us.”

It’s unclear on the number of co-ops and quilt squares involved in the project. Groves, now 70 and battling breast cancer, didn’t create a national group, preferring instead to let trails stay in local hands. The majority of installations were done before 2013 or 2014.

The quilts are now part of the rural landscape, much like the power poles and transmission towers co-ops have built over the years. And co-ops have taken pride in them.

When asked to hang a quilt at a location outside co-op lines in 2008, Maquoketa Valley Electric Co-op’s Patty Manuel recalled CEO Jim Lauzon as saying, “We started this. We want to continue.”

Take a look at some of the barn quilt squares hung by co-ops across the country:



A lyre adorns a quilt hung by Illinois Electric Co-op's Darren Hayn in Calhoun County, near the co-op's Winchester headquarters in 2011. (Photo By: Brandon Moore)



In 2012, Ropp Jersey Cheese in Normal requested that Corn Belt Energy in Bloomington hang its cow quilt on a building in McLean County. (Photo Courtesy of Corn Belt Energy)



Maquoketa Valley Electric Cooperative hung this barn quilt about 5 years ago for a family in Jones County, Iowa. (Photo Courtesy of MVEC)



Minnesota Valley Electric Co-op's Mike Otteson (left) and Kent Schmitt hang a barn quilt square in Carver County—one of 24 installations sometime between 2011 and 2013. (Photo By: Susan Larson)



Crews at Oconto Electric Co-op in Oconto Falls hung 48 quilts, including this one at the Delano family farm. (Photo Courtesy of Barn Quilts of Oconto County)