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Lawsuit fraying close-knit bonds

2 from Gee's Bend sue collectors who made them famous

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Gee's Bend, Ala. — The quilts of tough denim and bright cottons made by the women of this remote, impoverished community improbably found a place in prestigious museums and on postage stamps. Their makers have traveled the country and eaten in the White House. The quilts were made by the first lady Laura Bush.

The Atlanta family who turned these simple symbols of comfort into contemporary art, the Arnetts, promised the 70 or so Gee's Bend quilters — mostly elderly, African-American women — that the fame and income their creations would bring would improve their lives. And for many years, that's just what happened.

But now that same money and prestige threaten to unravel the delicate threads connecting Gee's Bend, the Arnetts and the art world.

Two quilters, including one of the most celebrated, 79-year-old Annie Mae Young, have sued the Arnetts for fraud, claiming they received far less for their works than they should have.

The Arnetts dispute the women's claims. And the majority of Gee's Bend quilters seem to wish Young and Loretta Pettway, who filed a similar suit, had left well enough alone.

Part of the power of the Gee's Bend quilts is the story behind them, a story of struggle and survival across generations. Like the quilts, the current struggle has many layers, many pieces.

At its heart, it seems, it's about family, and about a desire for respect — how to get it and protect it, especially when it's threatened by one of your own.

The collectors' story

The quilts of Gee's Bend have brought acclaim to the Arnetts, who say they gambled more than a million dollars on their belief that the misshaped patchwork was as significant an art form as abstract impressionism.

Bill Arnett has spent 30 years collecting vernacular art by untrained artists that some dismissed as junk.

His battle to have the art, and his efforts, recognized by modern art museums has often been discouraging, especially after a "60 Minutes" segment in 1993 depicted him as taking advantage of folk artists.

His four sons have joined him in his work. The one perhaps most like him, 39-year-old Matt Arnett, has been closely involved

Gee's (pronounced jeez) Bend. Over the past decade, he says, he's spent more time with its quilters than he has with his own grandmothers.

On a recent Saturday, he steered his messy pickup truck south again for the four-hour trip from Atlanta, this time to meet with attorneys and quilters.

The suits name Bill, Matt and brother Paul Arnett, as well as several companies that licensed images of the quilts.

Asked about the legal problems on the drive down, Arnett looks exasperated. A publicist along for the ride tells him he can't answer most questions. What he can talk about is the pride and risk his family took in purchasing the quilts.

When he and his father first came to Gee's Bend, some old quilts were being burned to shoo off mosquitoes. Some were sold for as little as \$4 by Gee's Benders desperate to pay bills. The Arnetts began offering hundreds.

"It was as if I came over and said I'll buy your recycling from you," Arnett said. "They thought we were crazy white guys."

In 2003, Bill Arnett estimated that he'd spent \$1.3 million to acquire 500 quilts, pay for their proper keeping and document them in books.

Maud Southwell Wahlman, a professor of global art at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, introduced the Arnetts to the South. She says the kind of investing and collecting the Arnetts did was necessary.

"You have to invest a lot to get one good thing for \$1,000," said Wahlman. "You do that because you want the artist to dig up the best pieces. ... It's like a photographer taking 100 pictures to get a good one."

The Arnetts' investment began to pay off in 2002, when the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston put the quilts on exhibit. Critical acclaim brought the family a measure of vindication.

"We put these quilts in front of eyeballs that would never see them otherwise," Matt Arnett said. "Not just the quilts, but the Gee's Bend."

So was born the Gee's Bend brand. The Arnetts helped the quilters form a collective to price and sell the quilts to ensure that they shared in the profits. For their part, the Arnetts licensed the images of the quilts for bedding, rugs and greeting cards.

The Arnetts say they can't talk about profits while the lawsuits are ongoing. "The numbers are small and the percentages are small," said Matt Arnett of royalties from licensing.

Licensing companies cut checks directly to the Gee's Bend Foundation, and that money — now more than \$100,000 — is in an escrow account, said the Arnetts' publicist, Dindy Yokel. The foundation's board members include Bill and Matt Arnett, their father and several quilters, who requested the escrow arrangement because the community has not decided how the money should be spent. The foundation has applied for nonprofit status.

As he pulls up outside the modest building that houses the Gee's Bend Quilt Collective, Matt Arnett defends his family's act.

"I don't apologize for what I do," he said. "For 40 years a lot of people came [here] and never did anything. We cared enough that we had to be done."

"If we did it and went broke doing it and using all our resources, my dad and I would still not stop doing it. If something is important, you do it, even if critics come and laugh."

The quilters' story

It's clear right away that money and notoriety have changed Gee's Bend, a community of 700 on a two-lane road south of Selma.

Folks used to leave their doors unlocked here. Now, to protect quilts valued at \$200 to \$7,500 each — a lot of money in a place where families might live on \$700 a month — burglar bars have been added to the windows of the collective building.

Most of the quilters share family bloodlines and last names —- Pettway, Young, Bendolph —- passed down from Gee's Bend owners. Quilting was also passed down. The collective includes multiple generations: mothers, daughters, granddaughters. Each gets half of what her quilt sells for; the collective divides the rest.

Some of the elderly quilters liked the arrangement because it preserved their eligibility for the Medicare they rely on.

"These women can't afford to go out and make the kind of money people want them to have," said Louisiana Bendolph, 46. "I thought one of us would pull the rug out from the rest of us."

But even those who support the Arnetts, and greet Matt like they would a son or brother, do so with some regrets over their own decisions. Maybe, they say, they've trusted too much. Their votes on business deals presented by the Arnetts have been oral and unanimous, but not recorded.

Mary Lee Bendolph, 71, says she wishes the Arnetts had told her and others about the possibility of a lawsuit. "I didn't think I needed a lawyer," she said. "We all make mistakes doing things without thinking."

"[The Arnetts] gave us a good start but we didn't do enough to help ourselves," said Nettie Young, 90. "We didn't ask enough questions."

Many Gee's Benders feel indebted to the Arnetts. They are grateful for money that paid their bills and helped their kids go to college. Quilting fame brought respect and praise from a world they never imagined would care about them, their work, their history.

"Remembering my great-grandmother means more than anything, the stories she told and having her quilt hung on the wall in my museum and I can say, that's my community and this is where I came from," said Louisiana Bendolph.

Her mother, Mary Lee Bendolph, used to be most proud of raising eight children without accepting welfare. Now she also brags about her numerous trips to promote the quilts, about hugging Laura Bush at a luncheon in 2003.

"They've been extremely fair to my mother," said Mary Lee's son, Reuben Bendolph Jr., a test engineer from Huntsville who manages her finances. "She's reaped quite a few benefits, [but] the close-knitness here has disappeared because most people have access to money and they don't need to depend on each other."

The lawsuits, quilters agree, are a modern intrusion on long-standing tradition.

"Used to be if someone killed a hog, they went around with a little bag and everyone got a piece of that," quilter China Pettway recalled. "Love is still here, but it's not what it used to be."

Annie Mae Young's story

Annie Mae Young offers a reporter and photographer a mixed greeting.

Mention her artwork, and her face brightens. "You've seen my quilts?" she says, a note of amazement in her voice. But mention the lawsuit, and her tone changes. "I don't want to talk about that," she says.

Among the dozens of Gee's Bend quilters, Young is arguably the most famous. She made in 1976 what became the signature Bend: Denim and khaki from old pants surround bars of bright red and yellow. It's a roaring fireplace of color hemmed in by a hardscrabble existence.

Her work hangs in the permanent collections of three major museums. But no such respect existed behind the scenes, her lawyer Young claims she hasn't made any money from the \$45 coffee table books, \$5,000 rugs or other items bearing her quilt designs.

The Arnetts paid "only a small pittance . . . and never [provided] an inventory of what was taken and sold," her lawsuit says. "I have taken advantage of [her] advanced age, limited education and trusting nature to be unjustly enriched."

The suit claims the Arnetts never owned the intellectual property rights to the quilts, never asked permission to use her pictures but promised to and never gave any money back to Gee's Bend.

Like the misbehaving cousin left out of the family reunion, Young has been ostracized by many of those she left behind.

"Ms. Young now seeks to promote herself over the group," Arnett attorney Greg Hawley said in a news release. "She is no team player."

But a month after she sued, quilter Loretta Pettway filed a similarly worded suit. Others may follow.

Whatever happens, this rip in the Gee's Bend fabric, many quilters believe, will mend eventually.

"Like families do, we fight until teeth and tongue fall out," said China Pettway, Loretta's cousin. "But then we get back together. The Bible says that united we stand and divided we fall. Gee's Bend might stumble but we are going to get back up."

Nettie Young, 90, laughs ruefully about the mess. "We weren't too famous," she said, "to get sued."

Staff
Map identifies the location of Gee's Bend in Alabama. Inset map outlines area of detail relative to

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