

A refuge by the sea!

Empty Spools Seminar at Asilomar

by JENNIFER ROUNDS



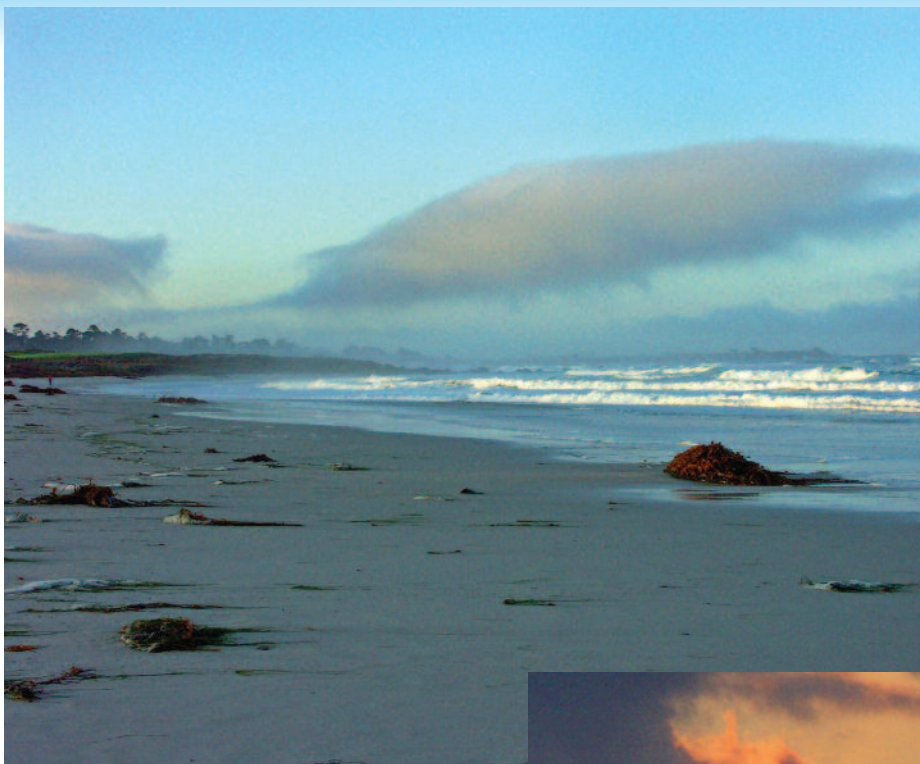
Photo by Gregory Case Photography (www.gregorycase.com)



Photos by Cyndy Rymmer

Asilomar Conference Center (above) and beach front in Pacific Grove, California

I can think of no better motivation for stepping outside my role as a writer than to make a pilgrimage to the Empty Spools seminar at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove, California. As a quilting immersion, there is little that can compare to this fabulous annual seminar—five days of uninterrupted quilting, the camaraderie of new and old friends, superlative teachers, the Monterey Coast view, and (best of all) an escape from everyday life.



Photos by Cyndy Rymmer

Coastal views of Monterey Peninsula

For twenty-four years, Diana McClun, one of the great ladies of quilting, and her Empty Spools partners, Gayle Wells and Suzanne Cox, have organized and delivered week-long quilting seminars in the United States. They began in 1985 with a stellar cast of teachers, including Michael James and Jinny Beyer, and have been exceeding those standards ever since.

Empty Spools at Asilomar is the result of Diana's search for high-quality quilting education. As co-owner (with Gayle) of a popular San Francisco Bay area quilt shop during the early 1980s, Diana, along with then-staffer Suzanne, was skilled at organizing quilting education events with renowned instructors. However, she was frustrated by the restrictions of the typical class format. To Diana, there was more shopping than learning happening in the standard one-day seminars—she wanted to develop learning experiences more conducive to creative thought. After experimenting with other formats, Diana devised a five-day intensive with one teacher. Suzanne then suggested the serene and sublime Asilomar facilities on the Monterey Coast, and Empty Spools was born!

Power Sewers and Other Attendees

The typical Empty Spools seminar year runs in five sessions from February through August and features professional teachers who represent the full range of quilting tastes and trends. By year's end, about 1,100 students from across the U.S. (as well as a good number of international students) will have participated in the sessions. About two hundred fifty of

these are first-timers. Others are serious veterans, some of whom have shown up every year since the conference began. The age range is broad, from 30 years old to 90 years old (yes, 90!). Mothers bring daughters, and sisters invite sisters. Some come solo to renew connections or make new friends, while others come with mini quilting groups for a special shared treat.

For those attendees who travel some distance and who don't want to haul equipment and supplies, there are plenty of resources available, like sewing machine rentals, an on-site quilt shop operated by the Cotton Patch of Lafayette, California, and access to local quilting stores via shuttle.

There are other attendees who are more elaborate with their preparations. A few regulars, fondly referred to as "power sewers," have been known to drive up with heavily loaded vans and roll off portable sewing centers that are ready to operate with the flick of a switch. These ladies work



from dawn to dusk and soak up the experience as if they've been starving for quilting satisfaction.

Create and Connect

Certainly Empty Spools has evolved over the past 24 years, but the essentials haven't changed. The seminar remains a venue in which to explore creativity, forge friendships, and make connections with a very accessible teaching staff. The large round tables in the dining hall invite friendly conversation, while the Asilomar Conference Grounds compel exploration. However, there are other elements that make attending Empty Spools such a remarkable quilting event.

A Show, Share and Tell session offers a glimpse of the creative output of the remarkable quilters who attend Empty Spools. All are welcome and all receive unstinting support from fellow students and instructors, especially when they bring projects started at prior Empty Spools conferences. Another sharing opportunity occurs during the traditional open house with a scheduled stroll through all the classrooms to view projects in progress.

Inspiring by Instruction

Both the walkabout and the evening get-togethers offer opportunities for the instructors to share their recent work and to preview their curricula. Many seminar rebookings stem from the open house, when a prospective student targets an instructor with a method she would like to try. The success of Empty Spools can be attributed to the ability of the instructors to expand creative horizons and enhance quilting skills.

Diana gets very emotional when she takes the classroom stroll. "I love to see what the teachers pull out from the students. I cannot believe the amount of work they accomplish



Ebb on the Boardwalk by Valerie Sauban Chapla

Photo by gregory case photography (www.gregorycase.com)

during the week." Because so many students are repeat attendees, Diana has a bird's eye view of their progress, with some of them even earning selection as Artist in Residence—a popular program at Empty Spools for the past ten years—for upcoming sessions.

Valerie Sauban Chapla, an administrative law judge by day and exquisite quilter by night, was selected Artist in Residence during the conference's twentieth year, for excellence in design and execution. Her Asilomar-themed quilt, *Ebb on the Boardwalk* (above), was photographed and reproduced as a print, which was given as an anniversary gift to each participant that year. Although she's taken classes from many Empty Spools instructors, Valerie is a Ruth McDowell devotee. What is so surprising about her experience at Empty Spools is that she won't spend her precious classroom hours with Ruth working on a project. Rather than sew a stitch, Valerie sits quietly, soaking up the creative process, as Ruth works one-on-one with students. Then, creatively replenished, Valerie heads back to her studio, eager to explore ideas germinated at Asilomar.

Valerie's approach demonstrates that Empty Spools is all about enjoying an exceptional personal learning experience. As Diana, Gayle, and Suzanne told me with lighthearted humor, "You have to work hard to have a bad experience here!"

For more information about Empty Spools and the 2009 seminar schedule, visit online at www.emptyspoolsseminars.com. ❖



Spacious conference center lecture hall

Photo by gregory case photography (www.gregorycase.com)