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The Use Of Cotton Sacks In Quiltmaking

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When today's quilter decides to make a quilt, she selects new fabric at a local yardage shop from a wide range of prints in a rainbow of colors in a quantity to suit her needs. She has sufficient money from her own earnings or from the family account to spend for the fabric and batting necessary to make a quilt to satisfy her creative nature. The need to supply a warm bedcovering is of minor concern. Blankets and machine-quilted comforters are readily available at a reasonable price for keeping her family warm.

In contrast to this plentiful supply of available goods throughout the country, quiltmakers of the past were often limited by the remoteness of their homes to stores and fabric sources, dependent on mail order or the traveling peddler for any bright new material. The money available for family purchases had to cover many needs, such as staples, seed, and those items not usually produced at home such as shoes or eyeglasses. Therefore, new fabric purchased exclusively for quilts was limited. Quilters, however, were very resourceful in finding fabric sources for making the quilts the family needed for cold winters in homes heated only by a fireplace or stove.

Feed and flour sacks were always available and were an excellent source of fabric. By examining antique quilts, quilt tops and quilt blocks, by interviewing quiltmakers, and by reading letters and periodicals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we find that feed and flour sacks were readily available and were often used in making quilts.

An early example of feed sack use is found in a mid-1800s quilt in the collection of the Shelburne Museum. The stencil printing which

was used to show the contents of early bags is still visible on some of the white patches. Margie Gorrecht, thought to have lived in York, Pennsylvania, made this finely quilted **Irish Chain**, using the fabric available to her.[1] A quilt, ca. 1850, belonging to the Dearborn, Michigan, Historical Museum also includes flour and sugar sacks. The solid red and white pieced **Cross and Crown** quilt has backing fabric with a stamped design from BB & R Knight, Providence, R. I.[2]

From the 1800s to the early 1900s in rural America quilts were often made of salvage material from the farm household. Not only farm families purchased products which were packed in sacks, but urban dwellers also purchased many of their foodstuffs packaged in cotton bags. These bags were used to package staple goods, especially flour, but also sugar, salt, rice, split peas, pearl barley, rolled oats, and cornmeal. Cotton bags were recycled as containers for foodstuffs such as corn and apples grown and harvested on the farm. The bags were used to store such items as home made noodles and later were recycled again for the fabric. Feed bags held poultry grains and other animal feed. Women used sack fabric for clothing, patches for quilts, and towels, and they used smaller bags for storage and numerous other practical things for the home as well as backing for quilts.Housewives used every scrap of fabric in the thrifty times during and after the Depression. Women used feed and flour sacks for dresses, shirts, pajamas, aprons, sunbonnets, towels, and pillow cases and other household items. Quiltmakers made patches or quilt blocks from the leftover scraps and still usable pieces cut from worn clothing as well as feed and flour sacks. Local bakers were glad to sell flour sacks cheaply to homemakers.

Homemakers held bag parties so friends and neighbors could exchange plain sacks or colorful print sacks to suit their needs. Thelma Campbell Butts tells of growing up in Shawnee, Oklahoma, in 1908 and later moving to Kansas City, Missouri, in 1911: "Mother would attend the Farm Club once a month to quilt or to piece or do whatever handwork the hostess wanted done, hopefully to quilt. She traded her print sacks for white sacks to make tablecloths and towels."[3]

The most unusual source I found for sack fabric used in quiltmaking was the muslin used to wrap rubber tires. In the 1920s Susie Harriman Grover's son, Fred, would bring her the muslin tire wrap-

pings from the Ford garage in Rice Lake, Wisconsin. She bleached the fabric and made her **Double Wedding Ring** quilt top.[4] Worn sacks could provide the foundation necessary for the pressed work construction of log cabin, crazy, and string patchwork. In an unfinished **Crazy Quilt,** colorful delegate ribbons dated 1896-1898 from Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin, and a wide variety of bright silks are sewn to a backing made from various Pillsbury Best xxxx feed sacks.[5] The maker of this crazy quilt did not bother taking the time to remove the red and blue lettering of the Bemis Bag Company as she knew this foundation cloth would be covered by the quilt backing.

Even today some remaining print on the fabric may be readable or show shapes, colors of company logos, contents, and weight. The black ink used to print the early bags was difficult to remove even with the use of kerosene, lard, bleach, lye soap and boiling.[6] Some of the stamping or printing may remain to provide a clue as to what the bag held and where it was milled. Mill location together with other data might suggest where a quilt was made. National, regional or local distribution of mill products is an important part of this data. Since the local mill was usually in the area of the quiltmaker's home, an anonymous quilt can thus be given some frame of reference. For example a mid-western **LeMoyne Star** scrap quilt had some sack material on the back which when held to a mirror clearly showed, "Pillsbury xxxx Feed, Clinton, Iowa." This quilt can now be given a possible geographical location.[7] Large mills could distribute their products regionally or nationally and therefore be one indicator to suggest where a quilt was made.

Another quilt to found in central Missouri had black printing on the side of the orange sashing clearly showing the distinctive printing style of Purina Feed Chow, a well know St. Louis milling company. The seven pointed **String Stars** of this quilt top had been appliqued on salt and sugar sacks that are easily identified by the remaining print on the back of the blocks.[8] The visible printing was not of concern to the quiltmaker because the remaining print marks could not be seen on her finished quilt. The quilt top was built on the wrong side of the flour sack. The front of the sack was covered with batting and backing. More examples of sack fabric use was found in string patchwork than any other patchwork technique.

Some homemakers used the sack fabric as it came with the printing clearly marked. Stories of wearing undergarments and playclothes identified as poultry feed sacks used on the farm are still vivid memories of some mid-western men and women today.[9]

Other quiltmakers used the colorful logos printed on the front of the flour sacks as the block design for their quilt tops. These logos included a wide variety of designs such as flowers, animals, birds, Indians, bread and biscuits, fields of grain, and farm scenes. Romona Randles Crosley of Liberal, Kansas, tells of setting the colors by soaking the flour sacks in a salt and vinegar solution overnight, a practice she learned from her grandmother, Lula Dawkins Randles (1877-1970). Grandmother Randles was born in Collinsville, Texas, and homesteaded in Turpin, (Beaver County) Oklahoma. She was an active quiltmaker who taught Romona to quilt. The practice of saving flour sacks during the 1930s to make quilts was common, and some quiltmakers competed to see who could gather the most sacks from the greatest distance. The flour sack quilts made by her grandmother have worn out, but Romona, wanting to preserve this historic practice, made two quilts, in 1985 and 1986, using her grandmother's leftover flour sacks which had been stored in an upstairs trunk.[10] Eva Amanda Brown Morgan cut 7" x 8" blocks from fronts of twenty-five pound cornmeal sacks showing the smiling face of Aunt Jemima. She pieced these with alternate blocks of solid red during the cold winter of 1919 in Center Hill, Texas, to make her quilt.[11]

The many states that have done or are doing state quilt projects have found many quilts that use feed and flour sacks.[12] Recycled sacks frequently were used with manufacturers' marks visible; however, some were home-dyed with most of the printing removed. Mary Midgett Bridgman (1845-1928), of Hyde County, North Carolina, made an orange and black **Melon Patch** quilt in 1902 using dyed sack fabric.[13] Bertie Yoder Miller, of the Conservative Mennonite branch, south of Hutchinson, Kansas, tells of her mother, Edna Nisly Yoder making quilts for Bertie and her four sisters in 1951. She embroidered feed sacks with green crochet thread to make five elaborately quilted spreads with no battings.[14]

While some homemakers used the sacks complete with printing, others laboriously removed the labeling on the feed and flour sacks to

Figure 1. 49-pound bag of Robin Hood flour. Instructions for removing ink are printed in the box at the top: "This bag is printed with specially prepared soap-soluble inks. To remove easily, wet bag, rub soap on printed portions, and put to soak in soapy water. Then rub for about three minutes and boil for about ten minutes–both in soapy water."

produce snowy white fabric for towels, curtains and other household items.[15]

Bag-producing companies listened to their customers when complaints arose concerning the difficulty in removing the early black ink used to stamp the mill company's name, contents, and weight on the cotton bags. Around the turn of the century they changed the method of marking to stamping and printing with a colored ink that could be more easily removed. The mill company even put the washing instructions on the back of the bag at the top where it was most visible. The bags now printed in lighter ink in black, blue or red still had to be soaked, washed, and, perhaps, bleached to

Figure 2: Familiar Bemis cat, "Biddy," logo of the Bemis Bag Company.

remove all traces of the ink to be ready for another use. Again responding to their customers, who did not like all the work of removing the printing, the companies developed paper banding in the 1920s. All printed matter including colorful logos, contents and weight were printed on a wide paper label, which was glued to the flour sack for easy removal by soaking, thus giving added protection to the sack fabric.

The Depression years of the 1930s and 1940s gave the bag companies an opportunity to increase their sales, although the economic times were poor. The combination of customer demand coupled with what they felt was an excellent marketing potential led the bag companies to offer patterned bags. These colorful bags were printed in popular pastel colors in calico, floral, and geometric designs as well as solid colors. The paper wrapper or small paper label could easily be removed to let the homemaker create a garment and use the leftover cuttings in her quiltmaking. Homemakers nationwide responded to the lean economic times when money was in short supply by making use of what was readily available, so they used feed sack fabric to create

Figure 3: Detail of 100-pound floral print feedsack showing Bemis label and simple instructrions for removal.

garments and bed covers.

In 1858 Judson M. Bemis founded the Bemis Bag Company in St. Louis, Missouri. Increased cotton fabric production and the development of the chainstitch sewing machine in 1846 were important factors that led to his decision. Bemis was the first company to produce machine-sewn bags as well as the first company to close the filled bags by machine. Both of these industrial developments led to greater production possibilities and lower costs as they replaced time-consuming hand labor. The market for cotton bags was an ever-increasing one: consequently, Bemis established its own cotton mills and a bleachery in order to provide material for its growing textile bag business, which by 1910 had expanded to eleven bag factories. As other packaging materials such as paper and plastics gradually replaced textiles, the Bemis Company phased out of cotton milling and sold its final U.S. mill in 1980.[16]

Of the bags studied that noted the manufacturer printed on the bag, Bemis Bag Company was found most often, followed by Chase

Bag Company and Fulton Bag & Cotton Mills. Bemis was the largest producer and distributor of sack fabric, known in the textile trade as "greige goods" or "gray sheeting". Their logo, the Bemis cat, "Biddy," was a familiar mark on feed and flour sacks. The 1950 edition of **Davidson's**, the blue book of the Textile Industry, listed thirty-two bag goods companies under the Cotton Manufacturers classification. The manufacturing company with the largest number of locations and which manufactured the greatest number of bags was the Bemis Bag Company.[17]

To determine if a quilt contains sack fabric the following descriptions of sacks will be helpful:

FEED SACK
- plain color similar to unbleached muslin
- coarse in weight—heavier than dress goods
- plain weave—when new and unwashed is flat and even, but after washing may appear uneven or bumpy
- may have row of holes made when bag was stitched at the factory using heavy string-like thread
- could be printed in a variety of patterns, e.g.,floral, calico, geometric

FLOUR SACK
- plain weave
- flat surface, even after washing
- medium weight, similar to dress fabrics
- may be unbleached, bleached, or printed in a solid color or a wide variety of patterns, e.g., floral, calico, geometric, or checked

SUGAR AND SALT
- plain weave, flat surface, fine thread
- fabric may not be very strong
- thinner than dress goods, like lawn
- white or patterned; may be red, white and blue stripe, or blue ground with small white floral motif

TOBACCO
- similar to sugar and salt sacks except that they were always light and could be bleached to white
- size 3" x 4 1/2." These small, Bull Durham brand, tobacco sacks held the tobacco used to "roll your own" cigarettes.

The bag manufacturer used heavy thread similar to string to chainstitch the bag together. The big needle used in stitching the bag

Figure 4: Five-pound Red Ball Brand sugar bag.

together made large holes in the fabric and the shifting contents pulled at the stitching to make the holes even bigger. Evidence of these holes on the backing fabric or on quilt tops and blocks, indicates their origin as grain, flour, or other sack material. The holes in the fabric are often seen even after many washings.

To construct the sack the bag was sewn along one side and the bottom or along both sides. When filled, another row of stitches across the top closed the bag. These stitches are usually in an arch or curved shape since the stitching was done around the sack contents. The chainstitching was easily raveled by pulling a thread, a job often given to children. This heavy thread similar to string was saved by winding it into balls for use in tying quilts, quilting, crocheting, raveling for sewing thread, and other household needs.

In measuring over one hundred bags I noted a wide variety of sizes. One 100-pound plain unbleached grain bag measured 40" x 42",

Figure 5: Back of quilt showing the use of feed sacks with the printing still clearly visible.

another 100-pound bag was 37" x 53", and a third, 38" x 46". A quiltmaker knew that her assortment of bags, in good condition, would determine the amount of piecing needed for the backing of her quilt.

By about 1920 there was some standardization for some products such as flour. Flour was sold in uniform-sized bags and by standardized weights, such as 5 pounds, 10 pounds, 25 pounds, 48 pounds, 49 pounds and 100 pounds.

In the 1940s employees of the Bemis Bag Company were told of the number of bags for sewing needs in the company newsletter called, "Bemistory." For example, two or three matching bags were needed for a child's dress, and five were needed for a woman's dress. Fashion shows and contests were held to show and promote the use of bags for clothing.[18]

In the 1920s the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, printed a booklet, *Sewing with Cotton*

Figure 6: Detail of quilt back showing 100-pound bran sack from the Purcell Mill & Elevator Co. of Purcell, I. T. (Indian Territory which became the state of Oklahoma on November 20, 1907.)

Bags. They offered it to homemakers, sewing instructors, home demonstration agents, club leaders and other interested groups to show what could be done with what was apt to be regarded as a waste material. The booklet cost five cents, and patterns sold for ten cents each or three for a quarter. Homemakers in cities as well as on the farm had already made good use of this material for many years as we know from the many quilts pre-dating the 1920s that contain sack fabric. This thirty-two-page booklet mentioned over fifty items including numerous items of clothing, mattress covers, pillow cases, comforter covers, bedspreads and crib covers. This popular, well-illustrated booklet of ideas was revised in 1937, 1938, and twice in the 1940s. Some of the pattern and idea booklets were available from the National Cotton Council headquartered in Memphis, Tennessee.

One booklet of only two pages was titled "Comforts and Quilts." It suggested using printed cotton bags and plain ones that could be dyed lovely pastel shades. Instructions included removing the chainstitching, sewing the bags together, tying or tufting, applique and cutting patches. To date I have found twelve different editions of these booklets. Mrs. G. C. Clark of Washington, however, had not read the booklet. She wrote to *Needlecraft Magazine* in March 1929, asking for helpful ideas for using her dozens of ten-pound oatmeal and cornmeal sacks "that were all nicely washed with no lettering on them." The editor responded with directions for "the daintiest little quilt imaginable . . . of just such small sacks, cut in squares with a quaint nursery rhyme or fairy tale outline design to be done in simple stitchery."

The competition from the increased use of cheaper paper bags greatly concerned the cotton bag industry in the late 1940s. A thirty-man committee held an initial meeting in the spring of 1948 to formulate a plan to halt the declining sales of cotton bags. The committee included bag manufacturers, bag fabric manufacturers, textile merchants, textile converters, representatives from the raw cotton industry, and a staff member from the National Cotton Council.[19]

The committee promoted interest in using flour and feed sacks for another purpose. The result of this promotional activity was recorded in current magazines of the day. An article in the Business and Finance section, of *Time* magazine, January 1949 described the popularity of "old flour bags." It cited that "Macy's in Manhattan was hawking an odd item, dish towels made of old flour bags, selling 30,000 in ten days." The Sears, Roebuck catalog sales of used flour sacks were also brisk. *Time* noted that across the U.S. thousands of women were using a "special pattern book" turning dress-printed flour bags into clothes, curtains, tablecloths, quilts and slipcovers. The *Time* magazine article continued by describing the effect of the increased demand for using flour sacks by stating the following:

> All this stir was the result of a wide-awake promotion by the onetime sleepy cotton industry. In plugging these apparently unimportant items it had a highly important purpose. It hoped to win a nip and tuck race with papermakers for what has been one of the biggest markets for U.S. cotton textiles (bags absorbed about 8% of all

cotton textile production before the war).

PAPER WAR. Since war's end, the papermakers have been edging high-priced cotton out of the bag market. But when 20 states passed laws forbidding the re-use of any bags for food, cotton men finally got up off their bales. With cotton bags at 32 cents (per 100-lb. bag) vs. 10 cents for paper bags, cotton-bag makers had been getting by only because bakers were able to use cotton bags three and four times over in handling flour. Last spring members of the National Cotton Council and other cotton men raised $380,000 for a last ditch fight. Feed and flour bags had been used for years by farmers' wives for aprons, dresses, etc. but the cotton men decided to go after city folks too. A tougher and much more important job was to sell cotton bags to wholesale bakers: they didn't give a hoot about prints.

IN THE BAG. So cotton men dropped in on secondhand dealers in key U.S. cities and convinced them that they could profitably boost their business by buying used bags from bakers, processing them into tea towels, selling them through retailers. Bag dealers were soon buying bakers' used cotton bags for as much as 25 cents apiece, thus cutting the original cost to bakers to around 7 cents—well under paper prices.[20]

Seven months later the successful selling drive had more than doubled sales for 37-inch sheeting, the most widely used fabric for bagging.[21]

Researchers in other countries also cite use of sack fabric in quilts. Canadian farmer Eli Merkley and his wife married in 1850, and had twelve daughters, eight of whom never married. One hundred and fifteen quilts made in the late 1880s in anticipation of marriages were found intact in 1974. All of the quilts still showed the mill marks from the sack fabric used as the backing material, a common practice in the area.[22] In Londonderry, Ireland, in the 1920s Mrs. Hawkins used cut-offs from the shirt factory where she worked to make each of her four daughters a shirt quilt which she backed with flour bags purchased from the local baker.[23] In Australia wheat and flour bags were used to make waggas, a covering used outdoors to keep out the cold and rain. Constructed of sewn together bags, these "wagga rugs" originally were made by men to be used by shearers and bushmen.[24]

My study has shown that cotton sacks were used in quiltmaking over a long time period, from the mid-1800s into the 1970s. City

homemakers as well as rural farm households used the bags. While the use of sacks was nationwide, more were produced and used in the south, southwest, and midwest, and use in those areas continued for a longer time. Thrift was a major factor in the continued use of cotton sacks in quiltmaking, and this thriftiness was exploited by manufacturers to promote their business. Thus, the humble idea of re-using feed and flour sacks for quiltmaking had a nationwide effect on the economy of the country.

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