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Feed Sacks in Georgia: Their Manufacture, Marketing, and Consumer Use

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This study, based on data gathered from interviews with 239 men and women, analyzes the manufacture, marketing, and use of feed sacks in Georgia. Frugal Georgia housewives, coping with the boll weevil depression and droughts in the 1920s and the Great Depression in the 1930s, found a myriad of uses for the coarse cotton cloth, recycling it into clothing, quilts, and other household articles.

Georgia was the home of Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills, founded in Atlanta in 1868, one of the nation's largest manufacturers of cotton sacks. As Fulton and Atlanta prospered and expanded, the need for cotton sacks to package agricultural products also grew.

Competition within the cotton sack industry increased in the 1940s as each manufacturer endeavored to design the most attractive prints for packaging feed, fertilizer, flour, and sugar. Georgia families anticipated the arrival of the feed truck or the rolling store or the trip to town when they could pick the prints for clothing and household needs. Rigorous marketing, as well as feed-sack contests such as those at the Georgia State Fair in the 1950s and early 1960s, extended the feed-sack era, but failed to prevent its eventual demise.

Feed sacks entered my life when a friend gave me seventeen print sacks. As I looked for fabrics to coordinate with the prints to use in a quilt, I talked to people about feed sacks and found more prints. As my collection increased, it continued to amaze me how many of these fifty-year-old sacks were still available. Viewing quilts made

from sacks furthered my interest in the sacks, in their uses, and in their stories. By interviewing people about their memories of feed sacks, I discovered the meaningful part this recycled fabric played in the lives of rural Georgians. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. This significant history needs to be recorded while first-hand information and sources remain available.

Feed sacks served as containers to ship feed, fertilizer, flour, sugar, and other products, but my research addresses the reuse of these sacks by Georgia consumers and the promotional efforts by the sack industry to encourage this second use. Georgia was the home of Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills, one of the major feed-sack companies, and some of their suppliers, customers, and competitors. The history of cotton-sack manufacturing, marketing, and use in Georgia reflects the feed-sack era throughout rural America.

Housewives in Georgia willingly used cotton sacks to provide various items for their homes and families. Reusing this free cloth seemed a logical extension of accepted household economy in the latter-nineteenth century and early twentieth century, but depressed times in the South during the 1920s and 1930s turned the frugal use of sacks into a necessity for many families. The reuse of cotton-sack fabric became more desirable when feed-sack manufacturers offered a wide variety of attractive sack prints by the end of the 1930s.

Following World War II the economy improved, a transition took place from rural to urban living, and paper bags along with bulk delivery replaced the need for feed sacks. Various marketing strategies extended the popularity of cotton sacks, but by the 1960s most feed-sack companies virtually discontinued the production of cotton sacks.

Men and women around Georgia provided information for this paper in letters or interviews, beginning with owners of feed-sack quilts and with those who responded to an inquiry regarding feed sacks in the *Farmers and Consumers Market Bulletin.* Nearly all of the contacts grew up on farms where cotton was the main crop. Their memories extended into the 1940s, the peak years for feed sacks; many also recalled the 1930s, some the 1920s, and a few the 1910s. Unless otherwise noted, all individuals, towns, or counties named are in the state of Georgia.

Geography and climate determined Georgia's agricultural econ-

omy. Since the eighteenth century, Georgia farmers have produced such products as corn, oats, peanuts, and wheat, but historically cotton has been the chief cash crop for most of the state.[1] Georgia's rivers and Atlantic Coast give the region easy access to markets of the world.

Cotton Sacks in the Nineteenth Century

Georgia farmers, like those elsewhere, needed a way to package farm products to transport them to markets, and to bring other products to their home and farm. Until the late 1840s barrels were the primary containers for packaging farm and food products. Early bags used for packaging were homespun and handsewn for family use. Farmers stamped their names or initials on coarse cotton bags to carry grain to local mills and flour back home again in the same bags. Manufactured cotton sacks gradually replaced home-produced bags, and by the 1890s cotton sacks had surpassed barrels as food containers.[2] The flour industry was the largest user of barrels, and flour trademarks and logos in circle designs created to fit on the tops of barrels continued to be used by flour mills on cotton sacks (see figure 1).[3] Another legacy relating to barrels was that textile bag sizes continued to coordinate with barrel sizes; for example, a 49-pound flour sack held the equivalent of a quarter-barrel, and a 98-pound sack compared to a half-barrel.

Jacob Elsas, one of the leaders of the textile-bag industry, immigrated to the United States from Germany in 1861 as an orphaned teenager. He was reared by relatives in Cincinnati, Ohio.[4] During the Civil War he served in the Union army in Cartersville, Georgia, and built a log cabin country store there after the war, in 1865. His store prospered, and Elsas became aware of the need for cloth bags of various sizes to package goods such as beans, rice, and sugar. Recognizing an opportunity for another business, he moved to the ruined but recovering city of Atlanta in 1867 and established a bag factory there a year later.

Jacob Elsas, aware of the profit New England textile mills made on cloth he purchased from them (made of cotton grown in Georgia and other Southern states), decided to spin his own yarn and weave his own fabric to supply his bag facility. Thus the Fulton

Figure 1. Examples of circular logos on Georgia flour company sacks owned and photographed by the author.

Figure 2. The trademark of Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills, an American eagle, was stamped on Fulton's plain and logo sacks. Copy taken from a flour sack owned by the author.

Cotton Spinning Company began operation in Fulton County in 1881. After both the bag plant and the cotton mill were expanded, they operated separately, but combined under the name of Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills in 1894 (see figure 2).[5] Fulton Bag became a major cotton-sack company, ranked equally with Chase Bag Company (founded in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1847) and led only by Bemis Company, Inc. (originating in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1858.)[6]

The Fulton company mills made their own cloth, but also purchased additional yardage from other mills, including Harmony

Grove Mills, Inc. in Commerce, Georgia. Established in 1893, Harmony Grove made all-cotton sheeting and greige goods (unfinished fabrics just off the loom), then sold to cotton-sack manufacturers such as Fulton, Werthan Industries Packaging in Nashville, Tennessee, and Dowling Bag Company in Valdosta, Georgia.[7] Crystal Springs Bleachery Company (now Crystal Springs Print Works, Inc.), established in Chickamauga, Georgia, in 1909, also sold bags, plain fabric, and later fabric in prints. Crystal Springs competed with Fulton, but operated on a much smaller scale.[8]

Early bags were plain white or off-white cloth. A piece of cloth folded in half, then sewn across the bottom and up one side formed the sack. Logos representing the brand name of the flour or other product appeared on the front of some sacks, and these came in three or four colors by the 1870s.

Quiltmakers recognized sacks as a source of cloth as early as the 1870s. The Georgia Quilt Project, during the early 1990s, documented several nineteenth-century quilts containing fabric from cotton sacks. Mary Jane Elizabeth Windom (1855-1927) lived in Carroll County, and made over one hundred quilts. She made a Caesar's Crown quilt in the 1880s which looks brown and blue, but close examination revealed the original colors to be red and green (see figure 3). The flour sacks used for the backing were from "Kingbery's Mills, Carrollton, Georgia–John N. Dunn & Co., Atlanta, Georgia."[9]

Julia Smith (1861-1932) lived most of her life in Madison and Jackson Counties, and pieced a Tree of Life quilt in the late 1800s or early 1900s for her granddaughter. The inscription which originally appeared on the binding said, "Iris Lee made by your Grandmother Smith," but this has washed out. Meal sacks dyed green and rose were used to make the top for this quilt. Some printing still shows through the green-dyed backing fabric made of cotton sacks, but it is no longer legible.[10]

The Early Twentieth Century

Competition in the early 1900s stimulated bag manufacturers to produce bags that would interest buyers. Jo Johnson remembered a 50-pound flour sack in 1919 which pictured the front and back of

Figure 3. Mary Jane Elizabeth Windom, known as Bettie, maker of the Caesar's Crown quilt (on right). Photographs courtesy of Betty Hendrix.

a doll with dark curly hair. Her mother cut out the doll, sewed it on the machine, and stuffed it with cotton. Jo and her younger brother took the doll to a little spring branch near their house and, being Baptist, had a baptism. The doll had to lie out in the sun a long time to dry.[11]

The cotton industry experienced numerous fluctuations through the years, particularly in the early 1900s. The highest production of cotton bales in Georgia's history occurred in 1911 and crops remained good the next few years.[12] The boll weevil, however, infested Georgia in the mid-teens, destroying cotton crops and trans-

forming "white fields of prosperity into barren regions of poverty."[13] A full-scale economic depression in the South in the early 1920s followed, with droughts in 1924 and 1925 causing further shortages of cotton.[14] Growing cotton was the only way many farmers knew to support their families and, during a decade of hard times, thousands of farmers deserted the land. Cotton continued to be a cash crop across Georgia, but never regained its former status.

New markets for cotton-sack makers opened in the 1920s in the form of feed packaging. Advances in poultry nutrition and an expanding feed industry for farm animals significantly increased the use of sacks. During this time chicken feed experienced phenomenal growth.[15] Cotton sacks, whether they were used for fertilizer, flour, sugar, or other products, now became commonly known as feed sacks.

Juanita Barrett recalled that sacks played a vital role in her home during her early life on the farm. In the late 1920s her family used flour and chicken-feed sacks to make all kinds of clothes for the family. Juanita said, "We had no zippers then, so my older sister and I did a lot of work on buttonholes. Some of the sacks would also be chosen for tablecloths, quilts, curtains, and pillow slips." No matter how small the left-over scraps were, the girls would hand-sew them together to make doll clothes and doll quilts.[16]

Irene Mixon grew up on a farm and remembered that it was common in her area in the 1920s for women to wear a cap in the house. The cap, usually made from a cotton sack, kept their hair in place and kept the dust off. The circular cap looked much like a night cap; it came down over the ears, had a casing for elastic, and often a ruffle around the edge. Irene had no money to buy elastic, so she cut 1/4-inch strips from inner tubes and used that for elastic.[17]

The 1930s

The Great Depression of the 1930s intensified an already unstable economy in the Southern states and contributed to the increased popularity of feed sacks. With no money to buy more than necessities, destitute families used feed sacks to provide clothing and household cloth items. Feed-sack fabric, which had been recycled in the early years of the century because people were typically thrifty, now became an essential for many people.

Fertilizer sacks made from Osnaburg, a strong, heavy, coarse fabric, are known as guano sacks in the South, "pronounced guanner in Georgia."[18] Many older Georgians from rural areas remember what it was like to sleep on guano-sack sheets. As Georgia Burgess put it, "You didn't have to scratch, just rub a little on those

rough sheets."[19] Four or five guano sacks sewn together made a sheet, and after several washings they became softer. They felt warm like a blanket, but, being cotton, felt cool in the summer.

The cotton pick sack, the largest cotton sack made, could be up to twelve feet long. The person picking cotton pulled the sack by a strap worn over the shoulder.[20] These sacks were manufactured from a coarse strong cloth, but most farm families could not afford the inexpensive sack and made their own.

Uses for the plain and logo sacks were limited only by the resourcefulness of the person utilizing the bag. Georgians used the cloth for aprons, bonnets, dresses, handkerchiefs, play clothes, shirts, underwear, and for curtains, pillow cases, tablecloths, towels, and other household items.

In 1934, at the lowest point of the Great Depression, the Georgia Emergency Relief Administration held classes for young girls to show them how to make useful household items from common, economical materials. Teachers encouraged the girls to make dresses and other articles from cotton sacks.[21]

Women dyed sacks to get cloth in various colors. The good quality cotton sacks took the dye well. Although packaged dyes were available, Georgia housewives often used such items as broom straw, Georgia red clay, pokeberries, and walnuts to dye sacks. Sack makers observed that women dyed sacks and in 1936 Percy Kent Bag Company of Kansas City, Missouri, presented "Tint-sax," sacks containing feed and corn meal, in eleven pastel colors.[22] Solid-color sacks produced in the 1930s also came in Nile green, tangerine, and buttercup yellow.[23] A medium-blue solid color 100-pound Percy Kent sack imprinted Kasco Mills, Inc. is in my collection. Pictured above the logo are a little boy and his dog beside a girl pointing to a clothesline full of their clothes. The caption reads "My mamma made all these things from *Cotton Bags.*"

During the 1930s and 1940s the feed industry continued to expand, providing a sizable increased market for cotton sacks. Chickens were an important part of Georgia's rural economy; farm women earned money not only by selling eggs and sometimes chickens, but also by selling feed sacks.

Jesse Jewell, a pioneer in Georgia's chicken industry, began a large-scale business in 1938 in the Gainesville area with 12,000 baby chicks. His success marked the beginning of an industry that even-

tually transformed the raising of chickens from a cottage industry into a full-scale business.[24]

Dean and Elizabeth Lott also contributed to the chicken business in the Gainesville area. Beginning in 1938, they soon had eight large chicken houses with 80,000 chickens. Twice a week they bought whole railroad carloads of chicken feed in 100-pound sacks. Elizabeth stated, "I sold thousands and thousands of feed sacks; people came from everywhere to buy them. One woman from southern Georgia bought 200 to 300 sacks a week."[25]

Feed-sack companies prospered even through the Depression years. Families needed the products contained in sacks and also depended upon the free fabric they provided. The feed-sack phenomenon, however, occurred near the end of the 1930s with the advent of feed-sack prints. This new era brought patterns in flowered, geometric, paisley, plaid, stripe, and specialty designs. Feed-sack producers had a heyday as delighted women and girls selected the prints for their next dresses.

Richard K. Peek, then Vice-President at Percy Kent Bag Company, received credit for the innovation of prints.[26] His first job in the early 1900s had been with Fulton Bag Company, and he opened Fulton's sales office in Minneapolis in the mid-1910s.[27] In 1937 Peek noticed cotton slip covers on the backs of wooden chairs and thought sacks similar to these colorful materials would appeal to consumers.[28] He developed and promoted the patterned prints and, backed by a publicity campaign, his early initiative and active dedication to making cotton sacks fashionable led to the large-scale manufacture of dress-print and specialty sacks.[29] *Time* magazine gave Richard Peek the flattering title of the "Hattie Carnegie" of sack fashions.[30] Feed, fertilizer, flour, and sugar companies then competed to obtain the most appealing prints for marketing their products. A 1939 Kasco Mills advertisement declared the new prints "the best merchandising idea brought into the feed business in a coon's age."[31]

While feed-sack prints are often attributed to Richard Peek in the late 1930s, they actually appeared by the late 1920s. I have identified forty-three references which document the existence of feed-sack prints between 1927 and 1937. Mamie Sue Pruitt wore a dress at age nine, in 1927, made from a chicken-feed sack printed with a white background, red cloverleafs, and green leaves.[32] The

Bemis Company has samples of prints they produced in the late 1920s, and Fulton Bag Company had bags in prints when Tom Casey started work there in 1934.[33] Gracie Stowe wore cotton-sack dresses in prints before getting married in 1935.[34] Caroline Chandler told of a neighbor who wore a striped shirt made from feed sacks before he went into the Navy in 1936.[35]

Several quilts give additional evidence of the use of feed-sack prints during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Latisha Weeks (1888-1969) lived in Colquitt County and made quilts to keep her family warm, including a Crazy quilt made completely from cotton sacks when her son was born in 1930. The top is made of white sacks and a variety of prints, some with little flowers, tiny stripes, etc. The back is made from guano sacks stamped "C. O. Smith Co., Moultrie, Georgia."[36]

Also in 1930, Lucinda McEver (1872-1953) made a Monkey Wrench quilt in Cartersville, with the help of her daughter, Queenie. Made by hand, the quilt contains solid colors combined with various sugar- and feed-sack prints including jitterbug dancers and a farm scene. The back is made from sugar sacks hand-dyed green.[37]

Pansie Frost (1906-1975) lived in Walton County and made about fifty quilts. Her daughter, Perry Nelle Darby, owns a String quilt Pansie made about 1934 from a variety of feed-sack prints and solids, with four guano sacks, bleached and dyed light green, as the backing. Perry Nelle's grandmother, Ola Frost (1876-1935), also helped make this quilt, and she made Perry Nelle a doll quilt at the same time out of leftovers from Perry Nelle's feed-sack dresses. Perry Nelle later folded the doll quilt in half and made it into a pillow as a keepsake. Perry Nelle remembered wearing a feed-sack dress, yellow with flowers, to the funeral of her mother's newborn twins in 1932. The String quilt was made from scraps of Perry Nelle's, Pansie's, and Ola's dresses just after the twins' death. Her mother put Perry Nelle's name on the back and this is the one quilt she took to college in 1945.[38]

Once prints became available, Georgia women used scraps, larger pieces, and sometimes full sacks from prints in their quilts. Feed-sack prints are on the top and back of Samantha McEver's (1896-1959) Crazy Block quilt made in Colquitt County in the late 1930s. It has 180 five-inch blocks, and she called it the "Chicken Feed Quilt." The blocks include many feed-sack prints from fabric left after mak-

Figure 4. Various feed sack prints typical of the 1940s, owned and photographed by the author.

ing her daughter's dresses, and the back is four chicken-feed sacks–each a different print and color.[39]

During the 1930s and 1940s, the rolling store served residents of rural areas. People did not get to town very often, so the store came to them–about once a week. The rolling store was a pickup truck with canvas sides that rolled up for customers to see the merchandise carried that day by the vendor and fastened down when the owner travelled to the next stop to buy, sell, or trade what people had or wanted.[40]

The rolling store usually carried feed sacks, and women and girls anticipated the arrival of the rolling store even more once the prints became commonplace. Muriel Miller's family could buy feed sacks from the peddler and pick the prints they wanted for ten cents each, but they often traded fresh vegetables, potatoes, or eggs for them. Muriel's mother would get sacks of each pattern, and Muriel remembered going to school or church and seeing three or four others with dresses in the same print.[41] Perry Nelle Darby recalled the rolling store as a welcome treat. Monroe, the nearest town, was eight miles away, and her family only went there twice a year in the late 1930s; the roads were not paved, and it took all day in a one-horse wagon. When Perry Nelle's mother was low on money, she would gather up some feed sacks and sell them back to the feed mill in Gainesville for twenty-five cents each. She then used the money to buy necessities from the rolling store.[42]

The 1940s

The new feed-sack (and fertilizer, flour, and sugar) prints had a substantial impact on companies who made them, on businesses that bought them for packaging, and on housewives who recycled them during the 1940s and 1950s. The variety of colors and nearly endless number of patterns made the colorfast, washable, durable, cotton material from these attractive sacks highly desirable (see figure 4). Chicken-feed and flour packaging in the 1940s provided the majority of what Georgians later remembered as those "fabulous feed sacks." A few people, however, stated that hog feed came in the prettiest prints of all.[43]

In 1942, feed-sack companies produced and sold about fifty mil-

lion patterned sacks, most of which were recycled by American housewives.[44] Three million women and children wore clothing made from feed-sack prints. One mill making cloth for sacks claimed one thousand different designs as manufacturers attempted "to suit a wide range of tastes, from teenagers to grandmothers, and a great variety of uses."[45] In 1943 cotton-sack sales reached an all-time high, and by 1945 the greatest single use of cotton in its history was in making fabric for cotton sacks.[46]

Georgia housewives wore sack dresses and sewed them for their daughters, who wore them to school and to church, then to work or college, and beyond. Sarah Morrow wore feed-sack dresses to work at Coats & Clark along with her co-workers.[47] Lessie Gibby wore her sack dresses to work, also at Coats & Clark, and her colleagues told her she had "the most pretty dresses!" She thought those who had no sack dresses "weren't fortunate enough to have sacks."[48] Nan Curry attended college at Jacksonville State Teach-

Figure 5. Pictured at the left is the top half of page 25 in the 1944 National Cotton Council of America booklet, *A Bag of Tricks for Home Sewing.* Shown above is an apron patterned after the top illustration and a square of the same fabric, both owned and photographed by the author.

ers College in Alabama in 1943 when most of the students were girls because of World War II. Many of her clothes, including the stylish gathered and circular skirts, were made from fertilizer sacks. She remembered having a princess-style sack dress which buttoned down the front with big pearl buttons. The sack fabric had a white background filled with blue and yellow designs.[49] Alwayne Shipp taught after she was married and wore feed-sack dresses to school. She said her dresses, after being starched and ironed, were "slick as a button."[50]

During the 1930s and 1940s housewives usually wore aprons while in the kitchen or doing other chores, which often meant they left them on all day. They commonly used feed sacks for these cover-ups, not only because they were available at little or no cost, but because it generally required only one sack to make an apron. Caroline Chandler's neighbor used most of her chicken-feed sacks for the family's clothes, but when she had just one of a kind she gave it to Caroline's mother for an apron.[51] Thelma Collins had "beautiful feed sack aprons which were trimmed with lace and/or ric-rac" ranging from small dainty Sunday ones to large, everyday cover-ups (see figure 5).[52]

Figure 6. Bessie Archer as a young school teacher, c. 1896, and the front of her unnamed logo fertilizer-sacks quilt. Photographs courtesy of Anne Chamlee.

Georgia women also wore bonnets made from feed sacks in the 1930s and 1940s. Most women had gardens or did outside work on the farm, and would not think of working in the sun without this protection. The bonnets, which were heavily starched and made in various styles, usually had a wide brim in the front with a gathered ruffle across the back to cover the neck area.

Women frequently traded feed-sack prints. Billie Crumly said women exchanged with friends and neighbors to have the needed number of sacks all alike. It took three or four large feed sacks to make a dress, depending on the size of the wearer.[53] If Russell Weeks' mother had more of one kind than she needed, she swapped sacks with some of the neighbors to help them have more prints.[54]

Even after feed-sack prints became common, logo sacks continued to be used in various items, such as quilts. An unnamed quilt made by Bessie Archer (1876-1954) during World War II contains logo fertilizer sacks from the farm on the top and back, with an old quilt as the batting. She considered the quilt a failure after trying to remove the stamped logos on the front and even dyed it maroon to cover the letters. Only a trace of light pink remains, but the stamping is still readable (see figure 6). Tilmon Chamlee stated, "She was a master seamstress, but this quilt did not show her ability. She would be surprised and roll over in her grave if she knew anyone had any interest in that quilt."[55]

In addition to recycling feed-sack fabric, people also saved the heavy thread used to sew a sack. They often wound it to form a ball and kept it available for a variety of uses. I had observed a thick thread used to hand-sew seams on quilt tops and for quilting thread on older quilts for several years before being informed it was feed-sack thread.

Cotton-sack manufacturers continued to prosper during World War II. Companies such as Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills developed bags for use as sandbags and for other military uses, and made canvas tents. Also, the cotton-sack industry convinced the War Production Board to allow mills to continue using the now highly valued cotton and dyes in making sacks, primarily because of the dual use of the bags.[56] Products contained in the sacks still needed to be shipped, and the bags then provided useful fabric. The War Production Board standardized sack sizes in 1943, allowing only sizes of 2, 5, 10, 25, 50, and 100 pounds or more.[57] A 100-pound flour

sack provided a 36" x 42" piece of fabric, while a 100-pound feed sack yielded approximately 39" x 48".

While most feed-sack dresses were made for everyday use, Opal Reece recalled an unusual event in Dawsonville in May 1943 during World War II:

> Of course our graduation exercises had a patriotic theme but we wanted to go a step further and do something to contribute to the war effort. So we saved the money that we would have spent on caps and gowns and made our graduation dresses from feed sacks. They were floral design, floor length, evening dresses. We used our own individual patterns to make them, and no two were alike.

Opal still has a scrap of her dress fabric, a light background with a red-pink flowered design. She had all the white sacks she wanted from her family's country store where they bought salt and sugar in 100-pound sacks, then sold it by the pound; but she obtained her feed-sack prints from the neighbors who raised chickens.[58] Louise Walls graduated in the same class with Opal and her dress had tiers, white with blue flowers.[59]

Manufacturers of cotton sacks promoted "glamour" angles during World War II. One Fulton ad read, "When your product needs a beauty treatment brighten your package with a Fulton make-up."[60] Bag companies produced more specialty sacks and emphasized fash-

Figure 7. The Ratscat symbol designed by Fulton Bag Company's art department appeared on Fulton's specialty grain and seed sacks in the 1940s. A chemical was put into the fabric to keep rats from eating through the sacks. Photograph by the author of a Fulton sack she owns.

ion (see figure 7). This created demand for their own unique designs in response to intense competition within the sack industry.

By the end of the war, Fulton and other major sack makers kept sacks in style by hiring New York designers to plan new patterns to print on sacks. Tom Casey worked for Fulton Bag and remembered designing and printing fabric for sacks in the mid-1940s. As a salesman he was consulted for ideas and approval of planned patterns before printing the fabric. Spring prints were flowered and Fall prints came in autumn colors. He found that feed stores would stock extra feed so they could have repeats of the same print.[61] Meno Schoenbach ran the cotton mill and dye plant at Fulton, but by the mid-1940s designing for the sacks was done in New York by outside companies. Fulton supplied ideas and sketches, then the designers planned the patterns for Fulton's acceptance or rejection.[62] After William Addison was discharged from the Army in 1946 he worked at Fulton Cotton Mills. He supervised printing and dyeing of fabrics at the mill, and met with New York designers to create new patterns.[63]

The popularity of prints brought a further demand for products to be packaged in textile bags, but by the end of the 1940s three primary forces worked against the continued success of cotton sacks: competition from paper packaging and bulk delivery, changes in the agricultural economy, and growth of the commercial chicken industry. These changes prompted new strategies in order for cotton-sack manufacturers to save their markets.

As early as 1910 paper had made inroads as packaging for the same products carried by cotton sacks. Cotton-sack companies were forced to compete, and this competitive spirit helped them develop and promote cotton sacks. The Textile Bag Manufacturers Association organized in 1925 to combat the progress of paper packaging.[64] Paper bags continued to gain markets, and by 1942 they became both more economical to produce than cotton sacks and more popular with companies for packaging.[65] By the mid-1940s the economy had improved and technology had advanced in other types of packaging (such as plastic and mesh bags), again reducing the need for cotton sacks. Also, as paper-bag prices remained steady in the 1940s, cotton-sack prices increased. In 1948, the cost of a 100-pound cotton sack was thirty-two cents; a paper sack the same size cost only ten cents.[66]

In the mid-1940s a new threat surfaced. Near the end of World War II, Norman Elsas, President of Fulton Bag Company, saw a yellow concrete mixing truck as he drove out Marietta Street. He had never seen one before and stopped to watch as the truck poured ready-mixed concrete into the prepared forms. Since Fulton had been the largest single producer of cotton cement bags for many years, it struck him that this was the end! In less than four years cotton cement bags were no longer used in this country.[67]

Another important Fulton customer, Coca-Cola, had been purchasing sugar in cotton sacks, but soon realized there would be tremendous savings if sugar was brought in by bulk. Also in the late 1940s flour mills began to ship flour to bakeries in bulk.[68] With bulk shipping and multiwall paper bags, cotton-sack companies soon found decreased markets for their products.

After the establishment of large chicken farms in the late 1930s, a rapid rise in the chicken industry had occurred in Northeast Georgia centering around Gainesville and neighboring counties. Small chicken houses across the state had aggregately used a large number of chicken-feed sacks, but sales mushroomed when the big chicken farms bought truckloads and train-car shipments of feed in cotton sacks. By the 1950s, however, bulk feed replaced sacks.

The 1950s

Following World War II the economy prospered, with money and jobs more available. By the 1950s many farmers had moved to towns and cities. As people left the farms they no longer needed most of the products that came packaged in cotton sacks and the cotton-sack industry struggled to survive. Most of those remaining on farms had large farms–without chicken houses or a variety of animals, so that they did not buy feed and have feed sacks. Chicken or dairy farmers bought feed in bulk by the 1950s. Paper sacks had become much more common since they were now much cheaper than cotton sacks. In addition, people had money to buy clothes or fabric in stores, and transportation to get to town. The interest in home sewing declined, and those who did sew could now purchase fabric. So, for a number of reasons, activity in the feed-sack area dwindled.

During the 1950s, heavy advertising campaigns, along with feed-sack sewing booklets, contests, and fashion shows, proved to be among the most successful attempts to promote cotton sacks and prolong the feed-sack era. In 1950 the National Cotton Council made its first documentary film for television, "The Lady Bags a Bargain." Its public relations staff wrote the script based on a farm family and its use of feed sacks. Ford Boyd handled the production and promotion, and played the part of the farmer. In addition to a number of spots on TV, the film was also shown in schools and meetings.

The Household Science Institute, The Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, and later the National Cotton Council, published and distributed yearly booklets encouraging the use of cotton sacks as early as the late 1920s, through the early 1960s. Titles and contents varied slightly as each booklet contained ideas and uses for feed sacks, giving colors of the year for home and fashion. Patterns, showing a picture of the item and how many sacks it took to make the article, were available by mail–for fifteen cents each in 1944 (refer back to figure 5). The booklets emphasized mothers and daughters working together and the bonds established as young girls learned to sew.[70] The 1954 booklet contains this realistic illustration:

> A family owns 100 layers, two cows, and five hogs. Each month, eleven 100-pound bags of feed are needed for the hens, four bags for the cows, and one for the hogs. Since each 100-pound bag contains more than one yard of cloth, these sixteen emptied bags mean more than twenty-one yards of fabric available every month for home sewing–fabric obtainable in pastel tones, solid colors, gay floral designs, abstract figures, stripes, and plaids.

Young girls learning to sew commonly used feed sacks in 4-H projects and classes at school. Helen Barrett received some solid-colored sacks in 1954 and thought they were beautiful. She picked solid pink to make a dress for the 4-H Revue. The dress had a full skirt with a sleeveless bodice and featured a white Peter Pan collar made of white feed sacks. She thought solid-color feed sacks were high-fashion and remembered wearing the dress for a group picture at the District 4-H Contest.[72]

The yearly sewing booklets promoted "Save With Cotton Bags"

contests at state and regional fairs around the United States from 1953 through 1963. The first annual National Cotton Bag Sewing Contest received 30,000 articles entered in five categories.[73] The 1954 contest included eight categories, with cash prizes in each category. As an example, the first place quilt winner received $5; the second place, $3; and the third place, $1.50. The Sweepstakes Prize of a Pfaff portable zig-zag sewing machine valued at $350 was awarded to the person winning the greatest total of cash prizes at each fair. Therefore, organizers encouraged participants to enter all categories in order to have a better chance for the grand prize. The winning entry from each fair became eligible for the national competition and the chance to be International Cotton Bag Sewing Queen with over $2,500 in prizes and an expense-paid week in Chicago.[74]

Freda Rachels (then Lunsford) won the Sweepstakes Prize, the top award in the "Save With Cotton Bags" contest, at the Georgia State Fair in 1953. She won in the Mother-Daughter outfit category and several other divisions. Everything entered had to be made from cotton sacks, except trimmings. Freda used chicken-feed and hog-feed sacks from their farm. She joined the contest at a club where she belonged through Ann Rozier, the home demonstration agent in Hancock County. Until Freda won her Pfaff sewing machine (which she still uses), she had only a treadle machine.[75]

Freda's cousin, Minnie Frances Avant, won the "Save With Cotton Bags" contest Sweepstakes Prize at the Georgia State Fair the next year. She figured if Freda could win, so could she–and she did. Minnie Frances won first place in the Blouse, Stuffed Toy, and Mother-Daughter Dress Set divisions, and second place in the Pajamas and Quilt categories. Her Log Cabin feed-sack quilt includes a variety of prints; it has never been used and is in excellent condition.[76]

Electa Harris, a sister-in-law of Minnie Frances, entered the "Save With Cotton Bags" contest at the Georgia State Fair in 1955. To enter the contest she made mother-daughter dresses, window curtains, place mats and napkins, a stuffed toy, pajamas, and a quilt. Each category was judged separately, and she won cash prizes in several categories. Electa hand-pieced a Double Wedding Ring quilt from chicken-feed sacks, some from feed they used on the farm

and others bought from neighbors. She dyed the background for the quilt top and the backing fabric with a packaged yellow dye.[77]

The 1960s to the Present

The "Save With Cotton Bags" contests continued through 1963 in Georgia and across the nation and helped extend the feed-sack era into the 1960s. Cotton Bag Sewing Contests were held at forty-one major fairs around the nation in 1961, with a 25 percent increase in the number of entries. In 1962 this expanded to forty-four fairs.[78]

Times did change, however; cheaper paper and plastic replaced cotton as packaging materials and bulk deliveries took over the quantity orders for feed, fertilizer, flour, and sugar. Most of the major textile-bag companies diversified to other forms of packaging and are still in business today. Fulton Bag Company continued producing cotton sacks until 1958 (see figure 8). Then the company manufactured other types of bags until it was sold and operated under a new name in 1968.[79] Fulton had remained a family owned and operated Georgia company for a full century through three generations of the Elsas family.[80] The history of Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills paralleled the growth and development of Atlanta, as the Fulton plant became the largest industry in Atlanta and one of the leading textile industries in the South.[81]

In 1961, in one of the last efforts to continue the survival of cotton sacks, Richard Peek, President of Percy Kent Bag Company, sent Marshall Coker and Dawson Martin to do market testing from Atlanta across northern Georgia to the Carolinas to determine how housewives used the small 10-pound flour sacks. Georgia was considered a low-income state where housewives would utilize what others did not. They talked to women in the area, contacted home economists, and visited stores, but the only meaningful new information they found was that the 24" x 27" print sacks were just the right size to use as seat covers for chairs.[82]

In the early 1960s feed sacks became harder to locate; cotton-sack packaging was soon to be a thing of the past. Some housewives, however, continued to use the sack fabric in sewing projects. Around 1970, Alma Cummings (1897-1985) made a Monkey Wrench quilt by hand and included feed- and fertilizer-sack prints from their farm.

Figure 8. The last cotton sack made at Fulton Bag Company in Atlanta, November 28, 1958. Photograph by the author at the Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta.

She did a lot of sewing, and her great-grandson, Robert Brewer, remembered the feed-sack shirts she made for him. He said she made quilts only to keep warm and would never have expected them to have any historical significance.[83]

A few companies continue to produce cotton sacks in the 1990s. Friedman Bag Company in California, a primary manufacturer of sacks since 1927, makes plain and logo cotton flour and seed bags.[84] HUBCO, Inc. (Hutchinson Bag Corporation), a major sack producer since the early 1920s, makes some cotton sacks in prints. These are used mostly for packaging flour and rice and are found primarily on the West Coast.[85] HUBCO buys fabric for their sacks from Crystal Springs Print Works in Chickamauga. The Georgia plant determines the prints and sends the fabric to HUBCO to be made into sacks.[86]

Quilters and collectors have renewed an interest in feed sacks in the 1990s. Over 700 feed-sack club members (mostly quilters) share ideas, swap squares, hold conventions and retreats, and provide a network for questions and information.[87] A Georgia quilter recently made a feed-sack quilt with 3,000 pieces; another collector has over 1,000 full sacks; and I have accumulated 5,192 fabrics ranging from 3" squares to full sacks.[88] A Florida collector has catalogued 12,587 different cotton-sack prints since 1990.[89]

Current reproduction fabrics on the market include thirty feed-sack prints, new in the summer of 1996. They feature a variety of colors and patterns representative of 1940s feed sacks. Tommie Freeman, who has a quilt business finding homes for older quilts, sees many quilts made from feed sacks. She often has quilts with four feed sacks on the back, and with feed or fertilizer printing still on them.[90]

Feed sacks have always had both a functional and an intangible emotional quality. There are many packed away in closets, attics, and basements–some still waiting to be found. They also remain in the "memories of millions of home sewers and quiltmakers who remember selecting, trading, hoarding, soaking, starching, ironing, and sewing the distinctive coarse-woven fabric."[91] Feed sacks are a treasured part of our past and provide an example of the interaction between the marketing strategies of manufacturers and the needs and desires of consumers for more than a century. The feed-sack era is gone, but not forgotten.

Conclusions

Manufacturing cotton textile bags was an active industry from the mid-1800s through the 1950s. Many men and women living today all across America reused these plain or stamped logo sacks, and later the solid colors and prints that became so popular. Many Georgians share the sentiments expressed by Johnny Klugh after he talked to relatives about feed sacks at his family reunion: "We had forgotten just how pretty many of the designs were and just how nice many of the items made with feed sacks were; we had a good time reminiscing."[92]

The earliest use of cloth from sacks came about when practical women used what they had available. During the boll weevil depression and droughts in the South in the 1920s, and the Great Depression in the 1930s, most rural families endured financial hardships and feed sacks became a necessary and meaningful part of their lives. Alice Jordan's family represented many others in the 1930s, "We didn't have any money, I don't know what we would have done without those sacks."[93] Those I talked to, however, repeatedly referred to those years as "hard times but happy times." Life seemed much simpler and families were close.

As I talked with men and women about feed sacks, and received letters from others, many of them expressed the same or similar sentiments. Men and women reminiscing about their growing-up years expressed a nostalgia relating not only to feed sacks but also to those years. Opal Reece began her letter with, "This is fun, going down Memory Lane in search of feed sacks!"[94] Alma Burr ended her letter, "You brought back fond memories for me. This is all so very exciting!"[95] Jerry Andrews said, "My grandchildren are fascinated with them and love to hear about them. I hope they will always appreciate these loving 'threads of life.'"[96]

My "bits and pieces" of quilt history are feed sacks. Sally Garoutte's encouragement to researchers applies to feed-sack research as it does to other textile- and quilt-related studies: "We come to an understanding of our history only through small steps . . . and each one is a challenge for someone else to go a little further . . . quilt history is a continuing process. . . . There is much yet to uncover."[97]

I encourage others to tap men and women near them for the

memories and stories they can provide. I believe "the strong but aging voices of the farm women who bought and coveted cotton bags for a myriad of household uses need to be recorded before they are lost to legend."[98]

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