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Alabama Cotton and Bemis Bags Pieced into Quilt History

Sarah Bliss Wright

From 1929 until 1980, Bemis Bro. Bag Company operated a cotton mill and bag plant in the center of a mill village called Bemiston, near Talladega, Alabama. Bemis, at that time the largest cotton bag manufacturer in the United States, influenced the textile industry as a whole through innovative research, development, and marketing. Few Alabamians are aware of the significant role that Alabama cotton played, through Bemis bags, in providing feedsacks for the nation in the second quarter of the twentieth century. A stack of quilts purchased at a Bemiston estate sale in 2011 prompted this study of the Bemis Bro. Bag Company and the discovery that Alabama cotton and Bemis bags are pieced into quilts not only in Alabama, but all over the nation.

Twenty-three quilts lay folded on a cot in a long-vacant house in Bemiston, an historic mill village near Talladega, Alabama. Discovered at an estate sale in 2011, the quilts were of different patterns, some familiar and traditional, some free-style, and one merely of large rectangles sewn together. Grimy places where, years ago, hands pulled at the covers, spots and stains from a decade or more of lying dormant in heat and humidity, and a dinginess that comes of age only made them more interesting. The quiltmakers, Leola Young Heard (1872-1959) and her daughter, Elizabeth Heard Bean (1891-1979), created the quilts in rural Randolph County, Alabama, during the first half of the twentieth century (fig. 1).



The quilts, purchased from the estate as a collection, are relatively uniform in size, varying from seventy-one to seventy-nine inches long to fifty-nine to sixty-eight inches wide (figs. 2-4). Most have off-white sacks as backing, but sage, pink, yellow, light blue, and print fabric are also represented, along with faint reminders of “Rover Dog Food” and “Bryant’s Feeds”—stubborn, colorfast logos still visible after more than six decades. The brightly colored quilt tops display an array of patterned and solid fabrics that vary in thread count and quality. The limited amount of fabric available to Leola and Elizabeth is particularly evident in a Postage Stamp quilt with a solid yellow border on two sides, sashing from a different quilt as the border on the third side, and a strip of leftover pieced blocks on the fourth side (fig. 2). A Log Cabin quilt that artfully uses scraps of extra blocks from other quilts is evidence of the makers’ extreme frugality (fig. 4).

Feedsacks—A Resource for Resourceful Women

Feedsack quilts have long been admired, documented, and shared by quilters and quilt scholars. Quilt documentation days all over the United States have recorded stories of women who created bed coverings from colorful, patterned fabrics that started out as feedsacks. In-depth research published in *Uncoverings* include Laurel Horton’s “The Textile Industry and South Carolina Quilts” (1988), Pat Nickols’ “The Use of Cotton Sacks in Quiltmaking” (1988), and Ruth Rhoades’ “Feed Sacks in Georgia: Their Manufacture, Marketing, and Consumer Use” (1997). Loris Connolly’s 1992 *Dress* article on feedsack fashions, “Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story,” recounts the evolution of the feedsack.¹ Lu Ann Jones’ account of Southern women, feed bags, and fashion is published in *Mama Learned Us to Work; Farm Women in the New South*.² Gloria Nixon’s *Feedsack Secrets; Fashion from Hard Times* gives a history of dress prints, and Anna Lue Cook’s *Identification and Value Guide to Textile Bags* offers practical information for collectors.³ However, even with all of these excellent works, Mary Elizabeth Johnson Huff, author of *The American Quilt* (1993), *Mississippi Quilts* (2001), and currently at work on *Alabama Quilts*, affirmed the need for additional research:

Up to this point, there has been no substantial study of feed sack manufacturing in Alabama and the ultimate use of those feed sacks in quilts. The research into Bemis Bro. Bag Company of Talladega County, Alabama, and the



intricacies of the printing and marketing of the patterned sacks that found their way into clothing and quilts of a certain generation of Alabamians is a great contribution to the knowledge of Alabama quilts.⁴

Leola and Elizabeth joined the ranks of resourceful women across the nation who created quilts from feedsack fabrics. The Heard and Bean families made a living as farmers—typically frugal and industrious, like other Alabama farming families. The two generations lived in a modest frame house in the Rockdale community, four miles northwest of Wedowee, in Randolph County. Gravel and dirt roads connected the small communities scattered throughout the county. Trips to town for supplies were infrequent, but Leola and Elizabeth bought coffee in cans and flour in sacks from a man who stopped by to sell provisions from the back of a wagon.⁵ “Rolling stores,” wagons or trucks modified as mobile stores, roamed Alabama backcountry dirt roads, offering cloth, needles, thread, and a variety of other goods and foods.⁶ The women used what they had, creatively repurposing the cotton sack fabric for their families’ quilts. The quilts they made together from the mid-1930s through the mid-1950s passed down to Elizabeth’s daughter Alice Bean Johns (1915-1986), who kept them in her home in Bemiston, the mill village built for employees by the Bemis Bro. Bag Company near Talladega, Alabama.

The discovery of these quilts in Bemiston posed an interesting question: could the cotton sacks used to make these quilts have been manufactured right there at the Bemis Bro. Bag Company? The Bemis Company opened the Bemiston mill in 1929, bought cotton from local farmers, and used it to produce fabric for bags. Descendants of Leola and Elizabeth confirm that, like most Alabama farmers, they grew some cotton as a cash crop, along with food for the family.⁷ Could the same hands that picked the cotton used to make fabric for feedsacks later have bought that sack full of feed and used the fabric to make a quilt? The answer is in the history of Bemis Bro. Bag Company, the largest textile bag manufacturer in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, whose commitment to superior quality, consumer-driven products kept it at the forefront of the cotton bag industry throughout the era of feedsack quilts.⁸



Bemis Bro. Bag Company History

Judson Moss Bemis founded J. M. Bemis & Company in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1858. He produced high-quality, machine-sewn textile bags that could be imprinted with customer logos in multiple colors. He guaranteed every one of his bags against tearing. That guarantee, combined with increased demand for sacks of all kinds during the Civil War, resulted in rapid expansion of the new company. In the 1870s, Bemis expanded its business from simply manufacturing cotton bags to making the cloth for bags. By the early 1880s, still with just one cotton mill and bag factory in St. Louis, the company ranked second in volume in the nation to its rival, H. & L. Chase Bag Co., thought to be the first bag company in the United States.⁹

Minneapolis, Minnesota, became the center of grain milling activity in the United States in the early 1880s. Knowing that larger quantities of flour would require a larger supply of flour sacks, Bemis opened its first branch factory in Minneapolis in 1881. Every bag now carried the Bemis trademark of “Biddy,” the cat-in-the-bag logo modeled after a “championship mouser” at the St. Louis factory (fig. 5). In choosing Biddy for the company logo, Judson Moss Bemis wanted to emphasize that in “letting the cat out of the bag” he had nothing to hide and that he dealt fairly with his customers. The company flourished and the second branch in Omaha, Nebraska, opened in 1887 to meet the growing demand for their cotton bags.¹⁰ Evidence of Bemis Bro. Bag Company’s rising leadership in the textile bag industry is documented in Judson Moss Bemis’s 1888 appearance before the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance regarding a proposed tariff on imported jute. Mr. Bemis stated, “I am here in the interest of nearly half the bag manufacturers of this country.” At that time, twenty-five bag companies were scattered across the nation.¹¹

Bemis Bro. Bag Company’s success in Minneapolis and Omaha led to new bag factories in New Orleans (1891), Superior, Wisconsin (1896), San Francisco (1897), Indianapolis (1900), and Memphis (1900). To supplement the fabric production of its original mill (Home Cotton Mills in St. Louis), Bemis built a cotton mill near Jackson, Tennessee in 1900. (The company-sponsored village that arose around the new mill became the town of Bemis, Tennessee.) Acquisition of a bleachery and ink factory in Indianapolis meant that rolls of fabric produced at Bemis mills could be shipped in, bleached and printed, then shipped out to Bemis bag plants. A Bemis Bro. Bag Company



advertisement in the October 1901 issue of *Modern Miller* boasted that “more than half of the flour milled annually in the United States goes into Bemis Bags.” Expansion continued to Kansas City (1903), Seattle (1905), Houston (1906), and Winnipeg, Canada (1906).

By 1909, the number of bag companies in the United States had grown to 109, with Bemis Bro. Bag Company acknowledged to be the largest.¹² In 1913, the combined production of those companies was 600 million cotton bags.¹³ Though the Bemis Bro. Bag Company had diversified by adding jute and burlap to its textile bag production, the company’s corporate officers realized that the increased demand for cotton bags required them to have their own dependable supply of high-quality cotton, as reliance on cotton fabric from independent textile mills could potentially limit their ability to meet demand. The success of the Bemis, Tennessee, mill led the Bemis Bro. Bag Company to build another mill and village in Alabama, the heart of the nation’s cotton belt. The new town of Bemiston, three miles southwest of Talladega, was added to the map in 1929.

The Bemis Mills: Bemis and Bemiston

Bemis Bro. Bag Company built both of its mills—Bemis, Tennessee, and Bemiston, Alabama—in locations with established railroads, cheap coal, moving water to supply the mills’ steam engines, and cotton fields producing an abundance of high-quality cotton. Bemis Company attracted plenty of labor for its new mills—employees eager for a steady paycheck, comfortable housing, and company benefits. Wayne Flynt, Alabama’s pre-eminent twentieth century historian, describes the attraction that must have led quiltmaker Elizabeth Heard Bean’s daughter, Alice, to take a job at the new Bemiston mill: “Most mill workers were rural poor whites who gave up the uneven struggle on the land for the regularity of life and salary in a mill town. Whatever inspired them, women constituted an ever-expanding portion of textile workers.”¹⁴

Cotton mill villages were not unusual. Jacquelyn Hall’s book, *Like a Family; The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, presents a remarkable history of mill villages in the Carolinas in the first third of the twentieth century.¹⁵ When Bemiston became Alabama’s eighty-third cotton mill, most mills in the state offered subsidized employee housing that was, in some cases, better than the simple, unimproved homes many rural Alabamians left



behind.¹⁶ In Gadsden, Dwight Mill village's brightly colored, New England style cottages rivaled the planned villages at Huntsville's Merrimack Mill, Dallas Mill, and Ellawhite Mill. However, in the early 1900s, even the best-built villages contained houses close together without indoor plumbing. And, as the communities grew older or as profits decreased, some of the companies were not meticulous in maintaining the villages, resulting in living conditions that gradually declined. Avondale Mill Village (Birmingham), by no means a model for the early-twentieth-century textile industry, gained notoriety in 1912 from an unflattering account printed in a national magazine exposing child labor and squalid conditions.¹⁷ In 1929, when Bemis Bro. Bag Company built the new town of Bemiston, employee housing at other Alabama mills varied from well-kept cottages to run-down shotguns.

Albert F. Bemis, the son of Bemis Company's founder, set out to change the status quo of mill villages when he designed the town of Bemis, Tennessee, in 1900. An 1893 graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a degree in civil engineering, he was familiar with the controversies regarding industrial towns and with the latest innovations in building technology, and was determined that Bemis employees, who made the mill's operations possible, should be satisfied not only with their working conditions, but with their surroundings and living conditions as well.¹⁸ Twenty-nine years after the creation of Bemis, Tennessee, the same concept, with considerable improvements, was used in the planning of Bemiston, Alabama.

Life in the new, up-to-date town of Bemiston was idyllic for its residents. The community boasted modern houses, tree-lined paved streets, sidewalks, a dairy, grocery store where food was sold at cost, service station, post office, theater, beauty parlor, fire department, recreation center, ballpark, churches, and an elementary school. Every house had a bathroom with hot and cold water. Bemiston homes had a garage, though few employees owned a car.¹⁹ Such a carefully planned community ensured a happy, productive workforce.

Bemis designed the two mills to meet specific needs of the company. Bemis, Tennessee, produced five-hundred-pound rolls of high quality, fine-thread sheeting. Bemiston, Alabama, used high grade cotton for fine-quality sewing thread, and lower grade cotton to produce rolls of osnaburg fabric, twine and yarn-like thread, and heavy-duty Bemis A bags (fig. 6).²⁰ Bemis, Tennessee, shipped rolls of sheeting to the bleachery and printing factory, then to bag plants to be made into dress print bags. Bemiston's osnaburg, less tightly woven than sheeting, was sent directly to bag plants to be made into



plain bags imprinted with customer logos. Bemiston's "Bemis Special" thread, manufactured specifically for bag sewing and closure from the highest quality cotton, became quilting thread in the hands of frugal housewives. Bemiston made Bemis A bags, from raw cotton to finished bag, and shipped them directly to customers all over the nation. Railroads connected Bemis mills, bag plants, and customers; 1915-1950 marks the age of rail transportation dominance in the nation. In 1930, 250,000 miles of rail network accounted for sixty-five percent of all the freight tonnage carried in the United States.²¹

Cotton — From Field to Fabric

During the first half of the twentieth century, cotton was the principal cash crop of the South. The prevalence of cotton is easy to understand, as the per-acre value of cotton was about twice that of corn, the second most-profitable cash crop.²² At the turn of the century, the United States cotton belt, with Alabama at its center, produced more cotton per square mile than any other region in the world.²³ In 1939, cotton accounted for thirty-five percent of the value of farm output in the eight leading cotton producing states. Although acreage per farm was small in many cases, seventy-nine to ninety percent of all farms in Alabama grew cotton.²⁴ A cotton gin could be found wherever two roads met. Waring Hazlehurst, Manager of the Cotton Buying Division for Bemis from 1952 until 1980, stated, "It is a fact that West Tennessee and Alabama cotton was very high quality, and because it was locally grown, the cost was lower than lesser grades from other areas because there was no transportation involved. All of this made Bemis and Bemiston very productive and competitive."²⁵

The Bemis mill and the Bemiston mill each had its own cotton buyer who bought cotton from a ginner, from an agent, or from a middle-man who bought cotton from small farms in rural Alabama and west Tennessee on commission at one dollar per bale. Cotton, baled and un-baled, arrived at the mills by rail, truck, or mule wagon. The buyer would grade it according to cleanliness and color, and assign one of six classifications established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Cotton Standards: Good Middling (best), Strict Middling, Middling, Strict Low Middling, Low Middling, and Strict Good Ordinary (fig. 7).²⁶ According to Waring Hazlehurst:

Before cotton picking was mechanized, people hand-picked cotton from the same fields two or three times because bolls



didn't mature all at once. By the second and third picking, immature bolls had weathered and discolored, giving the cotton a tint of color. Good Middling was the best, and each grade lower had more color and trash. Good Middling was sent to Bemiston for high quality sewing thread. Middling and Strict Middling were sent to Bemis for sheeting. Lower grades of cotton were used at Bemiston where the color didn't matter. The flecks and natural color in osnaburg and Bemis A bags was due to the leaf trash and discoloration of the bolls.²⁷

By 1930, Bemis Bro. Bag Company operated cotton mills, a bleachery, ink factory, and bag factories across the nation, thereby controlling every stage of production, from cotton plant to finished bag. The cotton bags, bleached and unbleached, ranged in size from a salt pocket to a 220-pound bag, and could be imprinted in permanent ink with the customer's logo. Proofs of original artwork for customers' bags produced at the Bemis Seattle Bag Plant in the 1930s give an idea of the variety of use of Bemis bags: 239 flour sack customers, 103 feed and grain, and 29 miscellaneous—including sugar, rice, cement, walnuts, fertilizer, macaroni, sand, and soap.²⁸

Cotton Sacks Find a Secondary Market

The typical rural household re-used cotton bags, particularly in the South and Midwest.²⁹ The Great Depression left many American housewives with little choice other than to be creative in clothing their families—creativity given a boost by *Sewing with Flour Bags, A Handbook of Suggestions and Instruction*, published by the Household Science Institute in Chicago in 1923. The Textile Bag Manufacturers Association reacted to depression-era declining sales by joining forces with the Millers National Federation in 1935 to discourage millers from re-filling textile bags, calling it “unsanitary.” Instead, they encouraged millers to purchase bags that would have a secondary use in American households, and they published *Sewing With Cotton Bags* to encourage housewives to re-use bags.³⁰ But secondary use of bags became an organized effort on November 21, 1938, when the first meeting of the National Cotton Council of America (NCC), representing cotton producers, ginners, warehousemen, merchants, and cottonseed crushers, convened at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1940, the NCC launched the “Sewing With Cotton Bags” promotion that continued for



more than two decades, offering free booklets: *Needle Magic with Cotton Bags*, *A Bag of Tricks for Home Sewing*, *Bag Magic*, *How to Sew and Save with Cotton Bags*, *Idea Book for Sewing With Cotton Bags*, *Thrifty Thrills with Cotton Bags*.³¹ In 1941, textile manufacturers—including bag companies—became the NCC's sixth industry segment, forging a national partnership to market primary and secondary use of cotton bags.³²

Cotton bag companies looked for ways to increase sales and stifle competition from paper manufacturers who were moving into the lucrative market.³³ Even though Bemis Company itself had begun to manufacture paper bags, textile bags were still its principal product. Bemis began to print the National Cotton Council's offer on its bags: "Free, with our compliments! A book of new ideas for sewing with cotton bags. Send your name and address with our brand name to the National Cotton Council, P.O. Box 76, Memphis, Tennessee."³⁴ Loris Connolly, in a 1992 article for *Dress* magazine, sums up the industry-changing marketing strategy: "Developing along with this new bag market was the 'modern' era of packaging and industrial psychology, whose influence transposed bags from passive conveyors of a product into a dynamic means for furthering product sales."³⁵

Since the late 1800s, colorfast ink had been the standard for printing brand names, artwork, and description of contents on plain cotton bags. But when re-use of bags became a secondary marketing opportunity, Bemis directed its Indianapolis ink factory to develop washout inks that could be removed from the fabric with soap and water, boosting the popularity of Bemis bags with housewives weary of the hard work of removing stubborn logos (fig. 8). With the introduction and immediate popularity of patterned "dress print" fabric bags—including Bemis's fine quality dress print, "Bemilin," introduced in 1940—new problems arose.³⁶ Washout inks could not be successfully used in printing brands directly on dress print bags because the brand was very difficult, if not impossible, to read against the patterns of the cloth (fig. 9). Paper labels that could be pasted to the front of the bag seemed a solution, but the labels were easily torn in shipping (unsatisfactory to the primary customer) and disintegrated when wet and were hard to remove (unsatisfactory to the secondary customer).³⁷ Bemis began to work on a new soak-off label, but a patent on the label was delayed by the textile needs of World War II.



World War II Gives Dress Print Bags a Boost

With the advent of World War II, feedsack fashions moved out of the Depression Era and into a wartime way of life. The War Production Board (WPB), formed in 1942 as a United States government agency, regulated the production and allocation of materials for the war effort. Because of the huge need for cotton fabric for the armed forces, one of the most stringent and enduring WPB directives involved regulations designed to prevent crucial textiles and fabrics from being depleted by civilian clothing production.³⁸

In March, 1942, WPB rated cotton-bagging at A2, only one notch below military cotton cloth, because bags were essential to the delivery of goods of all kinds to civilians at home and to soldiers abroad. Limitation Order L-99 allocated a specific percentage of certain looms to the manufacture of bag fabrics, forcing all heavy-goods cotton mills to devote twenty to forty percent of their looms to cotton-bagging.³⁹ The War Production Board directive soon appeared in the *Florence (Alabama) Times Daily*:

The government ordered the cotton textile industry today to convert approximately half of its facilities to war production within the next sixty days. Under terms of the order, cotton mills must convert specified percentages of their looms, now making various cotton fabrics commonly used in clothing and home furnishing, to production of bag osnaburg—a coarse bagging material—and bag sheeting. Effect of the action will be to double production of material required for sand bags, camouflage cloth, and food and agricultural bagging.⁴⁰

Imports of jute and burlap had been suspended during the war, so some Bemis looms had already converted to weaving cotton fabrics. A 1942 report in the *Business and Finance* section of *Time* magazine confirmed Bemis Bro. Bag Company's increase in production of all types of cotton bags, and its pre-eminence in the industry: "Bemis Bro. Bag Co., No. 1 U.S. bagmaker, last week reported that, while burlap-bag output was down eighty percent, cotton and paper-bag production was up fifty percent."⁴¹ The wartime need for more "agricultural bagging" meant a huge boost to secondary use, particularly of dress print bags.

WPB Limitation Order L-85 subjected the women's apparel industry to strict standards in order to conserve material, machinery, and manpower, making ready-made clothing and dress fabric even scarcer. The National



Association of Dress Manufacturers launched L-85 with a joint fashion exhibit and war bond drive staged in the Rockefeller Plaza's Rainbow Room on June 25, 1942, after which the pattern industry saw a massive popular resurgence as home sewing became the norm for most garments.⁴² The Bemis and Bemiston cotton mills ran around-the-clock shifts to increase fabric production, meeting the needs of soldiers and housewives.⁴³ Bemiston converted its entire operation to the production of sand bags, and, since cotton bagging was considered essential to the war effort, the Bemis mill increased production of Bemilin dress print fabric, supplying feedsacks in colorfully printed fabrics to grateful women across the nation. The *Gettysburg Times* reported the increased demand for cotton bags in August, 1942:

...indications are that a ready market will be found for the approximately billion and a half yards of cotton bagging that the industry is making under orders from the War Production Board, according to the Cotton-Textile Institute. In fact, markets for cotton bags right now are much larger than most mills anticipated. Flour and feed mills in the Middle and Far West are buying cotton containers in large volume and indications are that the potato crop in Maine and Long Island will be wrapped in cotton.⁴⁴

As wartime production drew to a close in 1945, Bemis maintained its position in the packaging industry by finding out what the customer wanted and marketing to that demand. Secondary use of cotton bags clearly influenced the textile industries. If, after the war, used bags continued to be made into clothing and articles for the home instead of being re-used as bags, the market for new bags would correspondingly increase. Bemis's research regarding women's preferences for pattern, type of label, and other factors affecting the utility of cotton bag material for sewing yielded this obvious conclusion: bags made from good quality cotton fabric printed with colorful designs vastly increased the possible use of bags for sewing. Even though the dress print bag cost five to ten cents more than a plain bag, Bemilin bags provided good value because, along with the flour or feed, the purchaser got more than a yard and a half of usable cloth.

Bemis Band-Label—A Patented Improvement

The quality of Bemilin dress print fabric compared favorably with



material sold by the yard at dry goods counters. To solve the problem of printing on these attractively patterned bags, the company developed the Bemis Band-Label, a paper band encircling the bag laterally and laminated to the fabric. The paper band, printed with brand name and product information, easily soaked off in water, leaving the cloth unmarked and ready for use. Bemis's application for a U.S. Patent for its Band-Label, filed May 10, 1944, clarified the need for a new type of labeling: "It should be understood that today many bags are composed of so-called dress prints made in fast colors, which after a bag has served its purpose may be used for making clothing and the like."⁴⁵ The Band-Label provided the additional value of greater visibility of product information and better stability when transporting and stacking filled bags. "Another advantage...is that a large printing area is presented by the label and it also acts as a protective girth-wise band around the bag fabric."⁴⁶ Ad campaigns were launched targeting both primary and secondary customers: "FBS means your brand is displayed Front, Back, Sides on Bemis Band-Label bags. No matter how the bags are stacked, your brand is bound to show. Made of wet-strength paper, the Band-Label is easy to remove in one piece and it doesn't clog your washing machines or drains."⁴⁷ The new labeling was put to use on all Bemilil bags and some plain bags well before the patent was received March 2, 1948 (fig. 10).

The Feedsack Sways Fashion

Bemis ads in 1947 clearly touted secondary use by housewives in its marketing to feed and flour mills. "Demand for double-purpose, dress-print bags began sweeping the country years ago. It's bigger than ever now. Take advantage of this demand by packing your feed in Bemis Bemilil Bags."⁴⁸ "Style Your Feeds in Bemilil Prints. Women Go for These New York Fashions!"⁴⁹ Bemis corporate executives chose patterns for Bemilil dress print bags from original sketches by New York designers. Ten new designs were put into circulation each month to keep up with fashion changes, and the ten oldest designs were taken out of production.⁵⁰

Because some dress print patterns proved much more popular than others, the Bemis Market Research Department sent representatives to feed stores with a sample book and a survey to pre-test the popularity of patterns before they were printed on hundreds of thousands of yards of fabric. Researchers



asked each woman who came into the store to select the ten best designs in order of her preference. The sample designs receiving the most favorable votes were dubbed the “Panel-Picked Patterns” and marketed accordingly. “Who knows best what women want in fabrics for dresses, curtains, etc.? Why, the women who use these fabrics, of course.”⁵¹

The survey results, analyzed to determine the general types of design, color combinations, and pattern characteristics most preferred, were used by the designers in New York to more effectively create sample patterns for future surveys.⁵² To further refine targeted regional marketing, employees at each Bemis bag plant selected the patterns they liked best, indicating the patterns women in their region would favor.⁵³ According to Leon Droll, Vice President of the Bemis Textile Division, “It was always a big event to select the patterns for the coming year. It was usually done by the girls in the office from a catalog of patterns. They would look at fashion magazines and, after much thought, select the patterns.”⁵⁴

The newest trends in garment and fabric styles typically moved from the higher- to lower-income level customers and from urban areas into the less densely populated rural areas. The farm wife had never been considered a target market by the fashion industry. However, the impact of economic depression, war, and changing demands for cotton fabric culminated in a keen interest in the purchasing preferences of the farm wife, influencing business practices and policy decisions of textile companies, trade organizations, and textile designers.⁵⁵

The Bemis Bro. Bag Company corporate officers in St. Louis, intent upon producing the best quality bags possible, sent a message to the cotton buyers at the mills that they wanted the cleanest cotton available in order to produce the highest quality print bags on the market.⁵⁶ New marketing efforts to increase the use of emptied bags by housewives included a twenty-minute motion picture, *The King's Other Life*, the complete story of cotton bags from cotton field to cotton dress. Made available without cost to rural, civic, educational, or business groups in any part of the country, the movie highlighted life in Bemiston, Alabama.⁵⁷

Bemis Bro. Bag Company Serves Customers Across America

By 1948, Bemis Bro. Bag Company covered the nation with sales offices in Baltimore, Boston, Buffalo, Boise, Brooklyn, Chicago, Charlotte, Denver,



Detroit, East Pepperell in Massachusetts, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Louisville, Memphis, Minneapolis, Mobile, New York City, New Orleans, Norfolk, Oklahoma City, Omaha, Orlando, Peoria, Pittsburgh, St. Helens in Oregon, St. Louis, Salina, Salt Lake City, Seattle, San Francisco, Wichita, and Wilmington in California.⁵⁸ Regional traveling salesmen called on customers and took orders for bags produced by and shipped from the nearest Bemis bag plant: Seattle, Omaha, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Buffalo, Brooklyn, Jacksonville, Memphis, New Orleans, Houston, Los Angeles, or San Francisco.

Textile bag manufacturers successfully kept paper bags from gaining ground through the Depression and World War II by promoting secondary use of cotton bags to rural housewives. By mid-century, practicality and marketing steered urban housewives toward the feedsack trend, making the re-use of cotton bags a way of life in the average American household, from country farms to city apartments. No longer did feedsack clothing, dish towels, or quilts carry a stigma of poverty or farm life. Selling flour sacks in the city, an untapped market for bag companies, was a recycling idea that made sense, as reported in Tennessee's *Jackson Sun*:

Taking a cue from thrifty and fashion-wise rural sewing circles, city housewives recently decided they could put the cotton bag in action, too. Not having a stock of feed bags at her disposal as did her friends on the farm, the city homemaker found a substitute at her bakery. Since bakers order their flour in huge quantities, it is delivered in large-size bags. Some housewives persuaded their bakers to launder and sell them the empty flour bags. Other bakers all over the country liked the idea and began to make extra profits by selling their laundered flour sacks to women who sew.⁵⁹

For many years, bakeries had used heavy-duty Bemis A bags imprinted with the bakery name to be filled and then returned to the mill to be re-filled until the bag wore out. The more times the baker re-used the bag, the less the investment cost. When twenty states passed laws forbidding the re-use of bags for food products, competition from paper bag manufacturers increased.⁶⁰ Flour in single-use dress print bags that cost 32 cents (instead of



10 cents for a paper bag) seemed to increase the cost of doing business. To convince bakers to buy the single-use bags, the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association and the National Cotton Council produced a ten-minute movie, *Prize Package*, designed to show bakers how, through the use and resale of dress print cotton bags, they could eliminate flour container costs entirely and possibly make a profit on the one-use cotton bag (fig. 11).⁶¹

Bag companies used their sales forces to convince secondhand dealers to buy used 100-pound dress print bags from bakers for as much as twenty-five cents each (thereby cutting the cost to seven cents cheaper than paper) and sell them through major United States retailers. A 1949 article in *Time* magazine, "Cotton: A Double Life," reported that Macy's in Manhattan sold 30,000 "dish towels made from old flour sacks" in ten days, and that Sears, Roebuck catalog sales of used flour sacks were also brisk.⁶²

Staying in tune with the customer, good marketing, and exceptional quality kept Bemis Bro. Bag Company at the forefront of the textile bag manufacturers. The 1950 *Davison's Textile Blue Book*, an annual directory of textile mills, dyers, and finishers, listed thirty-two bag goods companies under the Cotton Manufacturers classification. The Bemis Bro. Bag Company held the distinction of the most locations and greatest number of bags produced by an American company.⁶³

The Textile Bag Era Draws to a Close

At the end of World War II, cotton made up seventy-five percent of the textile market. But by the mid-1950s, the packaging industry was changing. New synthetic fiber—acrylic, polyester, and olefin—were introduced. As technology developed, Bemis expanded into the exciting new world of plastics. Cotton fabrics were still produced in Bemiston, Alabama, and Bemis, Tennessee, but market demand for bags shifted from cotton to paper. Even though Bemis Bro. Bag Company continued to manufacture cotton bags through the 1960s, paper bags, which could be produced faster and cheaper, caused Bemis to begin to phase out its textile bag plants. Textiles had been a part of the company's strategy since its founding in 1858, but in June, 1980, Bemis sold the last of its American textile mill operations—Bemiston, Alabama, and Bemis, Tennessee.

Leon Droll, Director of Bemis Textile Operations from 1968 to 1983, during the time that the company phased out its textile operations, offered



his corporate perspective on the demise of the cotton bag:

It was not simply that paper was cheaper than cotton, as paper was a one-use bag, and the cost per bag of cotton bags was actually cheaper than paper when repeated use or secondary use was considered. It was not that U.S. bag manufacturers couldn't compete with cheaper imported textile bags; imports did not influence the American market until later. It was not that plastic replaced cotton, as plastic packaging did not become a factor until after cotton bags had been phased out. The causes? A change in people's habits and a population shift. People had moved from the farm to the city. Families were smaller and women were working, so they didn't cook as much. They didn't buy fifty- and hundred-pound bags of goods any more. They wanted five-, ten-, and twenty- pound bags. Merchants preferred paper bags because they could be made as strong as cotton bags, and they were easier to stack on the counter. They displayed better on the shelf. Simply put, dress-print bags were single-use bags, with an intended re-use that made them cost-effective because they provided free fabric to the housewife. When the housewife didn't buy big quantities of flour and sugar and feed, and affordable fabric was available elsewhere, dress-print bags were no longer in demand.⁶⁴

For more than fifty years, Bemis cotton bags had found new purpose in the hands of resourceful women, who undoubtedly breathed a sigh of relief when, after the Great Depression and World War II, they finally could purchase fabric from seemingly endless bolts. The generation of women whose lives exemplified "waste not, want not" washed and folded those plentiful cotton bags and put them into storage. The textile bag era drew to a close, but feedsack quilts, made from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s during the height of production of Bemis dress print bags, remain a colorful part of quilt history across America.

Bemis Bags in Alabama

But what about Leola and Elizabeth's quilts? Might they contain Alabama cotton? It has been established that Bemis Bro. Bag Company,



with bag plants all over the nation, bought cotton in Alabama, wove it into fabric, then bleached, imprinted, and made the fabric into bags. But did any of those bags return to Alabama to the households that picked the cotton?

Prior to 1951, General Mills' Gold Medal, Pillsbury's Best, and Ballard's Obelisk were the top-selling premium brands of flour (as opposed to locally milled, lower grades) in the Southeast. In addition, the mills listed in Appendix A also sold premium flour in substantial quantities in the rural areas of the Southeast, including Alabama. These mills accounted for seventy percent of the total sales of flour in the Southeast in 1952.⁶⁵ Research has yielded evidence that Gold Medal, Pillsbury, Martha White, Robin Hood, Polar Bear, and Omega are some of the brands of flour known to have been packaged in Bemis bags, and known to have been sold in Alabama, thereby providing a link to Alabama cotton.

In addition to re-use of Bemis feed and flour sacks in their quilts, it is possible that Elizabeth's daughter, Alice Bean Johns, gave Leola and Elizabeth dress print fabric that was made available to Bemis employees. A photo from a 1930s edition of *Bemistory*, the company magazine, features an employee at the Houston plant wearing a Bemilin dress and displaying a quilt she made from Bemilin scraps (fig. 12).⁶⁶ In 1950, as part of a company-wide celebration of the 50th anniversary of Bemis, Tennessee, the Bemiston plant took part in a dress-making contest using fabric from the Bemis, Tennessee mill that all employees and their families could purchase at cost.⁶⁷ Alice, who began working at the Bemiston mill in 1939, may have bought a stash of Bemis fabric for her mother and grandmother to use.

Does a "Martha White" flour bag with a Bemis logo prove that Leola and Elizabeth's cotton came back to them as feedsacks? Certainly not. But if one considers that Bemis Bro. Bag Company wove all of the fabric for its bags from cotton purchased near Bemiston, Alabama, and Bemis, Tennessee, that Bemis dress print fabric was made available to its employees in Bemiston, that Bemis salesmen sold Bemis bags to customers in Alabama, and that some national milling companies with sales in Alabama packaged feed and flour in Bemis bags, there can be no doubt that pieces of Bemis bags made from Alabama cotton were sewn into Alabama feedsack quilts. Leola and Elizabeth probably used Bemis bags in their quilts—and they represent thousands of similar Alabama farming women who could have seen the cotton they picked return to them in Bemis fabrics.



Conclusion

Research to determine whether Bemis bags might have been used to make one rural Alabama family's quilts yielded a much broader history. In the 1930s, recognition that textile bags were losing the battle with paper bags propelled the nation's bag manufacturers into extensive research and development that led not only to improvements in cotton bags, but also to changes in marketing psychology and advertising strategies. Bemis did not independently come up with all of the new ideas. Its competitors, Percy Kent, Chase, Fulton, Werthan, Central and numerous smaller bag companies contributed to the development. But, by virtue of the fact that it was the largest company, Bemis led the way, capitalizing on ideas that would boost sales, make a profit, and keep the textile bag a viable choice in the packaging industry—resulting in millions of yards of “free” fabric in the hands of creative women. The availability of feedsack prints undoubtedly encouraged the making of pieced quilts.

Feedsack quilts represent the artistic expression of American women in a distinctive textile era (1930-1960). If textile bag manufacturing companies had ceased operations in the 1930s, if companies had not fought to keep the cotton bag alive, if dress-prints had never been developed, if women had not embraced the idea, then quilts made in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s might look significantly different. Bemis Bro. Bag Company shaped the industry, and in doing so, shaped a portion of quilt history.

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Appendix A

The following mills sold premium flour in substantial quantities in rural areas of the southeast, including Alabama, in 1952.

The Colorado Milling & Elevator Company, Denver, Colorado
Brand Names: Kansas Maid, White Goose, Pike's Peak

Martha White Mills, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee
Brand Names: Martha White, Falcon, Lily White

General Foods Corporation, Inglehart Division, Clarksville, Tennessee
Brand Names: Swan's Down, Tender Flake

J. Allen Smith & Company, Knoxville, Tennessee
Brand Name: White Lily

International Milling Company, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Brand Names: Robin Hood, Silver Mist, Town Crier

Yukon Mill & Grain Company, Yukon, Oklahoma:
Brand Name: Yukon's Best

Nebraska Consolidated Mills Company, Omaha, Nebraska
Alabama Flour Mills Division, Decatur, Alabama
Brand Name: Mother's Best

The New Era Milling Company, Arkansas City, Kansas
Brand Name: Polar Bear

Cosby-Hodges Milling Company, Birmingham, Alabama
Brand Name: White Tulip

The Buhler Mill & Elevator Co., Buhler, Kansas
Brand Name: Dixie Lily

Shawnee Milling Company, Shawnee Oklahoma
Brand Name: Shawnee's Best

H.C. Cole Milling Company, Chester, Illinois
Brand Name: Omega Flour



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