

Nineteenth and early 20th century tobacco companies had some unique ways of promoting their products. These promotions made possible the lesser-known practice of sewing quilts and other decorative items out of silk and flannel tobacco premiums.

A Brief History of Cigar Ribbons



During the late nineteenth century most men enjoyed a good cigar. Because many cigars were made and sold locally there were cigar manufacturers everywhere. With thousands of brands to choose from there was keen competition among companies to establish their name as the best.

Cigars were often sold in bundles wrapped by a silk ribbon with the brand name printed on it. These ribbons served not only the practical purpose of packaging the cigars but also as a way to attract buyers to a specific brand. Often ribbons were made with low grade silk but a few companies used fine silk with their name woven into the fabric to show that their cigars were made with a higher-grade tobacco.

Americans were already fond of collecting and these ribbons became yet another way to collect. Collectors even traded ribbons with others to obtain a varied collection. Women found that a great way to show off a ribbon collection was to make a pillow, tablecloth or even a quilt out of the ribbons they had collected. To create these decorative items cigar ribbons were often stitched on a muslin backing using fancy stitches like those used in [crazy quilting](#). Log cabins and fans were two popular patterns.



Pictorial Silks for Promotion of Cigarettes



[click to view full quilt](#)

Just after the turn of the century cigarette companies began to press their sales and by 1920 cigarette smoking had become quite common gradually including more and more women. Unlike the cigar ribbons that just happened to lend themselves to creating decorative items, cigarette companies devised a more direct appeal. They had already been inserting trading cards of sports figures and other motifs into their packages. Around the first decade of the century they began to include a small silk picture instead.

By shifting to offering pictures on silks companies could use the buying power of women. Women were eager to obtain these popular sets of printed silk. The quality of these "silkies" varied from brand to brand. Eventually both silk and cotton was woven together making more colorful pictures possible. Some companies even included instructions for making household items with their silks. These cigarette silks were not only used to make quilts but they were also included in some crazy quilts.



(See more silks at Maureen Greeson & Co.)

Printed Flannels Packaged With Tobacco

Another form of popular novelties packaged with tobacco was printed flannels. An innovative motif included both oriental and Navajo designs touted as miniature Indian rugs. Cigarette silks and tobacco flannels have pictured everything from animals to flowers, from famous people to children at play and from flags to kewpie dolls.



The practice of giving away novelties to promote the sales of tobacco products diminished with the advent of World War I. But for several carefree years around the turn of the century women had enjoyed making decorative items with these novelties. What fun it would be to collect and sew with such novelties today. I'd prefer to see them packaged with a healthier product.

Hmmm, how about frozen diet dinners?

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Reference:

"Better Choose Me: Addictions to Tobacco, Collecting, and Quilting, 1880-1920" by Ethel Ewart Abrahams and Racheal K. Pannabecker from [Uncoverings 2000](#)

Webpages:

Thanks to Maureen Greeson for permission to post the blue boy cigarette silk picture.

Also thanks to Teddy Wintersteen for permission to post the floral cigarette silk quilt seen in the thumbnail above.