

Feedsacks bring to mind poverty of the Great Depression but at the same time there is a romance to the idea that women could make something beautiful from something so mundane.



In truth feedsacks were used for sewing well before the depression and for several years after. The evolution of the feed sack is a story of ingenuity and clever marketing.

#### From Barrels to Feedsacks

Initially farm and food products were shipped in barrels. Between 1840 and 1890 cotton sacks gradually replaced barrels as food containers. Many of the logos on the flour sacks were circular, a legacy from the time when these logos had to fit on the top of a barrel. <sup>1</sup> Women quickly discovered that these bags could be used as fabric for quilts and other needs.

Cotton had been king until the period of 1914 to 1929 when the price dropped out of the cotton market partially because synthetic fabrics like rayon became popular for dresses and undergarments. With the drop in the price of cotton even more companies began using cotton sacking as packaging.

#### How to Get Rid of Those Durn Labels



Initially these bags were plain unbleached cotton with product brands printed on them. In order for women to use these bags they first had to remove the label. Housewives used such methods as soaking the brand in kerosene or rubbing it with unsalted lard then washing it with lye soap. Later Fels-Naptha soap and Chlorine bleach were used. <sup>2</sup>

In spite of their efforts the entire brand label didn't always get removed and sometimes it didn't seem worth the bother especially for making undergarments. As a result there are some amusing stories regarding feedsack underwear. "One young girl was out walking with her beau when she tripped and fell. Oh, how embarrassed she was when her betrothed noticed her underdrawers imprinted with 'southern best'! Another story was about a woman who made her husband's drawers from a flour sack and left the words 'self rising' on the cloth." <sup>3</sup>

#### Manufacturers Finally See a Promotion Opportunity

It took a while for feed and flour sack manufacturers to realize how popular these sacks had become with women. Eventually they saw a great opportunity for promoting the use of feedsacks. First feed sacks began to be sold in colors then around 1925 colorful prints for making dresses, aprons, shirts and children's clothing began to appear in stores. Manufacturers began to paste on paper labels making it far easier to remove them.



By the late 1930s there was heated competition to produce the most attractive and desirable prints. Artists were hired to design these prints. This turned out to be a great marketing ploy as women picked out flour, sugar, beans, rice, cornmeal and even the feed and fertilizer for the family farm based on which fabrics they desired. Some sacks displayed lovely border prints for pillowcases like the above print. Scenic prints like the one below were also popular. Manufacturers even made pre-printed patterns for dolls, stuffed animals, appliqué and quilt blocks.

#### The Buying, Selling and Trading of Feedsacks



Those who found they had more feed sacks than they could use were able to sell them back to the store where they were then resold. Chicken farmers went through a great many sacks of feed so the sale of feedsacks became a side business for some of them. Feed sacks were even sold by itinerant peddlers giving country women who lived far from town a chance to pick and choose from a variety of feed sack colors and prints. Women also traded feedsacks in order to get patterns that matched fabric they already had or for colors and prints they wanted. They were most creative in finding ways to get the varied fabric they wanted for their feed sack quilt.

#### Feedsacks Remained Popular Well After the Depression Years

We usually think of feed sacks being a way women provided clothing and bedcoverings during the economic hard times of the boll weevil depression in the south in the 1920s and the Great Depression that followed. But actually printed feedsacks were used for sewing from before these depressions to well after World War II. Even though the economy improved during the 1940s it was necessary to conserve because of the need for war supplies. Using feed sacks for sewing was considered patriotic and women still enjoyed finding attractive prints on feedsacks. Iowa quilter, Ethel Taylor Jordan, recalls how "Papa couldn't go to the store and buy feed without one of us girls, if you were the one who needed material you were the one who got to go." <sup>4</sup> Moreover if it was a long way to the store and a few sacks of flour were to be bought a fellow's wife or daughter might have had him move several 50 pound sacks of flour from a 6 foot high stack just so she could get the matching fabric she wanted. <sup>5</sup>



By the 1950s paper bags cost much less than cotton sacks. Companies began to switch over to this less expensive packaging. To combat this the feedsack industry actively promoted the use of feedsacks in advertising campaigns and even a television special encouraging the use of feed sacks for sewing. Although feedsacks were gradually replaced by other materials as late as the 1960s the fabric sack industry tried to compete by offering novelty fabrics including rayon and blended materials.

#### Are You Sure It's Really a Feed Sack?

It's not as easy as you might think to identify feed sack fabric. The paper labels were easily removed from a feedsack and even with older ones the label has often been removed. A coarse weave is not a good indicator as fabric like this could also be bought off the bolt as well. The best indicator is a line of holes from the chainstitching that once held the sack together. <sup>6</sup> Better yet you may be so lucky as to find a feedsack with the sack stitching still in like the one pictured above.

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(As both spellings, feed sack and feedsack, are commonly used I have used them interchangeably.)

#### References:

<sup>1</sup> p123 "Feedsacks in Georgia: Their Manufacture, Marketing, and Consumer Use" by Ruth Rhoads from Uncoverings 1997

<sup>2</sup> p260 "[West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers](#)", by Fawn Valentine

<sup>3</sup> p66 "[Soft Covers for Hard Times](#)", Merikay Waldvogel

<sup>4</sup> p88 [Patchwork: Iowa Quilts and Quilters](#), by Jacqueline Andre Schmeal

<sup>5</sup> p106 "Southwestern Quilts and Quiltmakers in Context" by Jeannette Lasansky from Uncoverings 1993

<sup>6</sup> p131 "[Clues in the Calico](#)", by Barbara Brackman