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**From Feed Sack to Clothes Rack:
The Use of Commodity Textile Bags in American Households from 1890 – 1960**

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*In this day of high prices I wonder if the average homemaker realizes
the possibilities of the homely flour and sugar sacks?*¹

Minnie L. Church, home economist, 1921.

The term “Gunny Sack Dress” may bring to mind a droopy and ill fitting garment of coarse cloth worn by poverty stricken children on a prairie, this image is reinforced by a Time magazine interview with a manager from Pillsbury Flour in 1946, “They used to say that when the wind blew across the South you could see our trade name on all the girls’ underpants.”² Indeed, during fabric shortages brought on by World War II, a number of United States families turned to an unusual material, the cotton commodity bag. This replaced heavily rationed cotton yard goods for the home sewing needs of their families. Cotton bag sewing was both a frugal move and a patriotic one. A newspaper column from May 1944 explained, “Best of all is the patriotic spirit you show when you salvage fabrics. The housewife who converts cotton bags into the many useful items they are capable of becoming under the magic of willing hands and minds not only serves herself, but conserves essential fabrics for her country.”³ The Textile Bag Manufacturers Association proclaimed, “A yard saved, was a yard gained for victory!”⁴



Figure 1. Example of a cotton dress print feedsack c.1940 Source: Powell.

¹ Minnie Church, “What to Do With the Sacks.” *American Cookery*, October 1921, 206.

² “Women: Foul Rumor”, *Time Magazine*, March 11, 1946.

³ Cherie Nicholas, “Smart Apparel, Household Items Can be Made From Cotton Bags.” *Mt. Adams Sun*, May 5, 1944, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

A traditional discussion of commodity bag sewing begins with the Great Depression and ends around World War II, but the origins of this sewing custom are more than 100 years old. As early as the 19th century, fabric was used in the production of commodity bags for the grain industry as improvements in sewing machine technology allowed for more efficient production of fabric bags with strong seams.⁵ Women were sewing common household items from the fine bleached muslin and coarse burlap gunny sacks of the 1890s, the yarn dyed striped and gingham checked sacks of the 1920s, and the colorful dress print and brightly dyed solid percale bags which were popular from the mid 1930s to the early 1960s. (Figure 1).

After this time, paper replaced cotton throughout the bag manufacturing industry. The National Cotton Council's Cotton Bag Sewing Queen Contests of the late fifties and early sixties were intended to slow this crossover to paper and maintain a certain amount of nationwide demand for the cotton bag at a time when bag manufacturers were eager to move to the use of a less expensive alternative. The bottom eventually fell out of the artificial demand for cotton commodity bags during the early 1960s and bag manufacturers switched in large numbers to the paper commodity bag.⁶

The earliest bags were made from burlap (jute) and osnaburg, a coarse cotton fabric. A 1933 booklet from the US Department of Agriculture describes the benefits of using cotton:

“Cotton bags make attractive packages; they supply a suitable surface for brand names and make possible effective advertising; they are durable and little affected by moisture; they represent minimum tare weight; and they have a high salvage value.”⁷

These cotton bags also provided a strong boost to the American Cotton industry. At its peak, 1,283 million yards of cotton fabric were used in commodity bags, “and accounted for 8.0% of the cotton goods production and 4.5% of total cotton consumption in the U.S. in 1946.”⁸

A 1921 issue of American Cookery presented the value of commodity bag sewing in this way:

“In homes where little folks are growing up, not a scrap of sacking need be wasted, for each sack takes the place of an equal quantity of muslin, since there are so many necessary little garments to be made. The sacking, while not fine in quality, is most serviceable for drawers, petticoats, underwaists, etc. These garments may be made plain or have a touch of crochet or torchon lace for the trimming.”⁹

In 1927, three yards of dress print cotton percale (the typical amount of fabric needed for an average size adult dress) could cost sixty cents when purchased from the Sears and Roebuck catalog. Three yards of gingham dress goods could cost forty cents.¹⁰ In comparison, three yards of dress quality gingham used in Gingham Girl Flour sacks from the George P. Plant Milling Company could be salvaged after the use

⁵ Kendra Brandes, "Feed Sack Fashion in Rural America: A Reflection of Culture." *The Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy* 4 no. 1 (2009), 3.

⁶ Gloria Nixon, *Feedsack Secrets: Fashion from Hard Times*, 102- 105.

⁷ R.J. Cheatham, *Cotton Bags as Consumer Packages for Farm Products*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1933, 1.

⁸ Susan Miller, *Vintage Feed Sacks*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2007, 13

⁹ Minnie Church, "What To Do With the Sacks." *American Cookery*, May 1921, 207.

¹⁰ These prices were taken from the Sears and Roebuck Fall Catalog of 1927 (See illustration attached).

of two or three one hundred pound bags of flour.¹¹ The Plant Milling Company from St. Louis, Missouri began to offer their baking flour in red and white yarn dyed gingham sacks around 1925.¹² Label information was printed on each bag with water-soluble vegetable inks, to simplify the removal of the logo.¹³

Throughout the years, women improved upon methods of removing company logos and related text from each sack. Before commodity bag manufactures were aware of the widespread repurposing of their products, logos were printed with strong inks and the removal process could be time consuming:

“After ripping the sacks apart, she washed and bleached and washed, and it generally had to be done several times before they were thoroughly clean, but when she obtained that result she added to the rinsing water a very little starch...”¹⁴

The advertisement is a rectangular box with a light background. On the left side, the text reads: **WAYNE CHICK STARTER** in large, bold, block letters. Below this, it says **Now In PRINT BAGS** in a similar font. Underneath, it states **Each Bag A 50c** and **Value in Cloth**. At the bottom left, it says **Buy Your Chick STARTER**. On the right side, the text reads **Dress Print Bags** at the top. Below that, a smaller paragraph says: **Yes, your old favorite, Wayne Chick Starter is available in dress print bags—many beautiful designs. Get an extra value by using Wayne this year—get excellent material for dresses, children's clothing, curtains and other garments.** In the center of the right side is a line drawing of a young girl with curly hair, wearing a polka-dot dress with puffed sleeves and a full skirt. Below the drawing, it says **Dress Up With** and **WAYNE CHICK STARTER** in large, bold, block letters.

Figure 2. Newspaper advertisement for Wayne Chick Starter in dress print bags. Inwood Herald, April 19, 1945.

By the time the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association published *Sewing with Cotton Bags* in 1933, preparing a textile bag for reuse had been simplified. “The ease with which printing ink may be removed from cotton bags” they explained, “depends on the kind of ink that has been used. Under ordinary circumstances, it is sufficient to cover the inked places with lard or soak them in kerosene overnight.

¹¹ Anna Lue Cook, *Identification and Value Guide to Textile Bags*, 73. Families that did not use such high volumes of dry goods could purchase empty bags for five to fifteen cents each from their local baker. Bakers were usually happy to get rid of their extra packaging in this way.

¹² Nixon, *Feedsack Secrets*, 14.

¹³ *Ibid*, Nixon 16.

¹⁴ Quillin, 672.

Then wash out in lukewarm water.”¹⁵ The use of kerosene as a cleaning product is hazardous, and could create a deadly explosion from the smallest spark. Therefore, it was a noticeable development in the late 1930s when removing the logo became as quick and easy as soaking the cloth in warm water to remove a paper label.

Once the printing was removed, the chain stitching was pulled away from the side of the bag and the fabric was starched and ironed. A one hundred pound bag of chicken feed became a 36” X 44” piece of cloth, a little more than one yard of fabric. A Life Magazine profile of the Martin family from rural Maryland described their homemade sack clothing in the early 1930s:

“Around this time feed sacks were beginning to come in print patterns as well as in white and when they were empty of chicken mash they were filled up with Martins. One feed sack made a dress for a small Martin, two or more for a larger Martin.”¹⁶ (Figure 2)

A typical rural family with a handful of chickens might take a month or so to collect enough cotton bags for a garment, but families that raised chickens on a larger scale could have a full supply of yard goods at their fingertips at all times. A farmer’s wife described their family’s commodity bag usage in the book, *Feedsack Fashion*:

“We had two big chicken houses and used fourteen sacks of feed every week. My husband got most of the sacks. He always tried to get two or three of the same pattern so we would have enough to make something. He did a pretty good job of picking them out.”¹⁷

During the middle of the 1930s, feedsacks became colorful and filled with bright patterns. Although several companies seem to take credit for this phenomenon, the Percy Kent Bag Company’s Ken-Print collection may have been the earliest.¹⁸

Feed companies began to notice that while a husband may have little preference in the brand of egg mash fed to his chickens, if his wife needed a specific pattern to match a feedback that she already owned, her husband began to demonstrate a preference. Suddenly, feed companies were being encouraged to use the latest dress print bags and feed supply stores were turned into fabric stores, to the disdain of one feed salesman interviewed in 1948 who said, “Years ago, they used to ask for all sorts of feeds, special brands you know. Now they come over and ask me if I have an egg mash in a flowered percale. It ain’t natural.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Textile Bag Manufacture's Association, *Sewing with Cotton Bags*. Chicago: The Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, 1933, 2.

¹⁶ William Brinkley, “Degrees by the Dozen on \$40.00 a Week.” *Life Magazine*, September 19, 1955, 108-204.

¹⁷ Brandes “Feed Sack Fashion,” 10.

¹⁸ Several companies claim to have introduced the Dress Print Commodity bag. The Bemis Brothers Bag Manufacturing company takes credit on its historical website www.bemis150.com for introducing printed bags to the United States while the article “Chicken Linen and Other Cloth Sacks” by Angela Hancock and Paul Wilson from the Summer 1977 edition of *Bittersweet* gives credit to the Werthan Bag corporation in Nashville, Tennessee. The Percy Kent bag company has a significant amount of surviving primary sources from the mid thirties to back up its claims of being the first company to print patterns on their bags. A selection of Percy Kent advertisements can be found in Gloria Nixon’s *Feedsack Secrets: Fashion from Hard Times*.

¹⁹ Brandes, 5.

Feed sacks may have looked like dress fabric, but they were stacked in store piles with little fanfare and employees were surprised by requests to move several hundred pound bags of chicken feed to get to the perfect dress print pattern. One man remembered trips to the feed store as a teenager when it was important to run this errand with several friends because, “his mother’s preferred patterns would always be on the bottom, so he and his “buddies” would have to hoist sacks until they secured the patterns his mother wanted.”²⁰

Once the fabric was prepared, there was very little difference between a length of feedsack dress percale and a length of dress percale purchased in a store as a new yard good. The Percy Kent Bag Company hired top textile designers from Europe and New York City to create stylish prints with colorfast dyes.²¹

When the country went to war in the 1940s, domestic fabric production was put on hold while textile companies created goods for the use of the military. Textile rationing during World War II did not originally apply to feed sacks, which were classified as “industrial” textile products. During the height of war production restrictions, hundreds of colorful dress prints were available at the rural feed store, providing a wider variety of patterns than any store carrying traditional yard goods at that time.²²

In 1943, the United States War Production Board standardized bag sizes into six types ranging from 2 to 100 pounds in an effort to reduce waste.²³ The production board approved pattern books for release to the home front. One mother made her young daughter’s entire wardrobe from feed sacks during the war, “the war effort took all of the fabric on the market.” She told an interviewer, “you could buy very little printed fabric.”



Figure 3. Cotton Bag Sewing Queen Advertisement, source: Farm Journal.

²⁰ Ibid, 9.

²¹ Nixon, Feedsack Secrets, 62. A full page ad from the April 19, 1947 trade magazine, *Feedstuffs* is featured on this page.

²² Brandes, 5

²³ Miller, Vintage Feed Sacks, 9.

The availability of yard goods began to improve for rural shoppers during the spring of 1945. After the war, the child accompanied her mother to a department store that was fully stocked to pre-war levels and pointed to bolts of traditional yard goods in the window,” Oh mom, look at those pretty feed sacks!”²⁴

By the early 1950s, popularity of the dress print bag began to fade. Traditional yard goods were becoming more accessible all over the country and the rural lifestyle that enabled families to use dozens of one hundred pound chicken feed sacks in a year began to disappear. The cotton industry began to lose some of their most lucrative customers as bag companies began to make the switch to the multiwall paper sack. This new method was less expensive for them to produce, and more effective in protecting the contents inside. To slow this changeover, the National Cotton Council began to sponsor exciting contests in every state in the country to encourage women to become the “National Cotton Bag Sewing Queen.” (Figure 3).



Figure 4. Feed Sack Dress. Cotton and Linen, 1956. (National Museum of American History Object ID: 1992.0102.04) <http://historyexplorer.si.edu/resource/?lp=artifacts&key=1134>. Used with permission.

Contests took place at state fairs and were advertised along with pattern booklet giveaways in rural magazines like *Farm Journal*. Regionally, the prizes included expensive sewing machines and even automobiles, with the chance to move on to the national competition and win trips to Hollywood complete with movie studio tours and shopping sprees.²⁵

²⁴ Brandes, 8.

²⁵ Nixon, “Feedback Secrets”, 102

The Cotton Council partnered with some of the leading pattern companies of the time and released a final wave of pattern books encouraging the use of cotton bags to create dresses styled in the latest fashions. Dozens of categories were established (children's wear, women's wear, household curtains and table linens, etc.) and the main fabric in each entry needed to be a cotton commodity bag. Any kind of trimming could be used as decoration.²⁶ (Figure 4).

The feed sack dress in the collection of the National Museum of American History (object ID: 1992.0102.04) created by Mrs. Dorothy Overall for a 1956 sewing contest sponsored by the National Cotton Council is completely different. It is fashionably designed with a cinched waist and a full pleated skirt in the style of the mid-fifties. It features an organdy lining and "machine quilting with a synthetic silver sewing thread."²⁷ This dress earned second place in a regional tier of the "Cotton Bag Sewing Queen" contest (Figure 3) and may not resemble anything that comes to mind when discussing clothing made from chicken feed sacks.²⁸

In an attempt to get their entries noticed in the Sewing Queen competitions and duplicate high fashion garments, the contestants added flashy trimmings whenever possible. The Dorothy Overall dress is lined in black organdy, a luxury fabric at that time which would never be used to line a traditional feed sack dress. If a farmer's wife had a dress length of organdy lying around to line a dress, they would have made the dress from that organdy and lined it (if they needed a lining) with the feed sack. The silver thread used in this dress is also a clue to its status as a showpiece. The dress is a showpiece, but as an example of the commodity bag sewing tradition, it only tells a small part of the story.

A resourceful spirit was the key to a comfortable American household filled with food, clothing and home decorations during the first fifty years of the twentieth century. Looking back with a modern eye, where a finished garment (most likely produced in a developing nation by poorly paid workers) can be purchased from a store at a fraction of the price of its cloth, it is a challenge to put yourself in the place of that rural woman with several family members to clothe, but no budget for store bought clothing or new yard goods to sew these garments at home. For a large portion of lower income families throughout the United States, assistance to expand the family wardrobe came from the commodity cotton bag.

A closing paragraph in a short story from *Arthurs Home Magazine* from July 1892 explains the phenomenon well, "So, that is the secret of how baby looked so lovely in her flour sack: just a little care, patience and ingenuity on the mother's part."²⁹

²⁶ "History Wired: a Few of Our Favorite Things." [Si.edu](http://historywired.si.edu/detail.cfm?ID=391). Available from <http://historywired.si.edu/detail.cfm?ID=391>. Rules from the 1960 Cotton Bag Sewing Contest stated "Articles must be made entirely of cotton bags except for trimmings; they must have been made after January 1, 1960; and the same items may not be entered at more than one participating fair"

²⁷ National Museum of American History Collection: Feedsack Dress." [Smithsonian National Museum of American History](http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object.cfm?key=35&objkey=197). Image used with permission Available from <http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object.cfm?key=35&objkey=197>.

²⁸ Several terms are commonly used in the sources collected for this paper when discussing cloth bags. These bags will be referred to as "textile bags, commodity bags, feedsacks and flour sacks," but will always describe a cotton bag of varying size, sewn together with a machine made chain stitch originally used to store household goods such as flour, sugar, salt, and chicken feed. Sources from the last ten years discussing these bags in a scholarly context tend to use the term, "commodity bag."

²⁹ Quillen, "Cozy Corner Chat." 672.

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