

THE FASHION'S IN THE BAG: Recycling feed, flour, and sugar sacks during the middle decades of the 20th century

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A modest temporary exhibit, FEED BAGS AS FASHION, opened in the National Museum of American History about a year ago (See fig. 1).¹ The enthusiastic and personal reactions evoked by the exhibit, and a story about it picked up by newspapers throughout the United States and Canada, made clear that the subject had touched a popular nerve. The responses of those who called or wrote, and visitors' comments, revealed that the recycling of flour, sugar, and animal feed sacks was a common, if not universal practice in the States between the 1920s and 1960s, still remembered vividly by both country and city folk. This recycling was not confined to desperately poor families; some individuals from frugal-minded families in middle income brackets also still remember the joys or pain of wearing feed sack clothing and making all sorts of household items from sacks.

In this paper I shall review various aspects of the topic, drawing from my own research, as well as from that of Sunae Park who curated the exhibit and from Lu Ann Jones, whose research materials and interviews with rural southern women were incorporated into the exhibit script.

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The reuse of cotton bags probably dates from the time when such bags were first made. Without going back too far in history it is easy to find evidence of varied reuses for these ubiquitous textiles. One example in the Division of Textiles of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History,² dating back to about 1876, is a table or bed cover, made from two English salt bags, whose printed designs are still present. A line drawing of the bust of George Washington incorporated into the producer's logo suggests that the bags and their contents were destined for the American market. Later 19th-century examples of recycling are a nightgown and a corset cover in the Division of Costumes collection. These were made from flour sacks, whose manufacturers' logos evidently were difficult to remove (See fig.2). Undoubtedly such "undercover" reuses were found in thrifty families that were not necessarily poor, since no one outside the family circle got to see, let alone know, the humble origin of these garments' fabrics.

The most dramatic use of grain sacks found in this research was in putting out prairie fires. The following is a recollection of such an event, that took place in 1877 on a Wilson, Kansas homestead:

. . . father took a shovel and started toward the fire raging . . . in tall blue stem grass in the creek bottom . . . A man dashed up on horseback and called to him to drop his shovel and get some wet grain sacks. . . . Mother and father each seized the 'American extra heavy A seamless' white grain sacks, dipped them into water to wet them well, and then hastened toward the fire.

A number of neighbors came too, . . . fought the flames for hours and finally subdued them . . . [Mother had] smote the flames of burning grass [with wet sacks right alongside the men]!³

* * *

Although some hand-sewn flour sacks were made during the first half of the 19th century, it was not until the invention of the sewing machine that flour put up in cotton sacks began to replace flour sold in barrels. Henry Chase who founded the Chase Bag Company in 1847, working with John Batchelder, developed a chainstitch machine-sewn flour bag by 1849.⁴ Also, according to Terry Sharrer of the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, in August 1864 J. M. Hurd of Auburn, New York patented a machine for making sacks in quantity, that helped manufacturers meet some of the great demand for them during the Civil War. Changes in the flour milling process, enabling millers to sell their product in smaller quantities, also produced a new demand for cotton bags. Interestingly enough, bag sizes continued to correspond to old barrel measures -- a 98 lb. bag equalled a half barrel -- until 1943 when the U. S. War Production Board standardized flour packages, limiting them to only six sizes, ranging from 100-pound capacity down to 2 pounds.

Bags printed with the mill's name probably came in during the 1880s. One in the Division of Textiles collection bears an 1890 copyright date. Incidentally, Dr. Sharrer revealed that the earliest bags with logos, made for the Ralston Purina Company, sported a picture of a mule.

One of the first well-publicized instances of recycling flour bags occurred during World War I, when millions of sacks of flour were shipped overseas. An American organization, the Commission for Relief in Belgium, chaired by Herbert Hoover, carried out this effort, designed to assist the people of Belgium, then being threatened with starvation. In addition the donors had thought that emptied sacks could be made into simple clothing, which was also in short supply. Many recipients, though -- grateful Belgian women, mostly working in groups -- hand-embroidered the bags and decorated them with lace. For a short time these took on a life of their own, becoming widely publicized as souvenirs, with some sent to the United States as "thank yous," and others actually sold to support the Belgian relief effort. There are two bags in the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Political History collection (See fig. 3). More comprehensive collections can be found in the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University and the Hoover Library in West Branch, Iowa.

In the mid-1920s, recycling flour sacks into clothing, accessories, and decorative household items became a popular fad in America. It was during this period that the first, not-too-successful, attempts were made to market flour in bags with printed patterns.⁵

The Great Depression of the 1930s turned a fad into a necessity for many families. Bags with printed patterns were reintroduced in 1936 and won acceptance at this time, backed by a publicity campaign to promote their use. While recycling bags in retrospect might seem to be a perfect idea, it was not without its down side, for there was among many a stigma attached to wearing feed sack garments that, at the very least, separated city dwellers from country "hicks." That might be hinted at in an elderly Pennsylvania woman's poignant recollection of her childhood:

I can remember the excitement I felt on Saturday mornings when I was allowed to go to the feed mill with my dad. While we were waiting for the grinding to be completed, I'd look at feed sacks and dream about a new dress.

When it came time for me to pick the sacks, I usually knew what I wanted. One of my favorite dresses was a pink flowered one that had a bustle in the back -- Mom always kept up with fashions by looking at Sears catalogs.

When I was in sixth grade, I was voted the best dressed girl in my class. That was a real compliment to my mother because I was a poor country girl in a town school.⁶

* * *

During the 1940s, years of severe shortages and restrictions on the use of textiles brought on by World War II, American women were encouraged to continue recycling cotton bags. In fact, the availability of bags with printed designs, vigorously advertized by the National Cotton Council and the Textile Bag Manufacturers' Association popularized and prolonged their widespread re-use until the 1960s (See fig. 4), when cheaper paper and plastic replaced cotton almost universally as bagging materials.

* * *

Although today you can count on the fingers of one hand the number of cotton bag manufacturers in this country, in 1947 this industry absorbed 8% of all cotton textile production. A related, equally impressive statistic, is that in the same year the consumption of cotton fabric for meals, feed, fertilizer, flour, and sugar bags amounted to an estimated 750 million yards.⁷ Such numbers suggest how important this outlet was to cotton growers and processors, and why the two major lobbying organizations, the aforementioned Cotton Council and the Textile Bag Manufacturers' Association, were so active in promoting the use of these bags. The following comments on changes in farming practices, based on Lu Ann Jones' research and Sunae Park's exhibit script, further explain the popularity of printed feed bags:

Their rise "coincided with changes in the farm economy that had important consequences for [rural] women. . . ." In the 1940s egg, poultry, and milk production, "once controlled by women, now passed to husbands and sons" with the accelerated commercialization of poultry and dairy production. The stepped-up production also required "farmers [to] purchase more feed for their larger dairy herds and poultry flocks.

"While this development deprived many women of a significant source of income from their butter and egg trade, women's [re]use of feed bags indicates that they were able to turn the commercialization of livestock production somewhat to their advantage. [Thus] . . . the feed bag [became] . . . a paradoxical symbol of women's position in this shifting farm economy. Men might control the raising of poultry and livestock . . . , but mothers, wives, and daughters often . . . select[ed] the bags in which the animal feed was packaged.

[And] "women with access to . . . [more bags than they could use often sold them] to neighbors and pocketed the proceeds. A lively trade flourished in the hill country of the South, where commercial poultry production took off after World War II. Arthur Fleming, a retired poultry grower from north Georgia, recalled that his wife used some of their feed sacks to make dresses, but 'what she didn't want she would sell. . . . There were people that came around and bought those sacks, . . . then you'd have neighbors that didn't raise chickens, and they'd look at the sacks and . . . pick out what they wanted. . . . the sacks was bringing . . . from twenty to twenty-five cents apiece. . . .' And temporarily, at least, women controlled a portion of this changing economy"⁸ with their so-called "chicken linen."⁹

The individual bag manufacturers and their suppliers dreamed up all sorts of ideas to make their products attractive. In 1942 Pacific Mills pushed their line of bag materials that immediately could be converted into usable items like pillowcases. Pacific also claimed that it made bag cloth in a thousand different designs.¹⁰ Such manufacturers' patterns were designed to suit a wide range of tastes, from teenagers to

grandmothers, and a great variety of uses, from children's clothes to kitchen curtains.

Bag manufacturers' advertisements, appearing in trade journals like FEEDSTUFFS and FLOUR AND FEED in the 1940s and 1950s, tried every possible angle that might appeal to rural women. One of the Bemis Bag Company's 1948 strategies was to set up panels of typical farm women to pick their favorites from among a wide range of patterns. Then Bemis used those patterns in their Bemiline Dress Print Bags.

During World War II in the mid-1940s, other manufacturers promoted various "glamour" angles and male vs. female points of view. All of these today would strike even a closet feminist as running the gamut from mildly patronizing: "When your product needs a beauty treatment brighten your package with a Fulton make-up" (See fig. 5) -- to blatantly sexist (an ad labelled "Nice package", showed a shapely young woman wearing a two-piece bathing suit) -- to coarse and tacky (Another ad depicted a smiling farmer ogling a passing schoolgirl whose windblown skirt revealed her printed underpants. His comment, printed below the picture was "Begorra... and she'll be making my pants out of 'em yet"). Following this general trend the Erwin Manufacturing Company produced a series of cartoon ads that offered mild comments on the battle of the sexes.

But some ad campaigns went to great pains to suggest that feed bag prints could be sophisticated, through their subject matter (ballerinas, floral prints) or by introducing . . .

The Designer Behind the Design . . . A. Charles Barton, Design Director for the Percy Kent Bag Company. From his studio in New York, Mr. Barton, one of America's foremost designers, sends out the distinctive ideas for which P/K Bags are famous.

European by birth and education, . . . [with] an international reputation as one of America's foremost fabric designers. . . . Mr. Barton has just recently completed a tour of the Middle West to view first hand the many uses to which Ken-Print material is being put by the versatile homemakers of this area, and to get new ideas for future P/K patterns. Upholding the Percy Kent tradition of 'always something new,' he promises more of the clever colorful designs that have made Ken-Print Bags the 'glamour sacks' of America.¹¹

Putting a positive spin on housewifely drudgery was a feature of cotton bag companies' ads that painted word-pictures such as ("Glad Sacks" and "gay, colorful, up-to-the-season prints"). These firms also attempted to capitalize on the happy family image with ads showing little daughters helping their mothers carry out their housewifely tasks.

Direct appeals to consumers took several forms: the traveling fashion show of garments made from bags, pattern booklets that combined information about the bags and practical tips on how to transform them into useful items, and cotton bag sewing contests. The author received first-hand information on the contests from a farmer's wife, Mrs. Dorothy Overall of Caldwell, Kansas, who won second prize in the national cotton bag sewing contest in 1959 (See figs. 6 and 7). She donated to the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Textiles her winner's certificate, publicity materials, and some of the beautifully-sewn contest entries that had influenced the judges' choice. And she sewed all the items she entered in that contest on a sewing machine she had won in a previous bag sewing contest!

Incidentally, her daughter Roberta won first prize in 1963 in the special teen division of that year's bag sewing contest. Like all of her mother's contest-winning entries, Roberta's dress also demonstrated her

sophisticated sewing techniques. Although Mrs. Overall was a farm woman with access to feed bags, she used only flour sacks for the contest entries, because she felt that they offered the best quality fabric.

An 81-year-old lady recalled in a book of "memories by Hoosier homemakers" that heavier seed corn sacks "made lovely table covers [that they put]. . . together with single tatting or a little crocheting . . ." ¹² Such a doiley, still bearing the bag's printing, was donated to the Division of Textiles collection recently. Made by a lady who died a few years ago at age 90, it provides an example of this type of work. Other examples of feedbag recycling in the Division of Textiles collection are an apron made from five different printed cloths; a Dutch boy-and-girl-printed skirt made by a Russian immigrant mother in the 1930s, from a bag she purchased at a Gaithersburg, Maryland feed store; and a pieced quilt top found in rural North Carolina, made from a variety of solid-colored and printed sacks (See fig. 8).

One feed merchant's complaint about printed bags was illustrated in the cartoon shown in figure 7 and another's was expressed in a 1948 magazine article:

'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.'¹³

But not all feed merchants complained about printed feed bags. In 1945 Roy O. Frantz, pictured with his three sons in figure 1, asked his wife to sew feed bag shirts for them that they could wear for the opening of his Frantz Feed, Seed and Supply Store Store in Pueblo, Colorado.

And some feed companies and merchants went out of their way to capitalize on the bags' attention-getting value. During the 1948 presidential election campaign one Kansas City poultry feed firm packed its product in sacks with labels picturing either an elephant or a donkey. A count of the number of each sold in early September 1948 accurately predicted the Democratic victory that would occur in the presidential election in November '48: the donkeys sold 51% to the elephants' 49%!¹⁴

* * *

An anonymous ode to Depression Flour Sack Underwear sums up the feelings of many who were forced to endure the physical and mental pain of this particular form of cotton sack recycling:

When I was just a maiden fair,
Mama made our underwear;
With many kids and Dad's poor pay,
We had no fancy lingerie.
Monograms and fancy stitches
Did not adorn our Sunday britches; . . .
No lace or ruffles to enhance
Just 'Jockey Oats' on my pants.
One pair of Panties beat them all,
For it had a scene I still recall--
Chickens were eating wheat
Right across my little seat.
Rougher than a grizzly bear
Was my flour-sack underwear. . . .
All through Depression each Jill and Jack
Wore the sturdy garb of sack. . . .
There were curtains and tea towels too,
And that is just to name a few.
But the best beyond compare
Was my flour-sack underwear.¹⁵

NOTES

1. A "Showcase" exhibit in the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution, August 6, 1991 - January 15, 1992.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all examples cited of cotton bags and their recycled products are from the collections of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. If no specific collection is mentioned, the item being discussed is in the Division of Textiles.
3. Stratton, Joanna L. Pioneer Women. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1981, p. 85.
4. Steen, Herman. Flour Milling in America. Minneapolis: T. S. Denison & Co., p. 114.
5. Austin, Carole. "From Aid to Art: Decorated Flour Sacks from World War I," A Report from the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, Fall 1986, p. 3.
6. Recollection of Joan Griffith, Smicksburg, PA in "Feed Sack Dresses," Reminisce magazine, September/October 1991, p. 28.
7. Claussen, H. P. "Important Textile Position in Bag Industry Faces Test", Journal of Commerce, Jan. 28, 1948, p. 11, reprinted in The Cotton Bag Promotion Program for the Year 1952 published by the Cotton Bag Market Committee of the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association.
8. Exhibit script version dated June 3, 1991, pp 8-9.
9. Cook, Anna Lue. Textile Bags (The Feeding & Clothing of America). Florence, AL: Books Americana Inc., 1990, p 12.
10. Gertrude Allen's This Week Magazine article that appeared in "Feed Bags de Luxe", The Reader's Digest, March 1942, p. 111.
11. Feedstuffs, February 8, 1947, p. 35.
12. Arnold, Eleanor ed. Buggies and Bad Times. [n.p.], The Indiana Extension Homemakers Association, [n.d.], p. 116.
13. Perkins, D. W. "Fashions in Feed Bags," American Magazine, March 1948, p. 32.
14. Ibid.
15. Cook, Anna Lue. Textile Bags (The Feeding & Clothing Of America). Florence, AL: Books Americana, Inc., 1990, p.2.1

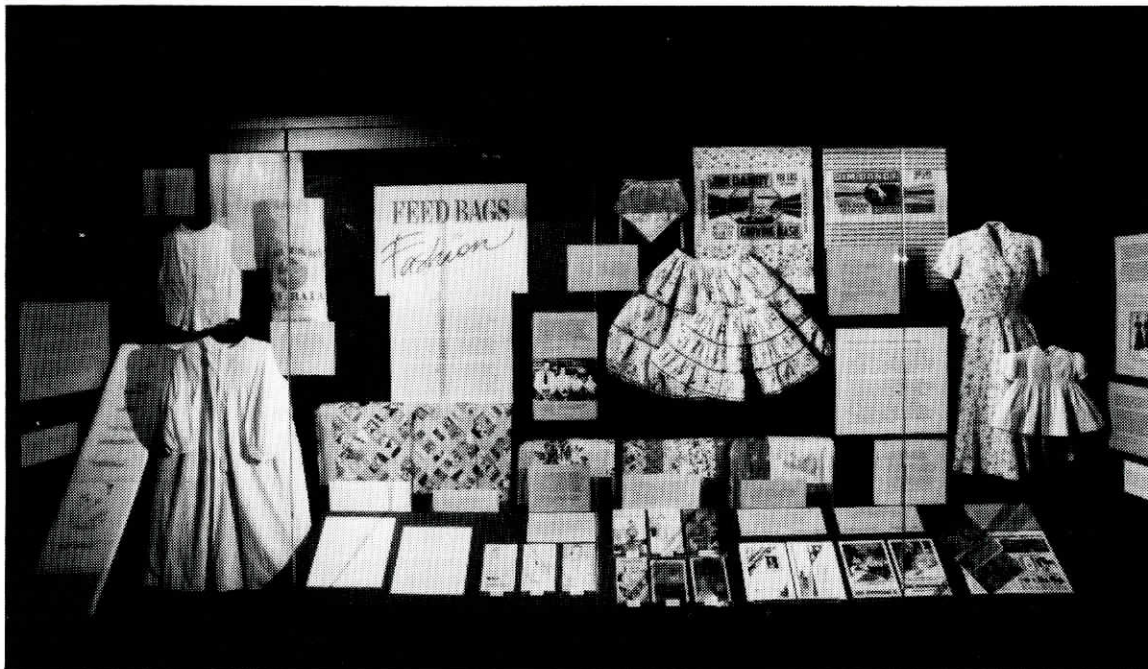


Fig. 1. FEEDBAGS AS FASHION, a Division of Textiles "Showcase" exhibit in the National Museum of American History (NMAH), Smithsonian Institution, August 6, 1991 - January 15, 1992.



Fig. 2. Detail, late 19th-century nightgown: reverse side of the yoke, showing part of the printing on the flour sacks from which it was made. Division of Costume collection, NMAH.

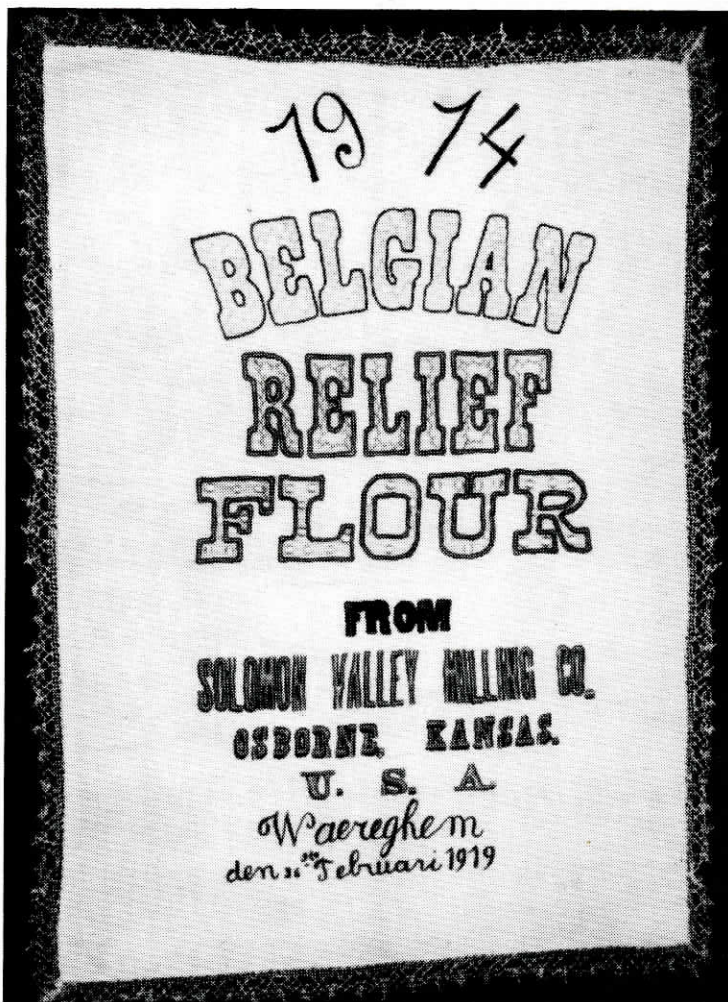


Fig. 3. Flour sack sent to Belgium in 1914 as part of the Belgian relief effort during World War I, embroidered by a woman in Waereghe m, Belgium. Division of Political History collection, NMAH.

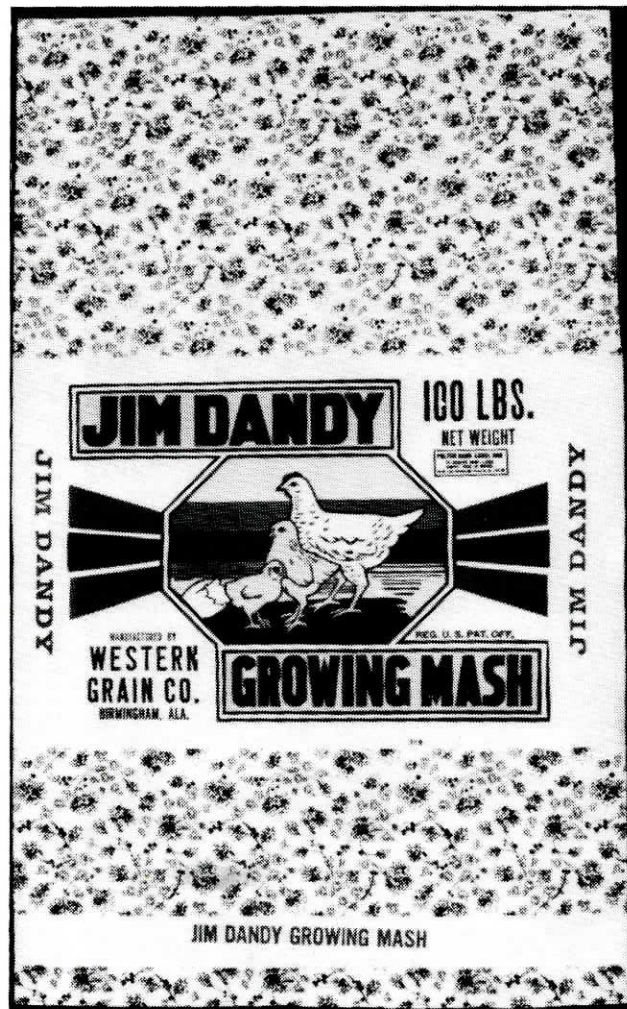


Fig. 4. Printed chicken mash sack with an easily removed band label. In the collection of Anita Z. Weinraub.

YOU can WIN wonderful prizes!

Enter your fair's 1960 COTTON BAG SEWING CONTEST

Buy your commodities in cotton— sew the bags to win cash, sewing machines, home appliances and other valuable gifts including

FREE VACATION IN HOLLYWOOD!

1959 national winners were readily entertained by Jack Baber, sponsor of the NCGTV show, "Queen for a Day" and the day in the film capital, Left, Cotton Bag City Queen Mrs. J. Melvin Peterson, Route 2, Selah, Washington; and right, Mrs. G. B. Overall, runner up, Route 1, Caldwell, Kansas.

MORE EXCITING DETAILS INSIDE

Fig. 6. Flier announcing the 1960 contest. Mrs. Dorothy Overall is on the right.

Nice Package!

Flour bag to sun suit is the short story behind this eye-appealing package.

Women are buying many products —sugar, salt, seed, feed, flour, etc., in colorful Ken-Print Bags, because they are re-usable in making everything from dresses to draperies.

If your product is gathering cobwebs on retailers' shelves, let Percy Kent offer suggestions that will make them move—but fast!

PERCY KENT BAG CO. INC.
BUFFALO KANSAS CITY NEW YORK

Fig. 5. Ad that appeared in FEEDSTUFFS magazine's February 1, 1947 issue.

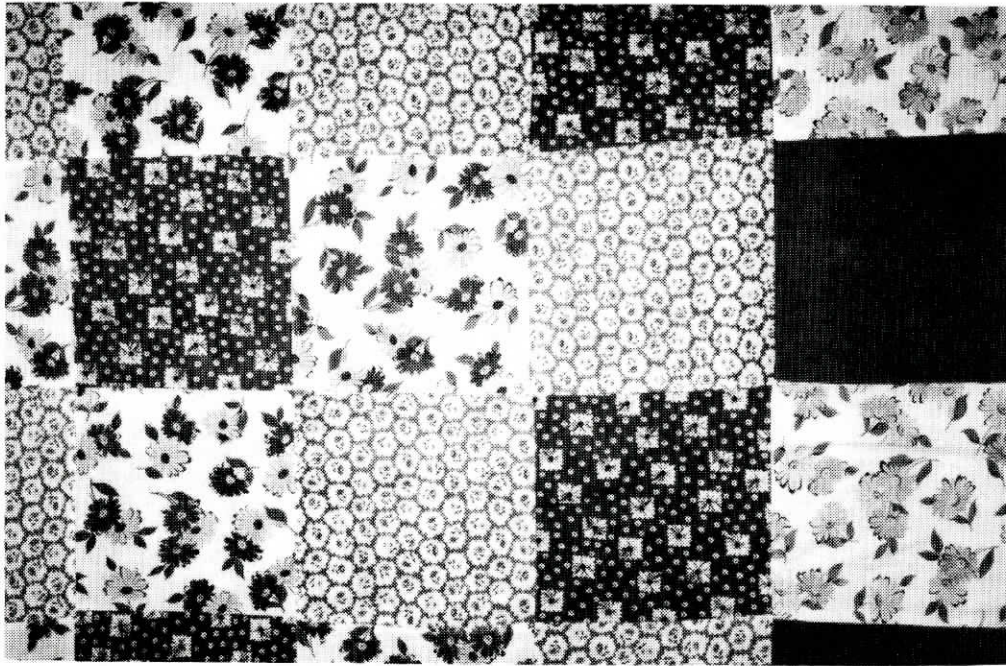


Fig. 8. Detail of a quilt top made from printed feed sack fabrics; collected in North Carolina. In the Division of Textiles collection, NMAH.

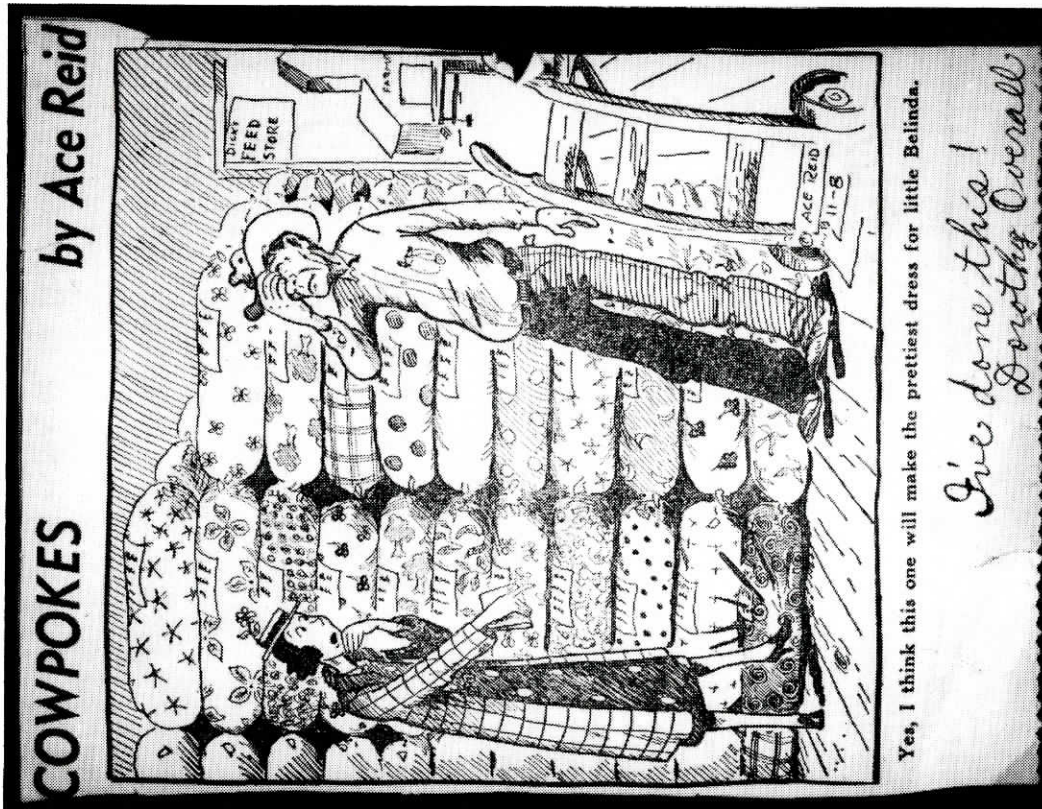


Fig. 7. From a Kansas newspaper, 1950s or 1960s.