

CHICKEN LINEN

Mid-twentieth century American feedsacks



In the farmlands of mid-twentieth century America, dry goods were sold in printed cotton sacks designed to appeal to female customers who could turn them into clothes and household textiles. Now sought by collectors and quilters on both sides of the Atlantic, the story of the decorative feedsack illuminates the history of rural America and the women who lived and worked there.

The first two decades of the twentieth century were, says David B Danbom, the 'golden age' of American agriculture. Rural living standards rose, communities became less isolated and country people more modern. This period of 'rare prosperity' ended with a drop in farm prices in 1920, bankrupting some half a million farmers, followed by the 1929 stock market crash which reduced domestic and export markets. Finally, the devastating drought and dust storms of the 1930s Dust Bowl drove thousands out of the Midwest and into poverty.

In these straitened circumstances women made the best use of what they had to hand including the sacks in which fertilizers, animal and human feed stuffs were packaged. Rural women had been salvaging farm sacks for domestic use since they replaced wooden barrels in the nineteenth century: but, says oral historian Lu Ann Jones, removing the durable inks with which they were branded required elbow grease and patience. The sacks had to be soaked in soap and lye, rinsed, rubbed, boiled, bleached and rinsed again. They might then be embroidered, or dyed with commercial or natural colourants, such as black walnut, oak bark or sumac berries. After starching, drying and

ironing, the fabric was used for aprons, nightgowns, undergarments, curtains, towels and sheets. A decorative crochet trim was sometimes made from the chain-stitched thread, easily unravelled, with which the sacks were sewn together.

As manufacturers came to realise women's role in farm decision-making and the value to them of the sacks, the range, quality and thread count of feedsack fabrics increased. The familiar coarse burlap and canvas were joined by osnaburg, muslin, gingham, calico and percale and, seeking to outdo the competition, water-soluble inks, removable labels and coloured fabrics were introduced. These were followed by printed sacks bearing floral, striped, plaid and abstract patterns, a boon to patchwork quilt makers. There were also prints designed specifically for children's clothes or printed with patterns of dolls and soft toys to cut out and sew. The printed sacks cost a few cents more, but far less than the cost of equivalent fabric bought by the yard. Women visited feed stores, just as they would a fabric shop, to pick out the design they wanted – usually at the bottom of a floor-to-ceiling pile! If feed was delivered to the farm, women would choose from the truck.

As paid workers were laid off, farm women took on extra chores, many assuming full responsibility for large poultry flocks. The increased labour could be stressful, but the purchase of chicken feed (mash) provided them with surplus sacks to sell for extra income or give as payment to female 'help'. This also gave some poorer women, without the need or money to buy large quantities of feed or fertilizer, access to the sacks. ▶



Page 32: A whole feedsack before dismantling.

Page 33: Abstract cotton feedsack fabrics. Top left and centre, the same design in different colourways. Bottom left and centre, mid-century modern fabric designs.

Page 34: A mill worker with a flour sack printed with a soft toy to cut out and sew, c.1939.

Page 35: Floral, plaid and abstract cotton feedsack fabrics. The tight-weave fabric of the black leaves on red plaid design, top left, contrasts with the loose-weave osnaburg-type fabric of the abstract 'winged' design, bottom centre.

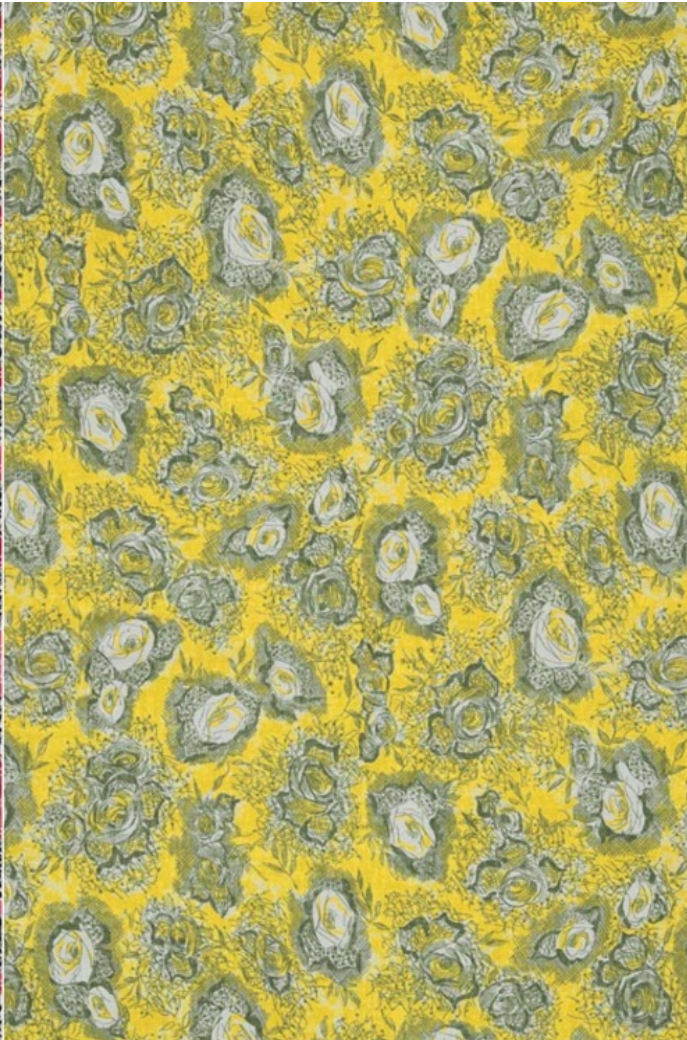
Page 36: Stacks of 'Sunbonnet Sue' printed cotton flour sacks, c.1939.



During World War II, the focus on military supply created civilian textile shortages and production of printed cloth was confined to military and industrial uses. Feedsacks' 'industrial' classification made them one of the few ways in which civilians could continue to access printed cloth and increased their popularity still further. Promoted by the government, the use of feedsacks for clothes and household items became an act of patriotism and it is estimated that over three million Americans owned at least one 'chicken linen' garment by the end of the War.

Feedsacks came in regulated sizes and contained between one-and-one-eighth and one-and-a-half yards of yard-wide fabric. Since many garments required several sacks, women traded and swapped to acquire sufficient matching yardage. The National Cotton Council and the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, in partnership with sewing-pattern companies, encouraged sack use, distributing instruction booklets and sponsoring sewing contests. They also launched advertising campaigns emphasising women's purchasing power to encourage manufacturers to package, and retailers to stock, products in cotton-print sacks.

Austerity interrupted the golden-age rural modernisation, but not the desire for it and fashion became an increasingly important feedsack factor. A rayon-cotton blend fabric with a silky texture and drape was introduced. Agricultural fairs held fashion contests where women and girls modelled garments they had made from feedsacks. Such was the enthusiasm for feedsack ▶





fashion that one dealer, in 1948, complained that customers who formerly focused on the quality of the chicken feed were now asking for 'egg mash in a flowered percale. It ain't natural!' Sack manufacturers promoted their use of New York textile designers and brought to country women the fashionable atomic and mid-century modern prints more commonly associated with urban style. But equally, rural women influenced the designs, the manufacturers surveying them to ascertain their tastes.

Nevertheless, feedsack fashion dwindled as clothes and fabrics returned to stores after the War, rural populations shrank, poultry farming industrialised, and paper became the favoured packaging material. Despite the Cotton Council's attempts to promote the continued use of cloth feedsacks – including competition prizes of sewing machines, domestic appliances and Hollywood vacations ('transportation – by jet, if available!') – production virtually ceased in the early 1960s.

Whole feedsacks are becoming scarce, but feedsack fabric remains readily available, especially through internet auction sites. Mostly low cost (trans-Atlantic postage excepted), washable (with care) and moth-resistant, it is an accessible, low-maintenance textile collectible. The cornucopia of brightly-coloured, small-scale patterns presents an array of possibilities to quilters and vintage textile enthusiasts, and offers an insight into the economic hardships, resourcefulness and perhaps surprising routes to modernity of America's country women.

••• **Dr Vivienne Richmond**