Feed Sack Fashion in Rural America: A Reflection of Culture

KENDRA BRANDES
Bradley University

Recommended Citation Style (MLA):
Brandes, Kendra. "Feed Sack Fashion in Rural America: A Reflection of Culture." The Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy 4.1 (2009): 1-23.

Key words: Convergence feed sacks, textile bags, recycled cotton bagging, commodity bags, flour sacks, chicken linen, fashion history, costume history, oral history, rural dress, home sewing, twentieth century dress, reminiscence transmission.

This is a peer-reviewed article.

Abstract

The recycling of cotton feed sacks[1] into apparel and household items was a common practice across rural America during the first half of the twentieth century. This creative recycling of a utilitarian fabric has, until recently, been omitted from histories of American fashion because the practice centered on fabric use rather than new garment styles, and because the farm wife of rural America was not considered to be a source of fashion inspiration. As an element of material culture, the clothing and clothing practices of rural populations reflect the life and times of the era to the same extent as that of the general population. However, it is the activities of these farm wives, clothing their families in feed sacks, that offer a view of life that was unique to rural communities during this time period. This project collected oral histories of individuals who shared memories of using feed sacks during the 1930s through the 1950s. The memories not only confirmed the wide spread use of feed sacks for clothing and house hold goods, but provided a glimpse of everyday life in rural America during this time period.

Introduction

The costume historian views the history of clothing as a true reflection of culture. "Clothing is one of the most personal components of daily life, and at the same time it is an expression of social activities deeply embedded in the cultural patterns of an era" (Horn & Gurel 1981, 3[1]). Flugel (1930[2]) used the term Zeitgeist to describe the study of clothing as a reflection of society. The Zeitgeist refers to the spirit of the times and is comprised of the prevailing values, attitudes, historical & political events, and economic conditions of an era. It is reflected by social activity as well as material culture. Clothing, part of material culture, captures the Zeitgeist of a society.

[1] [Editor's Note] Please see the use of terms for clarification between the usage of "bag" and "sack" throughout this article.

Histories of twentieth century fashion in the United States have interpreted changes in garment style and fabric use within the Zeitgeist of each era. For most decades of the twentieth century, changes in women's fashion reflected the spirit of the times more quickly than changes taking place in men's wear. The raised hemlines and bobbed hair of the "flappers" of the 1920s reflected changing attitudes toward women's role in society. The influence of the glamorous Hollywood fashion of the 1930s offered the general population a small measure of distraction from the grim realities of the depression. Each decade is rich with examples of fashion reflecting the social conditions of the time. However, most histories offer descriptions that apply to the U.S. population in general. Missing from these accounts are descriptions of clothing practices unique to rural populations. One particular practice, that of converting cotton feed sacks (see end notes) into apparel and household items, represents a void in the costume history of the United States. Women living in rural areas during the first half of the twentieth century exhibited highly resourceful and creative abilities as they converted these feed sacks into everything from undergarments to stylish dresses, and from dish towels to drapery for the home. Firsthand accounts of this practice may only be obtained from people who lived in rural areas during the period. Connolly (1992[3]) provides an extensive history of the development and use of these bags by rural families and states that "the strong but aging voices of the farm women who bought and coveted cotton bags for a myriad of household uses needs to be recorded before they are lost to legend" (p 32[4]).

Purpose of the project

The primary purpose of this project was to fill this void in the history of costume in the United States. Specific objectives of the project included (1) collecting oral histories related to the use of cotton feed sacks, (2) analyzing these histories for patterns and themes that might provide insight into aspects of life in rural America, and (3) reflecting upon emerging themes in light of clothing practices of the present.

Methods

The population for this study included any adult, male or female, who had memories of using feed sacks. Participants were initially identified by meeting with organizations in which membership included the cohorts of individuals living in rural areas during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Typical organizations included quilting groups, home extension groups, home sewing guilds, and retirement homes. A snowball sampling technique was used to identify additional participants.

Oral histories were collected using guidelines outlined by the Oral History Association. (Oral History 1992[5]; Neuenschwander 1993[6]) Demographic data was collected from each participant and each was asked to sign a consent form to allow the researcher to use the narratives in the research program. Each participant was asked open ended questions to prompt discussion of memories of feed sack use. Ten of the fourteen interviews were recorded and transcribed. Responses were compiled in relation to each question and were reviewed for both specific memories as well as for themes evolving from the collection of interviews.

The collection of these interviews is ongoing, but the responses used in this report began as early as 1993. The demographic information collected included the year of birth, the approximate age of the participant when using feed sacks, the place of residence when using the bags, and the source of family income during that period.

The birth year ranged from 1906 to 1946. Nine of the fourteen participants were born in the 1920s. Memories of the period of the greatest use were during the 1940s with two participants citing memories into the early 1960s. Eleven of the participants listed farming as the primary source of family income during the period focusing on feed sack memories. Three participants did not farm, but lived in rural areas and listed family income sources from home building, a grocery business, and the railroad. Participants listed places of residence during feed sack use in states in the Midwest including Illinois (10), Indiana (2), Iowa (1) and Nebraska (1).

Lomas (2000[7]) states that "After a period during which the voices of 'ordinary people" were rejected by professionals/academic researchers, the importance of oral history has begun to be acknowledged in the humanities and it is now being recognized as a valuable research tool for accessing first-hand experience" (p 363[8]). The number of interviewees necessary to adequately represent an event or time period has been debated when oral history is used as a research technique. Newton (1993[9]) suggests that "… between five and ten narrators' stories need to be juxtaposed in order to develop an analysis that is not changed dramatically by each new story" (p 304[10]). This review is based on 14 narratives. A review of the narratives revealed that while each participant's memories was unique and rich in description, no single narrative dramatically changed the description of the practice of feed sack use during the time period under investigation. This project is ongoing and narratives will continue to be collected as additional participants are located.

The History of the Cotton Feed Sack

From Wooden Barrels to Cotton Bags. Prior to the use of fabric sacks for packaging flour and feed, wooden barrels were the primary forms of packaging. The first use of cotton bags is traced to individual farmers in the early 1800's (Connolly 1992[11]). Fabric sacks were much easier to handle and to strap over the back of a horse for a trip to the mill. These early bags were rough fabric made of hand spun yarn and woven and sewn at home. The bags were often stamped with the name of either the farmer, or the mill where the grain was ground (Connolly 1992[12]: Cook 1990[13]). The invention of the sewing machine in the mid 1800's and improvements in spinning and weaving cotton made the use of bags more cost effective than wooden barrels by the late 1800's. Flour was the product most often transported in barrels, and early mass produced bags were sized by the system used for wooden barrels. One barrel held 196 pounds of flour, a half barrel was 49 pounds. Cotton bags were sized to hold the same amount of flour. By the early 1900's a demand for smaller, easier to handle bags resulted in an offering of bags in smaller sizes of 49, 24, 12, 6 and 2 pounds (Cook 1990[14]). Standard sizing of bags did not occur until World War II and resulted in sizes of 100, 50, 25, 10, and 2 pounds. The size of the bag would later become an important factor in determining how many were needed to make a garment or household product.

The first mass produced bags were available by the late 1800s and were made from a fairly coarse fabric called osnaburg. It was woven of white or brown cotton and was stamped with a logo or product label on the front of the bag. (See figure 1) These early bags were often used for rags, rough toweling and other functional uses on the farm. By the early 1910s, bags were offered in a wider variety of fabrics. Flour and sugar were packaged more successfully in lighter fabrics made of a tighter weave (percale and sheeting). Rural housewives readily recycled these lighter, softer bags into everything from undergarments to dresses and from dish towels to bed sheets and curtains. (See figure 2) Many women recycled feed sack fabrics out of necessity. Available fabrics and disposable income were both scarce and much effort was made to hide the fact that family members were clothed in feed sacks. For many women in rural America, use of these sacks for clothing was a mark of poverty. (Connolly 1992[15]). Soaking off logos, dying fabrics, and adding embellishments of ribbon, rickrack, embroidery, and decorative buttons helped make the feed sack dress or shirt less distinguishable from "store bought" garments.

The impact of recycling practices on business and industry. The use of feed sacks from the 1920s through the 1960s is more than a story of creative recycling. The purchasing preferences of the farm wife impacted business practices and policy decisions of private companies, trade organizations, and, most surprisingly, textile designers. Until the mid 1960s, fashion innovation often originated in a design studio and was presented to retail buyers and wealthy customers on the fashion runways of Europe and New York. In what is known as the "trickle down" theory of fashion dissemination (Simmel 1904[16]), the newest trends in garment and fabric styles typically moved from the higher to lower income level customers and from urban areas into the less densely populated rural areas. The farm wife had never been considered a target market by the fashion industry. However, the impact of depression, war, and changing demands for cotton fabric culminated in a keen interest within the textile industry to offer the farm wife the very best in printed fabric.

The transition from wooden and tin packaging for flour and feed to cotton bagging began as a matter of convenience. However, as cotton bag manufacturers and feed companies realized that women in rural areas were recycling the bags, attempts to make this recycling easier and more attractive were quickly undertaken. As early as 1925, Gingham Girl flour was marketed in red and white checked fabric of dress goods quality (Connolly 1992[17]).

Aware that many farm wives dyed the feed sacks before recycling them, Staley Milling Company of Kansas City, Missouri began offering "Tint-sax" in 1936. The sacks, manufactured by Percy Kent Bag Company, were available in eleven pastel shades in higher thread count dress goods of percales and print cloth (Connolly 1992[18]). Connolly states that while there is some evidence of printed fabrics used in feed sack production in the 1920s, wide availability of printed sacks appears to have begun in the late 1930s (1992[19]). (See figures 3 & 4) From that point on, companies marketing either the textile bags, or the products they contained, were in lively competition for the farm wife's feed sack purchase.

Feed sacks were designed with easy use in mind. Sacks were stitched along one side and across the bottom with a simple chain stitch so that stitching could be removed by clipping the top loop and pulling out the entire line of stitching very quickly. The string could be saved for other uses. More effort was made to use logo inks that were easily washed out (See figure 5). A few bag

manufacturers printed patterns for dolls, doll clothes, and other items on the backs of the feed sacks. Items could be cut directly from the sack and quickly sewn. Sacks were sometimes hemmed before being stitched as a bag so that when the chain stitching was removed, the bag was ready to use as an apron or tablecloth, depending on the size of the bag.

Marketing tactics were redirected from the farmer to the farm wife as bag manufacturers and mills attempted to "attract feminine attention to get the masculine dollar" (Lockhart 1933[20]). This shift in target market continued over the next few decades and did not go unnoticed by feed stores employees. A quote from a feed salesman in 1948 probably echoed the sentiment of many of his fellow feed merchants. "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" (Perkins 1948, 32[21]).

During the years that saw the feed sack develop from a coarse, colorless cotton bag to a brightly printed source of fashion fabric, segments of business and industry were organizing to increase sales and to help lower income families make the best use of this resource. Booklets offering garment patterns and instructions for using the feed sacks were offered by both commercial and non-profit organizations. The Household Science Institute, based in Chicago, printed booklets as early as the late 1920s (Connolly 1992[22]). The Textile Bag Manufacturers Association was created in 1925 to boost sales and joined forces with the Millers National Federation (flour millers) in 1935 to increase the sale of cotton bags by encouraging home sewing projects. Ideas for bag use and instruction sheets were printed in a wide number of magazines published for the rural audience. Local newspapers featured patterns for home sewing and for use in high school "domestic science" classes.

The Best Fabrics Available. During World War II, textile shortages for retail garments arose as a high percentage of U.S. textile production was funneled into the war effort. In 1943 the War Production Board restricted the use of cotton print cloth to military and industrial uses. "Good-quality house dresses and yardage for making them disappeared from the retail counters" (O'Brien 1944, p 84[23]). Fortunately for the farm wife, feed sacks were placed in the "industrial" category. High quality dress goods could still be found in abundance in feed stores across rural America while "store bought" clothing became scarce everywhere. Now, more than ever, bag manufacturers felt the pressure to offer feeds sacks that were not only colorful, but also of prints in the latest style.

During these years of focus on the printed feed sacks, the branded sacks (those printed only with logos or product information) were still available and were often used for undergarments and toweling. A 1946 issue of Time magazine documented an uproar when food shortages required shorter processing time of wheat, resulting in darker colored flour. This flour was to be packaged in plain muslin bags stamped with the word "Emergency". A Pillsbury Flour Company manager from Dallas, Texas stated, "They used to say that when the wind blew across the South you could see our trade name on all the girl's under pants. Now they all read 'EMERGENCY' " (p. 23[24]). This article reported that the alarm was false and the usual sacks would still be available. "Easter could come as usual. Across the young, church-bound backsides would still be emblazoned the good old legend: 100 LBS. FRESH GROUND" (Time, p. 23[25]).

In the years following WW II, the demand for cotton bags declined as paper bags became more cost effective (Cook 1990[26]). As a result, industry efforts to entice the farm wife to purchase fabric feed sacks intensified. The National Cotton Council and the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association partnered with Simplicity and McCalls pattern companies to further promote the purchase of feed sacks. Fashion shows and design competitions were sponsored by both business and trade organizations (Perkins 1948[27]). By 1947 major bag manufacturers had hired nationally and internationally known textile designers to insure that their bags were offered in the most up to date prints based on styles selected by farm wives surveyed for their preferences (Connolly 1992[28]). (See figure 6) In terms of fashion history, this fact alone is a truly unique example of the farm wife influencing the "high end" of the fashion process. Sales of feeds, bags, and cotton fiber depended heavily on the farm wife wanting a particular print, and millers and bag manufactures actively sought to meet that demand. The American farm wife was now the target market.

The production of the cotton feed sack began to decline in the late 1950s and all but ceased to exist by the early 60s. Connolly (1992[29]) identifies cost competition from paper bags and a shift away from small scale chicken farms as two important factors in this decline. Use of printed feed sacks can be documented through the late 1960s (Banning 2005[30]) although the period of greatest use was in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. It is from this time period that the following narratives are taken.

Memories shared through oral histories.

The focus of this project was not only to identify the items made from feed sacks, but to also collect the memories of everyday life in rural America. The descriptions and memories are intertwined. The unstructured nature of the interview allowed each participant to elaborate on some questions and speak only briefly about others

Items made from feed sacks. It was not possible to separate a recounting of items made from feed sacks from descriptions of other aspects of daily life in rural communities. The memories of these items are truly interwoven with memories of other activities during the time period. When asked what they remembered about the use of feed sacks, participants' responses revealed a wide variety of items. One participant explained that "Everything on the clothes line was from feed sacks" (Andris 2008[31]). (See figure 7) Additional accounts provided rich detail.

> We made as much as we could from them - our own dresses, children's clothes, little overalls. I remember for the children, shorts, little shirts. In those days they didn't have knits, not for outerwear they didn't. Underwear was knit material. Petticoats, aprons, dish towels, bedspreads . . . it was a way of life.
>
> It really served the purpose well to use as dish towels, and in those days everybody dried dishes. You didn't use a dishwasher. We didn't know what dishwashers were. It was a very versatile fabric. (Harris 1994[32])

> All of my underwear, slips, and of course my bloomers. They were made from the plain sacks – no printing on them. Also dresser scarves, aprons - a lot of

> them, pillow cases, and dish towels – some dresses. It took two (one hundred pound) sacks two make a dress for an adult."(Clendening 1993[33])

When asked if he remembered the use of feed sacks, one male participant, aged 68, responded

> Absolutely! They made everything with feed sacks. I remember this like it was yesterday. . . We had a feed dealer, Albert Brown in Thawville, Illinois. Albert was a great person and when this (the feed sacks) came in, Mom would always have Dad get the same pattern. We made curtains, towels, and just about everything. Some people used them for diapers. (Cornelius 1995[34]).

Participants confirmed that while the colored print bags were popular, the branded bags (those printed only with a company logo) continued to be used.

> Powdered sugar sacks had four X's. My husband always talks about my mother-in-law wearing underwear made from those sacks. Well, sometimes those prints didn't come off and you would see them (the undergarments) hanging on the clothesline with the four X's. (Harris 1994[35])

Responses to economic conditions of the period. Descriptions of feed sack use brought to light the economic hardships of the depression and war years. Participants described bartering goods because there was often little or no cash flow. Memories of walking into town revealed the lack of transportation and rationing of gasoline. Recycling garments for use by one person after another was common practice.

> We lived during the depression era in a rural area and we conserved everything. It wasn't called recycling back then, it was conserving. I remember what good seamstresses we had. They did so well without instruction or patterns. They learned from their mothers. My mother was very creative. Many women were. They knew how to add a little here and a little there. We did it all on the treadle (sewing machine). I remember going to the feed store and we would be so in hopes of getting sacks that matched. Maybe two that matched, or one that would match a fabric that we already had.
>
> My father worked for the railroad. We lived in Bloomington, Indiana, but in a rural area. We had a cow and chickens to help with the income, but we didn't farm. I can remember walking to the store and trading six eggs for a loaf of bread. (Clendening 1993[36])

When asked if fabrics from sources other than feed sacks were available, the responses were mixed. One participant reported availability of fabrics from dry goods stores during the war years. Another participant, living 30 miles away reported almost no other sources for fabrics during the same period. Those who remember alternate sources of fabrics responded with the following statements.

> We did purchase other fabrics, but we were big on making over things. You know, my mother would make me a coat from an adult coat, you know what I mean. And we'd do things, remodeling and making over. I guess we did a lot (C. Berg 1994[37]).

> Our main source (of fabric) was feed sacks. We had use of yard goods, but never bought much as we were too poor (Scheuring 1995[38]).

> Yes, the general store. I remember seeing it in bolts. It all looked so pretty. My mother, brother and I would walk about a mile to the general store – Kirbys in Bloomington, Indiana. We bought much of the fabric for our dresses from the general store. Occasional dresses were made from feed sacks. Later, I remember my mother ordering some of our clothing from the mail order catalogs. My mother did a lot of quilting. I can still see many fabrics from my dresses in the quilts. She also made woven rugs. She used fabric from clothing that was very worn, rolled it into strings and wove them into rugs (Clendening 1993[39]).

Others reported extreme scarcity of fabrics. When asked if other sources were available, one participant stated

> No. The war effort took all the fabric on the market. You could buy very little printed fabric. Our oldest daughter was born in '44 (1944) and all of her clothes were made from feed sacks. I can remember after she was maybe two or three years old, after the war was over, we drove past a fabric shop and she saw some other fabrics in the widow besides feed sacks and she said "Oh mom, look at those pretty feed sacks". She thought because she had nothing else to wear all the material was feed sacks.…
>
> The reason we couldn't buy fabrics, all these companies were making nylon and things for parachutes and the soldier's garments and this sort of thing. After the war, companies went back to producing fabrics. The first thing I can remember coming on the market (after the war) was checked gingham. That was the first fabric available, and people would stand in line when it was advertised that there were prints or material that you could buy. And people would stand before the doors opened in front of the store. One I remember was Penney's in Bloomington (Illinois). It was downtown then, but they were so in need of better fabrics I suppose and checked gingham was the first thing I could remember (Harris 1994[40]).

When asked about availability of fabric, the conversation extended to other consumer items as well. The interviewer was shown gas ration stamps that had been found in a shed and saved. The stamps had been divided into sets and framed. A set was given to each child in the family because they could remember the rationing of food, fuel, and clothing.

> We were only allowed so much. . . . I don't know if you have ever seen the gas ration stamps. Some of this was for field work too. See, 'permits delivery

> of five gallons of pure oil'. That was for the tractor, but this would have been for the farm because it says 'non-highway' so it would have been for gas. . . We had ration stamps for shoes, we were allowed only two pair a year. Also flour, sugar, and coffee. I don't remember anything else, but we were just not allowed any more than what your stamps permitted and you had so many stamps per number (sic) of members in your family. (Harris 1994[41])

Although rationing was not limited to rural areas, its impact on transportation was more keenly felt by rural families. Even after the end of World War II, transportation into town was not always easy. One participant's reply revealed that a trip to town was a "major event", and that magazines and local newspapers were their main source of fashion information and patterns for clothing construction.

> We ordered most of our patterns because going into Bloomington (Illinois) was an all day event. It was just easier to order. We ordered mostly from Prairie Farmer and got some from the newspaper. Newspapers had patterns in them that you could use. The Pantograph from Bloomington. Those are probably the main two. We used those more than patterns from places like Simplicity (Dorward 2008[42]).

Social Networks revealed. The importance of the feed sacks to rural families became apparent as participants described saving empty sacks and trading with neighbors to get several sacks of the same print. Feed store employees would make a special effort to provide sacks of matching prints for regular customers. The feed store itself was described as an enjoyable trip for young men to meet and talk during their work day. Participants described their "old" neighborhoods and the changes they saw through the years. While many participants remembered "being poor", it was often stated as a matter of fact rather than as a complaint.

One participant, Mr. Cornelius, spoke of the feed store manager serving beer to the farmers on hot summer days, and that this same manager knew of his mother's preferences in feed sack patterns so that he could save them for her. If the manager wasn't able to save the sacks, he gave Mr. Cornelius and his father the names of the farmers who had purchased the pattern. His mother would then contact those farmers and trade baked goods or other feed sacks for the patterns that she wanted. Mr. Cornelius stated that he loved recalling those days spent with his father. He explained that 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. He laughed and said he had a great time in the late 1930' with his friends. Going to the feed store was a treat for him. He said that even though they were "dirt poor" they were never unhappy because everybody was equally poor, so they helped one another.

One participant, a widowed farm wife, better fit the description of "farmer" as she raised chickens on her own farm and was a single parent to twin boys. She spoke of the owner of a local hatchery helping her find four matching 50 pound sacks so that she could make matching shirts and pajamas for her sons (Hayden 1995[43]). She explained that twenty five pound sacks could be pieced together for garments or used alone for towels and dresser or refrigerator scarves.

The memories of working with these fabrics provided insight into divisions of labor along gender lines. Even when trips to town were possible, many farm wives didn't make the trip. Their work was on the farm.

> We had two big chicken houses and used 14 sacks of feed every week. My husband got most of the sacks. He always tried to get 2 or 3 of the same pattern so we would have enough to make something. He did a pretty good job of picking them out. I didn't go. I was at home with the kids (Andris 2008[44]).

> I would send pieces along with my husband when he went to buy feed so that he could bring home the same colored sacks so that I would have enough to make some project because I made dresses from them and it would take about three (100 pound) sacks. I could get something for a child out of one . . . (Harris 1994[45]).

As one retired feed salesman explained:

> At that time most of the farm women did stay at home. A lot of the time the women even took care of the baby chicks. It was kind of the women's job.
>
> I used to stack the bags about ten deep in my truck, going from farm to farm on a regular route. Seemed like the ladies always wanted the one's (feed sacks) on the bottom. There used to be a special price on five bags. I would pick them out of five different spots on the truck (C. Berg 1994[46]).

Gender differences in work roles extended beyond the farm. One participant's discussion brought to light hiring practices in the 1940s. She remembered a change in hiring policy by a major company that allowed married women to work and being unable to take advantage of the change because of gas shortages:

> I bought very little ready-to-wear because I knew how to sew and I was a farm wife and didn't work. . . I was employed at State Farm (Insurance Company) and when I got married, State Farm was just then allowing married women to work, otherwise, when you got married, you had to quit. But because of gas rationing and the fact that we lived six miles east of Bloomington (Illinois), there wasn't enough gasoline for me to drive to work . . . (Harris 1994[47])

An interview about fabrics with one married couple revealed memories of social networks and neighborhoods in rural areas.

> Neighborhoods were close in those days. Everyone knew their neighbors and the women drifted back and forth. In fact in our neighborhood, the ladies had a club where they got together once a month and your closest neighbors helped you at canning time and thrashing time (D. Berg 1994[48]).

> You drive through the old neighborhoods and there isn't one third of the houses left out in the country that there was then. Some farmers farm ten times more that what farmers did back then. It's not unusual for somebody to farm two thousand acres. One farmer can farm much more now (C. Berg, 1994[49]).

Dorothy displayed a tablecloth made by her mother and explained how her mother used it as a record of her social network.

> People came by to visit her and she had them write their names, her friends and neighbors, and she embroidered them. . . .of course, I know all the people who wrote their names on there (D. Berg 1994[50])

During the course of the interview, the memories of this husband and wife drifted to discussion of rural neighborhoods and technology of the period. (C & D Berg 1994[51])

> You're into fabrics, but what electrification did when we were young! You know what it did to the country? Those were (sic) really some memories. (D. Berg[52])

> My brother was mentioning how much farther the electric company (had to install poles and wiring) - there used to be houses every quarter of a mile. And now you can go maybe one house in a mile and the electric company, instead of getting all that revenue, had to have these lines and get (revenue) from one family rather than five. (C. Berg[53])

> I think it was about 1940 when it came to the area and electric lights and the refrigerator were really - we thought they were just (wonderful). They (her neighbors) went on to get other appliances as people could afford to buy them. (D. Berg[54])

Dorothy was prompted by her husband to tell the interviewer about her "cousin and the ice cubes":

> We had telephone lines where people could listen in, you know. We all had our own shorts and longs, our rings, and my cousin listened in on the party line and this German speaking accent called his son and wife and he said 'could you kids come over tonight? This darn refrigerator is making ice cubes faster than mom and I can use them'. Every time the ice cubes froze, he took them out and put more water in. (D Berg[55])

The interviewer commented that most people today would think of ice automatically freezing and dumping into to ice container, but realized that the participant was referring to filling trays with water and manually removing the ice cubes once they were frozen.

> Two trays, that's all any of us had at the time. He didn't know what to do with all of that ice. My cousin couldn't wait to tell us. (laughing) That was really a change. (C. Berg[56])

Summary

The existing literature on feed sack recycling presents a detailed account of the history and use of feed sacks from an industry perspective. The oral histories add great depth to the literature by discussing the use of these sacks within the context of everyday life in rural communities. Clothing practices are not random. They reflect the cultural patterns and historical events of the times (Horn & Gurel 1981[57]). These life experiences, often considered too mundane to be recorded for history, provide subtle details about work relationships, economic conditions, the impact of technology, and social networks – the spirit of the times. These details, provided by the "strong but aging voices" of rural men and women, are a valuable component of the history of dress and of the cultural heritage of rural America.

Conclusions

The significance of these fabrics was especially evident during one interview as both mother and daughter shared memories of life on the farm through fabrics in a quilted coverlet. The mother, age 89, sat in a chair with the coverlet across her lap. Her daughter knelt beside her running her hand over the coverlet. Memories were immediate and often simultaneous as one would point to a particular print in the pieced quilt and both would identify how the fabric had been used. Pajamas for one son, a shirt for another, or a ruffle for a bassinet. Just as a specific sound or aroma can trigger memories, so too can the sight and touch of a fabric. An often used term "the fabric of our lives" (Cotton Incorporated campaign slogan, 1989) holds even more meaning for those who worked closely with these fabrics. So different from today's disposable fashion, the printed fabrics from these sacks were used and reused. Creating something fashionable from something utilitarian was challenging and rewarding. It required time and thought and the actual hands on process of making the dress, shirt, or set of curtains. Feed sack fabric remained visible for long periods of time. These fabrics originally held flour or feed and sat in the kitchen or barn serving as a product container. Once empty they were opened into flat fabric and washed. The resourceful farm wife worked with pieces of fabric of limited size to make the dress pattern fit the fabric, or strategically place the seam for a pillow case or bed sheet. As garments wore out, salvageable parts were recycled into quilt squares, rugs, or even cleaning rags. While few of the actual feed sack garments remain because of these recycling practices, the sight of the print or touch of the fabric became embedded in memories of when, where, and how these fabrics were used. A simple square of feed sack fabric can trigger those memories 40, 50, or 60 years later.

With the current interest in sustainability, lessons could be learned from this practice of connecting with fabrics and using them longer. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of sustainability is maintaining and strengthening the value systems related to family and work. Fabrics from feed sacks have sustained the memories of families working together to "make do", to innovate, and to create. There are currently no fabric shortages and today's clothing production techniques and distribution channels make the latest fashion trends readily available to urban and rural populations alike. However, there are fewer memories attached to today's

garments, worn for a short period of time and discarded. The memories of feed sacks collected from the women and men interviewed provide valuable insight into the importance of working together with the elements of our near environment (fabrics, foods, and housing) that shape our lives. This is the cultural heritage of rural America.

Use of Terms [back to top]

The terms bag and sack will be used interchangeably and will refer to bags made of woven cotton in various sizes for packaging food products. While the term "feed sack" is used throughout this discussion, the sacks were used to package flour, sugar, grains, as well as feed for chicken and other livestock. The terms cotton bag and textile bag have also been used in the literature to describe fabric packaging. Banning (2005[58]) used the term commodity bags to cover the range of products sold in these bags. Various fabric terms (osnaberg, sheeting, percale) will be used to describe the types of fabrics used, but many people living in rural populations during this era used the general term "chicken linen" because so many women made garments and household products from sacks containing chicken feed. The term feed sack will be used in this article because it is one of the most widely recognized by those who shared their memories for this study.

The terms costume, dress, and fashion are used interchangeably in this study. All three terms refer to the prevailing manner of clothing worn during the period under investigation.

Figures

Figure 1. Branded feed sack made of osnaberg. Used for towels, aprons, and undergarments.
(back to top)

Figure 2. Solid white percale feed sack over a branded feed sack of osnaberg. (back to top)

Figure 3. 25 pound flour sacks with pasted paper labels. (back to top)

Figure 4. Swatches of printed feed sacks. The fabrics pictured were used for boy's shirts, men's boxers, children's pajamas, mattress covers, and aprons. (back to top)

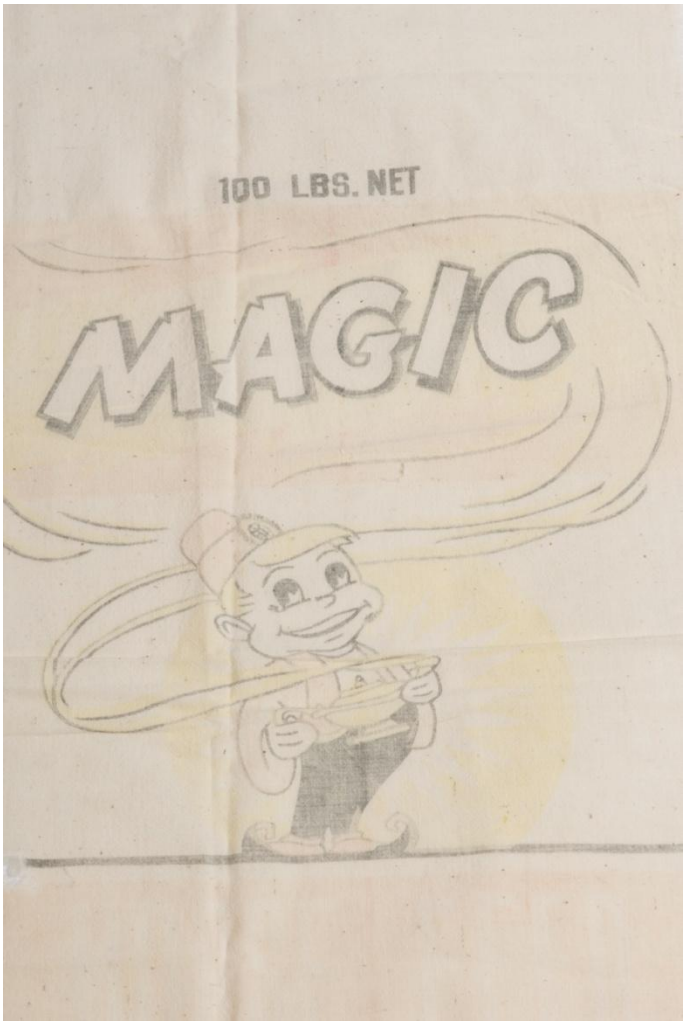

Figure 5. This 100 pound flour sack had been washed in an attempt to remove the printing, but the faded image remains. (back to top)

Photograph Currently Unavailable

Figure. 6 1940s fashion from the feed store. (back to top)

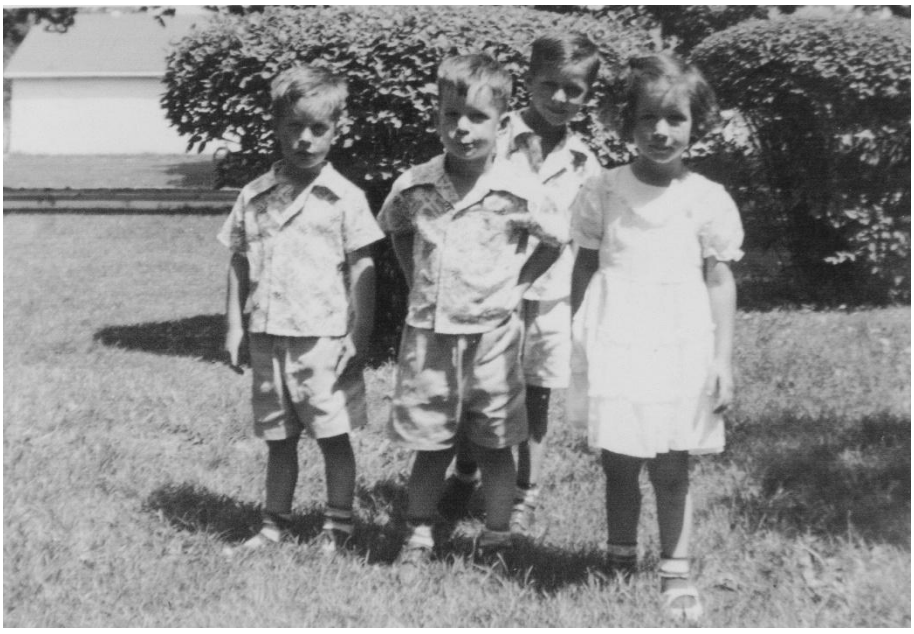

Figure 7. Boys wearing shirts made from printed feed sacks. Children of Russell and Zovelda Andris , farm north of Saybrook, Illinois, 1954.
(The author has written permission to use this photo.) (back to top)

Acknowledgements

1. This project was funded, in part, by the Illinois Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (formally known as the Illinois Home Economics Association).
2. Selected oral histories found in this paper were presented at the Oral History Association Annual Meeting, 1996. Additional presentations based on selected oral histories have been presented to state and local professional organizations in Illinois between 1996 and 2008.
3. The author would like to acknowledge and thank Joyce Fulton who, as a graduate assistant at Illinois State University, assisted in the collection of these oral histories.
4. A special thank you is extended to Carol Dorward, who provided family photographs and swatches of feed sack fabrics to this project.
5. Thank you also to Juanita Clendening of Bloomington, Indiana, who donated samples of feed sacks from her mother's collection.

End Notes: Brandes, Kendra, "Feed Sack Fashion in Rural America: A Reflection of Culture." *Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy* (4.1, 2009).

1. Horn, Marilyn and Lois Gurel. *The Second Skin.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, (1981). [back]

2. Flugel, J.C. *The Psychology of Clothes.* 1930. Reprint. London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1966. As sited in Horn, Marilyn and Lois Gurel. *The Second Skin.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981. [back]

3. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

4. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

5. *Oral History. Evaluation Guidelines*. Pamphlet. 3 (1992). Los Angeles, CA.: Oral History Association. [back]

6. Neuenschwander, J.A. *Oral History and the Law*. Pamphlet No. 1. Albuquerque, N.M.: Oral History Association (1993). [back]

7. Lomas, Clare. "I know Nothing About Fashion . There's No Point in Interviewing Me: The Use and Value of Oral History to the Fashion Historian". In *Fashion Cultures, Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, ed. Bruzzi, S. & Gibson. P.C. New York: Routledge, (2000): 363-370. [back]

8. Lomas, Clare. "I know Nothing About Fashion . There's No Point in Interviewing Me: The Use and Value of Oral History to the Fashion Historian". In *Fashion Cultures, Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, ed. Bruzzi, S. & Gibson. P.C. New York: Routledge, (2000): 363-370. [back]

9. Newton, E. *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town*. Boston: Beacon Press (1993). [back]

10. Newton, E. *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town*. Boston: Beacon Press (1993). [back]

11. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

12. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

13. Cook, Anna Lue. *Identification and Value Guide to Textile Bags: The Feeding and Clothing of America.* Florence, Alabama: Books America (1990). [back]

14. Cook, Anna Lue. *Identification and Value Guide to Textile Bags: The Feeding and Clothing of America.* Florence, Alabama: Books America (1990). [back]

15. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

16. Simmel, Georg. "Fashion". *International Quarterly*. 10 (1904): 130-155. [back]

17. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

18. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

19. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

20. Lockhart, James. "Attracting Feminine Attention to Get the Masculine Dollar". *Feedstuffs*. 5 (February 25, 1933): 10. [back]

21. Perkins. D.W. "Fashion in Feed Bags". *American Magazine*. Vol. CXLV, 3. (1948): 32-33. [back]

22. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

23. O'Brien. Ruth. "The Textile Situation on the Home Front". *Journal of Home Economics*. 36 (1944): 83 – 86. [back]

24. "Foul Rumor". *Time*. 23 (March 11, 1946): 23. [back]

25. "Foul Rumor". *Time*. 23 (March 11, 1946): 23. [back]

26. Cook, Anna Lue. *Identification and Value Guide to Textile Bags: The Feeding and Clothing of America.* Florence, Alabama: Books America (1990). [back]

27. Perkins. D.W. "Fashion in Feed Bags". *American Magazine*. Vol. CXLV, 3. (1948): 32-33. [back]

28. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

29. Connolly, Loris. "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?" *Dress.* 19 (1992): 17 – 36. [back]

30. Banning, Jennifer. "Feedsack Fashions in South Louisiana, 1949 – 1968: The Use of Commodity Bags in Garment Construction." PhD diss., Louisiana State University, (2005). http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-06232005-162008/ (accessed April 5, 2008). [back]

31. Andris, Zovelda. Oral history interview, March 2, 2008, Washington, Illinois. [back]

32. Harris, Marian, Oral history interview, April 21, 1994,Normal, Illinois. [back]

33. Clendening, Juanita, Oral history interview, April 9, 1993, Bloomington, Indiana. [back]

34. Cornelius, Wayne. Oral history interview, Sept. 21, 1995, Lexington, Illinois. [back]

35. Harris, Marian, Oral history interview, April 21, 1994,Normal, Illinois. [back]

36. Clendening, Juanita, Oral history interview, April 9, 1993, Bloomington, Indiana. [back]

37. Berg, Chester. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

38. Scheuring, Therese. Oral history interview, May 28, 1995, Defranie, Iowa. [back]

39. Clendening, Juanita, Oral history interview, April 9, 1993, Bloomington, Indiana. [back]

40. Harris, Marian, Oral history interview, April 21, 1994,Normal, Illinois. [back]

41. Harris, Marian, Oral history interview, April 21, 1994,Normal, Illinois. [back]

42. Dorward, Carol. Oral history interview, March 2, 2008, Washington, Illinois. [back]

43. Hayden, Charlotte. Oral history interview, Sept. 19, 1995, Normal, Illinois. [back]

44. Andris, Zovelda. Oral history interview, March 2, 2008, Washington, Illinois. [back]

45. Harris, Marian, Oral history interview, April 21, 1994,Normal, Illinois. [back]

46. Berg, Chester. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

47. Harris, Marian, Oral history interview, April 21, 1994,Normal, Illinois. [back]

48. Berg, Dorothy. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

49. Berg, Chester. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

50. Berg, Dorothy. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

51. Berg, Chester. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois.
Berg, Dorothy. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

52. Berg, Dorothy. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

53. Berg, Chester. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

54. Berg, Dorothy. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

55. Berg, Dorothy. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

56. Berg, Chester. Oral history interview, April 29, 1994, Bloomington, Illinois. [back]

57. Horn, Marilyn and Lois Gurel. *The Second Skin.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, (1981). [back]

58. Banning, Jennifer. "Feedsack Fashions in South Louisiana, 1949 – 1968: The Use of Commodity Bags in Garment Construction." PhD diss., Louisiana State University, (2005). http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-06232005-162008/ (accessed April 5, 2008). [back]

Additional Sources and Web Sites

Recycling and Resourcefulness! Quilts of the 1930s. Exhibit at the International Quilt Study Center and Museum, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. www.quiltstudy.org/discover/exhibitions/past.html

Hancock, Angie & Paula Wilson. "Chicken Linen and Other Cloth Sacks". *Bittersweet* Vol IV, 4 (Summer 1977). www.thelibrary.Springfield.Missouri.org/lochist/periodicals/bittersweet/sutif.htm

The Quilters Museum www.quiltersmuse.com/collectible_feedsack_cloth_and_q.htm

Author Information

Kendra Brandes (back to top)

Assistant Professor
Bradley University
Department of Family and Consumer Sciences
Peoria, Illinois 61625
Work Telephone: (309) 677-2431
FAX: (309) 677-3813
Home Telephone: (309) 444-2878
E-mail: kbrandes@bradley.edu

Kendra Brandes (Ed.D., University of Illinois, 1991) is currently an assistant professor in the department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois. She teaches courses in textiles, apparel, fashion history, and retail merchandising. She has held faculty positions at the University of Akron and at Illinois State University where she served as curator of the Lois Jett Costume Collection. She began collecting oral histories of feed sack use in the mid 1990s. Additional activities and research interests include service learning and developing links between the university and the community.