

Feed Sack Exhibit

By Fran Wallace

Remember when Ricky and Lucy and Fred and Ethel went to Paris, and as a joke Ricky and Fred tricked the girls into wearing burlap bags as dresses and feed buckets as hats? The joke, however, turned out to be on the boys as the fashionable women of Paris adopted the barn-inspired haute couture. Well, during the 1930's small rural communities, including Hayesville, experienced a similar revolution in the form of feed sack apparel,

Before getting into the history of this amazing textile in general, let's take a pause and look at how the Old Jail Museum came about their collection. The Rebecca Scroggs room, dedicated to textiles, had one section of the room which had various exhibits each year. Then in the early 2000's, after a successful seasonal display of feed sack materials the exhibit was removed. The following year, no one could have anticipated the hue and cry of the public to see the exhibit again. The call went out, and thanks to a few donors and the determination and generosity of one member, Sara Smith, the feed sack exhibition was reborn and remains one of the largest of its kind in the area. But back to the revolution. . .

The revolution began when the patent for printed flour sacks was secured by Asa Bales in 1924 and assigned to a milling company, George P. Plant Milling Co., located in St. Louis, Missouri, under the trademarked name, Gingham. In order to gain an advantage in marketing their new flours, Gingham, and Gingham Girl, since all flours were milled in much the same manner, the milling company came up with the novel idea of making the packaging stand out.

Thus, clothing material of a durable, non-fading, but erasable trade name was born. Gingham had long been a popular material for house dresses and children's play clothes; much of it was already color-fast, and thanks to another invention, the print identifying all pertinent information could be guaranteed to fade when washed because the ink was made of vegetable and was, therefore, soluble. It sounded good and was, but not all bag makers were as scrupulous in the ink they used, and unfortunately,

many rural children went to school with the print still visible on their clothing. At first the colors were limited to pink and white or blue and white, but as the market spread and other manufacturers began selling their own patterned flour sacks and feed sacks to the public, the variety of fabrics and colors also dramatically changed. In the 1930's, the pink and blue gingham was joined by pastels and the less durable but multi-patterned calico. In addition, feed sacks containing animal food appeared in gingham and calico as did, of all things, non-food items such as fertilizer. Pity the poor children sent off to school in fertilized clothing! The Great Depression hurt all the industries of the country, large feed sacks containing many foods for humans and animals included. Not until 1936 is robust advertising for printed feed and seed bags seen in prominent manufacturing journals, and although still entrenched in a depression of great magnitude, by 1936, unemployment had declined by 7% (from 24% to 17%) making the market more viable.

The year, 1936, is significant, too, because the Arkansas City Flour Mill introduced a line of flour sacks in nine different pastel colors of "excellent fabric". The flour was called Pastel Girl and Pastell, and the colors were: pink, lavender, orchid, tea rose, peach, yellow, rose, blue and tan. Additionally, prints of all kinds from Hansel and Gretel to cowboys and Indians to more sophisticated scenes appeared in the late 1930's. Luckily, the Old Jail Museum has a gem of a collection of feed sack materials spanning most all the colors and patterns from the heyday of dress sack apparel.

Not to be outdone by the front of the bag, the back also illustrated fun and useful articles to be sewn such as doilies, aprons, cuffs and collar sets, and tea towels. Doll patterns were also quite popular as you'll see when you visit our museum. These were called needlework imprints or backprints. Because the material covering the bags was seldom enough to make a whole outfit, (two to three large sacks would make a woman's dress) enterprising women held swap parties also known as "bag parties" where unwanted material could be swapped for needed fabric. Oklahoma has the honor of introducing a truly washable trademark and a softer material

thanks to housewives who complained to a local miller. The miller in turn contacted a bag manufacturer who gave the women what they wanted.

The war years saw tight restrictions placed on fabric quantities and bag sizes; yet, the sale of seed and feed bags (dress print bags) was astounding. More than 100,000,000 bags were delivered to the purchasers during WWII and according to author Gloria Nixon, at no time during the war could the bag manufacturers fulfill all of their orders.

Moreover, most anticipated a strong market, even with the piece goods market at full speed, after the war. And so it was. Bag makers hired fabric designers who created a plethora of fresh new designs, and where there were hundreds of patterns, there suddenly were thousands. Even the 1948 election was memorialized in patriotic prints for both candidates, Harry S. Truman and Thomas Dewey. Finally, in the late forties, a milling company included a 9" zipper in their bags, everything the modern housewife could want! Contests became popular in the fifties. Many focused on the chicken; who among the thousands of rural housewives could design an outfit or wardrobe made exclusively from a particular manufacturer's feed sacks? Quite a challenge, eh? Sounds like the plot for one of the fifties zany Hollywood comedies, doesn't it? If dressing fowl wasn't enough to keep the "little lady" busy, in 1950 the Percy Kent Bag Co. of Kansas City introduced a brand new line of Disney prints which, once again, you'll find in our museum.

Alas, by the beginning of the sixties, the dress print sack had all but disappeared. The economy was strong, women were entering the workforce and had less time to sew, and material more suited to work outside the home was readily available. There was simply no demand for those amazing feed and flour printed sacks.

If you miss the nostalgia of those days, however, all is not lost! Please join us at the Old Jail Restoration Celebration on Saturday, June 15, 2019 where all sorts of exhibits, including a remarkable collection of feed and flour sack bags, material and apparel awaits you, but please, no fowl!

This is part of a series of articles about historical gems in the Old Jail Museum and the interesting stories behind them. The museum is closed for the winter, but we hope to have made many improvements when it

opens for the summer season. The Clay County Historical and Arts Council is currently seeking to raise funds for the repair and restoration of the Old Jail Museum. To donate you may visit our website clayhistoryarts.org or mail your check designated for Old Jail Museum Restoration Fund to look at how the feed sack room at the museum came about. CCHAC, P. O. Box 5, Hayesville, NC 2890