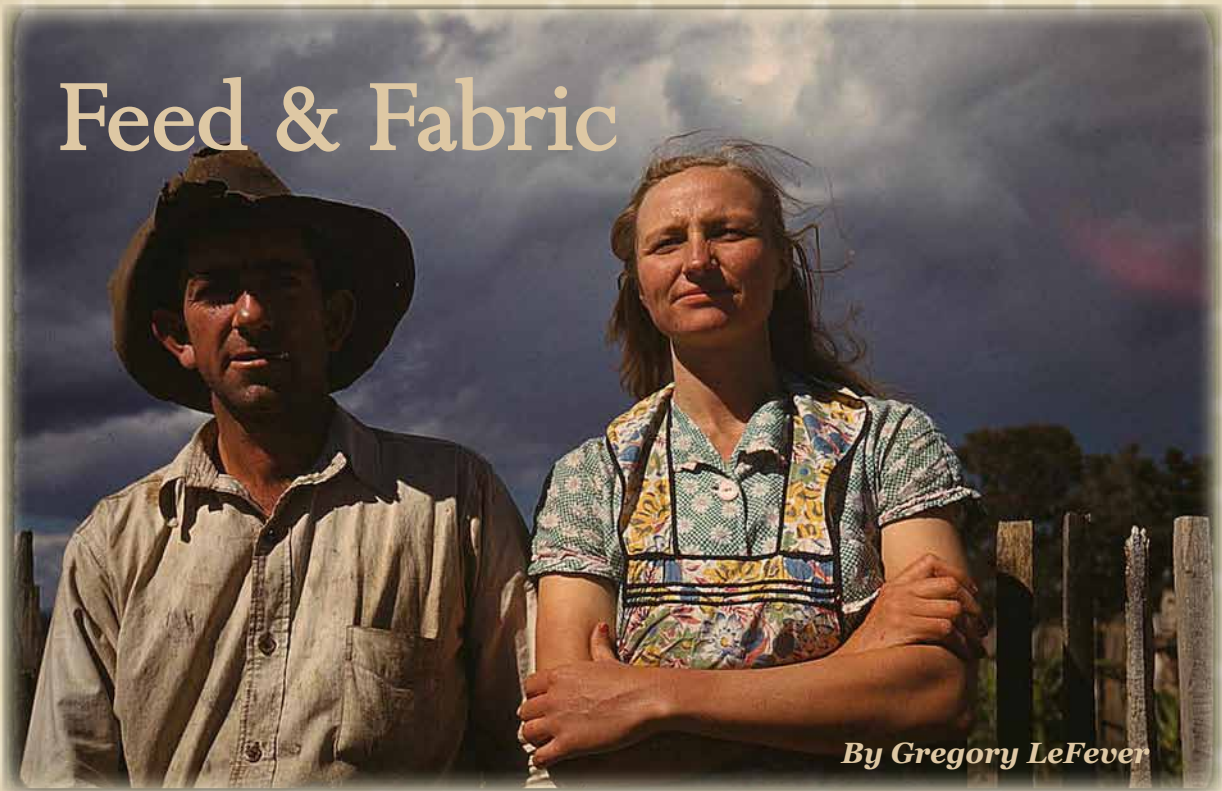




Feed & Fabric



By Gregory LeFever

The humble feedsack provides one of the most fascinating stories in the history of American textiles. Over the course of a century, this utilitarian sack cloth rose from the obscurity of dusty mills and dark barns to become colorfully patterned dresses, curtains, towels and quilts that brightened the homes of millions of families.

Feedsack cloth's popularity arose from a vibrant exchange between the ingenious companies that produced the sacks and the millions of American homemakers who came up with creative uses for the sack cloth. To this day, scraps of these now-faded sacks are sought by collectors, especially quilters.

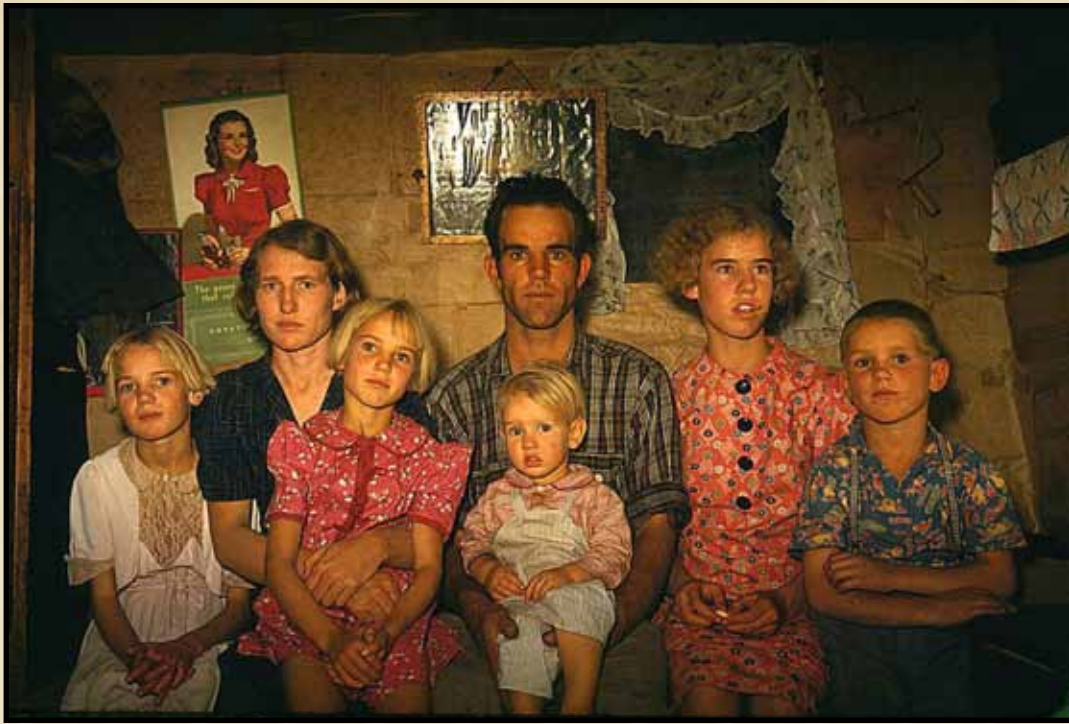
Feedsack cloth is exactly what its name implies: it's cloth sewn into the shape of a sack large enough to hold animal feed, grain, seed, flour, sugar, salt and other staples from the early 1800s through the 1940s.

From the time of the earliest European settlement in America in the 1600s through the American Revolution, food products were transported and stored in wooden barrels and boxes, and an assortment of tin containers. The invention in New York in 1846 of the "stitching machine" meant seams could be sewn into canvas bags strong enough to hold nearly 200 pounds of flour, sugar, or other foodstuffs. These canvas feedsacks were greatly preferred to the wooden barrels and boxes that leaked, eventually rotted, were easily damaged and heavy to move.

Plus, a canvas feedsack was easily refillable and often lasted several years. Then, shortly after the Civil War, competition from other countries drove the price of cotton downward and the feedsack companies found it profitable to switch from canvas to less-expensive cotton for their sacks.

A New Source of Cloth

With the switch from canvas to cotton, women quickly recognized a new and inexpensive source of cloth for many of their domestic needs. Soon they were cutting up the empty feedsacks for use



as dishcloths, towels, rags and other items where the cotton could be useful and beauty was not important.

Word got back to the sack manufacturers about homemakers using the sack cloth for domestic items. The companies, of course, recognized a good thing when they saw it – having women cut up and use the sacks meant more sacks would be purchased instead of being refilled. A number of the companies responded by using water-soluble inks that housewives could remove by soaking in lye or bleach for label-free, whiter cloth.

This improved cloth was suitable for curtains, towels, aprons and other more visible uses. Seeing this, the sack companies took the next step to print the sack labels on paper so they could be even more easily removed, which further heightened the appeal of feedsack cloth. There was a wide variety of sack sizes, including small one-pound or five-pound sacks, larger 10-pound sacks, on up to the much larger 50-pound and 100-pound sacks measuring up to nearly three by four feet in size.

By the late 1800s, homemakers considered the sack itself often as valuable to the household as the foodstuffs it contained.

Sack Cloth Gets Color

Sometime in the early 1900s, feedsacks became available in solid colors, broadening their appeal even more. By the 1920s, the companies were producing sack cloth offering patterns as varied and colorful as those found on fabric bolts in the sewing stores. Some of the companies copied patterns popular in the stores, while others hired designers to create highly attractive patterns unique to their sacks.

Due to the marketing savvy of these sack companies, housewives began accompanying their husbands to the feed mills to select their brands of flour, sugar, cornmeal, beans – even livestock feed and fertilizers for the family farm – based on the patterns printed on the sacks.

Eventually, some patterns printed on the sacks had borders for more colorful towels and pillowcases. Floral and scenic prints made attractive curtains. Some sacks had patterns for sewing dolls and stuffed animals, as well as quilting-block and applique patterns. Jumping on the trend, several sewing-pattern companies and magazines began publishing patterns designed to take advantage of the popular sack cloth, while some paper companies produced wrapping paper to match the sack-cloth designs.

Clothing was a favorite use of the cloth, from undergarments to children's apparel and women's dresses. Usually it took about three sacks to make one dress. One survey in 1942 estimated that three million American women and children – across all income levels – were wearing clothing made from feedsack cloth.

Dwindling, Then Collectible

In its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s – at one time more than 40 mills were producing sacks with thousands of different patterns – feedsack cloth became a fashion statement with rapidly changing prints and patterns. Housewives gathered together to swap swatches of cloth to expand their array of patterns and colors.

While there's been a tendency to associate feedsack cloth with the Great Depression in the 1930s, the fabric's actual popularity was established well before the Depression and continued well after those years of economic hardship. World War II's home-conservation efforts sustained the use of cotton from the sacks for a few more years.



Then, in the late 1940s, many of the sack manufacturers converted to heavy paper and some plastic containers for the foodstuffs they'd been selling in cloth sacks. Once the ally of the homemaker who favored their inexpensive cloth, the sack companies could no longer ignore the fact that a cotton sack cost upwards of 30 cents to produce, compared to only 10 cents per sack made of heavy paper.

Only a few companies still produce feedsacks of cotton, most of them located near Amish and Mennonite communities where the sack cloth still is valued. As for the genuine sack cloth from a half-century ago, a number of quilters and other textile lovers are collecting swatches from quilt shows or online from eBay and similar venues.

Looking back, feedsack cloth remains one of those rare instances when creative homemakers caught the attention of companies that brought their own creativity to the table and, together, the homemakers and these sack companies produced millions of colorful textile items that brightened homes across America.