

FEEDSACK FASHION IN RURAL APPALACHIA: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF
WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN ASHE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA: 1929 – 1956

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

FEEDSACK FASHION IN RURAL APPALACHIA: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN ASHE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA: 1929 – 1956 (May 2010)

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During the Great Depression, rural American women began re-using empty textile bags used to package animal feed, flour, sugar and other goods to make clothing and home textiles. In a culture of material scarcity, excess cloth was a valuable commodity for creative, thrifty women. In the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, cotton bag manufacturers targeted farmer's wives by printing stylish and colorful patterns on the sacks to be used for homesewing. In this case study of Ashe County, North Carolina, women's experiences with sewing and wearing textiles and apparel made from feedsacks and other economical fabrics sources were examined. Located in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, Ashe County has a unique sense of place and community, which was particularly evident in the more rural parts of the county. There, some residents did not have conveniences like running water or electricity until as late as the mid-1950s.

Rural women's roles as producers and creators were explored, as larger cultural changes, like an improving economy and modern technologies, affected the mountain region. Local store records revealed the transition to a full-fledged consumer society, when women began to purchase more ready-made garments and home textiles in the late 1940s and 1950s. Oral history interviews with rural Ashe County women supplemented an analysis of extant objects made from feed and flour sacks. A variety of attitudes were found about self-sufficiency, new technologies, consumer behavior and the power of store-bought goods to convey social status. It quickly became clear that rural women's relationships with dress and textile goods were complex. Women became increasingly reliant on ready-made apparel and home textiles, and the meaning of the objects and the user's relationship with the goods changed. Yet as they navigated social and technological changes after the Second World War, one constant remained – rural women's continued emphasis on fashion and appearance.

DEDICATION

To my grandparents Joanne Hartsoe Kemp and Bob McCoy who introduced me to interesting people, gave me family antiques and shared their stories with me. To their mothers – Granny McCoy and Granny Hartsoe, and all of their mothers, who going back centuries made clothing for their families. Thanks also to my family – my parents, my brother and my sister and to Keith and Rory (my favorite Brits).

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INTRODUCTION

“Women can be just as surely starved for want of pretty clothes as they can be for want of food.” – Lady Duff-Gordon¹

An excerpt from *The Flour Sack* by Colleen B. Hubert

In that long ago time when things were saved,
when roads were graveled and barrels were staved,
when worn-out clothing was used as rags,
and there were no plastic wrap or bags,
and the well and the pump were way out back,
a versatile item, was the flour sack.
Pillsbury’s Best, Mother’s and Gold Medal, too
stamped their names proudly in purple and blue.

The string sewn on top was pulled and kept;
the flour emptied and spills were swept.
the bag was folded and stored in a stack
that durable, practical flour sack.

Bleached and sewn, it was dutifully worn
as bibs, diapers, or kerchief adorned.
it was made into skirts, blouses and slip.
and Mom braided rugs from one hundred strips
she made ruffled curtains for the house or shack,
from that humble but treasured flour sack!

So now my friends, when they ask you
as curious youngsters often do,
"Before plastic wrap, Elmer’s Glue
and paper towels, what did you do?"

¹ “What they say about fashion,” *The New York Times* (1923-Current file), November 3, 1946, <http://0-www.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/> (accessed January 28, 2010).

Tell them loudly and with pride don't lack,
"Grandmother had that wonderful flour sack!"²

A 1950s promotional brochure by the National Cotton Council of America boasted about a feed-bag dressmaking contest between 1,500 women “down in North Carolina... which created so much excitement that New York newspapers carried stories about it. Highlights of the event were the smartness of the styles and the fact that no winning dress cost more than one dollar!”³ The emphasis placed on fashion-forward dresses made by skilled homemakers reflects the potentially contrasting themes of style and thrift that were used to market textile bags to rural women. Yet this juxtaposition would soon become irrelevant during the prosperous years that followed the Second World War. In the late 1940s and 1950s, rural women’s ideas about the value of thrift and re-use were being replaced by a willingness to consume. And the concept of fashion only grew in importance as the American ready-to-wear apparel industry developed. What follows in this thesis is that story as it unfolded in one place – Ashe County, North Carolina – during the twentieth century.

² Joanne Kemp, e-mail message to author, July 30, 2009.

³ *Smart Sewing with Cotton Bags*, (Memphis, TN: The National Cotton Council of America, no date).



Figure i.1. This dress was homesewn using feedsacks and what appears to be part of a lace tablecloth, Boone, North Carolina. *Photo by author*

During the 1920s resourceful Americans adapted the use of the cloth bags that manufacturers sold flour, feed, oatmeal and sugar in to create dresses, diapers, pillowcases, towels and other soft household supplies. As this practice grew in popularity and out of necessity, the companies packaging the goods caught on and began promoting their products to women through the colorful printed pattern on the sacks. This marketing strategy extended widely into the 1950s but persisted locally into the 1990s. This thesis focuses on that phenomenon using a case study of Ashe County, North Carolina. The practices found in Ashe County clearly overlap with the broader national trend, but differ in other ways.

Background

The process of acquiring a dress made from cotton sacks engages the wearer in a very different experience than the purchase of a ready-to-wear dress at a retail store. That difference can be seen in the transition to a consumer-oriented economy propelled by technological innovation and social change during the first decades of the twentieth century. Women at the beginning of the twentieth century faced enormous political, economic, and cultural adjustments as American society became increasingly urban and less agriculturally based.⁴

Rural women in the Appalachian South were affected by modernization at a slower rate because prosperity was a long time in coming to most of the region's residents. Technologies that acted as change agents in much of America were adapted to farm life often in unexpected ways. For example, textile industry innovations like improved sewing machines and dyeing processes led to less expensive ready-made garments in urban areas, and contributed to a declining interest in home economics. Yet those same technologies sparked a competitive market for colorful, printed cotton sacks among farmer's wives and reflects the do-it-yourself philosophy practiced on the frontier a century earlier. The ability to make do with what was available remained the key to survival in rural Appalachia.

Thrift was also an American virtue worth striving towards, particularly during the Great Depression and First and Second World Wars, when government rationing and fabric shortages were common. The "waste not, want not" philosophy

⁴ Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 2.

was crucial in a culture of material scarcity and scraps of fabric from worn-out dresses and aprons often ended up as patchwork quilts, doll clothing or rags.⁵

The story of feedsack fashion reflects shifting cultural values echoed in the changes in women's daily apparel. As mass-produced dresses became more prevalent, small-scale agriculture and home sewing declined. This study explores these important trends and the rise of a consumer culture in rural northwestern North Carolina as evidence of greater social change. Through systematic analysis of the material evidence such as apparel and home textiles made from cloth sacks, I search for symbolic patterns of social behavior and belief systems, in order to tie that behavior to the larger context of a culture in transition.

There are stories revealed with needle and thread not found in written and oral sources, still on their own they do not tell the full narrative. If someone has personal knowledge of an object, their testimony on the source of the cloth can be invaluable in identification and analysis. Oral histories prompted by objects to spark memories, store records, and other written and oral sources are used to create a more complete picture of women's roles in a shifting society.

In the course of the interviews, I assembled pieces of a collective or community memory about women's experiences with textiles and apparel in the rural mountain South during this time. Those testimonies provide insight into a developing consumer society, and the greater cultural and technological changes taking place in Southern Appalachia in the early to mid-twentieth century. Those same interviews reveal beliefs about class, gender, and race and how these values are communicated, avoided, or blurred through dress.

⁵ Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), 12.

Throughout the thesis several questions are explored: Why did people make clothes and soft goods at home instead of buy them? How was the reuse of textile bags marketed to rural women? Was there a social stigma attached to the practice of home sewing or using cloth sacks? How did this change as economic factors improved in the late 1940s? What other technological advances coincided with the shift from homemade to store-bought clothing and goods? What can we learn about changes in dress and consumer habits from oral histories? Finally, what can we learn from material objects that written and oral sources cannot tell us? Not all these questions offered clear answers, and sometimes raised additional questions in the process. Still, the answers do point to the complexity of consumer culture and the variety of attitudes women expressed about fashion.

In sum, rural women placed an emphasis on dressing fashionably regardless of socio-economic and geographical limitations. In Ashe County, people who were just trying to make do aspired to be stylish just like those with the means to purchase ready-made apparel. Despite the do-it-yourself aspect of feedsack culture, it incorporated national advertising campaigns and mass produced goods into rural Appalachia, making it a complex trend.⁶ Home sewing allowed women to control household costs and showcase artistic and creative talents though many clothed their entire family without the advantage of electricity as late as the mid-1950s.⁷ The eventual arrival of modern conveniences in rural Ashe County was one aspect contributing to the decline in home sewing. Following the Second World War, the old folkways slowly began to fall away when the national and local economies

⁶ Jones, 183.

⁷ Sarah A. Gordon, *“Make it Yourself”: Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890 – 1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 7.

began to accelerate. Rural families, many accustomed to material scarcity, sought opportunities to join the rising middle class and some finally had the income to dress in the fashion portrayed in department store windows.⁸

Historiography

The research on feedsack apparel is sparse and what little has been done is largely facilitated by renewed interest by collectors and quilters. Only a handful of scholars have tackled the topic. In 1992, Loris Connolly published an article in the journal *Dress* titled "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?," which offers a comprehensive approach to the subject. Connolly's article is well researched and draws from nearly two hundred surveys and interviews with feedsack users, producers, designers and collectors. Connolly also had at her disposal the Bemis Company archives, one of the largest producers of cloth bags in the world and a key developer in feedsack design and marketing. Her research on the rise and decline of cotton sacks as feed packaging and apparel is often quoted in other articles on the subject. While a sound overview of the subject, her lack of regional specificity leaves aspects of the trend relatively unexplored and she fails to place feedsack fashion into the larger cultural and social trends of the times.

Connolly over-emphasizes the environmental practice of recycling feedbags and frequently comments on the "disposable" nature of contemporary capitalism.

⁸ Jan Whitaker, *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 113.

While this is a valid point, evidence suggests a different motive in Appalachia, not environmental consciousness as she implies. Connolly studied costume history in the 1970s when fashion research focused on *haute couture*. Her research countered the typical fashion scholarship of the times, as she turned her attention to the fashion trends of average women. For this reason, and for the detailed history she provides on a largely unstudied topic, her study is an important resource for anyone interested in the subject.

Within the last few decades a new scholarship in social history has emerged that examines the role of rural women as central characters in the New South. Historians Lu Ann Jones, Rebecca Sharpless, and Melissa Walker challenge the stereotype of the meek or worn out farm woman by sharing the creativity and resourcefulness demonstrated in daily life. Using oral history interviews they explore the complex existence of rural women in the early half of the twentieth century as they deftly negotiated cultural change. Jones's *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South* weaves together several themes in the final chapter "From Feed Bags to Fashion." She offers strong evidence to argue that the use of cotton bags signified the incorporation of rural women "into a national economy as producers and consumers."⁹ Jones examines the approach of the sack manufacturers, who hired well-known designers to collaborate with farm women in developing stylish, fashion-forward prints. She suggests that feedsack dresses symbolized prosperity as much as poverty because one must be able to afford multiple bags to create a garment, and ponders the complexity of a domestic culture

⁹ Jones, 172.

that embraced thrift and reuse but “was also enmeshed in big businesses and marketing strategies that redefined sacks as a sign of fashion and modernity.”¹⁰

Although it is difficult to find fault with Jones’s argument, her analysis is limited to a brief chapter and in many ways simply traces the well-tread history of feedsack use. She uses advertisements and interviews as main sources, but fails to incorporate material evidence into the study. A footnote refers the reader to an exhibit of the same title as the chapter at the National Museum of American History in 1991, so it is probable that objects were better integrated into the overall research. However, an analysis of cloth sacks and items made from them would surely strengthen the work and lend insight to cultural values not expressed in written or oral sources. Finally, Jones challenges historians to further investigate this unique period in rural America – a challenge I gladly accept.

The other two articles on feedsack fashion rely too heavily on personal conversations. Focused on reminiscing rather than historical oral interviews the stories of the women and men focus on their fond memories of farm life in the early to mid-nineteenth century and lack academic rigor. For example, Julia Cauble Smith’s 2001 article “Flour, Meal, Salt, Sugar and Feed Sacks: Their Uses in Rural Texas, 1920-1960,” published in a local historical annual, lacks analytical substance and borrows heavily from Loris Connolly’s work. Likewise, Ruth Rhoades’s 1997 article, published in the quilting journal *Uncoverings* focuses on Georgia and their use as quilting material but fails to look deeply at the changes in rural society and what it indicates about an emerging consumer culture. Their work asked and answered different questions than this current study.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

In 2001, Jennifer Lynn Banning conducted her dissertation research on the use of “commodity bags” in garment construction in South Louisiana. Her dissertation focused on the technical aspects of sewing. She analyzed the actual construction and stylistic characteristics of thirty-seven original feedsack dresses made by one woman (Mrs. Aucoin) and compared them to fashions in *Good Housekeeping* magazines between the years of 1949 and 1968. Banning found that there were few variations in the fashion features of the hand-made and ready-made garments, but she does not emphasize the difference in the experiences associated with them, or the technology that enabled the transition to ready-to-wear. Furthermore she concentrates almost exclusively on the details of the object and ignores the larger narrative. Although she does suggest common elements of the collection may have reflected Mrs. Aucoin’s personality, what few cultural observations are offered are limited to one person rather than to a community.

There are two collector’s guides focused on feedsack history, one published in 1990 by Anna Cook titled *Identification and Value Guide: Textile Bags (The Feeding and Clothing of America)* and Susan Miller’s 2007 publication *Vintage Feed Sacks: Fabric from the Farm, A Collector’s Guide*. Cook’s work is widely referenced but out of print, and the pricing guide has become outdated. She covers the history of “textile bags” in the introduction and uses black and white images to educate the collector. The most unique aspect of Cook’s work is her comparison of dresses and garments with the sewing patterns that may have been used to create them.

Miller’s remedies Cook’s lack of color with her 2007 colorful guide, which is pure eye candy as the patterns come off the page in vibrant colors. She also offers a short history at the beginning of the book. Still, both authors compiled their texts to assist collectors and quilters, and thus were not interested in delving into patterns of

change that affected rural women during this often romanticized period of American history.

Scholarship to date has left many opportunities for expanding our understanding of feedsack fashion in rural Appalachia, and the larger context of technological, social, and cultural changes accompanying the rise of marketing and consumerism. Through researching the evolution of women's experiences with purchasing, sewing, and wearing feedsack dresses, one can trace the development of the ready-to-wear industry in the mountain South and the growth of rural consumption.

To place the experiences of rural women in Appalachian creating feedsack fashion in its larger social-economic context, a decidedly interdisciplinary approach is needed. My work borrows from many fields, starting with the material culture analysis of artifacts. It also draws on costume history and its methodologies. Although fashion history is often limited to high fashion and ignores average and rural apparel some of the approaches can be useful. In addition, this topic provides a lens to examine the growth of rural consumption, which has been a largely unexplored aspect of Appalachian history.

Ruth Schwartz Cowan's consumption-junction theory draws from her work on the history of technology and looks at the relationship between the consumer of the technology and the producer. In this research, farmers and their wives represent the consumers as they interact with the producer of the artistically packaged feedsacks. In this scenario, the rural woman acts as the consumer and, in some respects, the producer/creator by adapting the technology to create fashionable, durable clothing for her family.

Sarah Gordon's *"Make it Yourself": Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890 – 1930* examines the reasons why women made garments in the home rather than purchasing ready-made apparel. She found that home sewing was so cost effective that women could often afford to use higher quality fabrics, and they contributed to the management of the household budget. Women who made garments from cloth sacks saved money but did not benefit from improved material; however in some cases my evidence suggests that they may have been able to buy better patterns, buttons, and trimmings. Gordon looks at domestic sewing from both an urban and rural perspective, and although she briefly addresses the use of commodity textile sacks there is additional room for exploring the trend from this angle.

In 2000, Regina Blaszczyk published her groundbreaking study *Imaging Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgewood to Corning* which explores the customer-oriented research and development employed by smaller firms during the rise of modern American consumer society. Blaszczyk argues that too many historians assume that high-profile businesses like Coca-Cola were the norm in their strategy to appeal to consumers, when in reality "firms in the periphery concentrated on studying consumers and responding to their desires."¹¹ She focuses on the process of imaging the consumers and attempting to meet their needs through flexible, fashionable design. Blaszczyk's research primarily centers on the production and use of pottery and glassware, which she suggests was treasured and

¹¹ Regina Blaszczyk, *Imaging Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgewood to Corning* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 2.

embedded with personal meaning by the user.¹² But her theoretical framework can be adapted to textiles as well.

Grant McCracken's *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* suggests that because social science views the consumption of material goods as a symptom of greed and shallowness, the study of material culture has largely been overlooked by historians. Yet the relationship between culture and consumption, he goes on to elaborate, is mutually dependent, and a means for understanding the way a society functions.¹³ In a chapter on apparel, he dismisses the model that clothing is a form of language as overly simplistic and suggests that apparel is a *form* of communication but not as direct as mere language. Furthermore, the message conveyed through clothing is rarely interpreted correctly due to the gap in meaning of the medium and the message.¹⁴ Marshall McLuhan might suggest that the medium *is* the message in the study of dress, and the idea deserves further exploration. All these authors offer a variety of methods and theory to draw on for this study of feedsack use.

Methodology

In order to understand the full breadth of feedsack production, distribution, and use, I conducted oral and written interviews with users, wearers and collectors

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University, Folklore Institute), xi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

of commodity sacks, as well as the feed mills, wholesalers and merchants who distributed them to rural stores. I made use of merchant accounts from rural stores.

It is often personal connections that lead historians to their topics. It was no different for me. Because my grandparents grew up during the height of feedsack fashion in rural Appalachia, their memories, stories, and photographs served not only as an inspiration but a connection to pertinent sources and potential information. My grandmother, Joanne Hartsoe Kemp, helped by sharing her experiences with fashion and homesewing in the late 1930s through the late 1950s. The detailed ledgers kept by my great-grandmother, Mae Walker Hartsoe, for a country store she operated from 1948 to 1955 provided an interesting slice of consumer behavior in a changing region.

Making textiles and apparel from cloth bags was a common practice among rural residents from the 1920s to the 1950s. As a result, many physical examples still exist, whether they are family heirlooms, on display in museums or for sale at an antique store, they are highly collectible (particularly in Japan!). My great grandmother even made the quilt on my bed from feedsacks and old dresses. The many extant objects made it possible to examine the past first-hand. Feedsacks, quilts and pillowcases were among the objects “Granny Hartsoe” passed onto my grandmother, who gave them to me, as if she understood they were treasured items.

The sample collection used to conduct this research consists of nearly twenty cotton feed or flour sacks, six dresses, two bonnets, five aprons, two quilts, a set of curtains, a tablecloth, six pillowcases, a pair of bloomers and a short jacket, all

presumably created from textile bags in the U.S. between 1920 and 1960.¹⁵ By examining the objects with special attention paid to the quality of sewing and garment construction, the degree to which it demonstrated fashionable style and the overall range of items made from cloth bags, it is possible to draw important conclusions about how the garments maker thought about style and thrift.¹⁶

Interviews with my grandfather, Bob McCoy, who also owned a store in Ashe County from 1958 to 1969 present an additional point of view. These economic sources were invaluable in looking at types and amounts of products purchased in cloth sacks. His mother, my great-grandmother (Stella Brown McCoy), was another talented seamstress and I fortunately possess boxes of McCoy family photographs covering the 1920s through the 1950s. These records of dress in rural Ashe County provide fascinating examples and many of the photographs in this paper belong to this collection.

A wealth of oral histories that were conducted in Southern Appalachia beginning in the 1970s now reside in the archives in the Appalachian Collection at Appalachian State University Belk Library. Although most focus on general subjects such as life during the Great Depression, they contained pertinent bits of information related to dress and apparel. Unfortunately, many potential interviewees have already passed away, so it was necessary to draw on these earlier

¹⁵ It is necessary to acknowledge that there are limits to a material culture approach and that sometimes one encounters difficulty in being certain that an object was actually made from sack material because similar patterns appeared both on seed sacks and on store-bought bolt fabric. Earlier examples may reveal faint labels or a vertical line of holes from where the bag would have been stitched together. In later years textile bags came in hundreds of stylish prints and the plain weave cotton was similar to that found in bolt fabric and ready-made clothing. Feedsack quilts are particularly tough to identify though oral histories can validate or negate the use of commodity sacks in a specific object.

¹⁶ My great-grandmother made many of the items, while others were purchased locally, acquired through online auctions or generously loaned.

oral histories to round out my research. Additionally, the writers of the New Deal's Federal Writers Project conducted research on the rural mountain South and offer a few useful references to trends in the use of feedsacks. Many of these Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews have been digitized and were accessible through the Library of Congress Folk Life Center website. The Oral History Center at the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina was another fruitful source. The Ashe County Historical Society has published many books on life in the region that have facilitated my work.

Advertisements and brochures promoting the patterned sacks were also a relevant primary resource. Also contemporary articles published in farming and women's magazines, and local newspapers offer a window into the way feedsack fashion was viewed at the time. Likewise, period articles on the rise of ready-to-wear apparel and technology and the decline of small-scale agriculture were analyzed in order to gauge the rural response to these innovations.

Throughout this study the words sack and bag are used interchangeably as are the words textile, fabric and cloth. Efforts were made to be as specific as possible. For example, a feedsack literally once contained feed and a chop sack contained chop, but on occasion the word *feedsack* is used as a generic term for commodity textile bags. A sack described as "cloth" (in opposition to a paper bag) does not imply that it was made from a particular fiber, such as cotton or burlap, unless specifically stated. The term *homesewn* is also used frequently throughout this study, and refers to the process of making clothing and textiles within the context of the home. Usually this includes the use of a sewing machine, whether electric or powered by a foot pedal. The objects that were examined were rarely *handsewn*

without the use of sewing machines. One exception is detail work like knitting, crocheting and embroidering.

Though I attempted to show a broad picture of apparel and home textile use, the main focus of the study is on rural women's dress. Likewise, though I interviewed people from various parts of Western North Carolina, the primary concentration is on rural Ashe County.

Ashe County – A Case Study

Though various myths about the Appalachian region have persisted since its settlement by European immigrants, scholars of Appalachia have dispelled them in subsequent years. They argue mountaineers were not a strange breed of people, nor were they isolated from national markets, or strictly the victims of corporate interests. These myths tend to oversimplify the people who lived in the Appalachian Mountains, who were more diverse than previously understood. Yet early urban Americans preferred to paint a romantic picture of Jeffersonian yeoman farmers or dwell on feuding hillbilly stereotypes.

Just as there were differences governing the everyday life of people determined by social status and location in Appalachia, broader cultural narratives connected the region with the national conscience. In the nineteenth century newspapers across the country reported on technological advancements, the latest products of human progress. Opinions about religion and politics varied individually and locally, but widely held beliefs constituted a broader cultural identity as Americans.

Ashe County, referred to as the “Lost Province” due to its inaccessibility, is unique from other parts of Appalachia as people were historically more self-sufficient and landowning. There were no coal deposits, but timber, copper and iron mining were strong industries in addition to agriculture. Ashe County is unique compared to the United States as a whole because it remained largely rural long after the country became mostly urban. Many of the residents lived without electricity, telephones and indoor plumbing until the mid-1950s, and because descendants of the earliest settlers stayed and intermingled within isolated pockets a distinct sense of place, tradition and community prevailed.¹⁷ Local historian Patricia Beaver writes in her 1986 book *Rural Community in the Appalachian South* that:

Community homogeneity is expressed in terms of the collective representation of the community’s own historical mythic charter, involving the notions of common ancestry, shared experience, kinship, and rootedness in place. Cooperation among residents is achieved through mutual aid, and egalitarianism, despite obvious socioeconomic differences, is idealized and reinforced through various leveling mechanisms.¹⁸

Thus, those shared values did lead to a certain amount of “sameness” when it came to ideals of thrift and self-sufficiency.

The history of Ashe County is best understood with keen attention to the geographic conditions of the region. Located in the most northwestern corner of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, it borders the states of Virginia and Tennessee. Formed in 1799 from part of Wilkes County, Ashe County was sparsely settled for much of its history. Jefferson, the county seat, is named for Peter

¹⁷ This sense of place and community was likely to be found in other rural parts of Western North Carolina as well.

¹⁸ Patricia Beaver, *Rural Community in the Appalachian South* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 3.

Jefferson (Thomas Jefferson's father), who first surveyed the area in the 1740s with his associate Stephen Fry.¹⁹

Across Ashe County's 427 square miles there are three major townships that once thrived as railroad stops: Warrensville, Lansing and West Jefferson. The town of Jefferson was established much earlier. Outlying regions of the county contain several dozen small communities, though place names and borders have shifted over time. Present day "townships" include Creston, Three Top, Clifton, Smethport, Teaberry, Big Horse Creek, Little Horse Creek, Crumpler, Grassy Creek, Chestnut Hill, Piney Creek, Glendale Springs, Buffalo, Laurel Springs, Fleetwood, Beaver Creek, Todd, Helton and Rich Hill, to name a few (see Figure i.2.).²⁰ The highest summit in the county, located in Creston, is called "The Peak" and reaches 5,196 feet. Other mountains are scattered across the region include Snake Mountain, Mount Jefferson, Rich Mountain, Pond Mountain, Three Top and the Bluff. The average elevation is about 3,000 feet above sea level.²¹

The New River, believed to be the second oldest river in the world, flows in a northerly direction. The two main branches, known as the North Fork and South Fork, stretch across Ashe County and into parts of Watauga and Alleghany Counties in North Carolina, and the state of Virginia. Smaller streams and brooks feed into larger branches and all eventually lead back to the New River.²²

¹⁹ Arthur Lloyd Fletcher, *Ashe County: A History, A New Edition* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., Publishers, 2006), 39.

²¹ *The Heritage of Ashe County, North Carolina, Volume II, 1994*, Published by the Ashe County Historical Society (Charlotte, NC: Delmar Printing Company, 1994), 1.

²² Leland R. and Mary Lee Cooper, *The People of the New River: Oral Histories from the Ashe, Alleghany and Watauga Counties of North Carolina* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., Publishers, 2001), 5-6.



Figure i.2. This map is based on a 1900 illustration of post office locations in Ashe County and shows the major townships. West Jefferson was founded around 1914 to host the Norfolk and Western rail depot. *Source: Adapted from Images of America: Ashe County. Published by the Ashe County Historical Society (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 128.*

The region was settled by Europeans as early as the 1770s, mostly by English, Scots-Irish and German immigrants who made their way down from Pennsylvania on the “Great Wagon Road” through the Shenandoah Valley.²³ During the Revolutionary War many local residents fought against the British government at the Battle of King’s Mountain, and in the 1780s most of what is now Ashe County

²³ Fletcher, 11.

was located in the failed state of Franklin.²⁴ A census taken in 1800 estimates a total of nearly 3,000 people in the county, and by 1850 the population had grown to around 7,500.²⁵ Despite the rough terrain and cold winters, those who chose to make their home in northwestern North Carolina found rich soil and an abundance of natural resources.

By 1900, the county still suffered from isolation largely due to poor roads, though the population soared to 19,500.²⁶ The railroads crept nearer and by 1905, lines ran through Wilkesboro, North Carolina, and Damascus and Abington, Virginia, which were still thirty to fifty miles away. Early residents had some success with iron and copper mining, though the supplies were exhausted by the 1920s and 1940s, respectively.²⁷ Most people were self-sufficient and agriculture thrived on the rich soil. Another early industry, sawmilling, was only in its infancy, though it too accelerated with the arrival of the Norfolk and Western railroad in 1914.²⁸ The town of West Jefferson was established two miles further west to accommodate the train depot, but Jefferson remained the county seat.

Roads were poorly constructed dirt paths and most people traveled on horseback or by wagon. Farmers transported goods to markets in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, Baltimore, Maryland and Bristol, Virginia/Tennessee. The journey

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26, 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁷ *Images of America: Ashe County*, Published by the Ashe County Historical Society (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

could take as long as a week. Gwyn Hartsoe fondly recalled a wagon trip when he was seven years old with his father to sell apples in Bristol in the early 1920s:²⁹

It was November and he had a wagon and a big team of horses... and he had 50 bushels of apples in it and he took them to Bristol. We started and we'd go about 20 to 25 miles a day. It took a little over three days to go from here to Bristol and then coming back it took several hours less 'cause you come right on, you wasn't loaded... We got a pretty good price for our apples, I think \$1.50 a bushel, the best I remember. It was a big price at that time. It was worth the trip. We raised our own apples. We had a variety of different kinds. We raised some ourselves and bought them up from our neighbors to make this trip.³⁰

Before bridges were built, people who lived on or near the New River had to ford the river on horseback. One woman explained how this inability to travel was the cause of a family tragedy:

This man came by one day and he was a little bit sick but we didn't have bridges then, you had to ford the river on a horse you know, and he couldn't ford the river because the river was high. And he asked my Mother and Daddy if he could stay the night and they never turned anybody away so... he spent the night and right after he left – he left the next morning, the river was down. And my little brother became really sick with scarlet fever. And they wondered if maybe he had caught that from the man. And he died, my little brother did.³¹

The mail truck was a reliable mode of transportation for many rural people. In the early 1930s, Mae Hartsoe, then a resident of Rich Hill, took a job in West Jefferson cooking and cleaning for a wealthy family. Her daughter, Joanne Kemp, recounted stories of how she would travel home on her days off:

The man that delivered the mail to the various post offices would let you catch a ride on the mail truck for a fee. The Fig post office was right there where you turn up Rich Hill, so she would take it to there [from West Jefferson] and then walk up Rich Hill, and that was how she'd come on home.

²⁹ Please note that I have chosen to leave quotes from the oral history interviews in the vernacular. This was done to more accurately reflect the spoken dialect of western North Carolina.

³⁰ Cooper, 129-131.

³¹ Anonymous, interview by author, Jefferson, NC, February 5, 2010.

As the economy improved after the Second World War, more Ashe County residents had access to vehicles. Yet many were still forced to rely on the help of their neighbors. Bob McCoy remembered what it was like in the 1940s:

We always had a truck or a car but most people didn't. Usually there's the rule that there'd be one person to have a car and everybody depends on that person to take 'em where they need to go.

In the nineteenth century, Ashe County buildings were the epitome of vernacular architecture and mostly consisted of one or two room log cabins or frame structures with a lean-to built on one side. People used leveled stacks of large stones to create the foundation and hold joists. Uniformly cut timber became available in mid-nineteenth century when carpenters developed water-powered sawmills, and allowed some improvements in building techniques and materials.³² The arrival of the Norfolk and Western train line, known as the "Virginia Creeper," around 1914 made more materials available and larger homes could be built.³³ Glass and other decorative elements could even be mail-ordered, and several colonial-inspired mansions were constructed in Jefferson and West Jefferson. It is thought that local silversmiths, blacksmiths, tinsmiths and other skilled artisans contributed to their construction.³⁴

During the first half of the twentieth century Ashe County saw steady growth of industry, and subsequently, population. In 1919, the Kraft-Phoenix Cheese Plant opened its doors, the Phoenix Chair Manufacturing Company was founded in the

³² *Images of America: Ashe County Vol. I*, 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

1930s (now part of Thomasville Furniture Ind.) and Peerless Hosiery Company (now Southern Devices) began operations in the 1950s.³⁵ Efforts by local residents, and the federal government, to achieve widespread rural electrification and telephone capabilities starting in the 1940s propelled these industries. Additionally, improvements in roads were inspired by a boost in the use of automobiles and helped ameliorate the perils of isolation. To a certain degree the county was becoming more prosperous but it affected residents of the two main towns far more than the county's more rural occupants.

When the Great Depression began in 1929, much of the county's occupants lived on (nearly) self-sufficient farms and because of the close-knit social structure fared better than many urban Americans. Several people interviewed remembered hearty meals the farm provided during years in which others suffered from hunger. Furthermore, those who lived in isolated rural communities were used to helping and relying on their neighbors during lean times. Though life was hard, it was not a drastic change for these cash-poor folks. Making do with what little you had was a required skill for survival in southern Appalachia. Most of Ashe County lagged behind the country in terms of technological and social change and residents were slow to achieve modern conveniences like electricity, indoor plumbing and adequate roads. It was not until the boom years after the Second World War that major transformations altered the cultural fabric of Ashe County.

³⁵ *The Heritage of Ashe County, North Carolina, Volume I, 1984*, Published by the Ashe County Historical Society (Winston-Salem, NC: Hunter Publishing Company, 1984), 60.

According to the United States' 1930 Census, the total number of people living in Ashe County came to 21,019. The neighboring towns of Jefferson and West Jefferson boasted the most densely populated area with 3,568 residents.³⁶ The remaining 17,451 Ashe County residents lived throughout the countryside. In the same year it was reported that of the 5,591 "gainful workers" in the county, 4,659, or 83 percent, were employed in the agricultural industry. Others worked in sawmills, building construction or the wholesale and retail trade.³⁷

Though many details about farm life are missing about the agricultural sector in 1930, the 1920 census provides a more complete picture of the typical family farm. It is reasonable to suggest that any changes in the size and management in the 1920s were minimal as the number of farms in the county from 1900 to 1920 only increased by one to two hundred every decade, standing at a total of 3,407 individual farms in 1920. Overall, the majority of Ashe County farms were on the small side, and ranged from 20 to 99 acres, while the median farm size encompassed 76.5 acres.³⁸ At opposite ends of the spectrum were three farms that contained less than three acres and three with more than one thousand acres.³⁹

³⁶ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Table 21: Population – North Carolina, For Counties by Minor Civil Divisions...*, 1930, Washington, D.C., <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1930.htm> (accessed January 22, 2010).

³⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Table 20: Population – North Carolina, Persons 10 Years Old and Over Engaged in Gainful Occupations...*, 1930, Washington, D.C., <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1930.htm> (accessed January 22, 2010).

³⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Table 25. Farms – General Statistics (No. 578. –Population, Farms and Farm Property)*, 1930, Washington, D.C. Data indicates that the average the average total acreage per Ashe County farm in 1920 was 148.2 acres, and 145.1 acres in 1925.

³⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Table I. Agriculture – North Carolina, Farms and Farm Property, 1920*, Washington, D.C., <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1920.htm> (accessed January 22, 2010).

86 percent of all farms were operated by the owner while less than 14 percent were farmed by tenants. Of those independently owned, three were “foreign-born white owners” and 64 farm-owners were “negro and other nonwhite.”⁴⁰ Historically, when compared to other Southern areas, Ashe County has a disproportionately low African-American population. Still, there were complex racial tensions, which were sometimes superseded by the need to rely on neighbors in small close-knit rural communities.⁴¹ Therefore it is not surprising that several African-Americans were farm-owners. Some historians have theorized that white Appalachian residents had enlightened views on racial inequality because slavery was not as widely practiced, but these have been debunked in recent years.⁴² In reality, there were local residents who owned slaves during the antebellum period, including the prominent Ashe County resident David Worth. With his wife, Elizabeth, he “employed” the family slaves in the manufacture of clothing, which was then sold in the Worth General Store in Creston (then known as the North Fork Township).⁴³ Yet the majority of people in Ashe County either could not afford slaves, or did not have a large enough farm to warrant the purchase and use of enslaved people.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ This issue will be briefly explored in a later analysis of country store ledgers from the late 1940s and 1950s that document the consumer purchases of multiple African-American families.

⁴² John Inscoe, *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 2-5.

⁴³ Fletcher, 233.

Some of the major agricultural products found on farms in Ashe County in the first half of the twentieth century included apples, green beans, tobacco, chickens, turkeys, hogs, cattle and sheep. The Kraft-Phoenix Cheese Plant in West Jefferson was estimated to have collected milk from as many of 90 percent of the farms in the county.⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier, many farmers traveled to Wilkesboro, North Carolina; Bristol, Tennessee or even to Baltimore, Maryland to sell excess agricultural products, suggesting that they were often more than just subsistence farmers. Within the community, people traded farm goods at the local country store for items they were not able to raise themselves. Bob McCoy, born in Ashe County in 1937, recalled the early days of his childhood:

We'd take eggs and sometimes chickens to Steven's grocery store on Saturdays and get coffee and sugar and flour and cornmeal. We usually just brought eggs but they used to bring chickens too.

Residents of Ashe County's four small towns, Jefferson, West Jefferson, Warrensville and Lansing, had a slightly different experience when compared to their more rural neighbors.⁴⁵ They were less likely to be farm workers, and often had greater access to cash and electricity when it became available as early as the 1920s.⁴⁶ Their proximity to downtown allowed them to purchase more store-bought goods. According to conversations with Ashe County residence, often "town people" had a reputation for being snobby and were considered more affluent by their county counterparts. There was a little boy whose family moved to Jefferson, and it was obvious he was just a poor country boy when lunchtime came. Everyone

⁴⁴ Bob McCoy, interview by author, West Jefferson, NC, January 13, 2010.

⁴⁵ Though I did not find evidence of this in my research, it is reasonable to presume that town residents would have been able to buy printed flour sacks from the baker or feed dealer.

⁴⁶ McCoy, January 13, 2010.

had peanut butter and jelly on store-bought loaf bread and he was so ashamed of his ham biscuits that he went out behind the school to eat where no one could see him.⁴⁷

Ashe County presented both challenges and opportunities for its residents in the first decades of the twentieth century, especially for the women of the region. The typical life of a rural woman in Ashe County in the 1930s and 1940s was far from easy. She often worked the farm with her husband as an “unpaid family farm worker” and did all of the child rearing, cooking and cleaning. This work was made more difficult by the fact that most homes in the rural part of the county did not have access to electricity until the late 1940s or 1950s, and indoor plumbing was a rare luxury. Women were responsible for making clothing for the entire family, although generally an exception was made for men’s overalls and jeans, which were purchased from local stores or the “Sears and Roebuck” catalog.⁴⁸ She likely helped manage the household budget and tried to make things herself rather than buying them.⁴⁹ It is notable that for families able to afford a sewing machine, it was often the only labor-saving device in the home.⁵⁰

In an oral history collection published in 2001, Mae Hartsoe described life on the family farm in the late 1920s and 1930s:

We raised most of what we eat, from what I can remember. We all worked hard, which all families had to do at the time... I had to work in the house, but I worked outside, too, just the same as the boys did... We lived good, we didn’t starve or anything, we just didn’t have a lot of money to spend. At

⁴⁷ McCoy, discussion with author, date unknown.

⁴⁸ McCoy, January 13, 2010.

⁴⁹ Gordon, 2.

⁵⁰ Marcia McLean, “ ‘I Dearly Loved That Machine’: Women and the Objects of Home Sewing in the 1940s” in *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1759 – 1950*, ed. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 84.

that time, in the mountains here when we's growing up. There wasn't any factories or anything to work at, just the farm was all there was.⁵¹

There were only minimal opportunities for work, particularly for women, outside of the farm at this time. There were not many options to better one's situation through education either. Although some rural residents left the county seeking higher education, it was not common for average citizens. Some residents even left the county for mill work away from the mountains.

Most of the schools in rural Ashe County were one-or two-room schoolhouses that instructed children of various ages. Many people attended school part of the year through the eighth or ninth grade, though wealthier citizens and later generations of middle-class residents usually graduated from high school and enrolled at a junior college or university away from home. Gwyn Hartsoe, like most of his neighbors, received only the bare minimum of formal education. He recalled his "schooling" in rural Ashe County in the 1920s:

About my schooling... I got up to seventh grade at Mill Creek. I was walking from the head of Mill Creek down over there to school and then eight miles back. That was 16 miles a day. Now that's not very enticing to get you to go to school. Back then people didn't pay too much attention to whether they went to school or not and that's as far as I got.⁵²

One resident of rural Crumpler remembered that her family stayed in nearby Grassy Creek for several months of the year so that the children could attend Virginia-Carolina School, which was built right on the state line. Later, she rode a bus to a school that was constructed at Healing Springs, about a mile from home. In 1944, at the age of sixteen, she left Ashe County to go to Peace College in Raleigh, which was then a junior college. Eventually, she graduated from the University of North

⁵¹ Cooper, 138, 145.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 137.

Carolina at Greensboro, formerly known as Women's Teaching College. She explained how proud she felt when after arriving in Raleigh, wearing a homesewn dress and hat, and how she felt accepted by her peers:

Nobody in that day and time had very many clothes, you know. We just wore what we had and I wore things that my sister handed down to me when I started growing up. And I remember when I went to Peace College I was you know, I was a really mountain girl. And they, my sisters and Mama made me a hat to wear... I felt like I looked pretty nice... I never felt any shame.⁵³

Traditionally, rural families were large so that there were more hands available to work the land. Systems of kinship formed an important part of a community's social structure and indicative of one's social status, political affiliations and general beliefs. Religious institutions comprised another main aspect of rural life in Ashe County and there were various opinions on which church was superior. Some of the major churches established in the area included Methodists, Presbyterians and various Baptists branches.

Periodic revivals and church socials were important community events, and provided prime opportunities for sharing ideas about style. Ashe County native Nell Sutherland recalled the importance of church to rural people:

The recreational activities were mostly around the church. Some of the time the neighbors would get together in the homes and sing... We would have camp meetings too. About a mile up Highway 88 [from Riverview School in Creston] was a great large tabernacle. Cabins were built and a kitchen and dining room. The finest of preachers would hold the meetings. Children would come and stay during the whole time. People gathered there for their reunions and worshipped. The camp was a loss to the community when it washed away in the 1940 flood.⁵⁴

⁵³ Anonymous, February 5, 2010.

⁵⁴ Cooper, 126-7.

Parts of Ashe County were still largely isolated until after the Second World War, and the local community built up around these systems of kinship and religious institutions. As Virginia Price Roberts explained, this distinguished the area from other rural parts of the state:

Your Western North Carolina was so rural you didn't hear about things. You didn't have communications as well as they did around Raleigh and the hog farmers and the cotton farmers [in Eastern North Carolina].⁵⁵

Take for example access to ready-made baked goods. Rural Ashe County women did not have access to already-baked goods and required large amounts of flour and cornmeal to make biscuits and cornbread daily. Tommy Little, who started working for Bare & Little, a grocery and feed wholesale company, in 1937 recalled:

Back then when I was working there wadn't any bakery trucks run through there, no bread trucks. And if they had a deal on flour... I know on my White Top [Mountain, Virginia] run me and a fella named Earhart, that was with Roanoke City Mills, he 'es doing detail work with me and had a little deal on it maybe buy so many bags and get so many free [from] the dealer... we sold 36,000 lb of flour [in 24 lb paper bags] in one day on that trip.⁵⁶

The need for flour, coupled with bag makers recognition of an adapted-use market in rural areas like Ashe County, started packaging flour in dress print bags in the 1940s. Those sacks provided a handy source of material for women's home sewing because they were already consuming substantial quantities for home baking. But turning flour sacks into a useable fabric was not an idea born overnight, as will be seen in the next chapter.

⁵⁵ Virginia Price Roberts, interview by author, West Jefferson, NC, March 5, 2010.

⁵⁶ Tommy Little, interview by author, Jefferson, NC, March 5, 2010.

CHAPTER ONE: EARLY FEEDSACK FASHION IN APPALACHIA

"It is a fine art to wear your clothes unconsciously, it is a still finer art to wear your old clothes as though they were your best ones." – Myrtle Reed⁵⁷

Joanne Hartsoe Kemp, who grew up in Ashe County, recalls what life was like on the family farm:

I was born in 1937, and people were trying to recover from the great depression the country was having. There was no money to buy hardly enough clothes to keep warm let alone anything [else] for the average Blue Ridge Mountain area farmer's family. My dad raised cattle to sell and hogs to kill so we could have hams and canned tender loin meat to make gravy and eat with our homemade biscuits. Our flour was always bought in 25 lb white cloth sacks. Mom used the flour sacks to make pillowcases, petticoats to wear under our dresses and things like that. I never had a store bought dress until I was in the 7th grade in school and picked beans in the summer to buy myself one.⁵⁸

Mrs. Kemp's memories of her mother reusing white flour sacks in a time when fabric was hard to come by are not unusual. Much of the rural mountain South suffered difficult economic times in the 1930s into the 1940s as the Great Depression touched all corners of the United States. Ironically, in some cases, rural families fared better than their urban counterparts as they were able to maintain a steady food supply through farming and keeping livestock.

⁵⁷ "What they say about fashion," *The New York Times* (1923-Current file), November 3, 1946, <http://0-www.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/> (accessed January 28, 2010).

⁵⁸ Joanne Kemp, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2008.

Making do with what one had was a philosophy and practice retained from the early days of settlement in the Blue Ridge Mountains, when people had little choice but to produce the goods they needed. In the late nineteenth century, parts of Appalachia were still an undeveloped region with rich natural resources, and store-bought cloth was not easily attainable. Many families made linen from flax or raised sheep and made homespun material from the wool. Yet the majority of high-quality bolt fabric available for purchase was imported from Europe and Asia, and was too expensive for anyone but the wealthiest settlers. In addition, the women's ready-to-wear industry was basically non-existent until the late nineteenth century and early ready-made dresses were crudely made and ill fitting.⁵⁹ In short, whether a woman labored over cloth and dress production herself or was wealthy enough to hire a seamstress, someone had to sew the dress.

Rural women were acutely aware of the need to keep their family clothed. This was not always easy when cloth was not readily available or economic hardships and limited availability prevented them from obtaining fabric or ready-to-wear garments. When feed and flour producers started using cloth sacks as packaging in the 1850s, it was natural that women with limited resources adapted them to new uses such as undergarments, pillowcases and towels.⁶⁰ Close to one hundred years later, a more modern version of textile bags were part of the American mainstream.

⁵⁹ Jenna Weissman Joselit, *A Perfect Fit: Clothes, Character and the Promise of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 31.

⁶⁰ Anna Lue Cook, *Identification and Value Guide: Textile Bags (The Feeding and Clothing of America)* (Florence, AL: Books Americana, Inc., 1990), 3.

This chapter presents a general history of textile bags as consumer packaging in the United States and covers the major corporations that facilitated their success in the early twentieth century. It also offers a window on how textile bags were embraced by consumers. We will explore the various economic and social conditions during the Great Depression and both world wars that slowed the rise of the women's apparel industry and delayed the decline of homesewing. By examining rural women in Ashe County and how they clothed their families, the importance of home textiles and apparel in everyday life becomes apparent. Furthermore, the illustrated nuances of the domestic rural experience in this early period shed light on the social context in which feedsack fashion bloomed by revealing a society in transition.

A General History of Textile Bags as Consumer Packaging

The history of textile bags in the United States can be divided into three main phases. From around 1850 to 1920, manufacturers experimented with cloth containers and their use was limited but rising. Starting around 1924, the first sack printed with a fashionable pattern found its way into the hands of American women. The final phase was marked by the mass production and the skyrocketing popularity of feedsacks beginning around 1940. The era of the textile bag drew to a close when most manufacturers replaced cloth bags with inexpensive paper bags in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Phase 1: ca. 1850-1920

Shortly after Elias Howe invented the sewing machine in 1846, manufacturers began adapting the technology to make cloth bags to replace barrels and tins as

packaging for various goods.⁶¹ Though more expensive to manufacture, cloth bags were more conveniently transported and could easily be swung across a horse.⁶² Improved sewing technologies facilitated the production of textile bags made from osnaburg, burlap, jute, hemp and cotton.⁶³ Bemis Brother Bag Company, Percy Kent Bag Company Inc., Chase Bag Company and several other major textile sack producers entered the business in its infancy in the mid to late nineteenth century.⁶⁴ Bemis Brother Bag Company, for instance, prospered through the course of several smart business decisions; in the early twentieth century Judson Bemis found himself with a cotton plantation, roughly a dozen cotton bag manufacturing facilities and in a superior position to lead an increasingly competitive industry.⁶⁵

By the First World War, machine-sewn fabric sacks were the industry standard for packaging flour, feed, sugar and other commodity products.⁶⁶ Bags sizes were not standardized but corresponded with an equivalent amount of product contained in a barrel. For example, forty-eight pounds of flour were equal to one and a half barrels of flour.⁶⁷ Enterprising American women took advantage of this new source of cloth and reused the bags when needed. This reuse was often identified with various levels of poverty.

⁶¹ Cook, 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Osnaburg is a rough, thick fabric usually made from tow, jute or flax fibers.

⁶⁴ Cook, 13.

⁶⁵ William Edgar, *Judson Moss Bemis, Pioneer* (Minneapolis, MN: Bellman Company, 1926), 251.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Ralph Naylor, discussion with author, Mocksville, NC, February 18, 2010.

The 1913 edition of *Household Discoveries and Mrs. Curtis's Cook Book*, distributed by the Success Company, presents a reference guide for practical household management. It contains instructions on proper ways to conduct house furnishing, cleaning, laundry, medicinal treatment, baby rearing, cooking, canning, personal hygiene and pest control. It does not appear to be intended towards women of the lowest or the highest financial circumstances but rather to the everywoman. Because it was written for a fairly moderate group of women, it is reasonable to assert that the advice offered was socially conservative and perhaps widely practiced.

Historian Sarah Leavitt writes in *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* that “furniture, curtains and bathroom fixtures do not have inherent qualities of morality or character. Domestic-advice manuals give these items cultural significance and characteristics... Their domestic fantasies helped create the idealized vision of home held by so many Americans.”⁶⁸ Mrs. Curtis's chapter on house furnishings and décor suggested that “large flour sacks may be utilized for sash curtains by carefully washing out the print and finishing with a suitable design in fancy work.”⁶⁹ The idea that flour sacks were an acceptable source of material for curtains in proper homes is intriguing, as many women preferred to sew with bolt cloth.

This advice also hints at the difficulty that women had removing the ink logo on early cloth sacks, despite many home recipes guaranteeing success. Not to be

⁶⁸ Sarah A. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 4-5.

⁶⁹ Sidney Morse, *Household Discoveries and Mrs. Curtis's Cookbook: An Encyclopaedia of Practical Recipes and Processes*, rev. ed. (Petersburg, NY: The Success Company, 1913), 47.

deterred by leftover ink, women adapted, and tried to use the portion stamped with the logo for something that had a minimal chance of being detected. For example, the sacks made wonderful petticoats, undergarments and dishtowels. The pillowcase in Figure 1.1 has a chopsack label that is barely faded regardless of multiple washings. Despite the label the owner could fill it with feathers and use the cloth as ticking. A more decorative case would have covered the pillow and a quilt made from worn out dresses completed the bed.



Figure 1.1. JP Green Milling Company chop sack used as an interior pillowcase.
Photo by author

Figure 1.2 features a brightly embroidered tablecloth with a still-visible soap company label, which is particularly noticeable in the sunlight. One could imagine that when placed on a table, a large flowerpot, placemat or stack of books could hide part of the logo. But rural women needed not fret over washing out labels for long –

the textile bag manufacturers and feed and flour mills were about to upgrade their product line to become more user-friendly. It is not known how exactly bag producers learned about the problem women faced in removing labels from the bag so that they could use the cloth for homesewing – maybe letters, or words from store owner – however, bag makers made it clear they wanted to accommodate their customers when bags began to be manufactured using washable ink.



Figure 1.2. Embroidered tablecloth with faded soap label. *Photo by author*

Phase 2: 1920-1940

It was Asa Bates of the Geo P. Plant Milling Company in St. Louis, Missouri who first capitalized on trends of reuse when he filed a patent for printed sacks in 1924. The red-checked pattern became a distinct point of promotion for the company's new line, Gingham Girl Flour.⁷⁰ Though it is unclear why no other bag

⁷⁰ Loris Connolly, "Recycling Feed Sacks and Flour Bags: Thrifty Housewives or Marketing Success Story?," *Dress* 19 (1992): 22.

manufacturers followed suit for more than a decade, it was probable unfriendly economic conditions stifled business changes at the time. In 1936, Staley Milling Co. of Kansas City, Missouri began selling bags in pastel colors, borrowing from women's long-standing practice of using dye to transform the plain bags.⁷¹

By the time the Great Depression hit the country in 1929, the appeal of "free" fabric in the form of cloth sacks increased exponentially and a variety of manufacturers embraced the product. This uptick in popularity, just as other phases in the story of feedsack fashion, was tied to larger national and international events. As the popularity spread, the reuse of bags became more accepted during the 1930s because most people in rural Ashe County were in the same poverty-stricken position. As one man put it "...after the Depression it was just a matter of learning to survive."⁷²

The early efforts to promote the reuse of sack fabric began to surface in the late 1920s. An educational brochure, titled "Sewing with Flour Bags," was published in 1929 by the Household Science Institute in Chicago, which instructed women on how to properly cut and sew the bags to make garments and other household products. Around 1930, Richard Peek, a salesman at Percy Kent Bag Company, is widely credited with coming up with the idea of printing fashionable designs on the sacks. The story goes that one day Peek noticed chair covers and curtains made from cotton bags in a restaurant. Peek realized that packaging consumer goods in printed cotton sacks that could also be used for sewing was an excellent marketing campaign. By 1935, Percy Kent Bag Company made Kent's

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷² McCoy, January 13, 2010.

dream a reality when they started selling dress print bags of higher quality cotton than previous material.⁷³

Phase 3: 1940-late 1950s

Around the same time Peek recognized the market value of feedbags made from high-quality prints, the roller-printing technologies became increasingly less expensive. And building on the growing dye business started during the First World War, the United States acquired German patents for synthetic dyes after the Second World War. Both these changes in production contributed to the mass production of bags.⁷⁴ By 1942 one mill claimed to produce printed bags in 1000 colorful designs.⁷⁵

Responsible for managing the manufacture of military and consumer products during the Second World War, the War Production Board (WPB) changed American fashion through restrictions on fabric use and garment construction. Those restrictions had the unintended consequences of fueling the growth of cotton bag production and home sewing. In 1943, Order L-85 determined that every dress produced by manufacturers not exceed one and three-fourths of a yard of fabric, but this did not extend to homemade apparel.⁷⁶ Yet American fashion designers responded with suitable garments and showed that even high-style apparel could

⁷³ Susan Miller, *Vintage Feed Sacks: Fabric from the Farm, A Collector's Guide* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, Limited, 2007), 9; Edie McGinnis, *Feedsacks! Beautiful Quilts from Humble Beginnings* (Kansas City, MI: The Kansas City Star Co., 2006), 12.

⁷⁴ Zelma Bendure and Gladys Pfeiffer, *America's Fabrics: Origin and History, Manufacture, Characteristics and Uses* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 511; Mary Schoeser, *Fabrics and Wallpaper – 20th Century Design* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1986), 30.

⁷⁵ Cook, 12.

⁷⁶ "American Fashion Goes to War," 2001, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3468301492.html> (accessed January 30, 2010).

accommodate thrift in the name of the war effort.

Fabric choices became limited as supplies of wool, silk, burlap and heavy osnaburg were directed towards the war effort. This encouraged the use of cotton fabrics and manufacturers looked to patriotic marketing and stylish designs to foster brand loyalty during the 1940s with the new styles and available fabrics.

A pair of articles published in March and July 1942 in *Time Magazine* lends insight into the role of the cotton bag industry during the Second World War as other sources of fabric became scarce. The price of American-grown cotton declined because of abundant supplies in the years leading up to the war. And shortages of burlap – a primary source for textile bags – was partly due to fighting in South Asia that prevented access to India, the world’s largest supplier of jute. A 30 March 1942 article proclaimed “What’s To Be Done? Best substitute for burlap is that lately over-produced U.S. staple—cotton.”⁷⁷

In fact, according to a July 1942 *Time Magazine* article, the WPB rated cotton bagging just one notch below military cotton cloth. One month later, the WPB went a step further and instructed all heavy-goods cotton mills to move 20 to 40 percent of their looms to cotton bags production. Obviously, the producers responded. According to the article, “Results are startling. Bemis Bro. Bag Co., No. 1 U.S. bagmaker, last week reported that, while burlap-bag output was down 80 percent, cotton-and paper-bag production was up 50 percent.”

The article implies that the change from production of burlap to cotton bags was inexpensive due to simple adjustments in the machinery. The military supply

⁷⁷ “Jute, Hemp and Bedlam,” *Time Magazine*, March 30, 1942, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,773207-2,00.html> (accessed January 25, 2010).

orders boosted the bag maker's bottom line and "...instead of starving on the jute shortage, Bemis Bro. – and most other U.S. bagmakers – are serving the war effort by the highest production ever."⁷⁸ In 1943, the WPB decided to standardize the U.S. bag industry further by creating six bag sizes: 100, 50, 25, 10 and 2 pounds.⁷⁹

As production went up and standardization became the norm, major bag producers and feed and flour mills joined together to form trade associations. Marketing and distribution systems were becoming more complex and despite widespread efforts by the United States government to promote thrift during the Great Depression and both World Wars, the trend towards increased consumption was on an upward track. According to consumer historian Susan Strasser in her book *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, spending actually increased during the Second World War despite organized conservation and recycling programs. As she puts it "... saving and making do went on mingling with consumerism as they had done for decades."⁸⁰ Still, patterns of behavior among individuals changed as consumerism became more integrated into everyday life. This trend followed a similar path in Ashe County, North Carolina. Yet modernization affected the region at a slower rate than other areas in the country. Consequently, Ashe County continued the use of feedsacks and homesewing longer than urban areas.

⁷⁸ "Business & Finance: Last Word in Jute," *Time Magazine*, July 6, 1942, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,932099,00.html> (accessed January 25, 2010).

⁷⁹ Cook, 7.

⁸⁰ Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), 260.

Homesewing and The Rise of Feedsack Fashion in Ashe County

Although there were women in every community who either could not afford a sewing machine, disliked sewing immensely or were able to purchase ready-made clothing, most rural women could sew to some degree. As Joanne Kemp put it, “You were expected to learn to sew when I grew up. I mean everybody needed to learn to sew and they needed to learn to make a quilt.” Girls were taught by their mothers from a young age or they learned in home economic classes in school. Some girls took to sewing especially early, as Mae Hartsoe’s younger sister Belle remembered:

She made me my first dress... she couldn’t even sit and reach the pedal on the sewing machine. Mama told me about it. And she wasn’t over 9 or 10 [years old] I wouldn’t guess.⁸¹

Sewing was a skill that improved with practice, and many women commented that the most difficult step of garment construction wasn’t sewing at all – it was cutting the item out of the fabric. Virginia Roberts taught home economics at Riverview School in Warrensville, North Carolina for thirty-seven years. Her mother, who managed the family dairy farm, was a member of the local Home Demonstration Club.⁸² Mrs. Roberts, who grew up wearing dresses lovingly made by her mother and grandmother, explained that she always had plenty of clothes and that she was proud to wear homesewn apparel. Drawing on her experiences as a teacher she illustrated the hierarchy of homesewing:

But that’s an elite thing... Everyone didn’t know how to sew. You had to have... finesse? Your field hand ladies didn’t sew. It was people who had

⁸¹ Belle Sapp, telephone interview by author, February 17, 2010.

⁸² Mrs. Robert’s father, Gwyn Price, was the Chairman of the Rural Electrification Administration for the state of North Carolina from 1940 to about 1972.

been to school and who were more or less leaders in the community. They were more apt to sew.⁸³

This revelation raises questions about how impoverished women who could not afford a sewing machine or the required skills clothed their families. It is unlikely that they were able to purchase ready-made garments in this early period, when even middle-class, land-owning families could rarely afford to. In all likelihood they may have been able to borrow a sewing machine from a neighbor to put together a poorly made garment, though it is assumed that they possessed very few clothes. Or, perhaps, they received hand-me-downs from more affluent neighbors. Wealthier neighbors often lent assistance to less well-off neighbors, but there could have been resentment on the behalf of the beneficiary of the hand-me-down clothes or as this story illustrates by the giver. Mrs. Roberts recounted such a tale from her childhood:

Well I outgrew my very favorite one [dress] and Mother gave it to the neighbor up in the mountain and the next day she wore it to hoe corn in and I cried and I cried and I cried. Because that was my favorite Sunday dress and I'd taken such good care of it and she had no appreciation. She resented that it was mine and that I thought it was special... I said Mother "If you ever give her anything else of mine I'll tear it up first!" But Mother did. She said "The child needs clothes."

Social programs may have also helped provide poor families with clothing. During the Great Depression, the Works Projects Administration (WPA) set up "sewing rooms" in Ashe County so that women could be employed sewing clothing for the needy. On 1 June 1941, a WPA statistician reported that Ashe County women produced 71,630 garments made to specification. The clothes were turned over to the County Superintendent of Public Welfare and distributed to families

⁸³ Roberts, March 5, 2010.

unable to purchase or make adequate clothing.⁸⁴ According to an article published in *The Journal of Home Economics* in 1941, the WPA Sewing Program employed over 100,000 women in 1,500 locations across the United States, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The relief work was intended to provide women with steady wages and improved sewing skills. They made apparel for infants, children, men and women. Each local project was sponsored by a local public agency responsible for a portion of the operating costs, machinery and materials.⁸⁵ It is not clear what type of fabric was provided but it is possible feedsack cloth was used.⁸⁶ Though most of the women who participated in this work already possessed the needed skills to manufacture garments, others required lessons on homesewing.

There is certainly some validation to Mrs. Robert's assertion that sewing was an elite activity. A costume collection at the Museum of Ashe County History contains many hand-tatted lace pieces made by Jenny Maxwell Ballou, wife of Attorney and State Senator Bob Ballou. The Ballou family lived in a large white farmhouse at the foot of the Peak and the property was once the site of the Maxwell general store and a makeshift stage coach stop. Jenny Ballou owned several tailor-made dresses and department store blouses, including a shirtwaist sold by Gimbel Brothers around the turn of the century (see Figure 1.3). There is evidence that high-priced garments were ordered by mail and sold at the Maxwell store. Yet a

⁸⁴ Fletcher, 326-7.

⁸⁵ Catherine Cleveland, "The WPA Sewing Program," *Signs of the Times, The Journal of Home Economics* (October 1941): 587-588.

⁸⁶ Other such welfare programs were established early in Ashe County, and local historian Arthur Lloyd Fletcher contends that the first county "poor tax" was documented in an 1806 county court session. In fact, he argues that the county, in accordance with the state constitution, was "welfare-minded." County and church programs helped the most underprivileged residents, and often preceded federal and state funding.

collection of images taken between 1905 and 1925 reveal the ladies of the house relaxing on the back porch while engaging in fancy work and other textile crafts. An intricately woven rug in the museum's collection was made using wool from the farm by Jenny and her sisters. The women not only combed and carded the wool, they dyed the filaments, then designed and hooked the rug, which features two lions. The fact that prosperous rural women delighted in producing beautiful garments and textile goods despite being able to afford expensive, fashionable clothes is evidence that homesewing on one end of the spectrum was sometimes a mark of "high class." This was sewing for leisure as opposed to sewing for economy. Upper-class women often had more free time to invest in this sort of fine handiwork because they were not working the farm. Historian Melissa Walker points out that class distinctions were less pronounced "in an era in which there were fewer consumer goods, class differences in consumption patterns might have been less visible."⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Walker, 102.



Figure 1.3. Gimbel Brothers blouse, ca. 1910 from the Virginia Ray costume collection at the Museum of Ashe County History. *Photo by author*

There is no evidence uncovered through this study that men did any homesewing in rural Ashe County. But long-time home economics teacher, Virginia Price Roberts, taught a class at Riverview School for boys to learn basic skills like how to patch clothing.

Now I taught boys to do that in a family living class – I taught them how to sew on a button, how to mend a tear and how to iron a shirt and how to wash things, how to make cornbread, how to make sausage gravy.

In rural Ashe County, women of every socioeconomic status probably sewed on some level, whether they patched up the few garments they had to preserve them as long as possible, made clothes for the family or just did fancy work in leisure time. Evidence suggests that most women paid attention to what others wore and

tried to keep abreast of trends through catalogs distributed by the rural mail route established in the late nineteenth century.⁸⁸ It was a welcome distraction from rural life and there is evidence that they were concerned with matters of style. Zetta Barker Hamby, who was born in Grassy Creek in 1907, describes in her memoirs the importance of dress to rural women: “Since much of the clothing was made in the home, ladies, especially, always observed what friends and neighbors were wearing.” She mentions elsewhere that church gatherings afforded an opportunity to see what everyone was wearing.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Fletcher, 268-9.

⁸⁹ Zetta Barker Hamby, *Memoirs of Grassy Creek: Growing Up in the Mountains on the Virginia-North Carolina Line* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998), 132, 73.



Figure 1.4. Trade School 1927-1929, "the older class." Rural Trade, Tennessee is less than two miles from Ashe and Watauga Counties. Note the stylish homesewn dresses with shortened skirts and low waists, typical of the period. *Photo from personal collection*



Figure 1.5. Virginia Brown and her daughter Ruby in the 1920s wearing fashionable clothing that was likely homesewn. They were residents of the Peak community in Creston, North Carolina. *Photo from personal collection*

The introduction of printed textile sacks provided rural Ashe County women who were interested in following fashion trends with the tools to make stylish garments and home textiles. Though not all women used them for sewing and there were strong opinions pertaining to their use, particularly for dresses, feed and flour sacks provided more opportunities to obtain material. Mrs. Roberts put it plainly “That’s when this [feedsack] really came into popularity because these were there and it gave them an access to material they didn’t have otherwise.”

Even with the wider choice in design, the way that women used cloth sacks for textiles and apparel varied widely as it always had, according to what was

accessible, what their soft goods needs were and what they were comfortable making. In the 1920s and early 1930s the only cloth sacks available were not dress prints but crude white cotton or muslin material stamped with the company's logo. As demonstrated previously in this chapter, the ink was difficult to remove and limited women's desire to sew with them. Consequently, they were used more for backing quilts, sheets, undergarments, petticoats, diapers, rags for cleaning, laundry bags and other items that need not be as pretty. Yet it is reasonable to assert that in some cases women had no choice but to make skirts and blouses from them, however undesirable.

Beginning in the late 1930s and early 1940s, better-quality cloth sacks with dress prints became increasingly available to rural Ashe County women and the options for homesewing expanded greatly. Now women could make dresses, skirts, aprons, quilts and curtains from the colorful fabric. Eventually, horse feed, mule feed, dairy feed, chicken feed, chop, salt, sugar, flour and many other commodities came in cotton sacks. While some companies, like Purina Mills, never packaged feed in dress prints, various brands adopted the practice as an advertising tool. When so many types and brands of feed and flour came in dress prints, the patterns became as important or more important than the product within the bag. Tommy Little, of Bare & Little Company, described the dynamic in Ashe County:

Most of your cheaper line of feed, dairy feed, especially, they wanted, it come in dress print bags. And that was a little bit of their selling point... was the bags and the price of course.

In short, a smaller brand could entice buyers just by the types of designs they offered.

There are several ways that women acquired cloth sacks for domestic re-use. They came "free" with the purchase from the local country store of various feed,

flour and sugar brands. Consequently, during the height of popularity in the 1940s and early to mid-1950s, they were very accessible to rural people. The ubiquity of dresses made from feed and flour sacks led to the dresses being considered “common” in rural Ashe County and may be one reason they were rejected by women concerned with social status and style.

Families who did not need or want to use the textile bags for homesewing gave them to a neighbor or sold them back to the feed store.⁹⁰ Feed dealers and wholesale shops then sold the empty sacks to women who did not need to buy feed but still wanted printed sacks for homesewing. Linda Henson, who grew up in rural Wilkes County, spent a lot of time on her grandparent’s chicken farm. Her grandmother used the chicken feedsacks to make everyday dresses for her daughters, but she preferred to use manufactured bolt-cloth to make their Sunday dresses. Due to the large size of the farm she ended up with a lot of leftover sacks. Mrs. Henson described accompanying her grandmother on trips to the feed dealer every few months:

My grandfather would buy the feedsacks. And she [my grandmother] would use some of them for sewing, and she would sell some of them. She would get a stack of say 50 to maybe a 100 and take them back to the feed store to sell them back... It was Roaring River in Wilkes County. It was a train depot and apparently there was a feed store there too in that area. I would think she was getting so rich, she may have got a quarter a sack, or a dime or something but she would come out with all these dollar bills. It would look like a lot of money to a little girl.⁹¹

Whether used or returned, the sacks were a very economical source of fabric in either case, and could provide a bit of excess income for the seller. Rural Ashe

⁹⁰ At least one of the author’s elderly relatives recalled giving printed cloth sacks to a neighbor because she was not going to use them. She was only a little surprised that the neighbor was so offended at the gift.

⁹¹ Linda Henson, interview by author, Vilas, NC, January 26, 2010.

County residents who did not live within walking distance of a general store or feed shop, or lacked the means for transportation to the nearest facility, had other arrangements for acquiring textile bags. Bob McCoy recalled one of the best methods for getting feedsacks:

Everybody who sold milk [to the Kraft Phoenix Cheese Plant in West Jefferson] used the milk truck and for a quarter you could catch the milk truck, come to town and buy a bag of feed and he'd take your feed back home for you. For a quarter... The milk truck was about the only way most people could get into town.

Obviously women had aesthetic preferences about which printed pattern to buy, but traditionally feed purchases fell into the male sphere. Men seem to have been the primary buyers of feedsacks in Ashe County and this sometimes sparked conflict. Virginia Price Roberts remembered her mother's dissatisfaction over a farm hand's purchase of non-matching prints:

That was a real problem. Mother would go to the barn and just chew the guy out that would bring home the feed for the week or the month: "Why didn't you get these all to match?!" "Well I just pick up whatever they had" you know and "Well you get 'em to match!!"⁹²

Even though Mrs. Price did not make the purchase herself because the task was delegated to a farm employee, she tried to control the outcome. She knew it was important to have two or three feedsacks of the same pattern in order to have sufficient material for a dress. Homesewers and storeowners recalled this fact, as Tommy Little of Bare & Little Company explained:

What tickled me was the way the old man would go and pick those bags out and they wanted 'em of course to match.⁹³

⁹² Roberts, March 5, 2010.

⁹³ T. Little, March 5, 2010.

Although Bare & Little was strictly a wholesale business, farmers who lived close to West Jefferson knew they could visit the feed warehouse in the afternoons after the morning deliveries had been made and buy feedsacks at the wholesale price. Mr. Little's nephew, Randy Little, remembered from working for the family business that farmers and their wives were picky about the feedsacks they purchased. They examined each sack thoroughly to ensure it did not have any tears or holes in the corners from hungry rats.⁹⁴ And Tommy Little shared an interesting story about a gentleman who became too engrossed in picking out feedsacks for his wife:

In one of the warehouses we had over there it had a basement in it and it had an elevator and we had the feed packed – we didn't use the elevator – back against the elevator shaft and all three of us [employees were sitting there] and that old man's back in there in that feed [warehouse] picking out his bags he wanted, and all at once he disappeared and the boy said "Where'd he go?" Bout that time he come walking up the steps from the basement. He'd got in there and fell down that shaft but it didn't hurt him! He never said a word! Just come up, [like] nothing ever happened.

And sometimes the selection of feedsack prints was left up to other members of the family. Joanne Kemp's father often brought her along to the store so that she could pick out the pattern:

Dad would take me to buy chop... along with him and there was just these big stacks of feed piled in that feed room... and Dad, he'd say "Go in there and pick out the two alike that you like" cos it'd took two feedsacks to make me a dress. And I would go in there and I had little overalls on or something and I'd just crawl around on the feedsacks huntin two that I liked. And I would pick out the two I wanted and sometimes one would be on the bottom stack and another over here on the top of one. And they'd go in there and move those feedsacks and get the two that I'd picked out... Mom would always tell me "Now when you pick outcha feedsack pick out some rickrack that matches it." ...so they had all of that in this display case. They had embroidery thread and rick rack and things like that and... they'd hand you out some that looked like it matched the colors of what you picked out and

⁹⁴ Randy Little, telephone interview by author, February 17, 2010.

they'd let you take it over and match it to the feedsack. And then a lot of times Mom had told me to go ahead and get some buttons...⁹⁵

This changed after the Second World War when the Hartsoe family opened up a small store next to their home in Creston. Joanne explained:

It was simpler because she would pick out the feedsacks when they were unloading em off the truck and she'd pick out two alike for me a dress and have em set over to the side and if somebody wanted them she'd say there were sold and when Dad got home from working in the sawmill he was gone a week at a time and when he'd come home "Them two there are the two you can take out to the barn and when you get through with em we're gonna make Joanne a dress." And so it was a lot easier after she had the store.

If not every woman in Ashe County embraced feedsack fashion, who were the women in Ashe County that did adopt this home economics trend? It was not as simple as those who had access to cloth sacks and needed to use them. The reuse of feed and flour sacks is an intricate and multilayered phenomenon. Most women who used feedsacks also used bolt fabric and purchased store bought goods when they had the means. Many of the women interviewed for this study recalled using other thrifty fabric sources besides feedsacks for homesewing. One woman remembered her sister buying cloth scraps for homesewing from Worth Miller's store in Crumpler:

He [Worth Miller] kept little... they rolled it up in sort of little pieces, lots of different materials that were brought in, just the ends of bolts and things like that... scraps. He would get a good many of those and my sister Edith was four years older and she would go and get some of those pieces and would make her own clothes [from the scraps].⁹⁶

Iva Lea Seagraves recalled buying fabric from Belk's department store after they opened up a location in West Jefferson in the 1940s:

⁹⁵ Kemp, February 23, 2010.

⁹⁶ Anonymous, February 5, 2010.

Belk's had boxes of material... Just in pieces, scraps. I made the girl's clothes mostly out of that. It was inexpensive you know, real cheap.⁹⁷

Pride and Sewing

So while there could be prejudices against women who sewed with feedsacks and even those who sewed with bolt fabric, it was not universal. In the earlier period of feedsack re-use, the ink label was a dead giveaway that a person was wearing clothing made from cloth sack. In fact, many of the patterns on the feedsacks mirrored what was sold in stores as bolt fabric. Yet because so many other people were in the same economic situation it was somewhat acceptable. In the 1940s, colorfully printed sacks became readily available and the better quality fabric and more stylish patterns made it less apparent that the garment was made from a sack. As the economy began to improve again after the Second World War, it became increasingly undesirable to use feedsacks for homesewing, particularly for dresses. Eventually, even homesewing would become an unwelcome badge of poverty or un-stylishness. Attitudes about what defined acceptable dress varied slightly according to the social status and beliefs of a given person. It is complex and some opinions were extremely strong.

Take, for example, the attitudes of Bob McCoy's mother, Stella Brown McCoy, toward fashion. She felt it was okay to wear an apron made from feedsacks because it was worn in the private space of the home, but would not use cloth sacks to make her dresses. She claimed to be able to identify a feedsack dress from a mile away, and Mr. McCoy said about his mother "She's a very proud woman. I doubt she ever wore feedsack dresses." The McCoy family was better off than some of their neighbors because her husband was a farmer and a carpenter. Mrs. McCoy's

⁹⁷ Iva Lea Seagraves, interview by author, Warrensville, NC, February 23, 2010.

mother, Virginia Brown, and all of her sisters had a reputation for making the most fashionable clothing and home textiles possible for themselves.⁹⁸ They obviously spent a good deal of time ensuring that every detail was properly styled to reflect their social status and sewing skills.



Figure 1.6. The McCoy family appears here in their Sunday clothes, at home on the farm. Stella McCoy was a talented seamstress who made apparel for herself and her youngest son, Bob. The men's suits were probably ordered from a catalog like Sears and Roebuck or Spiegel's. West Peak, September 1939. *Photo from personal collection*

At another end of the spectrum is the Hartsoe family, who lived on the east side of the Peak. Gwyn Hartsoe had a substantial farm, and he operated a portable

⁹⁸ In a separate interview, a woman who knew Mrs. McCoy suggested that strong beliefs about appropriate dress stemmed from how her mother felt. "That kind of feeling is handed down motherly I think."

sawmill, so the family income was not limited to selling agricultural products. From 1948 to around 1963, Mae Hartsoe ran a small country store next to their house. Although the store was not a very profitable enterprise, it gave them more access to cash and ready-made goods. Mrs. Hartsoe was a talented seamstress, and she made clothing for her two daughters and herself. Additionally she made quilts, curtains, rugs and other home textiles. Mrs. Hartsoe used feedsacks, flour bags and ready-made bolt cloth for her homesewing needs. She was not particularly concerned about which source of cloth was used for each project; she merely used what she had. She could have afforded to be more discriminating about fabric sources as the economy improved in later years, but Mrs. Hartsoe took a thrifty, common sense approach to homesewing. Her daughter, Joanne Kemp, recalled that her mother never left a scrap of material unused. As Joanne outgrew her feedsack dresses, pieces of it were repurposed into quilts, doll clothing or cleaning rags (see Figure 1.7). These differing attitudes about clothing and textiles suggest an emotional involvement with dress and social status that can be puzzling to historians, but are pieced together further in the next chapter.



Figure 1.7. Quilt made by Mae Hartsoe using fabric scraps from worn-out dresses. The outline of a sewn-up pocket is visible on the pink material. *Photo by author*

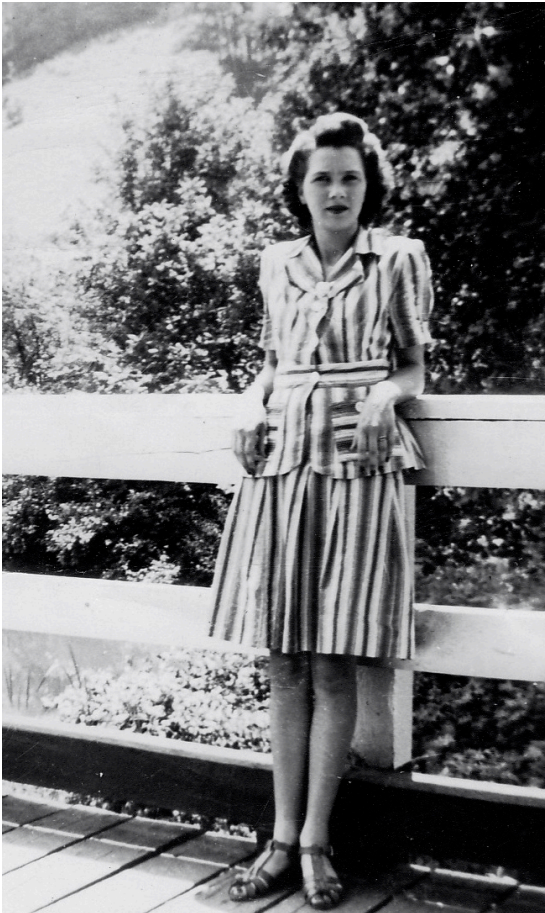


Figure 1.8. A young Ashe County woman wearing a homesewn two-piece outfit, ca. 1940s. *Photo from personal collection*

CHAPTER TWO: STYLE, THRIFT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Every woman should dress well whether she can afford it or not. – Gertrude Atherton⁹⁹



Figure 2.1. Roommates at Lees-McRae Junior College, 1957. *Photo from personal collection*

In the photograph in Figure 2.1, taken at a junior college in Banner Elk, North Carolina (approximately forty miles from Ashe County), both young women are

⁹⁹ "What they say about fashion," *The New York Times* (1923-Current file), November 3, 1946, <http://0-www.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/> (accessed January 28, 2010).

dressed similarly and in the latest fashions. It is difficult to identify, without prior knowledge, that the woman in the printed skirt purchased her ensemble from a department store, and that her roommate, Joanne Hartsoe Kemp, is wearing a dress made by her mother's expert hands. Though not all rural mountain women possessed the talent to produce such fine, stylish garments, women who did took pleasure in clothing their family properly and in the latest styles.

Making that happen was no easy task and usually required several steps. Goods packaged in a cloth sack or bolt fabric must be purchased from a local store. Manufactured sewing materials like thread, buttons and rick rack must be obtained, usually from the local store. Namebrand dress patterns needed to be bought from the department store or ordered from a national catalog unless a neighbor was willing to trade patterns or a woman was skilled enough to make her own from wrapping paper. Finally, construction of the garment was made possible by the still-novel Singer treadle sewing machine. Every detail in the process of making a homemade dress included interaction with major corporations and national marketing campaigns. The groundwork was being laid for a consumer revolution, when buying factory-made apparel would become more common than homesewn fashion.

Previous generations of residents in Ashe County were largely self-sufficient before the rural mail route was established and the railroad came in 1914.¹⁰⁰ Because Ashe County residents were isolated, contact with mass produced name-brand products was especially limited. However, things began to shift in the 1940s and 1950s as new ideas and technologies slowly infringed on the traditional way of

¹⁰⁰ Fletcher, 236.

doing things. Among the changes that took place after the Second World War was a spike in the number of Americans living in urban conditions.¹⁰¹ As people from rural areas migrated to urban centers more of them had access to better paying jobs and store-bought goods. The trend towards an increasingly urban America was inevitable and irreversible. Coupled with a rise in the middle class, modern comforts were becoming more available and affordable to all people.

This chapter first provides a broad overview of the cultural, social and technological changes that took place in the United States, and in Ashe County during the 1940s. Specific attention is given to innovations in the apparel industry that enabled the mass production of printed sacks and accelerated the women's ready-to-wear business. Vertically-integrated corporations like Bemis Brothers Bag Co. were in a strategic position to control the supply chain and boost sales. At a more local level, rural electrification programs, improving telephone capabilities, better funded education and sturdier roadways changed life in Ashe County.¹⁰² The impact of these larger changes on daily life were explored through oral history interviews. Advertising targeting rural women grew, bringing a fresh awareness of their importance as consumers and connecting them to the outside world. The

¹⁰¹ According to the United States Census, 39.7 percent of the U.S. population was urban and 60.3 percent was rural in 1900 (though not necessarily agricultural). By 1910 this began to change slowly with 45.7 percent deemed and 54.3 percent rural. It extended further in 1920 with 51.2 percent urban and 48.8 percent rural, and by 1930 56.2 percent of the population was labeled as urban. This only increased by three-tenths of a percentage point in the 1940 census. In 1950, however, the Bureau of the Census broadened the definition for the term urban, and therefore the increase may appear to be larger than it actually was when compared to previous data. For example, the old definition classified 59 percent of the population of the continental U.S. as urban and the new rules claimed 64 percent. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population and Housing, Table 15. Urban and Rural Population of Continental United States, by Regions, Divisions and States, and of Alaska, Hawaii and Puerto Rico: 1790 to 1950*, Washington, D.C., <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1950.htm> (accessed February 5, 2010).

¹⁰² *The Heritage of Ashe County, North Carolina, Volume II, 1994*, Published by the Ashe County Historical Society (Charlotte, NC: Delmar Printing Company, 1994), 211.

chapter finishes with an examination of material culture objects made from cloth sacks with the intent of revealing what items people actually made, including a brief analysis of promotional brochures distributed by various corporations with advice on how to sew with cloth bags. These brochures unite the overarching themes of style and thrift.

Cultural, Social, and Technological Changes

The modern concept of “technology” is indeed modern, and the current definition is not necessarily reflective of how people viewed it in the early twentieth century. Today we tend to associate the word with the concept of linear forward progress and advancement.¹⁰³ McLuhan argues that technology, sometimes used interchangeably with “tool,” is what we make, and an extension of ourselves.¹⁰⁴ Machine-made goods are the product of human intellect and the internal combustible engine and a simply carved wooden knife both qualify as technology.

It is difficult to extrapolate how early twentieth century residents in the rural mountain South felt about the rapidly changing human experience. Even if some new technologies were not available or affordable to most people in Ashe County, it does not mean that rural residents were ignorant of such devices. Sooner than later, technology would come calling and the pent-up desire for modern conveniences would eventually alter traditional mountain culture. The very idea of new technologies like electricity or indoor plumbing, and their increasingly common

¹⁰⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 57.

presence in America, shaped modern culture, whether rural Ashe County folk had access to them or not. Probably not everyone desired the modern conveniences that today's mountain residents cannot fathom living without, but still many did. Ruth Schwartz Cowan argues in *A Social History of American Technology* that people often had many different and surprising ideas or reactions to new technologies.¹⁰⁵ Some were eager to embrace it and some were resistant or even felt threatened by new-fangled ways.

Towards A More Efficient Bag Industry

But whether new tools altered household labor, large-scale manufacturing or better transportation options, they affected daily life and influenced grander cultural systems. Some of these innovative and improved technologies in the apparel industry (like better machinery), coupled with an increasingly urban population who were reliant on ready-made goods facilitated the perfect storm for companies who stood to profit from homesewing and feedsack fashion. In other words, more sophisticated systems of production, marketing and distribution played a large part in the growth of American industry.

One of the first enterprises that saw opportunities in using dual-use packaging for their products were feed or flour mills and cloth bag manufacturers. Originally the reuse of sack fabric was an unintentional perk for women with little funds or access to ready-made cloth. Mills used early cloth bags to package goods for the convenience of transport or because they believed there was a demand for them. In 1858, Judson Moss Bemis, founder of Bemis Brothers Bag Company,

¹⁰⁵ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 203.

opened its first cloth bag factory in St. Louis, Missouri.¹⁰⁶ A cunning businessman, he meticulously courted flour mill clients, marketed machine sewn bags with guaranteed strength and printed color trademarks. Several years later his business became a quintessential vertically-integrated business investing in cotton plantations and continuing to build facilities around the country to manufacture burlap, hemp and cotton bags. Bemis Brothers Bag Company not only grew, bleached and milled the cotton, they produced fabric sheeting to make the bags from.¹⁰⁷ By 1926, when Judson Bemis's biography was published, the company claimed to be the biggest operation of its kind in the world.¹⁰⁸ Factors like sheer innovation, determination and a fully managed and vertically-integrated supply chain contributed to the brand's long-term success. In the early to mid-twentieth century Bemis simultaneously prolonged the use of cotton bags while developing new production methods for the paper sacks they predicted would eventually replace cloth bags. In every sense the company shaped the bag industry and continues to play a major role in consumer packaging. However, Bemis is not the only major company in the story of feedsack fashion, and fierce competition between bag manufacturers led to improved products, advanced marketing techniques and a better understanding of consumer needs. Equally successful corporations include Chase Bag Company, which was founded in 1847 in Boston and Percy Kent Bag Company Inc. which began in 1885 in Brooklyn. Many other

¹⁰⁶ Edgar, 139.

¹⁰⁷ Bemis: Celebrating 150 Years, 1858-2008, <http://www.bemis150.com/content/timeline.asp> (accessed January 20, 2010).

¹⁰⁸ Edgar, 263-5.

smaller enterprises in the cloth bag industry took a cue from larger businesses and developed their own branded bags.¹⁰⁹



Figure 2.2. JP Green Milling Co.'s Daisy brand flour sack pillowcase. *Photo by author*

One of the first brands to supply Ashe County with goods packaged in cloth sacks was JP Green Milling Company. Based out of Mocksville, North Carolina (roughly seventy miles from Ashe County), the first JP Green flour mill was built in 1911. In the 1930s the company distributed various types of feed, corn meal and flour throughout Ashe County and parts of Watauga County, as well as Grayson County, Virginia. According to Vice President Jack Naylor, in the 1940s and 1950s delivery trucks transported two to three hundred twenty-five pound bags of corn meal to Ashe County a day, or two full truckloads.¹¹⁰ Most of the shipment was delivered to Bare & Little, the leading grocery and feed wholesaler in the county.

¹⁰⁹ Cook, 18-20.

¹¹⁰ J. Naylor, February 18, 2010.

Bare & Little also supplied farmers and country stores in parts of Alleghany County and Watauga County, North Carolina and Grayson County, Virginia. Some of the larger operations, like Bob McCoy's grocery store in Clifton, which opened in the late 1950s, received feed and corn meal directly from JP Green in addition to flour and grocery products bought through Bare & Little. The Daisy brand flour manufactured by JP Green was eventually packaged in cotton sacks that featured a printed border and were known as "pillowcase bags." Competing flour brands in the region were Southern Biscuit Flour, Midstate Flour and Polar Bear Flour, which were distributed by a wholesaler in Wilkesboro, North Carolina.



Figure 2.3. Mae Hartsoe owned this Keystone brand mule feedsack. Keystone was manufactured in South Boston, Virginia and sold by Bare & Little Company. *Photo by author*

Tommy Little of Bare & Little Company remembered selling colorful "dress print" sacks in the early 1940s. The largest supplier of dressprint bags sold by Bare

& Little was Keystone Mills based in South Boston, Virginia. In addition to offering JP Green products to customers, the company sold flour from Roanoke City Mills, corn meal from Barr Scott Mill in Bristol, Snow Goose Flour and Salem Milling Company products. Snow Goose and Salem Milling Company were based on the West Coast and shipped in by rail. Mr. Little explained further:

We got 50,000 lb flour from the West. Lord a mercy we sold car load after car load of that. They had a deal that it didn't cost anything hardly to ship, they called it... free transit. But they would get a load of grain in and they would allow them to manufacture and ship it back it out on a cheaper rate and they could ship it in cheaper by rail then we could haul it.¹¹¹

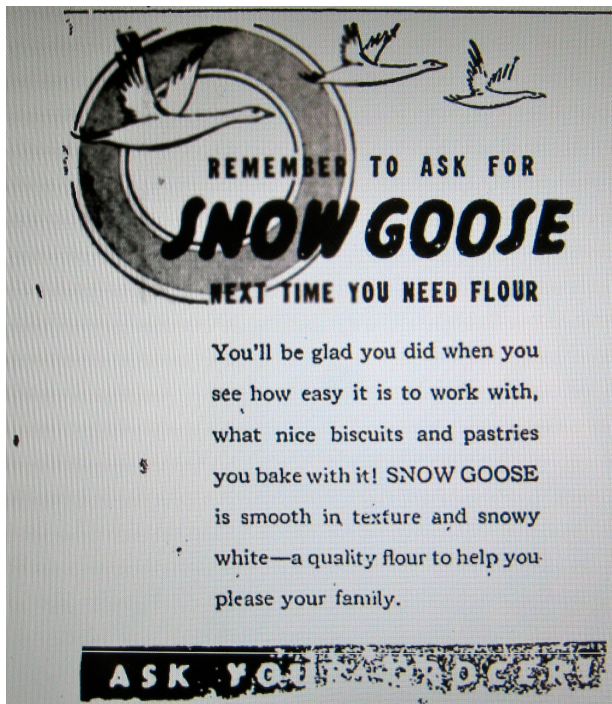


Figure 2.4. Snow Goose advertisement from Rock Hill, South Carolina newspaper. *Rock Hill Herald*, 1 October 1947.¹¹²

¹¹¹ T. Little, March 5, 2010.

¹¹² *Rock Hill Herald*, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1821&dat=19471001&id=FEctAAAAIBAJ&sjid=bj4FAAAAIBAJ&pg=3499,666754> (accessed February 20, 2010).

Ralph Naylor, president of JP Green, recalled that other feed mills serving the area included Big M Feed, Big Rose and Union Grove. A company named Allstar, out of Albemarle, Virginia, sold feed directly to dairy farms. Mr. Naylor explained that bag vendors often called on the mill to sell cloth bags. In the early years, they purchased “seconds,” which were plain bags that had been used, cleaned and turned inside out to hide the original trademark. The new logo was simply stamped on the exterior of the bag.¹¹³ While Mr. Naylor could not recall if the mill used any bags from larger brands like Bemis Bag Company or Chase Bag Company, his uncle Jack remembered using Werthen brand bags from Nashville, Tennessee. He supposed that in the 1920s and 1930s when there were fewer cloth bag manufacturers, the mill may have been more likely to purchase bags from larger brand names.

As changes in the industry increased standards in cloth bags and smaller enterprises followed these trends, it was often cheaper to buy from more localized companies. Though not all of the products sold through JP Green and Bare & Little were packaged in dressprint bags or even cloth sacks (many brands used burlap or paper bags), there were a variety of regional and national brands available to rural Ashe County residents in the local country store in the 1940s and 1950s.

As one examines the rise of mass production of cotton bags, several changes in the manufacturing process play a role. In addition to better and more efficient industrial sewing machines, chemical dyes and roller-printing machines contributed to new methods of production during the 1940s. According to a Fabric and Color Dating Guide written by quilt appraiser Eileen Jahnke Trestain, there was an

¹¹³ Though this saved the company money it is doubtful that these “second” bags would have been used by rural women for homesewing.

increase in the quality of cloth available: "...one can find an almost even distribution between smooth, even-weave fabrics, and coarsely woven, thick-threaded fabrics in the feed sacks as well as fabric on the bolt."¹¹⁴ Around the same time, roller-printing technologies and the synthetic dyes, as mentioned earlier, all contributed to the mass production of bags.¹¹⁵

It was more than the feedsack companies that encouraged the use of their products. Pattern companies Simplicity and McCall's, feed and flour mills, cotton and textile bag associations and home demonstration agents all encouraged home sewing with sack fabric.¹¹⁶ And Ashe County women embraced the concept. Hoping to instill confidence in the consumer to create fashion-forward dresses for less, promotional materials promised tidy, perfectly decorated homes and families. Trade groups formed between like-minded businesses that were intent on boosting the advertising power of various corporations with a stake in the cloth bag industry.

The Textile Bag Manufacturers Association and the National Cotton Council of America united in the 1930s to subsidize the profitable and growing trend with advanced marketing strategies. They sponsored national dressmaking contests at state fairs, distributed brochures and published advertisements geared towards rural women. Home demonstration agents, employed by the United States Department of Agriculture, also attempted to engage rural women in methods of home improvement. Generally a local woman hosted Home Demonstration Club

¹¹⁴ Eileen Jahnke Trestain, *Dating Fabrics: A Color Guide, 1800-1960* (Paducah, KY: American Quilter's Society, 1998), 131-2.

¹¹⁵ Zelma Bendure and Gladys Pfeiffer, *America's Fabrics: Origin and History, Manufacture, Characteristics and Uses* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 511; Mary Schoeser, *Fabrics and Wallpaper – 20th Century Design* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1986,) 30.

¹¹⁶ Jones, 173.

meetings where she educated neighbors about how to cook inexpensive, nutritious meals, manage family finances or sew the most stylish clothing for the least amount of money. Ongoing home improvements were seen as necessary by senior Home Demonstration workers, who wrote in 1933 that they intended to aid women in methods “to do the tasks of the home with a minimum of labor and time and to devise sources of income that will enable the home maker to purchase those things that will make for efficiency, comfort and attractiveness [in the home].”¹¹⁷

Rural Responses to Change

There were periods in Ashe County history when large groups of people migrated out. In particular, during the Great Depression people from Ashe County left to find work farther north or in the North Carolina Piedmont to take up work in textile mills, and in the Second World War many residents joined the military. As families relocated they were exposed to modern conveniences and new ways of life.

In the 1940s Ashe County men and women who served in the Second World War experienced foreign cultures in far away lands.¹¹⁸ Both of these broadened the worldview of Ashe County residents and those who returned home influenced the community with higher expectations for standards of living. In 1943, Belle Hartsoe Sapp left Ashe County with her husband to work in Delaware. She explained how she faced many changes in making the move from a rural mountain-side to an urban center:

We lived with a lot more conveniences than we'd had in North Carolina... We had to buy all of our groceries of course. Back home we had all our own chickens and pigs and our own milk and so on.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Home Demonstration Work*, Misc. Publication No. 173, Washington, D.C., September 1933.

¹¹⁸ According to Ashe County historian Fletcher, records show that the total number of Ashe County men accepted for military service through May 1946 reached 1,730 (146).

Though Mrs. Sapp eventually acclimated to her new home, and never returned to Ashe County, she carried with her rural traditions like baking biscuits and homesewing with feedsacks. She also bought empty printed sacks from a local feed store to make clothes for her young daughter.

After the Second World War, Ashe County emerged as a deeply patriotic place as demonstrated by the homecoming parades and monuments erected to honor the local war effort.¹¹⁹ The strong work ethic required to survive the Great Depression and two world wars could now be put towards improving the county. Previous efforts sponsored by the WPA had begun the process of building better public infrastructure and the county government had fresh priorities for rural modernization. These were long-term goals, however, and passable roads, better-funded schools and electric co-ops were not immediately available to all rural citizens of Ashe County. Electricity and other infrastructure updates acted as modernizing agents and over time, changed daily life for Ashe County women.

The movement towards rural electrification was a largely grass-roots operation, and coincidentally the chairman of the North Carolina Rural Electrification Administration (REA) was from the Warrenton township of rural Ashe County. Gwyn Price held the post from 1940 to around 1972 in the state capital of Raleigh, while his wife and children stayed behind to manage the family

¹¹⁹ This is in contrast to when the U.S. first entered the First World War. Political tensions remaining from the Civil War were still warm in Ashe County and nearly forty drafted men refused to fight. In 1918, then North Carolina Governor Bickett confronted the deserters outside the county courthouse and eloquently persuaded them to make their country proud. They did.

dairy farm.¹²⁰ His daughter, Virginia Roberts, recalled her father's involvement with the REA:

Jefferson and West Jefferson had electricity but out in the county there was none. So he was the instigator for getting it to all of the rural places and so we [our family] got it here a little earlier I think than most people.

The Rural Electrification Administration was established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935 as part of the New Deal.¹²¹ In 1932, it was estimated that only 10 percent of American farms had electricity.¹²² The program intended to help farmers achieve greater efficiency and a higher standard of living through supplies of low-cost power. However, there were issues about whether local cooperatives or private electrical companies should be granted loans from the federal government to provide this power. Several years after it was established, the REA was re-evaluated and in 1939, in an attempt to streamline efforts, the program was placed under the Department of Agriculture.¹²³

In 1938, Caldwell County's Mutual Rural Electric Association expressed willingness to share power with parts of Ashe, Watauga and Alleghany Counties. In 1940, a separate company, Blue Ridge Electric Membership Corporation (or BREMCO), was formed to serve these three counties.¹²⁴ Gwyn Price, a former school principal, served on the new board and the following year he was named Chairman of the North Carolina REA. By 1941, BREMCO provided power to almost 1,500

¹²⁰ Cooper, 32.

¹²¹ Marquis Childs, *The Farmer Takes a Hand: The Electric Power Revolution in Rural America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1952), 53-4.

¹²² Childs, 29.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹²⁴ Fletcher, 242.

residents in Ashe County.¹²⁵ However, construction of new power lines was temporarily put on hold during the Second World War, as materials and manpower were needed elsewhere. Efforts were revived in 1948 when a new sub-station, built in Beaver Creek, ran a 44,000 volt transmission line to Boone and provided electricity to over one thousand new members. Slowly but surely power lines spread throughout rural Western North Carolina, and by 1962 BREMCO reported 6,619 electric meters in Ashe County.¹²⁶

Mr. Gwyn Price was also involved in efforts to bring telephone lines to rural Ashe County, and he sat on the board of the local telephone co-op.¹²⁷ In 1951, Mr. Price obtained a federal loan for Skyline Telephone Cooperative under the REA's new telephone loan program. The million dollar loan paid for the construction of telephone lines for nearly 4,000 subscribers across Ashe, Watauga and Alleghany Counties.¹²⁸

Even as these major efforts were underway in western North Carolina, in Ashe County, these changes came unevenly. In the four major towns (Jefferson, West Jefferson, Warrensville and Lansing) transportation woes were fewer, and

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Mrs. Roberts also shared a colorful story about her father's work in securing a loan for Skyline Telephone Company: "The new minister was coming and Mother went out in the yard to meet 'im and he was a little city boy you know and he came in and introduced himself and he said 'And what does your husband do?' and Mother said 'Well he works in Raleigh.' And so the minister said 'Well maybe he can help us get telephones here!' Well Daddy had just spent months going from Raleigh to Washington [D.C.] to get the loan from Skyline to have the first telephones here. And he'd just been going and going and Mother put her hands on her hips and said 'Well he's doing his damndest!'"

¹²⁸ Skyline Membership Cooperative, *The Connection Newsletter*, February 2007, "Skyline's Early Days," https://www.skyline.org/uploads/file?newsletters/February_2007_connections.pdf (accessed March 1, 2010).

electric, plumbing and communication systems were more available at an earlier stage (in the 1920s) than to those in the countryside. The proximity to the railroad also enhanced the ability of the more urban residents to utilize new technologies. In farther corners of the county, however, change came more slowly. In the area of Ashe County known as Creston, electricity was not available until the mid-1950s. And when it did become available, local residents usually installed the wooden poles, electrical wires and light bulbs themselves. Bob McCoy, of Creston, recited a story of coming home from school every day and pulling the string on the single light bulb in the house to see if the electricity had come on yet. He said that the first time it did was like magic.

According to the 1950 Housing and Population census, of the 5,691 homes reported in Ashe County, only 758 had an indoor bathroom and hot running water. Nearly 2,500 residents living in non-dilapidated dwellings recorded zero running water or toilet facilities.¹²⁹ A survey on plumbing facilities in “rural-farm dwelling units” paints a more specific picture of the standard of living in Ashe County in 1950. A total of 4,432 homes fell into the rural-farm category, or 78 percent of all housing units in the county. Of those homes, 73 percent reported having electric lights, 90 percent had a radio in the house, and 1.5 percent a television. 75 percent

¹²⁹ U.S. Census of Housing – General Characteristics, *Table 26. Occupancy Characteristics, Type of Structure, Number of Rooms, Condition and Plumbing... For Counties: 1950*, Washington D.C., <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1950.htm> (accessed January 22, 2010).

did not have any refrigeration equipment, and 89 percent listed wood as their primary cooking fuel.¹³⁰

No one interviewed in the course of this study could recall the exact year they got electricity, but could narrow it down to a couple of years span. This suggests that electricity did not have that large of an impact when it first appeared in rural homes in Ashe County, as it was expensive to use and it took time to acquire electrical devices. Joanne Kemp recalled the effect of electricity on doing homework after dark:

You'd sit down at the dining room table and you'd have a lamp there in front of you shining on your books at night while you was getting your lessons and after you got electric lights you only had one light overhead and it didn't make much more light on your book than the lamp had. I remember that you'd always set on the side til the light came over your shoulder to hit yer book. Whereas before the lamp'd be sittin right in front of ya and it'd shine right down on ya... but we weren't ever allowed to light the lamp to use too.... They didn't put outlets on every wall like they do now. Because you didn't have much of anything to plug in.

Although rural electrification eventually changed life in Ashe County permanently, its impact was clearly gradual.

As historian Regina Lee Blaszczyk points out in her book on American consumerism, people did not just adopt new technologies and goods, they “integrated them into existing routines, traditions, communities and ways of self-understanding.”¹³¹ One of the new products that impacted rural women's daily life was the electric stove. Randy Little, whose mother was hired by the REA in the

¹³⁰ U.S. Census of Housing – North Carolina, *Table 33. Plumbing Facilities, Year Built, and Equipment of Rural-Farm Dwelling Units, For Counties: 1950*, Washington D.C., <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1950.htm> (accessed January 22, 2010).

¹³¹ Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *American Consumer Society, 1865 to 2005: From Hearth to HDTV* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2009), 95.

early 1950s to educate women about how to use their new stoves, remembered a story about her involvement:

They were just starting to get electric stoves and people were converting from firewood stoves to electric and she'd go out and show the lady of the house how to cook on her new electric range. About a month later a lady was complaining because her electric bill was just horrendous and of course how do you cook on a woodstove – you'd get up at four in the morning and load it up with wood and light the fire and at seven o'clock it was hot and ready to cook. So that's what this lady was doing, getting up at four o'clock and turning all the burners on her electric stove wide open to get it warmed up for three or four hours before she started to cook on it. You know it's just one of those things you wouldn't think of but she was just doing things the way she knew how to do it.¹³²

Most women recalled an easier transition to using electric stoves, though the wood stoves were often kept for canning food. Joanne Kemp described her mother's reluctance to give up her wood stove.

When Mom got her electric stove, she kept her wood stove. They set side by side, she never would give up her wood stove, she used to always make her cornbread in [it], she said it was better'n the electric stove. [She used the electric stove for everything else ex]cept canning, she said it cost too much electricity and if you set the canner on there which was a water canner... it has a big bottom. The burners weren't big enough to can good on it and the canner fit on [the wood stove] and she felt like it was gettin even heatin' and it was safer canning to do it on the wood stove. So, yeah that was the way she used to can her beans and things, was you know in that hot water bath on the wood stove. And she never changed from that.

So while rural Ashe County women, like Mrs. Hartsoe, embraced some aspects of modern domesticity they maintained traditional ways of performing other tasks. This transition is significant when it comes to understanding how homesewing, fashion and an emerging consumer culture fit into rural daily life. One form that this shift took was through more wide-spread use of advertising and promotions.

¹³² R. Little, February 17, 2010.

Advertising to Rural Women

Articulating and communicating what companies today know as a “brand identity” was a method employed by many bag makers, pattern companies, sewing machine businesses, trade groups and feed and flour mills. Therefore it is noteworthy that these enterprises focused their advertising on women beginning in the mid-1920s, because in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries most companies incorrectly assumed that men pulled the purse strings in the household economy.¹³³ Furthermore, mills and bagmakers were selling “masculine” products (such as animal feed) to be used primarily by male farmers. So it is ironic that manufacturers began marketing goods to rural women based on the exterior packaging. It proved a clever positioning strategy and reflects a way businesses in the twentieth century engaged customers.¹³⁴

Rural women in Ashe County may have been exposed to print advertising for textile bags in women’s magazines or farming magazines. Wealthier residents probably subscribed to the *Winston-Salem Journal*, or Ashe County’s only news publication, the *Skyland Post*. But we cannot assume that exposure to ads was widespread, particularly before the late 1940s when finding money to buy magazines or newspapers would have been difficult for many rural people.

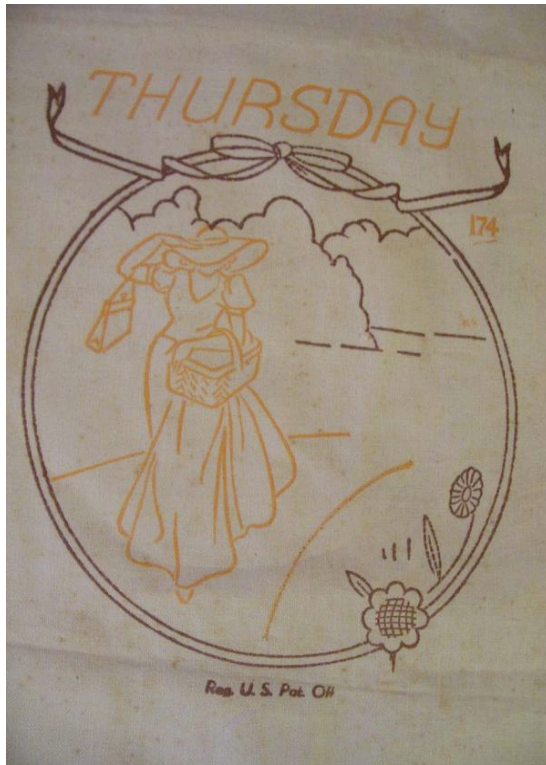
Most likely, information about new products and goods were spread through word of mouth, merchandising displays in local country stores and consumer packaging.

In 1947, Percy Kent Bag Company hired European fabric designer A. Charles Barton to tour the American Midwest and experience first-hand what Percy Kent

¹³³ Roger Horowitz and Arwen Mohun, eds., *His and Hers: Gender, Consumption and Technology* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1998), 11.

¹³⁴ Blaszczyk, *Imaging Consumers*, 2.

brand “Ken-Print” bags meant to rural women who aspired to appear in high-style clothing made from the “glamour sacks.”¹³⁵ Giving a voice to rural women by asking for their input also connected them to urban American society and the international fashion stage.¹³⁶



Figures 2.5-2.6. Flour sack made by Percy Kent in 1936. *Photo by author*

Many of the prints that ended up on the textile bags were available in a similar form on bolt fabric or ready-made apparel and the designs reflected popular trends in thematic design and ultimately diminished the distinct appearance of sack fabric and any stigma that may have been associated with the reuse of feedsacks for

¹³⁵ Connolly, 27.

¹³⁶ Jones, 178.

apparel. Tropical motifs and Mexican and South American designs gained popularity during the Second World War as the European fashion industry and the typical prints associated with European wear were largely shut down.

The Americanization of fashion was in many respects associated with California and palm trees and those motifs became commonly depicted on garments.¹³⁷ Textile bag prints produced during the height of feedsack fashion in the 1940s and 1950s reflected broader aesthetic trends. Patterns found on cloth sacks can be categorized into several main areas: floral (the most common), abstract (often mixed with florals, these may also draw from the work of modern artists), novelty (usually for children or young adults), solid color and border (intended for use as a pillowcase) (see Figures 2.7-9). New methods of mass production allowed companies more cost efficient ways to expand the number of patterns offered in a given season.



Figure 2.7. Patriotic WWII Novelty print.

¹³⁷ Whitaker, 72-4.



Figure 2.8. Children's novelty print.



Figure 2.9. Abstract floral print.

Explaining whether there had been a growing desire for cheap trendy fabric, or rural women were not as concerned with being fashionable prior to more options becoming available around 1940, is significant. Was it only after having more access to national market trends did Ashe County women realize they wanted to be stylish? That doesn't seem likely. It is difficult to know the answer without examining a range of garments from earlier periods when fabric and sewing materials were less accessible and affordable. Material culture and interviews of women who lived in the rural mountain South in the early twentieth century reveal they were as stylish as they had the means. However there was a palatable shift during the 1940s and evidence suggests that as women were exposed to the opinion of more tastemakers they were eager to participate in clothing trends.

During the 1930s and 1940s there was increased coverage of fashion in the mainstream news and the glamour of Hollywood spread with motion pictures.¹³⁸ Opportunities to create trendy and inexpensive garments were indeed increased by the expansion of pattern options on cloth sacks. If stellar sales figures are an indication of success then feedsack fashion was all the rage: Bemis Brothers Bag Company estimated in March 1942 that three million Americans of all income levels wore clothing made from sack fabric.¹³⁹

The promotional emphasis put out by the feedsack makers on the twin pillars of style and thrift were incredibly effective and they also made the product convenient to use. Rural women placed an importance on dressing fashionably in every day life. The evidence points up that women may be too humble to admit it but style was a priority (see Figures 2.10-12). The skilled construction of fashion-forward garments suggests it was important to women regardless of socio-economic status.

¹³⁸ Whitaker, 63.

¹³⁹ Cook, 8.



Figure 2.10. Dress, Blair Farm, NC.
Photo by author



Figure 2.11. Pamphlet, Textile Bag
Manufacturers Association, 1939.



Figure 2.12. Dress made from three bags and featuring starburst button and stylish contrasting trim. *Photo by author*

Style and Thrift Revealed Through Extant Objects

To find evidence of cultural change not expressed in written or oral sources the following questions must be asked of the feedsack objects: What technologies enabled the feedsack clothing trend to become so successful and iconic? Of the elaborate number of uses suggested by promotional brochures, what textile objects were actually made from sacks? Did rural women place importance on dressing fashionably in every day life? How is this reflected (or not) through the development of trendy bag prints?

It is possible to gain broader understanding of the items made from commodity sacks by browsing online auction sites like eBay, etsy or Sharon's Antiques, a website devoted to antique and vintage textiles, including feedsacks.¹⁴⁰ Particularly on the hugely popular eBay, hundreds of full sacks are listed daily. It is more unusual to find well-conserved apparel and accessories, partly due to the high rates of fabric reuse. For example, one shirt examined at the Blair Farm in Boone, North Carolina, was obviously once a dress belonging to the owner's grandmother. The skirt was likely made into an apron or girl's dress (see Figures 2.13-14). Others items found frequently for sale are aprons, quilts, pin cushions, chair seat covers, embroidered dish towels, pillowcases, doll clothing, clothespin bags and occasionally dresses, skirts, petticoats and blouses. More functional items such as diapers or undergarments rarely show in the listed items though these were some of the earliest and most common uses.

¹⁴⁰ www.ebay.com, www.etsy.com and www.rickrack.com/



Figures 2.13-2.14. Former dress, Blair Farm, NC. *Photo by author*

Brochures printed by bag manufacturers, feed mills and cotton trade groups educated women about how to sew with the cloth sacks. The language used in these promotional brochures emphasized fashion and good housekeeping/ mothering, and suggest a vast number of items one could make. The lingo reads much like a catalogue or magazine; the brochures feature ideas for reuse, sewing tips and patterns by Simplicity and McCall's. Conveniently, patterns shared the same number as those found at Sears and Roebuck but were tested by the pattern companies in order to provide the number of expected bags each article required. For example, the ensembles in Figure 2.15 call for anywhere from two to six large bags, depending on the size of the garment.

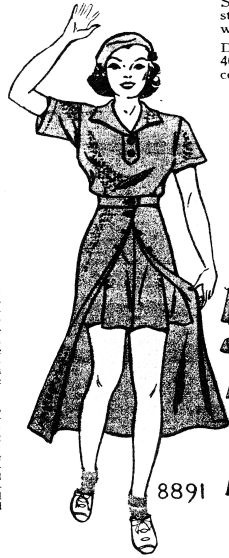
PLAY CLOTHES



3116

116. **PLAY SUIT.** Here is the overall suit that young things find as flattering as they are practical. You will probably find them so comfortable that you'll wear them about your housework. The loose shoes with them is very simply made and you can wear it with separate skirts and suits.

Designed in sizes: 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20. Size 18 requires 2 bags 36 x 44, and 1 bag 9 x 30. Upper part (b) of overalls must have piece of a facing made on bottom trouser legs instead of hem. If blouse is in contrast 1 bag 36 x 44 and overalls 2 bags 36 x 44 and bag 26 x 26.



8891

8891. **SIMPLE SPORTS ENSEMBLE.** The shirt pictured is universally becoming, the shorts are full enough and snug enough to look trim and allow free movement. Skirt can be buttoned on over shorts and removed at will. Simple and easy to make. Clear instructions step by step are given with the pattern.

Designed in sizes: 14, 16, 18, 20; 40 and 42. Size 18 requires 6 large cotton bags.



8217

1217. **SMART NAUTICAL ENSEMBLE.** sizes: 12, 14, 16, 18 and 20. Size 18 requires 2 bags 16 inches long x 36 inches wide for the bolero. For the topper, 2 bags 26 inches long x 26 inches wide. For the trouser, 2 bags 44 inches long x 36 inches wide. 1 bag 26 inches long x 26 inches wide for the hat.

Patterns Listed May Be Purchased at 10c Each

« 4 »

Figure 2.15. Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, 1939.

Promotional text (see Figure 2.16) delighted the reader with imaginative possibilities for “what is apt to be regarded as waste material” (Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, 1939). While some ideas are easily more functional, such as aprons, smocks and house dresses, the list stretches the limits of creativity as it continues with items like toast pockets, stuffed animals, suitcase covers, yardstick holders, dress form linings, scrap books, jelly strainers and hooked rugs. In total this particular list, found on the back cover of the brochure, entices the customer to “make these attractive and practical things of cotton bags” with 50 suggestions for creating apparel and home textile products.



Figure 2.16. Back cover of promotional brochure distributed by the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, 1939.

Another pamphlet, published in the 1950s by the National Cotton Council of America, *Smart Sewing with Cotton Bags*, refers good-naturedly to the range of potential uses in a section titled “On Your Own,” which encourages women to “turn out smart tricks at smart savings.” After listing curtains, lingerie cases, slip covers and luncheon sets, a rare moment of overwhelming possibility is revealed:

You can't sew without thinking of collar and cuff sets, dickeys, bibs for baby, dusters, and all of the other uses you can find for cotton bags. You know we didn't mean to omit shoe bags, or covers for your washing machine and your electric mixer. And little seat pads for the porch chairs in the summer. We could go on... and on...¹⁴¹

And so many brochures did.

¹⁴¹ *Style and Thrift: Sewing with Cotton Bags* (Chicago, IL: The Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, 1939), 21.

These endless lists of possibilities makes one wonder what women actually made from sack fabric and if their homes were as well-adorned with decorative covers as the promotional materials suggest. As the variety of print designs expanded and ink labels became an obsolete sign to distinguish sack fabric from bolt fabric, the reuse of bags likely became more socially acceptable. Though sewing skills varied, most of the women using them must have had some basic knowledge. Yet some uses, like pillowcases or dish towels, were probably more popular due to ease of construction. One also questions what items most rural women had time to make. It is difficult to definitively answer any or all of these issues, but it is likely that we would find a spectrum of items made according to need and sewing ability and time.¹⁴²

The variety of items examined demonstrated careful and skilled construction with tidy seams, nice draping of fabric and creative embellishments. Embroidery was one of the most common and simple ways a woman could add style and beauty to a tablecloth, apron or pillowcase (see Figures 2.17-18) and gave one the opportunity to express creativity. Later bag manufacturers made it even more convenient by printing the design directly on the sack in washable ink. Virginia Roberts recalled the importance of embroidered textiles to every home:

Every bride took what you call your hope chest and before she was married you were supposed to have X amount of tea towels. In fact we used to have books that told you how many tea towels you needed and how many sets of sheets.¹⁴³

¹⁴² In interest of full disclosure I am guilty of a bias that could slightly skew my analysis: I am drawn to beautifully made things. If forced to choose between purchasing a crudely made housedress and a finely constructed dress with stylish details, the choice is obvious. Furthermore, a nicer garment is more likely to be saved than discarded or used for a broom cover. Therefore, observations based on pure physical evidence are limited in scope but may be complemented with personal testimony regarding actual use.

¹⁴³ Roberts, March 5, 2010.



Figure 2.17. Detail on pillowcase. *Photo by author*



Figure 2.18. Child's muslin apron. *Photo by author*

Some types of flour, sugar and feedsacks required no sewing – they were printed with a colorful border and intended for use as a pillowcase. Other offerings included cloth bags featuring the outline of a teddy bear or doll. All one had to do was cut it out on the dotted lines, stuff it with rags and sew it together to make a children's toy. Often the same company released promotional lines of dolls and doll clothing printed on the bag to attract repeat costumers. This concept also appealed to urban women and their children.

What women made from the feedsacks depended on several factors: the availability and cost of cloth sacks, bolt fabric, sewing supplies and ready-made apparel, the clothing and home textile needs of the woman and her family, their socioeconomic status and her comfort and skill with home sewing. Before the 1920s it was usually more cost-effective to make a new dress rather than buy one, and ready-made apparel had a reputation for being poorly constructed from inferior

fabric.¹⁴⁴ Changes in fashion in the coming decade favored looser, straighter garments and manufacturers were able to produce more affordable dresses. Consequently the shift in style also allowed women without refined sewing skills the opportunity to save money by making their own clothes.¹⁴⁵ American fashion grew into its own distinct category in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s but the primary reason for homesewing remained the ability to contribute to the household budget. Home economics were the driving force behind women's reuse of feed and flour sacks until national and local economies improved. Yet, it was also larger trends, such as better transportation, access to electricity and with contact to larger national fashion trends through catalogues, movies and magazines that encouraged women to continue to sew.

¹⁴⁴ Gordon, 7.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

CHAPTER THREE: FROM CUSTOMER TO CONSUMER

“When we buy a pair of new shoes or a new hat we wonder how we ever had the nerve to be seen in the old ones.” – William Feather¹⁴⁶

The act of purchasing new goods involves layers of meaning that communicate modes of behavior and attitudes. Changes in the material consumption of rural Ashe County residents reveal subtle shifts in accepted beliefs. As women, in particular, were able to purchase more goods after the Second World War, a wide variety of behavioral changes occur. In Ashe County, a larger shift towards a standardized, homogenous array of material objects took people farther away from the days when individually produced goods were common. This exodus from thousands of years of mostly handmade material culture affected average rural consumers in ways that were difficult to comprehend at the time. This was especially true for consumers in western North Carolina after the Second World War.

As William Feather’s observation suggests, replacing old possessions with new ones can bring about a change in attitude about the object itself. But to fully understand this change, the context of the object must also be considered. Within

¹⁴⁶ “What they say about fashion,” *The New York Times* (1923-Current file), November 3, 1946, <http://0-www.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/> (accessed January 28, 2010).

the context of material and monetary scarcity, the well-worn hat is just a hat, though not a particularly special one. Still it is presumed to keep one's head protected from the sun and rain. In the context of the purchase of a new hat, the discarded one appears shabby and unfashionable in comparison. As the trend cycle shortened over the course of the twentieth century, lowered production costs made goods more affordable, the story of replacing old stuff with new stuff played out over and over. In a departure from centuries of thrift and home economic savvy, modern rural American consumers began to favor disposable, easily discarded items. Throughout the United States, the development of a growing middle class accompanied the spread of department store culture and rising expectations for standards of living. Department stores helped transform what used to be considered luxuries into everyday necessities.¹⁴⁵ These changes in attitude about goods and their values were demonstrated through new patterns of consumer behavior, especially with regard to the purchase of textiles and apparel. This chapter addresses how these changes were manifested in rural Ashe County after the Second World War.

¹⁴⁵ Whitaker, 5.



Figure 3.1. Creston resident Joanne Kemp wears a dress and jacket made by her mother to wear for Easter in 1956. *Photo from personal collection*

THE PRINCESS LOOK
 Lovely new silhouette in beautiful new Kerrybrooke dresses... especially flattering to pretty young figures, especially wonderful in bright red

Regent Velvetreen \$16.98... sizes 7 to 15. Soft, thick piled cotton with a twill back... very fine, durable fabric. Flared 8-gore skirt is about 117-in. in sweep... has wide box pleats all around. Detachable collar and cuffs are heavy white cotton lace. Back zipper to below waist. Fabric belt not shown. Dry clean. Slip, wt. 3 lbs. *Junior's* sizes 7, 9, 11, 13, 15 only. *Order under correct size.* 031 D U1454—Black... \$16.98 031 D U1455—Bright red... \$16.98

Our Best Fallie \$10.98... sizes 9 to 17; 10 to 18. Crisp rayon with cotton filling for extra body. Long-line princess dress. Sweet jacket... wonderful ensemble! Dress has extra detachable collar of white rayon faille with matching back zipper. Fabric belt included. Collarless jacket has fabric bow, sleeve ending of white rayon faille. Dry clean. Slip, wt. 3 lbs. *Junior's* sizes 9, 11, 13, 15, 17. *Misses'* sizes 10, 12, 14, 16, 18. *Order correct size.* 031 D U1108—Bright turquoise blue 031 D U1108—Navy blue 031 D U1107—Cherry red Dress and Jacket... only \$10.98

Five Cotton Pinwale Corduroy \$8.98... sizes 7 to 15; 8 to 16. Velvety soft fabric in a glamorous casual with the new long-line bodice. Full skirt has box pleats all around. Detachable collar is white linen-look rayon. Pearl-like button trim, long back zipper. Dry clean. Slip, wt. 3 lbs. *Junior's* sizes 7, 9, 11, 13, 15. *Misses'* sizes 8, 10, 12, 14, 16. *Please order correct size.* 031 D U1450—Cherry red 031 D U1452—Gold 031 D U1451—Periwinkle (Illa-c-blue) Each... only \$8.98

Figure 3.2. Mrs. Kemp's dress may have been inspired by this two-piece ensemble from a 1955 Sears and Roebuck catalog. Annual catalogs were often the main source of fashion advice for rural Ashe County women. Skilled seamstresses were capable of copying a dress like this without a commercial pattern. *Source: Joanne Olian, ed., Everyday Fashions of the Fifties As Pictured in Sears Catalogs (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 42.*

From Customer... to Consumer

Though the words customer and consumer are used interchangeably by modern marketing and branding firms, consumer historians usually differentiate between the two. Customers perform basic transactions for goods and services; consumers find new ways of relating to material culture as they engage in complex systems of distribution and marketing.¹⁴⁶ Historian Grant McCracken theorizes in *Culture and Consumption* that a shift in attitudes and outlooks, expressed by a “willingness to consume,” defines the transition.¹⁴⁷

Regina Blaszczyk suggests that one mark of a consumer-oriented society is the presence of companies engaging consumers through targeted product design and advertising.¹⁴⁸ Creative American manufacturers strived for a comprehensive understanding of consumer demands and preferences as they collected information about shoppers. These sophisticated enterprises pieced the clues together in an attempt to anticipate and meet consumer desires. The dialogue between businesses and consumers takes place in the market economy. Many successful companies adopted a similar philosophy in the twentieth century.

Historian Ronald Kline takes this one step further by zeroing in on rural American consumers and “the changing relationships among modernizers, farmers, and technological systems – the networks of interactions between groups that promoted these technologies to uplift rural life and farm families who tried to shape

¹⁴⁶ Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 20-21.

¹⁴⁷ McCracken, 20.

¹⁴⁸ Blaszczyk, *Imaging Consumers*, 1-2.

them to fit rural culture."¹⁴⁹ The transition to that of a fully developed consumer was an uneven one in rural areas as users adapted various new goods and technologies gradually and often in different ways.

In many ways, women who repurposed cloth sacks for home and apparel use were not only consumers and customers, they were also producers and creators. The shift towards becoming a full consumer was also slowed because the society was in transition. A similar argument could be made that the purchase of bolt cloth, garment patterns, sewing machines, notions and accessories was a consumer act. But buying materials is only the first step in the production of clothing and home textiles. Human effort must be extended to transform the selection of materials and tools into a garment or other textile good. The maker is involved in designing and shaping the object into a reflection of their tastes and values. The finished product is tangible evidence of the maker's productive and creative abilities.¹⁵⁰

Ready-made garments, on the other hand, reflect the consumer's buying preferences and taste but do not allow involvement with the production or design. In modern times some people pay top dollar for couture dresses designed just for them, and average consumers manage to feel as if they were expressing themselves with store-bought clothes. The thought of making them at home seems absurdly laborious because most Americans do not understand basic principles of garment construction. Whether producing, buying or consuming, Ashe County women were

¹⁴⁹ Ronald Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technological and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 6-8.

¹⁵⁰ McLean, 70.

constantly making choices and evaluating those choices based on the larger context of their environment.

Although consumerism in some form was present in American culture beginning with the Consumer Revolution of the eighteenth century, the United States did not reach levels of mass consumption until after the Second World War. It might have happened sooner but the Great Depression and two World Wars stifled the economy. Modern patterns of consumer behavior were not widespread in rural Ashe County until the late 1940s. Despite this, consumerism slowly increased nationally beginning in the 1930s.¹⁵¹ Clothing and home décor were two of the primary ways that women “upgraded” their environment with store-bought goods when economic circumstances improved. Subtle changes in the source and construction of home textiles and apparel are demonstrated in period photographs. One can see, for example, how homesewn apparel was often complimented with ready-made pieces. Virginia Roberts, referring to photographs of her 1948 Riverview School graduation, commented on the popular fashions of the time:

Every girl would have on saddle oxfords – every single one. And you know that must have been difficult for some of them to pay for saddle oxfords and yet they all had them. Now a couple of the girls had saddle oxfords but they had their winter coat buttoned up because they didn’t have a new spring dress, that’s what I figure. Their coat was buttoned up to the top. Everybody else had on spring clothes and they didn’t.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁵² Roberts, March 5, 2010.



Figure 3.3. Mrs. Kemp and friend wearing homesewn shirts and saddle oxford shoes at Lake Junaluska Church Camp, July 1953. Photo from personal collection

Saddles
Beloved Free 'n' Easy Classics
in Quality We're Proud of!

Our Finest Quality Saddle
\$3.85
PAIR

And we think if you could find your quality at any price! Finest upper made of the best quality fine leather with famous bell-shaped all saddle stitching, a non-expansive moisture-locking recessed "flap" and gum rubber sole and heel. Superior leather with construction. Unlined for light flexibility. Women's and Girl's Size 5 to 9 in A (Very Narrow) Widths 3 1/2 to 8 in C (Medium) width. All half sizes included. Same size, width. See Page 1155. Shipping weight, 1 pound 11 ounces. 15 K 2069—White and Brown Leather Pair.....\$3.85

Quality at a Special Price!
\$1.88
PAIR

Finest saddle shoe we know of at this low price! Genuine track construction for flexibility. Lacing opening in each rubber sole, leather stitching. 1 1/2" rounded leather upper. 4 color combinations. See Page 1155. Women's and Girl's Size 5 to 9 in A (Very Narrow) Widths 3 1/2 to 8 in C (Medium) width. All half sizes included. Same size and width. Shipping weight, 2 pounds 2 ounces. 15 K 2195—White and Brown Leather 15 K 2191—Snake and Brown Leather 15 K 2192—White and Black Leather 15 K 2095—White and Blue Leather Pair.....\$1.88

Walled Toe for Short Look
\$1.98
PAIR

Finest construction, materials, and workmanship possible in a shoe at this low price! Expertly constructed with synthetic sole, of naturally resistant and longer wear. Leather stitching. 1 1/2" rounded leather upper with moisture-locking saddle stitching. And the walled toe to counter and neutralize the heel is extra wide! Here's an excellent buy on both quality and style! See 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125. Women's and Girl's Size 5 to 9 in A (Very Narrow) width. 7 1/2 to 9 in C (Med.) All half sizes included. Same size and width. Shipping weight, 2 pounds 2 ounces. 15 K 2097—White and Brown Leather 15 K 2098—Two-Tone Brown Leather Pair.....\$1.98

4-STAR FEATURE
5 WIDTHS...50 SIZES

- ★ Extremely Flexible Because They're Goodyear Welted
- ★ Smooth Leather Insoles
- ★ Leather Quarter Linings
- ★ Fine Quality Leather Uppers

Features Seldom Found Under \$4!
Made by a famed maker of 84 shoes—with all their fine features! Authentically made but that has slight toe-follies for extra comfort! White waterproof rubber sole wear well—and are easy to clean and dry! High quality and fine. Complete with construction for superb flexibility. 100% grained leather uppers. Women's and Girl's Size 5 to 9 in A (Very Narrow) width. Size 5 to 9 in A (Very Narrow) width. 4 to 9 in B (Narrow) Size 3 1/2 to 8 in C (Medium) width. 3 1/2 to 8 in C (Med. Wide) All 1/2 sizes included. Same size, width. Ship. wt. 1 lb. 12 oz. 15 K 2255—White and Brown Leather. Pair.....\$2.85

EASY PAYMENTS Everything and anything in this Big Book may be purchased on Sears convenient Easy Terms. You may buy shoes for the entire family all at once. See inside Back Cover.

248 - SEARS, ROEBUCK AND CO. ○

Figure 3.4. Advertisement for saddle oxford shoes from Sears catalog, 1941/2. Saddle oxfords remained popular into the 1950s. Source: Joanne Olian, ed., *Everyday Fashions of the Forties As Pictured in Sears Catalogs* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1992), 28.

The transformation from customer to consumer took shape in Ashe County in different ways. The general consumer habits of rural citizens varied widely according to the economic ability, accessibility of consumer goods and differing attitudes about the importance (or disdain) for expressing one's social status through material objects. For example, people who lived in Jefferson and West Jefferson bought substantially more goods, but their consumer habits still depended on their socioeconomic status to some degree. In the countryside it was only one part of the equation. Most rural families produced much of their own food so they didn't *need* to buy much; it was more a matter of *want*. Opportunities to buy goods, especially before the late 1940s and early 1950s, were limited to the local country store, mail order catalog or the occasional trip to town. Some families who were tenant farmers or suffered financially had difficulty purchasing much of anything, but they may have been able to barter or work for store credit. Bell Hartsoe Sapp recalled exchanging goods at the local country store in the 1930s:

There was a rural store down there on Rich Hill, W.R. Roten's store. We used to save our eggs and take 'em to the store and trade 'em for flour and sugar and things like that.¹⁵³

Jack Naylor, who sold feed and flour with JP Green Milling Company out of Mocksville, North Carolina, remembered trading cattle feed with Joe Stevens at Steven's Store in Creston for pistons. "He was a real good trader," Naylor remarked.¹⁵⁴ Store records from the late 1940s and early 1950s from Ashe County present evidence that acquiring goods through trade or work exchange was still an accepted practice. However most people bought things with store credit and settled

¹⁵³ Sapp, February 17, 2010.

¹⁵⁴ J. Naylor, February 18, 2010.

up whenever they had the money. Local storeowner Bob McCoy remarked that he often had to write off bad debit when people could not pay at all.

Many rural families with income were content with near self-sufficiency, while their similarly equipped neighbors delighted in buying small luxuries when they could. Some rural people of moderate income in Ashe County strove to better themselves with store-bought goods and others in similar circumstances felt little need to buy things they could produce themselves. Oral history interviews reveal different attitudes, priorities and behavior in the first generations of modern consumers in rural Ashe County. Yet there was a growing consensus that store-bought goods were automatically superior, perhaps due to novelty. Though mass-produced goods hide the human involvement through complex systems of production and distribution, over time most rural residents came to embrace the convenience of ready-made textiles, apparel and foodstuffs while still maintaining certain practices that would later be deemed “old timey.”¹⁵⁵

Linda Henson, who was raised in rural Wilkes County, likened the appeal of store-bought apparel to that of loaf bread:

It was like having store-bought bread ...white bread, light bread or whatever they called it. It was better than biscuits. Can you imagine? To me, how could anything be better than biscuits?¹⁵⁶

After years of making cornbread and biscuits on a woodstove almost daily, it is understandable that women who were able to bought loaf bread to supplement the family diet. Sliced loaf bread was a novelty to rural Ashe County families. And as

¹⁵⁵ Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 20-21.

¹⁵⁶ Henson, January 26, 2010.

store-bought bread replaced biscuits, flour use declined, which also meant that women had fewer flour sacks to use for homesewing.

One of the most significant changes in attitude was the belief about what constituted appropriate materials and sources for clothing. Though this shift was not universal among rural Ashe County women, over time factory-produced clothing became the status quo. Access to better priced ready-made garments increased in the years following the Second World War as roads improved, department stores expanded their offerings and women became even more style-conscious.

Still, many women continued to sew their own clothes for the rest of their lives, but others reduced the amount of time they spent on homesewing in favor of buying ready-made dresses. Not everyone felt that homemade apparel was something to be ashamed of, but some were strongly opposed to the practice when it was no longer a necessity. But as Mr. McCoy points out, the most significant factor affecting consumer habits was the improving financial situation in which Americans found themselves:

As the economy picked up, people that wore homemade goods was kindly looked down on. It could mean your social status... Some people when the economy picked up they had means to get better jobs. Spend more. And the people that were less educated have less means to buy.¹⁵⁷

Men and women who worked in manufacturing during the war had a bit of excess cash and were eager to spend it on consumer goods, particularly after years of being thrifty. Mr. McCoy's father supplemented the family income with work besides

¹⁵⁷ McCoy, January 13, 2010.

farming and when that became more lucrative it increased his family's purchasing power:

I can remember when Daddy did carpenter work he made thirty five and forty cents the hour and I remember when it went to fifty cents an hour it was a big thing.

And when Belle Sapp and her husband moved to Delaware in the 1940s they also experienced an uptick in wages as a result of his new job.

My husband when he started out he made 45 cents an hour... [he had] been working on the farm for 10 cents [an hour].

Clearly such a large increase in salary made a difference in what people purchased by giving them the option to spend money instead of time. The transition of rural Ashe County customers into consumers appears to coincide with better access to better goods and improved spending power. In comparison to urban Americans, rural Ashe County residents were slower to experience cultural changes caused by an evolving mass market.

Granny's Store Ledgers

Records from a country store ledger from Creston, North Carolina, that date between 1948 and 1955 provide a sampling of changing consumer habits after the Second World War. Though changes in consumption patterns developed unevenly, it is clear that based on these store records, people were choosing to be less self-sufficient. Mae Hartsoe opened her store in 1948, shortly after returning from Baltimore where her husband built ships for the war effort. The small shop was located next to the house she shared with her husband and three children. Mrs. Hartsoe was an enterprising businesswoman and operated the store until about 1963

when she started work for the Creston Post Office. She was well liked and respected but demonstrated a humble attitude about her store's involvement in the community:

The people who came were just local people that lived all around here. Many people had to walk to go to the store then. We had basic things like sugar, coffee, flour, meal and canned goods. We had just groceries and kerosene. We always had kerosene 'cause people had to have a lot of kerosene at that time for kerosene lamps.¹⁵⁸

Three ledgers dating from 1948 to 1955 offer specific details about the purchase of feed and flour sacks, clothing, sewing notions and objects related to new technologies. The ledgers record each purchase by the name of the client and most were frequent customers. Mrs. Hartsoe's daughter, Joanne Kemp, ran the store on Saturdays and recalled that it was a popular place to buy bologna, cheese and bread at lunchtime. The cheese, distributed by Bare & Little Company, was produced at the Kraft Phoenix Cheese Plant in West Jefferson and made using milk from local farms.

Over the course of the period covered by the three ledgers there does not seem to be a decline in the purchase of cloth, thread, feed or flour. Mrs. Hartsoe sold needles, thread, buttons, men's overalls, pants, jeans and candy supplied by the Frank Crowe Company in Wilkesboro. Bare & Little delivered groceries and feed to the store regularly and EG King, a women's clothing wholesaler, supplied Mrs. Hartsoe's store with dresses, skirts and sweaters. Carl Roland, an old friend of hers, was the company salesman for EG King, based out of Bristol, Tennessee. Though Mrs. Hartsoe continued to sew most of the clothing for herself and her two

¹⁵⁸ Cooper, 144.

daughters, she sometimes bought last season's ready-made sample garments from Mr. Roland.

Many Ashe County residents must have had enough money to buy cigarettes, soft drinks, cakes and candy, as they seem to be popular items. These and other processed, branded foods were relatively new additions to the rural diet. Mrs. Hartsoe sold plenty of Kool-Aid, Moon Pies, Cheerios and Aspirin, and patrons were probably exposed to more brand-distinct packaging than ever before.

The store carried a wide assortment of items, including lumber (from Mr. Hartsoe's sawmill), fresh produce, canned meat, bread, cheese, feed, flour, flashlights, batteries, stovepipes, toothpaste, lipstick, washing powder, toilet paper and shoes. Mrs. Hartsoe sold pesticides such as tomato dust and fly spray. She sold a lot of men's overalls, ankle socks and canning supplies. According to multiple oral history interviews, women continued to can in order to preserve meat and produce for years after they had electricity and freezers. Some never stopped.

There were several African-American patrons at Mrs. Hartsoe's store. Ed Wellington, his wife, Dory, and their four children lived on The Peak near the McCoy family. He purchased flour bags, shirts and light bulbs, according to store records. Mr. Hobart Hillard, who was blind, lived with Ethel Stout and her niece Josephine. Mrs. Stout, an African-American widow, had a reputation as a good cook and prominent local families often asked her to cook for their parties and social events. When Mrs. Hartsoe was sick with rheumatic fever she helped with housework in exchange for store credit.¹⁵⁹ Items purchased separately by Mrs. Stout

¹⁵⁹ Mrs. Stout and her husband are buried in a special section for African-Americans in the Thomas and Worth family cemetery. This is somewhat ironic given that David Worth, who settled in Creston in the nineteenth century, was one of the area's largest slave owners.

and Mr. Hillard included chicken feed, flour bags, chopsacks, a towel and men's work gloves.

There does not appear to be a difference in what items people purchased based on race or gender. Though both women and men had accounts listed in the ledgers, men were the more frequent customers. Within a family account, Mrs. Hartsoe sometimes indicates which specific family member (besides the primary account holder) charged the item to the store. More often than not men appear to do most of the shopping. Even the purchase of "feminine" items like skirts, dresses, cloth and thread were usually made by the male head of the household.

A close reading of the ledgers reveal much about the purchases of Ashe County residents in regard to ready-made clothing. The first ledger begins in 1948 and shows no records of women's apparel being sold in the store. The next consecutive ledger picks up in 1951 and records more pants and sweaters sold. By the third ledger, which dates from 1953 to around 1954, sales of mass-produced clothing were more pronounced. This is likely due to the introduction of women's apparel to the store's offerings. The document shows an increase in purchases of dresses, skirts and sweaters, as well as fashion accessories, like white anklet or "bobby" socks, belts and scarves. Yet sales of materials for homesewing decline only slightly.

Those who made a living off the farm continued to buy sewing materials in addition to ready-made goods. Will Lefewers, a frequent customer at Mrs. Hartsoe's shop, came to the mountains to work at Knox Knitting Mill, a small production facility in Creston. Mr. Lefewers must have also raised livestock because he bought a feedsack nearly every week. He also purchased overalls quite regularly, and sometimes shirts, cloth, work gloves, flashlight bulbs and batteries.

Changes are subtle in the records from 1948 to 1955. Later documents might show a gradual increase in the variety and amount of goods bought as over time people became more affluent. In the period covered in the ledgers, there were small changes as Mrs. Hartsoe began to sell more technological goods like electric light bulbs. But sales of flashlights and kerosene lamp oil were still high, suggesting that electricity had a minimal impact on basic needs for light sources.

It seems based on the records, that Mrs. Hartsoe's customers were experimenting with new goods and new ways of acquiring them. They were receiving an education in branded textiles and groceries, preparing for the next big leap in the local consumer market.

Multiple changes propelled the migration of rural residents out of the country and into town for shopping needs. Improved roads and the growth in car ownership helped rural residents gain easier access to retail facilities like department stores and grocery stores. But you had to have transportation to the store and not everyone could afford a car or a shopping spree. There were also problems with a lack of selection at first, and sometimes it was just easier to make a dress rather than buy one, even if you could afford to. Mrs. Kemp remembered what it was like when she was a young girl in the 1940s.

There was no place to go shopping. We had a Smithey's in West Jefferson and they sold an awful lot of material... But you know if you ordered one [a dress] from the catalog sometimes it had to be sent back, it couldn't be altered to fit ya. And if you went to town to try to buy one they didn't have a big choice for you to try on.

Luckily for Mrs. Kemp and her girlfriends, better shopping choices in Ashe County were just around the corner.

Department Store Culture

Large department store chains were a departure from small country stores because they were more likely to be owned nationally rather than locally. By the 1950s, department stores had evolved from stuffy dry goods shops that targeted only men into modern retailers with clear branding known as much for their women's wear offerings as for their environment.¹⁶⁰ People were encouraged to make specific purchases in specific stores instead of everything from one store.¹⁶¹ Department stores hired professional advertisers to create flattering advertisements and entice customers with confidence-boosting products.¹⁶² The rise of the contemporary department store as a popular taste-maker for the urban and now rural middle classes coincided with the success of the American women's ready-to-wear industry after the Second World War.

¹⁶⁰ Whitaker, 53.

¹⁶¹ That trend is reversing in the present day as Wal-Mart, the leading United States retailer, gives Ashe County residents the opportunity for cheap one-stop shopping. Though many are opposed to the big box store's presence in the county, it is a popular place, at the expense of many smaller businesses.

¹⁶² Whitaker, 49.



Figure 3.5. Ashe County residents socialize in downtown West Jefferson on a Sunday afternoon in the late 1940s. *Source: Images of America: Ashe County Revisited*, Published by the Ashe County Historical Society (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2002), 78.

When people (especially rural women) had the opportunity to obtain more stylish clothing and home goods they did. In this case, goods were mostly ready-made American garments after the Second World War. Mainstream America's relationship with fashion was changing. The apparel industry fared more positively in the 1940s because European designers were forced to halt business during the war. Hollywood actresses appeared on the silver screen in small towns across the country and women everywhere aspired to be Judy Garland or Rita Hayworth. The war effort influenced the dress of movie stars just as it did for all American women. Paramount studio designer Edith Head was quoted as saying that the L-85

restrictions “served the useful purpose of improving and toning down movie styles, putting actresses into clothes instead of creations.”¹⁶³

In 1946 *The New York Times* first added a section covering fashion trends.¹⁶⁴ An article in the first “special fashion section” of the *Times* speaks of resourceful American designers who were excited to see the end of government restrictions on fabric, insisted on post-war feminine allure, and promised to make beautiful clothing for women of all needs and tastes.¹⁶⁵ It is as if designers sensed a more prosperous future for the women’s ready-to-wear industry in the United States and envisioned a time when all consumers looked to manufactured garments designed by professionals for their textile and apparel needs.

Though it is a stretch to believe rural women in Ashe County read *The New York Times*, the impact of fashion on the American consciousness trickled down to women of all social and economic standings. As argued previously, rural Ashe County women were concerned with wearing up-to-date clothing styles. And they were just as keen to support the United States fashion industry, as the designers were to provide them with trendy apparel.

After the Second World War, for the first time in American history rural women ceased making clothing almost entirely. Of course garments were still made, in the literal sense of the word, perhaps by women, but certainly not in their homes. Garment-making also became a duller, less satisfying tactile experience for

¹⁶³ Florence S. Richards, *The Ready-to-Wear Industry, 1900-1950* (New York: Fairchild Publications, Inc., 1951), 29.

¹⁶⁴ The New York Times Timeline, 1941-1970, http://www.nytc.com/company/milestones/timeline_1941.html (accessed January 29, 2010).

¹⁶⁵ Virginia Pope, "Fashions of the Times Preview, Spring 1947," *The New York Times (1923-Current file)*, November 3, 1946, <http://0-www.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/> (accessed January 29, 2010).

the producer. Busy households may be noisy, but were nothing compared to the constant sounds of a textile manufacturing facility where protective headgear and shouting were required. Industrial workers completed only one step of the production process rather than the entire work. They made identical things for anonymous strangers rather than individualized outfits for loved ones. There were many experiences lost when clothing became mass-produced.

Though the average woman stopped sewing in the mid-to-late 1950s, many of the women interviewed noted that they continued to make clothing or quilts from time to time. The main difference was that sewing was no longer a necessity but a preference. Still, as Americans moved away from homesewing it was not always a matter of choice. One woman explained why she finally stopped making her own clothes as during the 1980s:

I just started buying clothes and found that it was easier... It was cheaper to make them. A lot of the fabric stores around, we had some then that we could go and buy what we wanted, but a lot of fabric shops closed you know. I guess when polyester wasn't as popular as it was... and I don't know, I guess I got lazy... things improved a lot once you could sell things and get money. And all that sort of thing. And social security helped a lot.¹⁶⁶

Women who never particularly enjoyed sewing, and even those who did took pleasure in a new pastime – shopping for ready-made garments.

One of the first department stores in urban Ashe County was founded as a dry goods store in 1889 in downtown Jefferson. MacNeills store is still locally owned and operated. Several residents remembered shopping in West Jefferson at Blackburn's department store, Belk's department store and Rose's. It is worth noting that all of these chains were based out of North Carolina. Some people traveled even farther out of the county to shop in Winton-Salem or Bristol,

¹⁶⁶ Anonymous, February 5, 2010.

Tennessee. Virginia Roberts remembered her mother taking a Greyhound bus that went through Creston to buy bolt cloth in Bristol. Joanne Kemp recalled that things her mother could not make, like shoes, for example, were purchased on day trips to Bristol. Sometimes she would catch a ride with her father in his truck when he delivered a load of lumber from his sawmill to a furniture company in Damascus, Virginia, on the way to Bristol.

The experience of making a dress versus buying one are two vastly different experiences. Both usually involved the input and company of other women; women often shopped together whereas before they used to sew together. Shopping, however, involved more social interaction with others in public spaces. It was an easier task, and required minimal skill and labor. In the 1950s, shopping was considered more of a leisure activity than work to most women and people enjoyed strolling through town and “window-shopping” as much as anything. Making purchases from a store involved managing the household budget in different ways than sewing to save money. Now that there was more money, there was more to efficiently manage. According to historian Lu Ann Jones, Home Demonstration agents promoted “cultural ideas that encouraged farm women to mimic aesthetic standards set by middle-class women who lived in towns... [They] emphasized that farm women had achieved an important milestone when in appearance they could not be distinguished from town women.”¹⁶⁷ Clearly one of the best strategies for mimicking the appearance of “town women” was to shop at the same stores as they did.

¹⁶⁷ Jones, 19-20.



Figure 3.6. Four Riverview School students wearing homesewn dresses, May 1954. *Photo from personal collection*



Figure 3.7. Spring 1956, the last day of Riverview School. All four Creston residents wore store-bought dresses and white pumps. *Photo from personal collection*

New Behaviors

Shopping required a whole new set of social skills, like how to act in public, how to socialize appropriately and how to interact within a group. Shopping also emphasizes a specific set of material culture, because you had to have nice-enough clothing, heels and a hat to be seen in public shopping. Women did not go shopping in old work clothes, they wore their best Sunday outfit. Note that one had to have the right clothes to begin with, whereas before you could sit at home and sew in an old housedress and apron and it did not matter. Linda Henson, who grew up in rural Wilkes County, recounted her grandmother's new-found love for shopping:

She was all into going to a store and buying a dress in Winston Salem... and my grandmother didn't shop on side streets. She was a Main Street shopper... I guess you could say she was a little snooty in her way.¹⁶⁸

Her grandmother's disdain for stores located on side streets is puzzling but demonstrates strong opinions about what is considered to be proper and in good taste. To her, it was important that she not be seen shopping on secondary streets because that implied she was of inferior stock.

Ashe County native Virginia Roberts recalled that her grandmother shared similar beliefs about cultivating a respectable reputation in public spaces. Stylish, clean clothing and accessories communicated to passersby that these particular ladies understood the unwritten laws of fashion, appearance and social status. Mrs. Roberts explained the significance of wearing a hat to her grandmother:

Now my grandmother... didn't ever go to town without a hat on. She always wore her hat. There was a sense of pride or something that everybody didn't have.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Henson, January 26, 2010.

¹⁶⁹ Roberts, March 5, 2010.

This vague sense of pride regarding public appearances was partly due to the social preoccupation with public dress and formality. Rural women owned two types of dresses – a work or housedress and a Sunday or “better” dress. And if they only owned one store-bought dress, naturally it served as the nicer option, the one they wanted to be seen in. Reverence for ready-made fashion was apparent through the enthusiastic shopping rituals demonstrated by rural women.

In rural Ashe County, those who were used to wearing homesewn clothing viewed the first acquisition of a ready-made dress as a memorable occasion. Belle Sapp purchased her first store-bought dress not long after she was married in her early twenties:

I didn't have a dress from the store until I was I guess... it was probably in the [19]40s before I ever had a dress that was bought already made...¹⁷⁰

Joanne Kemp worked on other people's farms during the summer to save up money to buy her first ready-made dress. She remembered how motivated she was to expand her collection of store-bought dresses, after wearing clothing expertly sewn by her mother for most of her young life:

Considering out of how many clothes it takes to wear until I was 14 or 15 or something like that [that were homesewn]. [I] would pick beans in the summertime for people at 50 cents a bushel and would save up the money. I bought probably two or three dresses you know maybe one each summer from my money.¹⁷¹

Shopping as a habitual activity taught women how to discard objects because they were no longer stylish. Buying ready-made clothing was important to rural women because it symbolized participation with the modern consumer culture. And women who possessed the correct kinds of garments could be certain that they were

¹⁷⁰ Sapp, February 17, 2010.

¹⁷¹ Kemp, February 23, 2010.

in good social standing. As popular clothing became mass-produced and more widely advertised, the particular brand, or style of dress that was most appealing was clearly spelled out to department store consumers. Historian Jan Whitaker refers to this guidance as setting “parameters for normalcy while offering choices.”¹⁷² When women made clothing at home they were more engaged in decisions about the fabric, color and fit of the piece. In a culture where homesewing was prevalent, the “right” style or color was more ambiguous because it involved personal interpretation.

The decline in homesewing in rural Ashe County likely affected other aspects of women’s daily life. However, it is hard to measure the impact of individual technologies that changed how rural women acquired clothing. Telephones, better roads, electricity and a recovering economy all transpired over a brief period of time and contributed to the transition to a consumer economy. Therefore, women now had the ability to use electric appliances like sewing machines, washing machines and electric stoves if they could afford them. After installing hot and cold running water and indoor plumbing inside the home, rural families found them to be incredibly convenient. Certainly it reduced the time it took for family members to perform specific tasks, like baking cornbread. But did they have more leisure time? According to historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan, the standard of living went up, but so did the amount of labor required by women to run the home. Just as larger electric stoves enabled women to cook more elaborate and varied meals, it also increased expectations for what the meal should include. There were less vegetables to grow, but more to buy. And as women acquired bigger wardrobes, there was more

¹⁷² Whitaker, 4.

clothing to launder.¹⁷³ Time saved on one task was usually allocated to a new, different activity.

The eagerness by most rural Ashe County residents to embrace new ways of acquiring new goods demonstrates the willingness McCracken argues is characteristic of a consumer. It is displayed best by the transition from a culture where well-made, homesewn textiles and apparel were a mark of status and skill to one where mass-produced American soft goods were held in higher regard. These changes in dress and consumer habits accompanied other long-term social and cultural changes in the community, the state and the country.

¹⁷³ Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology*, 195.

CHAPTER FOUR: WHEN FEEDSACKS AND HOMESEWING

FELL OUT OF FASHION

“The frock your wife just couldn’t manage without last spring is the piece of rag she’s just given you to clean the car with” - Anonymous¹⁷⁴

After the Second World War, the improving economy brought greater access to modern technologies and consumer goods for average rural Americans. One of the most sought after purchases was a new car, which could be more easily produced now that supplies of metal and rubber were not required for the war. Yet for women who spent years economically sewing their own clothing or buying ready-made apparel with mandated yardage restrictions, the ability to purchase stylish garments by American designers was a new luxury. The new fashions were mostly designed by Americans for Americans, and defined a distinctly American style.¹⁷⁵

The quote that starts this chapter demonstrates the increasingly quick turnover of fashion trends embraced by many rural and urban women. In the quote, the woman still demonstrates reuse of the fabric by offering the “rag” to her

¹⁷⁴ “What they say about fashion,” *The New York Times* (1923-Current file), November 3, 1946, <http://0-www.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/> (accessed January 28, 2010).

¹⁷⁵ European designers, like Christian Dior, continued to influence American style but for the first time there was a distinct fashion industry in the United States.

husband for cleaning, but displays a different attitude about thrift – she is discarding the dress because it is no longer stylish, not because it is worn out. The bemused husband suggests that “last spring” his wife was fixated on the frock she “couldn’t manage without.” Yet her infatuation was only temporary. If the woman had made the dress herself she might not be so quick to discard it. When people make things, they have a different connection to them. They understand the work that goes into production and appreciate it more. It becomes an extension of them.¹⁷⁶

Manufactured goods, however well-designed, are distancing rather than engaging. People rarely wonder about the object’s origins and makers but tend to devalue the item.¹⁷⁷ Most modern women do not possess knowledge about how to remake or alter clothing.¹⁷⁸ As historian Susan Strasser puts it: “Fixing and finding uses for worn and broken articles entail a consciousness about materials and objects that is key to the process of making things to begin with. Repair ideas come more easily to people who make things.”¹⁷⁹ The stewardship of objects, particularly of clothing, becomes less typical as rural Americans make fewer objects and purchase more ready-made goods.

This new attitude about objects was common in the American conscience, despite efforts by artisans and artists to revive cottage and handicraft industries as early as the 1920s. Ashe County was no exception and rural residents usually embraced consumer goods that made life more comfortable when they became

¹⁷⁶ McLuhan, 57.

¹⁷⁷ Strasser, *Waste and Want*, 10.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

available. The growing affluence of rural mountain residents, and a desire to join the middle class is symbolized by the purchase of ready-made goods. Decreasing production costs made ready-to-wear apparel more affordable and contributed to a reduction in homesewing. These factors also led to the eventual decline in the popularity of reusing commodity textile sacks in rural Ashe County. Yet some rural women seemed hesitant to stray from the home production of clothing and continued to sew with textile bags and other fabric for cultural, rather than for economic, reasons. Consequently, the commodity bag industry in Western North Carolina and the Southeastern United States adapted to meet local needs.¹⁸⁰

A Changing Industry

Some of the major United States bag manufacturers began producing paper sacks in addition to cotton, osnaburg, burlap and denim bags during the Second World War. Bemis Bag Company, for instance, opened a new factory in St. Louis in 1944 to make special waterproof paper bags for the military to protect overseas shipments of gas masks, clothing, dehydrated soups and airplane parts.¹⁸¹ As demand for consumer products increased in the peaceful and prosperous 1950s, manufacturers wanted the least expensive packaging materials available. Having

¹⁸⁰ The reuse of feedsacks for homesewing may have continued in other rural parts of America on a small scale as it did in Western North Carolina. However, the author did not find any evidence to support this and most general histories of feedsack re-use argue that the trend dissipated by the 1950s.

¹⁸¹ Bemis: Celebrating 150 Years, 1858-2008, <http://www.bemis150.com/content/timeline.asp> (accessed March 20, 2010).

moved in the direction of paper, the trend continued after the war and demand persisted.

While many textile bag manufacturers experimented with paper bag technologies they also made an effort to prolong demand for cotton commodity sacks. A *Time Magazine* article dated 31 January 1949 explains that the “cotton men” were motivated to action by the recent success of manufacturers who only produced paper bags. In 1948, the National Cotton Council and other “cotton men” raised \$380,000 to secure their position in the bag industry. Bag dealers in key United States cities strategically bought used flour bags from bakeries, recycled them into dish towels and convinced retailers to sell them to urban consumers. Bakers continued to buy flour in higher priced cloth bags because the cost (after selling the empty sacks to bag dealers) made them cheaper than paper bags. And sales of flour sack dish towels were strong – the article reports that Manhattan retailer R.H. Macy & Company sold 30,000 units in ten shopping days. Urban grocery stores also began carrying 10 and 25 pound printed flour sacks, that could be used for simple homesewing projects like dish towels and pillowcases (see Figure 4.1).¹⁸² Cotton industry leaders reported that sales of cotton sheeting used for bags had more than doubled since the beginning of the effort.

¹⁸ It’s unlikely that urban women made adult apparel with the 25-pound sacks. If it takes approximately two to three 100 pound sacks to make an adult size dress, a woman would need to accumulate about ten bags of the smaller size.



Figure 4.1. Ten pound Robin Hood flour bag. *Photo by author*

Promotional efforts extended to maintain rural consumers as well, and newspaper articles from the 1940s and 1950s suggest that feedsack dress-making contests were held across the country at local and state fairs. Many of them were sponsored by the National Cotton Council of America and other special interest organizations. A 9 October 1949 article printed in *The Hartford Courant* described an unusual competition sponsored by the Poultry and Egg National Board. Rather than featuring rural women in garments created from poultry feedsacks, the contest called for costumes made *for* chickens, turkeys and ducks from the cloth.¹⁸³ There is no evidence that such an event was ever held in Ashe County but it is clear that feed and flour mills, bag makers and trade groups tried to reinvigorate the industry through clever marketing and promotions. It is likely that the cotton industry felt threatened by the increased consumption of synthetic fibers and blends in the 1940s

¹⁸³ "Board Conducting Contest to Reveal Best Dressed Fowl," *The Hartford Courant* (1923-1984); 9 October 1949, in ProQuest Historical Newspapers [database on-line], ASU library; accessed December 7, 2009.

and 1950s. In 1950 the ready-to-wear industry reported that 80 percent of New York's 3,700 dress firms used synthetics and blends.¹⁸⁴

In a Chicago *Daily Defender* article from 18 May 1959 titled "Fame Awaits Femme At State Fair Who Can Whip Up Best Sack Dress," a contest promoter sadly hints at the end of cloth bags: "This year's contest may well be highly competitive because the cotton feed stacks [sic] are becoming scarcer. Many feed manufacturers... have been discontinuing the use of the cotton bag and are using a heavy paper container."¹⁸⁵ While feedsack use began to decline in some parts of the country, the same was not true of rural Ashe County.

The End of an Era in Ashe County

American reuse of cloth sacks for homesewing was not widely advertised or documented after the 1950s, and general histories of feedsack apparel suggest that they faded into obscurity shortly thereafter. However, oral history interviews reveal a more complex story in Ashe County. In Western North Carolina there was a gradual decline in demand for cloth bags, compared to other parts of the country such as the Midwest. Textile bags were available as late as the 1990s in Western North Carolina. When Bob McCoy sold his store in Clifton in 1969 he was still doing a brisk business in printed feedsacks supplied by JP Green Milling Company and Bare & Little Company. This suggests a reluctance to change habits on the part of older women who found it convenient to sew with textile sacks.

¹⁸⁴ Richards, 31.

¹⁸⁵ "Fame Awaits Femme At State Fair Who Can Whip Up Best Sack Dress," *Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1956-1960)*, 18 May 1959, in ProQuest Historical Newspapers [database on-line], ASU library; accessed December 7, 2009.

Tommy Little, former co-owner of Bare & Little Company, speculated that it was not so much demand on the part of consumers but long-standing habits in the bag industry that kept cloth bags in use as packaging. His nephew Randy, who spent several summers working for the family business, estimates that in the late 1960s, dressprint sacks accounted for roughly 15 to 20 percent of overall sales. The rest of the bags were made from burlap. In his opinion, the dressprint sacks produced then were not as fashion-forward as bags made in the 1940s and 50s.

The best I remember there was pink and blue and yella with maybe white or blue flowers and typically it'd be a little buttercup, about a 3/8 inch size flower... Very utilitarian looking, it'd be a repeating pattern, you know maybe in a diagonal fashion. There may have been a star or some others but most of them were very simple patterns.¹⁸⁶

Randy, who graduated from Ashe Central High School in 1969 in an urban part of the county, could not recall his peers ever wearing apparel made from cloth sacks. He remembered that some of the young women sewed their own clothing, but they purchased store-bought material from the department store. The quality of the sack fabric probably declined in this period as reuse wasn't as common and the textile industry grew more complex. Feedsacks were still used for sewing but they weren't exactly fashion-forward.

By the 1960s, the largest United States bag makers like Chase Bag Company, Bemis Brothers Bag Company, Fulton Bag Company and Percy Kent Bag Company no longer made printed textile bags. That left open an opportunity for the creation of niche markets for other companies to supply feed and flour mills with cloth sacks for consumer packaging. As Ralph Naylor of JP Green put it:

¹⁸⁶ R. Little, February 17, 2010.

When demand for cloth bags fell off smaller producers were left making cloth bags and only smaller more independent farmers wanted them.¹⁸⁷

Mr. Naylor also explained how clever companies looked out for opportunities to recover from production mishaps:

Textile manufacturers who made a mistake or had poor quality goods would try to sell the material to bag producers.

Though textile manufacturers reported fewer mistakes in the second half of the twentieth century, this ability to remain flexible was crucial to the survival of small producers.¹⁸⁸

In the 1970s and 1980s, cloth bag manufacturers moved away from cotton material and began using synthetic fabric like polyester. In fact, JP Green sold laying mash, dairy feed and dog food in woven polyester bags with mostly juvenile prints like Spiderman and Ronald McDonald. Mr. Naylor was taken by surprise when he rejoined the family business in the 1990s and a grocer placed an order for what he called "Ronald McDonald bags." Though he was not clear on how consumers used the bags after purchase, clearly someone still preferred printed textile sacks. When the JP Green flour mill burned down in 2001, some of these bags were also destroyed. According to Mr. Naylor, there were other companies that used cloth bags for packaging since its widespread decline, although he was not sure if they were intended for homesewing. CC Ruth Company, located near Siler City, North Carolina recently sold animal feed in fabric sacks and up until several years ago, Kasco Company sold dog food in synthetic textile bags. Besides the obvious difference in quality and design in later cloth bags, larger changes in the

¹⁸⁷ R. Naylor, February 18, 2010.

¹⁸⁸ Richards, 31-2.

United States bag industry mimicked a shift in the American economy as production moved out of the county. Mr. Naylor put it succinctly:

All of these [new] bags are made offshore, probably in China whereas in the heyday of feed bag production they were American made.



Figure 4.2. A Christmas stocking made by Mrs. Naylor, grandmother of JP Green Milling Company President Ralph Naylor. The woven polyester material was originally a textile sack with a patchwork pattern sold by JP Green in the 1990s. *Photo by author*

Larger Economic and Cultural Trends

Ashe County's modern reinvention does not follow the same trajectory as urban regions, but economic and cultural changes had an impact on daily life. Changes in economic practices reflected changes in American culture, as post-war citizens embraced modernism. Increasingly there was better access to more goods for less money, and record breaking earnings reported by the ready-to-wear

industry in 1946 reflect that.¹⁸⁹ Throughout the prosperous 1950s, rural consumers increasingly relied on ready-made goods and apparel and demand continued to rise. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, American manufacturing centers relocated to less-developed countries seeking more efficient ways to save on production costs and pad the bottom line. A more sophisticated economy required better managed distribution systems to satisfy the targeted consumer market. These economic and social changes were apparent in Ashe County.

Among the most significant changes took place in agriculture. In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's passed the first New Deal act, affecting the federal government's role in American farming.¹⁹⁰ Ashe County farms saw subtle changes as the government became more involved in the industry, and certain aspects – like federally subsidized prices for fertilizer and lime – were received with mixed reactions, some less favorable than others. County agents, employed by the United States Department of Agriculture, visited local farms and suggested ways to more effectively modernize what was now viewed as a business venture. Though some efforts, like the Soil Conservation program, were largely beneficial to maintaining a successful farm, other "improvements" like mechanization and the encouragement of chemical fertilizers boosted productivity but ultimately changed traditional agricultural practices. Most farmers were probably interested in adapting to newer scientific ways of farming but there were still pockets of farms that resisted these changes.

¹⁸⁹ Richards, 30.

¹⁹⁰ Paul Volpe, New Deal Chronology, "New Deal Timeline," An American Studies Website, 2002, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/volpe/newdeal/timeline_text.html (accessed April 11, 2010).

According to Mr. Naylor of JP Green Milling Company, one of the most substantial changes affected chicken farming. A process called “integration” started when chicken farmers partnered with corporations in the 1960s. While the farmer still owned his land and chicken houses, the corporation supplied and owned the chickens and the feed. It was less expensive to deliver chicken feed in bulk to the farms and sacks weren’t needed at all. Furthermore, new union regulations limited the amount of weight members were required to lift to 80 pounds, completely banning the use of 100-pound sacks in this case.

Other market forces at work contributed to the decline of small grocers, and the economy became less localized. Before rural roads in Ashe County were paved and improved in the 1950s and 1960s, there were locally-owned country stores every couple of miles. Each store was more or less suited to local needs. There was not usually a lot of profit to be made but the arrangement generally worked well for storeowners and their neighbors. Yet as more people were able to purchase vehicles and travel greater distances, the small grocers lost a lot of business to larger store chains, like Kroger and Lowe’s Foods. Gwyn Hartsoe explained why he and his wife Mae finally closed their store in the early 1960s:

It didn’t make enough money for me to stay and fool with it. I had other work and we just closed it up. By that time supermarkets were beginning to come in. There was no money in it for the small grocery. You take today, these little stores, you can go to the supermarket and buy as cheap as they can get it wholesale. We done all right with the little store while we had it. We didn’t make no big money, but it run the family, in other words, bought our groceries and stuff.¹⁹¹

This trend has only accelerated over the last several decades and abandoned country stores dot the Ashe County landscape. Although several service stations, like the

¹⁹¹ Cooper, 133-4.

Creston Superette and Wood's Grocery, sell basic groceries to local residents, very few people rely on them for all of their foodstuffs.

Mr. Little and his family sold Bare & Little's wholesale grocery business in the 1990s because there were not many stores left to supply. They were all "closed out" as he put it, although some store buildings were adapted for other uses. Bob McCoy's store in Clifton is now owned by the Ashe County Outreach Ministries, a nonprofit group made up of volunteers from local churches. The organization hosts monthly fish fries to raise money for a food bank that provides 20,000 pounds of food a month to needy residents.¹⁹² And in Creston, Riverview School operates as a community center with a thrift shop, café, food bank, barber shop, gym and more.

These and other large-scale changes were evident in Ashe County, and rural residents were even more tied to national and international markets and distribution systems. Additionally, local manufacturing facilities in the furniture and textile sectors increasingly moved off-shore, leaving residents to find new work. Other factories used new technologies for automation, increasing productivity so much that fewer employees were needed.¹⁹³ This trend continues today although a handful of small, local factories remain open. This is significant in terms of the economic health of Ashe County and has a negative effect on the population as young people leave the region in search of better-paying jobs.

On the other hand, a new sector has revived the local economy in more recent years – tourism. Ashe County has successfully rebranded itself as a summer tourist

¹⁹² Ashe Outreach Ministries, <http://www.coxroost.com/aom/about.htm>, (accessed April 15, 2010).

¹⁹³ Mark Hopper, discussion with author, April 5, 2010.

destination, and often traditional folk ways are glorified and exploited. There has been a resurgence of nostalgia for rural mountain culture, story-telling, music and textile hobby arts like homesewing, knitting and quilting. Despite this interest in handicrafts, local Ashe County residents buy most of the goods they use.¹⁹⁴ Many continue to raise large gardens, can produce and keep horses and cattle. All, but a minority, have electricity, running water and indoor plumbing, most have a satellite dish and a mobile phone. The mountains have seen drastic changes over the course of the twentieth century, but there is still a distinct sense of place, and of community, in parts of Ashe County. It is the kind of place where when two vehicles meet on a curvy mountain highway, often the drivers wave to one another, even if they are strangers.¹⁹⁵

Conclusion

The phenomenon of feedsack fashion in rural Ashe County is evidence of when textile bag manufacturers sold mass-produced printed sacks to farmer's wives for re-use in homesewing projects. Although this involved sophisticated systems of marketing, production and distribution, rural women transformed the material into something distinctive, reflecting the maker's talents. In this way homesewers were not merely customers, they were creators and producers.

Cultures that make most of the objects they use have a different relationship to those objects compared to a society where the majority of objects are factory-

¹⁹⁴ However, some of them make a living selling handmade goods to tourists.

¹⁹⁵ Particularly if they both have Ashe County plates on the front of the automobile to show they are not tourists.

produced. How one acquired an object had an impact on how they felt about it, especially if one method involved a large amount of input and work and the other required almost none. Women's relationships with garments and home textiles changed when they began purchasing ready-made apparel rather than making them at home.

The growth of the American apparel industry after the Second World War fueled some rural women's appetites for new goods and experiences. There was a decreased need to be thrifty but the emphasis on style and fashion was heightened. The local department store played its part in shaping rural clients into consumers. It acted as tastemaker and retailer for aspiring middle class citizens. Shopping became a leisure activity for women, and many were tempted by the eye candy displayed in store windows.

The transition from customers to full-fledged consumers in rural Ashe County coincided with larger cultural shifts towards a more technologically advanced society. Rural residents demonstrated varied responses to improvements like telephones and electricity. Better roads gave people greater access to larger stores and more manufactured goods. New consumer products were integrated into daily life and were more likely to be standardized, homogenous objects devoid of personalization.

Rural Ashe County women negotiated these changes in various ways. In some form, all were reflected in modifications of dress and social attitudes about appearance. The transition from sewing a dress at home to purchasing a dress at a store makes individual preferences about style public. And as a woman selects the particular garment of her fancy from a rack of professionally-designed, mass-sewn pieces, her contribution to defining herself through dress changes. She no longer

“makes” a dress, she “chooses” a dress... unless she becomes a fashion designer.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Natalya Rachael Hopper was born in Boone, North Carolina, on June 9, 1982. She moved to Round Rock, Texas in 1990 where she attended school through age 16. In 1998 she moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and graduated from Carolina Friends School in 2000. Later that year, she began her undergraduate studies at Appalachian State University, where she took courses in Watauga College, then part of the Interdisciplinary Studies department. In 2003, after an inspiring visit in Hong Kong, Ms. Hopper transferred to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to pursue a Bachelor of Science degree in Textile Products, Design and Marketing, which was awarded in 2006. For several years after graduation, she worked in retail management, and at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In the fall of 2008, she accepted a teaching assistantship in Public History at Appalachian State University and began study towards a Master of Arts degree. In 2009, after winning the Thomas J. Keefe History scholarship, she was also chosen to participate in a new research mentoring program. She commenced work as a Graduate Research Associate under the direction of Dr. Ray Miller in the Theatre and Dance department, and was a charter member and Media Manager for the ASU Graduate Historical Association. The Master of Arts was awarded in May 2010. Several weeks after graduation, she was married and relocated to London, England, where she is pursuing a career in costume and textile history in the museum sector.

Formerly known as Ms. Hopper, Mrs. Buckel is a member of Phi Alpha Theta, the Costume Society of America, the UK Costume Society, the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Ashe County Historical Society. Her permanent address is 42 Carson Court, Pittsboro, NC. Her parents are Mark Hopper of Carrboro, NC and Regina McCoy of Pittsboro, NC.