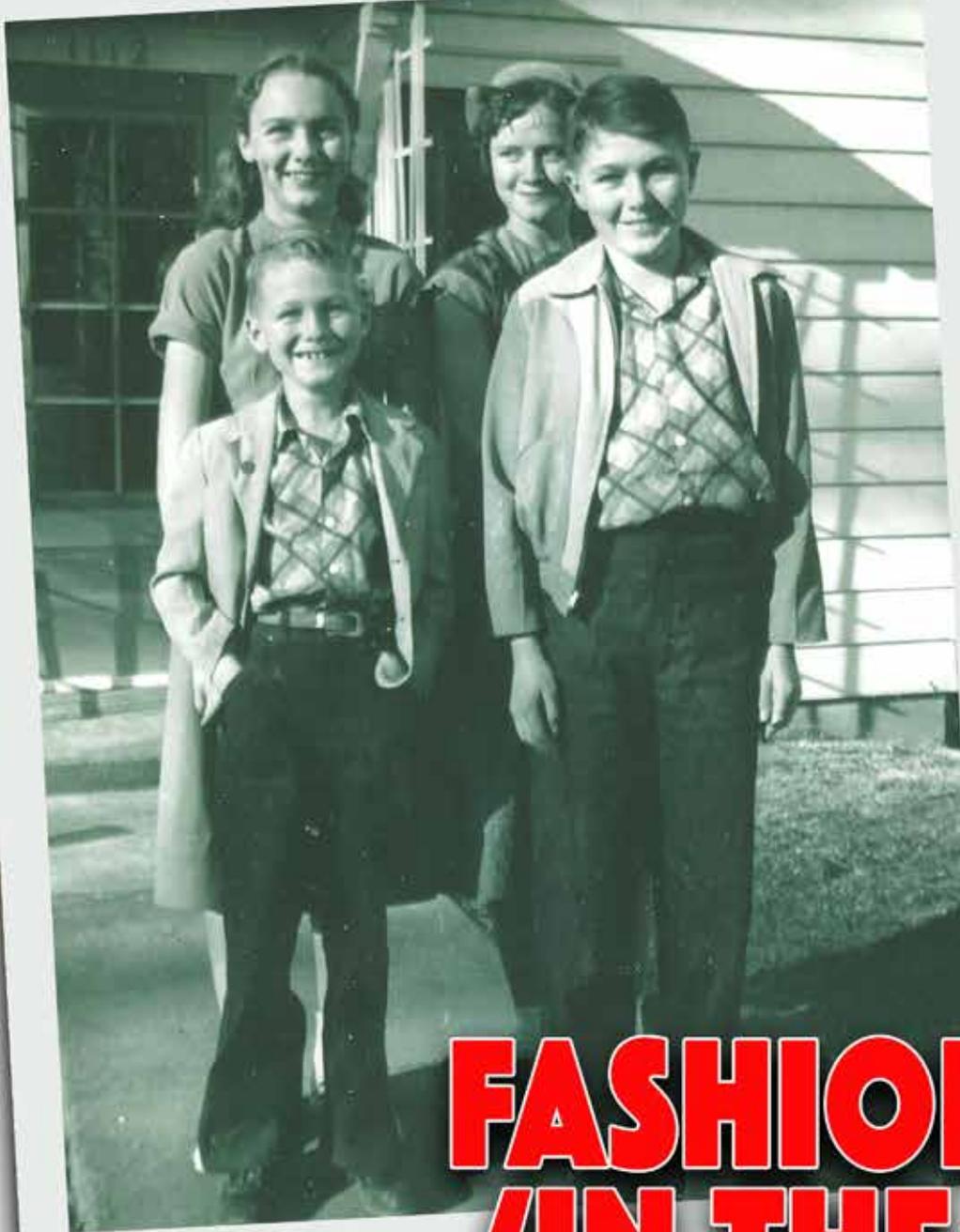


These boys proudly display their shirts made from feed or flour sacks.



FASHION WAS 'IN THE BAG'

During the Great Depression days, we all marched to the same tune — repair, reuse, make do, and throw nothing away. The “feed sack evolution” was one of ingenuity and clever marketing.

Now when I look back on the Great Depression days of the Thirties, I marvel at how my parents coped with the weather tragic incidents, and the lack of money. It was a time of hard work and

frugal habits. We had to make do with what we had, wasting nothing. Most took thriftiness to new heights of creativity during this period of time.

Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks during that period of time was providing clothing for my older sister and me. We both were growing fast, and soon our garments had sleeves too short, tightness across the shoulders, and no more hem “to let down.”



I, being the youngest, often wore Mother's "cut down" dresses, my sister's outgrown dresses, and my aunt's made-over dresses and coats.

During this time in the Thirties, we were all influenced by the clothing that such stars as Lana Turner, Paulette Goddard and Judy Garland wore in the movies. Of course, we could not come close to the glitz and glamour of those Hollywood styles. However, with discarded clothing and flour and feed sacks, we created our own unique styles.

Years ago, grain, flour, seed and animal feed were transported in tins, boxes and wooden barrels which at the time, leaked. Bulky, heavy, and difficult-to-handle, these containers were replaced with heavy canvas bags. However, when synthetic fabrics such as rayon came into use, the North East Mills began weaving inexpensive cotton fabric. At



Mrs. Norval from Auburn, Nebraska sewed this sunsuit made of feed and flour sacks, for her son. It is on display on the doll.

this time, while cotton bags replaced canvas bags. A 50-pound bag measured 24 by 38 inches; a hundred pound bag was 39 by 46

inches. In addition, the invention of a stitching machine in 1846, that stitched tightly, assured no spillage.



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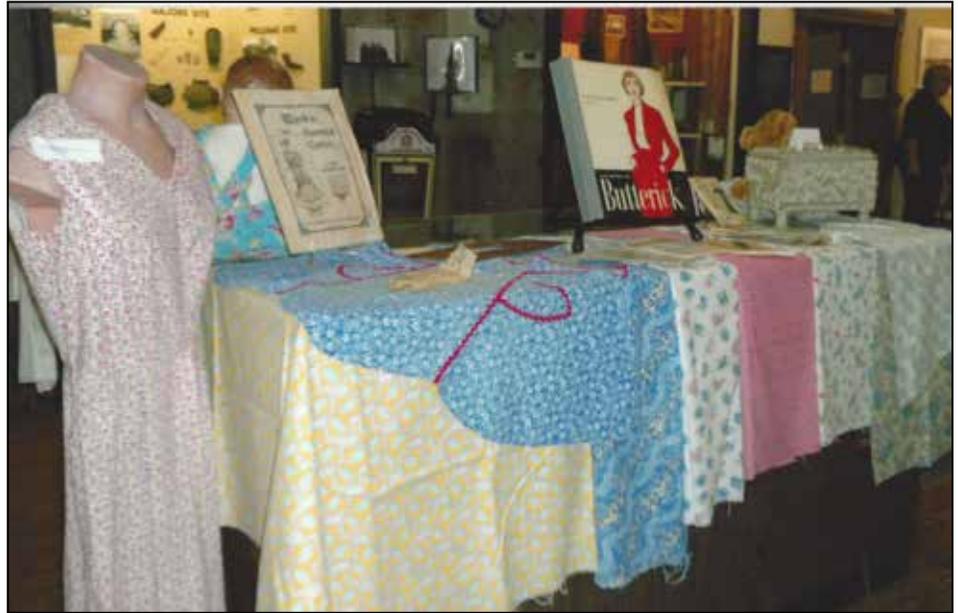


Aware of widespread poverty in the '30s, suppliers realized some women were using the white cotton sacks to make clothing for their families. Utilizing marketing skills, they replaced the white cotton bags with a variety of solid and printed bags. Designers were hired to make interesting, attractive prints.

These sacks, commonly called "chicken linen," "pretties" or "hen house linen," represented a great source of utilitarian fabric for all kind of household items. Once on the market, women chose flowered, plaids, striped, polka dot and other patterned materials for towels, diapers, dish cloths, quilts, dresses, skirts, blouses, underwear and other necessities.

Making dresses of this material was perhaps its most popular use. My mother used three identical bags for each dress. Using colorful rickrack, bias tape, buttons, ribbon, lace and other items for decoration, these sack-dresses became unique creations. Women of that time used ingenuity and cleverness displaying a sense of fashion with domestic thrift.

All the ladies who sewed profited from bag manufacturers who include "How-to" pamphlets



The dress and apron on the table with folded feed sacks, show the ingenuity of those sewed years ago.

in the sacks. Also, magazines and pattern companies, realized the popularity of feed sack projects, often published patterns to encourage novel use of the prints.

One farmer complained that his daughters were always "on hand" when he purchased feed. They selected the sacks for their dresses. He said that he often removed several 50-pound sacks to pull out a sack that matched others they had chosen.

One lady recalls going to the mill with her dad to look at feed sacks and dream about a new

dress. When it came time to select sacks, she knew exactly the floral print sacks she wanted. Mother and daughters copied fashion trends by studying the Sears & Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogs.

One farmer complained: "I don't know why women worry so much about their clothing. With their bodies, they would all look good in sacks." This man probably unaware of his prophetic statement.

One problem was that labels were difficult to remove. Some women soaked the sacks in kero-

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This simply made dress is fashionable with its wide collar and gathers at the waist. This dress and these feed sacks have been displayed in the Nemaha County Museum in Auburn, Nebraska.

sene some rubbing the printing with unsalted lard, others laundered the sacks using lye soap. Later they used Fels-Naptha soap and chlorine bleach.

The following directions were given to help remove ink.

“Soak over night in soap suds and cold water. Then wash thoroughly in warm suds until ink has been loosened. Rinse well and if necessary boil for ten minutes to restore the natural whiteness of the cloth.”

Later, manufacturers began using easy-to-remove paper labels.

Because of competition, some manufacturers created border prints for pillowcases, scenic prints, patterns for dolls and stuffed animals, doll cloth patterns, and quilt blocks on the material. Even the strings on these sacks were used for knitting and crocheting.

By 1941, 31 textile mills were manufacturing sacks. In 1942, it was estimated that three million women and children of all income levels were wearing feed sack garments.

One women told this story: She had one dress, made from feed

sacks, to wear to school. After arriving home each afternoon, she washed and ironed that dress so

she could wear it to school the next day.

Of course, in addition to ladies' dresses, skirts and blouses, other garments were made. Some wore slips and panties made of feed sacks. One young woman, who was with her boyfriend, tripped and fell. With her skirt hiked up, the boyfriend saw the printing on her panties . . . “Mother’s best.”

One woman related that when she was a small girl, her mother made her a pair of “feed sack” panties with a pocket sewed on them. She was so proud of the panties that she showed everyone those panties. Fifty years later, she was worrying about her lack of decorum.

Some women were better with a needle or sewing machine than others. Some simply took the straight pieces of fabric and



Two brothers, wearing shirts made from feed sacks, are dressed ready to travel to town.



used elastic casing for the waistline. The sides were stitched together with the bottoms and tops hemmed with openings for arms.

The men were not left out. They often had shirts and shorts made of feed sacks. Boys, going to school wearing feed sack shirts, were often the object of jokes.

There were some drawbacks to items made from feed sacks. Because there was no “perma-press” clothing at the time, dresses, especially, had to be sprinkled, rolled, and then ironed. Women spent hours in kitchens over hot irons that they had heated on their wood-burning stoves.

Some of the most lasting items made with these feed sack were quilts. Much material used for quilts first saw service as dresses or curtains. Quilts, especially, left a legacy for succeeding generations. We often point out quilt



This bear wears a “feed or flour sack” sunsuit made for a girl by her 10-year-old brother in 1953.

pieces, and recall that they were at one time a special dress.

During World War II, it was considered patriotic to use feed sacks because much cotton fabric was being used in the construction of uniforms. Pattern companies began making patterns for feed sack clothing. Later, when these were no longer available, women used other materials for their sewing projects.

In the 1950s, paper and later plastic bags replaced many of the cloth bags, as these bags cost less. At this time, sack manufacturers tried to tempt customers back with cartoon-printed fabrics, from Buck Rogers and Davy Crocket, to Alice in Wonderland and Cinderella. But through advertising campaigns, manufacturers convinced women that the change was best. Today, it is only the Amish who still use cotton

sacks for their dry goods.

The Great Depression years were times of good things, difficulties, problems, joys and inspirations. Certain items found in Grandma’s trunk — dresses made during that time, a quilt, and an occasional lone tea towel — remind us of days gone by. Those days of economic depression taught us thrift, sharing, and the ability to make things out of what was available. ■

An advertisement for Midwest Mixer Service. At the top, a white truck is shown in a feedlot. Below it, a large black cow with a red tag numbered '989' is the central focus. The text 'When feeding is Important...' is written in a red, stylized font across the cow. Below the cow, two trucks are shown: a green one and a white one. The 'HARSH' logo is visible. At the bottom, the 'MIDWEST MIXER SERVICE' logo is prominent, along with contact information for Dodge City and Scott City. A list of services and a 'KUHNS FEED-GATE' logo are also included.

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