



# From Feed Sacks to Dresses: Upcycling Consumer Goods Packaging During the Depression in the United States

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18th Annual City Tech  
Poster Session



Photo Credit: Flour Sacks, Margaret Bourke-White/LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images

About 100 years before the Great Depression in the United States, a change in the way that certain goods were transported—from wooden barrels to cloth sacks—had an unexpected impact on women’s fashion. During the Great Depression in the U.S., the unemployment rate exceeded 20 percent and nearly half of U.S. banks failed. Facing economic hardship, women found creative ways to use the humble feed sack (sacks filled with corn meal, flour, or other grains) to make clothes for themselves and their families.

*Companies that manufactured cotton feed sacks observed customers using the sack fabric for clothing. These companies responded by changing their packaging to fabrics with bright colors and prints, which helped attract women to specific client brands.*

In addition to this new marketing strategy, companies also began to print their sack logos with water-soluble ink, removing the stigma attached to using commercial packaging materials to make clothes. Eventually, national sewing contests were organized by trade organizations to demonstrate women’s skills and ingenuity fashioning feed sacks as well as the creative marketing strategies of bag manufacturers and their customers who were mainly flour and feed mills.



Photo Credit: The National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, Washington DC, United States, Smithsonian Institute, Feed Sack Dress.

The use of feed sacks for clothing extended beyond the Depression and into the 1950s. Even though paper bags were replacing cloth bags, some packaging companies and trade associations tried to extend the popularity of cloth feed sacks. This brown print dress was made by Mrs. G. R. (Dorothy) Overall of Caldwell, Kansas, in 1959, for the Cotton Bag Sewing Contest sponsored by the National Cotton Council and the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association.



An ad for Bemis Brothers Bag Co., one of the largest suppliers of cloth feed sacks in the United States. Bemis Bros. maintained its lead in cloth feed-sack production until paper bags started to replace the cloth bags after WWII. (Bemis Co. Archive, Minneapolis, MN)



Photo Credit: Denise H. Sutton, Clay County Old Jail Museum, Feed Sack Fabric Display, Hayesville, NC

**Upcycle:** to recycle something in such a way that the resulting product is of a higher value than the original item; to create an object of greater value from a discarded object of lesser value.

**Recycle:** to reuse or make available for reuse. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Each feed sack consisted of approximately three yards of fabric and was sewn on one side, the bottom, and the top with heavy thread, which was often saved to reuse in quilting. Initially, fabric used to make cloth bags for animal feed was cotton osnaburg, heavier in weight, looser in weave, and lower in thread count than that used for flour, sugar and salt (Connolly, 1992; Cook, 1990; Nickols, 1988). As animal feed was larger in size than the fine granules of flour, sugar, and salt, it was not necessary to use a higher quality fabric in the packaging. In contrast, flour, sugar, and salt were likely to be packaged in high thread count, tight weave cotton percales (Cook, 1990). Cotton was the primary, but not the only, fiber used to manufacture commodity bag fabric. While it was the most prevalent, rayon, nylon, flax, and kenaf were also used (Newcome & Nesselroad, 2000).

Connolly, L. (1992). Recycling feed sacks and flour bags: Thrifty housewives or marketing success story? *Dress*, 19, 17-36.  
Cook, A. L. (1990). *Identification & value guide to textile bags*. Florence, AL: Books Americana Inc.  
Nickols, P. L. (1988). The use of cotton sacks in quilting. *Uncoverings: the Research Papers of the American Quilt Study*, 9, 57-71.  
Newcome, B. T. & Nesselroad, J. S. (2000). Fairmont State College textile bag collection. In F. Valentine West Virginia quilts and quiltmakers: Echoes from the hills. Pp260-267. Ohio University Press: Athens, OH.



**EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN!**  
While clearly not the same as upcycling feed sacks into dresses, fashion brands such as Anya Hindmarch—a British accessories company—realizes the benefits of upcycling plastic bottles into tote bags. The red tote bag in the photo above was made using 32 plastic bottles and sells for approximately \$700. Photo Credit: Anya Hindmarch website, 2020

“As a young girl, when we went to the feed store, my sisters and I would search through the stack of feed bags to find matching prints. We wanted enough fabric to make a dress.”  
– Judith H., Little Rock, Arkansas, August, 2019, author interview.

“Miss Caroline seemed unaware that the ragged, denim-shirted and *flour sack-skirted* first grade, most of whom had chopped cotton and fed hogs from the time they were able to walk, were immune to imaginative literature. Miss Caroline came to the end of the story and said, “Oh, my, wasn’t that nice?”  
– *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee