

# Cloth Seed Corn Sacks Tell Rural History

If you saw your last name on a cloth seed bag, you would probably stop to check it out. That's what happens when Ron Kelsey takes bags from his collection to the Minnesota State Fair. In the early 1900's, farmers had many choices of seed corn, and they often knew who grew it and where it was grown, because the name and town were on the bag.

The retired high school ag teacher started collecting seed bags 25 years ago, in part to preserve his family's history. His parents grew seed corn for two different companies in Mountain Lake and Sacred Heart, Minn. The family also entered corn at the State Fair, which 72-year-old Kelsey has attended every year except one since he was 7.

"I started wondering what happened to all those cloth bags," he says, recalling how he got started collecting. He finds them reasonably priced for \$2 to \$10 at flea markets, auctions and antique stores. His criteria are that they be cloth and meant for seed corn, not feed. Most are from small companies in Minnesota but he has also picked up seed bags from other states.

"One from Wisconsin had a photo of the seed corn grower's little girl in overalls sitting on a pile of corn," Kelsey says. He knows because her family told him when they saw the bag at the Minnesota State Fair display.

Growers sent their design ideas to one of three printing companies in the Twin Cities, who came up with the final graphics for the bags. By the late 50's, all bags switched from

cloth to paper or plastic because of cost.

That was a loss to frugal homemakers who used the sacks for dish towels and even underwear. Some of the bags include directions on how to get rid of the color (boil them in water overnight). Kelsey says dirty sacks are more valuable than faded sacks, so he advises people not to wash bags if they want to sell them. It's also nice if the bags have tags that list germination information, which dates the cloth bags.

With people buying them for home décor - and to frame if they have their own names on them - some bags now sell for as much as \$30 to \$50 on eBay. Kelsey saw one with Abraham Lincoln's picture sell for \$500 at an auction.

His favorite bags are the ones for his parents' corn and an unused bag for an open-pollinated Land O' Lakes variety in the late 20's. He's always looking for a few specific varieties. For example, he doesn't have a bag from the Trojan Seed company, which was a big company in Olivia, Minn. Recently, he picked up two flax sacks at an antique market, claiming Windom, Minn., to be the "Flax Capitol of the World".

"That was exciting," he says, "because when I was young, and we sold our flax to Windom, that was indeed their claim to fame."

He's also looking for a cloth bag from the Garst Seed Company in Iowa.

"I want that bag because Nikita Khrushchev



Ron Kelsey and some of the cloth seed corn bags from his collection. "In the early 1900's, farmers knew who grew their seed corn and where it was grown because the name and town were on the bag," he says.

came with President Eisenhower to that farm to buy seed in the 1950's. My brother was with them on that farm, and Khrushchev took a bag of seed back to Russia," Kelsey says.

The Lambertson, Minn., collector has had requests to purchase his bags from people in various states, as well as from Russia, England and Canada. For the most part, he wants to keep the collection intact and pass it on to a museum. Four rural Minnesota museums have already expressed an interest.

The 250-bag collection is an important part of Kelsey's family history and agriculture history. He points out that the bags are proof of how law was defied.

"In 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt standardized the size of sacks into a 50-lb. bag and a 100-lb. bag," Kelsey explains. "This might have worked for flour and feed, but not for grain, as farmers wanted their grain in measurements of bushel weight, and all grains have a different bushel weight. Manufacturers of the bags did not abide by the president's standards, but made bags by farmers' requests. My seed corn sacks hold 56 lbs., the bushel weight of corn, and most of the corn sacks are marked with that weight."

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## Adult Coloring Books Have A Country Theme

Coloring isn't just for kids any more. Two Vermont artists recently published an adult coloring book called "The Country Comforts Edition" featuring rural drawings with tractors, flowers, birds and old pickups.

Liz Capen is a multi-media artist and author of Shaftsbury Hollow Tractor Olympics (featured in FARM SHOW, Vol. 36, Issue 3). Her rural Bennington, Vt., neighbor, Everley St. Peter, is a graphic and multi-media artist. The two spent a lot of time creating art together last year after Capen was laid up after a foot injury. They simultaneously came up with the idea to draw pictures for a coloring book.

Many of the drawings are partially based on photos each has taken.

"We printed them in black and white to look at the lines," St. Peter explains. That helped inspire the overall design format.

"The drawing with tractors came from three different photos," Capen notes.

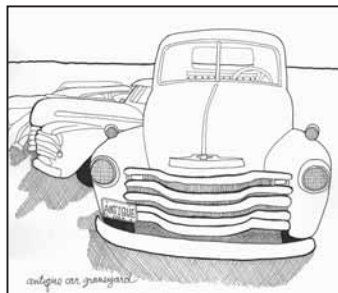
Printed on one side of 70-lb. paper, each of the 50 drawings can be cut out of the book and framed. The artists were mindful of colorists who like to use "all the colors in the crayon box." Or, colorists can use watercolors and pencils as well as gel, glitter or micron pens.

Some designs, like a limb of apples, are simple; and others, like a covered bridge, are more detailed.

"We questioned people about what they liked. One thing they said was that sometimes they want something simple after work. Or, they want something complicated so they get lost in the picture," St. Peter says. The result, they hope, is a book that appeals to everyone, including men and senior citizens.

They've found interest in the U.S. printed \$14.99 book at local bookstores and gift shops. Groups sell them for fundraising.

The books are available for purchase through each artist's website. And, there will likely be more books in the future. The



Two Vermont artists have published an adult coloring book featuring rural drawings with tractors, flowers, birds and old pickups.



The 50 drawings are printed on heavy paper so they can be cut out of the book and framed.

artists are going through photos for ideas and deciding on a theme for Volume Two.

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## Amazing Farm Wrench Book

Everything you ever wanted to know about farm wrenches is likely to be found in one or another of P.T. Rathbone's series of Farm Wrench Books. In a project that never ends, Rathbone keeps finding more wrenches to cover.

"I did the first volume and immediately started getting corrections and additions," says Rathbone. "When I finished Vol. 2, the corrections and additions were already coming in for Vol. 3."

Rathbone sells Vol. 1 for \$60, Vol. 2 for \$50 and Vol. 3, recently finished, sells for \$55. All prices include postage. All three volumes are available as a set for \$155.

"If you are interested in farm wrenches, you need to start with Vol. 1," advises Rathbone. "The following volumes don't repeat information found in the preceding volumes. They only correct it if a mistake was made."

FARM SHOW purchased Vol. 1 to get a firsthand look, and the material covered is impressive. Entries include photos or drawings of wrenches issued by long-gone farm implement companies. Rathbone also offers histories of the companies whenever possible.

Companies covered go far beyond the standard tractor and field implement companies. The book includes wrenches from buggy, silo, cream separator, windmill and gas engine companies. However, that doesn't begin to describe the variety of wrenches or companies in the book.

Rathbone notes that there were thousands of companies making farm equipment over the past century and a half. The challenge is finding information on what they produced and the special wrenches used to work on them.

Rathbone covers 783 companies in Vol. 1. Some, like the Aetna Company, had one wrench that lasted for 10 years and folded. The flyer reproduced by the company history shows the mower and reaper or "Aetna Self Rake" mower.



P.T. Rathbone keeps finding more wrenches to include in his series of Farm Wrench Books.

Compare that to the 8 pages of wrenches from International Harvester Co. The historical record starts with the American Harvester Co. forming in 1890 and ends with the sale to Tenneco, Inc. in 1985.

The companies started or acquired by John and Charles Deere and partners and their wrenches cover 11 pages. They include Deere & Mansur, who developed a rotary corn planter in 1877.

If the main book is interesting, the supplement is a must have for collectors. It consists of lists of wrench part numbers and the company names that go with them. The last section of the supplements includes names of companies and parts numbers of wrenches sold at major auctions in the 1990's. Each successive volume offers an updated price guide, as well as additional companies and wrenches.

Vol. 3 is only 259 pages compared to the Vol. 1 with its 500+ pages. However, it includes 1,200 new wrenches and the histories of another 239 companies. With Vol. 3, the supplement really stands out. It matches 6,000 wrenches with their companies and gives an updated price list.

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