



Mattress making was a family affair.

“In No Way a Relief Set Up”: The County Cotton Mattress Program in Kansas, 1940–1941

by Virgil W. Dean and Ramon Powers

It was a community project, explained Wilma Ferrick when describing her participation in the Clay County, Kansas, Cotton Mattress Program. She was ten years old at the time, living with her divorced mother and sister on the rented farm of her grandparents, who had lost their own 160-acre Cloud County farm during the Depression. Betty Bowdine Vawter resided on a farm in Osage County. Her future mother-in-law arranged for Betty and her son Clarence Vawter to make mattresses as part of the Shawnee County program. Thus, the young couple started married life with a new mattress instead of a secondhand one. Thelma Allendorf recalled skipping school to help her family make two mattresses at the fire station in Oskaloosa, Jefferson County; a decade later, while living in north Topeka, they lost the mattresses in the 1951 flood.¹

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The authors owe special thanks to all of the cotton mattress program participants who generously shared their memories with us by letter and telephone, but we are especially grateful for several county extension agents, including Mae Farris True, Anna Scholz Klema, and Ethel Avery Griffing, who provided many of the photographs used in this article. Early on invaluable assistance was received from Marlene Hightower of the Cooperative Extension Service, Kansas State University, who helped us locate material and publicize the project. Of benefit also was a reception for Vera Ellithorpe held at the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka on July 21, 1996. Blair Tarr, museum curator, also helped locate and acquire one of the 1941 cotton mattresses for the museum collection.

1. Wilma Ferrick, Tecumseh, Kansas, March 15, 1994; Betty Bowdine Vawter, Carbondale, Kansas, March 16, 1994; and Thelma Allendorf, March 29, 1994, and Allendorf to Ramon Powers, February 28, 2007, telephone interview notes and correspondence, Cotton Mattress Program, in authors' personal research files, Lawrence and Topeka, Kansas.

The mattress-making activities that these women remembered were a part of the County Cotton Mattress Program adopted by the state of Kansas in 1940. It was one of the many federal government programs launched to address the persistent problems of agricultural overproduction, in this case the vast surplus of cotton in the American South, and a need for improving living standards in rural areas by providing mattresses to those Americans still classified as poor. Government programs designed to address agricultural production and commodity prices have been widely acknowledged, studied, and accepted as a permanent feature of the farm economy.² However, New Deal programs aimed at improving households and homemaking are less understood and little appreciated. This is especially true of the mattress program, enacted when the Depression seemed to be coming to an end.

Well before the onset of the Great Depression, the Kansas Cooperative Extension Service, established under the authority of the Smith–Lever Act of 1914, engaged in programs to enhance people’s lives by educating women on various aspects of better homemaking, including things to look for when purchasing a mattress.³ The disparity between urban and rural life became increasingly apparent during the first three decades of the twentieth century, attracting the attention of Progressive-era reformers, such as those of the Country Life Movement, and national legislators, who focused on loan programs, cooperative marketing solutions, and commodity prices.

2. David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928–1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982); Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981); Michael W. Schuyler, *The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Middle West, 1933–1939* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1989); Craig Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890–1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 235–89.

3. Earl H. Teagarden and Robert L. Johnson, compilers, *The Kansas Cooperative Extension Service: Extending the University to the People, 1914–1989*, Part 1 of 4 (Manhattan: Kansas State University, 1991), 32, see online at www.ksre.ksu.edu/historicpublications/Extension_History.htm; Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900–1940* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), especially 143–46; Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Dust in Southwest Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 54–58; and Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies & The Modern Farm Woman, 1890–1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 76–77, 175, who gave some attention to “home industry programs” championed in the 1920s by home demonstration agents.

At the same time, extension professionals reached inside the farm home to promote domestic economy and to help those rural people who had, for example, known nothing but “shuck or straw mattresses” all their lives. During the 1930s a myriad of New Deal initiatives, not the least of which was Rural Electrification, enhanced these ongoing Extension Service efforts.⁴

With the close of the Depression decade in 1940 and the commencement of an unprecedented prewar federal defense buildup, millions of Americans went back to work and saw their standards of living rise accordingly. The national economy was on the upswing, and Kansas participated in the boom. The state received its fair share of government contracts, and in 1940 and 1941 cities hosting defense plants bustled with commercial activity.⁵ The future even bode well for the state’s major industry—agriculture. Traditionally the first to suffer and the last to recover in times of economic hardship, Kansas farmers endured three especially bad years before the long awaited recovery blossomed in 1941. That year, according to the State Board of Agriculture, “Kansas farm production . . . was about 16 percent above 1940 and well

4. Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Jefferson County* (Extension Division, Kansas State College), 31, Reel 154 (Kansas Historical Society, MF 7684), Record Group 33, Extension Service Annual Reports, General Services Administration, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, RG 33). For this project, which began in the spring of 1994, we interviewed or corresponded with some three dozen Kansans or former Kansas residents who had, as adults or children, been involved with the County Cotton Mattress Program. Many related experiences similar to that of a Jefferson County resident who said at the time, “This will be my first mattress to sleep on in my life[;] I have used shuck or straw mattresses all my life.” Flora M. Work Faunce of Denison, Kansas, recalled on March 17, 1994, that her family “slept on a straw mattress during the depression” and they “were thankful” for the one they made in 1941; Anna M. Pierson of Holton, who wrote to us on March 15, 1994, said that her family previously “had Feather beds.” Wilma Ferrick’s family had slept on old feather bed mattresses that they had made many years before. Telephone interview notes and correspondence, Cotton Mattress Program, March–April, 1994, in authors’ personal research files. See also Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies & The Modern Farm Woman*, 13–64; Edmund de S. Brunner and E. Hsin Pao Yang, *Rural America and the Extension Service: A History and Critique of the Cooperative Agricultural and Home Economics Extension Service* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1949); Roy V. Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970); Wayne D. Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-five Years of Cooperative Extension* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989).

5. Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007); R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 303–19.



Ethel Avery (Griffing), Home Demonstration agent, Cherokee County, stitching a mattress tick. Photograph courtesy of the Morse Department of Special Collections, Kansas State University Libraries.

the spring of 1940. Through a letter dated April 27, 1940, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Grover B. Hill invited Congressman Charles L. South of Texas, and by implication the entire membership of the U.S. House of Representatives, “to attend a mattress-making demonstration . . . in the patio of the Administration Building, Department of Agriculture, commencing

Cooperative Extension Service Historical Files, University Archives, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. The authors found no documentary evidence about African American participation in the mattress program. The number of black farmers in Kansas was in decline by 1940, as it was throughout the region, but a few persevered near Nicodemus in Graham County and elsewhere—the 1940 U.S. Census enumerated 65,000 black Kansans; classified 13,000 of them as rural; and found only 681 African American farmers. One might assume that a few of these folks made mattresses, but whether or not their mattress-making experience was a segregated one is to date unknown. Chester Owens of Kansas City reported in March 2014 that the two elderly African American women he asked had not heard of the program. However, Frederick Meenen, a retired Clifton, Kansas, farmer who lived in both Wyandotte and Barber Counties during the early 1940s, recalled that “a few blacks participated.” Frederick Meenen, March 9, 1994, and Chester Owens, March 18, 2014, phone conversations with Ramon Powers; for census data and an insightful discussion of the rural black experience, see Debra A. Reid, “‘The Whitest of Occupations’? African Americans in the Rural Midwest, 1940–2010,” in J. L. Anderson, editor, *The Rural Midwest since World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 204–54.

Monday, April 29, and lasting through Tuesday, May 7.” The demonstration, wrote Hill, represented “one feature of the Department’s programs for increasing the domestic consumption of surplus cotton.” The assistant secretary pointed out that the cotton and ticking used in the production of these mattresses were being made available under the Agricultural Adjustment Act’s section 32, which provided funding for “domestic-consumption” programs, and the Department of Agriculture Appropriation Act of 1940. “The mattresses,” Hill explained, “will actually be made in the same manner that they are being made in the States” already participating in the program: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Under these various programs “any farm family whose cash income is \$400 or less may qualify for a mattress, which they make themselves with the assistance of various agencies of the Department.”⁹

Congressman South inserted Assistant Secretary Hill’s letter in the *Congressional Record* and added that “all of us who have given serious study to the question of surplus farm commodities agree that the problem is one of underconsumption rather than of overproduction.” Because American agriculture was part of the global economy, of course, this “underconsumption” problem had international implications. It was linked to world events: the war in Europe, which disrupted transportation lines and textile production, and developments in Japan, which switched from foreign cotton to the cheaper Japanese-produced rayon. As the global market shrank, government and farm officials in the United States sought alternatives abroad and at home. During the past few years, explained Congressman South in May 1940,

9. 76th Cong., 3rd sess., *Congressional Record, Appendix*, 86 (May 3, 1940), pt. 15, 2661; “Amendments to the Agricultural Adjustment Act, 1935,” in Wayne D. Rasmussen, ed., *Agriculture in the United States: A Documentary History*, 4 volumes (New York: Random House, 1975), 3:2304. Section 32 was attached to the Agricultural Adjustment Act as one of a group of amendments adopted on August 24, 1935. It “appropriated for each fiscal year . . . an amount equal to 30 per centum of the gross receipts from duties collected under the customs laws . . . [for use by the secretary of agriculture] to (1) encourage the exportation of agricultural commodities and products . . . ; (2) encourage the domestic-consumption of such commodities or products . . . ; and (3) finance adjustments in the quantity planted or produced for market of agricultural commodities. The amounts appropriated under this section shall be expended for such of the above-specified purposes, and at such times, in such manner, and in such amounts as the Secretary of Agriculture finds will tend to increase the exportation of agricultural commodities and products thereof, and increase the domestic consumption of agricultural commodities and products thereof.”



Cotton Mattress Program officials believed the family was the ideal work unit. Because the undertaking involved hard, heavy labor, at least two people were required to work on each mattress at the Wabaunsee County program, and it was noted that “as a rule the best made mattresses were those on which at least one man helped.” For this same reason, perhaps, Stevens County planned to require that each family be represented at the “work unit” by a husband and wife, mother and older son, or a father and an older daughter. The Hayhurst family, pictured here fluffing the cotton, constructed their mattress at a site in Bird City, Cheyenne County. Photograph courtesy of the Morse Department of Special Collections, Kansas State University Libraries.

there had been “many campaigns to encourage the use of various articles” requiring cotton in their production, but the Cotton Mattress Program promised even more benefits because of the substantial amount of cotton needed to manufacture a single mattress. The congressman estimated that it required at least fifty pounds of cotton to make one mattress; thus “ten mattresses . . . dispose of an entire 500-pound bale of cotton, and at the same time a local want is supplied.”¹⁰

In 1940, when Congressman South’s remarks appeared in the *Record*, the cotton producing states of the South

were the main participants in this peculiar dual-purpose relief *and* surplus disposal program. Indeed, the Texas congressman and others believed “the greatest need for these cotton mattresses is in the sections of the country where a large surplus of cotton is produced.”¹¹ This also may have been true of similar programs administered by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s. These were production programs, however; mattresses and comforters were manufactured by agency

10. 76th Cong., 3rd sess., *Congressional Record, Appendix*, 86 (May 3, 1940), pt. 15, 2661. For efforts to dispose of surplus, see Edgar H. Omohundro, Nathan B. Salant, Maurice R. Cooper, and L. D. Howell, *Domestic Cotton Surplus Disposal Programs*, Miscellaneous Publication No. 577 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, U.S. Department of Agriculture, September 1945); Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865–1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984); Irvin M. May, Jr., “Cotton and Cattle: The FSRC and Emergency Work

Relief,” *Agricultural History* 46 (July 1972): 401–13; see also Edward S. Miller, *Bankrupting the Enemy: The U.S. Financial Siege of Japan before Pearl Harbor* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2007).

11. 76th Cong., 3rd sess., *Congressional Record, Appendix*, 86 (May 3, 1940), pt. 15, 2661. According to the authors of *Century of Service*, “The Federal Surplus Relief Corporation had bought raw cotton and arranged for it to be made up into clothing, sheets, and mattresses during the latter half of 1934, the objective being to provide work for the unemployed and supplies for the needy, and to reduce cotton surpluses.” Gladys

employees for distribution to the needy: "The mattresses were given to the most destitute of the relief homes, where people were sleeping on the floor, on sacks of moss or straw, or on mattresses so soiled and infected as to be unsanitary." The FERA program produced some 1,320,000 mattresses and over three million quilts and comforters between April 1, 1934, and July 1, 1935. In Kansas alone WPA workers manufactured 20,197 mattresses during the first four years of its effort, 1935–1939. Thus, the mattress (and comforter) production efforts of the FERA and WPA benefitted the citizens of many states outside the South as well, and the Cotton Mattress Program of 1940–1941 quickly gained in popularity.¹² During fiscal year 1942, forty-six states, including Kansas, implemented the program—rural families made nearly 1.25 million, fifty-pound cotton mattresses and over one million, four-pound cotton comforters. Fiscal years 1941 and 1942, according to the chief of the Agricultural Adjustment Agency (AAA), who considered the program a great success, saw the production of over 5.5 million cotton mattresses and comforters.¹³

The mattress program of 1940–1941 fit well with the long-standing preference for work relief provided to those "deserving poor" who were willing to help themselves if given the opportunity. In fact, many preferred to view it as a very different kind of program. "It is to be understood that this is not a relief program in any way," said Pauline Crawford, Stafford County's home demonstration agent. "It is simply a means of helping the cotton growers use the surplus cotton." In the same vein, the *Hugoton Hermes* opined: "The Cotton Mattress Program is in no way a

Relief Set Up because [unlike previous programs that gave bedding to needy families, here] the family carries out the construction of the mattress and thus earns the mattress in the same way as the farmer who is cooperating with the Conservation Program" earns his subsidy.¹⁴

In Kansas the implementation of the Cotton Mattress Program also reflected a traditional commitment to local option and control.¹⁵ Kansas counties decided individually whether or not to participate in the program that was administered locally by the Extension Service, a well-established agency with a presence in all but two of the state's 105 counties. Overall, acceptance of the Cotton Mattress Program was impressive and widespread: a total of seventy-nine counties participated, and, one county, Chautauqua, transferred materials to another county because of inadequate work centers for making mattresses. The state Extension Office sent Anna Scholz (Klema) to administer the program in the two counties—Gove and Trego in far western Kansas—that had decided they "really DIDN'T want extension programs, but DID want to make the mattresses available to their people."¹⁶

Home furnishings specialist Mae Farris True, a home demonstration agent in Oklahoma before moving to Kansas in 1939, took charge of the Cotton Mattress Program in Kansas the following year. She was entrusted with the task of taking the program to the counties in part because she was the only state staff member who had seen and participated in the

L. Baker, Wayne D. Rasmussen, Vivian Wiser, and Jane M. Porter, *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Centennial Committee, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1963), 185.

12. U.S. Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Work Division, *The Emergency Work Relief Program of the FERA, April 1, 1934–July 1, 1935* (Washington, D.C., 1935), 65; Federal Works Agency, U.S. Work Projects Administration, *Physical Accomplishments Reported for July 1, 1935 through June 1, 1939* [1939]; see also Martha H. Swain, "The Forgotten Woman: Ellen S. Woodward and Women's Relief in the New Deal," *Prologue* 15 (Winter 1983): 201–13; Nancy E. Rose, "Production-for-Use or Production-for-Profit?: The Contradiction of Consumer Goods Production in 1930s Work Relief," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 20 (Spring 1988): 46. As Rose demonstrated, FERA production-for-use projects, such as its early manufacture of cotton mattresses for distribution to relief clients, was often challenged by the private sector, which accused the government of having an unfair advantage in the marketplace. This issue is addressed in somewhat more detail below.

13. U.S. Department of Agriculture, AAA, *Report of the Administrator of the Agricultural Conservation and Adjustment Administration, 1942* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 17; U.S.

Department of Agriculture, AAA, *Report of the Administrator of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, 1941* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 34. According to Omohundro, Salant, Cooper, and Howell there were a total of five separate mattress programs; they were "in operation during the fiscal years ending in June of 1936, 1939, 1940, 1941, and 1942." Omohundro, et al., *Domestic Cotton Surplus Disposal Programs*, 16

14. *Hugoton Hermes*, July 25, 1941; Pauline Crawford quoted in the *St. John News*, St. John, Kansas, March 27, 1941.

15. See Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "Hard Times, Hungry Years: The Failure of Poor Relief in Southwestern Kansas, 1930–1933," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 15 (Autumn 1992): 154–67.

16. Anna Scholz Klema, "Memories of the Cotton Mattress program in Kansas—1940–1941," unpublished typescript, copy in authors' personal files; *Gove City Republican-Gazette*, March 20, 1941; Annual Report of the Home Furnishings Project, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941*, 43, 118, Reel 147 / MF 7677, RG 33. After Gove and Trego Counties, Klema helped finish the program in Bourbon County. See Anna Klema, Russell, Kansas, to Virgil W. Dean, December 28, 1996, and accompanying mimeographed copy of *Kansas Annual Report, 1942, Bourbon County*, "Cotton Mattress Program," authors' personal files. According to the previously cited "Summary of Cotton Mattress Program in Kansas" (1941), the program was sponsored by the Extension, in cooperation with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Surplus Marketing Administration, and the Farm Security Administration.



Regional workshops were conducted throughout the state in the late fall of 1940 for county extension agents and the representatives of local governmental agencies who were to be involved in the program. Workers, pictured here fluffing the cotton, learned how to construct a mattress from start to finish so that they could effectively take the program back to their counties. Photograph courtesy of the Morse Department of Special Collections, Kansas State University Libraries.

production of a mattress. "The program was introduced to the Kansas Extension Service by a representative from the United States Department of Agriculture [USDA]," explained True in 1940. "The Administrative Staff felt it could well serve the low income families of the state. The program was then presented to the state specialist staff . . . [the Farm Security Administration (FSA), and the Triple-A] by the U.S.D.A. representative and a Home Management Specialist with the Oklahoma Extension Service who had supervised the cotton mattress program in that state."¹⁷

Although a few of the men involved objected, commenting, according to True, that "it would be a

waste of time and effort on the part of the county staff," the program was approved by a majority of the staff. Implementation of the program required the involvement of various governmental agencies. "The F.H.A. [*sic*, FSA] and county welfare staffs assisted in notifying their clients of the program and encouraged them to take part," True recalled. "The A.A.A. [staff members] were responsible for getting the cotton and ticking to the counties. Most of the cotton used was shipped in from the Compress Storages in Oklahoma."¹⁸

One-day, regional workshops were conducted throughout the state in the late fall of 1940 for county extension agents and the representatives of local

17. Mae Farris True, Amarillo, Texas, to Ramon Powers, January 28, 1992; Annual Report of the Home Furnishings Project, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941*, RG 33. See also Teagarden and Johnson, *The Kansas Cooperative Extension Service*, Part 2 of 4: 70.

18. True to Powers, January 28, 1992. In her 1992 correspondence, True referred to the role of the Farmers Home Administration (FHA), but in 1941 its predecessor, the FSA, was the federal agency involved. The FSA was abolished, and the FHA established to absorb its duties,



The ticking was rolled up wrong-side out and then unrolled over the bed of fluffed cotton.

governmental agencies who were to be involved in the program. At these workshops, participants discussed ways to inform the public of the program and how to proceed in signing up those who were eligible; the local welfare supervisor and the FSA staff were responsible for signing up applicants. The AAA procured the necessary cotton and cover material and, working with the county agent, determined how much cotton was required. Workshop participants also discussed the availability of space and equipment for the actual production of the mattresses.

"Supplies were ordered as each county determined their needs. We were very fortunate in that we had only the best of materials with which to work," True recalled.

The cotton was Grade A., the best quality and the ticking or cover was made of a hundred percent cotton (10 oz.) stripped fabric. The ticking was stitched into a box size cover 54" X 72" X 10", a standard double bed size. The depth of ten inches was reduced when the rolled edge was put around the top and bottom edges after the cotton was in the tick. The mattress was tacked every 12–18 inches with heavy waxed cord to hold the cotton in place keeping it from shifting. These mattresses were

in 1946. See Edward L. and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Encyclopedia of American Agricultural History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), 115–17.

very good. To revive a cotton mattress all that was necessary was a day in a good warm sun, four to six hours on one side, turn and repeat on the other.¹⁹

According to the *Hugoton Hermes*, a good mattress was essential to a comfortable bed, and "one of the oldest and most popular types" was the "easily constructed" cotton mattress. When completed, reported the *Hermes* on July 25, 1941, the family will have "earned a piece of household equipment valued at from \$10 to \$12." At a cost of about \$1.25 to program participants—a fee that helped defray the expense of paying an extension supervisor and the costs for mattress twine, needles, and incidentals—this was a mighty good deal.²⁰

Reaction to the proposed program varied from county to county. Many agents and potential participants accepted the concept only after they fully understood the nature of the program and had seen that quality mattresses really could be constructed in this manner. At a February 1, 1941, meeting in the office of the Sumner County Farm Bureau, the home demonstration agent explained the Cotton Mattress Program to the twelve people in attendance. Those present apparently were the members of the executive board of the extension service. According to the report submitted by the county agent, "after a few comments by the board members it was voted that the cotton mattress program not be adopted and that it was not suited to this county. The program, therefore, was never undertaken in this [south central Kansas] county."²¹ But it was accepted in neighboring Harper County to the west and Cowley County to the east, and far western Wallace County acquired approximately

19. True to Powers, January 28, 1992; the *Hugoton Hermes*, July 25, 1941, provided a brief description of the process as did the *St. John News*, May 15, 1941. See also, booklets, "Make A Mattress" and "Care Of The Bed," Annual Report of the Home Furnishings Project, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941*, 74, RG 33.

20. *Hugoton Hermes*, January 10 and July 25, 1941; *St. John News*, May 15, 1941; *Emporia Gazette*, April 2, 1941. The *Hermes* gave the cost to the family as \$6.50; this is almost certainly a mistake. Other sources put the figure at about \$1.25 per mattress. On March 27, 1941, the *News* reported that the "total cost of the mattress and comforter will be \$1.25," while the *Gazette* gave the cost to the family as \$1.50. Vivian Beougher of Gove County remembered a \$2.00 application fee for each mattress.

21. Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Sumner County*, 110, Reel 159/MF

12,000 pounds of cotton (4,000 pounds of this eventually was transferred to Sherman County) that went into the production of 158 mattresses and 185 comforters. To the state extension service, county officials reported: "The Cotton Mattress Program has benefitted a large number of low income families in the county and is perhaps one of the best methods of using up surplus commodities in Wallace County." One hundred and two families in the county reportedly benefitted from the program. Stafford County, which called its project the "Better Bedding Program," anticipated at least 120 applicants; officials ordered enough cotton and ticking for 240 mattress and residents completed 204.²²

In Leavenworth County opposition virtually vanished when residents understood the Cotton Mattress Program. "The [county] agent discussed it and got people to understand that it was not a relief program," reported the county's home demonstration agent; "so many people who first hesitated about applying on that basis, were much happier when they understood it to be an educational and self-help project." Once adopted, the need became quite evident: "The agent was surprised at the number

7689, RG 33. Founded in essence as a support organization for county extension agents in the mid-1910s, the farm bureau movement and subsequently the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) enjoyed a quasi-governmental connection with the United States Department of Agriculture and state agricultural colleges for many years, despite the changing nature of the national and state organizations. The symbiotic Extension Service-Farm Bureau relationship became politically untenable during the 1940s. However, as the powerful AFBF clashed with several other farm organizations, most notably the National Farmers Union, over policy issues at the national level, formal "divorce" proceedings were launched in Congress by 1949. See "Divorce of Extension from The FB," *Kansas Union Farmer*, February 1949; Charles M. Hardin, *The Politics of Agriculture: Soil Conservation and the Struggle for Power in Rural America* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952); John Mark Hansen, *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919-1981* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Christiana McFadyen Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal: A Study of the Making of Nation Farm Policy, 1933-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962).

22. Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Wallace County*, 89, 156, Reel 159/MF 7689, RG 33; Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Stafford County*, Reel 159/MF 7689, RG 33; Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Harper County*, Reel 153/MF 7683, RG 33; Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Cowley County*, Reel 151/MF 7681, RG 33; *St. John News*, March 27, 1941. On January 23, 1941, the *News* announced that 120 applicants would be needed before the program could be implemented. Officials ultimately certified 300. See also the *Stafford Courier*, Stafford, Kansas, January 16, 1941.

In alphabetical order, the leading counties in terms of family participants were Bourbon (364), Butler (625), Gove (308), Jefferson (297), Johnson (229), Leavenworth (255), Logan (261), Osage (289), Smith (664), and Trego (544). Annual Report of the Home Furnishings Project, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, 46-48, RG 33.*

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Earlier New Deal ventures into mattress making had been curtailed because of opposition from some mattress manufacturers, but the 1940-1941 program apparently was not regarded as a threat. Crook Furniture in Hutchinson ran an advertisement in the Hutchinson News Herald, February 11, 1940, for a one-day-only sale on their "50 lb. All-Cotton Mattress." Their "innerspring mattresses" sold for \$19.95. A year later, Lawrence's Miller Furniture Company offered "The New Beautyrest" for \$39.50.

of people who said this was the first new mattress they had ever had in their home." Some households reportedly had one mattress; the rest of the family slept on "straw or shuck ticks or pads." As of October 31, 1941, 255 families had made 383 mattresses.²³

A Lyon County agent used a regular "With the County Agent" column in the *Emporia Daily Gazette* to announce,

23. Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Leavenworth County*, 121, Reel 155/MF 7685, RG 33.

promote, and justify the mattress program. On March 12, 1941, the column began: "You're spending one-third of your life in bed. Eight hours out of every 24 are needed for sleeping. It's small wonder, then, that most of us are particular about having a comfortable bed." The interest in "the 'cotton mattress program,' as it has been called," proved this was just as true for Kansans as for other Americans. Creatively, the agent went on to link good bedding to America's ever-increasing concern for national defense: "We're hearing a lot about nutrition and national defense. Nutrition and general health in all its aspects—and the need of restful sleep is one of these. These new mattresses that will soon be completed in many sections of Kansas will help promote restful sleep, and provide comfortable sleeping quarters for thousands of persons—thus helping to carry on our national defense program."²⁴ By implication then, participation in the Cotton Mattress Program was one's patriotic duty. Whether out of patriotism or simply need, the program was well received in Lyon County, which conducted a second round of mattress making in late October 1941.

Without dissent, Stevens County officials decided early in January 1941 that the county would sponsor the program. A cotton mattress committee was formed consisting of the welfare director, the supervisor of the local FSA, and the county extension agent, Z. W. Johnson. The committee determined that all WPA and Farm Security clients were automatically considered eligible for participation; the former would apply directly to the welfare director and all FSA clients would apply through Farm Security. The county committee would pass on the eligibility of all other interested people in the county who could apply through the Farm Bureau office or with their extension agent. "Any low income rural family which has had for the latest current year a net income of [not greater than] \$500.00 plus \$50.00 for each member of the family in excess of four persons, is eligible," reported the *Hermes*. A family could acquire one mattress for each two members up to a total of three mattresses.²⁵

Stevens County sent a delegate to Garden City's two-day cotton mattress school in preparation for conducting its mattress program. In May the county agent and a county road patrolman went to Ulysses to secure tables to be used in the construction process, and in early July a

group of women was invited to the welfare office to assist in making the cotton ticks. All the ticks were completed prior to starting the mattress construction work on July 16. According to the report submitted by Stevens County:

The mattress construction work was carried out in a large broomcorn warehouse where the cotton mattress tables were provided. There were from 9 to 10 construction tables in operation at once. One hundred and twenty mattresses were constructed in 12 days. Here again the mattress applicants were called in, so many each day, to complete their mattresses. On several days, there were more than 50 men and women assisting in the construction of mattresses.²⁶

The program also was well received in Wabaunsee County. In a report to the state extension office, officials concluded that "the people in the county believe the program is a fine opportunity for the low income families which include a large proportion of the people in this county. At first many people thought the program was only for those receiving relief checks or having WPA jobs. Through publicity, letters, and personal contacts this error has largely been corrected." The report continued, "in general the business people have approved of the program and have been very cooperative, especially in loaning scales for weighing cotton."²⁷

This sensitivity to the program's reception by the private sector is telling. Program officials were no doubt conscious of the fact that opposition to such government production programs had in the past and easily might in the future emerge if the project were to be seen as a threat to the interests of private manufacturers and dealers. Contemporary newspapers advertised new, store-bought mattresses for considerably more than a dollar or two: Crook Furniture in Hutchinson ran a one-day-only sale on their "50 lb. All-Cotton Mattress"—a \$6.50 value for only \$3.88. Their "innerspring mattresses" sold for \$19.95. A year later Lawrence's Miller Furniture Company offered "The New Beautyrest" for \$39.50. Even on the low end, however, qualifying mattress program

24. *Emporia Daily Gazette*, March 12, 1941, item headed "COTTON MATTRESS PROGRAM"; *Emporia Daily Gazette*, December 26, 1940; *Emporia Daily Gazette*, March 17, April 2, and October 29, 1941,

25. *Hugoton Hermes*, January 10, 1941.

26. Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941*, Stevens County, 91, Reel 159/MF 7689, RG 33; *Hugoton Hermes*, May 30 and July 25, 1941.

27. Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941*, Wabaunsee County, 106, Reel 159/MF 7689, RG 33.



Columbus conducted its mattress program at the Cherokee County fairgrounds. Other communities used warehouses, schools, fire stations, and other large open spaces that might accommodate up to a dozen special 57 by 75 inch construction tables.

participants found the prices prohibitive. Earlier studies had shown “that low income families do not constitute an effective demand factor,” and thus the program could be conducted “without hurting established commercial production and distribution of these products.” In fact, “it was considered probable that the program . . . might lead to a greater future commercial consumption.”²⁸

In certain counties the supervisors were paid. In Wabaunsee County, “when the program was started the supervisors were offered 75c for each mattress completed. Upon recommendation from the state chairman this rate was changed and the supervisors were offered \$4.00 a day.” The supervisors—Mrs. Edith Weeks of Belvue, Mrs.

L. E. Spangler of Harveyville, and Mrs. Alyoe Tomlinson of Eskridge—had full responsibility for supervising the families making the mattresses and securing receipts for the mattresses completed and the names of each individual who worked on a mattress each day. In Stafford County, Mrs. Josie Grubaugh, who had attended the training school in Pratt, was hired as superintendent of the program at fifty cents per mattress.²⁹

The public was made aware of the opportunity afforded by the Cotton Mattress Program in a variety of ways. In Wabaunsee County, for example, all welfare and FSA clients were informed. News releases were sent to nine newspapers in or near the county, and “Notices were sent to all school teachers to send home with their students.” According

28. Omohundro, et al., *Domestic Cotton Surplus Disposal Programs*, 16; Rose, “Production-for-Use or Production-for-Profit?,” 48–51. Some earlier government ventures into mattress making had been curtailed because of mattress manufacturers’ opposition, but the 1940–1941 program apparently was not regarded as a threat. For mattress ads, see *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, April 15, 1941; *Hutchinson News-Herald*, February 11, 1940, and March 4, 1940.

29. Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Wabaunsee County*, 105, Reel 159 / MF 7689, RG 33; Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940,



Fluffing the cotton appears to have been a community activity at the work site in Cherokee County.

to the extension report, the “latter method” was quite successful; it “evidently reached many families not contacted by any other methods.”³⁰

Mattress construction required approximately a day and a half, according to the Stafford County report. It took about a half day to make the tick and approximately another full day to complete the mattress. The latter involved hard labor. At least two people were required to work on each mattress at the Wabaunsee County program, and it was noted that “as a rule the best made mattresses were those on which at least one man helped.” For this same reason, perhaps, Stevens County planned to require that each family be represented at the “work unit” by a husband and wife, mother and older son, or a father and an older daughter.³¹ All of this reflected a traditional gendered attitude toward the division of labor, of course, but also the program’s emphasis on family and community involvement.

In Gove the “work unit” was the basement of the grade school. Vivian Beougher, a long-time county resident, clearly recalled her experience with mattress construction in an essay titled “We Made a Mattress.” First, she was

given instructions and patterns and the blue and white striped ticking material for the mattress. Then, wrote Beougher, “A woman helped me cut the cover out so it would be done properly and sent me home to sew it [the ticking] up.” Sewing machines were provided for those who did not have them. “After sewing it all up except for one end,” Beougher continued,

I and my husband took the cover back to the Grade School where the supervisor weighed out 50 pounds of cotton from the bale and showed us to a large table on which we were to build our mattress. The table was the size of the full-size mattress (54” X 72”) with the outline marked on the top. She showed us how to separate the layers of cotton, gently, so as to fluff it and lay it on the table evenly in the required size to fit the cover.

I have no idea how many tables there were, but you can’t imagine how the lint off that cotton filled the air and got into your eyes and ears and lungs and hair, with all those people tearing and fluffing all that cotton all over the large room. This was all compounded by the formaldehyde used to treat the cotton bales to kill the bugs that eat the cotton. . . .

[T]he cover, which was rolled down, wrong side out, [was] then rolled up over the cotton. Next you sewed the open end with strong thread and a needle. Now you were given a baseball bat to beat the mattress into shape and help to fluff the cotton more. . . . After this was done, you took a large curved needle and strong cord string and sewed the roll around the edges on both sides.³²

When the “tufting” was completed, the mattress was ready to take home and, after several days of warm sun and fresh air, the new mattress was ready for use.

Beougher had no desire to relive her mattress making experience, but noted that “we did enjoy the nice warm mattresses for many years. Sure did beat corn shucks or fresh wheat straw

to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Stafford County*, Reel 159/MF 7689, RG 33.

30. Annual Report of the County Agent, November 1, 1940, to October 31, 1941, *Kansas Annual Report, 1941, Wabaunsee County*, 105, Reel 159/MF 7689, RG 33.

31. *Ibid.*; *Hugoton Hermes*, January 10, July 25, 1941; see also the *St. John News*, May 15, 1941, which included four photos of mattress construction along with a brief description of the process.

32. Vivian Beougher, “We Made a Mattress,” unpublished manuscript. See also the *Hugoton Hermes*, July 25, 1941, which gave the dimensions of the special construction table as 57 by 75 inches. At St. John in Stafford County, the ticks were sewn in a “local sewing room” under the supervision of Mrs. Margaret Carrier. *St. John News*, May 15, 1941.

with a few beards that stuck through the mattress cover that I had experienced at home as a child." If properly cared for, reported the *Hugoton Hermes* on July 25, 1941, these mattresses might last ten to fifteen years.³³ Although individual circumstance and experiences varied, Beougher's memories of the Cotton Mattress Program, which she and many others had participated in years before, were typical. All readily admitted the need, as they related their particular story, and took pride in their accomplishment—a quality mattress that was appreciated and used in the home for many years.

Historians have, for the most part, overlooked the County Cotton Mattress Program, but for many mattress makers the memories remained vivid. Although one could not classify it as a major social program in Kansas or elsewhere, it was promoted statewide and conducted in seventy-nine of Kansas's 105 counties. Generally, where the mattress program was implemented in Kansas it exceeded expectations, with the number of eligible participants surpassing all estimates in many localities. In Ford County, for example, the "County Agent was sure there was not anyone in that county that would qualify for a mattress," remembered Mae Farris True. "It turned out there were four hundred fifty mattresses made in the county." In all, nearly 12,000 needy families across the Sunflower State participated; they constructed more than 18,000 mattresses and 10,000 comforters.³⁴

As mentioned above, there was an effort to sell the mattress program as *not* "a Relief Set Up" in many of the counties where it was adopted and, in others, an apparent reluctance to admit to the need for such assistance. But the need did exist. In 1941, with the nation on the verge of total war and defense industry cities such as Wichita bustling with economic activity, many poor rural farm families, as well as those in small towns and cities across America, had yet to emerge from the Great Depression. This peculiar—one could also say imaginative—project represents an interesting way in which national programs, designed to deal with a special economic problem (a price-depressing surplus of cotton), were targeted to

address a seemingly unrelated social need and bring relief to the lower-income population in many Kansas counties. "The cotton mattress program," observed department historians in the USDA's *Century of Service*, was "initiated to increase the domestic consumption of cotton and to raise the standard of living of low-income farm and city consumers."³⁵ This county-level program also embodied the self-help approach of certain other New Deal social programs. Materials and know-how were provided by the government, but participants had to pay a nominal enrollment fee and provide the entire labor of making the mattresses. When the wartime shortage of cotton ticking caused the mattress program to be discontinued, virtually everyone considered it an unqualified success story.

Although home demonstration agents such as Pauline Crawford of Stafford County insisted at the time and in retrospect that the Cotton Mattress Program was "not a relief program in any way," participants were indeed the beneficiaries of government largess. To deny this fact is to engage in a bit of self-deception, but it is a self-deception that Americans have practiced for more than two centuries, as national and state governments subsidize businesses and corporations, farming and ranching operations, and any number of other private and public sector interest groups and activities. Like the myriad of work relief programs that characterized the 1930s, the Cotton Mattress Program offered a government-subsidized benefit—a new mattress and comforter—to qualifying participants who paid a nominal fee and provided the necessary labor to complete the project. The participants' labor and fee did not, of course, cover the true costs of the cotton and related materials or staff required to organize and conduct the program—by definition, this was a form of relief. But regardless of how participants and organizers sold or perceived the program, the results were positive, at least in the short term, as they were with many of the New Deal's relief programs. Even critics of the federal government's "make work" initiatives admitted years later that the County Cotton Mattress Program made life a little better for those Kansans who participated. [KH]

33. Beougher, "We Made a Mattress"; *Hugoton Hermes*, July 25, 1941.

34. "Summary of Cotton Mattress Program in Kansas," 1941.

35. Baker, et al., *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 185.