

Sweet dreams of Alabama cotton mattresses

By Rebekah Davis

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In 1974, John Denver released an instant-classic song about a bed that was “nine feet wide, and six feet high, soft as a downy chick,” the “Grandma’s Feather Bed” of childhood memories. You may not know that the song was penned by Gadsden, Ala., native Jim Connor, originally as a poem to his own Grandma, who ran a boarding house in Birmingham. But you might guess that the bed was more likely stuffed not with “the feathers of forty-eleven geese,” but with Alabama cotton, like tens of thousands of mattresses across the state that were carefully stuffed and sewn by the ladies of the home demonstration clubs in the late 1930s.

Like the rest of the state, Limestone County was still reeling from the Great Depression in 1937, when the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation launched its mattress-making program. The program was designed to address a great irony of the time: In the midst of one of the greatest cotton surpluses of all time, cotton prices had dipped so low that cotton farmers themselves couldn’t make enough money off the sale of cotton to buy cotton itself.

As the Tuscaloosa News of Feb. 28, 1939 stated: “In homes where the father has spent many a day behind a mule in a cotton patch, only to lose money on his crop because of the low ‘surplus’ price paid for his cotton, the family is sleeping on mattresses made from straw or corn shucks or hay that has been borrowed from the winter feed supply of one or two mules.”

The FSCC addressed this problem by supplying ticking to families at no charge, as well as 45 pounds of “scrap” Alabama-grown cotton per mattress. The only cost was about 30 cents per mattress, for tufts and twine.

County agents trained ladies at mattress-making centers, and in Limestone County, that meant that ladies in home demonstration clubs from French’s Mill to Salem turned out for what amounted to huge mattress-making parties. At the end of the day, the ladies would pose beside – and on top of – huge stacks of mattresses worthy of the Princess and the Pea.

The same scene was repeating itself in counties all over the state. By 1940, 58,490 Alabama women had made 34,762 mattresses, and cotton farmers and their families were no longer sleeping on corn shucks.

And odds are, at least one or two of those cotton beds would “hold eight kids and four hound dogs and a piggy we stole from the shed.”

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