

WORK DRESSES WORN BY A SELECTED  
GROUP OF RURAL WOMEN

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By

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Bachelor of Science

Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College

Stillwater, Oklahoma

1927

Submitted to the Department of Household Arts

Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

1941

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The writer wishes to thank Miss Dorothy Saville, Associate Professor, Department of Household Arts, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, for her constructive criticism and helpful suggestions in this study.

Appreciation is extended to the Home Demonstration Club women of Caddo County whose contributions made this study possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

Consumers today may buy in the market all or most of their clothing. Whether work dresses, which are those usually worn only around the home for house work or work out of doors, are bought ready-made or made at home, the consumer is confronted with the problem of getting the best value for the money spent.

It is not always easy for women to find dresses they wish to buy at the price they are able to pay. It may also be difficult to find dresses possessing the qualities desired in the proper sizes in the stores which are accessible. On the other hand, it may often be difficult for manufacturers and sellers to find what consumers want and to provide the desired goods at the prices the majority of consumers can pay. Assistance can best be given to women in their selection of work dresses when certain information regarding their living conditions, buying practices, and standards for selection is known.

In home demonstration work, the writer has had an opportunity to see many of the clothing needs and problems of rural women. In this study an effort has been made to find where rural women in Caddo County, Oklahoma, bought their work dresses, whether they wished to buy them ready-made or to make them at home, the prices they wished to pay, the points they considered important in work dresses, the difficulties they encountered in making choices, and the factors which influenced their selection.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Very few reports were found which dealt with the choice of work dresses worn by rural women. In working with the rural women, the writer had an opportunity to become aware of the many problems which confront women in the selection of ready-made work dresses and the selection of patterns and materials from which to make their dresses.

Consumer choice in work dresses and yard goods is dependent upon information received from advertising, labels, and sales persons.

In a study of clothing expenditures of families at high income and low income levels, Coles<sup>1</sup> reported that the lower income families most frequently purchased ready-made dresses at mail order houses and smaller department stores. Prices ranging from under \$1.00 to over \$4.00 were paid for ready-made dresses. Prices usually paid per yard for materials for house dresses ranged in price from under 9 cents to over 50 cents. There was considerable difference in the expenditures for the ready-made work dresses but practically none for the home made ones.

A study on cotton fabrics made at the Kansas Experiment Station<sup>2</sup> showed that in many cases the fabrics were not labeled as to fiber content and that no sales information could be secured from the salesmen. Among the fabrics that were labeled many more were described inaccurately than accurately.

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<sup>1</sup>J. V. Coles. "Consumer Demand in Missouri for Selected Articles of Clothing." Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin, No. 300, (1939), pp. 1-58.

<sup>2</sup>H. Fletcher and L. Dennhardt. "Adequacy of Labeling of Certain Textile Fabrics With Regard to Fiber Content." Journal of Agricultural Research, Vol. 58, (June 15, 1939), pp. 895-904.



The Minnesota Experiment Station<sup>3</sup> reported an interesting study of ready-made work dresses and materials suitable for such garments. Information received from labels and sales persons was an important factor affecting the consumer's choice in the purchase of street and work dresses and yard goods. More reliable standards and dependable labeling were found to be needed as guides to the quality of both workmanship and materials.

It was also found in the Minnesota study that the women did not know how to use the information which was given on the labels sufficiently well for it to be of any assistance to them in making their purchases.

Ruth O'Brien<sup>4</sup> stated that some of the consumer's problems in buying cotton are:

Not being educated to use the goods to the best advantage; not being able to translate information supplied on labels; lack of information over the counter; and lack of equipment to analyze fabrics.

According to a study of expenditures on clothing for lower income families reported by Blackmore,<sup>5</sup> in many cases cotton fabrics were not labeled as to fiber content and no information could be secured from

<sup>3</sup>E. L. Phelps, and others. "A Study of Certain Factors Related to Consumer's Choice in the Purchase of Street Dresses and Yard Goods." Journal of Home Economics, 31, (1939), p. 393-398.

<sup>4</sup>Ruth O'Brien. "Cotton Fabrics Research in the Bureau of Home Economics." Journal of Home Economics, 32 (September, 1940), pp. 443-447.

<sup>5</sup>B. Blackmore. "Clothing Purchased by Farm Families in Tompkins County, New York, 1927-1928." Cornell Agricultural Experiment Bulletin, No. 615 (1934), pp. 1-44.

the salesman. She also stated that among this same lower income group there was a considerable difference in expenditures for ready-made work dresses and practically none for home made dresses. Since there was little difference in prices paid, the difference in expenditures was largely due to the number of dresses purchased by each woman.

Percale and cotton prints have been extensively used for work dresses. The quality of the material can not always be determined by the price paid per yard. This fact was reported in a study by Saville<sup>6</sup> in which there was a wide range in grade of percale at the same price. She also stated a marked difference in strength and amount of sizing was found in percales in the same price range. The accuracy of sales information might sometimes be questionable since some of the percales were advertised as having a much higher number of yarns per inch than they actually did have.

Since the rural women make many of their own dresses, it is desirable to know something about the patterns they generally used. Few investigations of companies making inexpensive patterns suitable for work dresses have been reported. However, Hopkins<sup>7</sup> made a study of several brands of different priced patterns and found that the medium priced patterns gave a better fit than the less expensive ones. The medium priced patterns were the ones in the price range of 30 cents to 45 cents while the cheaper ones were the 10 and 15 cent patterns.

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<sup>6</sup>Dorothy Saville. "Relationship Between Price and Certain Properties of Percaloes." United States Department of Agriculture Experiment Station Record, Vol. 84 (April, 1941) pp. 570-571.

<sup>7</sup>Maude Hopkins. "A Study of Inexpensive Commercial Dress Patterns." Master's Degree Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, Stillwater, Oklahoma, (1934).

From the standpoint of fit alone, the inexpensive patterns with few exceptions might be satisfactory enough to make them a most economical purchase.

## PROCEDURE

In order to secure specific information concerning the choice of work dresses by rural women, the questionnaire and interview methods were used. Information was obtained regarding the living conditions, age of women, number in family, home economics training, where they bought their materials and dresses, and whether they bought or made most of them. The brands of the ready-made dresses and materials preferred for both the ready-made and home made dresses were recorded. Various makes of patterns and their costs were also considered.

The plan for the study was discussed with the women at their club meetings. Their cooperation was essential if accurate and complete results were to be obtained. The women were quite eager to give the necessary information and also volunteered some information that the questionnaire did not include.

The questionnaire was filled out by 200 home demonstration club members in Caddo County, Oklahoma. The women interviewed represented all parts of the county for some of them lived in communities from the poorest farming area and others from the best. Some of the women lived in modern homes while others lived in small poorly constructed two and three room houses. Their families ranged in number from one to ten children. The average number in the family was 3.6; average number of girls in family 1.3; average age 9.8; average number of boys 1.7; and average age 10.3 years.

Caddo County is located in southwestern Oklahoma. Anadarko, the county seat, has a population of 7,500 and is located 65 miles southwest of Oklahoma City. The county is 48 miles long and 36 miles wide. It is one of the best agricultural counties in the state, although it has some of the richest and also some of the poorest soil in the state.

The county has both paved and graveled roads and national and state highways which make transportation possible to most parts of the county.

Since Caddo County is a representative county of the state, the problems of other home demonstration club women would probably be similar. The living conditions of the group contacted were listed in the same way as those used by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration as follows:<sup>1</sup>

Home (land) owner - owner of the land.

Tenant - two classes. (They were used only as tenants in this survey.)

1. Cash tenant rents for so much cash usually with a written lease signed each year or for several years.
2. Managing tenant is one who rents for third and fourth and pays the landlord one-fourth of the cotton crop and one-third of the grain crops as rent.

Share croppers - the landlord furnishes teams, tools, and seed and they each get one-half of the proceeds of the crop.

Day laborer - hired for so much per day or per month, may or may not furnish the house.

Throughout this study the term living condition has been used to designate whether the families were home owners, tenants, share croppers, or day laborers.

Of the 200 persons contacted there were 133 home owners, 51 tenants, 4 share croppers, and 12 day laborers. The home owners made up two-thirds of the women contacted.

To understand why the selection of ready-made work dresses and materials was limited, in this study it was desirable to know the prices

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<sup>1</sup>Oklahoma Handbook, Agricultural Conservation Program, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Southern Division, United States Department of Agriculture, 1941, p. 31.

paid for dresses and the types of stores from which their purchases were made. This was done by having the women list the prices paid and the type of stores from which they made their purchases.

In order for the writer to make a more complete study of their problems it was desirable to know something about the training of the group of women. They reported whether they had had any training in home economics, in the grades, in high school, in college, or in all three. If they did not have any home economics training, they were asked to state whether they had taken any training in clothing in home demonstration club work in either infants, childrens, or adult work, or had taken all three in club work. They might report for both the home economics and home demonstration training if they had had such training in educational groups.

The influence that age might have on selection of materials for both ready-made and home made dresses and the prices paid were factors considered in this study. The women were grouped in age brackets and asked to check the group most nearly their correct age. The age brackets were:

Young - ages 19 to 29 years.

Mature - ages 30 to 44 years.

Middle - ages 45 to 59 years.

Elderly - ages 60 and over.

The women were asked to list reasons for their choice of dresses or yard goods since individual likes and dislikes are important factors in woman's choice of clothing. This information gave some index as to the standards of the women.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_ No. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Home owner \_\_\_ tenant \_\_\_ share cropper \_\_\_ day laborer \_\_\_
3. Age: Young \_\_\_ Mature \_\_\_ Middle aged \_\_\_ Elderly \_\_\_
4. Number in family \_\_\_ Sex: Girls \_\_\_ Ages \_\_\_ Boys \_\_\_ Ages \_\_\_
5. Have you had home economics training? \_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_ High school \_\_\_  
College \_\_\_
6. Number of years you have been a club member \_\_\_\_\_
7. Did you take clothing in club work? \_\_\_ adult \_\_\_ childrens \_\_\_  
infants \_\_\_
8. Do you buy your dresses ready made? \_\_\_ make them \_\_\_ Both \_\_\_
9. If you buy them, from what kind of store do you buy? Locally  
owned \_\_\_; chain store \_\_\_; mail order \_\_\_; others \_\_\_
10. How many do you buy a year? \_\_\_ ready made \_\_\_ made at home \_\_\_  
How many times can each dress be laundered? \_\_\_
11. What features do you look for when buying a ready made dress:  
Durable material \_\_\_ comfortable style \_\_\_ plain in design \_\_\_ with  
little trim \_\_\_ fast color \_\_\_ ample material \_\_\_ wide seams \_\_\_  
Fully shrunk \_\_\_
12. Do you prefer some particular brand? \_\_\_ If so, what? \_\_\_\_\_  
why? \_\_\_\_\_  
How do you determine the size to buy? \_\_\_\_\_  
What material or materials do you prefer? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Why do you buy ready made dresses? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Why do you make your own work dresses? \_\_\_\_\_
15. What patterns do you use? Brands? \_\_\_\_\_ Home made \_\_\_\_\_  
Why do you use this or these brands? \_\_\_\_\_

What is average cost of home made dresses including thread, trim-  
ming, patterns, etc.? \_\_\_\_\_

16. What qualities do you look for in selecting material for work  
dresses \_\_\_\_\_

List individual ideas or list following: Strength of fabric \_\_\_\_\_  
becoming color \_\_\_\_\_ quality of material \_\_\_\_\_ shrinkage \_\_\_\_\_ color  
fastness \_\_\_\_\_ sizing \_\_\_\_\_

17. What material do you prefer? \_\_\_\_\_ why? \_\_\_\_\_

18. Where purchased: locally owned \_\_\_\_\_ chain \_\_\_\_\_ mail order \_\_\_\_\_  
others \_\_\_\_\_

How many times can your dress be laundered? \_\_\_\_\_



## DISCUSSION

The results of the 200 questionnaires were analyzed to find what effect living condition, size of family, age, and certain other factors had upon the choice of work dresses by the group of rural women.

The living conditions were one of the main factors influencing the choice of work dresses. It may be seen in Table I that 62 per cent of the women were home owners, 20 per cent tenants, and 9 per cent share croppers and day laborers. In studying the results obtained from the questionnaire, it was found that the living conditions did not seem to make any great difference as far as expenditures for the garments were concerned. Those living in the poorer communities paid approximately the same price for the materials for making their dresses and slightly less than the other groups for their ready-made dresses.

The women paid from 9 cents to 22 cents per yard for the material for home made dresses or an average of 15 cents per yard. This made the average cost for the home made dress including material, pattern, thread, buttons, and trimming about 80 cents. Some of the smaller women could make a dress out of about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  yards while some of the larger women required 4 to  $4\frac{1}{2}$  yards. The amounts needed also depended upon the style into which the garment was made. The ready-made dresses varied in price from 55 cents to \$3.59 with an average cost of \$1.53. The day laborer and share cropper families usually did not have sewing machines. However, in a number of cases the home owner or the employer of these groups would let the women use their machines.

On the basis of average expenditures the ready-made work dresses cost almost twice as much as those made at home.

Table I The proportion of women in different living conditions who bought ready-made and home made dresses and the average prices paid.

Living Conditions	Women Contacted		Home Made Dresses		Ready-made Dresses		Ready-made & Home Made
	No.	Per cent	Per cent of Women	Average Cost of Dress	Per cent of Women	Average Cost of Dress	Per cent of Women
Home Owner	133	66.5	26	95¢	31	\$1.75	43
Tenant	51	25	10	85¢	11	1.25	16
Share Cropper	4	2	7	55¢	9	.90	1
Day Laborer	12	6	2	55¢	3	.90	4

The majority of the women, regardless of living conditions, bought both their materials and dresses from locally owned stores. The next largest group bought from mail order houses and chain stores. (Table II). The reasons the women gave for buying from locally owned and chain stores were: they could try the dresses on to see how they fit; could judge the quality of the materials and see the color combinations. The women bought from mail order houses because they did not always have a chance to go to town when they needed a new dress. Some of them had small children and had no place to leave them when they went to town. Many of the women stated that the catalogs gave very good descriptions of the materials and dresses so they knew what they were buying. Often the dresses and materials in the catalogs were lower priced than the local stores and the quality and fit just as satisfactory.

Table II Types of stores in which work dresses and materials were purchased.

Types of Stores	Ready-made Work Dresses		Materials for Work Dresses	
	Number of Women reporting	Per cent	Number of Women reporting	Per cent
Locally Owned	123	60	108	51
Mail Order	85	42	56	28
Chain Stores	46	23	36	18
Others	43	21	16	8

A few of the women had had training in home economics in the grades, high school, or college, and in some cases in all three. However, the majority of them did not have any home economics training but did take some phase of clothing in home demonstration club work. Of the 115 women who had only home demonstration training, 82 of them took adult clothing or studied how to select materials, to fit, and to construct garments for the adult. Fifty-one took children's clothing, 12 took infants' clothing, and 107 of them took all phases of home demonstration clothing.

The home economics training or lack of it did not appear to influence the women to buy ready-made dresses in preference to home made or vice versa. In both groups the majority of the women made some of their dresses and also bought some of them. A majority of all the women made a greater proportion of their work dresses than they bought ready made. (Table III).

Table III The selection of work dresses by women with home economics training and without such training.

Training	No. With Training	Made and Purchased	Per cent Made & Purchased	Made All	Per Cent Made All	Purchased All	Per Cent Purchased All
Only Home Demonstration	115	75	66	23	21	26	13
College	12	8	66	3	25	1	8
High School	70	50	71	17	24	5	8
Grade	60	39	64	15	25	4	11

The writer was interested to know if the age had anything to do with the amounts paid for the garments, the selection of materials, and the wearing qualities expected. The young women paid less for both their ready-made dresses and dresses made at home because they were just establishing their homes and starting their families and did not have the larger amounts to spend for clothing. The mature and middle aged women spent the most, usually because they had more money to spend and could afford to pay more. Usually their children were reared and their homes already established. Some of them stated that it required the better garments and patterns to fit their figures. (Table IV).

As far as the period of serviceability was concerned the home made dresses were worn from 42 to 180 weeks with 54 weeks as the average length of serviceability. Because some of the younger women worked in the fields and cared for small children their dresses received more severe wear and therefore did not last as long as the garments for the mature and middle aged women. The ready-made dresses

were worn from 38 to 150 weeks with an average of 49 weeks. The difference between the ready-made and home made dresses in length of time worn was probably due to the fact that the women were able to buy a better grade of material at the same cost when they made their dresses. The ready-made dresses often had narrow seams and parts cut the wrong way of the material and were, as a result, skimpy in appearance. These factors made a poor fitting garment and lessened the period of service.

Table IV The choice of work dresses by women in different age groups.

Age Group	Average Price		Materials		Wearable time in weeks	
	Ready-Made	Home Made	Ready-Made	Home Made	Ready-Made	Home Made
19-29	90¢	65¢	Percales Prints Broad-cloth Seer-suckers	Percales Prints	52	78
30-44	\$1.85	90¢	"	"	64	102
45-59	1.90	\$1.00	"	"	64	112
60 on	1.25	70¢	"	"	104	104

Since so many of the women made their dresses, their reasons for choosing home made instead of ready-made dresses were recorded. (Table V). The majority stated they preferred making their dresses because of the economy in price. A large number said they could fit themselves better and the dresses wore longer. By better fit they meant they could fit themselves through the shoulders and hips which made the dress more comfortable and more attractive. The home made garments also had wider seams and ample material which made it possible for the dress to wear

longer. Better construction, better materials, and greater comfort were also given as reasons for choosing home made dresses. Some of the women made their work dresses because they enjoyed sewing.

Table V Reasons for choice of home made dresses.

Reasons	Women Reporting	
	Number	Per Cent
Less Expensive	121	60
Better Fit	96	48
Longer Wear	92	46
Better Material	92	46
Better Made	78	39
Greater Comfort	69	34
Ample Materials	68	34
Enjoyed Sewing	42	21

Many of the women preferred ready-made dresses to those made at home. (Table VI). The majority of these women thought ready-made dresses were better in style and more attractive than those made at home. Others stated ready-made dresses were less expensive and fit better than the dresses they could make. Some of the women did not have time to sew or found it inconvenient to make their own dresses.

Table VI Reasons for choice of ready-made dresses

Reasons	Women Reporting	
	Number	Per Cent
Better Style	35	17
Lack of Sewing Machine	31	15
More Attractive	23	12
Lack of Time for Home Sewing	22	11
Less Expensive	20	10
Better Fit	19	9
Convenience	16	9
Poor Health	14	7
Difficulty in Fitting One's Self	12	6

Since a number preferred to buy their dresses ready-made, an attempt was made to find out if they preferred any certain brands. (Table VII). The majority did not prefer any particular brand because they purchased what they could find that was attractive, a good fit, and a price they could afford to pay. The Nelly Don was the most preferred brand. Other brands mentioned were Layne Bryant, Mary Lane, Georgiana, and Carol King. These were perhaps suggested because there was not much variety in choice of brands available in stores in small towns.

Table VII Brands of ready-made dresses preferred for work dresses.

Brands	Women Selecting Brand	
	Number	Per Cent
No Particular Brand	129	64
Nelly Don	48	24
Layne Bryant	21	10
Carol King	7	3
Georgiana	7	3
Mary Lane	7	3

The women were confronted with the problem of selection of patterns for their work dresses. (Table VIII). The majority of them chose Simplicity patterns because Simplicity patterns could be purchased in most all of the small towns and was low in price. The McCalls and Butterick patterns were also selected because they fit better than the cheaper patterns. These two brands were sold only in the county seat town. Cappers, New York, Ann Adams, and Advance were among the others mentioned. Home made patterns were listed by a large percentage of the women. By home made, they meant the use of the same pattern a number of times with variations or the combination of two or more patterns to create a new design and one that would fit well. Some of the women ordered their patterns from newspapers and magazines. As a rule these were 10 cent and 15 cent patterns.



Table VIII Patterns preferred in making work dresses.

Name of Patterns	Women Reporting	
	Number Using Patterns	Per Cent
Simplicity	95	48
Butterick	28	14
New York	24	12
McCalls	20	10
Ann Adams	4	2
Advance	4	2
Cappers	2	1
Home Made	51	25
No Special Make	26	13

Most all club members, regardless of training, age, or living conditions, made more dresses than they purchased ready-made. Since these women were all home demonstration club members they had opportunities for more assistance with the selection of materials and patterns and the construction of their dresses than they did with the selection of the ready-made dresses.

Because of local, county, and state style revues in Oklahoma, where the women made and styled their own dresses, they were given more assistance with home made dresses.

## CONCLUSION

In the rural section the buying habits of the women present a similar pattern. The home owners and tenants paid more for their dresses because they often bought better materials and styles.

Since all groups bought from the same types of stores in small towns, their choice in selection of materials, patterns, and ready-made dresses were limited.

The home economics training did not appear to influence the women to either buy or to make their dresses. This was probably because the home economics training as a whole was quite limited.

The mature and middle aged women paid more for both their dresses and patterns. This was usually due to the mature figure being harder to fit or the poorly fitting qualities of the cheaper garments. The mature and middle aged women wore their dresses a longer period of time because their activity around the farm was less than that of the younger women. The mature and middle aged women could afford to pay more for their dresses because they had their homes established and had more money to spend.

No particular brand of ready-made dresses was preferred because they bought what they could get that would look the nicest and be most comfortable for a price they could pay.

Of the makes of patterns available, the women selected those which were the most economical in price and best in fitting qualities. A number of the women used the same pattern a number of times by making small variations. Patterns were sometimes combined to make new designs.

The majority of the women both bought work dresses ready-made and made them at home. There was a higher percentage making all their dresses than those buying all dresses ready-made. This was probably due mainly to the economic factor. The home made dresses were lower priced, also serviceable for a longer period of time, and better fitting.

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Typist: Evelyn M. Eaton.