



A Celebrity Flemish Flour Bag in The Land of Nevele

The Historical Society of The Land of Nevele

When asked if there are decorated flour bags from WWI in Belgium, the answer is a resounding: yes! There is even what I would call a Celebrity Flemish Flour Bag!

Thanks to the excellent publicity of the Historical Society of The Land of Nevele and the Heritage Center Hansbeke in the province of East Flanders, this decorated Flour Bag is a regular appearance in Flemish local media.

So there was plenty of reason to travel to Hansbeke with my friend Karien Boosten to see the Flour Bag in real life and to experience the enthusiasm for the local heritage. On September 11, 2018 we were warmly welcomed by the chairman André Bollaert and vice-chairman Hugo Schaeck.

The first public media appearance of this Flour Bag was in 'Het Nieuwsblad' of February 1, 2016: 'Flour Bag from WWI enriches Nevele' collection with Flemish showpiece'.¹ Then it appeared on Flemish television.²

AVS Sinksentento pointed their cameras at the Flour Bag on May 15, 2016 and Mr. Bollaert explained:

"And then there is this Flour Bag, which was embroidered in a Landegems convent. It is in fact an acknowledgement to the American residents of Caldwell in the United States, back then a small town in Kansas, to the north of Texas, so as an expression of gratitude for the donation of wheat, flour and other foods to Landegem. You can clearly see that it was embroidered here in Belgium. Have a look at the American flag, the number of stars. The Americans had certainly placed the right number of stars on it."

The decorated Flour Bag was donated to the Historical Society by a former librarian at the library of Landegem, a borough of Nevele.

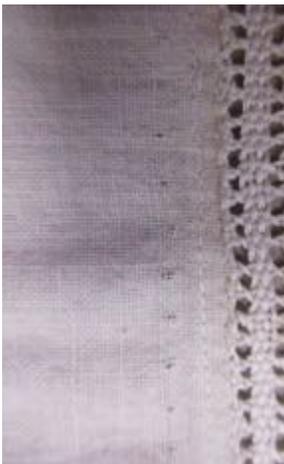
She received it from her grandmother, who preserved it in a paper bag.

Decorated Flour Bag

The Flour Bag is framed, but at my request it is taken out of its frame, so that I can take it carefully in my clean washed hands, place it on the table and have an optimal look at the front and rear side.

The title 'Flour Bag' for the delicate garment I discuss here can be regarded as a 'nickname' for insiders. Without prior knowledge, its denomination would rather be 'wall hanging' or 'table runner'.

The first thing that strikes me are the stitching holes in the right edge of the cloth, the hallmark of its origin as a flour sack: the seam of the empty sack has been unpicked, the incisions have remained.



After the sack was opened up, one half of the sack has been used and the cloth is hemmed with a sewing machine.

The second thing that catches the eye is its stitching at the top: the flour sack is apparently worn through its use of filling, sealing and opening, which caused holes in the fabric. The holes have been stitched thoroughly by hand.



Maybe it was meant as a table runner? A brown spot gives rise to this presumption.



Embroidery

The quality of the embroidery radiates craftsmanship, the stitches are placed with love from the front till the finish at the back.

The original American print 'BELGIAN RELIEF FLOUR FROM CALDWELL, KANSAS 49 LBS' must have been an industrial design, the characters have measured sizes.



Subsequently, a Belgian design would have been drawn carefully on the cloth and adjusted in size to the American print. The added decorations are wheat stalks, ribbons, the Belgian and American flag and the year marks 1914 and 1918.

The upper half of the Belgian design, the six wheat stalks, which envelop the two flags and are tied together by the blue ribbon, has the exact same width as the letters.

The prints and designs on the canvas formed the patterns for the embroiderer and the question is whether she would have received instructions about embroidery stitches and colors of yarn. The embroidery yarns are of mercerized, twisted, cotton.

The embroidery stitches are straight stitches, basting stitches, loop stitches. Seven colors are used: golden yellow, yellow beige, orange yellow, green, red, blue and black.



The embroidered letters/characters also participate in the setting, the outer contours are rimmed and filled with various ornamental stitches in different colors.

Presumably the cloth has been washed, the printing and patterns have disappeared and the color of the gold-yellow yarn has bled because of the aniline used in the dye. A hint of yellow colors the lace trim.



Bobbin lace



The elegant trim along the edge of the Flour Bag is made in bobbin lace technique, the thread is unbleached, twined cotton.

Two of the used lace patterns are the 'open fan' and the 'linen string'.

The lace trim is sewn by hand around the embroidered cloth, the starting and ending points are positioned in the upper right corner.

Sizes Flour Bag in cm	height	width
Total	76	52
Cloth	67	42,5
Bobbin lace	5	± 260

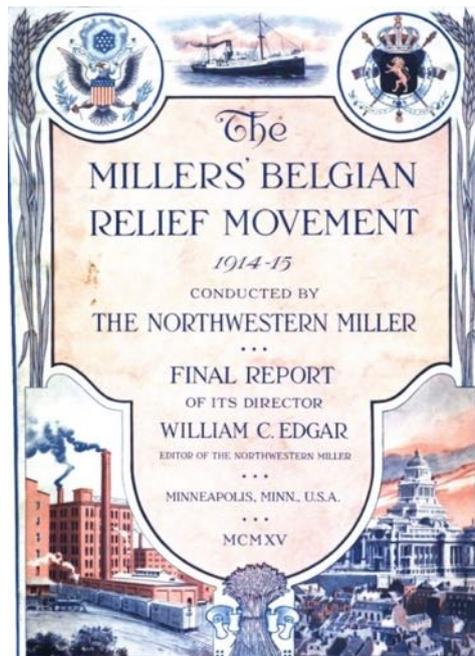
Embroidery

BELGIAN RELIEF	6	32
FLOUR	6	
FROM	2,2	
CALDWELL, KANSAS	4,5	32
49 lbs	2	9
Wheat stalks with flags	18	32
1914	2	4,5
1918	2	4

After seventy-five minutes of study, the decorated Flour Bag is framed again in Hansbeke.

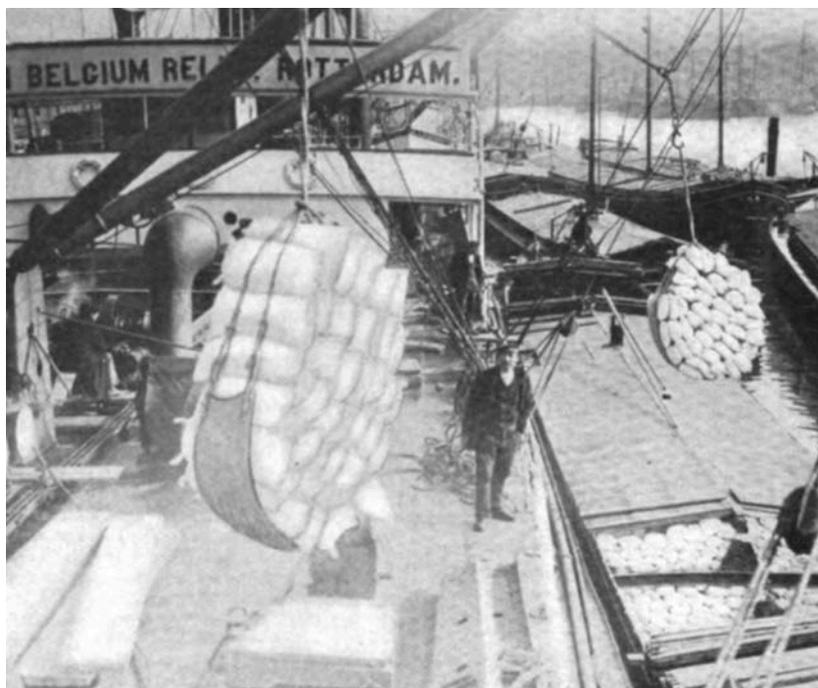


The Millers' Belgian Relief Movement 1914-15



The study of this Flour Bag set me on the track towards studying the relief movement of the Northwestern Miller in 1915. I wonder if the Flour Bag may have been part of this relief.

'The Northwestern Miller' in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was a leading American newspaper for the grain trade and millers. The editor-in-chief, William C. Edgar, took the initiative for the Belgian Relief Movement in November 1914, which eventually led to the dispatch of a steam ship filled to her utmost capacity with relief supplies, 280,000 sacks of flour, from advertisers, readers and sympathizers of the newspaper.





Mr. Edgar himself accompanied the cargo in March 1915 to Europe into Belgium and assisted in its ultimate delivery and distribution. With great enthusiasm he reported in his newspaper about his experiences during the exciting journey.

After returning, he provided his contributors the following account through the Report: 'The Millers' Belgian Relief Movement 1914-15 conducted by The Northwestern Miller. Final Report of its director William C. Edgar, Editor of the Northwestern Miller, MCMXV'.

Four items in the Report are particularly interesting in relation to the identity of the decorated Flour Bag in the Heritage Center Hansbeke:

- 1) The Report lists all contributors with name and quantity of donated flour and goods. And yes, it says: 'Caldwell - Citizens' under the 'List of Contributors' of the state of Kansas.

Kansas

Arkansas City—New Era Milling Co. and citizens of Cowley County	139
Arkansas City Milling Co. and citizens of Cowley County	139
Atchison—Cain Milling Co. and citizens.....	265
Buhler—Buhler Mill & Elevator Co. and citizens....	75
Caldwell—Border Queen Mill & Elevator Co.....	12
Citizens	50
Caldwell Milling Co.	12
Hutchinson—Hutchinson Flour Mills Co.	25

- 2) The Miller's Belgian Relief Movement was carefully directed by Mr. Edgar. He reports that clear instructions were issued for packing the flour. These stipulated that a **strong forty-nine pound cotton sack** be used. This was for three reasons:
 - a) the size of the package would be convenient for individual handling in their ultimate distribution
 - b) the use of cotton would, to a certain extent, help the then depressed cotton market
 - c) and finally and most importantly, after the flour was eaten, the empty cotton sack could be used by the housewife to create an undergarment, the package thus providing both food and clothing.
- 3) The branding of the sacks was also made part of these instructions. Contributing millers were requested to brand all flour intended for the Miller's Belgian Relief Movement according to directions, which were plainly given as follows. On the left the instruction, on the right the implementation on the Flour Bag:



On the left the instruction, on the right the implementation on the Flour Bag:

Belgian Relief Flour	Belgian Relief Flour
from	from
Blank Milling Co	Caldwell, Kansas.
Blanktown	
Blank State	49 LBS.

- 4) Having delivered the relief supplies through-out Belgium, Mr. Edgar arrived in Brussels at the head office of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) in mid-March 1915. Mr. Richards, a CRB employee, informed him of the reuse of empty flour sacks, the transformation of sacks into handsomely embellished gifts, and showed him an example. Edgar ordered a large quantity of flour sacks to be embroidered and decorated, his intention being to donate them in due course to the generous contributors of the Miller's Relief Movement. He asked for his order to contain a large variety of sacks that bear the marks of the various mills contributing to his cargo.

DECORATED SACKS

As a means of expressing their gratitude to America, the Belgian women and girls, who are ingenious and expert at needlework, have embroidered and decorated many of the empty flour sacks which originally contained our flour. These are frequently seen in the shop windows, and the proceeds from their sale go to the relief funds. Some of these bags are very handsomely embellished.

Through Mr. Richards, of the Commission in Belgium, I ordered a large quantity of these souvenirs to be embroidered and decorated by Belgian school children after a design shown me in Brussels. These bear the marks of various mills contributing to our cargo, as large a variety as could be selected under the



Conclusion

The decorated Flour Bag of the Historical Society of The Land of Nevele seems to have been identified:

The cotton sack filled with flour, donated by the residents of Caldwell, Kansas, arrived in Belgium in March 1915 as part of the Northwestern Miller's relief effort.

Many questions remain concerning the process:

- Where in Belgium was the flour consumed and where did the empty sacks go?
- Where was the Flour Bag embroidered and the trim of bobbin lace made?
- Who worked on the embellishment of the Flour Bag?
- Why has the embellished sack not been sent to Caldwell, Kansas as the manifestation of Belgian gratitude?

The story of the grandmother of the librarian, the donor of the Flour Bag, will hopefully be able to provide clarity!

Celebrity Flemish Flour Bag

The popular Flour Bag was in the newspaper once more thanks to our visit.³

Het Nieuwsblad headlined September 13, 2018:

'Dutch interest in Flour Bag First World War from Landegem'!⁴

Annelien van Kempen

(Tekst and images of the Flour Sack)

(Other images are from the Report: 'The Millers' Belgian Relief Movement 1914-15')

October 24, 2018

Bronnen:

¹ *Het Nieuwsblad of 1 February 2016, see https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20160131_02100635*

'Flour bag from WWI enriches Nevele collection with Flemish showpiece

After Flemish Minister for Culture Sven Gatz (Open VLD) announced that a flour bag from the First World War was to be placed on the list of 'Flemish Masterpieces', the Historical Society of Nevele also appears to be in possession of such a showpiece.

A beautiful embroidered flour bag from the First World War had been hidden in the archive of the Historical Society in Hansbeke for years, until this week Minister Sven Gatz placed another flour sack on the list of 'Flemish masterpieces'. The alarm bells in the head of André Bollaert, chairman of the Historical Society 'Het Land van Nevele', immediately went off. "We actually wanted to present this bag at our Pentecost exhibition. But now that a similar bag has appeared in the news, we are already announcing our news".'

² *AVS Sinksentento on May 15, 2016, see <http://www.avs.be/avsnews/sinksentento> (1.32 min. - 2.08 min.)*

³ *Het Nieuwsblad of September 13, 2018: see https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/blsde_03741240*

'Dutch interest in Flour Bag First World War from Landegem.

During the First World War much food aid came to our country, especially from the United States. As an expression of gratitude, some embroidered a flour bag for their well-wishers. It was a simple gift by the poor people, but made with great gratitude. The Netherlands only has one such flour bag in the Textile Research Center of Leiden. Hence the interest for the copy that is kept by the Historical Society 'Het Land van Nevele'.

The copy from Landegem was intended for the town of Caldwell in Kansas, which contributed a lot to the relief effort during the First World War.

The Dutch artist Annelien van Kempen from Voorburg is doing a study about the flour bags with embroidery from the First World War. Together with Karien Boosten from Nijmegen she visited the Heritage Center in Hansbeke of the Historical Society this week. They were received by chairman André Bollaert and vice-chairman Hugo Schaeck.

After the visit to the Heritage Center, they went for further research into the House of Alijn and the Amsab-ISG archive in Ghent. They were definitely impressed by the copy that is preserved in Hansbeke.

It is striking that culture minister Gatz recognized such a flour bag in 2015 as a Flemish Masterpiece. A request from the Historical Society to the Flemish cultural administration to have the Landegems copy examined and also recognized as such, was pressed for, but still remained unanswered.'

⁴ *Documentation from the Historical Society of The Land of Nevele, information sheet received on 11-9-2018:*

'The Flour Bag

The town of CALDWELL in the state of Kansas was founded in 1871 and the same year a post office was established. Between 1867 and 1871 the Chisholm Trail was located east of the hamlet. This Chisholm Trail (named after Jesse Chisholm) was a route through which shortly after the American Civil War (1861-1865) cattle from Texas to Kansas City were transferred and / or smuggled. In 1879 the town was recognized as a city.

The town had a turbulent history and was after three years already at its ninth marshal. It was a real 'cowboy city' where gunfights, theft and murder were characteristic of the first years of its existence. The region was later mainly known for its high production of winter wheat. The town is named after Senator Alexander Caldwell, Senator for the Republicans from 1871 to 1873. After two years he had to leave the Senate after rumors of bribery of opponents. Later he became a banker.

Commission for Relief in Belgium *)

From 1915 onwards, the Belgian population was helped by the "Commission for Relief in Belgium", which transported shipments of flour and other goods from the USA.

The initiator of this was Herbert Clark Hoover (1874-1964) who stood at the cradle of the CRB and later became the 31st President of the United States.

The main part of the goods consisted of flour from American flour mills and was packed in fine cotton bags, each with its own printed inscription and logo indicating from which miller and which state they originated.

When the sacks were empty, they were collected and distributed to convent workshops and schools, sewing workshops in general as well as individual artists. They were embellished and/or turned into tablecloths, an apron, pillow, etc., to be offered as a gift and a gesture of gratitude to people who had played a role in the relief operations.

Herbert Hoover received more than 300 decorated flour bags, some of which were painted by Belgian artists, including Jos Albert, Piet van Engelen and Jean Brusselmans. They are kept at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in West Branch, Iowa.

Two types of bags have been preserved; on the one hand, the original, unprocessed sacks of the American millers of which one example is in Hasselt (about 50 are in the Musée du Cinquantenaire, Brussels) and on the other hand the processed sacks that were sent to the United States or donated in Belgium to local employees or patrons. A copy of this latter species is preserved by the Historical Society 'Het Land van Nevele'.

There were two kinds of expression of gratitude. Either they sent back the embellished sacks or they sent them a school photo, or both.'

*) Source: Musée du Cinquantenaire, Brussels, website November 2014, see <http://www.kmkg-mrah.be/nl/amerikaanse-meelzakken-uit-de-eerste-wereldoorlog>