

Better Choose Me-- Exhibit Text and Object Labels

Introductory Module

Better Choose Me

tells the story of fabric novelties issued with tobacco products from 1880 to 1920. Brightly colored silk ribbons were tied around bundles of cigars to advertise their quality and brand names. The ribbons became a popular collectible during the 1880s, and many women sewed them into table covers, quilts, and pillow tops.

With increased competition in the tobacco industry in the early 20th century, new advertising items were produced to promote regular purchase and brand loyalty. Both silk and cotton flannel novelties were printed in collectible sets and distributed with tobacco purchases. Women were encouraged to collect these fabric novelties and to make them into useful and decorative items for the home.

The exhibition features cigar ribbons, cigarette silks, and tobacco flannels from the Ethel Ewert Abrahams collection.

Better Choose Me, Best Cigar Made

By 1880 cigars replaced smoking tobacco and snuff as the most popular tobacco product in the US. Cigars were hand-rolled in large urban factories and cottage industries in small towns. Together the manufacturers produced thousands of brand names, including the BCM company whose slogan was "Better Choose Me/Best Cigar Made." Magazine articles instructed women on creative ways to make these ribbons into fashionable items for their parlors.

Table cover

36" x 36"

1880s

Silk ribbons with silk fabrics; feather & herringbone stitching; cotton and silk passementerie trim; tassels of cotton, wool and silk yarns; cotton percale backing

Maker unknown; purchased in Pennsylvania

The Resource of a Cigar

"The best and only rest possible to many a nervous woman is fancywork. Remember monsieur, she had not the resource of a cigar" (*Dorcas Magazine*, October 1884). While it was unacceptable for a woman to relax with a cigar, she could resourcefully use the colorful ribbons wrapped around bundles of cigars. This fancy table cover features cigar ribbons in a variation of the "log cabin" pattern.

Table cover

24" x 24"

1880s

Silk ribbons; feather stitching; silk backing

Maker unknown; purchased in Colorado

Credits

This exhibition was produced by
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Bethel College
North Newton, Kansas

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Silkies Module

Each One Recommends One More

“Each One Recommends” was the marketing slogan for Zira cigarettes in 1914. Yet the tobacco industry was aware that the public recognized few differences among brands. The-prize-in-every-package developed as a selling technique to create differences and to encourage brand loyalty.

Silk novelties that came free with tobacco products were especially popular with women. Beginning in the 1880s, the fad began with the silk ribbons wrapped around bundles of cigars. The colorful, lustrous silk could be stitched into items that would be fine enough for the parlor. With the development of “silkies,” small printed silk rectangles inserted in cigarette packages, tobacco companies expressly encouraged creativity among their female collectors with the instruction:

Useful in making pillow covers and other fancy articles for home decoration.
Old Mill Cigarettes, ca. 1910

Although a parlor throw or quilt required a significant collection of silkies or ribbons, most women with a male family member who smoked could accumulate enough to make a pillow.

1

Sixty cigar ribbons were collected to make this pillow top—both yellow (average quality tobacco) and red (better quality tobacco). Cigar brands with Spanish names, such as Reina Victoria or El Firma, show the link to the Cuban tobacco preferred by many smokers. While the 5-cent cigar and many of these brand names are distant memories, the Owl brand of cigars remained available and popular.

Pillow top

20" x 19"

1880s

Silk ribbons; feather stitching (by hand) and zigzag stitching (machine restoration); replacement backing

Maker unknown; purchased in Colorado

2

In this pillow top four brands of cigar ribbons serve as sashing for silkies distributed by Zira cigarettes, including the popular cartoon “Zira Girls” who appear in six silkies. The silkie in the lower left hand corner is labeled “Zira Girls, Made for Men.” Under each arm a man carries a Zira Girl in the shape of a cigarette:

Clarissa: “Oh Etta, I see our finish.” Etta: “Me too!”

Pillow top

18" x 16"

early 1900s to 1915

Silk ribbons and novelties; feather stitching; cotton fringe; replacement backing

Maker unknown; purchased in Pennsylvania

3

This pillow top features sixty silkies. Lacking a twenty-fourth bathing beauty to complete the row, the creative maker substituted a Hebrew queen with her harp. The women are surrounded by flags representing 18 states and the nation of England, while silkies of dogs are found in each corner. Eight repeats of a photo- graphic image of the actress Lissi Hajos supply the left and right borders.

Pillow top

17" x 15"

ca. 1910

Silk novelties; feather stitching; cotton sateen backing

Maker unknown; purchased in Omaha, Nebraska

4

For today's collector, individual silkies can be found in antique shops, although a completed item such as a pillow top with silkies is a rare find. The maker of this pillow had collected only one pineapple silkie and one bunch of grapes, but had accumulated an abundance of flower silkies. Less common are the silkies of African animals and flags, and the golden eagle with a fish in its talons and the US flag in the background.

Pillow top

15" x 15"

ca. 1912

Silk novelties; feather stitching; rayon satin backing

Maker unknown; purchased in Omaha, Nebraska

5

Feast your eyes on this fruit collection—apple, pear, watermelon, raspberry, cherries, and grapes. An array of garden flowers and a beautiful moth show the range of collectible silkies, but it is Mab, the 15th century Queen of Ireland that crowns this pillow. The Queen Mab silkie was issued by Nebo brand cigarettes as part of a series on queens both ancient and contemporary.

Pillow top

15" x 13"

ca. 1912

Silk novelties; herringbone stitching; cotton sateen backing

Maker unknown; purchased in Omaha, Nebraska

6

Green sateen provides a background to artfully placed silk novelties. Prominent are examples of the "queen" series from Nebo. Chief Big Razor first circulated in the 1880s as a collectible card while the two examples of "Snake Dance, Moki Indian Priests" are new issues. The pillow also features cartoons, including a boy pretending to smoke, "Don't you Tell", and the tobacco slogan, "Chewing the Rag."

Pillow top

21" x 18"

ca. 1912

Silk novelties on cotton sateen; herringbone stitching; cotton percale backing

Maker unknown; purchased in St. Louis, Missouri

Baseball/Native American Module

Baseball the All-American Sport

Baseball has been linked to tobacco advertising since the 1880s when tobacco companies distributed collectible cards printed with photographic or chromo-lithographed images of major league players. The fad for collecting these early cards waned in the 1890s, although baseball continued to appear in tobacco advertising art.

Around 1910 increased competition in the tobacco industry led to new promotional efforts. Once again baseball cards were distributed with cigarette purchases, while the invention of printed silkies and flannels provided a new way to honor baseball heroes. Tobacco novelties also featured collegiate athletics from football to rowing to golf.

Take Me Out to the Ballgame

In comparison to flag flannels, flannels printed "on point" to represent a ball diamond are rare. Three flannels in this quilt show players who were in the first five selected for the Baseball Hall of Fame: Ty Cobb, Walter Johnson, and John P. Wagner. The quilt was made by Cathrine Wright (1891-1979) for her husband, William. As the owner of a mercantile store in Kansas City, Kansas, William was likely to have received special flannels given to dealers to entice tobacco consumers.

Bed quilt

67" x 76"

1916

Cotton flannel novelties; cotton sateen sashing and backing; hand-quilted

Maker: Cathrine Wright, Kansas City, Kansas

Collect Them All!

In the years prior to World War I, various cigarette brands inserted printed novelties that represented American Indian symbols. Flannels printed with Indian designs were referred to as "blankets" because some featured the geometric patterns found in Navajo and Pueblo weavings. However, flannel novelties were designed by non-Indian illustrators who incorporated their own ideas regarding Indian traditions.

With a wide range of designs available, a complete collection of Indian blankets required continuous purchase, which was obviously the manufacturer's intent. A woman might trade her "doubles" for others to complete her collection or to obtain the patterns desired for her sewing project.

To Honor the Indians of America

In this quilt blue sashing frames motifs representing many American Indian cultures: Iroquois masks, a peace pipe representing a Great Plains tribe, a Pueblo-style kachina, and a totem pole from the Northwest Coast. The swastika is illustrated in many flannels in this pre-World War I quilt. The swastika was an ancient symbol for good health among native Americans as well as for the peoples of Iran, India, and Japan.

Quilt

58" x 74"

ca. 1914

Cotton flannel novelties; cotton twill sashing and border; cotton print backing; hand-quilted

Maker unknown; purchased in Indiana

Flag Module

Raise High the Flag!

One of the most common tobacco novelties was a flag—flags of the world, state flags, even flags from American cities and colleges. Flags were printed onto silk fabric, cotton sateen, or cotton flannel.

Small fabric flags were commonly inserted in cigarette packets while larger flags were included in cigar boxes or tobacco tins, or redeemed from the company by mailing in coupons. Although many flag novelties were not marked with a brand name, over a dozen American tobacco brands are known to have issued flags, including Clix, Egyptienne Straights, Fatima, Nebo and Zira (all cigarette brands).

Stepping Out with Flags

Solidly constructed with cigar flannels, this comforter was a thrifty, functional bedcover. Yet the maker expressed her creativity by placing the US flags and butterflies in a staggered arrangement that forms a visual staircase. However, additional flannel yardage at the top and bottom of the comforter was required, either because she ran out of cigar flannels, or because her growing children needed a longer bedcover.

Bed comforter

74" x 82"

ca. 1913

Cotton flannel novelties; cotton flannel borders and backing; cotton batting; hand-tied

Maker unknown; made in rural Indiana

A Salute to Flags

Larger premiums were redeemable by mailing in coupons rather than being inserted directly in a cigarette packet. These 6" by 9" cotton sateen flags were a part of a 35 flag series to be redeemed for Zira cigarette coupons. Twenty-seven different nations are depicted in the 49 flags in this quilt. The red, white, and blue borders of this lightweight quilt change to bold tricolor stripes on the reverse side.

Quilt

70" x 82"

ca. 1914

Cotton sateen novelties; cotton broadcloth borders and backing; hand-quilted

Maker unknown; purchased in Ohio

Chalk Mound/Crazy Quilt Module

The Anti-Cigarette Movement: The Kansas Story

Ever since Kansas entered the union in 1861, Kansans were known as populist reformers. In 1889 the state legislature prohibited the sale or gift of tobacco and narcotics to persons under the age of 16. Kansas towns such as Burlington, Emporia, and Norton, imposed taxes on cigarette dealers in the 1890s. By 1895 the city of Lawrence outlawed the sale of cigarettes or cigarette papers.

In 1895 North Dakota became the first state to ban cigarettes. The anti-cigarette movement grew until in 1909 Kansas joined Minnesota, South Dakota, and Washington in cigarette prohibition. Yet all forms of tobacco remained popular. Continuous purchase and brand loyalty were encouraged by advertising novelties included free in the packaging and coupons redeemable for free gifts. On November 2, 1911, Kansas newspapers reported that a Holton man saved enough tobacco tags to get a free rocking chair. However, his wife figured the money he spent for tobacco would have bought a bedroom suite, a kitchen range, a parlor table, and a rug for the living room.

Employees of the state of Kansas were forbidden to smoke according to a Civil Service Commission ruling of 1915. Yet in 1916 it was reported that over 1,400 pounds of tobacco were raised on the Kansas penitentiary farm and distributed to the prisoners, presumably as chewing tobacco or for roll-your-own cigarettes. It was openly admitted that cigarette smoking steadily increased in Kansas, even though sale was prohibited by law.

Anti-cigarette sentiments continued to flourish in opposition to popular practice. In 1917 the Kansas Attorney General ruled that periodicals sold at newsstands and on trains in Kansas could not carry cigarette advertisements. But cigarettes were widely used by the Kansans who served in the US military in World War I. Upon their return to Kansas they argued: "If cigarets were good enough for us while we were fighting in France, why aren't they good enough for us in our own homes?" Thus in 1920 the American Legion lobbied for the repeal of the law prohibiting sales to adult men.

While bills to legalize the sale of cigarettes were repeatedly defeated, cigarettes were readily available "under the counter" at tobacco stores, drug stores, and pool halls. Fines for their sale were only sporadically enforced. Finally in 1927, Kansas became the last of 14 states that outlawed cigarettes to repeal their anti-cigarette law.

From *The Annals of Kansas, 1886-1925, Volumes One and Two* (1954, 1956), "Cigarets for Grown-up Kansans,"
The Literary Digest, February 26, 1927, *Tobacco*, by Jack J. Gottsegen (1940).

Just for May

Only a few homes remain as evidence of the once thriving community of Chalk Mound, Wabaunsee County, in northeast Kansas. Oliver and Ida McDivitt Button were prominent citizens of Chalk Mound and the parents of ten children.

Ida Button was active in a quilting group that formed in the late 1890s. By 1911 the group had 26 members who met once a month in each other's homes to stitch on a project provided by the hostess. This comforter was possibly the work of the Chalk Mound quilting group. May Button, the youngest child of Oliver and Ida, was six years old in 1912, the date stitched on the comforter along with her name.

A tobacco flannel in May's comforter depicts a US flag with 48 stars. Arizona and New Mexico joined the union in January and February of 1912 as the forty-seventh and forty-eighth states.

Bed comforter

68" x 80"

1912

Cotton flannel novelties alternating with wool worsted; feather stitching and stem stitch embroidery; cotton blanket batting; striped cotton flannel backing; hand-tied

Maker: Ida McDivitt Button, Chalk Mound, Kansas

A Crazy Kind of Comfort

In this comforter the maker displayed her practicality in recycling scraps of fabric and her fancywork skills. Decorative stitching embellishes the block construction. Note the fragment adorned with violets painted on silk, and another with Kensington embroidered flowers. Printed flannels feature Lute Boone, an American League baseball player, an Indian blanket, and the flags of Germany, Bulgaria, the US, and the Americas.

Bed comforter

78" x 90"

1914

Cotton flannel novelties; wool, silk, and rayon scraps; backing of 4" wool squares; hand-tied

Maker unknown; made near Springfield, Illinois

Prestige in the Smoking Room

After dining with his business partners, the business tycoon could retire to his smoking room where this elegant throw would be conspicuously draped over a sofa. With only one silkie per package, the collection of 250 silkies representing universities, lodges, cities, and nations reveals a significant smoking habit. Tobacco brands issuing woven silkies in this throw include Calumet, Coat of Arms, and Egyptienne Luxury.

Throw

50" x 58"

ca. 1912

Silk novelties alternating with silk and cotton fabrics; feather stitching; silk borders; replacement backing; hand-tied

Maker unknown; purchased in Boston, Massachusetts

Fantastic Flannel Flags

Flags printed on flannel were distributed in different sizes and with different background colors and trim. To use her collection of flannel flags, the maker of this lightweight bedcover placed some fabrics vertically and others horizontally, all framed with red sashing. Not counting the large flannel of France and her colonies, ten of the 41 nations depicted in this throw have more than one flag. Can you find them?

Parlor throw

46" x 65"

ca. 1914

Cotton flannel novelties; cotton sateen sashing; cotton flannel backing; hand-tied

Maker unknown; purchased in Colorado

From "Our Own" to "Banker's Daughter"

In the last decades of the 19th century, a corner table was a popular parlor furnishing and available for purchase in department stores and nationwide mail order. The creator of this cover for a corner table creatively arranged gradations of yellow cigar ribbons from ten different brands. By 1900 ribbon-bundled cigars began to be replaced by paper-banded cigars in a box.

Table cover

18" x 18"

1880s

Silk cigar ribbons; feather stitching; tiered ribbon ruffle; cotton chintz backing

Maker unknown; purchased in Missouri

Make It Do or Do Without

The base from a kerosene lamp and a worn fragment from a crazy quilt were creatively recycled into this pin cushion. Stitched into the quilt fragment is a cigarette silkie of the vaudeville actress May de Souza. Actresses also appeared on collectible cards in the 1880s.

Pin cushion

6" high

early 1900s

Silk novelty and fabrics; decorative stitching; pressed glass

Maker unknown; purchased in Kansas

A Kewpie Cutie

Tobacco companies sought famous illustrators to design their advertising novelties, including Rose O'Neill who was best known as the creator of the Kewpie doll. O'Neill promoted her patented character in a dizzy array of money-earning spin-offs—nursery china, greeting cards, and recipe book illustrations. This kewpie quilt was completed with a scantily dressed bathing beauty by O'Neill (lower left corner), and another illustrator's baseball flannel (lower right corner).

Bed quilt

65" x 83"

1914

Cotton flannel novelties; cotton sateen sashing and borders; cotton percale backing; hand-quilted
Maker unknown; purchased in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Kewpies Forever

Bisque doll

4 3/4" tall

Bisque; silk satin ribbon; marked Huda

Nursery plate

7" diameter

China; transfer print; copyrighted Rose O'Neill Wilson, Kewpie, Germany; Prussia Royal Rudolstadt

Jell-O and The Kewpies

4 1/4" x 6 1/8"

Paper advertising novelty

Kewpie harvesting cherries

5 1/4" x 6 1/8"

Cotton flannel novelty

Kewpies eating jam

5 1/8" x 5 7/8"

Cotton flannel novelty

To Decorate or to Be Tidy

This lengthy scarf-like throw, the creation of a meticulous seamstress, could have served two functions. Certainly the 75 small flannel flags collected from cigarette packets were decorative. But a "tidy" could both adorn the shoulder of a davenport and protect the sofa from soiling. The length of this tidy suggests that it could also have been used as a scarf for an upright piano or a long sofa table.

Tidy/scarf

72" x 15"

ca. 1912

Cotton flannel novelties;
hand-knotted cotton fringe

Maker unknown; purchased in Colorado City, Colorado

Tobacco and the American Indian

This tied comforter contains thirty-two flannel novelties with Indian-style designs which were distributed with tobacco products. The history of tobacco has always been linked with native Americans as they introduced Europeans to tobacco. A life-size figure of an Indian with an outstretched hand holding a bundle of cigars was a common symbol in front of 19th century cigar factories and stores.

Bed comforter

53" x 74"

ca. 1914

Cotton flannel novelties alternating with worsted wool; hand-tied
Maker unknown; purchased in rural Illinois

In Admiration

The maker of this parlor piece collected 484 cigar ribbons before beginning to sew. The cigar brand names are artfully staggered on every other row and black decorative stitching further accents the strong color contrast. Brand names include Spanish titles such as Fastidio, José, Londres Finos, and La Natividad. Pippins is the brand name that appears most frequently, pippin meaning a highly admired thing or person.

Parlor throw

56" x 89"

Silk cigar ribbons; herringbone stitching; replacement binding and backing

Maker unknown; purchased in Columbus, Ohio

Fashionable Ladies

At first glance, this table cover with a deep lace drop appears to be pieced from a significant collection of silkies. Instead, the maker seamed together two widths of yardage printed with the fashionable lady collectible set. The maker possibly obtained the fabric lengths as imperfect "seconds" or as "remainders" when the tobacco companies discontinued distributing the promotional silkies.

Table cover

42" x 47"

ca. 1920

Silk novelty cloth (two widths); cotton lace ruffle

Maker unknown; purchased in California

Displayed on Body Forms

Royally Robed in Rugs

Over 700 printed velveteen and jacquard-woven "rugs" with silk fringe were collected for this lounging robe made around 1912 by Lena Searing Bergman (1891-1970). Affectionately known as "Amma," Lena stitched each novelty onto a red flannel base and lined the garment in red silk. Even the covered buttons and belt were fashioned from novelties woven with "Persian" designs. A resident of the state of Michigan, Lena included one non-rug flannel, a University of Michigan pennant (low center front).

Woman's robe

ca. 1912

Cotton velveteen and silk novelties with silk fringe; printed cotton flannel ground; silk lining

Maker: Lena Searing Bergman, Michigan

A Turkish Dancer

With the introduction of cigarette silkies, tobacco companies began to promote collecting and creating with the little fabrics. Advertisements in magazines specifically targeted women with suggestions that included pillow covers, crazy quilts, door curtains, and fancy costumes. The maker of this vested outfit based her design on the women's apparel shown in advertisements for cigarettes using Turkish tobacco.

Woman's costume

ca. 1920

Silk novelties; decorative embroidery; pressed metal "coins"; polished cotton vest and skirt; cotton batiste hip sash with reproduction center portion; reproduction blouse

Maker unknown; purchased in Pennsylvania