

Fabric Scope for 1973-1974

by Barbara Cook & Janet L. Vaughn*

A period of revaluation seems to be surfacing in the United States today. From the nostalgia of "American Graffiti" to the back-to-the 50's look in fashion, the search is on for a more simple, less cluttered life-style.

Shortages of both natural resources and agricultural products have caused unprecedented rises in the cost of living for most Americans. While food prices continue to rise and dominate the media, the fabric industry predicts shortages of wool, cotton, and polyester.

The August 1973 issue of *Fabric-news* reports a beginning polyester shortage which "will remain for at least another 12 to 18 months." Such a shortage is caused by the worsening petroleum shortage since polyester and some other manmade fibers are made from petroleum byproducts.

While the industry indicates a shortage, local retail outlets claim polyester continues to dominate the scene for fall and holiday wear. In a recent interview, Shirlee Anderson, Divisional Merchandise Manager of Levy's department store in Tucson, said there is an abundance of polyester garments for fall. "Polyester is blended with other fibers — such as nylon — for consumer interest and appeal." She doesn't believe that such fiber blending is caused by the shortage of the polyester fiber.

However, wool is another story. The increase in land value has made raising sheep unprofitable because of their need for vast grazing acreage. Consequently, most wool is imported and only small amounts are available. Thus, the higher prices for this fiber.

"Wool is being blended to keep the price down," Anderson said, "but the prices of coats and items made from wool have increased substantially since 1972. Wool yarn is disappearing from the local retail outlets because of the spiralling costs and consumer

refusal to pay such increasing costs.

Cotton shortages were evident as early as March 1973 when price increases on towels and sheets were made, according to James Davis, the Merchandise Manager of Steinfeld's department store. Davis said, "About three weeks ago (late August), we were asked to order towels and sheets for stock through December 15. If we ran out of sheets tomorrow, we couldn't obtain any more."

Davis wasn't sure a cotton shortage had caused the sharp decrease in supply. In the manufacture of towels and sheets, it's easy to produce "irregulars" which raises the cost of quality merchandise. "While some lines are still available, the prices are out of sight," said Davis.

Children's clothing and infant's sleepwear have taken a sharp rise in prices because of increased labor costs and the federal regulations for flame retarding infant's wear. The flame retardant coating is applied to the fabric itself. The result is "rather stiff and uncomfortable" according to Davis. "The process required extensive chemical testing, and now infant's wear is priced very high because of such testing costs."

Another problem accompanies the flame retarding of infant's wear. The flame retardant is removed if the garment is washed in a nonphosphate detergent according to Mary Jean Wylie, Associate Professor of Home Economics of the University of Arizona. Most companies fail to indicate this removal of the retardant by washing on the care label of the garment. So the consumer pays for a nonphosphate detergent — in the interest of ecology — and pays extra for the flame retardant — through no choice

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as a consumer buyer. And, after the first washing, the protection that the government initially intended is lost down the drain!

Children's clothing prices will continue to be high according to Davis. He gave reasons for such trends as the labor involved in making a child's garment is about the same as for an adult's, and the difference in the amount of fabric required is insignificant when compared to the labor costs.

American consumers demand another convenience: durable press finish. Polyester and similar knits are increasing in demand because of the no-iron characteristics. "Women today demand a no-iron finish, and price doesn't matter that much," says Anderson.

Cotton may be treated with a durable press finish but such garments soon need some ironing after just a few launderings. But the homemaker just doesn't have the time for such "touching up"! According to Wylie, cotton fibers lose as much as 50 percent of their strength when such a durable press finish is applied. Consequently, blended fabrics and knits are much more in demand — especially for women's wear.

The ladies and juniors departments of Levy's show few woven fabrics but feature knits almost exclusively says Anderson. *American Fabrics and Fashions* reports in the fall issue that "Knits will pass wovens in apparel poundage this year for the first time in U. S. textile history."

While cotton knits are expected to be in demand even more in the Spring of 1974, both Davis and Anderson believe that prices will be even higher.

Because of anticipated fiber shortages and higher prices for ready-to-wear, home sewing is gaining as a household production activity. Many are more willing to buy fabric and

spend time making adult and children's clothing as an alternative to the high costs associated with ready-to-wear.

In a recent *Barron's* article, Singer predicted the total number of home sewers would increase 25 to 30 percent by 1977 — a most interesting prediction considering the number of women expected to also be gainfully employed outside the home.

Many appliance manufacturers and food companies emphasize quick preparation and time conserving qualities — for which the homemaker pays dearly. Yet, the number of persons who opt to make the household's clothing is increasing at an accelerating rate. The sheer, economic facts may be spurring them on to spending time rather than money.

Another strategy which consumers

can use to conserve on clothing costs is to pay particular attention to the care labels which are attached to ready-to-wear garments. Anderson and Davis both described typical consumer complaints as: poorly constructed or manufactured garments. In fact, when such complaints were investigated *the consumer* was at fault. That is, garments were not laundered or ironed properly.

According to federal regulations, labels indicating the fiber content by percent and care of the garment must accompany each item which is for sale. "Manufacturers are very conscientious about content and care labeling,"

Figure 1. One of the department store buyers, Carol Weber, left, of Steinfelds in Tucson, is being queried by author Barbara Cook, right, about the trends of women's ready-to-wear for spring and summer.

Davis said, "but if we get a shipment without labels, we have labels printed and charge such costs to the manufacturer. It's our only protection against consumer abuse of the garment." Labels also must state the manufacturer's name or number, and the generic name of the fiber.

Appropriate care of the item is the key to its life expectancy or use. As consumers our responsibility is to read the label and follow the instructions. With the multiplicity of available items, retail sales personnel cannot be *reasonably* expected to know *all* the answers regarding care and use.

Although many fall fashions are polyester knits and blends, cotton is still strong on the Southwestern scene for the "natural" feel and look. While
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Figure 2. Barbara Cook, senior in Home Economics, left, is shown some of recent style arrivals in the store as acquired by Shirlee Anderson, Buyer for Levy's in Tucson. Ms. Anderson says that women customers demand a no-iron finish for convenience without too much concern for cost. Their time is important.

many women prefer the easy care of manmade fibers and cotton blends, many men prefer cotton shirts because of the comfort and absorbency factors.

Comfort is the quality considered most important by 85 percent of Americans regarding clothing. Maybe it's time we modify some of our fast-moving, easy care ideas and consider the merit of more permanent items. Selecting the appropriate fabric initially and caring for it properly are priority actions in order to maximize consumer satisfaction.

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