



# Back Story

*Footprints from the Past*

February 2017



Welcome to February, a month that brings up a vitally important question – Can the groundhog be trusted? According to the reports I've seen, we're in for six more weeks of winter. Which may be a good thing, as this will keep me out of the garden and sitting in front of the computer to finish up some overdue tasks.

This month we're taking a peek at vintage textiles. There are so many different directions we could go with the idea of vintage textiles; fabrics, clothing, quilts, rugs, wall hangings, samplers, household linens, feed sacks, hankies, and more.

Following is some information on how to clean and store your vintage linens, along with some pictures of various ways to use them in your home. (Thank you Pinterest!) We end the newsletter with a short story about some rag balls from Amana, Iowa. This story was taken from my ebook, [Wash on Monday](#).

This

Trisha Faye

[texasrishafaye@yahoo.com](mailto:texasrishafaye@yahoo.com)

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## Publication News

**Skirt! magazine** accepted an essay for their January issue—Brave and Magnificent Steps. (For those online, here's a link: <http://www.skirt.com/skirt-essays/brave-and-magnificent-steps/>)

**Good Old Days** magazine accepted a Strange Easter in 1942. It's based on Iona Mae (Jones) Burk's story about Easter morning in 1942. Traveling to Missouri, the family was camped by the side of the road. Little Mae was worried that the Easter Bunny wouldn't find them. But it did, courtesy of mother Bea Jones. A paper-mache rabbit, filled with candy was left by the sleeping girl – clear out in the middle of nowhere. This Easter tale will be in the April 2017 issue.

**Purpose magazine** accepted a story, Mildred's Sweet Spirit. The theme was 'Fruits of the Spirit' and a story about my Grandma Cline was what came to mind when I thought of fruits of the spirit. It will be in the July 2017 issue.

## Caring for Vintage Textiles



### STORING VINTAGE TEXTILES:

Here's how the [Kansas Historical Society](#) recommends storing your vintage textiles.

When storing your textiles, choose an area that has the most stable environment, such as the main living area in your home. Basements can be damp, causing mold and mildew, and invite insects such as silverfish. Attics are usually hot and dry, which will desiccate textiles and cause their embrittlement. The levels to strive for are 70 degrees Fahrenheit (plus or minus 5 degrees) and 50 percent relative humidity (plus or minus 5 percent). Equally important is to try to eliminate rapid fluctuations in temperature and humidity. All organic materials, especially textile fibers, are susceptible to expansion and contraction from humidity fluctuations. This movement causes abrasion and degradation of the fibers.

Ideally, all textiles should be stored flat. This is especially true of heavy and beaded clothing as the weight will cause stress. If you do decide to hang clothing, pad the hanger with polyester batting covered by washed cotton muslin. A wooden hanger provides the best support, but must be padded. Do not allow any textile to come in contact with unsealed wood or cardboard as the acids will migrate and there is also the chance for staining. A barrier can be provided with acid-free materials (boxes, tissue, blotter paper), washed cotton muslin, or old clean cotton sheets. It is not advisable to use plastic as most plastics are unstable and can release damaging fumes. Large textiles such as quilts should be folded as few times as possible. Pad these folds with rolled acid-free tissue, muslin or sheets. The sleeves and bodices of clothing should also be padded. Do not stack them as the weight will cause creasing. At least once a year, check your textiles for insect infestations and re-fold them in different places.

## CLEANING YELLOWED VINTAGE LINENS

[HOME EC 101](#) has these recommendations for cleaning yellowed vintage linens:

If you plan on bringing the towels into general use, an overnight soak in a sodium percarbonate solution may help get rid of the yellowing. Typically Oxiclean is the most familiar brand of sodium percarbonate. Your bathtub or a storage tote (without holes in the bottom, check first, ask me why I suggest that step) can work for soaking, if you struggle with soaking in a front load washer.

You can also try Oxiclean on the hankies and items like pillowcases, but I would recommend a more gentle approach, first.

Many people who work with fabrics from the 50s recommend Biz, an enzymatic laundry booster.



Still others recommend soaking in Borax with Woolite or a very gentle detergent like Dreft.

And finally there is a detergent specifically sold for this purpose called Restoration – I have NO experience with this product, so I cannot vouch for its effectiveness, but I have seen it recommended here and there over the years.

## ADVICE FROM CYNTHIA'S LINEN ROOM:

"Restoration" and white vinegar are my preferred products. In August of 2007, I acquired and laundered priceless napkins that came from the King of Italy. If I fearlessly treated these fabulous heirlooms with "Restoration," you can only imagine my trust in this product. Read the label and use common sense. You may only need to use "Restoration" for your initial laundering to remove horrible storage grime but it is so effective that you may reach for it more often. I add "Restoration" in the washing machine with my family's laundry, too. It removes odors, age spots, storage stains, label stains and often, but not always, some rust. If it does not remove the rust, I use "Whink Rust & Stain Remover." Be aware that if rust has already eaten away the fibers that, by dissolving the rust with a rust treatment, you may be left with a hole where the rust had been.

As with most products, I use less than the manufacturer recommends and I repeat the treatment on very stubborn stains or rust. You will be rewarded for your patience.

In the past, I tried almost anything that anyone had ever suggested or that I ever read about on very bad stains on whites. I've used (with varying results) automatic dishwasher

detergent, white toothpaste, lemon juice with sunshine, stain sticks, sprays and bleach. After all that experimenting, I now use "Restoration" first and, if stains remain after two or three sessions with it, I put the dampened piece outside on the lawn in bright sunshine for a day. This is a magical solution; often horrible stains will disappear within an hour. The magical part is that I have been off doing something else! If the item comes back inside and the stains persist, I may resort to using bleach with laundry detergent. I like to have a bleach pen on hand because it allows me to pinpoint where I apply the bleach. After using bleach, always rinse with white vinegar, then rinse again with clear water.

For great advice from [Cynthia's Linen Room](#), check out her post about it online at:

<http://www.antique-linens.com/laundryTips.html>.

She has detailed instructions, along with a slew of great photographs on cleaning vintage lines – whites and colors – along with tips on washing delicate items such as lace or christening gowns, washing large objects such as sheets, tablecloths or bedspreads and washing fringe. She also discusses storage and ongoing maintenance.

## Home Décor with Vintage Textiles

Here are some home décor ideas for using your vintage textiles in your everyday life. Images compliments of Pinterest.







## Amana Rag Balls



### Amana Rag Balls

#### Middle Amana, Iowa, 1890

*"Aber Vater, muss ich das?"* But Father, do I have to? Elsie Ackerman asked, a pout on her face.

*"Ja, meine Tochter."* Yes, my daughter, he replied. "You know that the Council of Brethren assigns jobs to everyone in the community. Once you turn fourteen, your schooling is over and you have a job assigned, like we all do."

"But I don't want to work in the kitchens. I don't like to cook and bake all day. And sewing and mending all day isn't fun either."

"What you want to do *meine Tochter* is not the concern of the Council. Their concern is what's best for the colonies. Most young girls are assigned to the kitchen, the gardens, or the laundry. And with winter approaching, there is little need for help in the gardens right now."

"I can't help it the winters here are so cold and snowy that we can't garden."

"It's very mild here. I was a young boy when the Ebenezer Society moved here from Buffalo, New York. Now, that was a place that has a winter. This here is merely a pouf of snow compared to what I grew up with. May I remind you that you're lucky that I'm in a pleasant mood this evening, or there would be harsh consequences for you speaking back to me in this manner?"

*"Es tut mir leid, Vater."* I'm sorry, Father," a contrite Elsie replied. "It's just that the thought of working in one of the kitchens to serve three meals and two snacks a day to everyone just sounds like so much cooking. You wouldn't think we'd need to have fifty kitchens going. Couldn't I go to work at the mills with you? Working with the blue print cottons would be much more exciting."

"No. The mills are no place for a young girl. Neither the cotton mill nor the woolen mill. The work there is hard and strenuous. You've never been inside where the heat and the smells from the dye vat fill the air with their fumes."

"Vater, there are some women that work in the woolen mills."

"No, even if the Council allowed it, I would not allow my daughter to be subjected to a life of this type of labor."

Elsie's mother, Emma, entered the small front room, wiping her hands on the dish cloth tucked into her indigo apron waistband. "Carl, let the girl head for bed now, if her studies are completed. The bell will be ringing early in the morning."

"Off with you then. *Gute Nacht, Liebes,*" he said, patting Elsie on the top of her blond braided head.

True to her mother's word, the bell tolling from the village tower rang long before the sun rose. After breakfast, cooked by the women of the community - a task that Elsie did not want to emulate, she headed off for the school house. She dreaded when her school days would come to an end on her upcoming fourteenth birthday.

On her way to worship service that day, Elsie walked slowly around Lily Lake on the way to the small white chapel where services were held in Middle Amana. Each of the seven villages had its own church located in the center. These were simple structures, reflecting the simplicity of the German immigrants that had come to this new country in search of a place to practice their religion free from persecution. The plain brick or stone buildings were void of the flashy stained glass windows and high steeples that many of the other churches in America displayed.

The history of the colonies, starting in Germany's villages in 1714, was well known to the 1800 residents of the seven Amana colonies. The religious movement call Pietism had many followers that banded together in a common belief of faith renewal through reflection, prayer and Bible study. They believed that God, through the Holy Spirit, inspired individuals to speak. This gift of inspiration, or prophecy was the foundation for the group that became known as the Community of True Inspiration.

When persecution continued, Christian Metz led the community to a new home in a new world, looking for religious freedom, much as the first American colonists were searching for. They pooled their resources and bought 5,000 acres near Buffalo, New York. As the community grew and adopted a constitution and formalized communal way of life, they needed more farmland to support them.

A move to Iowa in 1855 gave them the land they needed to grow and flourish.

While well known to everyone, as this community history was passed down through the years, none of this mattered to Elsie. She was conflicted about not wanting to do the work she feared the elders would designate as her job.

During the quiet worship service, Elsie offered up prayers for a solution to her dilemma. *Please Lord, let there be another job for me that's not in the kitchens. I don't want to be selfish. You know my heart. But the thought of standing behind a hot stove all day long does not bring joy to my heart.* She didn't know if her quiet pleas were heard, but her heart was eased.

The month passed quickly. Too quickly. Elsie repeated her prayer daily. At the many worship services throughout the week, and at times in between too.

After her fourteenth birthday, she was called to the Council of Brethren. The elders sat, clearly outnumbering her, with stern countenances.

Elsie sat in her seat, hands clasped in her lap in nervousness, yet her head held high in defiance of the meek attitude she knew the Council expected.

"You're of age now to work for the community I understand," the elder said, peering over the top of his spectacles.

"Yes, Herr Klein, I am."

"We have no need of help in this garden at this time of year. And the laundry positions are well filled. Typically we would assign you work in one of the many kitchens in the community."

"Yes, sir."

"It's been made apparent to me," at which he glanced at Elsie's father sitting beside her, "that you don't wish to work in the kitchens."

"No, sir. I was not looking forward to that assignment."

"You do realize that the work everyone in the community provides – everyone – is for the best of the community as a whole and not for the individual person. That is how we have been able to provide so well for each other and thrive as the Amana colonies."

"Yes, sir. I understand that." Elsie's lip trembled, but she refused to give the elders the satisfaction of seeing her cry upon getting assignment she did not want.

Herr Klein's look softened as he gazed into her eyes. "However, I do believe we can come to a satisfactory agreement in this unusual situation. As favor grows with our well made goods, especially the calico and woolen fabrics, more people come from around the area to shop at our establishments. We are in need of a larger supply of household items to sell. Our woven rugs are quite popular and our stock needs replenished with more expediency. Instead of the kitchens, I believe we can assign you to Fraeulein Helga, to aide her with her rug weaving and learn the skill yourself."

A smile spread across Elsie's face, from ear to ear as her head bobbed up and down. "Oh yes, Herr Klein. That is an assignment I am most excited about. I know some basics already ... and I can help with anything Fraeulein Helga needs ... and I can be there at first light tomorrow ... and I ..."

The Elder held his hand in the air, with an unusual smile on his face. The other members of the Council glanced at him with mixed looks of puzzlement and astonishment. He was acting out of character with this unexpected wavering of tradition. "Settle down little one. You can begin your apprenticeship at Fraeulein's next week, the day after the Sabbath."

"Yes sir, I will. And I'll be the best helper she's ever had. And I'll learn and I'll help the community by making many fine rugs with good craftsmanship and care."

"I'm sure you will little one. Tonight at worship you may want to offer an extra thanks to our Lord for this opportunity, and

also for the fine loving father you have, who was willing to intercede with the Council on your behalf."

Elsie enjoyed her apprentice work with Fraeulein Helga. At first she wrapped many calico strips into rag balls, readying them for the weaving process. Over time, the elder weaver began teaching Elsie, who became a proficient weaver of her own right. Thousands of rag rugs were created under Elsie's steady and patient mastery of the loom, until the community voted to disband its communal society in 1932. Elsie lived out the rest of her life in Amana, in a house overflowing with indigo rag balls and her woven creations.

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The history of the seven Amana Colonies and their origins in Germany, to Buffalo, to Iowa is true. Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965, hundreds of thousands of visitors a year visit this Iowa area where the community thrived from 1855 to 1932.

Was there an Elsie, a Herr Klein, or a Fraeulein Helga? Maybe not specifically by those names nor in those roles. However, fourteen year old girls were assigned work in the gardens, the laundry or the kitchens. Most 14 year old boys were designated work on the farm, in the craft shops, or were sent to college to be trained as teachers, doctors and dentists.

The Amana Calico Mill was built in 1861. It grew from one building to eight buildings at its height of production in the 1890's. At its peak, the mill produced up to 4500 yards per day. The British naval blockade during World War I interrupted the import of the German dyes used in the calico production. Not able to maintain the quality of the product they wanted, the community closed the factory. Today two buildings remain, the fire and printing houses, which are used by the Amana Furniture Shop.

And passing through time, remnants of this period of history remain. These three rag balls were discovered in an antique store in Bedford, Iowa on my journey there in 2014. (Now I wish I would have purchased the rest of them.)

Originally, fabric was purchased from the south and shipped to the Print Works, where it was then dyed and processed into "blue print". Yardage was sold locally and further out by salesman traveling the countryside with sample books. Some calico was cut into strips, wrapped into rag balls and used to make rag rugs. These balls were recently found in an attic in Amana. From there they ended up in an antique shop in Bedford, where I found them. I brought them back to Texas with me, as an Iowa treasure and remembrance of a special trip.

Who cut them into strips? Whose hands touched these, as they worked with the cottons and rag rugs? How did they get stashed in an attic to sit for eighty to a hundred years? These answers we'll never know. The people have long passed on before us, taking the mysteries of their lives with them. We can see and hold the rag balls they once touched, and only imagine a fictional story of the women or people behind these pieces of the past.