In 1916, Belgian Piet van Engelen embroidered this astonishing rooster crowing at sunrise. The initials "A.B.C." —beneath the branch and Belgium's coat of arms—were original to the flour sack.

Right: A display of embroidered sacks in a Paris shop in January 1919, and two more examples of the considerable skills of Belgian women and girls.

Saying 'Thank You'

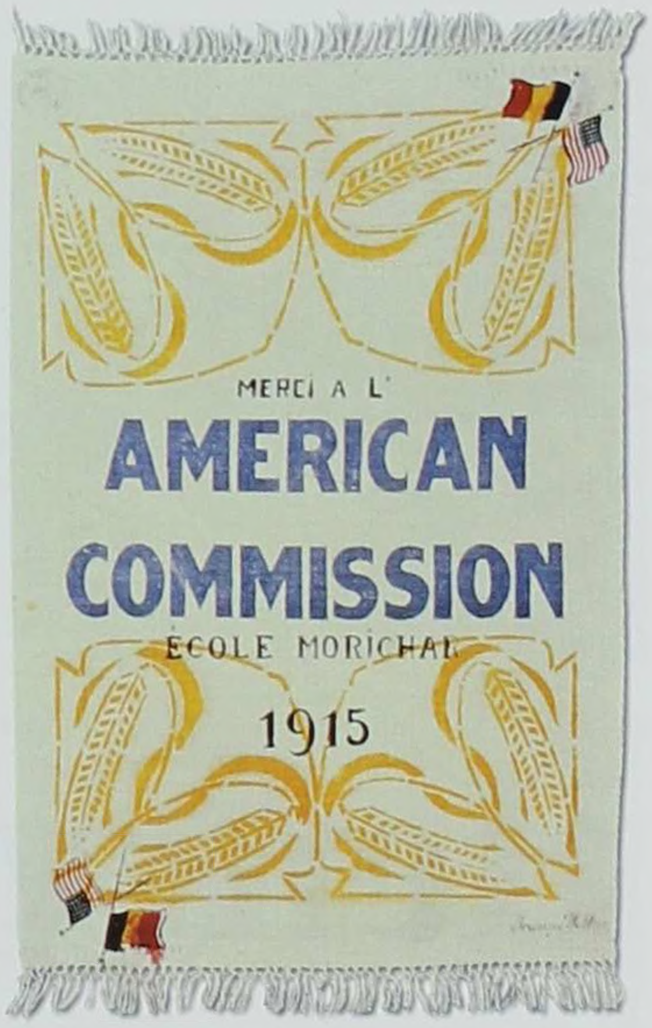
The Story of the Belgian Flour Sacks

During World War I and under the chairmanship of Herbert Hoover, the Commission for Relief in Belgium shipped 697,116,000 pounds of flour to Belgium, and evidence indicates that sugar and grains were also sent. The flour was packaged in cotton bags by American mills. The movement of these bags throughout Belgium was carefully controlled by the CRB since cotton was in great demand for the manufacture of German ammunition and also because the CRB feared that the flour sacks would be taken out of Belgium, refilled with inferior flour, and resold as relief flour. As a result, the empty flour sacks were carefully accounted for and distributed to professional schools, sewing workrooms, convents, and individual artists.

Separate from the trade schools of Belgium, the professional schools specialized in training girls to sew, embroider, and make lace, and the sewing workrooms were large centers established in the major Belgian cities during the war to provide work for the thousands of unemployed. Girls and women made famous Belgian lace, embroidered textiles, and repaired and remade clothing in these workrooms.

The flour sacks were used by

these various Belgian groups to make new clothing, accessories, pillows, bags, and other functional items. Many women chose to embroider over the mill logo and the brand name of flour, but entirely original designs were sometimes created on the sacks and then embroidered, painted, or stenciled on the fabric. Frequent additions to the flour sacks were Belgian messages of gratitude to the Americans; embellishments of lace; the Belgian and American flags; the Belgian lion; the Gallic cock; the American eagle; symbols of peace, strength, and courage; the Belgian colors of red, yellow, and black; and the American colors of red, white, and blue. Artists, in particular, used the flour sacks as the canvas background for creating original oil paintings.



The completed flour sacks were carefully controlled and distributed to shops and organizations in Belgium, England, and the United States for the purpose of raising funds for food relief and to aid prisoners of war. Many were also given as gifts to the members of the Commission for Relief in Belgium out of gratitude for the aid given to the Belgian people.

Herbert Hoover was given several hundred of these flour sacks as gifts, and the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum has one of the largest collections of World War I flour sacks in the world.

—by the Hoover Library-Museum Staff

ALL FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF HERBERT HOOVER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY-MUSEUM

The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum is located in West Branch, Iowa, Hoover's hometown. In the exhibit galleries, visitors will see the many sides of Iowa's only president: his childhood in West Branch, his years as a mining engineer, his humanitarian food relief effort during two world wars, and his public service as secretary of commerce and U.S. president.

The museum also features an ever-changing array of temporary exhibits on a wide range of topics. In recent years the museum has featured exhibits on the Revolutionary War, the Mississippi River, and western film stars, among other subjects.

The library-museum also contains Hoover's personal papers and more than 150 other research collections, which have been used by more than 3,200 scholars since the library-museum opened in 1962. The collections include the papers of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Lou Henry Hoover, Bourke Hickenlooper, Lewis Strauss, Clark Mollenhoff, and others.

For more information, call 319-643-5301, or visit: www.hoover.archives.gov.