

# Cotton:

## *The Fabric, Fiber, Flavor of Our Lives*

*by Anna María Pérez-Wright*

**F**rom blue jeans to baby wipes, from dollar bills to dynamite, cotton is more than just the fabric of our lives. It has been cultivated and fashioned into fabrics for at least 7,000 years. Archeologists have found cotton fabric fragments in Mexico dating to 3,500 B.C., India to 3,000 B.C., and in the southwestern United States to 500 B.C.

Last year, consumer demand for cotton in the United States was about 34 pounds per person, with 53 percent of that used for apparel. Grown in 17 states covering more than 12 million acres, cotton makes its way into thousands of items. Cotton generates more than \$40 billion in revenue a year in the United States, with \$40 million of that in New Mexico, according to the 1997 U.S. agriculture census. The state has 487 cotton-related businesses.

"That includes all seven segments of the cotton industry: producers, cooperatives, ginners, crushers, merchants, warehouses and manufacturers," says Shawn Boyd, agricultural economist with the National Cotton Council, an industry lobbying organization.

Cotton Incorporated, a North Carolina-based research and marketing firm, launched the now-famous "Fabric of Our Lives" advertising campaign on Thanksgiving Day 1989.

"When people think of cotton, there's an immediate association with



**Denim dudes:** Cotton jeans and T-shirts are staples of American culture.

apparel, but there's so much more," says Gary Raines, fiber economist with Cotton Incorporated. "An example is paper currency, which isn't really paper, but a blend of 75 percent cotton and 25 percent linen."

Industrial products containing cotton include wall coverings, book bindings, zippers and thread. The fuzz left on the seed after ginning is referred to as "linters." Linters with longer fibers are used for medical supplies, twine and candle wicks. The shorter linter fibers are used for filler in gun powder, mops, cotton balls, automotive upholstery and fine writing paper. Other uses

include paint, plastics for windshields, tool handles and X-ray film.

One of the most promising new uses for cotton fiber is in nonwoven products, according to Mac McLean, Cotton Incorporated's associate director of nonwovens research and implementation. "Our research focuses primarily on using cotton in hygiene products," he says. "These include disposable diapers, baby wipes, feminine hygiene and adult incontinence products."

Because cotton can absorb up to 27 times its own weight in water, it's the most popular fiber for towels and washcloths. Consumers apprec-



**Comfort food and fiber:** Cottonseed oil is found in many of today's popular snack foods and cooking oils. The most popular fiber for towels, cotton can absorb up to 27 times its own weight in water. It's also used in cosmetics and soap products.

ciate cotton sheets, especially if they are made with Pima cotton, which is grown primarily in New Mexico, Arizona and California. These can be pricey, but they are prized for their luxuriousness.

Although cotton is used for all types of apparel from hats to shoes, men's and boys' jeans, underwear and shirts top the list, says Anne Keyes, Cotton Incorporated's retail market analysis manager. A 500-pound bale of cotton can produce

about 215 pairs of jeans.

"Cotton is so versatile, just about everything you can wear has the potential of cotton being used in that garment," Keyes says.

The amount of harvested cotton it takes to produce that 500-pound bale also yields enough cottonseed oil to cook nearly 6,000 snack-sized bags of potato chips. Cottonseed oil also can be found in cosmetics, soap and food products. More than 154 million gallons of the oil end up in

margarine, cooking oil, salad dressing and snack items, such as crackers, cookies and chips, according to the National Cottonseed Products Association (NCPA).

"Cottonseed oil was the first vegetable oil used in the United States," says Ben Morgan, NCPA executive vice president. "In fact, the first shortening, Crisco, was made from crystalized cotton seed oil, which is where it got its name." Even toothpaste and ice cream include cottonseed by-products.

More than 9 billion pounds of whole cottonseed and cottonseed meal are used in feed for livestock, dairy cattle and poultry, according to National Cotton Council statistics.

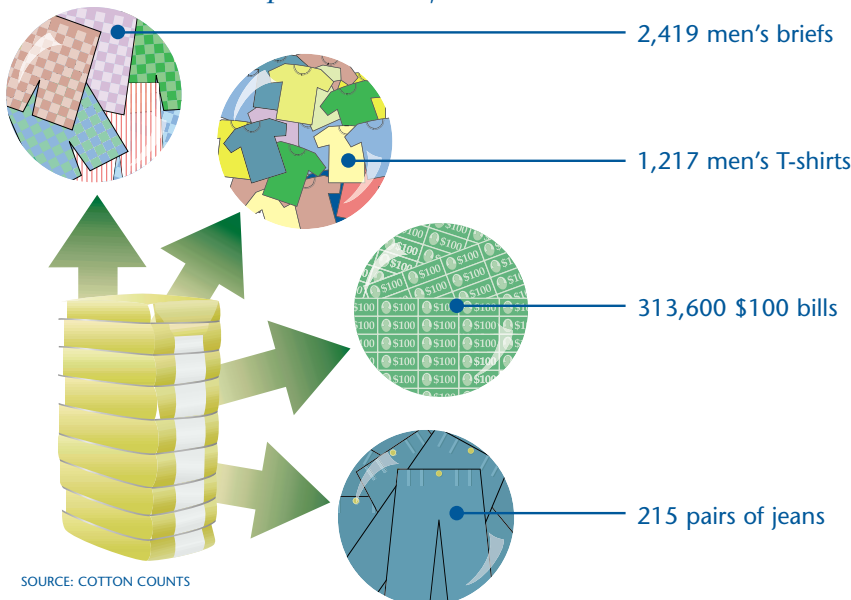
"Many New Mexico dairies incorporate a mixture of these into livestock feed," says Robert Flynn, NMSU associate professor of agronomy. "This provides the cows with a rich source of protein, fat and fiber."

Cottonseed hulls, the tough outer seed shells, also are used for livestock feed, but in addition, are used in synthetic rubber, petroleum refining, plastic for small textile machinery parts and the mud used in oil well drilling.

"Cotton really is an integral part of our lives," Keyes says. "Just try living without it." **R**

## Cotton Commodities

One 500-pound bale of cotton can either make:



SOURCE: COTTON COUNTS