

Warren Featherbone Company

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The Legacy of Warren Featherbone

*My thanks to Sally Helvenston, Michigan State University Department of Human Environment and Design, author of *From Feathers to Fashion*; Val Berryman, curator, Michigan State University Museum; and Carolyn Damstra, assistant editor of Michigan History Magazine, for their permission to use photos and information from this magazine article which appeared in the 1996 Sept/Oct issue.*

Our great grandmothers would immediately recognize the name of Warren Featherbone as boning for their garments and corsets; our grandmothers, as fine bias tape and other sewing notions, and the modern vintage fabric collector, a desirable brand of fine bias tape for quilting and heirloom sewing projects.

The Warren name is an old and respected one. Its metamorphous from turkey quills to sewing notions to children's clothing is an example of how many textile companies survived and adapted to the changes in fashion and lifestyles.

Before 1883 women had to endure the heaviness and discomfort of whalebone as a stiffening in their foundations to keep them in trim shape. Due to the high cost of whalebone, flat steel, horn, rattan and a patented fiber from the ixtle plant called Coraline were suitable substitutes.

It was then that Edward Warren, who ran a dry goods store in Three Oaks, Michigan, began a quest for a better stay after hearing his customers gripe about the price and short durability of whalebone.

According to author Sally Helvenston in her *From Feathers to Fashion*, Warren in his buying trips to feather duster factories in Chicago learned that large quantities of pointer feathers, those with plumage on one side only, were discarded by manufacturers as unsuitable for feather dusters. He decided that this cheap raw material was a perfect substitute for whalebone.

His product was patented in 1883, quickly followed by building machinery and the opening of his small factory. Once it was proven to dressmakers and dry goods dealers that featherbone was superior to whalebone, his business flourished.

There were many imitators once competitors got wind of Warren's success, forcing the company to



Out of the past ♦ turn of the century display from the Warren Featherbone collection donated to Michigan State University Museum. Top photo is from the cover of Michigan History Magazine, Sept/Oct. 1996 issue. Bottom photo is also from that issue. - Courtesy Michigan State University Museum and Michigan History Magazine.



take many would-be rivals to court.

Promotional card late 1890s-early 1900s.

With changing fashion styles, Warren kept adding new products and promotional campaigns. Featherbone bustles, bust extenders, featherbone-stiffened fabric, different weights and widths of feather bones, collar and belt foundations were among the new features offered. Featherbone Parlors were established in major cities and fashion shows were held to demonstrate the latest uses of featherbone to customers.



Featherbone parlor, the scene of many fashion shows to demonstrate how Warren's featherbone enhanced milady's costumes. This parlor was located in New York City. - Courtesy MSU Museum

Promotions included instruction booklets and in 1893 Warren began publishing the *Featherbone Magazinette* for distribution to dressmakers and retailers plus advertisements in *Ladies Home Journal* and other women's magazines.

To further reach the home market and dressmaker, Warren patented and market a featherboning attachment for the home sewing machine in 1895. This 3-1/8" long attachment mounted on the bed of the sewing machine and aided in the insertion of featherbone or stay. As it was attached with the same bed-mounting screw still in use on today's machines, the attachment works on nearly most 19th and 20th machines, and can be found occasionally on online auctions, flea markets and other vintage and collectible outlets.



Ads for featherboning - *Ladies Home Journal*, August 1896; *Fashions Magazine*, December 1901; *Dry Good Economist*, December 13, 1904; and *Elite Styles*, October 1913.

By the early 1900s, success and acclaim resulted in the opening branch offices in Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Louisville and foreign markets in Canada, Europe, South America and Australia.

With the end of WW I came a testing time as the need for featherbone dwindled drastically. New selling lines were explored and added to meet the latest trends - elasticized undergarments such as bandeaux and girdles, hair curlers, comb cleaners, handbags and hats. In 1920, notions were added - rickrack, braided elastic, blanket binding, tie cords, boned belting, garters and bias tape, dress linings in messaline lawn, tussah, tussah silk and Nika rayon, bead cord, elastic corset webbing, garter belts and sew-ons,

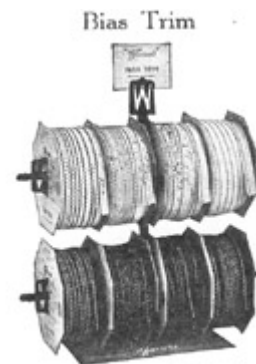


flower and hat wires, hip flares, lampshade binding, lingerie elastic, ribbon and shoulder strapping, frilling, button looping, collar flares and supports, girdellas, girdles, guimpe, multi-colored trims and weighted tapes. Author Sally Helvenston notes that many of these were natural items to produce as the company was already in the business of making narrow fabrics through its cloth-covered stays.

Warren News, Vol. VII, No. 2, 1922, contained style hints for home dressmaking. Among the products featured were a variety of weighted tapes for dress hems to keep them stable on windy days. - Courtesy Sheila Ramsey

The new venture was successful and in 1925, a softer bias tape in a wide range of colors was introduced. This tape was one of the finest on the market and lasted into the 1960s. It is likely that this tape more than any other Warren product has made its name so widely recognized by today's collectors.

In its 1930 booklet *When Woman Sews*, the company stated that "the creation of a line of finest quality bias fold tape in a wide variety of smart colors and wanted fabrics has made this article of special decorative value and its use much more diversified....it is cut on a true bias...method of handling preserves the proper elasticity of the tape which insures smooth turning of curves and any tendency to pucker during laundering.....adaptable to heavy fabrics and sheerest lingerie."



From this Stand Bias Trim is sold by the yard to the Customer.

One could buy bias tape trim directly from the reel in 1922. The white lawn trim was stitched on one edge in one of 8 colors.



The very chic 1930 When Woman Sews booklet featured a foreword by Mrs. Calvin Coolidge, the President's wife, about the values of learning to sew. Shown here are uses for bias tape on gift items and dresses. Uses for other Warren products featured it trims for lingerie, household decorating, children clothes, night and loungewear and dress linings. - Courtesy Sheila Ramsey

The nainsook and Cloth of Gold tapes were made from genuine J&J Bluebird Nainsook and J&J Cloth of Gold, the only tapes to be made from these original trademarked fabrics as far as is known. J&J stood for Jackson & Jackson of Tryon NC which created Cloth of Gold in 1901, and later licensed the name to reputable mills which produced quality lines of fine fabrics. Other fabrics were lawn, pure silk and Nika rayon, and by 1939 percale was added. Nainsook and lawn were made in extra fine, fine and regular cottons with the extra fine nainsook having a silk finish. All fabrics were washable and color fast, and lawn was boilfast. Money was refunded if tapes did not live up to these guarantees.

Tapes came in 13 sizes for cottons and 1/2" only for silk and rayon; 30 nainsook colors, 21 lawn colors, 33 silk colors and 18 rayon colors; decorative in two and tri-tones and frilled. They could be purchased cellophane wrapped or from spools. Wrapper label designs varied over the years but with the exception of two designs, they were variations of the original three oak trees. See photo gallery of bias tapes and labels at end of column.

Should consumers have any questions or need help in using any notion, Warren established an educational department to service requests.

With an eye toward the future, other textile ventures were

explored which would provide broader product bases for marketing, longevity and profit. During the 1930s Warren, in a project with B.F. Goodrich of Akron OH, developed a plastic resin film Koroseal and ways to use it. This led to Feathertex baby pants in 1938 and other plastic products including bibs, rainwear and garment bags.

Following WWII, a multitude of economic considerations drove many businesses south. In 1956 Warren, deciding not to replace its outdated plant, followed suit and relocated to Gainesville GA.

In the ensuing years, the company pursued children's wear, creating the Alexis line with the help of 1950s designer Charles James, noted for designing women's fashions using boy models. Plastics and notions began taking a back seat and were gradually eased out, and the last featherbone product used for insulation in aircraft ended in 1960. Today, Warren's major line remains with children's wear and the Alexis label.

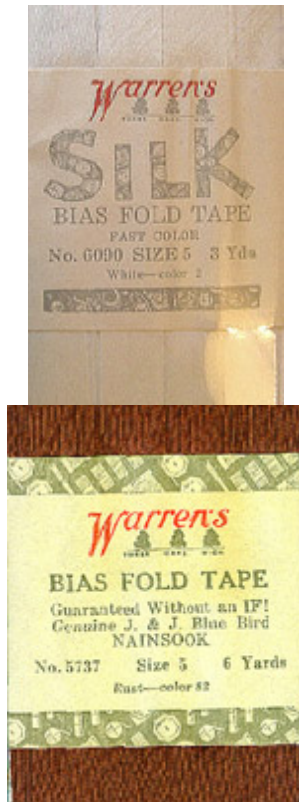


A 1939 Warren's booklet *Bias Tape Braids and Frillings* illustrated how to use these trims for accessories, curtains, table linens and other household items. - Courtesy Sheila Ramsey

Warren's Photo Gallery Wrapper Labels, Cardboard and Notions



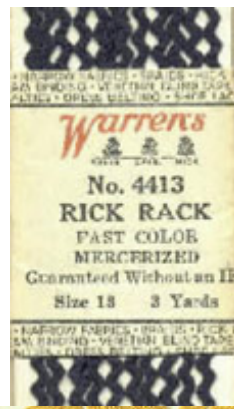
The ever-constant Warren logo with the three oaks.



Silk and J. & J. Bluebird brand nainsook bias tapes. The reels of tape wrapper design denotes tapes made from est. 1925 to est. mid-1930s. Silk was pure dye habutai verified by Japanese inspectors for U.S. customs clearance.



Cloth of Gold pongee finish [smooth] and J. & J. Cloth of Gold percale bias tapes. By 1939 the wrapper design was changed to borders promoting the product line. This design was prevalent during the 1940s.



By the 1950s, wrapper design took on a modern look with a combo coordinated thread/bias tape pack. In an unusual venture, Warren teamed with Creed & Stewart for the Boiltex brand. Fabric is specified only as fine quality cotton, more than likely percale.

Examples of mercerized baby and standard rickrack. Border design denotes this would have been late 1930s-40s.

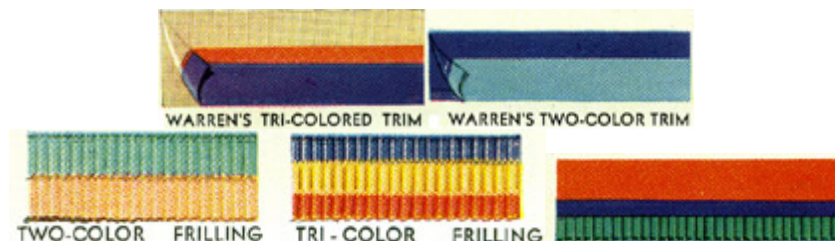


Warren's tiny rickrack-edged bias trim, 1940s. - Courtesy Sheila Ramsey

Rayon bias tape was carded differently than other notions; probably dates to 1950s.

Notions cardboards were utilized to promote Warren products on both sides. This card is from 1930.

Blanket binding offered in 1930.



Two and three-tone bias trims and organdy frilling were featured in a 1930 booklet.

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