

A Kaleidoscope of Color

American Indian Trade Blankets

American Indian trade blankets are among the most colorful items ever created by American industrial designers. Made for both the Indian trade and for general household use, a half-dozen manufacturers once made these vibrant woolen robes. Today, Oregon's Pendleton Woolen Mills is the sole surviving producer of the trade blankets that are a fixture throughout Indian Country and the American West.

THE EARLY RESIDENTS OF NORTH AMERICA fashioned warm robes for themselves for many millennia. Whether crafted from woven cotton, yucca, feathers or rabbit skins, or made from tanned elk or buffalo hides, wearing blankets were a ubiquitous feature of the Native wardrobe. Trade blankets made by outsiders did not appear until the eighteenth century, when "point" blankets were imported from England by the Hudson's Bay Company. From 1780-1890, these blankets — cream-colored with black, yellow, red and green stripes — were a staple of the fur trade and many thousands made their way into Indian hands.

A second wool wearing blanket tradition was contemporaneous with the beginning of the Hudson's Bay Company's trade. Navajo weavers paired newly-arrived sheep wool with their existing weaving technology and began making blankets that became prized attire throughout the American West. Near the end of the nineteenth century, trading posts appeared in the Navajo Nation. These traders encouraged the production of rugs that could be sold to distant, non-Native customers and weavers subsequently turned away from making the fine wearing blankets for which they were so well known.

After reservation constraints limited Native access to the plant and animal species they had used to make their own wearing blankets, and after Navajo women turned their attention to making rugs, enterprising American woolen mills began producing brightly colored blankets for sale to Native peoples. These trade blankets soon became an important part of Native culture.

J. Capps & Sons had its origins in a wool carding operation that Joseph Capps began in Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1839. Over time the business grew to include other wool-related activities and by 1886, J. Capps & Sons was producing cloth, clothing and blankets. In 1892, it began making blankets for the Indian trade and a decade later it was selling blankets under three different names: J. Capps & Sons, Ltd., Jacksonville Woolen Mills and American Indian Blanket Mills. With the advent of World War I, the company began manufacturing clothing and cloth for the war effort. It never returned to the manufacture of woolen wearing robes. After hostilities ceased, Capps retooled and focused its production on Indian-design wool mackinaws.



J. Capps & Sons (Jacksonville, IL, c. 1852-c. 1977), Crow-pattern blanket, c. 1911, wool with cotton warp, 68" x 50"; Collection of Mark Pigott



J. Capps & Sons (Jacksonville, IL, c. 1852-c. 1977), Moqui-pattern blanket, c. 1911, wool with cotton warp, approx. 72" x 60"; Barry Friedman collection



T. Harmon Parkhurst (American, 1883-1952), *Mrs. Emiliana (Romero) Samuel selling pottery, Tesuque Pueblo, New Mexico, c. 1930s*, T. Harmon Parkhurst Photo Collection, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives, New Mexico History Museum/Department of Cultural Affairs, Neg. No. 046097

During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, wool trade blankets were worn throughout Native North America. This woman is from Tesuque Pueblo, which is located about ten miles north of Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Shuler & Benninghofen Woolen Mill Company (Hamilton, OH, 1859-1967), *Geometric-pattern blanket, c. 1913*, wool with cotton warp, approx. 72" x 60"; Barry Friedman collection

Between 1890 and 1917, J. Capps & Sons produced trade blankets in twenty-two different patterns — each with the name of a North American tribe — and in two hundred color combinations. Its advertisements claimed that the company's designs were Indian art adapted from Native — especially Navajo — designs. They were, in fact, mostly designed by local Portuguese immigrants. Capps targeted white audiences in its national advertising, which included use of the short-lived "Cozy Corner Girl," a spokeswoman who reported on the regular comfort she received as a result of having Capps blankets in her life. In 1913, the company announced that it was also making trade blankets for "The Tribe of The Great Outdoors."

Buell Manufacturing Company (St. Joseph, Missouri) was founded in 1877 on the shoulders of an existing mill. The company began making Indian trade blankets in about 1898 and continued production for a little more than a decade. Overall, the Buell enterprise produced fewer than twenty blanket patterns and many of these were woven with a muted color palette. In contrast to other manufacturers, Buell was responsible for the trade blanket designs that were most closely tied to historic Navajo and Pueblo textiles. Three of their patterns were based on specific Southwestern Indian motifs — "Hanolchadi," "Zuni" and "Shoshoni" — which respectively replicated a Navajo Third Phase Chief's blanket, a Hopi striped manta and a Navajo weaving design. As a result of its short production history and limited output, Buell blankets are now rare items.

Racine Woolen Mills (Racine, Wisconsin) began operations in 1863 but did not begin actively making Indian trade blankets until 1893. During an 1880s selling trip through the American West, Sands M. Hart, the son of a company founder, noticed that the Native people he saw on various reservations were frequently attired in brightly colored blankets. Racine Woolen Mills was already producing popular Badger State-brand women's shawls and selling them throughout the Midwest and West. Their looms were easily adapted to produce blankets and fringed shawls for the Indian trade.

Although Racine Woolen Mills was an early trade blanket manufacturer, it was not a large company. In 1905, it unsuccessfully attempted to purchase the struggling Pendleton Woolen Mills. In 1912, Racine itself ceased operations and Sands Hart created the Racine Woolen Manufacturing Company. This new enterprise contracted with other mills to produce Racine-style trade blankets from original Racine designs. It maintained this business model until the 1930, and then sold other manufacturers' blankets and textiles until closing its doors in 1951.

Oregon City, Oregon, sits beside a wide waterfall on the Willamette River. These falls were an early source of water power and Oregon City Woolen Mills had its origins in a wool manufacturing facility that dated to the 1860s. The company did not begin making Indian trade blankets until about 1905. After 1910, it competed with the resurrected Pendleton Woolen Mills for a share of

the trade blanket market. This contest ended in 1932, when economic troubles triggered by the Great Depression caused the mill to cease operations.

Oregon City Woolen Mills produced diverse patterns in a wild array of colors. It made more pictorial patterns than any other manufacturer and surviving examples of these are highly collectible. Although many Oregon City blankets reveal colorful and romantic imagery, the company's advertising copy claimed that its patterns came from designers who were "steeped in Indian lore" and who had worked alongside Native people to secure favorite designs, symbols and colorings.

Wool production began in the Pendleton, Oregon, area before 1860. A wool-scouring mill was established there in 1893 and the city soon became an important wool market, shipping clean wool to Oregon mills, San Francisco, and eastern markets. Local businessmen realized that the operation of a textile mill would enhance the existing scouring operation. Pendleton Woolen Mills was incorporated in 1895 and began production the following year. With the market provided by the adjacent Umatilla Indian Reservation, the company's first Indian-design blankets were released in October 1896.

In 1901, Pendleton put its first Jacquard loom into operation. That same year, Joseph Rawnsley — an Englishman and graduate of Philadelphia Textile School — was hired to run the loom and design Indian blankets. The Pendleton mill was soon in financial trouble and it had ceased operation by 1908. Pendleton residents recognized the importance of the facility to their local economy and they resisted calls to move it. Contact was eventually made with the Bishop family of Salem, Oregon. That city's Thomas Kay Woolen Mills was operating under the direction of Charles P. Bishop. Bishop's sons, Clarence and Roy, were graduates of the Philadelphia Textile School and both had worked at mills in the east and south. With a third brother, Chauncey, they agreed to take over the Pendleton operation.

The Bishops acquired the Pendleton mill in early 1909. By September of that year, a new concrete building had been built and production had resumed. One of the first decisions Pendleton's new management made was to rehire Joseph Rawnsley. His work solidified Pendleton's market share and significantly impacted the Indian trade blanket industry. Pendleton blankets designed and produced before Rawnsley's death in 1929 are much sought after by today's collectors. In fact, vintage blanket collectors prefer blankets made prior to 1942 — the year that mills took up manufacturing for the war effort. After the war, Pendleton did not resume production of Indian blankets until 1947, and after that date their offerings of patterns were significantly reduced.

While Indian trade blankets are synonymous with twentieth-century reservation style, they were never Native-designed or Native-made. Manufacturers were dependent on sales to the non-Native market and rather than transferring specific Native designs onto their blankets, they created patterns that appealed to romantic mainstream stereotypes about Indian imagery. The names of specific patterns were assigned because of their lyrical quality rather than relationships to objective origins. This was reinforced by advertising copy telling buyers that wrapping up in a colorful trade blanket was equivalent to realizing "a dream of the far prairie and a covered fire." Conversely, a 1910 J. Capps & Sons



Oregon City Woolen Mills (Oregon City, OR, 1864–1932), Totem Pole blanket, c. 1920s, wool with cotton warp, 71" x 62"; Collection of Mark Pigott



Oregon City Woolen Mills (Oregon City, OR, 1864–1932), Happy Hunting Ground blanket (front and back), c. 1920s, wool with cotton warp, 71" x 54"; Collection of Mark Pigott



Oregon City Woolen Mills (Oregon City, OR, 1864–1932), Geometric-pattern blanket, c. 1920s, wool with cotton warp, approx. 72" x 60"; Barry Friedman collection



Pendleton Woolen Mills (Pendleton, OR, founded 1895), Pattern No. 406 blanket, c. 1905, wool, approx. 72" x 60"; Collection of Mark Pigott



Pendleton Woolen Mills (Pendleton, OR, founded 1895), Pattern No. 23 blanket, c. 1915, wool with cotton warp, approx. 72" x 60"; Collection of Mark Pigott

advertisement for “genuine” Indian blankets for the home suggested they would give the residence a “mark of luxury — of refinement — of taste.”

The majority of vintage trade blankets that are still in circulation come from non-Native families because Indian people wore them as clothing and generally used them until they were worn out. Others were esteemed as burial attire and the practice of wrapping departed relatives in a new Pendleton blanket is still a common practice in Navajo and Zuni communities.

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Further Reading

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