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Boll evils

By Charles Matthews
Mercury News

If you were asked to list the things that have shaped civilizations, you might think of gold and silver, of water and wheat and rice, of timber and oil and coal. But would you think of the fabric that's probably next to your skin as you read this?

It's easy for me to add cotton to the list. I grew up in the deep South and can remember stooped figures in fields of white and burlap-wrapped cotton bales on loading docks. But I also know that behind the "Gone With the Wind" picturesqueness of those images lies a history of exploitation and toil.

In my lifetime, the stooped figures were replaced by machines, and the bales are now wrapped in plastic. But the Southern cotton economy is troubled: In the Mississippi Delta there are casinos and catfish farms where there were once cotton fields. As Stephen Yafa tells us, in 1970 there were 300,000 cotton growers in the United States; today there are about 25,000.

Yafa has also seen the transformation of a cotton economy, but from a different angle: He grew up in Lowell, Mass., a city created by cotton, once the proud center of the American textile industry. But when he was a boy the industry had relocated to the Carolinas. The mills were decaying hulks, "rows of massive rectangular brick buildings with tiny windows, mostly abandoned."

Today, Lowell has been fixed up for the tourists: The mills are museums and there are guided tours of the city's ethnic neighborhoods. "Little did we know our sweaty streets were destined to become theme-park attractions," Yafa writes.

Yafa's "Big Cotton" is an ambitious attempt to trace the role played by cotton in the exploration and settlement of the New World, the rise of colonialism, the emergence of industrial capitalism and the Marxist reaction against it, slavery and the Civil War, the development of agribusiness, the environmental movement, and the globalization of commerce and agriculture.

The cotton plant, a swamp mallow of the genus *Gossypium*, has been with us since prehistory. The fabric has no single origin: Cultures in Asia, Africa and South America -- so widely separated that they could have had no contact with one another -- learned how to cultivate and spin cotton more than 5,000 years ago.

It wasn't so successfully grown in Europe, however, and that's why it was one of the items that Europeans sought out when they began to explore and colonize the world. As Yafa points out, there are more than a dozen references to cotton in the journals of Christopher Columbus. Once the trade in cotton was established, it became so popular that manufacturers of fabrics made from wool, linen and silk pressured governments to ban its import. France did so in 1686, England in 1700, but the bans were mostly ignored.

When the British took over India in the mid-18th century, they shut down all Indian manufacture of cotton cloth. India's raw cotton was shipped to British textile mills, which then shipped back the finished cloth to sell to people who once wove it for themselves. "By depriving India of the fruits of its own labor, England all but guaranteed that the crop would one day come to symbolize colonial subjugation and provide a rallying point against it," Yafa comments. "When that day finally arrived in the early 1900s, a frail warrior with the heart of a lion, Mahatma Gandhi, intertwined the destinies of homespun cotton and self-rule so adroitly that he made one indistinguishable from the other."

Indian cotton also played a role in the formation of another cotton culture. The British bartered it for slaves in West Africa, whom they then shipped to the Americas -- where, of course, descendants of the slaves would one day labor in Southern cotton fields. A lot of the history of cotton is of the "what goes around, comes around" variety.

The influx of Indian cotton also led to the industrial revolution. Taking advantage of a mechanized spinning machine invented by James Hargreaves, Richard Arkwright set up his first textile mill in 1771, creating the factory system and becoming, in Yafa's words, "the man primarily responsible for changing the way we earn our living in the Western world." The era of William Blake's "dark Satanic mills" began, with its legacy of blight and pollution, child labor and other abuses. Yafa also reminds us that the co-author of "The Communist Manifesto," Friedrich Engels, was the son of a German cotton manufacturer.

The phenomenal success of Arkwright's factory system was hastened by an invention by an American, Eli Whitney, whose cotton gin separated cotton fibers from the sticky seeds. In 1793, the year of Whitney's invention, only 4 percent of clothing in Europe and the United States was made of cotton. By the end of the 19th century, that figure had risen to 73 percent. The United States exported 487,000 pounds of raw cotton to England in 1793. By 1825, the year Whitney died, those exports totaled 171 million pounds. During that period, the slave population of the South

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more than doubled.

"Cotton is a drug," wrote the black author Richard Wright, "and for three hundred years we have taken it to kill the pain of hunger, but it does not ease our suffering." Much of the story of the American cotton culture is so familiar that Yafa need only sketch it in -- slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, sharecropping, and the great migration of blacks to the North as mechanization eliminated the necessity of hand-picking.

He focuses in more detail on the environmental havoc wrought by cotton, beginning with attempts to control the boll weevil, a pest that crossed the Rio Grande at Brownsville, Texas, in 1892, and traveled eastward about 60 miles per year, reaching the Carolinas in 1921. (That it moved east and not west helped California become the state that grows more cotton than any other except Texas. The cotton fields of California grower J.G. Boswell, Yafa notes, "cover more square miles than Rhode Island.")

By 1962, the year that Rachel Carson's enormously influential book about pesticides, "Silent Spring," was published, Yafa tells us, "cotton farmers were applying more than 41 percent of all pesticides in agricultural use in the United States. The South accounted for two-thirds of them."

The problem was that the stronger the pesticides sprayed on them, the tougher the weevils got: a simple matter of survival of the fittest, or natural selection. (It's ironic that the South, the region most notoriously opposed to the teaching of Darwin's theory, should be a place where it could be clearly seen in action.)

Fortunately, some eco-friendly ways of handling cotton pests, such as pheromone traps, have been developed. But cotton is a never-ending source of problems and controversies. Yafa concludes the saga with the latest ones: genetic manipulation of cotton DNA, the battles over subsidies for American cotton growers, the demise of the American textile industry, and the emergence of China as a cotton power.

Yafa sometimes works too hard at lightening up a tough subject -- he includes, for example, an overlong, superficial and glib social history of blue jeans. He also has a fatal weakness for weary jokes that land with a thud: Discussing the efforts to develop pheromone traps that lure insects with the scent of the opposite sex, he reports on a failed experiment in which "female weevils weren't turned on. I'm sorry, they said in effect; I have a headache tonight." And he stumbles into inconsistency: On the very first page, he tells us that cotton is grown on about 77 million acres in more than 80 countries, but on page 293, the figures are 90 million acres in 70 countries, and he gives no source for either set of figures in the notes.

But "Big Cotton" is a readable, informative and often entertaining book about a complex and perhaps surprisingly important subject. It gives a new meaning to that ad slogan cooked up for the Cotton Board, "The Fabric of Our Lives." There were many deaths in the weave, too.

BIG COTTON: How a Humble Fiber Created Fortunes, Wrecked Civilizations, and Put America on the Map

By Stephen Yafa

Viking, 397 pp., \$25.95

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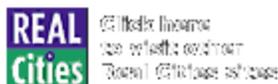
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