



The Woodard family produces throws from their cotton crop.



THE FABRIC OF FAMILY

A business is built on a near-tragedy and a mother's dream.

By **Des Keller**

Five years ago, Tracy Woodard and her husband, Ty, started the business Covered in Cotton from their Darlington, South Carolina, farm.

The company uses a portion of the family's cotton crop to manufacture throws, baby blankets, table linens, hand towels, and aprons.

The success of Covered in Cotton led to the construction two years ago of a 6,000-square-foot on-farm warehouse with offices, a showroom, and a processing facility for online orders.

"Five years sounds so long and so short all at the same time," says Tracy. "Looking back, I see how the Lord has done so much with a small idea." Tracy isn't just giving thanks for their successful business — it's more than that. A lot more.

Close Call

Covered in Cotton was born of a life-threatening illness suffered by one of Tracy and Ty's three children. Tobin, now 8, survived and has thrived since. In response to what

seemed like a random act of kindness during his hospitalization, Tracy was inspired to give back.

The idea for the business took nearly three years to germinate. But we're getting ahead of the story. In December 2015, their 3-month-old twins, Tobin and daughter Tyson, were staying with Tracy's parents in Lexington while the young couple attended a conference. Tracy's mother called to tell them Tobin was running a fever but otherwise seemed fine.

Even so, the parents fortunately cut their trip short. Tobin had swiftly become listless and barely able to move. Tracy and Ty rushed him to Prisma Health Children's Hospital in Columbia, South Carolina, where he was diagnosed with bacterial meningitis, the most serious form of a disease that affects the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

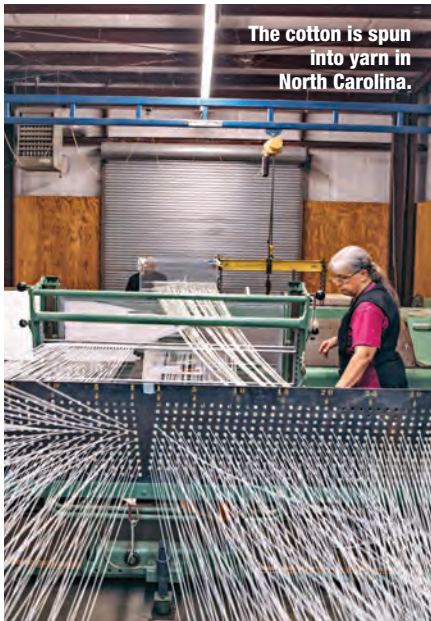
Even with treatment, bacterial meningitis can be deadly, and half of all patients afflicted with it suffer long-term effects. Large doses of antibiotics are the only real treatment. Tobin spent 35 days in the hospital. Tracy

stayed at the hospital with him while Ty split his time between the hospital and the 4,500-acre farm he works with his father and brother.

Tobin's condition became worse before it became better. The day before Christmas Eve, he needed emergency brain surgery to relieve fluid pressure on the brain and to treat the existing infection.

Before the surgery, a nurse at the hospital gave the family a blanket. The Woodards were so touched by the act that the blanket still lies folded in their home.

The surgery was successful. "You would have never known he'd been through anything by the next morning," says Tracy. Tobin continued to improve. His hair grew in, covering two incision scars on his scalp. ▶



The cotton is spun into yarn in North Carolina.



Covered in Cotton products are packaged and shipped from the Woodard farm.



He regained the ability to move his head and rolled over for the first time in the hospital.

Turning a Dream Into Reality

Tracy continued to hold the memory of the blanket long after they left the hospital, and it appeared in a dream two years later.

“I woke up and knew that we were supposed to make blankets or throws with our own cotton,” she says. “I even knew what it was supposed to be called and what the logo would look like.”

In a notebook she wrote down everything in her dream. “I even dreamt about how the throws were to be tied into the story of our son. I told Ty, ‘This is what we’re supposed to do.’”

Ty was on board, but coming up with an idea and actually making it happen are two different things. After 10 months of research, calls, meetings, designs (Tracy has a graphic communications degree), and expenses, the first batch of cream-color throws were delivered to the farm.

Covered in Cotton products are the result of a nearly 500-mile round-trip journey. The cotton leaves the Woodard farm for a gin in Hartsville, South Carolina, then goes to a yarn spinner in Thomasville, North Carolina; a yarn pleyer in Hickory, North Carolina; a weaver in Blacksburg, South Carolina;

and finally to a seamster in Lamar, South Carolina, before the products return to the farm where they are packaged and shipped.

About 90% of Covered in Cotton’s sales come through its online site (coveredincotton.com). The company also does limited wholesale business with select retailers, mainly in North and South Carolina. Tracy also hosts sales events and tours at the farm throughout the year. They rely on social media and email marketing mainly, but the most interest has been generated by media, such as *Successful Farming*, telling their story.

Providing Comfort

Tracy’s idea wasn’t just about a way to make money by creating value-added products from the family’s cotton crop. Tracy wanted to return the kindness of that nurse by providing throws for other families in situations similar to theirs. A Covered in Cotton throw is donated to one of South Carolina’s children’s units for every 10 the Woodards sell. They have now donated more than 1,000 throws.

Ty and Tracy have gotten this far with the help and support of Ty’s parents, Frankie and Connie Woodard, and Ty’s older brother, Wes. The three families run the farm together. Wes and Ty also operate a cattle herd as a separate business, while Wes has a hay

enterprise.

Asked if she would have done anything differently, Tracy says it would have been nice to have taken more classes or workshops to learn the manufacturing process or more effective marketing. But you can’t foresee the future or know the perfect timing.

“We’re still not experts,” Tracy says. “But our relationships with partners in the Carolinas have allowed us to shed some light and tell their stories about what they do — and about what we do on the farm. I now do a lot of speaking and traveling, often to ag-related events. It gives us a platform.”

Life goes on for the Woodards, the family farm, and their burgeoning business. Tobin shows no lasting effects from his bout of meningitis. He and Tyson are now 8, and their older brother, Tate, is 11. All three kids play baseball, while Ty helps coach their teams and Tracy is team mom. Tobin loves football and baseball. Tyson does cheerleading and plays piano. All the kids like horseback riding.

Occasionally, the children will complain when they have to go along to run errands related to Covered in Cotton, such as making deliveries.

“We have that conversation about how Mom and Dad don’t work for someone else,” says Tracy. “There are a lot of benefits because of that, but it also means 24/7 responsibility. Part of that responsibility is to help other families and provide comfort in some way.” **SF**