# Washday In the 1920's

**by Katheryn Freeman Fuller**
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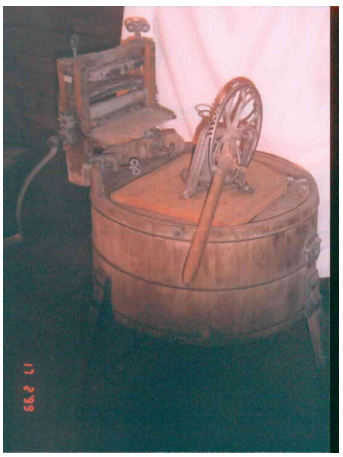
Laundry is no big deal in the nineties. Pick up a load of clothes in the same general category, throw them into the washer, with detergent, set the dials for temperature and time, and read a book, chat on the telephone, or do whatever you wish. When the washer is finished, shake the clothes out a bit, transfer them to the dryer, set the dials for fabric and time, and go back to your other occupation. When the dryer is finished, fold the clothes and put them away. As I said, no big deal, and you may do the laundry at any hour of the day, any day of the week.



Wooden washing machine used by Hazel B. Freeman, mother of Katheryn F. Fuller. Shows the apparatus on cover to agitate the clothes.

Washday in the twenties was an ordeal. Monday was washday for practically the whole population, and in the villages there was some rivalry among housewives to be first to get sheets on the line. In our household preparations began Sunday evening when my mother shaved a cake of yellow Kirkman's Borax Soap into a saucepan, covered it with water, and put it on the back of the wood-burning kitchen range. Before going to bed she pumped water from the cistern and filled the copper washboiler and left that on the range to start warming during the night.

A wooden machine with no cover showing the ribbed inside to help scrub the clothes. Note white electric washing machine in background and also the old scrub board leaning against a discarded kitchen sink.

Immediately after breakfast the next morning the electric washing machine was dragged in from the back porch. Ours was a "laun-dry-ette", purchased from Edwards Mercantile Company (Padgett's). In the summer the washing was done on the porch, but during the winter the process was crammed into the kitchen, leaving little room for other activity. First the hot water from the boiler was transferred to the washer, then a bench with two washtubs was set up for rinsing, and well water was added to them; in the winter some hot water was added to the cold. The soap had become jelly overnight and was added to the washer, making a good suds. Our washer had a spin-dry (the "dry" part of the name) so the clothes didn't have to go through the wringer into the first rinsing tub, but the next two steps used a hand wringer. Then the basketful of clean laundry was taken to the line and hung up, summer or winter. On a cold winter day the clothes were frozen before the last ones were pinned to the line. In the summer a light breeze and sunshine dried them quickly.

The same water served for as many loads as there were, getting colder and dirtier until by the time the barn clothes were washed last it was not as efficient as for the whites. When the last load was on the line there was still hard work left. The rinsing tubs were emptied, a pailful at a time, then the washer, and the equipment was stored for another week.

Obviously, one washing per week meant that clothes were not washed after one wearing. The general rule was one clean outfit of underwear and stockings per week, and usually one outfit of "everyday" clothes. There might be two or three aprons, which protected the housedress. Even one outfit per week made a big washday if there were several children.

Perhaps a few words of explanation about cistern water and well water might be helpful. Most farmhouses had cisterns, usually in the cellar, occasionally in the attic. Those in the cellar were built of concrete or stone, usually square and 8-10 feet per side, and about the same in height. Eaves troughs and downspouts drained the rain and melted the snow from the roof into the cistern. A cast iron pump in the kitchen, operated manually, raised the water to the sink. The water was soft (no minerals), made a good suds, and was used for all washing. Well water, on the other hand, was good to drink, but was hard (contained minerals), and in the days before detergents, made soap very ineffective, forming curds that stuck to the clothes, but didn't clean them. If there was a long dry spell in the fall, people worried that the cistern wouldn't provide soft water all winter.

Wringers which were operated by a hand turned crank for pressing the water out of the washed clothes. Can be seen in the Edwards Museum.


Copper washboiler used to heat the water for the washing machine. Also a metal plunger to agitate the clothes by hand.

Before the twenties and rural electrification there had been some progress from the "washtub and scrub board" of our great grandmother's day. My mother had a wooden washing machine, a tub slightly larger than the ordinary laundry tub, corrugated on the inside to give a rough surface, and with a round plate of wood about a foot in diameter with four wooden pegs. This was connected to a heavy stick which was pushed back and forth by hand and agitated the pegged plate. Some machines had a wheel with a handle to supply the manual power. This was an improvement, but not exactly labor-saving.

In the late twenties GoldDust made its appearance for laundry and dishes. It was fine grains of soap and much simpler than shaving the Kirkman's Borax, but was still harsh, and women's hands were red and chapped all winter. Gradual improvements came until now we have mild suds in hard water, and change our clothes as often as we like.

A couple of anecdotes have a slight connection to the topic. In regard to changing clothes infrequently - In the early 1900's my mother was teaching in a rural school where there were four boys from one family. Their mother had a strange custom. In the fall she bought new long johns for each boy, and sewed them closed. In the spring she cut the boys loose, to the relief of not only the boys, but the whole school.

In the 1880's when my mother-in-law was a child, one cold, windy night a man stopped at their house, visibly upset, and talking incoherently about a ghost. Superstition was quite common, but that ghost was taken care of when they discovered a man's union suit, frozen stiff, had loosened from the clothes line, and was "walking around", driven by the wind.


Showing the inside of the plunger which was used to agitate the clothes being washed in a tub when no washing machine was available.