

Wash Day!

Washing laundry is one of the oldest domestic tasks known to man, and it took enormous amounts of time and energy. Washing has developed significantly over the course of human history. But how was it done before all the developments of the last 100 years?

- In earlier times, people brought their laundry to rivers and streams to wash, using rocks or boards as scrubbing surfaces.
- Soap got its name, according to an ancient Roman legend, from Mount Sapo, where animals were sacrificed. Rain washed a mixture of the melted animal fat and wood ashes down in to the clay soil along the Tiber River. Women found that this clay mixture made their wash cleaner with little effort.
- Soap, as such, made from ash, lye and animal fats or oils, was rarely used before the 1700's and not easily attainable if you were poor. It was used only for tackling stains and not used in the whole wash. Stains or heavily soiled linens were treated at home before taken to the river by soaking laundry in lye. It was called 'bucking' and aimed to whiten as well as cleanse and was only done once every few months.

Real progress in clothes washing didn't really begin until the 1700's.

- Washing by machine goes back as far as the 1700's but not many people had seen a washing machine, much less used one. Before the 1800's, they were used mostly by private institutions or rich private homes.



- The one machine that *did* receive much attention was the "Washing Mill" introduced by Edward Beetham in 1787. It was advertised as "works by pressure only" as opposed to the act of wringing, which was portrayed as damaging to linen. Towards the end of the late 18th century, other rivals were advertising their similar washing inventions.

- There were two influential English designs patented before 1800. Rogerson in 1780 and Sidgier in 1782. They were similar in that they both adapted a rotating drum design to their machines. Washing machines in hospitals and other private institutions used this basic idea. These were only slight improvements to the washing laundry industry, including the invention of the scrub board in 1797, which remained the most popular method of washing for some time.

- Drying was done outside in the sunshine. The sun was also used to bleach by whitening fabrics. The laundry was spread out on bushes, hedges, and even the grass. Occasionally people would build wooden frames or use rope for drying indoors in the event of poor weather. There were also outdoor frames and

clotheslines used for drying, but it was not common.

- After the 1800s, wooden washtubs and dolly tubs filled with hot water, a bar of soap, washboards, dolly sticks, and wooden plungers were the items most widely used for washing throughout the 1800's. There were washing machines of a kind, but not many homes had them. They were primarily marketed to private institutions and the wealthy. Riverside washing continued throughout many parts of the world.
- Between 1800 and 1900, the western world prospered and more laundry ingredients such as starch and laundry blue were introduced and sold to more homes. In 1847, William Blackstone built his first hand driven, wooden washing machine. Many improvements came about in the 19th century. Factories mass produced metal tubs, tongs, clothespins, pegs, pins and drying racks.
- Soap in the 1800's was only used economically, mainly being used to tackle heavily soiled linen or stains. Ash lye was still used to clean everyday clothing. By the end of the 1800's, you could readily buy a branded laundry soap bar and grate it or buy already made soap flakes pre-packaged. New oils became available such as palm and coconut. Palm oil was used extensively for white soap. We see improvement in starch production. Laundry blue, borax, and washing soda were all packaged under various brand names and advertised to restore faded clothing. Borax was promoted as a miracle all-purpose cleaning product. By the end of the 1800's and into the early 1900's, the laundry industry drastically expanded.
- In the early 1900's, the wooden washtubs were replaced by metal tubs. The earliest manual washing machine imitated the use of a washboard by using a lever to move one curved surface over another and rubbing clothes between two ribbed surfaces. This washer was patented in the U.S. in 1846. The first electric powered clothes washer was invented by Alva Fisher in 1908. By 1911, it was possible to buy oscillating cylinder, domestic washing machines with sheet metal tubs inside.
- Beatty Brothers of Fergus, Ontario, was the first company to produce an agitator washing machine. In the United States, the first company to adopt agitator technology was Maytag in 1922.
- In the 1920's, Canadian machines were offered with built-in gas or electric water heaters. The next development of the washing machine was the clock timing device which allowed the machine to be set for a predetermined length of wash cycle.
- John W. Chamberlain invented a machine that would wash, rinse, and extract water from clothes in a single operation in the 1930's.
- In 1947, the first top-loading automatic washing machines were introduced by the Whirlpool Corporation.
- The first automatic washing machines were made in Europe in 1951.
- In 1957, GE introduced a washing machine equipped with 5 push buttons to control wash temperature, rinse temperature, agitation speed and spin speed.

