

Laundry In the Model A Era

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In our car club we talk about the cars and we talk about era clothing, but we do not talk about cleaning our clothing. I have a book written in 1931 about laundering and dry cleaning. The book was published by the Woman's Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences. After reading this book, I see that laundry is laundry. We still have to sort, wash, dry, iron and fold our clothes. However, during the Model A era, it was a lot of work. The process took the better part of two days and could be downright dangerous. They did not have the conveniences that we have today.

When Is Wash Day?

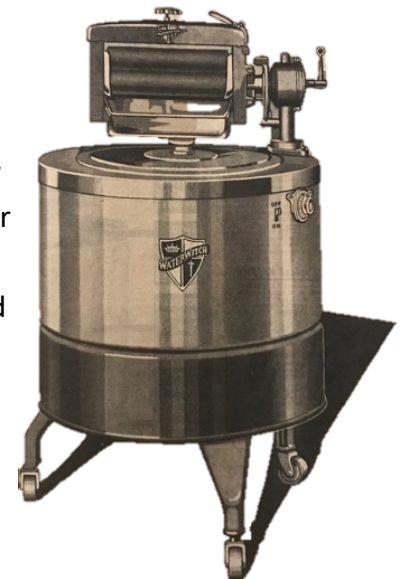
A famous poem says that Monday is laundry day. The book says that Tuesday was becoming more popular. Monday was the day to prepare for the washday: put the house in order, remove stains, mend and sort the clothes.

Setting Up the Laundry – The Equipment

In most homes the laundry was done in the kitchen or in an adjoining room. Sometimes the laundry was in the basement. No matter which room was used, it needed to be well ventilated, well lit and have access to hot water.

Washing Machines and Tubs

There were several types of washing machines. Basically they were washing tubs with a lid and a device inside to agitate the clothing. They could be cranked by hand or have a motor powered by electricity, gas or water. The 1931 Sears catalog advertised an electric washer for \$50.00 to \$65.00 and a gasoline one for \$89.50. A hand activated machine sold for \$16.00. To put this in perspective, the Model A era was during the Great Depression, when the average annual income was \$1850.00. That is about \$36.00 a week. I suspect that most homes used the hand cranked model. The wash tub with a wash board was still available, as well as a hand held suction plunger or agitator.



The washing machine tubs needed to be cleaned by hand with soap and water. If the tub was copper, a mixture of vinegar, salt and kerosene was used. In our modern era we use a tub cleaning agent and the washer cleans itself.

Soap

Detergent as we know it today was not invented until 1933. A laundress needed to be a simple chemist. Soap used for laundry needed to be flaked, so that it could be dissolved in water. It could be purchased already flaked. If flaked soap was not available, bar soap was flaked by



using a soap flaker. The picture at left shows a basic hand-cranked soap flaker. The soap was dissolved in hot water and whipped to a foam. Soap jelly could also be made by mixing flakes, water and borax. This mixture was heated on the stove. Soap beads were new on the market in the Model A era. They were supposed to dissolve in water instantly. A laundress also needed to be familiar with bluing, starch, acids, alkalis and how to soften water.



Clothes Washing

After soaking, washing the clothes with soap was the next step. Then, they had to be rinsed two or three times. The washing machines of the era didn't have a rinse cycle. The water would have to be emptied and refilled each time. After washing and between rinses, the clothes were put through a ringer; either electric or hand cranked.



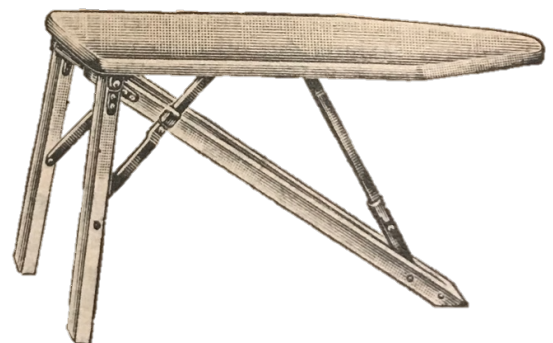
Clothes Drying

For the most part clothes were hung to dry outdoors or inside on racks during inclement weather. There was a clothes dryer patented in 1892, but it basically was a ventilated device that sat on top of a stove with a hand crank. The type of dryer we use today was not sold until 1938.

Irons and Ironing Boards

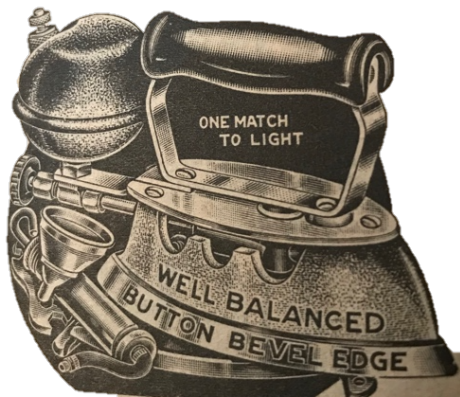
Ironing boards were similar to the ones we have today. The picture at right shows a typical three-legged board. A sheet of asbestos could be used to hold the hot iron when it was not in use during the ironing process.

There were a wide range of irons available. They came in different sizes and were used for different purposes. It



was suggested that if only one iron was purchased, it should weigh between six to eight pounds. Regulating the temperature of the iron was also more difficult than it is today.

Irons were heated through different means: gas, electric, gasoline/kerosene and charcoal, or the old fashioned cast-iron model that was heated on the stove. The gas iron is pictured below at left; the electric iron at the right. With all of these types, except for the electric iron, drafts could be a problem because they could fan the flames and cause a fire. The gasoline irons were sold from 1930's through the 1950's. If a house did not have gas or electricity, the self-contained gasoline iron was an alternative.



Steam irons for the home were not available until 1950. In the Model A era, the wrinkles in clothes needed to be removed by other means. After the clothes were dry, they had to be dampened by sprinkling them with water. Then they were rolled up to wait to be ironed.

As we wear our period clothing, especially reproduction and era image, we should be grateful that at the end of the day, that we have more cleaning options and modern technology to more quickly and easily clean our clothes. They will be ready for another day without having to deal with the hazardous and time-consuming process used almost a century ago.

References

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