

Agitated to Clean: How the Washing Machine Changed Life for the American Woman

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History



Abstract

For most historians there exists a minimal understanding of women's domestic life in the past. This project explores the tools used for washing clothing and provides insight into the lives of the individuals who used them, and how the evolution of these tools changed their way of life. Using a method based on the works of Jules David Prown, an interpretive analysis is being completed for multiple artifacts selected from the Idaho State Historical Society's collection. The steps of this method include a thorough description of the artifact, making deductions about the artifact based on the description, as well as creating and testing hypotheses about what the artifact signifies. In addition to focusing on the specific artifacts, advertisements for these items are being analyzed to determine how these products were marketed to these women; this will assist in determining the comfort levels individuals had with newer methods of washing, and reveal the proposed benefits of transitioning to new machinery. The overall purpose of this research is to ignite an interest in the history of domestic women, as well as promote the preservation of the artifacts they used on a regular basis.

Introduction

The individuals that fill the role of homemaker in American homes over the past couple centuries have been largely ignored, with their work being seen as low status, low security, and a low power job. In the book *Homemakers: The Forgotten Workers*, Rae Andre discusses how the job of caring for children and the home is thought to be a priceless contribution to the family, yet there are a lack of benefits being extended to this group, which is comprised mainly of women. This could be because "homemaking and domestic culture have traditionally been disdained or overlooked by historians in inverse proportion to their glorification in popular literature. Decades of scholarship, following prevailing attitudes in our society, have placed a higher value on customary male activities than on customary female activities."¹

These activities were hardly static, and "as the site of male labor shifted from the homestead to stores, factories, and offices, the house became the place for another kind of work- specialized domestic work—women's work."² This so called "women's work" was never ending: "every household was then a long term storehouse and a large-scale processing plant that required constant labor almost around the clock."³ This need for constant labor led to the technological advances within the 19th and 20th centuries, specifically the invention of the electric washing machine. For women "the household inventions did produce a higher standard of living and a wide range of technological possibilities by the end of the 19th century."⁴

One of the main responsibilities of a homemaker, then and today, was the care and cleaning of the clothes worn by the family. "Doing laundry was their most backbreaking and time consuming chore, especially since it took at least two days every week. But even more than time, it was the lack of water and the sheer bulk of farm dirt in clothes that made the job so onerous."⁵

¹ Marilyn Ferris Motz and Pat Browne, *Making the American Home: Middle Class Women and Domestic Material Culture 1840-1940*, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988), 2.

² Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16.

³ Walter Buehr, *Home Sweet Home in the 19th Century*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965), 39.

⁴ Susan B. Strasser, "An Enlarged Human Existence? Technology and Household Work in 19th Century America," in *Women and Household Labor*, ed. Sarah Fenstermaker Berk (Berkeley Hills; Sage Publications, 1980), 30.

⁵ Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, 158.

In 1981, a national oral history program began, and many women shared their memories, both of managing their own households and the work done by their mothers. Several participants commented specifically on laundry. Jane Morgan, a participant from Mississippi, recalled: “My mother used a scrub board and three big tubs of water to do the washing with. I’m talking about a zinc tub of well water that we had drawn from the well and heated in a wash pot. Of course wash day was an all-day affair, usually on Monday.”⁶ According to Kathleen M. Brown in her book *Foul Bodies*, “doing laundry on Monday permitted the women to schedule their most strenuous day of labor immediately after a day of rest.”⁷ In addition, Sunday meals usually consisted of a large spread, allowing for easy leftovers on Monday and more time to devote to the task of laundry. Prior to the use of the washing machine, clothing was often washed outdoors, in tubs of water that were hauled from a spring or well and heated over a fire. The work consisted of scrubbing out dirt, wringing out the clothing, then hanging it on the line to dry. This was no easy task.

The washing machine changed the method of cleaning. Jessie Halsell of New Mexico stated:

I believe our son was about six months old when we got our first washing machine—a gasoline motor. It was something to own the first washing machine in that little community. A number of people come [sic] in to see it work—to see if it would work. Frankly I hoped it would, and it did. What a blessing for someone to have. Of course, we had no running water. The water still had to be warmed in the big old black wash pot outside and carried in in a bucket. But, oh, we was [sic] glad to do that. I got loose from that old washboard.⁸

Early washing machines were marketed and thus viewed as a tool that would radically diminish the work being done by women in the home. No longer were they required to spend their Mondays scrubbing laundry up and down the washboard. A machine could now do it for them. Oral histories can provide insights into the lives of these women, but additional sources, including material culture and advertisements, can expand on those insights. This allows a better understanding of the habits and beliefs surrounding washing machines and their addition to the home.

Methods

So how can the lives of these women, many long gone, be examined and appreciated? Material culture can fill the void and provide an opportunity to better understand the lives of these women from the 19th and 20th centuries. Jules David Prown states in his article “The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?” that “the study of material culture is the study of material to understand culture, to discover the beliefs—the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time.”⁹ Information about these forgotten women is revealed through the process of choosing a specific category of material culture and focusing on how it was used and what role it played in the lives of the homemakers. In addition to bringing a greater understanding to the lives of these women, studying particular material culture can bring value to the items by placing them within a historical context and showing what an item suggests about the world it resides within.¹⁰ Haltman writes:

It begins with the premise that in objects there can be read essential evidence of unconscious as well as conscious attitudes and beliefs, some specific to those object’s original makers and users as individuals, others latent in the larger cultural milieus in which those objects circulated. Our focus tends to be more on user interface, on the ways embedded meanings are actualized through use. Material culture, in this view of it, is consequently less an explanatory than an exploratory practice.¹¹

⁶ Eleanor Arnold, ed. *Voices of American Homemakers*, (Bloomington: Indiana Univeristy Press, 1985), 159.

⁷ Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 218.

⁸ Arnold, *Voices of American Homemakers*, 166.

⁹ Jules David Prown, “The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?” in *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*, ed. Jules David Prown and Jenneth Haltman, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000), 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ Kenneth Haltman, Introduction to *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*, ed. Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000), 9.

A number of washing machines from the collection at the Idaho State Historical Society were examined using this method of studying material culture. First, each item was described in thorough detail looking at all aspects, material, spatial, and temporal. For example, when inspecting the washboard, it was discovered that there was a significant amount of wear on the top left side. This element in the description led to deductions about what might have caused this to occur. Was it something that was originally in the wood before the item was created? Was the item stored in a location where something else was constantly rubbing on the side? Or more likely, was the worn spot the result of an individual bracing the board with her hand while scrubbing clothes up and down on a weekly basis?

The next step in the process is to form speculations about what the item signified and how it fit within the culture in which it existed. These include ideas about who was using the board and what she thought about the item. Was she grateful for the tool or was there hope for a better alternative? Was a better tool available but outside of her fiscal reach, leading her to make do with what she had? These questions then led to written sources to determine if the ideas that were proposed could be correct. These written sources included the previously mentioned advertisements and oral histories.

Artifacts

This article will discuss three artifacts in detail: a washboard (accession # 1959.214.0000), an Automatic Washer Electric and Power machine (accession # 1970.019.0001), and a Bendix Automatic Home Washer (accession # 1991.065.0000). These artifacts are all part of the collection at the Idaho State Historical Society.



Figure 1. Idaho State Historical Society
Cassie Green, photographer



Figure 2. Idaho State Historical Society
Cassie Green, photographer

To understand the significance of advanced technology for clothes washing, a starting point must be established. This was done by examining a washboard that would have been used prior to more advanced machinery. The washboard is rectangular in shape, with legs that extend down. Measuring 18 inches high and 9 inches across, the construction is simple and designed for utility, possibly homemade. A corrugated metal plate is fitted on the front with a dull and scratched appearance, an additional wood piece is in place behind the plate for support. The piece is held together by metal nails. There are several flaws in the construction causing gaps between the wood pieces. Additionally, the wood was not sanded to be smooth. The wood is slightly bowed in places, possibly due to continued use in water over the years. The metal plate was not perfectly flat against the wood, and this allowed for some give and take as the user pressed the clothing up and down the plate. The bottom left corner shown in fig. 2 shows the imprint of the metal ridges on the wood. This provides evidence of the force being exerted during use.

While this tool required a substantial amount of energy to operate, it was fairly small and did not take up a large amount of storage space. It would be relatively simple to learn to use, and the modest design would have made it possible to build one at home, making it an affordable tool.



Figure 3. Idaho State Historical Society
Cassie Green, photographer



Figure 4. Idaho State Historical Society
Cassie Green, photographer



Figure 5. Idaho State Historical Society
Cassie Green, photographer



Figure 6. Idaho State Historical Society
Cassie Green, photographer

The Automatic Washer Electric and Power Machine, model 4, was built by the Automatic Electric Washer Co. in Newton, Iowa, circa 1915. The design features a wooden barrel sitting on top of a metal cart. The sides of the cart move up and create a tabletop next to the barrel. The cart is able to be easily moved due to a wheel base. The barrel is approximately 21 inches across and 15 inches high with metal rings around the top and bottom.

(Advertisements suggest a tub capacity of eight sheets.) The lid swings up and opens to one side revealing a dolly mechanism attached to the lid (fig. 4). “A dolly is comprised of a wooden stick or mallet with an attached cluster of legs or pegs and is used to pound and grab onto and move the clothes through the water.”¹² Once closed, the lid has a gear on the top that attaches to a removable arm. The arm runs down the front of the machine (seen in fig. 3) and is attached to the gear box on the underside of the cart.

The gear box contains a number of exposed rotating parts. There is an open space where the electric motor originally attached to the drive rod. An outline of the motor exists (fig. 5) in the wood as well as holes and a bolt from where it was originally bolted to the base. A small plastic white piece is screwed to the bottom side of the tub and secured the electric cord to the machine. Though this machine was electric, it would not have been plugged in to an electric socket. The technology at the time used a base similar to a light bulb that would be screwed into a light socket to provide the power. Even though the machine uses electricity, it is not designed for running water and features a water line on the side. The user would have to heat and carry water in order to wash clothing. The bottom of the barrel has a stopper that can be removed in order to drain the water after use.

Fig. 6 shows an additional arm that is running down the side of the machine. This has two distinct purposes, the first is it can be used to attach a hand crank to the washer. This enables the user to hand propel the dolly in the barrel and the wringer in the event that electricity is not available. The second function is it allows for the machine to be multifunctional. Washing women could attach various kitchen appliances, including an ice cream freezer, a food chopper, or a butter churn.

This arm also provides power to the wringer located on the top of the barrel. The wringer is sitting on top of a rotating arm that allows for the wringer to move to various locations. This movement permitted a second barrel to be placed over the lifted cart side and filled with clean water for rinsing and the clothing to be immediately placed in the wringer from either tub. The wringer includes features such as adjustable rollers for bulkier clothing and buttons and a safety release to be used in the case of entanglement. A reversible water board made it possible for the water pressed out of the clothing to flow into either the wash barrel or the rinse barrel.



Figure 7. Idaho State Historical Society
Cassie Green, photographer

¹² Lee Maxwell, *Save Womens Lives: History of Washing Machines*, (Eaton, Colorado: Oldewash, 2003), 7.

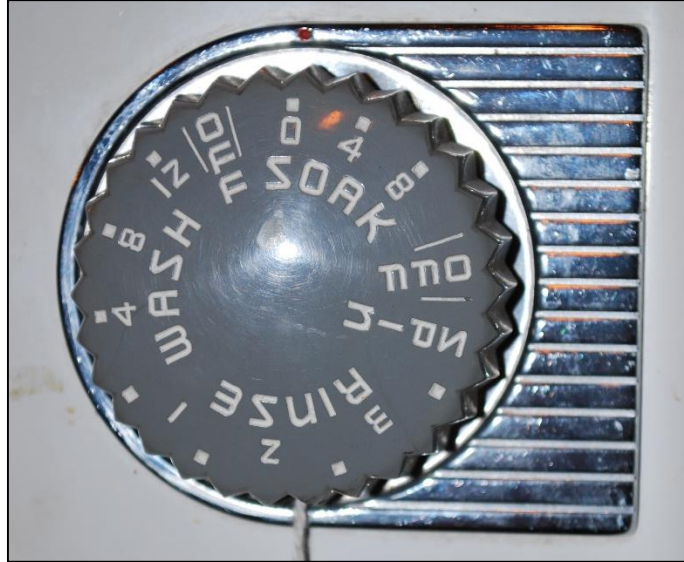


Figure 8. Idaho State Historical Society
Cassie Green, photographer

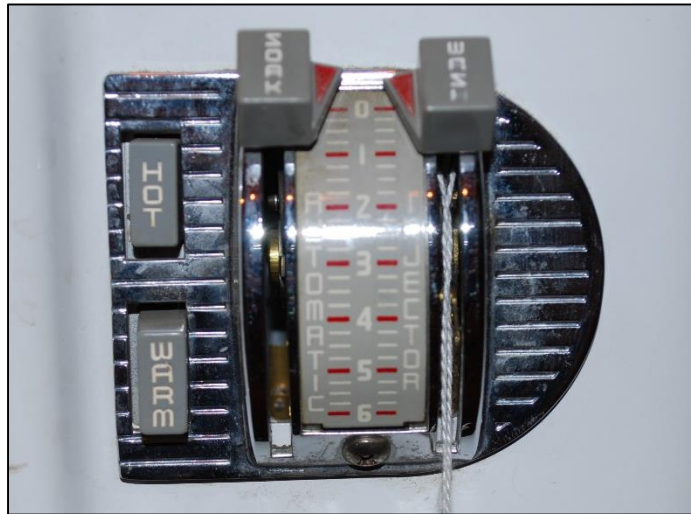


Figure 9. Idaho State Historical Society
Cassie Green, photographer

This Bendix Home Washing Machine was built in Indiana in the 1940s. The machine is rectangular in design with a metal frame that is 20 inches by 25 inches. The machine is three feet tall and sits on metal feet. Painted with a glossy white finish, there are scratches in multiple places from use over time. The top of the machine has a three-inch diameter hole to attach a vent to. On the right side of the top, is a plastic piece that flips up and allows the user to place soap in the washing machine. Inside the opening is a metal rotating piece that pushes the soap further into the machine. There is evidence of a powdered material, possibly some kind of detergent.

The front of the washer contains a small round door that swings out to the left. The door features a white frame with a glass center so the inside can be viewed. Silver colored handles on the side match the silver found on the control knobs. Inside of the door is a metal drum with small holes to allow for water flow. The drum is enamel-coated navy blue with white speckles, and there are four fins evenly spaced along the side to ensure movement of the clothing.

The top left and right corners of the machine have the control knobs. The left side has a knob with a ridged edge (fig. 9) and markings for wash, soak, spin, and rinse. The machine can be set to wash for differing time frames, which allows for a more specialized cleaning. The right side has two buttons that select the water temperature (hot, warm) and two sliding knobs that control the timing for the automatic injector for the soap.

The back of the machine features an electric two-prong plug, a hose to allow for water flow into the machine and a drain hose to empty the machine. The bottom of the front of the machine has a pull down panel that allows easy access to the machinery.

Discussion

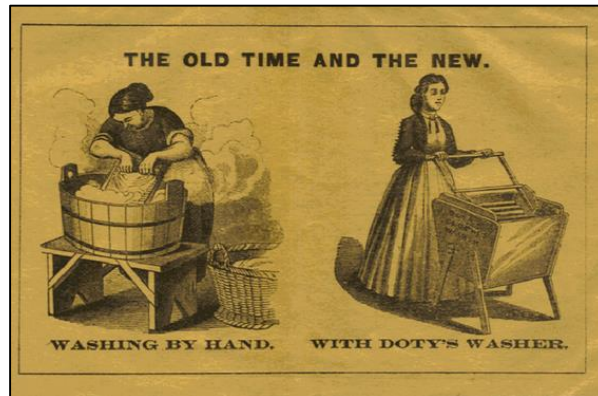


Figure 10. 1860 Doty Washer Advertisement,
Lee Maxwell Collection

The notion of the washing machine caught on relatively quickly, and by the 1920s there were approximately 700 manufacturers producing a variety of machines.¹³ During this time, the number of middle-class families in America grew. This made it difficult to find cheap labor to help with washing clothing, and women in the home wanted a better way to manage this time-consuming chore. Advertisements presented the idea that a washing machine was going to take away the wash day drudgery and turn Mondays into a bright and happy day. In the advertisement for the Doty Washer (fig. 10) from 1860, there is a drastic difference between the woman using the washboard to wash her clothing and the woman using the washing machine. The woman on the left is bent over the washbasin in an uncomfortable position. She appears to be exerting a tremendous amount of energy, and the viewer can feel her exhaustion and discomfort. The style of clothing that she is wearing is something that you would expect someone to wear when they are anticipating a difficult and dirty chore, and her hair is pulled back in order to keep it out of the way of her working. The basket of clothing at her feet indicates she has much more work ahead and the day is far from done. The woman on the right with the Doty machine is much more relaxed. She does not have the bent-over posture of the other woman. She is standing upright and relaxed, a similar stance to that of a mother pushing a baby buggy through the park. She is not surrounded by additional laundry because thanks to the ease of the machine, her work is almost over. Her clothing is more elegant, not something she would wear for everyday chores. Her hair is styled and she looks as though she is ready to attend a fancy event.

¹³ Maxwell, *Save Womens Lives*, 40.

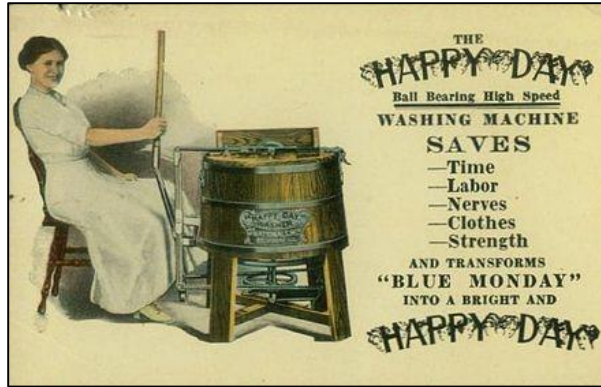


Figure 11. 1910 Advertisement
<http://www.wikiwand.com>

The advertisement shown in fig. 11 uses similar techniques to relay the message that a washing machine can improve a woman's life. The woman shown is relaxing in a chair, wearing a nice dress and heels, and she is smiling. The text points out that a machine not only saves time and labor but a woman's nerves. Marketers told women that owning and using a washing machine would improve their lives in more ways than one. Other advertisements show women relaxing with their families or reading while their laundry is being cleaned.



Figure 12. Hotpoint washer and dryer
www.buzzfeed.com

In addition to the marketing of these machines to women, men were told that washing machines would improve their lives as well. A variety of methods were used to encourage the purchase of a washing machine. The advertisement in fig. 12 promoted the idea that a washing machine would make a wife happier and that could possibly lead to more sex, greater health, and fertility (thus the mention of the wife being pregnant). Another advertisement for the Automatic washer appealed to a sense of fairness, reminding men that they used machinery to improve the efficiency of work on the farm, and women should have that same opportunity in the home.

So the real question becomes, do these machines live up to the claims their advertisements make? Does the addition of a washing machine to the household save time and labor? Is the woman of the household able to enjoy luxuries she was not able to before?

Through the examination of the artifacts, it is obvious that the change from washboard to machine saved labor in the home. When using the washboard, the user is the source of power, and the washing relies on the energy she is expending. With the powered machines, the power is coming from an outside source, be that gasoline, electricity, etc. This is an improvement, but not in the amount of time being saved. Early machines still required a

significant amount of time to set up and run. Water had to be heated and hauled into the machine, the machine had to be started, monitored, and stopped, and the clothes had to be run through a wringer in order to remove excess water before hanging them out to dry. The Automatic Washer had a water line on the side of the barrel that would determine how much water needed to be added to the machine in order for it to run properly. After using the machine, the water would have to be drained through a small hole in the bottom of the barrel.

While the machine was in use, the exposed gear box in the bottom would create a safety hazard that would prevent a woman from walking away from the machine if she had small children in the home. In his book *Save Womens Lives: History of Washing Machines*, Lee Maxwell talks about giving tours at the Antique Washing Machine Museum in Colorado. During one of those tours he had an experience where “one gentleman demonstrated vividly how the exposed gears and chains were responsible for the loss of two fingers when he was only 18 months old. The following year he crawled under the washer again, but this time he only lost one more finger and on the other hand.”¹⁴ The movement of the gears would be enticing to young children but could pose a serious risk, thus requiring mothers to stay close to the machine while in use.

The final stage of washing clothing was to run it through the wringer to remove excess water. This required the user to be at the machine for a length of time, and it was a dangerous process. As mentioned previously, early electric machines screwed into light bulb sockets, which made it difficult to stop the source of power to the machine if caught between the rollers. Some wringers would have a safety release, but this would only allow the rollers to separate; it would not cease the movement of the machine. If a user was already significantly entangled, the safety release would not provide much assistance. In his book, Maxwell recounts stories of women caught in wringers. “On one vivid occasion a lady leaned over and exposed a donut sized badly scarred bald spot right on the top of her head, caused when her hair got caught in the wringer and wouldn’t let go until she was scalped.”¹⁵ In 1920, the Meadows washing machine came up with a solution to this problem. In order to activate the wringer, the user had to step on a foot pedal. If the user was caught in the wringer, she would be pulled off the pedal and the wringer would stop turning. This idea was used by a number of companies, including Maytag, as late as 1983.



Figure 13. Bendix advertisement
Pinterest.com

The invention of more modern machinery solved these problems. Machines like the Bendix Automatic Home Washer provided opportunities to walk away from the wash process through the addition of water hookups in the back of the machine, fully enclosed mechanics, and spin cycles for drying. The Bendix machine was controlled by the knobs on the front of the machine, the clothes simply had to be placed inside, the knobs set, and the machine took care of the rest, thus producing a workless washday.

¹⁴ Maxwell, *Save Womens Lives*, 73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

Conclusion

Women have had a complex relationship with washing machines from the time of using a washboard to the fancy mechanics that are found in the popular front loading machines of today. While the more modern styles of machinery allow for the woman to walk away and enjoy the luxuries of relaxation, this was not an option with the earlier styles, despite what the advertisements might have claimed. While early machines did save a woman from the backbreaking work of scrubbing clothes clean by hand, it was still a time consuming project that required her to spend a significant amount of time working. The promises that the advertisements were making could not be held up. A woman did not have the option of placing her clothing in a machine and walking away. She did not have the chance to sit down and relax, enjoying luxuries like reading because she needed to be next to the machine. Although she was not using manual labor to run the machine, she was still an integral part and her presence was required for the clothes to be cleaned safely.

Women wanted the luxuries being presented by the advertisements. They wanted the ability to walk away from the machine and have it still accomplish the task of cleaning clothes. Examination of the material culture shows the evolution of the machinery and the changes that occurred over time. This happened because of the desires of women demanding more. Without looking at all three pieces—oral histories, material culture, and advertisements—the history of the washing machine and the changes it brought to American women cannot be accurately understood.

Acknowledgements

As a young child, I discovered the magic that exists between connecting history from a book with a tangible artifact from the past. It has been a privilege to work with these wonderful pieces of history, and I am most grateful for the opportunity. I would like to acknowledge the Idaho State Historical Society for allowing me to explore and learn about their collection of washing machines. Sarah Phillips and Tim Blood, thank you for your support, encouragement, and willingness to assist me in this project.

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