



DOING THE LAUNDRY IN 1950'S COLLINGWOOD

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Does anyone remember when Monday was called “Wash Day”? For centuries women did the washing of clothes on Monday. One reason for this was that, before labour saving devices were developed, doing the laundry involved a lot of hard physical labour whether it was beating the clothes against rocks down at the creek, or using a wash board in a rinse tub and wringing the water out by hand, or, later, using a hand-cranked wringer, all of which required considerable stamina. The reason for doing this on Monday (and perhaps for most of the day on Monday) has been stated that because Sunday was a day of rest, the women, having rested on Sunday, would have sufficient energy for the task on Monday.

In Victoria Public School on Maple St. in the 1950's we learned a rhyme called “The Days of the Week”. It went like this:

*On Sunday hear the church bells ring,
On Monday wash the clothes;
On Tuesday get the ironing done,
On Wednesday Mother sews.
On Thursday go a-calling [i.e. on friends],
On Friday clean and sweep;
And Saturday is baking day,
And thus we close the week.*

Long before modern electric or oil and gas-fired hot water heaters were developed, water had to be heated on the wood and coal kitchen stove. Since the electrification of some rural areas near Collingwood was not completed until into the second half of the 20th Century, many farm houses would have heated water from their well on the kitchen stove. In town with the benefit of an unlimited supply of water from Georgian Bay (and no water meters) and electricity supplied by the Public Utilities Commission, it was commonplace for homes to have a hot water tank consisting of a galvanized tank on a short metal pedestal and an electric “immersion element” contained in an oversized pipe near the tank with an on-off electric switch. Sometimes the associated plumbing would be connected as well to a pipe that looped through the wood/coal cook stove so

that the water would at least be kept warm when the immersion element was turned off. These tanks had only two settings: On or Off. There was no thermostat and if the immersion element was left on too long, not only would the water be extremely hot, but the tank would let you know it was extremely hot by making loud cracking sounds as the metal expanded, similar to the sound a kitchen pot makes when placed on a hot burner without any water in it. These tanks were placed in some convenient spot: ours was in a corner of the bathroom, some houses had the tank near the kitchen stove. If a home had a basement the tank was located there.

It was customary to “feel the tank” with your hand to get an idea of how much hot water was in it when someone wanted to take a bath. The expression, “There’s still some hot water in the tank” must have been uttered millions of times in those days after someone had taken a bath. These tanks were also known for springing leaks and many a household became aware of this when they heard a “spraying” sound. This was particularly annoying when it occurred in the middle of the night. A plumber was called in the morning to replace the tank and there would be no water until it was replaced because the whole house had to be shut off for opening up the pipes to replace the tank.

In the 1950's the ubiquitous electric wringer washing machine was still the workhorse of choice before automatic washers became commonplace. This washing machine was on wheels so it could be moved around and had a large tub with an agitator that was started up by a pull knob or a long handle on the outside of the tub. The wringer portion of the machine mounted above the wash tub had a set of rollers activated by a separate electric motor. The wet clothes were fed into the wringer which directed the wash water back into the tub and as the clothes came out the other side they went down into a large galvanized "rinse tub" or a kitchen sink or basement laundry tub filled with clear water depending on the location where the machine was used. The direction of rotation of the rollers was now reversed by a lever and the now-soaking wet-again clothes in the rinse water were fed back through the wringer while the water ran back down into the rinse tub. As the clothes came through the wringer they were caught by hand to be transferred to a basket for hanging out to dry. Some people preferred to empty the wash water and refill the machine with clear water to rinse the clothes.

The wringer was the dangerous portion of these machines and not a few ladies and children got their fingers, hands or arms caught in the rollers while feeding the clothes into them. One neighbour of ours had her arm go through the rollers right up to the elbow before the machine could be stopped. Because of

this danger, there was a panic bar on both sides of the wringer housing so that if one hand were caught in the rollers, the other hand would hit the panic bar and the rollers would spring apart to free the person's arm or hand. The panic bars carried the words "Push To Release".

When this cycle of wash/wring, rinse/wring had been completed, the wash tub was drained either with a hose or a bucket under the tap on the outside of the machine. I well remember helping my mother with the laundry using such a machine. My father's work clothes from the Collingwood Shipyard were the last load to be done, and when the machine was drained there would be a layer of coal dust from the Shipyard on the bottom of the tub (the Shipyard used vast quantities of coal for cranes, heating buildings and pumping out the two drydocks). Remember when "Dungarees" was the term used to describe the sturdy denim-like material for work pants and overalls? The term was a British modification of the word "Dungri" for the name of the fabric originating in Dongri, India. Today we call this clothing "jeans".

The washed clothes were almost invariably hung outside to dry on a clothesline that typically ran through pulleys from the back porch to a post at the far end of the back yard for those who owned a house on the typical quarter-acre lot in town. People living in apartments may or may not have had access to a

clothesline but there were also fold-out/fold-up wooden drying racks that stood on the floor for use indoors, especially when it rained on washday. One ingenious version of these was lowered down from the ceiling (where all the heat went to) with a rope and pulleys. Wet clothes were hung on the wooden rungs and it was then hoisted up to the ceiling above the kitchen stove to dry in the heat. In the episode “Mama Loves Mambo” of *The Honeymooners* TV comedy originally broadcast on March 3, 1956, Alice Kramden was on her way to get the wash off the roof of their apartment building because it looked like rain. The women residents of that building did their washing in the basement and then carried the heavy wet loads several floors up to the roof for drying. The physical labour involved in this was an intense “given” when there was no alternative to compare it to.

Many of you will remember the wonderful fresh air smell of clothes that were hung out to dry on the clothesline. In the winter, the clothes would freeze stiff as a board so that a pair of pants could be made to stand up on their own without a person inside them. Even frozen water evaporates and eventually the clothes would thaw or sometimes the frozen clothes were brought inside to thaw on the wooden racks mentioned above, with the added bonus of helping to humidify the dry indoor air. In most areas of Collingwood the fresh smell of clothes hung outside to dry was a given, except for those people who lived

near or adjacent to the two branch lines of the Canadian National Railway that came into town: the main line from Allandale on the east side of town, and the line from Beeton which came into town along the length of Walnut St. In these areas, laundry drying outside was at the peril of steam locomotives passing by while belching black coal smoke. On Walnut St. there were only two trains a day until October 1955 but on the main line there were multiple passenger and freight trains daily. Many a housewife on Minnesota St. had to scramble to get the laundry off the clothesline in the late afternoon when a “grain extra” train double-headed with two steam locomotives was leaving town because the amount of smoke blasted into the sky as the heavy train started to move was incredible.

My mother once had an interesting experience with the clothesline that had unintended consequences. In the 1950's there was a popular laundry detergent powder named “Duz” and its advertising slogan was, “Duz does everything”. Our two living room windows had venetian blinds and the easiest way to clean these was to wash them in the bathtub. One summer's day my mother washed the blinds in Duz and then hung them out to dry on the clothesline. She happened to look out the window as a breeze came up and, at first, she thought it was snowing. In fact, the Duz had loosed the enamel coating on the

slats of the blinds and it was blowing off in flakes. This was one instance where Duz did more than even it claimed to do.

Some other popular detergents of the day included Fab, Cheer, Breeze, Oxydol and Tide. Tide was first introduced in 1946 as “The Washday Miracle” and it was claimed that it could cut the washday work in half because with Tide all you needed to do was wash, wring out and hang on the line—there was no need to rinse because Tide was so unique that in the process of wringing, the dirt came out of the clothes with the sudsy water. This claim of cutting the time in half must have been tempting for women with a large family with multiple loads to wash—the time saved from slaving over a wringer washing machine by not rinsing could be used for other housework.

A popular sales gimmick at the time was for large boxes of laundry detergent to contain “free” glassware, dishes, kitchen and bath towels, wash cloths, etc. A person diligent in their loyalty to one brand could, over time, build up a complete place setting of dishes and glasses by buying that brand of detergent. At one time boxes of Blue Cheer contained a free steak knife along with the invitation to build a complete set. It didn't seem to occur to people buying these products that the free gift took up space that would normally be occupied by detergent. This also guaranteed that the detergent would run out faster and require the purchase of another box. Soap manufacturers also

sponsored daily daytime radio dramas that were familiarly known as “soap operas” aimed at a female audience. For a time, Colgate-Palmolive sponsored CBC Radio’s daily noonday variety show “The Happy Gang” which is said to have reached two million listeners daily. This program of music, singing, skits and jokes was a vital part of the daily life of Canadians across the country from 1937 to 1959 and was also heard in the United States via the Mutual Broadcasting System. It can be seen from the foregoing that soap and its various manufacturers had a prominent place in the daily life of Canadian families not only in the washing of their clothes and dishes and providing them with “free” gifts, but also in the culture of the day through their sponsorship of popular broadcast entertainment.

Ironing the freshly washed clothes was another experience. The steam iron had been invented in the 1920’s but was not commercially successful until the late 1930’s and, like other consumer items affected by the rationing and shortages of the Second World War years, steam irons did not become widely used until the middle of the century. Our mothers, therefore, ironed clothes the way our grandmothers did using a straight electric iron although some ladies in remote country locations may still have been heating their irons on the kitchen stove. To moisten the wrinkled laundry many people had an old ketchup bottle with a sprinkler head stopper in the top. The bottle full

of water was shaken over the item to be ironed, dampening it slightly then the hot iron was applied. My wife's mother simply dipped her fingers into a glass of water and flicked the moisture onto the fabric to accomplish the same purpose. Steam irons and "permanent press" fabrics reduced the effort required to complete the job.

By the later 1950's with the post-war prosperity, automatic washers and dryers were purchased in larger numbers. My parents' first electric dryer bought from Russ Campbell in the Diefenbaker era had a number of stickers on it saying things like, "BUILT IN CANADA BY CANADIANS FOR CANADIANS" and "BUY CANADIAN—KEEP CANADIANS WORKING" along with maple leaf logos. Even the convenience of an electric clothes dryer could have unintended consequences. When John and Bonnie McInnis had the corner store at Hurontario and Cameron Sts., they installed a clothes dryer and while the steam was venting to the outside of the building on a cold winter's day, someone at the nursing home across the street decided that McInnis' store was on fire and called the Fire Department.

Unlike today when automatic washers and dryers need little more than loading and pressing a "start" button and cleaning the lint trap, doing the laundry used to be much more hands-on, and labour-intensive. Whether beating clothes against

rocks in the creek or using a washboard in a tub and a hand-cranked wringer, or using an electric washer/wringer, or washing in the basement of an apartment building and then carrying the wet clothes up several floors to the roof, the exertion differed only in degree, not in kind. With modern appliances, fabrics and softeners, washday is not the “drudgery” experienced by our ancestors.

Having a source of hot water progressed as well from heating water on the kitchen stove, to galvanized tanks with immersion elements, to the modern water heaters of today. When the “Cascade 40” (i.e. 40 gallons) electric water heater was introduced in the 1960’s, there was a television commercial for it where different members of a family sang the Cascade 40 jingle to the tune Frere Jacques on the sound track. It was sung as a “round” by the family members and the split screen showed variously, a teenage daughter washing her waist-length hair, her kid brother in the bathtub, the father taking a shower and the mother filling the automatic washing machine, all of them smiling for joy at the thought of endless hot water, the implication being that they had the then-luxury of more than one bathroom and could do this all at the same time and the hot water would never run out. The words began: Cascade 40, it’s electric, heats up fast, heats up fast; and ended with the family repeating “We love you!”. The voiceover guaranteed “Lots and lots of hot water”.

At the time, the Cascade 40 was competing with the late 1950's introduction of natural gas in our area which claimed that its "Magic Blue Flame" was faster than electricity in its "recovery rate" in reheating a tank. In any case, both electric and gas-fired water heaters were a blessing compared to the old way of heating water on the kitchen stove or in an old-style galvanized tank, some of which, after being discarded, were sliced open lengthwise and turned into planters. Not to be left out, there were also oil-fired hot water heaters similarly claiming a high recovery rate. Harold Nixon of Collingwood, the local Esso agent who had the Esso tank farm on Balsam St./Highway 26, had an oil-fired hot water tank in his home on Ste. Marie St. As mentioned earlier, there were no water meters in Collingwood and with the limitless water in the bay, people could use all the water they wanted for a flat rate (some even left their garden hoses running on their lawns while it rained). The only cost for hot water at the time was the initial cost of the appliance and associated plumbing and the electricity to heat it.

Laundromats are, and have been, quite commonplace for nearly sixty years. In the Collingwood history book *Chicago of the North*, on pages 110-111, Anita Miles tells the story of Collingwood's first Coin Wash opened by a Mr. Haughton in 1960. J. T. MacMurchy's headline in the *Enterprise-Bulletin* proclaimed, *A Post-War Miracle—Collingwood Coin Wash is Typical of North American Boom*. Anita Miles relates how this

new convenience gave housewives some leisure time to visit with neighbours, have coffee, etc. while waiting for the automatic machines to do their work. She also says that some of the women found that the new automatic machines did not do as good a job as the old-style wringer washing machines and clotheslines. The “whiteness” of a woman’s washing hanging out on the clothesline used to indicate her “status” in the community. There are actually old TV commercials on YouTube playing to that very theme of the distress of a woman whose wash is not as white and soft as her neighbour’s across the fence. Her kindly neighbour tells her which brand of detergent to switch to and all will be well happily- ever-after. Now that the majority of the population uses clothes dryers instead of a clothesline, the stigma of not having the whitest wash on the block for all to see is not the issue it was a half century and more ago. Readers are invited to look up the 1950’s laundry commercials on YouTube. There are dozens of them featuring wringer washing machines, clotheslines and various brands of detergents, all, of course, claiming to produce the “whitest wash” and the implied attendant marital and family bliss that went with it.

David Vuckson, who in his childhood had a lot of experience with a wringer washer and a clothesline, is a great-grandson of Collingwood merchant R. W. O’Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.