



WASHBOARDS

For centuries, women washed clothes in rivers. They carried clothes to a river, soaked them in the water, and beat the clothes with a stick or a stone to remove the dirt. Some women used tree branches to pound the clothes. Some women used long, round sticks that looked like baseball bats. Some had ridges along one side that looked like rows of teeth.

The modern washboard combined the ridges with metal. Stephen Rust patented the first metal-covered, grooved washboard in 1833.

This washboard changed laundry methods. It was small enough to fit into a wooden tub. This meant that women did not have to carry their clothes to the river. The ridges on the washboard were more gentle on the clothes than river rocks. This meant that clothes lasted longer. Ridges removed the dirt faster. Clothes were cleaner.

Washing laundry was still hard work. Women had to haul and heat water. They scrubbed and dried each piece by hand. This took many long hours. Many women chose one day each week as “washday.” All they did all day long was wash and iron clothes.

Washboards were most popular between 1925 and 1955. After World War II electric washing machines replaced washboards.

Today, washboards in the United States are mostly used as musical instruments. In many developing countries, women still use washboards.