



WASHBOARDS

Washing clothes in a river was the norm across the world for centuries. Women carried the laundry to a river, soaked it, and then beat the clothes with a stick or a stone. Later, some women used laundry bats to pound out the dirt. Laundry bats came in many shapes and sizes. Some were just tree branches. Some were long and round like baseball bats. Still, the process of washing clothes did not change. Beating wet clothing with some hard object continued to be the method for cleaning clothes.

Washboards evolved from laundry bats that had ridges along one side. Women also began to use smooth washboards and washtubs to avoid standing long hours in a river. These ridges combined with the smooth washboard and the grooved, wooden washboard was born. Stephen Rust patented the first metal-covered, grooved washboard in 1833.

The grooved, metal-covered washboard was small enough to fit into a wooden tub. This meant that carrying clothes to the river was not always necessary. The ridges on the washboard were easier on the clothes than river rocks. This meant that clothes lasted longer. The grooved metal surface increased the washing surface. Dirt was removed faster and more efficiently. Clothes were cleaner. But, washing laundry was still difficult work. Women had to haul and heat water. They scrubbed, rinsed and dried each piece by hand. This process took many long hours. Many 19th century women chose one day each week as “washday.” All they did all day long was wash, dry and iron clothes. “Washday” lasted far into the 20th century. It continues today in many underdeveloped countries.

Washboards were most popular between 1925 and 1955. Ten companies made washboards then. The two largest were the Columbus Washboard Company and the National Washboard Company. Between 1925 and 1955 the Columbus Washboard Company sold 15,000,000 washboards. They offered twenty-two different styles for purchase. The post-World War II boom in cheap electric appliances reduced the use of washboards. By the early 1970s, only the Columbus Washboard Company was still in business. Today, the company makes washboards for sale in the United States for use as musical instruments. A large market for washboards exists overseas. In many underdeveloped countries the centuries-long practice of taking the laundry to the river, soaking it, and beating the dirt out remains a large part of women’s lives.