



## WASHBOARDS

For centuries, women washed clothes in rivers. They carried the laundry to a river, soaked it, and beat the clothes with a stick or a stone to remove the dirt. 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. Some had ridges along one side that looked like rows of teeth.

People combined the ridges from laundry bats with smooth, flat boards and the modern wooden washboard was born. Stephen Rust patented the first metal-covered, grooved washboard in 1833.

The grooved 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. The grooved metal surface increased the area for washing. Dirt was removed faster. Clothes were cleaner. But, 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 19<sup>th</sup> century women chose one day each week as “washday.” All they did all day long was wash and iron clothes. “Washday” lasted far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Washboards were most popular between 1925 and 1955 when over 15,000,000 washboards were sold in the United States. After World War II electric washing machines replaced washboards. Today, washboards are used mostly as musical instruments. There is a large market for washboards 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.