



Today laundry is made easier with electric washers and driers.

But it was not always like that!

Washing day now...

To begin, think about the way we do the washing today. We have an electric washing machine and perhaps an electric drier. By touching a few buttons on the machine we can wash our household linen and clothes in under an hour. All we have to do is take them from the machine and hang them either on clotheslines or on hangers.

If the weather is wet, we can dry them simply by transferring them to a drier. Drip dry clothes, paper serviettes and plastic or non-iron tablecloths make ironing unnecessary in many cases. When clothes need ironing, electric steam irons make the work simple and easy.

...and washing day then

We are looking back to a time when there was no electricity, when gas was used only for lighting or for powering heavy engines. All clothes and household linen, curtains, etc. were of wool, linen, cotton or silk. Everything required ironing.

In larger houses such as 'Currajong', where families were more affluent, servants were employed. To do the weekly wash, maids stripped beds of sheets and pillowslips and collected towels, table linen and clothes. In less



The happy washerwoman



NATIONAL TRUST
OF QUEENSLAND
Townsville/NQ Branch

Heritage Centre
5 Castling St, West End
Townsville Q4810
Ph (07) 4771 5873

Text:
Dr Dorothy M. Gibson-Wilde
and Don MacDonald

Layout:
Bruce C. Gibson-Wilde

Photos:
Dr Dorothy M. Gibson-Wilde
and John Oxley Library

affluent households the housewife did this task. Blankets, mosquito nets, curtains and heavy baize or woollen tablecloths were not washed so frequently —only once or twice a year.

Sorting

Once all the clothes and linen were collected, white items were sorted from coloured items from which dye might run. Heavily soiled items were also separated and any stains removed.

Boiling

In the meantime a fire was lit under the 'copper', a large copper bowl set either in a brick enclosure or, for later versions, a metal stand. Water was placed in the copper with some soft soap, which was often home made, and the white washing was placed in to boil.

Coloured items were seldom boiled, but set to soak separately in a tin tub with some soft soap. Woollen items were soaked carefully in warm water with a little soft soap. Soiled items were often boiled separately. If heavily soiled they were rubbed with a scrubbing brush over a scrubbing board made of rippled wood or glass, before being boiled.

Rinsing and wringing

All items, whether boiled or soaked, required rinsing to remove the soap suds. The coloured and woollen items were usually rinsed first in separate tubs of clean cold water. This left all of the tubs ready for the white washing when removed from the copper. A 'copper stick', usually a piece

of smooth thick dowelling about 120 cm long, was used to lift the clothes from the copper into the tub. Then they were transferred to a hand wringer or mangle to remove the last of the suds.

The wringer consisted of two rollers that were rotated in opposite directions by turning a handle. When wrung out, the articles were placed in a tub of clean cold water. Once rinsed and put through the wringer again, they were immersed in another tub of water into which a 'blue bag' was immersed to give the clothes a whiter appearance. Then they were put through the wringer or mangle again.

Starching and drying the wash

Most items were then hung on a clothesline made of wire or rope strung between two posts, and propped up with a long bush pole. Some items required starching to make them stiff. Starch granules were dissolved in a large bowl of hot water. The items were soaked for a few minutes in the starch water before being wrung out by hand and placed on the clothesline.

Sheets, pillowslips and towels were made of huckaback (a coarse linen or cotton fabric), not terry towelling as they are today. Sometimes they were put back on beds and on wash stands without being ironed. However, they were usually ironed.

In poorer households, Mum did the washing, sometimes helped by the children if washing was done at the weekend when they were not at school. The same procedure was followed in larger households, where several

copper loads of washing were needed and washing day took a whole day.

Ironing was hard work, especially in the hot summer weather. Of course maids did the ironing in the wealthier homes, but it was Mum who did the ironing in most homes. On page 3 an old Townsville resident describes the ironing days he remembers as a child.

Homemade soap

Soap for both bathing and laundry was often home made. Here is one of the many recipes for laundry soap.

Laundry soap

Take 6½ lb of clean fat, 1 lb of caustic soda, ½ lb of borax, ½ lb of resin, 2 gallons of water and a small cup of kerosene.

Boil all ingredients, except the kerosene, steadily for two hours. Remove from the fire and stir in the kerosene. Pour into a kerosene tin cut lengthwise to set.

Caution: Be sure to use a large vessel and exercise care when the mixture is boiling hot.

Ironing

by Don MacDonald

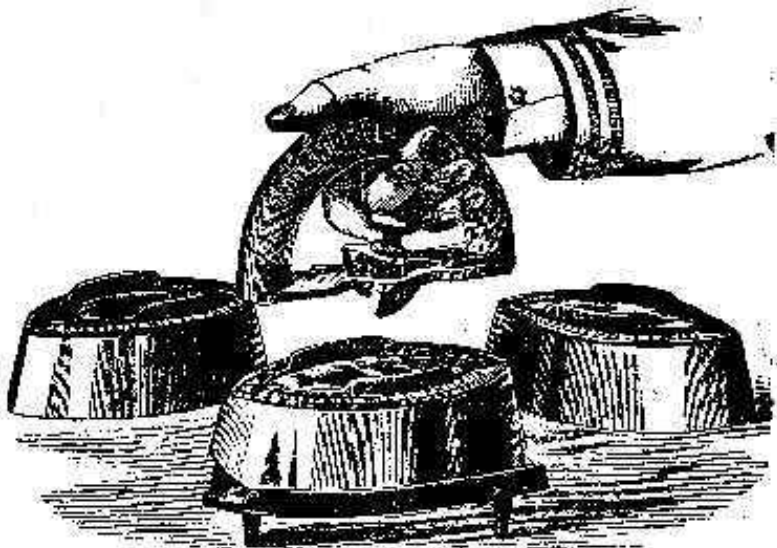
It has been a good drying day, the clothes have all been brought in off the line, some have been folded and put away in drawers and cupboards, and some have been damped down ready for tomorrow's ironing.

As a small child, this did not make sense — the dry clothes were sprinkled with water, rolled up tightly, and packed in a basket. I realise now that this ensured that the moisture was distributed evenly through the material to facilitate ironing.

Next day, breakfast is over; Dad has gone to work, and the kids to school. Instead of letting the fire die down in stove as usual, Mum adds more wood, for today the irons must be kept hot.

Soon three flat irons are sitting on the hottest part of the stove while the ironing blanket is set up on the kitchen table. This consisted of two or three thicknesses of an old blanket covered by an old white cotton or linen sheet. (The ironing board so common today appeared much later.) The flat iron had a heavy iron base, and the handle was part of the iron. By the time the iron was hot enough to use, the handle was

Mrs Potts irons.
Note the detachable handle.



also quite hot and needed to be wrapped in a couple of thicknesses of material.

As the iron became cold with use, it was put back on the stove to reheat, and one of the hot irons taken up, and so on until the ironing was done.

It did not make sense to a mere male, but very often sheets, pillowslips, tea towels, and other household linen were also ironed!

It was a primitive, uncomfortable and possibly dangerous system. Eventually it was a little improved by the introduction of irons with detachable handles, called Mrs Potts irons. With these irons only the bases heated, and the handle stayed cool.

Ironing was done in this way for many years. The next great improvement was the self-heating iron. Now at last Mum could do the ironing away from the hot stove in a hot kitchen.

Basically the self-heating iron comprised a heavy base supporting a fuel tank. The first irons used hot charcoals that heated the iron from the inside. Later the tank was fitted with a burner, and high-grade petrol

was used. This was called either white spirit or 'Shellite'. A measure was supplied so that the correct amount of fuel could be poured into the tank. A space was left for air to be pumped in under pressure, using a small handheld pump. Methylated spirits was then burned in the base of the iron to heat the fuel pipe and the burner. A needle valve on the base of the tank was then opened and the fuel was forced through the hot pipes round the burner where it vaporised and burned with a clean blue flame, directed to the base of the iron. A full tank would give 1 to 1½ hours ironing, with perhaps a bit of additional pumping to maintain pressure. If all the fuel was not used, it was recommended that the remainder is discarded or at least the tank emptied before refilling. It was important that the tank not be overfilled.

On all three types of iron, after the ironing was finished and while the iron was still hot, the base was rubbed over with a piece of beeswax wrapped in cloth to prevent rust and to keep the ironing surface clean.