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## Laundry in the 19th Century

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### Goal:

To provide students with a hands-on experience of how laundry was done in the 19th century. This activity will demonstrate to participants, in an experiential way, the time, space, labor, materials, and planning required to complete a seemingly mundane household task in the pre-mechanized era. The laundry process is also a fun activity which requires logistical coordination, thereby promoting group cooperation and communication. This activity will also give students an appreciation for how advancing technology brings change through time.

**Age Group:** Grade 3–Adult

### When:

During a field trip to Ardenwood (by reservation only).

**Where:** In the farmyard.

### Materials:

All materials needed will be provided by park staff.

### Background:

Before the advent of mechanized washing (“washing machines”) in the early to mid 1900s, doing laundry was a formidable task. So arduous was it, that washing the family’s laundry was called the “weekly affliction.”

In fact washing, as a weekly chore, did not appear until the 19th century. Prior to that, washing occurred every few months. This was because of the difficulty of the washing process and because of the fragile nature of some early garment materials (silks, brocades, velvets). Presumably there was no merit in trying to keep clean the coarser garments of the working world.

Hints on how to decrease the washing burden included dressing in printed clothing rather than in white. An 1874 issue of the magazine *The Household*, recommended stocking up on “undergarments”—separate ones for the day and night, so that these may be changed as often as once a week. . . .” Colored tablecloths were promoted over white linen. Shirt collars and cuffs were detachable and thus cleaned more often than the entire shirt.

These preventive measures aside, there still remained the task of washing. A few gadgets were needed to help with the laundry process. The wash boiler was a cast iron or copper cauldron (hence also known as the "copper") in which clothes and soapy water could be heated over an open wood fire or wood-burning stove. The wash stick was used to stir and whack this hot, soapy concoction. The "dolly-stick" or "peggy-stick," as it was variously known, was a wooden stick with a handle at its uppermost part and four to five legs or prongs at its base. It was simultaneously pounded up and down and rotated in the washing tub filled with soapy clothes, thereby aerating the wash solution and loosening the dirt. The wash board was a wooden board with a corrugated zinc surface against which clothes were rubbed clean. The handwringer was a crank-operated gadget which squeezed excess water out of the clothes by pressing them between rollers. It could be attached to a table or washtub with clamps. A larger version of the wringer was used for further drying and pressing. It was, appropriately enough, called a "mangle." A drying rack was used when space or weather did not permit outdoor drying.

A washing machine of the 1850s was a crank-operated device which buffeted the clothes between a circular drum and its outer octagonal case. The clothes could then be plied through an attached wringer and mangle. The Sears Roebuck Company offered a variety of washing machines in its 1902 catalog. Complete

## MONTGOMERY WARD & CO.

### Anthony Wayne Washer.

Note reduced price.



57193 The Anthony Wayne Washer, with corrugated stave and bottom. This is the best round washer made. Some prefer the round washer to the square; we have selected the Anthony Wayne as being the best on the market, and we offer it at a price which places it within reach of all. Price.....\$2.75 Weight, 50 lbs.

### Clothes Pins.



57139 Clothes Pins, round head, 30 doz. in box.....\$0.32

Montgomery Ward & Company Catalog and Buyers Guide No. 57, 1895

with a guarantee that the machine would not damage clothing, prices ranged from \$2.72 to \$5.62. To eliminate the toil of hand operation the Maytag Company added a pulley mechanism to their machine, thus allowing for attachment to outside power sources. This 1909 washer was named "The Hired Girl Washer." It was not until the 1920s that electric washers became somewhat more affordable and thus more commonplace.

## Action:

Because this activity requires special preparation and because materials and space are limited, it is necessary to reserve this program in advance. To do this, simply call the park as soon as your field trip date and time have been arranged. The activity area *must be supervised at all times* by the teacher or adult in charge.

There are many steps involved in this cooperative group process. Therefore, it is best to divide the group into small work forces giving specific tasks to each group. Please note that, in the past, this entire process was done by one or two people (usually women) and thus was much more time and labor intensive than when shared among a large group of students.

The method for doing the laundry is as follows:

- Sort the clothes into light, dark, delicate, and woolen categories. The light and delicate articles are washed first, while the water and tubs are cleanest. Delicate items are not scrubbed with the wash board. Woolen items are rinsed in cold water, not hot water (to avoid shrinkage).
- Fetch water from the pump for two washtubs and one rinse tub. Fill the tubs one-quarter full.
- Scoop hot water into the washtubs from the wash boiler. Mix this with the cold pump water until the water is very warm, but not scalding. The washtubs should now be about half full. **Please note:** To ensure safety, the teacher or adult in charge *must* personally tend to the wash boiler, the fire, and the clothes going in and out of the wash boiler.
- Add soap to the washtub water.
- Put dirty clothes in the washtub.
- While one group scrubs the clothes in a washtub using the board, another group could agitate the clothes in the other washtub using the dolly stick.
- After the clothes are thoroughly washed, remove them and place the clothes in the

wash boiler; add soap, cover, and let boil for ten or fifteen minutes. Stir occasionally with the wash stick. Meanwhile, another batch of dirty laundry may be put into the soap-water washtubs.

- Remove the laundry from the boiler and place in clothes basket to drain for a few minutes.
- Move these clothes into the rinse tub, and rinse with clean water until all traces of soap are gone.
- Put clothes through the wringer to remove the excess water. Have the clothes basket ready to receive the clothes as they come through the wringer.
- Hang clothes on the line to dry.
- When washing is completed, rinse out all of the washtubs.
- Engage students in an informal discussion comparing the washing process, past and present.

## Resources:

- Ewing, Elizabeth. *Everyday Dress 1650-1900*. London: B.T. Batsford. Date unknown.
- Green, Harvey. *The Light of the Home*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.
- Milnes, Herbert. *Settlers' Traditions*. Erin Ontario: The Boston Mills Press, 1980.
- World Book Encyclopedia* Vol. 21. Chicago: World Book Inc. 1989.



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