

Monday's the Day We Wash Our Clothes

By Dan Phillips

I grew up in a family that was quite privileged. We had chickens, a milk cow, ducks, horses, a garden, and we had a washing machine. And it was a modern one—completely electric. It had two rubberized cylinders on the top that you fed the wet clothes through, and, like magic, all the water was squeezed out. The de-watered clothes dropped into a basket, ready for the clothesline. After each wash- or rinse cycle, my mother would empty the water onto the back lawn. That part of our lawn was always the greenest and needed constant mowing (the push type—no motor).

And our clothesline wasn't simply a rope between two trees. Oh, no. It, too, was quite modern. It looked like an upside down beach umbrella, without the canvas. On wash day my mother would simply get this contraption out, put the pole in a hole in our back patio, open the arms with the lines running between them, and, voila! She was ready to hang out the wash.

It is amazing to me that there are occasionally people who don't know what a clothespin is. There were many varieties, but the clothespins of choice were either the single peg with a split halfway up, or the more modern ones that were spring loaded. (These could be fashioned into a small firearm that shot spit-wads across the schoolroom.)

I remember numerous times that, after the first crack of thunder, we would all rush out and yank the clothes—dry or not—off the line and race back inside. Especially in March when there were always afternoon breezes, the clothes smelled clean and fresh, and crawling between those sheets was one of the cameo pleasures of my childhood. Sometimes the family schedule meant that the clothesline pole graced the backyard during the entire week. But the clothes were religiously whisked off when they were dry.

I also remember when clothes dryers first became popular. They seemed extravagant to me. Not only did the clothes not smell as fresh, but also they ran up the electric bill. And when the new automatic clothes washers became popular (we never could afford one), it was the subject of a good bit of conversation.

I remember my uncle explaining to me how the clothes got wrung out. It was a technical discussion, having to do with centrifugal force—my first brush with that scientific concept. And then the expended water simply ran down the drain to the sewer. That meant that you could have a washing machine inside the house without having to run a hose through the house to the garden. Wow! And automatic dryers worked on the principle of fluffing and tumbling the wet clothes while all the while blowing hot air on them. I knew I was living during an age of great invention.

But college obliterated all those memories. The only way to wash clothes was in the dorm laundry, and I quickly became accustomed to that mode. And I realized that my

childhood had indeed been a bit humble when I would go home for the weekend, and see the clothes on the line. Because, of course, that was old hat and the modern way was having a washer and dryer. After all, I learned that in college.

But somewhere between those days and now, the world changed. Who would have thought we would be buying water in bottles and that it would be hotly competed for between communities in a region? After all, gas was 24 cents a gallon in those days (premium), and so it was a ridiculous notion that one would ever pay for a gallon of water in its own container.

But sure enough the world changed. And even though we wash our clothes in the new-fangled way, we now have to start paying attention to water and energy use. A top-loading washer uses about 42 gallons of water per load, while a front-load type uses about 14. And so when our own washer craters, we will go for the front-loading type.

And I can assure you that clotheslines do work, just not very often in these parts. For most of the year in Huntsville, Texas, if you hang your wash out to dry, it will take about ten days to actually dry. In fact, during some parts of the year, your clothes quite likely would grow moss before they would dry. But during the less humid weather, you might try running a rope between two trees (if you're not privileged like I was), hang out your wash, and then celebrate the pastoral pleasure of wind-fresh sheets.

And the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality does allow you to expend washing machine water on your lawn or garden, but you must be very careful that it doesn't pond. It needs to have good drainage and soak into the soil.

The Texas Veteran's Land Board actually encourages clotheslines, and gives you a point on their sustainability checklist if you have one. You get three points if you have a front-loading washing machine.

But just like your dishwasher, if you run half-loads or quarter loads in your washing machine, you're being a bit piggy. It's not an issue of whether you can afford the energy or water bill, it's an issue of whether the community can afford to provide you with resources that you waste. Water is getting to be an issue. Ask any of the city staff. And at the same time ask them if they think water is going to get cheaper. Their short answer will be "No." The long answer will begin to worry you more than you are worrying now.

While worrying isn't a very good habit, it might be worth it to imbibe in a bit of healthy worrying about water. Unless, of course, you don't use water.