

THE FRANCESTOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM

Newsletter



May 2018

The Black Fly Issue

**When the maple tree buds are the size of a deer mouse's ear,
the black flies will begin to appear!**

Or something to that effect. But seriously what can top the annoyance of black flies? Perhaps wash day?

Oh the travails of wash day. Consider the joy of wash day for your great grandparents. Think of the many benefits they realized from this activity:

- 1 - There was the benefit of the cardio exercise realized while lugging the loads of dirty clothes across fields and through woods to the nearest river or pond.
- 2 - Enjoying the bracing feel of the cool water, especially in February when you also benefitted from the additional exercise of breaking the ice off the water.
- 3 - All followed by the exhilaration of pounding the bejeepers out of the clothes on a rock with a washing bat.

Those were indeed heady times. So what led to the automated, soul-sucking task known as the modern wash day? Taking the clothes into the laundry room and having to put them in the machine. Followed by the drudgery of adding the soap and, mercy, then having to press the start button. It is a wonder we all survive.

The 1600's - Imagine the disappointment when somebody came up with the idea for a wooden wash board. Such a modern convenience is found in **The Francelstown Heritage Museum**.



Judging from the wear on this wash board
it has scrubbed a good many clothes.

Eliminated was the joy of taking out one's daily frustrations by whaling on the clothes with a wash bat with your arms in freezing cold river water up to your elbows – or further if you should slip and fall in.

The 1700's - Things continued to go downhill once man-kind developed the ability to shape metal and the fluted metal washboard was developed and a metal wash tub replaced the river or pond.



There were some earlier versions with wood slats but the overall effect was the demise of the washing bat and reliance on rocks along with the old wooden wash board. With the metal washboard, clothes were soaked in hot soapy water in a washtub or sink, then squeezed and rubbed against the ridged surface of the washboard to force the soapy water through the clothes to carry away dirt. Rubbing the clothes on the metal board had a similar effect to beating the clothes and household linen on rocks with a washing bat. The metal washboards could also be used for washing in the river, with or without soap. Once washed, the clothes were rinsed and hung to dry, sometimes on convenient trees or shrubs.

And how would the residents of today's upscale "gated communities" feel about clothes hanging from the neighborhood shrubs to dry?

So eliminated now was the cardio exercise gained through lugging the clothes to the nearest river or pond. Instead a wash tub was placed in or near the home and filled with warm water to soak the clothes and scrubbed by placing the metal wash board in the tub.

The 1800's - The laundry day routines continued to evolve with the introduction of the "dollie" type washing machine. Dollie refers to the type of paddles inside the tub that agitate the clothes as you work the lever on top. But again you can see this for yourself as **The Francestown Heritage Museum** has such a machine on display.



Dollies themselves date back to the 1800's and this machine is ~1860's.

So in a short three centuries we have eliminated the beneficial cardio exercise gained through hauling the clothes to the river. People no longer experienced the bracing water, especially in February. Also gone was the exhilaration of beating the clothes on a rock with a washing bat. Fortunately, as easy as the dollie type machine made wash day, one still had the labor of ringing out the clothes (cranking the wringer by hand) and manually working the "dollies" in the wash tub with the lever.

Until the advent of these advances there were benefits that could not be experienced such as the thrill and danger of stoking your kitchen range fire with wood in order to boil enough water to fill the dollie machine twice (once for washing and once for rinsing). Then there was the adrenalin rush that came when you risked severe or possibly even fatal burns to carry the boiling water from the stove to the wash tub or dollie type washer.

The 1900's - But alas, even that exercise was to be denied the launderer. In 1912, along came the Easy Washer Company in Syracuse, NY. The Model "M" washer was one of the first electric washing machines there ever was and one can be seen in **The Francestown Heritage Museum**.



The Easy Washer boasted an all copper wash tub, steel frame, cast aluminum and brass parts and a Westinghouse electric motor. Contrast this with the early wash board and the later manual "dollie" type illustrated previously.

There was no need now to boil and carry the water due to the fact that the Easy Washer Company outfitted their machine with an open flame gas heater beneath. But all this advancement was not without drawbacks.

Back then there was no such thing as OSHA and the myriad of other safety watchdogs. There was still the opportunity to maim oneself by catching a finger or hand in the now mechanically rotating wringers, paddles, electric motor and belts. The hazard created by the open flame under the machine was surpassed only by the open electric motor also under the machine which, when gotten wet, created a severe electric shock hazard for the user.

So over all, where have all these improvements left us on wash day?

The 2000's - But as you can guess, gone today is the opportunity to amputate your fingers and hands, scald or electrocute yourself. Enter the modern washer machine. Fully enclosed, fully automatic and virtually eliminating the various listed benefits related to the bygone wash days of the past. Couple that with wash and wear synthetics and. . . .



So maybe the black fly isn't all bad (remember – we started this newsletter bemoaning the annoyance of the black fly). Look at the exercise we get chasing, swatting and running from them. Not to mention the enhanced vocabulary that results from our encounters with them.

THANK YOU FRANCESTOWN

The museum curators would like to thank the town residents for their unanimous vote at Town Meeting in favor of shared funding for our expansion of the museum into the lower level. We hope to have this work completed quickly as the actual relocating of our exhibits and reorganizing of the two levels will be a significant undertaking for us.

We selected Francetown Sand and Gravel to do the work as their cost was significantly under those provided by others. It is also reassuring to know that the Stewarts can be counted on to do a great job as they have for so many other town projects.

The first step is to remove some four feet of sand that was poured into the lower level at the time of construction to stabilize the foundation walls as there were no floors in place and it would be spring of the following year before there were.