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Lots of kids mean lots of clothes

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Jun. 22, 2009

(Dreamstime)

When *L?Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, marked International Women?s Day by declaring the washing machine the great liberator of modern women, I went to my mother, who was born during the last summer of World War I. Granted, she doesn?t have a dog in the birth control fight, as her oldest child was born in the midst of the Great Depression, in 1938, and her youngest, me, was born in the midst of the baby boom, in 1952. In my mother?s case, nature took its course (and took its course and took its course and took its course, if you follow me) until nature called it a day. I do remember an evening in the late ?60s or early ?70s when my oldest sister was discussing with my mother -- sotto voce -- various artificial contraceptives coming on the market. My father, irritated with the subject, exploded when he heard the letters ?IUD.?

?Well, damn it,? he snapped, ?I?m not an idiot. You don?t have to spell around me.?

So, while my mother is perhaps not the best woman to make the real-life comparison of benefits between the automatic rinse and spin and the Enovid-10 oral contraceptive pill, she will testify that the washing machine did, in fact, change her life, and for the better. She suspects someone in the Vatican has been talking to his mother.

Monday was washday, every Monday. (Tuesday was ironing day. Wednesday was probably something lighthearted, like clean the windows day.) It took all day long to do a wash, so long that there was even a particular menu for supper, comprised of dishes that could be prepared early in the morning and left to sit until evening. Monday supper was red beans, cornbread and onions sliced thin and soaked in vinegar. After the beans were on the stove and the onions cut and the cornbread batter made, then came the heavy work.

My mother remembers her older brothers gathering wood and building a fire outside the house. She remembers them carrying the black iron pot to the fire and hauling water to fill the pot. She remembers her mother scrubbing the worst stains on a washboard before dumping the clothes in the pot. She remembers the sight of her mother standing, mixing and stirring the clothes in the hot water and homemade lye soap with a long wooden stick, a real-life agitator.

My mother can?t decide if washing in summer or winter was worse. In summer, she remembers her mother standing above the acrid steam, the steam scalding her face and the sun burning her back. In the winter, the

warmth of the fire and the water was welcome, but it offered little protection against the raw north winds frosting the plains. And to wash in a dust storm was to risk trading grime for mud, the whole day?s work ruined.

My paternal grandmother used to say of Tuesdays that she worked with her ?sad iron.? When I asked her why she called it a ?sad iron,? she said, ?Because, honey, I?d just iron and cry and cry and iron.? Now this was the same woman who went out and milked all the cows before going back inside to finish labor and deliver my father, but I never heard her speak of birth and child-rearing as being equal to the misery of laundry.

When my mother married in the 1930s, she had two twin washtubs, one for washing and one for rinsing, set on the back porch. She heated the water on the stove and she used a washboard to scrub the clothes clean. She boiled the diapers, but diapers, she says, don?t really count as a wash, since they had to be boiled daily. She no longer had to kindle a fire and she had some protection from the weather, but the job still took all day. And the washday menu remained the same.

It wasn?t until the 1940s that my mother got her first washing machine, a Maytag wringer, complete with a hose for filling the tub. By the end of that decade she had a front-loader with a glass door. This one had a spin cycle. No more wringing sodden sheets by hand or by crank. My mother says she used to stand in front of the machine and gaze at the wet clothes through the glass door. She says, ?I?d watch everything go round, and I?d think, ?This is the most wonderful thing I?ve ever seen.? ?

When my parents sold that house, my father included the washer in the purchase price. My mother says she begged him not to; she says she cried.

Mother is siding with Rome on this one. After all, she speaks of us, her children, with real affection. Memory has softened most of the sharp edges. But when the talk turns to washdays, she shakes her head and grows silent. She isn?t happy to go back there. Then she says softly, ?It was hard. It was really hard.?

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