

Collecting Laundries/Cleaners

by
Mike Prero

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DIAMOND QUALITY CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING MATCH

Laundry was first done in watercourses, letting the water carry away the materials which could cause stains and smells. Laundry is still done this way in some less industrialized areas and rural regions. Agitation helps remove the dirt, so the laundry is often rubbed, twisted, or slapped against flat rocks. Wooden bats or clubs could be used to help with beating the dirt out. These were often called washing beetles or bats and could be used by the waterside on a rock (a beetling-stone), on a block (battling-block), or on a washboard. They were once common across Europe and were also used by settlers in North America. Similar techniques have also been identified in Japan. Wooden or stone scrubbing surfaces set up near a water supply or portable washboards, including factory-made corrugated glass or metal ones, gradually replaced rocks as a surface for loosening soil.

Once clean, the clothes were wrung out — twisted to remove most of the water. Then they were hung up on poles or clotheslines to air dry, or sometimes just spread out on clean grass.

Before the advent of the washing machine, laundry was often done in a communal setting. In poor parts of the world today, laundry is still done beside a river or lake. Villages across Europe that could afford it built a wash-house. Water was channeled from a stream or spring and fed into a building, possibly just a roof with no walls. This wash-house usually contained two basins - one for washing and the other for rinsing - through which the water was constantly flowing, as well as a stone lip inclined towards the water against which the washers could beat the clothes. Such facilities were much more comfortable than washing in a watercourse because the launderers could work standing up instead of on their knees, and were protected from inclement weather. Also, they didn't have to go far, as the facilities were usually at hand in the village or at the edge of a town. Sometimes large metal cauldrons, often termed "coppers", even when not made of that metal, were filled with fresh water and heated over a fire; hot or boiling water being more effective than cold in removing dirt. A posser could be used to agitate clothes in a tub.

These facilities were public and available to all families, and usually used by the entire village. Many of these village wash-houses are still standing, historic structures with no obvious modern purpose.

This job was reserved for women, who washed all their family's laundry. Washerwomen took in the laundry of others, charging by the piece. As such, wash-houses were an obligatory stop in many women's weekly lives and became a sort of institution or meeting place. It was a women-only space where they could discuss issues or simply chat.

European cities also had public wash-houses. The city authorities wanted to give the poorer population, who would otherwise not have access to laundry facilities, the opportunity to wash their clothes. Sometimes these facilities were combined with baths. The aim was to foster hygiene and thus reduce outbreaks of epidemics.

The Industrial Revolution completely transformed laundry technology. The mangle (or "wringer" in American English) was developed in the 19th century — two long rollers in a frame and a crank to revolve them. A laundry-worker took sopping wet clothing and cranked it through the mangle, compressing the cloth and expelling the excess water. The mangle was much quicker than hand twisting. It was a variation on the box mangle used primarily for pressing and smoothing cloth.

Meanwhile, 19th century inventors further mechanized the laundry process with various hand-operated washing machines. Most involved turning a handle to move paddles inside a tub. Then some early 20th century machines used an electrically powered agitator to replace tedious hand rubbing against a washboard. Many of these were simply a tub on legs, with a hand-operated mangle on top. Later, the

mangle too was electrically powered, then replaced by a perforated double tub, which spun out the excess water in a spin cycle.

Laundry drying was also mechanized, with clothes dryers. Dryers were also spinning perforated tubs, but they blew heated air rather than water.

In the United States and Canada in the late 19th and early 20th century, the occupation of laundry worker was heavily identified with Chinese. Discrimination, lack of English-language skills, and lack of capital kept Chinese out of most desirable careers. Around 1900, one in four ethnic Chinese men in the U.S. worked in a laundry, typically working 10 to 16 hours a day.

New York City had an estimated 3,550 Chinese laundries at the beginning of the Great Depression of the 1930s. In 1933, with even this looking to many people like a relatively desirable business, the city's Board of Aldermen passed a law clearly intended to drive the Chinese out of the business. Among other things, it limited ownership of laundries to U.S. citizens. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association tried fruitlessly to fend this off, resulting in the formation of the openly leftist Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (CHLA), which successfully challenged this provision of the law, allowing Chinese laundry workers to preserve their livelihoods.

Note that the phrase "Chinese laundry" as in "We set up a Chinese laundry in our ski lodge" is not a reference to the social history described above, but indicates a (usually temporary) system of indoor or veranda clothes-lines, whether well-organized or crudely-improvised, that have been rigged up to get clothes dry. The phrase is presumably kept alive by the colorful displays of washing that visitors to China often remark upon. [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laundry>]

Modern dry cleaning's use of non-water-based solvents to remove soil and stains from clothes was reported as early as 1855. The potential for petroleum-based solvents was recognized by French dye-works operator Jean Baptiste Jolly, who offered a new service that became known as *nettoyage à sec*—i.e., dry cleaning. Flammability concerns led William Joseph Stoddard, a dry cleaner from Atlanta, to develop Stoddard solvent (white spirit) as a slightly less flammable alternative to gasoline-based solvents. The use of highly flammable petroleum solvents caused many fires and explosions, resulting in government regulation of dry cleaners. After World War I, dry cleaners began using chlorinated solvents. These solvents were much less flammable than petroleum solvents and had improved cleaning power. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dry_cleaning] There are currently some 36,730 in the U.S., employing 147,936 people. Annual revenue is \$9 billion. [<https://www.ibisworld.com/industry-trends/market-research-reports/other-services-except-public-administration/personal-laundry/dry-cleaners.html>]

The coin laundry industry is approximately 70 years old and is primarily composed of individual owner/operators. No significant franchises are in operation at this time. Currently, there are about 29,500 coin laundries in the United States, generating nearly \$5 billion in gross revenue annually. [<http://www.coinlaundry.org/investor-resources/additonalinfo>]

I was going to say that I didn't think this was a particularly large category (numerically), but Donna Longenecker, PA, reported having 3,183 as of January 2016. Obviously, most are going to be front strikers.



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