



LAUNDRY

I. Goal

To introduce ELP participants and the public to the task of laundering clothing and fabric items during the 1840s in the absence of modern equipment and electricity.

II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Washing day required strength and stamina. Of all the household chores that depended on hauling water and building fires to heat it, laundry earned the most complaints from women. Every item, once it became wet, had to be wrung out by hand. Lifting heavy, wet clothes was very difficult work and made backs, muscles and wrists ache. Nearly every writer of household advice advocated that laundry should *not* be a one-woman job. Catharine Beecher called it "the American housekeeper's hardest problem." (*Never Done* pp. 104-5).

"Without running water, gas or electricity, even the most simplified hand-laundry process consumed staggering amounts of time and labor. One wash, one boiling, and one rinse used about fifty gallons of water or four hundred pounds, which had to be moved from pump or well or faucet to stove and tub, in buckets and wash boilers that might weigh as much as forty or fifty pounds." (*Never Done* p. 105). Of course, this above scenario, with its references to faucets and stove, does not address the even further rigors of doing laundry on the trail. The following quote, from Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, gives a glimpse into the reality of life and laundry in route. "When we started from Iowa I wore a dark woolen dress which served me almost constantly during the whole trip. Never without an apron and a three cornered kerchief, I presented a comfortable, neat appearance. The wool protected me from the sun's rays and penetrating prairie winds. Besides it economized in laundering, which was a matter of no small importance when one considers how limited and often utterly wanting were our 'wash day' conveniences. The chief requisite, water, being sometime brought from miles away."

Arrival at the Fort during 1846 would have been followed by a flurry of activity for women anxious to properly launder and care for what remained of their family's trail worn clothing. Denied on the trail their 'wash day conveniences,' the now plentiful supply of water, fuel to heat it and a place to hang laundry to dry were undoubtedly welcome amenities, even for this most dreaded chore. You may be surprised at the popularity of this station. Children and adults alike are fascinated with the whole idea of hand washing clothing. From carrying the buckets of water with the yoke to scrubbing with the wash board and hanging the laundry on the line, they take delight in learning the history of the 'American housekeeper's hardest problem.'

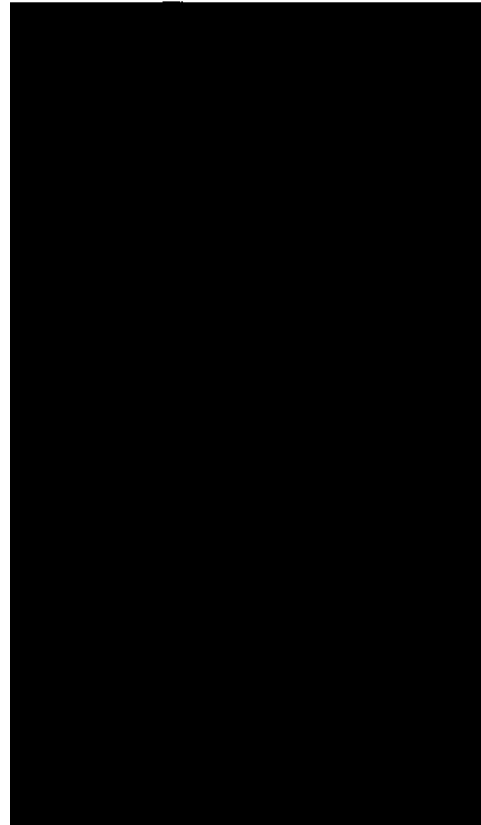


III. WASHING AIDS

In the 1840s, the list of utensils needed for washing was long or short depending on the washing site and the availability of items. Remember, the westward bound wife would have given up many necessities to help lighten the load of her family's wagon. The following is a partial list of laundry items mentioned in the 6th edition of Miss Leslie's The House Book, 1843:

- Kettles
- Buckets
- Clothes baskets
- Starch pans
- Lines
- Washing- bords (sic)
- Stout benches
- Lyebarel
- Ladle of tin or iron
- Clothes horse (for drying clothes) with broad, substantial feet
- Hickory stick to stir when boiling clothes
- Hickory fork to lift out hot clothes
- Oval tin cups to hold soap
- Indigo bag for bluing made from white flannel
- Brass or copper kettle as iron will stain clothes
- Iron wipers: old soft towels, old sheets
- Beeswax to rub on sole (of iron)
- 3 irons to one person ironing (the common name 'sad iron' came from 'solid iron')

WOOD AND IRON WASHBOARD



Soap:

Though soap was commercially available in the east by the mid 1800s, for the woman arriving at the Fort, it's not likely to have been available. Soap consisted of two key ingredients: lye and animal fat. The condensed version of this type of soap making is that there is a certain proportion of lye (sodium hydroxide) and water to fatty acids that forms a chemical reaction called "saponification." During saponification, the oils and lye mix and become soap. (<http://www.teachsoap.com/soapmakingmethods.html>)

The lye was leached from wood ash and the fat was rendered from the meat of a butchered animal or accumulated as a by-product of cooking. There were a variety of methods for obtaining lye. Bottomless barrels were layered with straw and sticks over which ashes were strewn and then water poured. If there was space to protect a container from rain, a continuous



method was used, collecting ashes in a hopper device which dripped the lye into a collecting vessel located beneath the hopper.

This link provides a clear video of an ash hopper:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgeLVp1iUY>

Unfortunately, the audio is poor, but with careful listening can be interpreted for students. A simple version of this process, called a lye dropper, pictured here, may have been employed by pioneer women short on devices.

Cleaning the fat for soap making, referred to as rendering, was the most unpleasant aspect of soap making because of the foul odors imparted during the process. To render, fats and waste cooking grease were placed in a large kettle over an open fire, outside. The mixture of fats and water were boiled for hours then allowed to cool overnight. By morning the fats had solidified and floated to the top of the water, forming a layer of sweet, clean fat suitable for soap making

In a clean, large kettle, the rendered fat was placed with the lye solution. The pot was placed outdoors, over a fire and boiled until soap was formed. The soap was done when the mixture rolled up into a thick, frothy mass, and a small amount, placed on the tongue, caused no noticeable 'bite' or sting. This boiling process could take up to six to eight hours, depending on the volume of fats and lye and the strength of the lye solution. (cited from suncitysoap.com)

Starch:

Wheat, potato gratings, rice or another substance rich in carbohydrate was boiled in water to make starch to stiffen clothes. (*Forgotten Household Crafts*, p. 93). A recipe for starch from Old Sturbridge Village 1856 *A treatise on Domestic Economy*:

"To manufacture starch: Cleanse one peck of ground wheat, soak for several days. When quite soft, remove the husk with the hand and the soft parts will settle. Pour off the water and replace it every day with fresh stirring it well. Strain off the water and dry for several day in the sun.

To prepare starch: 4 T starch rubber in water 'til lumps removed. Add ½ cup cold water. Pour this into 1 qt. boiling water and boil for 1 ½ hour, adding lump spermaceti (Whole grease) or lump of salt or sugar as large as a hazelnut. Strain and add a little bluing. This with hot water."



Bleach:

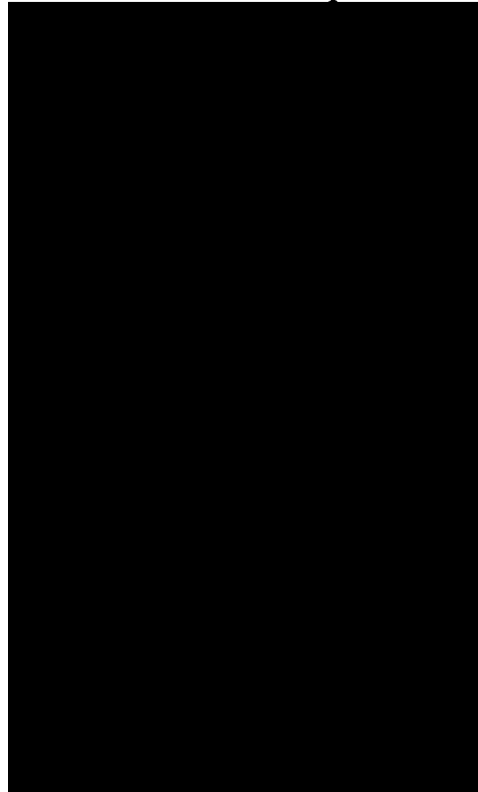
Additives for whitening clothes were limited. References to the use of sodium bicarbonate included cautions that it caused clothes to fall apart if used too liberally. Bluing, actually indigo dye in coke form, gave a bluish cast to white clothes, causing them to have a whiter appearance. (Old Sturbridge Village, p. 5).

IV. THE WORK

".. She dumped in the clothes and the soap and then thrust in her washboard - a board maybe 18 inches wide and 36 inches high with a fluted or ribbed surface - on which she would r-r-r-rub the clothes up and down to scrub out the dirt Hot water and improved washboard helped speed up the process, but it still required much back-breaking labor." (Home Sweet Home p. 61).

Steps of hand laundry:

1. Heavily soiled clothes were "spotted" (stains rubbed with soap) and soaked overnight in "lye" water (a dilution of lye). Lighter clothes could be soaked in plain water.
2. Soaking water was drained and laundry wrung.
3. Clothes were checked for dirty spots, soaped and rubbed against another item or on a wash board, rinsed and wrung again.
4. Clothes were boiled from 30 minutes to 1 1/2 hours.
5. Clothes were rinsed, lifted in and out of the water several times and wrung.
6. Clothes were shaken to eliminate as many wrinkles as possible, hung to dry and then, if necessary, prepared for ironing.



Drying clothes inside near the fire was disagreeable and in many cases not an option. Lacking a laundry line, women laid their wet washing on the grass, bushes or even a nearby tree. If clothes were to be dried on lines, the lines were first wiped off and then strung between trees or posts. "Sagging lines were propped up with clothes props," (long forked sticks or boards with a V-notch cut into the top. Clothes could be draped over the line or hung upon it with clothes pins (pegs). "The best and most durable of clotheslines are of horsehair or of twisted sea grass." (Miss Leslie, The House Book 1843).



Clothing was separated into that which needed to be ironed, starched and ironed or folded and put away. A table or a board supported by two chairs were commonly used for ironing . If even those were unavailable, there were other, creative means." ... There are two irons which we heat on the stove and I laid a long rather wide board on the dirt floor and put an old bedspread over it and my ironing sheet over that and we knelt down on the spread and ironed on the board and it worked fine. We will have a table before next Saturday and ironing will be easier." (So Much to Do. P. 274).

Once the surface was established, the equipment was prepared. Very dry clothes that were in need of ironing were first sprinkled with water (no steam irons!). Flat irons came in a range of sizes, some heated on a stove or fire. Charcoal or self-heating irons had to be fanned with bellows or swung through the air to keep the fire going inside them.



".... ironing traditional fabrics without the benefit of electricity was a hot arduous job. Irons had to be kept immaculately clean, sandpapered and polished. They must be kept away from burning fuel, and be regularly but lightly greased to avoid rusting. Beeswax prevented irons sticking to starched cloth. Constant care was needed over temperature Experience would help decide when the iron was hot enough, but not so hot that it would scorch the cloth. A well known test was spitting on the hot metal" (<http://www.oldandinteresting.com/antique-irons-smoothers-mangles.aspx>)

V. PRIOR TO YOUR ELP DAY

1. Collect clothing for your doing laundry at your station. Some suitable items include: small linens such as plain dishtowels, aprons, kerchiefs, woolen socks, trousers (no zippers), period shirts, (see your ELP costume guidelines) white flat sheets. You may also provide wicker laundry baskets for 'sorting' laundry at the station.
2. Decide which soap you will use for the station and acquire it. It is sufficient to have a few medium chunks of soap for the station (not every student needs their own piece). Please **do not** attempt to make soap as described in this document. Undiluted lye is caustic and will burn the skin and the fumes can be harmful.

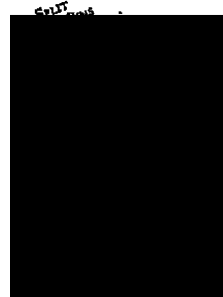


There are several options for soap:

- a. Should you desire to purchase and use a block of more authentic lye based soap, here are two sources (as of 8/2008). Both sites have interesting information about lye soaps in general:
 - <http://www.soapshed.com/store/Lye-Soap-Grand-mas-Ole-Timey-Lye-Soap-pr-16304.html>
 - <http://lyessoap.com/2o/0200uro/020Products/Y020-%20Pounds.html>
 - b. Purchase a bar of Fels Naptha, available in the laundry section of grocery stores and break into chunks.
3. Optional classroom project: The website <http://www.lyessoap.com> provides a simple soap recipe that is a suitable project for school aged children. Click on the link 'Kid's Activities.' This recipe will produce a softer soap than would be useful for washing, but will familiarize students with the idea of making and moulding soap.

Suggestions for ELP Day Activities:

1. Set up the laundry station with the following items from the ELP closet:
 - Clothes line, clothes pins, 2 wash boards
 - 4 tubs (3 galvanized, 1 wooden) – 2 for wash boards, one for rinse water, one to be filled with water near water source
 - 2 buckets
 - 1 iron (in flannel bag with beeswax)
 - 1 bucket carry yoke (located in the period kitchen)
 - 1 enamel coffee pot with lid and handle (from ELP cupboard; to be used for heating water at a nearby source of heat)



Your school provides: clothing and soap for the laundry demonstration.

2. Introduce students to the equipment, explaining the process necessary to clean the clothes. You are enlisting their help! As you will be in 1846 character, you can't compare to their knowledge of laundry practices, so play up the big differences:
 - a. It's hard work, a woman's worst chore, requires heavy lifting (reference hauling of water) have students try on the yoke and buckets.
 - b. Speak of the difficulties of doing laundry while on the trail west, the condition of your clothing when you arrived, eagerness to wash
 - c. Make reference to items you 'had to give up' or lost on the westward journey (perhaps irons, or kettles or your soap making devices)
 - d. Talk about your acquisition of soap for this task: did you have time to make it after you arrived? Trade for or buy it? If you didn't make it, why? If you did, how?



- e. Discuss how your clothing is fashioned in order to limit the laundry: detachable cuffs, collars, layers of undergarments, wool dresses and trousers (see ELP clothing handout)
3. Introduce students to the labor of laundry by assigning tasks and rotating as necessary:
 - a. carrying yoke with buckets of water; around the station and hauling from the water source to refill tubs
 - b. scrubbing laundry on the wash boards
 - c. rinsing and wringing laundry
 - d. hanging wash on the line
 - e. carrying a heavy basket of wet clothing
 - f. ironing (reference only)
4. While students are rotating through their tasks, use the time to introduce other thoughts about some challenges of washing laundry:
 - a. Drying laundry in wet weather
 - b. Stain removal
 - c. Ironing (testing the iron, keeping it hot)
 - d. Hauling water
 - e. The physical toll of the task on a woman's body/hands



"The afternoon has been devoted, by the female portion of our party, to the important duty of "washing." I noticed that the small branch was lined with fires, kettles, tubs, and all the paraphernalia necessary to the process of purifying linen."

from What I Saw In California, by Edwin Bryant



Most of the information in this document was originally researched by Sutter's Fort docent, Ann Dewitt. No biography accompanied the document at the time of revision and therefore it is uncertain which editions were used for those references cited. Authors' names have been added to most of the references cited, although a few remain obscure.

- *Never Done: A History of American Housework*, by *Susan Strasser*
- *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* by Lillian Schlissel
- *Forgotten Household Crafts* by John Seymour
- Miss Leslie's *The House Book*, 1843 by Eliza Leslie
- *Old Sturbridge Village 1856 A treatise on Domestic Economy*
- *Home Sweet Home*, author unknown
- *So Much to Do*, author unknown
- suncitysoap.com (site now inactive)
- <http://www.teachsoap.com/soapmakingmethods.htm>
- <http://www.oldandinteresting.com/antique-irons-smoothers-mangles.aspx>
- <http://www.soapshed.com/store/Lye-Soap-Grandmas-Ole-Timey-Lye-Soap-pr-16304>
- <http://lyessoap.com/2%20ur%20Products%20%20Pounds.html>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggeLVp1iUY>



Laundry Station Inventory Checklist

	Pre	Post
Clothing Bucket (itemized list inside lid):	_____	_____
Clothes line	_____	_____
Clothes pins	_____	_____
Wash boards	_____	_____
Galvanized tubs	_____	_____
Wooden tub	_____	_____
Buckets	_____	_____
Iron (in flannel bag with beeswax)	_____	_____
Bucket carry yoke (return to the period kitchen)	_____	_____
Enamel coffee pot with lid and handle (return to the ELP kitchen cupboard)	_____	_____