Washtubs

These indispensable household helpers did much more than laundry!

By Helen Bradfield Shambaugh

Many years ago in rural Morgan County, W.Va., most homes had no plumbing or electricity. Scarcely was anything used more in those homes than galvanized washtubs. When they weren't being used, most folks' washtubs hung on the back-porch wall or on the wall of an outbuilding.

Washtubs were essential for laundry. I am now more than three quarters of a century old, and in my lifetime, I have graduated from a washboard stuck in one of those tubs to a gasoline wringer washer, from that to an electric wringer washer, and finally, to my wonderful automatic washer and dryer—and I was delighted with each "step up."

I smile when I hear folks complain about doing laundry today. Few have experienced the drudgery of doing laundry with a washboard, a couple of tubs, and a back and two arms. Not to mention ironing all those starched items with sadirons heated on a woodstove!

Our dad built a long, wide bench to hold Mom's washtubs side by side. A narrow ledge near the top of the washboard held a bar of homemade lye soap, or sometimes, Octagon soap. The laundry was submerged in a tub of hot water, then lifted out and laid across the washboard, which was standing in the tub. Rubbed with soap, the item was then scrubbed up and down over the washboard's ribbed surface. Hands puckered like prunes, and knuckles blistered and were rubbed raw.

Above right: Two of the author's sons, Garry "Chip" and Kenny Shambaugh, share a washtub in 1955.
Right: Wade Shambaugh enjoys a splash in his mom's washtub in 1965.

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After sufficient scrubbing, the laundry was hand-wrung, thrown into a tub of clear water to which a little bluing had been added, swished up and down, and wrung again. Calluses formed on hands from the wringing, especially large items such as bed linens and heavy work clothing. More fortunate families had hand-turned wringers that attached to the side of the washtub.

Clean, wet laundry was carried in baskets to clotheslines of rope or wire in the backyard to drip and blow dry. No perfume could rival the scent of bed linens that went directly from the clothesline to the beds!

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But laundry was just one chore for the washtubs.

At butchering time, when friends and neighbors gathered to help, tubs held the fat that was trimmed from the meat, then carried to tables to be cut into small chunks for rendering into lard. A deep washtub was perfect for mixing Dad's recipe of brown sugar, salt, pepper and saltpeter for curing the hams, shoulders and slab bacon.

Meat to be ground into sausage was tossed into a holding tub, and another tub was placed beneath the sausage grinder to catch the ground meat. Salt, pepper and sage seasoning were mixed into the sausage right in the same tub. Tubs used for food preparation were meticulously cleaned and stored.

Ours was a large family, and we kept huge gardens and canned many foods. Tubs set on Mom's wash bench were perfect for washing and preparing food to be canned, and also for washing and rinsing the canning jars.

Our mother also used a washtub, raised on stones or bricks in the backyard, for processing canned food. After lining the bottom of the tub with thin slats of wood that Dad had cut to fit, she added as many filled and capped jars as the tub would hold—18, I believe.

Then she filled the tub with enough warm water to cover the jars, and she covered the tub with the scrap of metal roofing she used as a lid. A fire was kindled under the tub and kept hot enough to keep the water boiling for the proper time needed for processing. Some nonacidic vegetables and meat had to be processed in boiling water for four hours!

A stove-top canner held only seven jars, so tub canning was a time-saver, as well as a good way to keep the heat out of our home. The kitchen wood-stove kept hot enough to process the food would fill the whole house with stifling heat. Our only "air conditioning" was the breeze that trickled through the windows, and the coolest summer evening could not cool the house for comfortable sleeping.

At picnics and church festivals, ice-filled tubs kept beverages and perishable foods cool. Pranksters sneaked small chunks of ice to quickly stick down the collar or pants of an unsuspecting victim. Such laughter as the hapless victim wriggled and squirmed to get rid of the cold morsel and then went for his own piece of ice to get even! No young person was safe, but it was all in good fun.

And of course, there was Saturday night bath time. My siblings and I humorously recall that everyone got a bath on Saturday, "whether we needed it or not." After all, the next day, we'd be going to Sunday school and church.

In our home, a wash basin served for bathing during the week, but on Saturdays, we sometimes took turns in the washtub. Warm water came from the reservoir on the side of the old wood-burning cookstove. A couple of smaller kids might climb in together to spend happy hours playing and splashing, on the back porch in summer or in the warmth of the kitchen stove in winter.

Properly cleaned and dried, tubs would last for years. They dented easily, however, and one had to handle them carefully because a dent would rust and eventually become a hole.

If the hole was not too large, Mom would get her little box of Mend-its and patch it, and the tub would be good for a long time.

My late husband of 50 years and I raised seven children, and for many years of our early married life, we used washtubs just as my childhood family had. Of all the wonderful conveniences in my home today, indoor plumbing and the automatic washer get top billing from me.

I'm happy to no longer need those old washtubs, but they dwell in many of my memories of the Good Old Days. ❖

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