

Dancing Maytags, Laundry Sticks & Smoking Britches

Hot Rod Washing Machine was a Disaster

The Bonner Hooligan

A favorite hangout in Bonner, during the 1950s was the Soda Fountain located beside the Red & White Store, operated by Albert Dufresne. Today it is a delightful memory, and now serves as the home of the Bonner/Milltown History Center. Shortly after the year of 2013 rolled in, I had the good fortune of meeting with Judy Matson and some childhood friends to record stories of our younger years as kids growing up in this quaint little Lumber Town. Our conversations eventually shifted from childhood games to the memories of all the Moms in Bonner. Their devotion to their families was unbelievable. I certainly believe that if you were to attempt to write a Job Description for all the necessary "Mom Skills", it would take the form of several huge books.

Laundry was and always will be a never ending chore, so lets make a comparison of today's Job Skill Requirements for Laundry and compare them to the Job Skills used in the 1940s and 1950s. Today through modern technology we have washing machines that can handle almost any laundry chore by simply sorting colors and textures, before loading up the machine, adding some detergent, and programing the desired washing sequences

My memories of laundry day and square tub Maytags of the 1940s and 1950s, actually took place on my Grand parent's ranch. This was a labor intensive activity. Washing machines of this time period consisted of a square aluminum tub mounted on elevated legs with locking castors or wheels on the bottom end of each leg. A small platform was located between the bottom of the square tub and the locking castors which supported an optional electric drive motor or a single cylinder Gasoline Engine. Inside the square tub was a circular ribbed device, called the Agitator, which rotated in a left/right motion causing hot soapy water to surge through the laundry. The agitator was activated by engaging a lever on the gear drive mechanism. A lid was hinged on top of the tub to prevent water from being sloshed out. An external elevated shaft rose upwards from one corner of this machine and supported a wringer. The wringer was made up of two rubber coated rollers which rotated in opposite directions. The wringer rollers could be set to rotate away from or towards the washing machine by engaging a directional handle on the side of the wringer. The very top of the wringer had a tensioning spring which could be adjusted to wring out the soapy wash water. The wringer had a serious safety issue, as it could easily grab your fingers, pulling your hand and arm into the wringer. A short section of broom handle, about 18 inches long, was used as a precaution, to grasp and insert the laundered, and soapy clothes into the wringer, in preparation for the rinse cycle.

By the late 1940s my grandmother had worn out the electric drive motor as well as the original gasoline motor, but she was not yet ready to give up on her beloved old washing machine. She convinced my Granddad to incorporate another gasoline drive motor which was rather smokey and leaked oil. This engine ran well but would quickly fill the house with smoke, so she had granddad cut a slot 2 inches wide by 12 inches high in the side wall of the back porch. Now the engine could be operated outdoors, using a long drive belt to transfer the power through the wall to her washing machine. With a little tuning on the engine and some throttle tweaking, her grand old Maytag came back to life.

Wash day usually started at daylight on a Saturday morning which saw my grandmother building a fire in her Great Majestic cook stove in preparation for the gallons of hot water needed for her laundry. Next she rolled out the square tub Maytag Washer, inserted the drive belt through the slot in the wall, and connected the drive belt to the washer and engine. While the water was heating she sorted her laundry for colors and whites, before filling the tub on the old Maytag with hot water and a measure of White King Laundry Detergent. A load of clothes was added to the hot soapy water and she went outside to start the engine and set the throttle speed. After everything was running to her satisfaction she engaged the agitator lever on her washer-- closed the lid -- and the grand old machine sprang to life emitting a gentle sloshing sound as the soiled clothes once again churned through the wash cycle.

Now---lets add a five year old "Hooligan" to the mix. As with all young Hooligans, life on a ranch was one giant adventure, filled with imaginary friends and heroes, not to mention numerous secret forts filled with all sorts of treasures. My favorite fort was inside a roll of coiled up chicken wire. This coil of fencing was stored in an unused milking stall, which had an assortment of random materials thrown on top of it. This secret hideout was well camouflaged, and soon became an intricate part of my Hot Rod Washing Machine Caper.

Saturday was here!!! It was time to meet the challenge---which was---"push the pedal to the metal" on the old Maytag's Drive Motor and see just how fast she will go. Run the old machine at top speed until Grandmother is just inches away from grabbing you by the neck and tanning your hide. With split second quickness you must dash off to the security of your fort and hide there until things cool down.

With a racing heart and rapid breathing, I crept up to the smoky drive motor and opened up the throttle. What happened next was simply glorious! As the engine picked up speed, the old Maytag started a slow dance, which increased in tempo until the locking castors released, and the intensity of the agitator forced the lid open. Soapy water started oozing up through the lid, similar to a geyser in Yellowstone Park. By this time the old Maytag was dancing a soapy gig, and off in the distance I heard my Grandmother charging to avert this disaster. She uttered some unbelievable threats as I released the throttle and ran for the protection of my fort.

Safely inside my fort I savored the moment while grandmother raged about the colossal mess. Bobbie, the old barn cat came strolling in to my fort and I shared every exciting moment with him. He purred contentedly as my thrill packed story unfolded. A short time later, after the pandemonium quieted down, I made my way down to the swimming hole in Willow Creek to join a few friends in some refreshing water sports. They were spell bound with my great adventure but,----- little did I know that my new found glory was rapidly coming to an end.

Supper time was nearing and we said our good byes before journeying home for the evening meal. Walking through the back door, I was greeted by my grandmother holding her trusty Laundry Stick. Her story about the Great Hot Rod Washing Machine Adventure was vastly different from the story I told, and she emphasized each detail as she laid the laundry stick over my Smoking Britches.

Today as I prepare to celebrate my 70 first birthday, I still have a passion for Hot Rods and restoring vintage cars. Recalling my great laundry adventure of the 1940s, brings a smile to my face---but one thing is for certain---I will never again, drive a Hot Rod Washing Machine.

