

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

The September 1860 issue of the "New England Farmer" tells of a milking machine conceived by a Massachusetts dairyman. The machine operated on power provided by the motion of the cow's tail. In answer to the objection that the machine would work only during fly-time, the inventor recommended the introduction of artificial flies into the dairy stable.

People have been offering new inventions to the public for untold eons. It's man's nature to try to improve his environment.

If you had happened to grow up in a household where Father was an engineer and small-scale part-time inventor, you'd have learned early to approach every activity with an eye to simplifying, improving, or changing it for the better.

That's the way it was with us. Father had several inventions to his credit and was often sought out by other men who had invented mechanical gadgets or machinery to do a particular job, men who needed the input a talented and imaginative fellow could provide to pull the details of the idea together and engineer the finished product.

Father was just the person for these jobs for he was blessed with natural aptitude reinforced with education and experience for problem-solving. As a result, the atmosphere in which we grew up encouraged application of innovative methods and ideas.

Since I was the only girl in our family of four children, Mother expected my help with the many household chores that kept her busy from dawn to dark. There were a big laundry each week, beds to make every day, three meals to prepare daily. There were dishes to be done, housecleaning chores, and plenty of baking to keep our appetites satisfied.

Pies, cakes, cookies and breads were all baked at home by Mother. Simpler chores like bed-making, table-setting, dishwashing, and furniture dusting fell to my lot. My brothers often helped with these, but were excused if they found more "masculine" work to do, such as emptying the furnace ashes, helping Father at the shop, or cutting and splitting wood. Stereotyped sex roles were considered proper and entirely appropriate.

The upshot of it all was an inclination on my part to find, or at least think of, ways household chores could be performed more easily. Like the Massachusetts dairyman's milking machine, most of them weren't too practical.

One such idea was to build into the apron of the dining

room table a series of shallow drawers where table linen, cutlery and dishes might be stored. This, I figured, would save thousands of steps taken to repeatedly put dishes away in pantry cupboards and take them out again in preparation for every meal.

Why not, once the dishes and silverware had been scraped, rinsed, washed and dried, put them away in the table where they'd be ready for use by each hungry individual at the next meal? One step of the operation would be eliminated completely. No one would have to set the table; each person could slide out his drawer, set his own place, and serve himself.

No one but me ever considered this a workable plan, least of all Mother, to whom the ritual of putting dishes away and setting them out again for each meal was sacrosanct.

Bedmaking seemed another area calling for simplification. Why not attach a giant spring-loaded roller, similar to those used for window shades, to the footboard of a bed?

Then, instead of drawing the bottom sheet tightly and re-tucking all four corners, spreading up the top sheet and blanket, smoothing out any wrinkles and lumps, and making certain everything was even and centered, one could simply snap all the bedding into the roller, cover the mattress with the bedspread, and the job would be done in jig-time. At bed-time, each sleeper could just pull up his own bedding and climb in.

Another grand idea, but one deemed unacceptable. In fact, not even Father (who usually encouraged our independent ideas) seemed enthusiastic about hauling up his own sheets and blankets each night before retiring.

By the time I was in the market for my own bedding, someone else had had the bright idea of fitted sheets, both top and bottom, and these saved such a lot of tugging and pulling, they were immediately adopted by housewives across the nation.

While fitted top sheets are no longer made, the cornered bottom sheet is standard today. The only place you seldom find them is in motels or hotels which for some reason prefer the flat sheets throughout. Probably they wear longer under conditions of commercial laundering.

Cleaning and dusting were accomplished with the massive upright vacuum and dust cloths of soft flannel. Pre-treated cloths to gather and hold dust were unheard of, so dusting necessitated frequent shaking of cloth. Once a dust-cloth was saturated with furniture wax or polish, however, it gathered dust rather than spreading it around, and whenever dusting fell to me, I polished and dusted at the same time.

Precursor of the automatic dishwasher was the lazy housewife (or her daughter) who let clean dishes air dry in the drainer. Mother would have none of it, insisting the resulting water spots were unsightly and the procedure indicative of a slack housekeeper.

And before detergents, air-dried dishes did bear water spots. I couldn't for the life of me see that it mattered.

Next to washing windows, the chore most despised was ironing. There was always a mountainous pile after every washday. Handkerchiefs, for tissues weren't available; table linens, since paper napkins and plastic placemats weren't on the market, were just the beginning.

Each week, twenty-eight men's and boys' starched cotton shirts, seven dresses or blouses of mine and seven of mother's, along with our aprons must be ironed, folded, and put away.

Moreover, there were pillow slips and tea towels, slip and nightclothes to be ironed. The one concession Mother made to efficiency was folding sheets as they came from the line, matching corners exactly, and smoothing them into neat oblongs before stacking them in the linen closet along with terry towels and face cloths.

Blessed are they who invented no-iron fabrics, even if precious oil is used to create polyester fibres to weave with cotton!

Thinking about the changes of the past forty or fifty years makes us wonder what will come in the future. Refrigerators have replaced iceboxes, countertop burners and microwave ovens are replacing unit stoves, disposals replace the three-cornered garbage drainer that once sat in every soapstone kitchen sink.

Dishwashers and laundry appliances replace hours of Mother's labor. Trash compactors reduce refuse to manageable proportions, miracle fabrics eliminate cleaning bills and most ironing. Freezers put convenience foods at our fingertips.

Will we see window panes that don't need washing and polishing? Or floor coverings and upholstery fabrics that gather no soil nor show any wear?

Will some genius find a way to put snow to some good use? Already within our grasp is the capacity to harness the sun's energy.

How long will it be before television and telephone marry so we see as well as hear those on the other end of the line? Already we have explored outer space and brought moon rocks back to Earth.

And we can fly home from Europe in a few hours, arriving here before we leave there, by the local clocks.

Doubt not there'll be new ways, new methods, for this is historically man's manner in his environment; he sees, he cogitates, he changes and modifies all he touches. He has since the beginning of time.

Coming in the future will be still more inventions that haven't yet been invented; some, like the cow-powered milk-er, will find no takers; other, like fitted sheets, will impact our life-style.