

Laundry When Living Off-Grid

By Aur Beck

Learn how to do laundry by hand when you are living off the grid and harness the power of the sun for clothes that are solar dried.



The evolution of laundry in our family directly correlates with our family's growth. When we were a small family we washed and scrubbed our clothes in the creek or a bucket using a washboard with very little soap as it takes a while to rinse out the soap. Mom's homemade lye soap and later lye/goats milk soap was/is a good strong soap for doing laundry and when there was a very dirty spot we would scrub that spot well with soap and scrub it on the wash board.

I do remember having fun trying to twist out the water in big items like sheets and blankets. Even with pants, two of us would grab a side and wring out the water by each of us twisting the pants in opposite directions thus wringing out the majority of the water

before we hung it out on the line. We used to just hang everything on the clothes line but the weight tended to break the line no matter how many times we upgraded the clothesline and rebuilt it.

If we wanted to have hot water, it meant heating it on the stove or over a fire, which was easy in the winter as we always had a large pot of water on the wood stove for moisture in the air (wood burning dries it out) and for hot water. In the summer we didn't use as much hot water (we did have one of those plastic bag camping solar "showers" that we heated water in). Although later I did end up building a solar batch heater using a plastic tank painted black and mounted on the roof. The problem is we had no pump so we had to haul the water from the creek up onto the roof to fill the tank and then it was gravity fed. It usually got way too hot. Now a small solar electric (PV) panel and a little DC pump can do it wonderfully. I don't remember except vaguely once or twice using hot water to wash our clothes. I think once we had an infestation of lice and we boiled all of our clothes and various cloth sundries.



At one house we had a hand operated wringer washer which a couple of us kids got our hands stuck in when we were ringing out the clothes. It was a game for us kids as one kid would feed the clothes through the ringer while another would hand turn the crank. It never really hurt as the kid cranking would stop as soon as your fingers were caught and crank backwards to get you out. To wash the clothes there was a handle to swish back and forth to tumble the clothes. It was fun to see how dirty we could get the water as that felt like we accomplished something.

I know we had an electric operated wringer washer also but since we only had electricity for one winter it must have been only than that we used it. When we didn't have electricity, we would use it as a soak tub to soak the really dirty things. I remember being deathly afraid of getting my hand caught in the wringer but would actually, for the excitement, would push the limits on how close I could get my fingers to it and once did get my hand halfway up my forearm sucked in. I don't remember how I was saved but I do remember the pain and swelling being around for a few days.

Later, as our family grew, we would just do laundry in the large machines at a laundromat on our monthly town runs.

Drying was always done on a clothes line and even a couple of months ago when I went to the laundromat and dried my clothes in the dryer, due to it raining, I felt so guilty for doing it when I should have waited to do laundry when the sun was shining. Even when we did laundry in town 30 minutes away, we took all the clothes home to hang them out to dry. Only once did we wait so long to hang the

clothes out to dry that they had started to turn sour smelling. Drying them in nature's solar dryer made them smell fresh again.

I remember when my friend Dan, who lived off grid in Northern Michigan, made up solar clothes dryer kits which he called Solar Fusion Clothes Dryer and sold them at the Midwest Renewable Energy Fair. He actually sold out and had to buy supplies to make more kits. All that was in the "kit" was a piece of paper with instructions on how to set up a clothes line, 25 feet of clothes line, and 10 wooden clothes pins. He was selling them for \$10 each. People have become so disconnected that some people had actually no idea what a clothes line was. Dan was a funny man and he would explain it without ever saying clothes line. Pay once and you have free drying For Ever!! Do you have a solar clothes dryer that you use?

It is interesting to me thinking back that us kids always made any "chore" we had into a game so I still enjoy doing laundry to this day. I know it was work looking back but I don't remember it as work but rather as a fun time with my siblings.

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