

THE WORK OF KANSAS FARM WOMEN

Goal: Introduce students to the work of farm women before the turn of the century.

Objectives: When the lesson is completed, students will know that:

Farm women had primary responsibility for household work and the care of children.

Household work 100 years ago was much different from today.

Fathers' and mothers' roles have changed quite a bit in the past 100 years.

Vocabulary: Cabin
Quilt (noun & verb)
Prairie
Washday

From the Trunk: Pictures #7 – 11
Coffee Grinder
Vegetable Slicer
Cherry Pitter
Apple Peeler
Washboard
Sad Iron

Introduction

Make a list on the blackboard of the household work the students' families do. (Grocery shopping, cooking, washing dishes, yard work, sewing/mending....)

-Who does each of these tasks?

Family work roles have changed a great deal in the past 100 years. Today both parents often work outside the home and share household chores.

Choose one or two of the letters which follow to read to the students. They were written by Sarah Everett and her husband John between 1855 and 1863. Have the children listen to answer these questions:

-What kinds of work did Sarah Everett do?

-What troubles did Sarah have?

-Do you think Sarah liked living in Kansas despite her troubles?

-Does your mother do any of the jobs that Sarah Everett did? What doesn't she do?

-Think of your family's kitchen; what household appliances does your family have that pioneer women didn't?



The Letters Of John And Sarah Everett

Sat. Sep. 1, 1855

Dear Sister Cynthia

.....

Crops

Our corn is much higher than we can reach - it is earing out, our pumpkins and squashes are for the most part fruiting well and we have one large patch of beans that promise well. Our tomatoes are getting on as fast as they can but will not be ripe under a fortnight. Those with a few hills of potatoes comprise all our crop this year. Our cabin is

Cabin Life

still in a dilapidated condition - our sickness preventing us from fixing it up. The rain and sunshine of heaven can both alike visit us, but we murmur not at either - why should we murmur at anything that comes from Heaven? The worms are working in the logs at the side & over head so that we have continual dust dropping in every part of the cabin. Sometimes it gets an inch thick on things that are not moved for two or 3 days, &c. Write to us soon and often.

As ever your Sister

Sarah

Longwood Place Apr. 28, 1856

My Dear Sister Sarah

The duties of the farm prevented our writing any letters to anyone last week, but I hope our folks, as they know we are in the country and consequently inconvenient to the P. O., will feel no alarm in not hearing from us till the arrival of this.

I want to know in the first place before I commit myself, how many flowers have you gathered this spring? how many kinds have you seen?

Prairie
Flowers

If the Quakeress Sarah Ann, wife of Richard, had not called in this afternoon I would have culled a dozen or more choice prairie flowers for a bouquet and put them in this letter, perhaps you'll get them in another one of these days. Let me name some of the flowers I have (seen) within a few days, first the little spring beauties... (Sarah goes on to name Sweet Williams, violets, lambs tongue, Indian paint brush, wild cherry, sheep sorrel, indigo plant, and a number of other flowers for which she has no name.) What think you of our flowery home? Come out here and I will show you our building spot and if you don't almost swoon with the overpowering beauty of the surrounding scenery --don't visit Niagara on your way back. You couldn't appreciate its sublimity -- I must close for John has come in for his supper -- and tis after seven so I presume his appetite will not relish a long delay.

Yours mid flowers and sunshine

Sarah M. C. E.

Longwood May 7, 1857

Dear Father --

Yours of Apr. 23 came to hand this week -- John is very busy now with his Spring's work and can hardly find time to write -- He is getting on very well -- has done his own plowing (on the old land) and got it mostly planted. Will finish this afternoon all except a small patch for a few more garden seeds.

Breaking
Sod and
Splitting
Rails

The spring is so late that there has not been any sod broken yet in these parts -- John has split most of his rails so far this spring to fence in his new breaking and expects to be able to finish what he will need before his crop will be liable to injury....

Prairie
Fires

Little Franky went with us to "fight fire" till dark when I took him to the house and put him to bed and returned again as one alone could accomplish nothing.

There was nothing particularly dangerous if we were careful -- My dress or any of our clothes might have taken fire if we had not had our minds on ourselves as well as on what we wished to burn -- but we escaped unharmed with the exception of extreme weariness and severe colds.

Our nearest neighbor is three fourths of a mile distant. We had no time to take Frank there -- besides children here have to learn self reliance and independence as well as their parents -- That night Frank went to bed with his clothes on and without his supper without crying -- But he cried for his breakfast before we could hardly get our eyes open next morning....

A Cold
Spring

We are having a very dry spring and have had also a very cold one. During April the wind was strong and steady and cold - - the weather here was described by the Tribune in speaking of the weather in N. Y. that it was "unseasonably, unreasonably, uncomfortably and unnecessarily cold." It was that here once more also -- I close with love from --

Your children
Sarah & John & Franky

Tues. Evening Oct. 27

Dear Cynthia

If the baby will remain quiet long enough I will answer the questions in your last letter --

Sarah's
Duties

....John got back from Lecompton Tuesday, as we may have written in some previous letter. We both came through the trial unscathed by either the "winds or the wolves." And now what do you think of me, I have to stay alone two nights every week, and not only that but have three cows to milk besides pigs to feed and chickens to take care of and crying babies too look after. And just now as if all these were to little, the chills [malaria] have set in, so with all the rest of my duties I am compelled to shake every other day -- Tomorrow is my day to be sick and I am preparing for it today -- getting in from the field and boiling sufficient pumpkin to last the pigs -- keeping the cows up so that I may be able to milk early before my chills come on

Malaria

fixing food for Franky to help himself to &c. Baby will have the hardest time and I don't know just how he can be managed -- Hope this state of things won't last a great while.

Hardships
Frontier
Life

We have no very dangerous wild beasts that I know of. Prairie wolves are not dangerous and those are the ones that howl around our lone cabins. We are not so very far from neighbors only 1/2 a mile and we have far more companions among tame beasts than wild ones -- and as to hardships Kansas has less of them than many older countries -- That however depends in a great measure on the way we look at things -- Things that would have been to me unendurable hardships in Steuben are only a little disagreeable here simply because I like Kansas and didn't like Steuben and I am sure you would find few hardships were you to come here also -- but if mother can't bear to hear you speak of coming she would suffer grave hardships for you once you get here.... Love to all -- I must get to bed.

Yours sleepily

Sarah

Longwood, May 4, 1858

Dear Sarah --

Health
Problems

I have but a few minutes to write and perhaps it is good for my purpose as a longer time -- as I have nothing in the wide world to say - - My teeth are aching and have been all night -- It's a damp dark cold dismal time, come on I should judge on purpose, to give folks the toothache and ague, and to rot corn in the hill, and give children the croup -- If my judgement is right it accomplishes its purpose much better than we poor mortals seem to carry out our plans --for in our case as I stated before I've got the toothache, Mr. Snow who is stopping with us has got the ague and Frank has got the croup.

Last week I took out the mail so as to give John a chance to work at home fearing our crop would come out rather late by the three days delay, but this week it is not weather to plow drag or plant so he goes with it himself. I shall probably have to go again next week--

Sarah
Carries
the Mail

I have hardly got rested from my last trip -- I had to do a large washing and some ironing -- some cleaning, and cooking enough for him at home and myself, the day before I started -- then the 40 miles a day on horseback for three days -- then that night about midnight after I got home some emigrants got in that stopped with us and for whom supper and two beds on the floor had to be prepared -- which broke up that nights rest and the next day it was afternoon before they got started on so that I had my hands full till quite night getting cleared out after them.

The first night on my way to Neosho I traveled till nearly midnight -- On the high prairie I had great difficulty in keeping from being blown off from my horse, an inexperienced horse woman must inevitably have been borne off by the wind -- But I believe I may well boast a little on my skill in riding. I have rode down and up ravines steeper than your house roof barebacked with Frank in my lap when the banks were so slippery that the horse didn't pretend in going down 20 or 30 ft. to raise her feet more than once or twice and when in going up she would have to jump and plunge in the most violent manner to keep from slipping down again into the water. Such lessons were learned in the days of Ruffian notoriety when it was necessary to know the latest tidings and when 'twas safer for a woman to be seen out than a man....

Dairying
vs.
Teaching

I had an opportunity to take a school in Leroy while I was out, but the day I started John had sent out a man about 15 miles from here who owns 50 cows to see if we could hire 20 of them for the summer -- But they were such a poor lot of animals -- been so badly wintered -- old and never milked except by the calves -- so wild too -- that our messenger thought they were not worth taking as a gift -- So hoping that we might go to dairying I made no effort to secure the school as I should otherwise have done --

Yours as ever
Sarah

Longwood June 20, 1859
Robbie's birthday

Dear Jennie

Cheese
Making

....Our cheese is getting old enough to market according to the western notions. And it stands so far A. No. 1 which I know you will be glad to hear. We have sold five and a half at 12 1/2 cts a lb. We took two to town over a week ago and the merchant that bought of us said afterwards that he had tried a great deal of Kansas cheese and had made up his mind that it didn't pay, but that was good and he would like more of it....

Success!

I presume you think me very childish to feel so much elated simply because folks like my cheese, but you cant realize the reasons that make me feel so-- Supposing you had been living on the plainest possible food for only a few years say jonny-cake & skimmed milk for weeks together. Supposing you had turned your clothes inside out and bottom side up and then been obliged to wear tatters at that-- Suppose your toes had touched the floor till the 27. of Dec. and your crops had been shortened by drought and cut off by frost, and you had even with all the economy you could muster kept not only continually sinking in debt but taxing also the charity of your friends. Supposing this and a great deal more too tedious to enumerate I say -- don't you think that you would grow a little childish over the first faint gleamings of a better time coming....?

Weary sleepy
Sister S.M.C.E.

Longwood, Sep. 4 1861

Dear Cynthia & Jennie two times over-

Rain

(I believe that is the order in which we owe,) it is a dull rainy day that I cannot set myself to work so I am going to inflict a dull muddy letter on your patience. We have had no rain to do any good for a month, till night before last there came up a thorough thunder storm. John and Frank were caught out in the hardest of it while searching for the cows and had to come home without them.

After midnight the rain set in again and continued in fierce showers till morning -- this morning again a drizzling rain commenced before sunrise and still continues. (now 9 o'clock) We have a haystack not topped out!

John &
Sarah's
Workload

John and I are doing alone (except haying) and we cannot get time to write much-- I generally milk 11 cows in the morning and 10 at night that is about three good hours work in a day -- then it takes 4 hours more to work the cheese off and the rest of the time I have to do the family work -- How many letters a month could you mail and do all the work including sewing for a family of five, and do 7 hours hard work in a day extra...?

I am obliged to do without help because we cannot pay.

Yours wearily
Sarah M. C. E.

Osawatomie, Oct. 30, 1862

Dear Jennie

Gathering
Wild Fruits

...There has been an unusual amount of wild fruit in the woods here this season-- We had gooseberries two months. I canned about 14 qts after they were picked over beside having them constantly while they lasted, then plums came on and lasted till the frost came, then there were summer and frost grapes all through the woods in every direction, in some places there were a great many blackberries and also mulberries the most insipid fruit that grows, there are in places, too, "heaps" of paw-paws, a large green sickish fruit that some people are very fond of, and persimmons that before they have been ripened by several severe frosts will pucker ones mouth up so that they can't find their tongue for a week after....

Yours as ever S. M. C. E.

Excerpts from "Letters of John and Sarah Everett, 1854-1864; Miami County Pioneers" *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Volume VIII, Number 1, pp. 3-34, Number 2, pp. 143-174, Number 3, pp. 279-310, Number 4, pp. 350-383.

Quilting

From the Trunk:

Picture #7

Discussion:

- Have you ever felt lonely? Why were you lonely?

- Have you ever moved to a new home in a new town?
How did you feel about moving?

When families moved west they often left behind family and friends. Sometimes it was very lonely for the early settlers of the Kansas prairie. Farm women were among the hardest hit. Their husbands occasionally went to town to trade, and children might go to school when they were old enough, but the women usually needed to stay near the homestead to look after young children, gardens, and livestock.

Picture #7



As families settled closer and closer together, women gathered together to share work. The women in this picture enjoyed sewing together. Quilting was also a popular group activity. Sewing and quilting "bees" allowed women to do their work and enjoy each other's company at the same time.

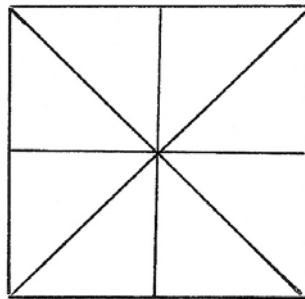


Activities

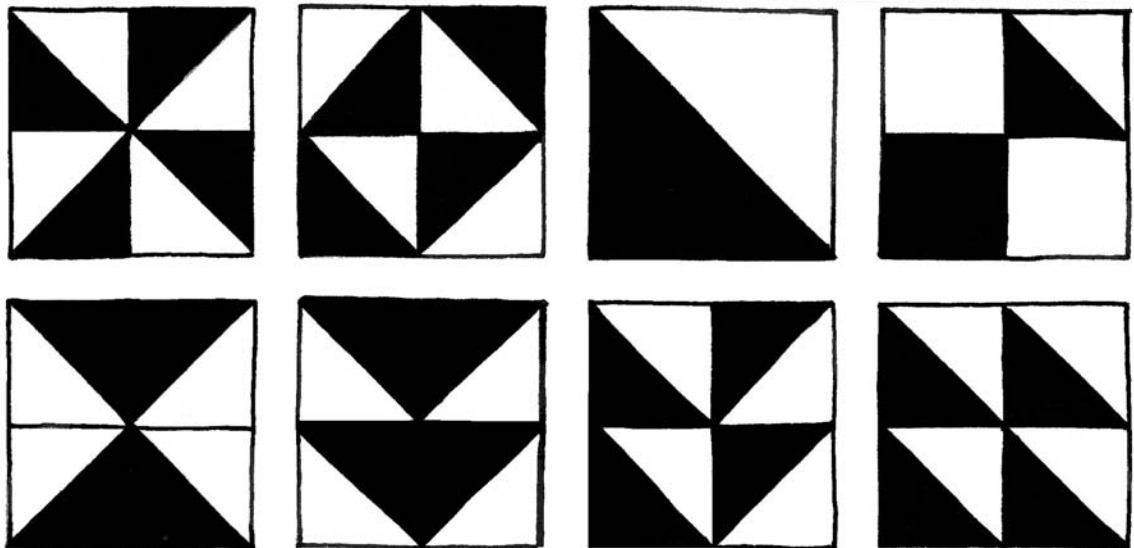
Make A Class Quilt

Supplies needed: White and colored paper cut into 8" squares, scissors, glue, masking tape

Give each child two square pieces of paper, one white and one a bright color. Have each child cut the colored piece of paper into eight right triangles as shown below:



The colored triangles can be shared with other class members so that each child can have a variety of colors in his or her "quilt block." On their white piece of paper each child can make a pattern using the colored triangles. When they are happy with their designs, they can glue their triangles in place. Then join all of the squares together with masking tape to make a class "quilt."



Cooking

From the Trunk: Coffee Grinder, Vegetable Slicer, Apple Peeler, Cherry Pitter, Picture #8

A farm woman raised and processed much of her family's food. she raised chickens, milked cows, and kept a garden. She also made butter and cheese, baked bread, and canned fruits and vegetables for use throughout the year.

Although they didn't have the same kitchen appliances as we have today, farm women did have tools to make their work easier 100 years ago.

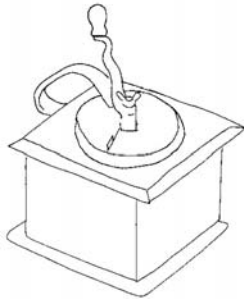


Activities

Food Preparation

On a covered table, place the four kitchen tools and the foods that go with them. Cards have been enclosed showing how each of these tools work. Four children at a time can go to the table and take turns operating the tools.

Supplies: Coffee beans, carrots, apples, cherries, small plastic bags, table covering, damp sponge



COFFEE GRINDER: Coffee was a precious item on early Kansas farms. As more people settled in Kansas, railroads and country stores made coffee more widely available. On some homesteads, however, grain was sometimes substituted for coffee. If coffee beans were purchased, they had to be roasted and ground in a box-type grinder like this one.

Because coffee was greatly enjoyed, but difficult to obtain, some people were willing to go to great lengths to get it, like Aunt Lizzie in this story:



Coffee Break

Aunt Lizzie lived through the early days on a Kansas homestead, enduring the privations common to all. In the years of crop failure and grasshopper plague, it was hard to obtain the plainest food, and luxuries such as coffee and sugar were almost unknown. Molasses was used for sweetening, and grain was roasted and boiled as a substitute for coffee.

Aunt Lizzie went to town one day, and having a little cash, she bought a few groceries, including a pound of coffee beans. She anticipated many cups of delightful brew as coffee grounds were saved and used over and over.

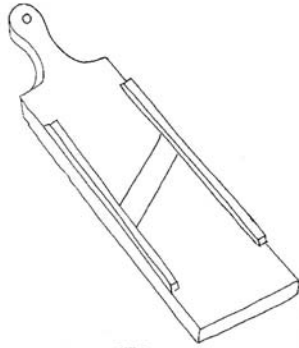
She made the trip with a neighbor who lived some miles away. It was dark when they reached the neighbor's home and Aunt Lizzie walked the remaining miles to her home.

Arriving at her dugout in the hillside, she was dismayed to find the paper bag containing the coffee had sprung a leak.

As soon as it was light next morning, she retraced her steps, salvaging the precious coffee beans.

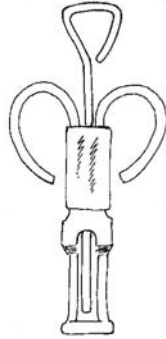
"And do you know," she would say, "I don't believe I lost an ounce of 'em. Did that coffee taste good." For Aunt Lizzie that had been a serious coffee break.

--Mrs. Ross Blake, RR 1, Oakhill Kansas, From *My Folks Claimed the Prairies: A Treasury of Homestead Stories from the readers of Capper's Weekly*, Virginia Haggart and Dorothy Harvey, eds., 1978.

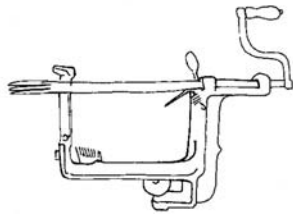


VEGETABLE SLICER: Vegetable slicers were made of wood with iron blades and were used a great deal in the days when most people kept a garden. Vegetable slicers similar to this are still available in stores and homes; many are now made of plastic.

-What do vegetable slicers and food processors have in common? Which do you think would work faster? Which would be less likely to break?

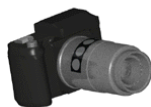


CHERRY PITTEER: This handy utensil removed the seeds from cherries quickly. Cherries could be eaten as a dessert fruit, preserved, dried, and used in making pies. When the students have used this utensil, ask if they can think of any other ways that the cherry pits might be removed. (Paring knives, fingers, and bobby pins are all common methods.)



APPLE PARER: Apples were very special treats on frontier farms. They became more available as settlers began to plant their own apple trees. Apples could be used in a variety of ways: dried, mincemeat, applesauce, apple butter, apple pies, and many more. There was much coring, paring, and cutting when apples were used in a recipe. The apple parer was developed to help with this job. Early parers were made entirely of wood except for their blades and prongs. In the middle of the 19th century, a model made entirely out of iron was produced.

Picture #8



This is Winslow Homer's painting "Fall Games, The Apple Bee." On the far left you will see a man seated at a table using one of the first factory-made iron apple peelers.

The apple peeler in the trunk works in the same way as the nineteenth-century models, though its design is modern.

-What method would the students prefer to use in peeling apples: a paring knife or an apple peeler?

-Which method is faster?

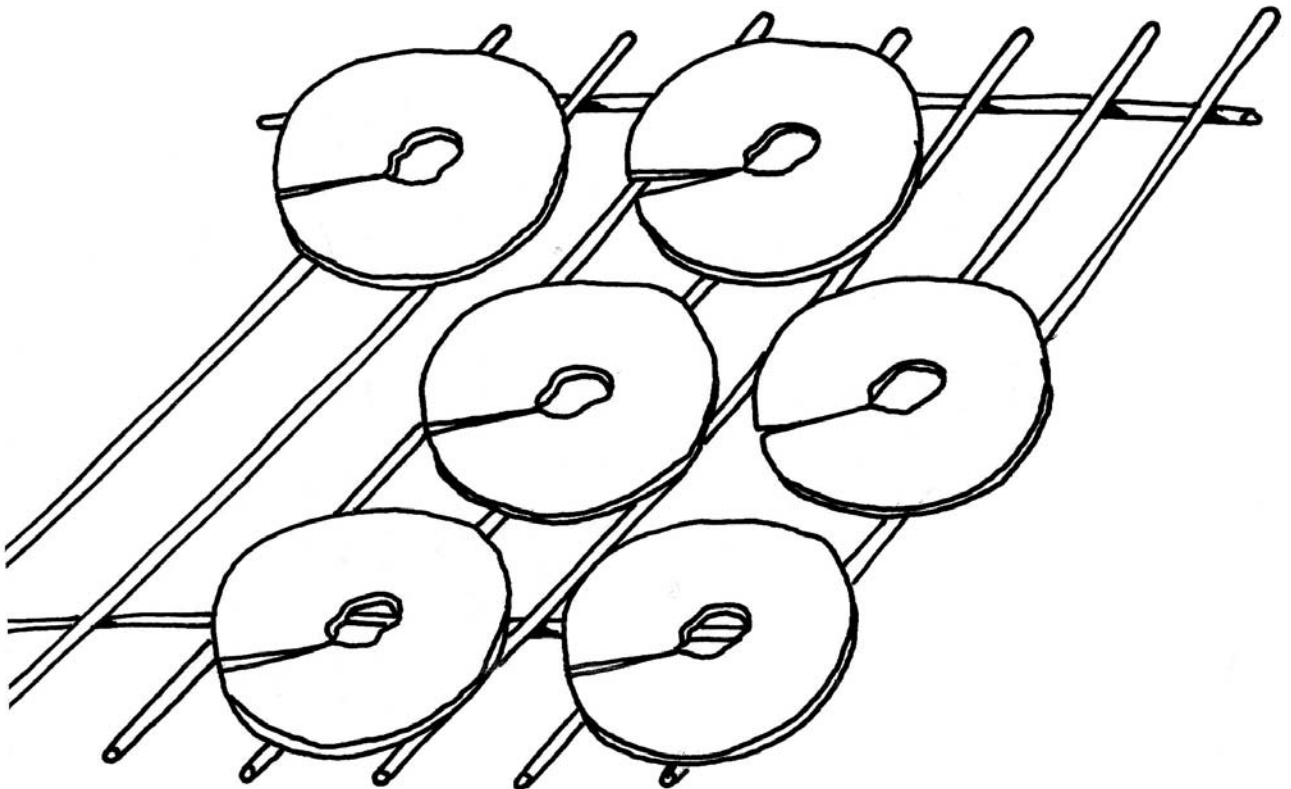
-Which method does the neatest job?

Food Drying

Many foods, such as corn, beans and apples, were dried and stored by farm women to be used during the winter. Take some of the apple slices you have made and let them dry on a wire rack or tray. Place the rack in a dry, well ventilated area of the classroom and cover with a thin towel. In two to three days they will be ready to taste.

From the trunk: Apple Peeler

Supplies: apples, wire racks, thin towels



Washing

From the trunk: Washboard, Picture #9

-How are clothes washed in your home?

-Who does the laundry?

-What steps does your clothing go through between the time you put it in the laundry basket and when it is ready to wear again?

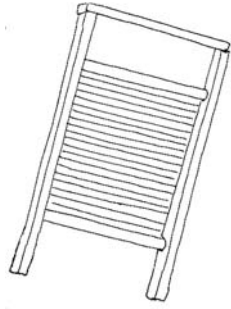
Washing clothing was an all-day job and very hard work on a pioneer homestead. Read about laundry day in the 1880s.



Washday

Wash day brought its problems for the frontier woman. As one woman remarked, wash day meant Monday and Tuesday and the term should have been "wash days." In earliest times there was no bar soap. Soft soap and hot water were put into a keg and then the clothes were dumped into this mixture. The clothes were first vigorously prodded with a stick, then taken out and laid on a block and pounded with a mallet. When the clothes were sufficiently clean they were hung on bushes or fences to dry. Wash boards, boilers, and machines were unheard of. Great care was taken not to break any of the buttons with the mallet for buttons were too scarce and costly. They were made of pearl or bone, mostly bone. ...Frequently the women folk of the family migrated to a little creek ... on wash day. The large ten gallon iron kettle and the clothes were taken to the bank of the stream and there, where wood and water were plentiful, the washing was done and the clothes hung on the brush and high grass along the bank to dry.

--From *The Sod-House Frontier*, by Everett Dick, pp. 238-239.



WASHBOARD: The washboard was an improvement over the mallet-method used by the early pioneers. After the clothing had been heated in a kettle with soap, they were removed and scrubbed vigorously up and down on the rough surface of the washboard.

Picture #9



Show the students this photograph of two women washing clothes with washboards. Note the dresses they are wearing; these are probably their oldest clothes.

-Are these women having fun?

-Are they working hard?

-Why do you think they are working outdoors?



Activities

Washing Clothes

From the Trunk: Washboard

Other Supplies: Pail of hot water
Soap (use lye soap if you can find it)
Dirty dishtowels or old t-shirts

Place the pail of hot water outdoors, or someplace where water can slosh out without harming anything. Then add the lye soap and place the washboard in the bucket as the women in picture #9 did. Put one or two pieces of dirty clothes in the bucket and scrub them up and down on the metal surface of the washboard.

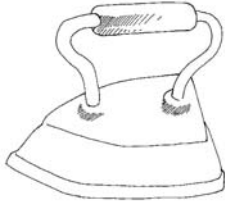
-How long does it take for your laundry to become clean?

-How would the students feel after doing a load of their family's laundry this way? (You may wish to point out firewood had to be chopped and a fire lit, water had to be drawn from a well or creek and heated on the fire before the laundry could be done.)

Ironing

From the Trunk: Sadiron

Other Supplies: Modern steam iron



SADIRON: Sadirons were used to press clothing in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The word "sad" in this case does not mean unhappy. It is an Old English word meaning heavy. Pass the iron around the class; the students will quickly understand how it got its name.

Irons like this one had to be heated on top of a stove before they could be used. Farm women usually had at least two irons so that they could use one while the other was reheating. The weight, heat and time needed to reheat these irons made pressing clothes a difficult and tiring job.

NOTE: IF YOU CHOOSE TO DEMONSTRATE HOW THIS IRON WORKS, BE SURE HAVE A THICK HOT PAD AVAILABLE. THE HANDLE OF THE IRON CAN GET VERY HOT. DO NOT TRY TO PRESS ANYTHING OF GREAT VALUE AS IT IS DIFFICULT TO HEAT AN IRON TO A SAFE AND CORRECT TEMPERATURE WITHOUT SOME PRACTICE. NATURAL FIBER FABRICS WILL DAMAGE LESS EASILY THAN FABRICS MADE FROM SYNTHETIC FIBERS.

Lunches For Wash Days

Because washing clothes was very time-consuming, some cookbooks listed special, easy-to-fix menus for wash day

Lunch No. 1 Cold roast beef, baked potatoes, bread, butter, pickles, mince pie

Lunch No. 2 Minced beef and boiled potatoes, cold slaw, custard pudding

Lunch No. 3 Fish, potatoes, tomatoes, rice pudding, and fruit

Lunch No. 4 Sliced cold veal, baked sweet potatoes, bread, butter, jelly pickles, apple pie

-What was special about these meals that made them appropriate for wash day? (Although they are large meals by our standards, the foods require little preparation because they were left-overs, could be served cold, or could be made ahead of time.)

-When your parents are very busy, what do you eat? Is it simple, quick food straight out of the refrigerator, frozen meals, or meals from fast-food restaurants?

House Cleaning

From the trunk:

Pictures #10 & 11

-How do you keep the floors in your house clean? List the various tools that you use.

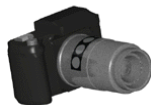
Picture #10



Most sod houses had dirt floors. An early pioneer woman cleaned them by sweeping out the rocks and grass that were tracked indoors. Later in a house with wooden floors, she could sweep and scrub her floor like the woman in this picture. Notice that she has on a blouse with short sleeves and has pinned up her skirt so that she can work on her hands and knees.

-What tools does this woman use to clean her floor?

Picture #11



Many houses had rugs which had to be taken out of the house and beaten two or more times each year to remove the dirt. Rugbeaters like these were used for this job. The rugs were hung on clothes lines, fences, or over tree branches and then beaten until no more dust would come out. This could take a very long time. Once they were old enough, this was a job usually assigned to children. Vacuum cleaners were invented in the mid-1800s but they did not become popular until after 1900 when they could be powered by electricity.



Activities

Classroom Mural

Add women to your mural doing the work you have learned about in this section.