

Laundry When the Wash Machine's Out

By: gvi

I have a deep and abiding love of history, only not the normal type of history they teach in school. Who-won-what-battle-in-which-war never really held my interest half as much as knowing what was in the soldiers' knapsacks, what they ate and how did they stay warm (answers: lots of wool/salt pork and hardtack/poorly). You'd picture me a good candidate to be a re-enactor, and I was, for a short while. I was a bagpiper for the 79th Fraser Highlanders, a French & Indian War unit. F&I re-enactors are the best. You rarely hear the word "farby" among them, and they brew most of their own alcohol.

But let's get back to the subject referenced in the title. In doing historical research, I'd sometimes come across old wills and probates, in which an account of the deceased's possessions was made. Go back far enough and you'll find that their clothing was inventoried as well. You'd be surprised how little clothing the average colonial owned; maybe two or three full outfits of clothes.

Why this was so may have had less to do with the cost of clothing-it appears that it was no more or less expensive, relatively speaking, than nowadays-but rather how much of a hassle it was to do laundry.

This article will explain a couple of ways to do laundry when there is no wash machine handy. Why would we want to know this? There are several times in a survivalist's life when he may find himself without a wash machine. The most common one would be while camping. We will look at this first.

I cannot claim to have discovered this technique, but I can tell you from experience that it works. I found it in one of "Ranger Rick" Tscherne's Ranger Digests. For as long as I can remember, I've never packed more than one spare change of clothing in any backpack I've ever put up; whether it be for going to the field or as a BOB. This is because I've always included two things that more than make up for the weight: a G.I. waterproof bag and a Ziploc full of laundry detergent. The waterproof bag has about two-dozen uses in the field, but in our case, we're going to turn it into a hand-powered wash machine with agitating action.

1. Put one set of clothes-one shirt, one pair of trousers, a t-shirt, pair of socks and drawers-in the bag. To prolong the life of the bag, turn the pants inside out-if they're BDUs, the metal take-up tabs on the sides will scratch the bag, and the buttons on blue jeans will do the same
2. Pour a quart (one canteen's worth) of cold water into the bag, along with a mess-kit spoon's worth of laundry soap. You can throw in a couple of SMOOTH river rocks if you have them, but this is not critical.
3. Close the bag up partway and squeeze most of the air out.
4. Finish closing the bag in the form of a "gooseneck" (instructions are printed on the side of the bag).

5. Squeeze, roll, mangle and toss the bag around for about five minutes. Really work the thing. You'll hear it squish and squash. This is just what you want to happen.
6. Open the bag, wring out the clothes, pour in another quart of water, and repeat steps 1 through 5 until laundry is clean (may take two or three rinses).
7. Line-dry as you would normally. To get it to dry faster and avoid wrinkles, make sure your laundry is spread out as smoothly on the line as you can. I thread the line through the sleeves of BDU jackets and t-shirts; this seems to help.

Now suppose we're at home, and there's no power. Or, as was my case, suppose you find yourself "in between jobs" for a spell and really don't want to waste money running the wash machine or going to the laundromat? You still need clean clothes, as much from the standpoint of good morale as for hygiene's sake (who wants to put on skuzzy old clothes after washing up?).

Anything you can throw in the wash machine can be hand washed. One of the best money-saving investments you can make is to go and buy an old-fashioned washboard and a drying rack. Washboards cost maybe \$15.00 or so, last time I checked, and I bought a folding wood drying rack for about \$5.00 at Wal-Mart. If you have a small, non-chain hardware store in your community, it's a safe bet they'll sell washboards. The Dollar Store may as well-you just might get lucky. Mine have paid for themselves many times over. If you have a large mop bucket, use it. Mop buckets use less water, and the washboard sits in there better than if you only use the bathtub.

Hand washing has one other advantage; namely, you can get really hard-to-clean clothes cleaner washing them by hand than any machine will do.

Start by "pre-treating" any really heavily soiled clothes. I work outdoors, and my blue jeans get filthy. No wash machine ever made has got the knees or the seam near the hems completely clean. Instead, I take a bristle brush and some cheap shampoo, dribble the latter on the problem area, and scrub the daylight out of it with the brush. They'll fade more than in a washer, but that's bound to happen anyway.

You can use the cheap shampoo trick right now, while you're still using a wash machine. Just pre-treat stains and soils with some shampoo instead of the more expensive stuff, which is really only shampoo without the fragrance. It works wonders on grease and oils.

To use a washboard, sit it in the bucket with about a gallon of water. Have a clean place to put clothes that have been washed-I use the bathtub. You can either use normal laundry soap or, if you really want to save money, use a bar of yellow Fels-Naptha brand soap. It's a cake of soap that's harder and slightly larger than normal bath soap bars. It costs around \$2.00 or so and lasts for about seven or eight small loads of laundry.

Take one piece of laundry, dunk it in the water, and lay it against the washboard. You don't have to lay all of it against the washboard, just one part at a time. Rub the bar of soap against the clothing-it'll be hard and will crumble a bit when it's new or dry, but will be easier to work with after a while. Then just pretend you're cleaning the washboard with the clothing. It's a thing

more easily done than described, but cleaning clothes like this is pretty intuitive, and you'll get the hang of just how to do it in no time.

You'll also find that, after a while, the water gets pretty soapy, and that you may not need to rub the soap on the clothing at all. For clothes that aren't soiled so much as "funky," you may only need to squish them around in your hands for a while.

After all your clothes have been washed, it's time to rinse. This calls for a LOT of water, but the water doesn't have to be drinkable, only clean. I've found that it usually takes two good rinsings to get the dirt and soap out. Wringing as much as possible out beforehand will save water.

Fill the bathtub with half of the water you intend to use (anywhere from three to six gallons is about right, depending on the size of the load). Swish and swirl the clothing around with your hands. You must make sure to get the soap out of the places you scrubbed it in, and this may take some elbow-grease. By the way, if you haven't noticed, this is an awesome workout for the muscles of the hands, wrists and forearms!

After you're done rinsing, wring the clothes out and either line-dry them or hang them on a drying rack indoors. If you have a heat source, put the rack near it (I use my apartment's radiator). An open window with a breeze wafting through will also help to dry things quicker. Remember again to lay things as flat as possible, or you'll get wrinkles. Now it's just a matter of time.

White bed linens, drawers and so forth should be bleached. What's more, these articles can stand boiling water. Unless you have a huge cauldron on a wood-fire outside, you'll just have to use the hottest water you can get. Linens and clothing used in caring for the sick should certainly be bleached and boiled if possible, but in any case bleached. Use household rubber gloves if you don't want your hands looking and feeling like a concrete worker's. If not directly soiled, whites can be swirled around in bleachy/soapy water in the tub with a wooden stick.

I've read one suggestion that has some merit to it, although I admit I've never tried it. A lady whom I hold in rather high regard made a sort of washer out of a 5-gallon bucket with lid, a plumber's plunger and a ring washer similar to that used for protecting the wiring that goes through the firewall of a car. She bored a hole in the lid, fitted the washer through, and put the plunger inside. It looks like a butter churn would if they were made of plastic. As I said, I haven't tried this, but there seems no reason why it shouldn't work.

Woolens don't necessarily need to be dry cleaned. Sweaters, blankets and such can be washed with Woolite, according to the instructions on the bottle. They should not be wrung or twisted, but rather laid flat and dried. It'll take a good long while, but that's what you pay to get wool's other benefits.

One final tip. If you use Fels-Naptha soap, make sure to put it in a soap dish or something that'll let it dry out. If you let it stay soggy, it'll turn to mush and you'll end up wasting most of it.

Washing things by hand is pretty simple, and it's also really inexpensive. It also gets clothes cleaner than they would if you'd washed them in a machine. Trouble is, it's awfully hard work. You can now see why people had so few clothes in the past.