

Donation of the Month

Object: Circa 1923 Eureka Vacuum Cleaner
Catalog #: 1983.9.1
Donor: Helen L. Horan



What would it be like if every spring you had to remove all the rugs, drapes, and wall-to-wall carpeting in your house, place them over a rope hung outside, and beat them until all the dirt and dust were removed? Not much fun, right? This backbreaking activity was an annual chore for most American homemakers about a hundred years ago, when spring-cleaning time rolled around.

As disruptive and tiring as it was, spring cleaning was a necessity in an era when many streets were unpaved and littered with manure, and wood or coal stoves and oil lamps filled homes with soot and ash. Each spring the entire house underwent a thorough cleaning: lamps were washed, wallpaper dusted, featherbeds left outside to air, stoves blacked (to prevent rust), and carpets removed for beating. In affluent homes, spring cleaning was done by servants. Most women, however, had to make do on their own, generally with the help of their daughters and neighborhood boys who could be hired for heavy lifting.

Housekeeping was tough. One early home economist described spring cleaning as “an abomination of desolation” that “breaks women’s backs and causes men to break the Ten Commandments.” Another home-advice writer warned that “at the first onslaught all home comfort ends, and regular meals become irregular lunches, and a quiet night’s rest something sought but not found.” A turn-of-the-20th-century poem warned of the spring-cleaning homemaker, “fly from her presence, dog and cat / fly from her

presence, man and mouse / it is the vernal frenzy that possesses her / she's cleaning the house." Even poet Emily Dickinson once wrote, "House is being 'cleaned,' I prefer pestilence."

The birth of the vacuum cleaner is due to a number of advancements in science and technology brought about by the Industrial Revolution. By the mid-1800s factories were producing tens of thousands of manufactured items along with tons of pollution. Dirt and soot were everywhere. About that time scientist Louis Pasteur made several significant discoveries which led him to theorize that infectious diseases were caused by microorganisms or "germs." Thus the development of the germ theory and the reaction against industrial pollution caused people to focus for the first time on hygiene and cleanliness.

Fortunately for homemakers everywhere, technology came to the rescue. One of the first carpet sweepers, the "Union," was patented in 1858 to take the place of the broom in the home. As the sweeper was pushed across the carpet the brushes located on the wheel axles lifted dirt into the housing. This basic design was greatly refined by Anna and Melville Bissell of Grand Rapids, Michigan, in an attempt to remove sawdust from the carpets of their crockery business. The Bissell Carpet Sweeping Company patented its first sweeper in 1876. Although early sweepers were lightweight and easy to use, they weren't extremely efficient.

The first true vacuum was patented in 1860 by Daniel Hess of West Union, Iowa, although it is unclear if it was ever made. When its bellows were pumped, the suction they created sucked in the dirt and trapped it in the vacuum's water-filled chambers. Another early model, the "Whirlwind," invented in 1869 by Ives McAffey of Chicago, created suction with a hand-cranked, belt-driven fan. All of these early vacuums were awkward, bulky, and expensive.

The next technological leap in cleaning came in 1901, when H. Cecil Booth of London invented the electric vacuum. It was so large that its vacuum pump and motor were housed in a horse-drawn cart, from which a 100-foot long hose was extended and snaked into the house. This event was such a novelty that society ladies in England invited their friends over for vacuum parties! Queen Victoria's carpets were cleaned this way, as were Britain's naval barracks, ending a plague which swept through the Navy at the turn of the 20th century.

In 1907 Murray Spangler, an inventor and janitor in Canton, Ohio, patented the first portable electric suction cleaner, making life a bit easier and cleaner for the homeowner. An asthmatic, Spangler wanted a smaller vacuum to help keep down dust on the job. Using a variety of items — a broom handle, a pillow case, a tin soap box — he created a device that used motor-driven fan blades to create suction. In 1908 he sold the vacuum's patent to his cousin's husband, William Hoover, and became a partner in Hoover's Electric Suction Sweeper Company. Soon many new vacuum companies sprang up, taking advantage of the growing popularity of electric appliances and of people's fear of germs.

One such company was the Eureka Vacuum Cleaner Company, founded in 1909 by Detroit businessman Fred Wardell. Unlike their competitors' vacuums, which were heavy, difficult to maneuver, and unreliable, Eureka's vacuums were versatile and lightweight. The company offered several helpful attachments to clean upholstery, walls, and bare floors — even a blower to dry hair. Eureka's vacuums were so well designed that they won an award at the San Francisco International Exposition in 1915. By 1919 Eureka was able to make 2,000 vacuums a day in their sophisticated, 3.5-acre manufacturing plant. The vacuum pictured here resembles Eureka Model #9, first made in 1923. Sears sold a similar-looking model for \$19.95 in its 1928 catalog, quite a hefty price for its day, making vacuum ownership a status symbol.

It's obvious that the vacuum has an important and impressive pedigree. This reducer of pollutants, eliminator of germs, and status symbol shouldn't be hiding in the closet, but should be proudly displayed in a place of honor in our homes!

CREDITS

Susan Strasser's book, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (1982); Harvey Green's book, *The Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America* (1983); Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth's book, *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and*

Services (1992), the Rogers Historical Museum's tour guide, "*Spring Cleaning in the Hawkins House*" (1997); Virginia Caputo's article "*Robert Kautzman, Vac Hunter*," *Maine Antique Digest*, (2001); Charlie Lester's website, "*The Cyber-Space Vacuum Cleaner Museum*" (www.137.com/museum/); Robert Kautzman's website, "*Vacuum Cleaner Museum*" (www.vachunter.com); the "*What You Need to Know About*" website (<http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/blvacuum.htm>); and the Eureka Company's website (www.Eureka.com/aboutus/).