

Doing the Christmas wash



By Mary Cook

My mother always claimed she wasn't the least bit superstitious. And yet, I remember now many things back in the '30s gave her pause for concern. A few grains of salt over the left shoulder with the shaker in your right hand if you accidentally spilled a bit on the floor. No umbrellas up in the house.... And this time of year, I remember especially how just a day before Christmas, Mother literally tore the clothes from our backs to put in the wash tub, because it was her belief that to wash between Christmas and New Years was a plain and simple invitation to nothing but hardship throughout the coming year.

But over Christmas there wasn't one thing Mother could do about her superstition...which according to Father was sheer nonsense, right up there with the salt over the shoulder, and burying a dish cloth to get rid of warts. He lamented time and again, that he could see no earthly connection between washing clothes between Christmas and New Years and bad luck. But he knew better than to argue with Mother.

The Christmas I remember descended on us as always, without too much fanfare...we got through the school concert, the church pageant, and the community Christmas party, and Christmas Eve day arrived with bitterly cold temperatures and drifts a mile high from an all-week snow storm. But we weren't long into the day when it soon became obvious that all was not well in the household. Mother had stripped the beds and taken every last stitch of clothes that had touched our bodies during the previous week. Everything that even looked like it stood the chance of getting soiled between Christmas and New Years hit the wash tub. We were also told to be especially careful with the clean clothes that we had put on, as they would be expected to last us for several days.

Just as Mother was gathering up the last remnant from the upstairs bedrooms, Audrey screamed that she was going to be sick. She made it to the back door just in time. This episode was quickly followed by the same performance from Emerson. He hated having a sick stomach and preferred to be on his own...so he made a bee-line for the outside privy. Before an hour had passed not one of us five children

was spared. It was obvious to all that we had come down with a case of the good old fashioned grip. Today, we know it as the flu, but back then it was the grip.

By late day, we were all in our beds.... and took turns running outside in the freezing cold to the privacy of the privy. Mother was torn between ripping the soiled clothes off our backs, and tending her ailing flock. More than once, she lamented that if this kept up, she would surely have to wash on Christmas day or the day after. Even though our bed linens came from flour bags, there was a limit to how many sheets and pillow cases we had.

Now, Father had great sympathy for his children with the heaving stomachs, but he was doubled over with laughter when Mother wailed that she just knew she was going to run out of clean clothes if the grip didn't let up.

We were steady enough on our feet to come down for the Christmas tree in the morning...but within the hour, we had hauled our few gifts up to our beds where we had little energy to play with them. We passed up Christmas dinner.... and instead took a few spoonfuls of milk pudding which Mother insisted would give us nourishment...What it did give us was another session in the outside privy.

The day after Christmas, the laundry was stacked behind the door in the bedroom at the top of the stairs. Mother tried to ignore it. We were down to wearing our long underwear for pyjamas. We heard from a neighbour who came to see why we weren't at church on Christmas morning, that the entire community was felled by the grip. Mother took to spotting the bed linens with a wet face cloth...and insisting that our smelly long johns would just be fine if we put our minds to something else.

Finally, after about three days, the grip lessened, and we felt like getting out of bed. All we had left to wear was outer clothes...and the beds had been stripped for the last time... there were no more flour bag sheets or pillow cases. We had long since gone through the last towel. Mother surveyed the pile of laundry and knew there was no alternative but to do a washing right smack dab between Christmas and New Years. Father could be seen snickering to himself from the kitchen.

Water was heated in the big oval copper tub on the front of the Findlay stove, and the old hand operated washing machine was wheeled to the centre of the floor.

We five children lined up like we had committed some crime, and our Mother looked like she had just been handed a letter edged in black. Just before she propped the first armful of clothes into the tub, we saw her cross herself...it was something she rarely did...and then it was only in grave situations. The gesture didn't escape Father's Lutheran eyes.

“While you’re asking the Pope for his divine blessing,” ... he was starting to laugh...

“would you mind asking him to wash the separator in the cow byre too...I hear it’s bad luck to wash it between Christmas and New Years...” The wet towel caught him square in the face.

This article originally appeared in the December 2009 issue of Forever Young Newspaper.