

# “Let your Corn Stalks Buy a Maytag”

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Prescriptive Literature and Domestic Consumerism  
in Rural Iowa, 1929–1939

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by Katherine Jellison

SIXTEEN YEARS before the 1929 stock market crash, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) polled farm women around the country in an effort to determine their particular economic, social, educational, and domestic needs. The USDA received 2,241 replies to this 1913 survey, and most of them echoed the sentiments of an Iowa respondent who stated that from a woman's perspective, farm homes most needed “Motor power[ed] (inexpensive) . . . labor-saving machinery in and out of doors.” According to survey results, farm women resented the fact that economic and power-source problems, and the priority placed on farm technology over household equipment, deprived them of the modern appliances that city women used.

In the year following that survey, the Smith-Lever Act responded to farm women's concerns by calling for the use of federal and state funds to support extension programs providing “instruction and practical demonstrations in agriculture and home economics.” Much of the vast literature that emerged from the extension movement during the next twenty-five years prescribed the use of mechanical equipment in farm homes. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Iowa extension service pamphlets, bearing titles such as *Laundry Methods and Equipment* and *Planning and Equipping the Kitchen*, recommended the purchase of modern devices. During the Great Depression, appliance

advertisements, as well as New Deal propaganda, took up the advice literature's call for farm home modernization and attempted to overcome any consumer resistance by exploiting many of the concerns farm women had been voicing since 1913.

Washing machine companies were among the chief advertisers encouraging impoverished farm women to buy their product. Before 1929, power-washer manufacturers had largely relied on the appliance's good reputation in prescriptive literature aimed at farm women. Such literature included a 1921 USDA bulletin, which had characterized laundry work as “among the hardest of the regular household tasks” and had promoted as the farm housewife's ideal “a separate room for her laundry, with running water and modern labor-saving devices.” Extension service publications had argued that farm women particularly deserved such equipment because they could not rely on laundresses or commercial laundries as city women did and because farm women washed larger and dirtier loads of laundry than their urban counterparts. Reaping the benefits of such positive publicity, Iowa washing machine manufacturers, including the Maytag Company of Newton and the Voss Company of Davenport, had soon stepped in to fill the demand for power washers in farm households. But what advice literature had once characterized as a farm home necessity had become a luxury in depression-era Iowa,



# THE NEW MAYTAG

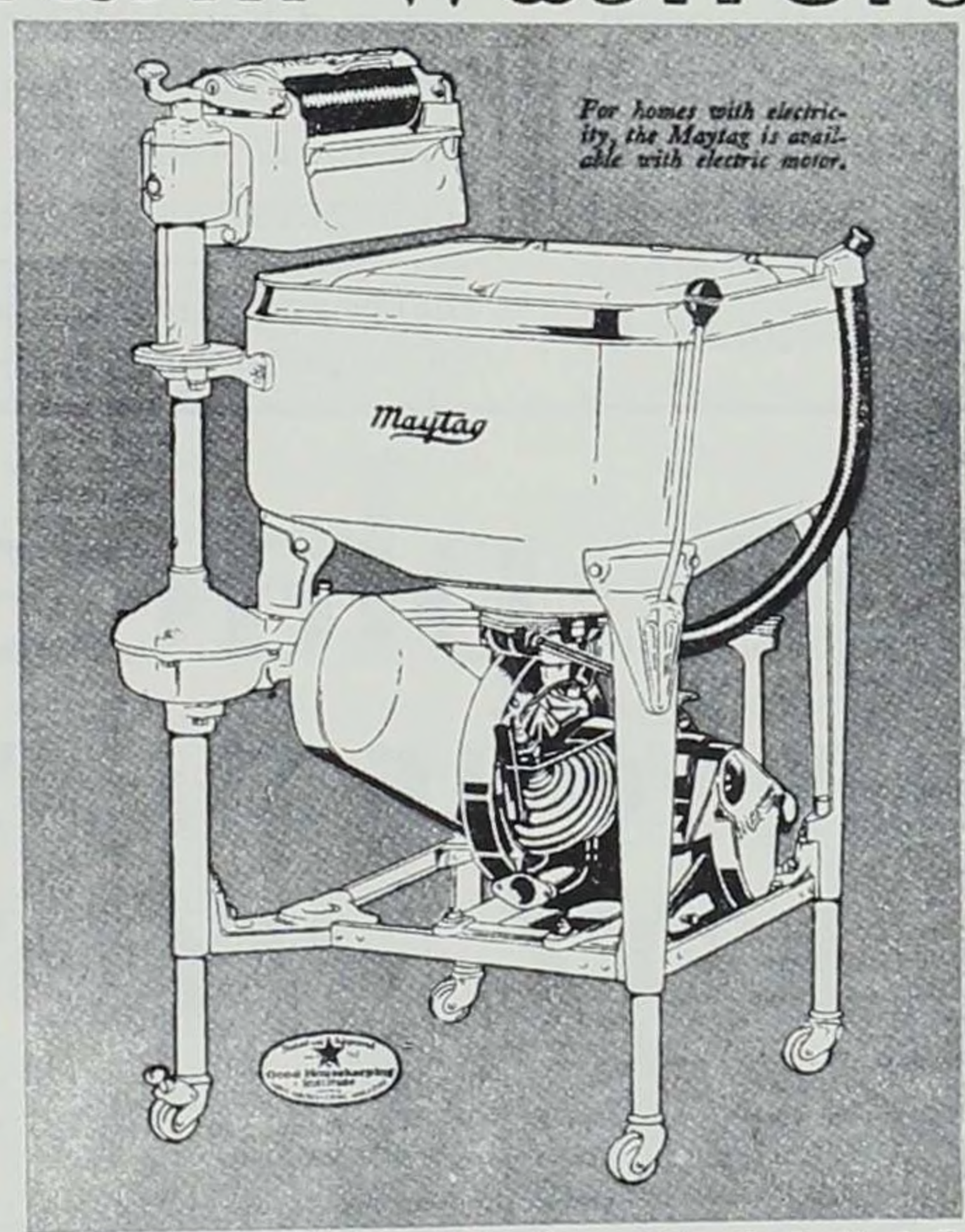


## Sets a NEW Standard for farm washers

**T**HE MAYTAG has always been the favorite farm washer... the first washer to be equipped with an in-built gasoline Multi-Motor. The NEW Maytag, the latest and greatest achievement of the world's largest washer factory, more than ever appeals to farm women.

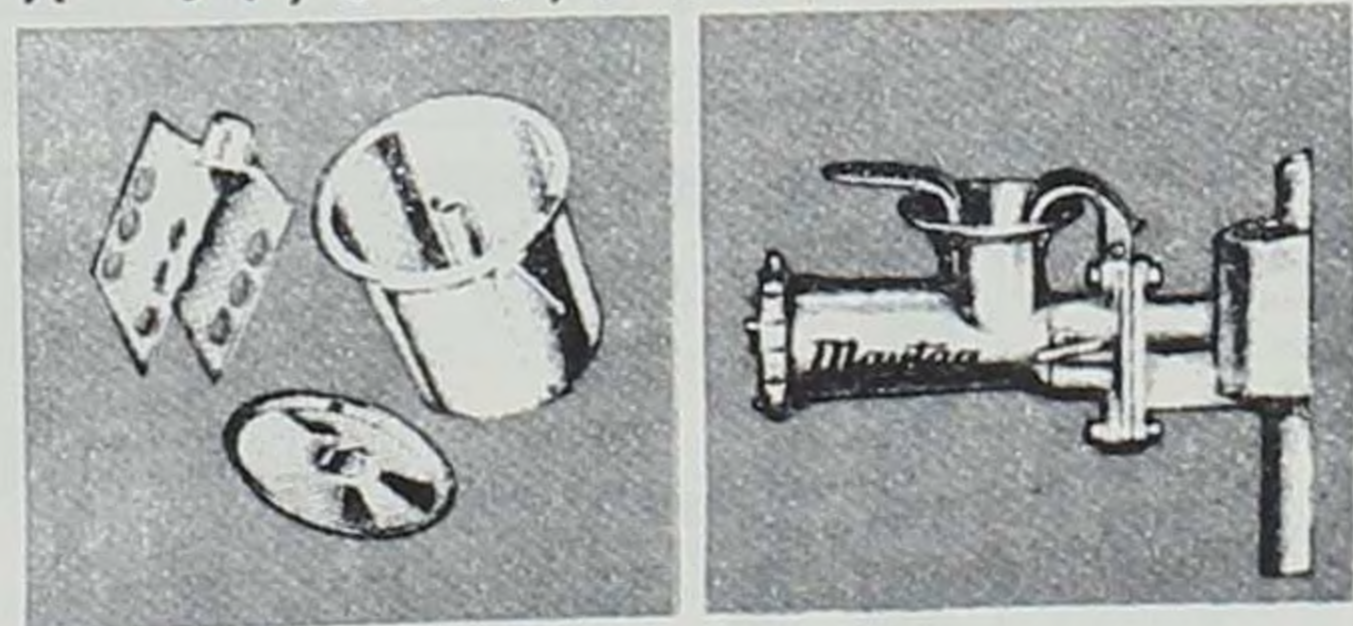
The NEW, roomy, one-piece, cast-aluminum tub, with quick-washing gyrafoam action... the NEW roller water remover, with enclosed, positive-action, automatic drain... the NEW quiet, life-time, oil-packed drive, with handy, auto-type shift-lever for starting and stopping the water-action... these and other new Maytag developments give the New Maytag value, usefulness and convenience that overshadow any previous Maytag, surpass any other washer.

**THE MAYTAG COMPANY**  
 Newton, Iowa  
 Founded 1893  
 NORTHWESTERN BRANCH:  
 315 Washington Ave. North  
 MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.  
 Branches, Distributors or Representatives in  
 London, Berlin, Hamburg, Geneva, Genoa,  
 Oslo, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Wellington,  
 Buenos Aires and other  
 principal cities.



*For homes with electricity, the Maytag is available with electric motor.*

A \$4,500,000 PRODUCT



### Power Churn Attachment

The Maytag churn attachment is an aluminum churn of 3 gallons churning capacity. It sets over the gyrotator post and utilizes the same power that washes the clothes. Water in the washer tub keeps the cream at the proper churning temperature. Easily cleaned, durable and a time and labor saver.

F-4-30

### A Power Meat Grinder Attachment

By simply lifting off the Roller Water Remover, this New Meat Grinder Attachment may be set over the shaft head of the power leg. Grinds sausage, mince meat, chops nuts, raisins, fruit, relish, etc. Saves time and labor. The churn and the meat grinder attachments are additional equipment sold at reasonable cost.



### TUNE IN on Maytag Radio Programs

over N.B.C. Coast to Coast Network  
 MONDAY Evenings 9:00 E.S.T., 8:00  
 C.S.T., 7:00 M.T., 6:00 P.T.  
 WJZ, New York; KDKA, Pittsburgh;  
 KYW, Chicago; KSTP, St. Paul;  
 WSM, Nashville; WREN, Kansas  
 City; KOA, Denver; KSL, Salt Lake  
 City; WKY, Oklahoma City; KPRC,  
 Houston; KECA, Los Angeles; KGW,  
 Portland; and Associated Stations.

### The Maytag Gasoline Multi-Motor

The simplest, finest, most compact washer engine built... interchangeable with the electric motor by removing only four bolts. Only four working parts... a step on the pedal starts it. Flood-proof carburetor, bronze bearings, Bosch high-tension magneto and speed governor, give it a smooth, steady flow of dependable power.

### A week's washing FREE - - - -

Write or phone the nearest dealer for a trial washing with the New Maytag. If it doesn't sell itself, don't keep it. Divided payments you'll never miss.

MAYTAG AD, WALLACES' FARMER, APRIL 12, 1930, PAGE 19

Depression-era ads reveal tactics used for selling washing machines to farm women. Above: Manufacturers reasoned that adding meat grinder and butter churn attachments would increase the appliance's usefulness on the farm.

and washing machine companies had to develop new strategies to sell their product.

**O**NE ANSWER to this depression-era marketing problem was to alter the product itself in an attempt to enhance its reputation as a labor- and money-saver. The Maytag Company used this strategy early in the depression by providing butter churn and meat grinder attachments, "at reasonable cost," which could be placed over the washing machine's gyrator post and shaft head and thus powered by the washing machine motor. Maytag advertisements in *Wallaces' Farmer*, Iowa's major farm life periodical, often prominently featured these "labor-saving" attachments at a time when women were interested in saving money by

preparing more dairy and meat products at home and in making money by selling such products outside the home.

Another strategy that washing machine advertisements employed was to capitalize on farm women's resentment of the fact that family resources often went to acquire modern field and barn equipment rather than new household devices. During the depression, outraged letters on the subject often appeared in *Wallaces' Farmer*. One, from a Pocahontas County resident who signed herself "A Disgusted Farm Woman," complained that "most men think that a modern kitchen is the bunk. Give us running water and electricity and refrigerators to keep our salads cool and our

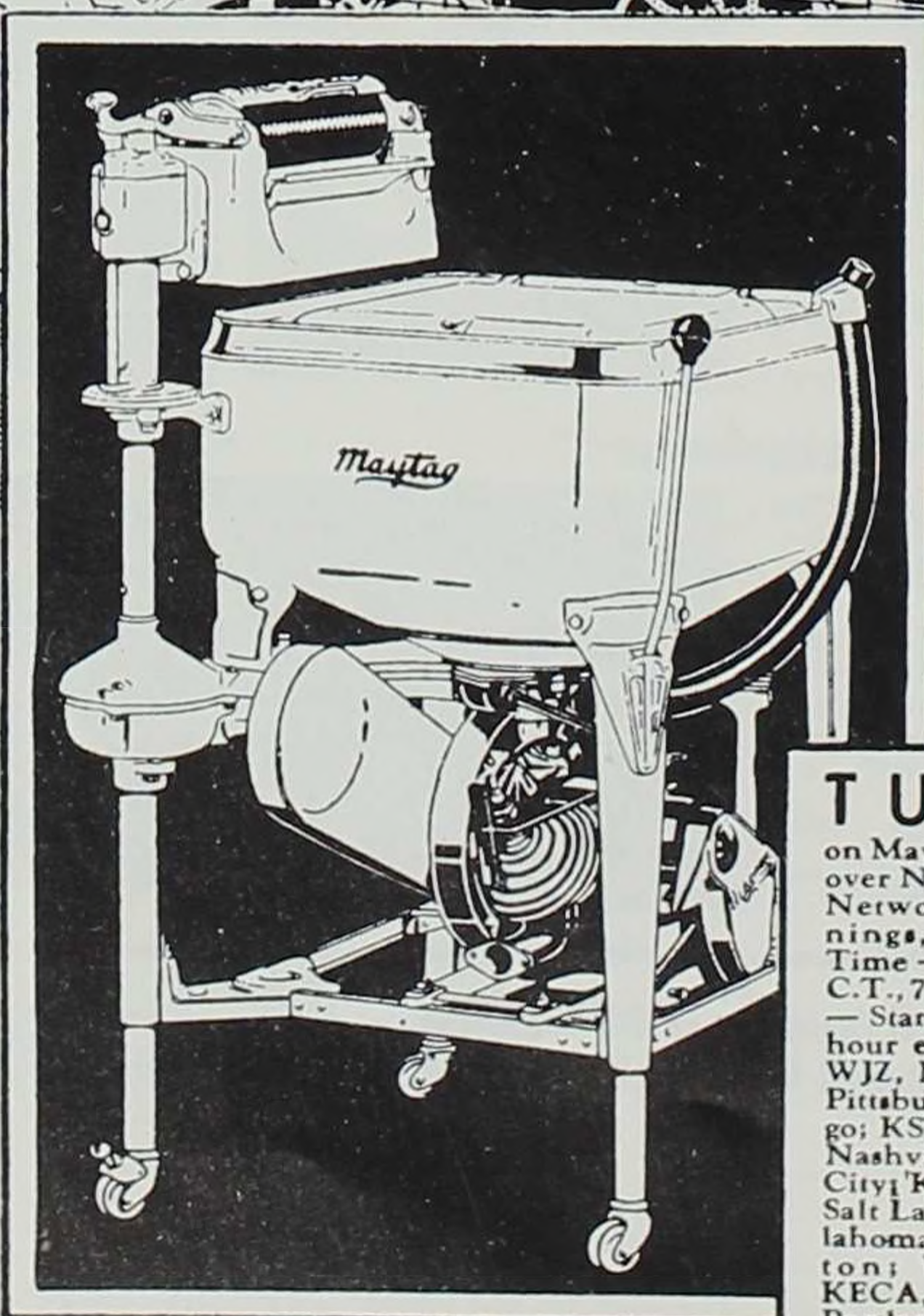
Below and right: Ads played on farm women's resentment of the power machinery that men used to ease farm work.

# Change places with your husband next washday



If your husband did the washing, he would insist on having a new Maytag, for the same reason that he buys power machinery for his field work.

The quick-washing Maytag gives you extra hours to spend in other profitable ways. The gentle, water-washing action makes the clothes last longer... washes everything clean without hand rubbing.



For homes with electricity, the Maytag is available with electric motor.

## TUNE IN

on Maytag Radio Programs over N.B.C. Coast to Coast Network Monday Evenings, Daylight Saving Time — 9:00 E.T., 8:00 C.T., 7:00 Mt.T., 6:00 P.T. — Standard Time is one hour earlier.  
WJZ, New York; KDKA, Pittsburgh; KYW, Chicago; KSTP, St. Paul; WSM, Nashville; WREN, Kansas City; KOA, Denver; KSL, Salt Lake City; WKY, Oklahoma City; KPRC, Houston; WFAA, Dallas; KECA, Los Angeles; KGW, Portland and Asso. Sta.



meats fresh, and we can be just as good cooks as you will find anywhere. . . . The men wouldn't consider planting oats by hand . . . but lots of women still use the same cooking devices our grandmothers used." Exploiting such sentiment, a 1930 Maytag advertisement asked farm women to "Change places with your husband next washday." The ad featured a drawing of a husband wearing an apron and carrying a full laundry basket as his wife drives by, waving from a tractor. The advertisement told women, "If your husband did the washing, he would insist on having a new Maytag, for the same reason that he buys power machinery for his field work." In 1931, Sears advertised its washers by arguing that "Men wouldn't think of pumping water for their cattle by hand. . . . So women shouldn't be doing their washing by hand when power can do it cheaper and quicker." By 1935, the image of the selfish farm husband had become such a staple of washing-machine advertising that the message of a Maytag ad featuring a man on a tractor, under the heading "Farm Women are also Entitled to Power," needed no further explanation.

Another major theme in appliance advertising of the period was the issue of modernity, with each washing machine company claiming that its product was the most modern alternative to the old-fashioned washboard. In 1929, the Voss Company claimed that "farm women have found . . . the Voss has every worth-while feature that you expect in a modern washer," and an advertisement for Thor washing machines promised that with the "World's Lowest Priced Quality Washing Machine . . . every farm home may have the most modern of all washers." In another 1929 adver-

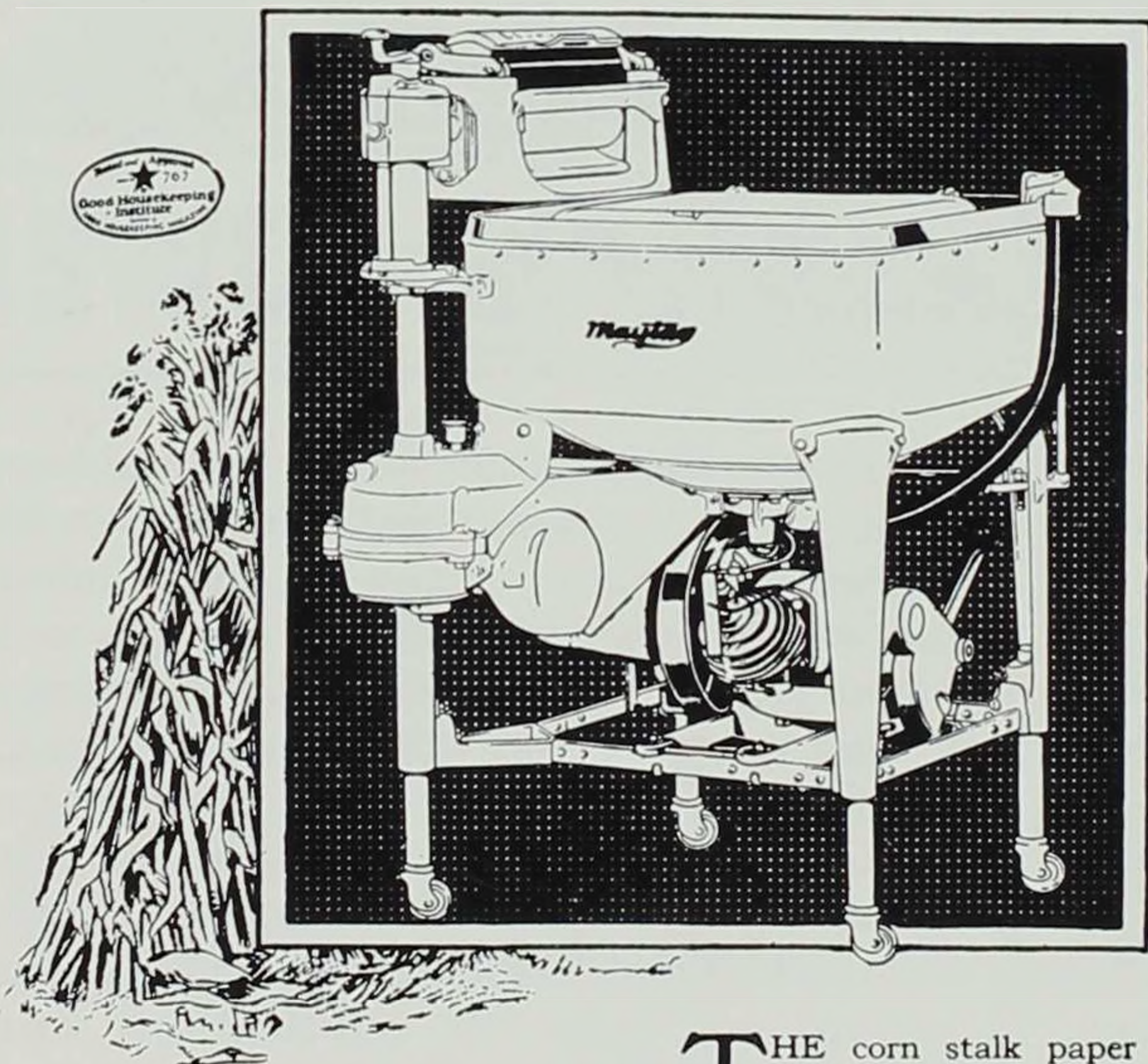
tisement, Maytag combined the modernity theme with the home-appliance versus field-equipment debate: "Farms of today demand modern labor-saving conveniences in the home as well as in the field. The Maytag is a washer in step with modern farm progress."

Advertising often exploited farm women's distress that they lagged behind urban women in the modernization of their homes. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, farm women's organizations and farm life publications voiced concern that women on farms were, in the words of one article, developing an "inferiority complex" because their homes did not live up to urban-defined standards. ABC Companion washer ads played on this concern by assuring consumers that "Farm women . . . as modern-minded as those who live in the city . . . need especially to banish the drudgery of wash day." The company's 1930 advertising campaign drove home the point that farm women were just as up-to-date as urban women by featuring pictures of the ABC Companion being used by a stylish young woman rather than the motherly, aproned female figure often seen in advertisements aimed at farm women.

Most of the era's washing machine ads emphasized the low prices of their products and included such key phrases as "Deferred Payments You'll Never Miss." Recognizing that farm women were using a variety of novel methods to earn money during the depression, the Maytag Company encouraged Iowa farm women to use one such method to purchase a new washing machine. Under the heading "Let your Corn Stalks Buy a Maytag," the 1929 ad urged farm women to take advantage of the new cornstalk paper industry by gathering and

# Let your Corn Stalks Buy a

# MAYTAG



For homes with electricity, the Maytag is available with electric motor.

## Gasoline or Electric Power

The Maytag gasoline Multi-Motor is now in its fifteenth year. It is so simple and compact that it is interchangeable with the electric motor by removing only four bolts. A step on the pedal starts it. All bearings are high-grade bronze. The carburetor has but one simple adjustment and is flood-proof. Bosch high-tension magneto and speed governor gives it a smooth, reliable flow of power.

**T**HE corn stalk paper industry opens a new source of revenue for the corn grower, brings new money from a product until now considered waste—money for additional home comforts and conveniences.

Let your corn stalks buy a Maytag. It is practically the only power machine asked for by the farm wife. It is not a luxury because it saves her time that can be profitably spent with her children, with the chickens or in other useful ways.

The Maytag, with its seamless, cast-aluminum tub and gyrofoam action, changed the long, tiresome washday to a pleasant hour or two. It washes grimy overalls clean without hand-rubbing; washes the daintiest garments hand carefully.

The Maytag Roller Water Remover, an exclusive Maytag product, is the latest, safest and most thorough method of wringing. It has a flexible top roll and a hard bottom roll; wrings everything evenly dry and spares the buttons. The drainplate reverses itself and the tension adjusts itself automatically to a thin handkerchief or a heavy blanket.

*Free* for a trial washing.

Write or telephone the nearest Maytag dealer.

Use the Maytag for your next washing. There will be no cost, no obligation. If it doesn't sell itself, don't keep it. Deferred payments you'll never miss.

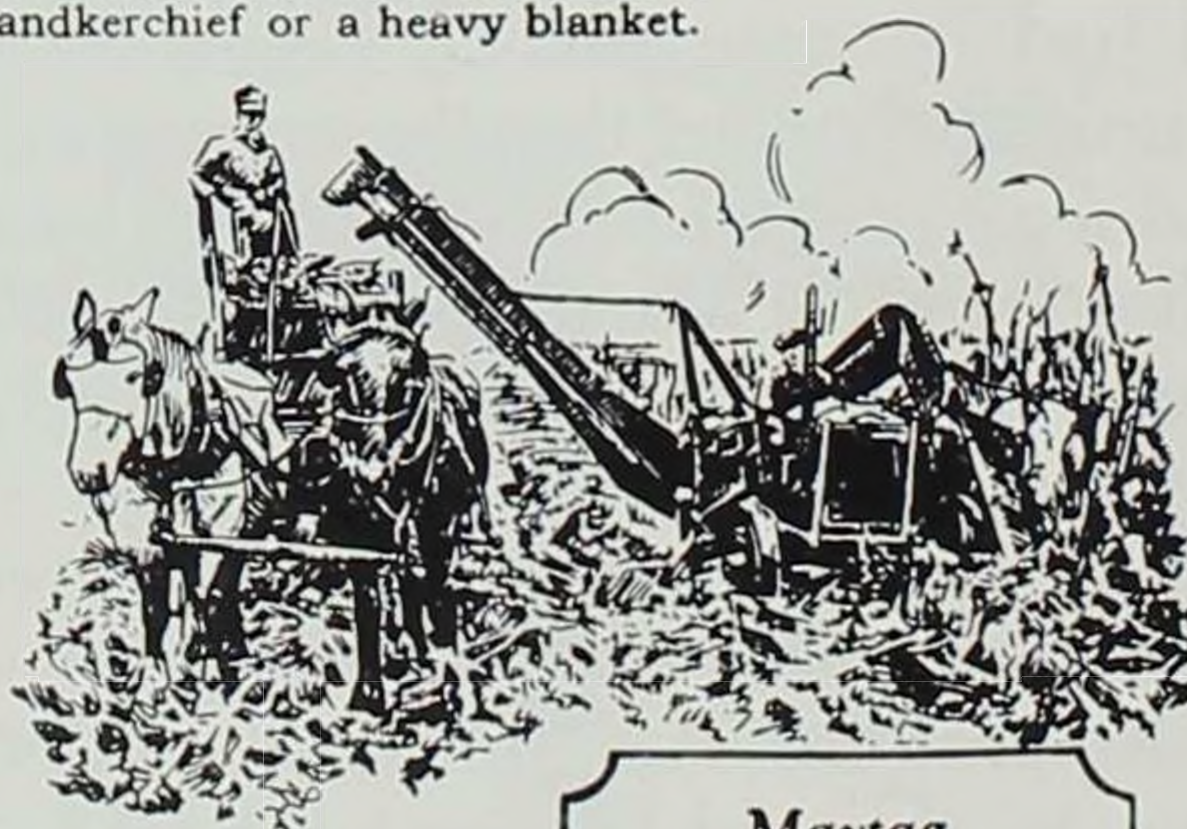
**THE MAYTAG COMPANY,**  
Newton, Iowa

Founded 1893

NORTHWESTERN BRANCH:  
515 Washington Ave. North, Minneapolis, Minn.

The Maytag Co., Ltd., Winnipeg, Canada  
Hot Point Electric Appliance Co., Ltd., London, England  
Maytag Company of Australia—Sidney—Melbourne  
John Chambers & Son, Ltd., Wellington—Auckland, N. Z.

## *Maytag* Aluminum Washer



### Maytag Radio Programs



WBZ-A Boston, KDKA, Pittsburgh, WCAU, Philadelphia, WTAM, Cleveland, WLW, Cincinnati, KYW, Chicago, WCCO, Minneapolis, KOIL, Omaha, KMBC, Kansas City, WBAP, Fort Worth, KGW, Portland, KFRC, San Francisco, KNX, Los Angeles, KLZ, Denver, KSL, Salt Lake City, CFCB, Toronto, KMOX, St. Louis, WJR, Detroit.

Over 50 stations now on the schedule; watch newspapers for date and hour.

selling “a product until now considered waste — [to earn] money for additional home comforts and conveniences.” Most Iowa farm women, however, employed more traditional means to earn money for household expenses. Farm women reported to *Wallaces' Farmer* that they were stepping up their efforts to raise poultry and can garden produce during hard times. Acknowledging that fact, Maytag advertisements by 1935 were urging farm women to “Let the Maytag Give You More Time For Your Garden and Chickens.” In other words, investment in a Maytag washer could indirectly lead to greater profits for depression-era women involved in raising and marketing their own products.

**N**EW HOPE arose for improving farm women's economic situation in 1933, with the creation of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). This controversial New Deal program to raise commodity prices by limiting farm production met with initial opposition from Iowans who were used to farming from “fence row to fence row” and who balked at the idea of cutting back on production at a time when people were starving in American cities. Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace responded to criticism of the AAA by using frequent radio broadcasts and the pages of his family's farm life magazine — *Wallaces' Farmer* — to convince farmers in Iowa and elsewhere of the program's merits. AAA propaganda directed at farm women included a front-page *Wallaces' Farmer* editorial, in which the author played on women's resentment that cash resources often went for improved equipment outside the home. The editorialist urged farm women to spend a portion of their families' first crop reduction checks to buy “a new sink and drain in the kitchen, a bathroom and complete water system . . . a new range, a power washing machine . . . and plenty of other things to make housework easier and to make the home more attractive.”

Letters of support for the AAA published in *Wallaces' Farmer* demonstrated that Iowa farm women often followed such advice. A Fremont County woman wrote that her family's first



Opposite: Ads urged farm women to use extra income to buy washing machines. Above: A bobbed hairstyle and a washer spell modern living in this ad aimed at farm women who envied urban “luxuries.”

ABC COMPANION AD, WALLACES' FARMER, JAN. 18, 1930, PAGE 12

purchase with its AAA check “was a power washing machine, because it would save so much time and hard labor.” Supporters of the AAA also credited it with raising farm prices to a level where farm families could afford a variety of household improvements. A letter from a Hardin County woman, appearing in *Wallaces' Farmer* in the last weeks before the 1936 presidential election, measured the success of New Deal policies by the number of household improvements in her rural neighborhood: “In our community we know of new furnaces in farm houses, new cupboards, new rugs, electric refrigerators. . . . As a farm woman too busy to study either politics or economics, I just ‘feel’ that these new things have come because of increased farm incomes, and that increased farm incomes are the result of the Roosevelt-Wallace program.”

Such statements served not only to encourage women's support of the AAA but to illustrate a main theme of New Deal agricultural policy — that farm life could be as pleasant and vital as life elsewhere. A major key to farm life happiness was the modernization of farm homes, and this was a primary goal of another New Deal project — the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), created in 1935. In a

Let the

**MAYTAG**

**GIVE YOU MORE TIME  
FOR YOUR GARDEN  
AND CHICKENS**



MAYTAG AD, WALLACES' FARMER, JUNE 8, 1935, PAGE 23

Less time washing clothes meant more time for producing food, for home and market.

1936 speech to farm women, for example, Secretary Wallace promised them that the REA would allow farm women to enjoy the same modern equipment that city women used. A year later, *Wallaces' Farmer* offered cash prizes to farm women for the best letters describing how electricity in the farm home had changed their lives. First prize went to Mrs. L.C. Davis of Tama County who described electricity as a "good fairy . . . [who] has waved her magic wand across my path." She went on to describe how her electric range, refrigerator, vacuum cleaner, iron, cream separator, toaster, and washer "all help to make life comfortable." Other letters indicated that household electricity had cured farm women's domestic inferiority complex. Mrs. Ed Reiste of Dallas County wrote about the wonders of her new electric range and added that the "farm woman of yesterday envied the city woman. . . . But now, with our modern homes, I think the city woman may well envy her farm sister."

**T**HIS STATEMENT represented extreme optimism at a time when economic realities still prevented most Iowans from achieving the modern domestic ideal. On the eve of World War II, only 16.3 percent of Iowa farm homes had

mechanical refrigerators, 80.1 percent of Iowa farm women still cooked on wood- or coal-burning stoves, and only 21.5 percent of Iowa farm homes had running water. At this time, 40.7 percent of Iowa farm homes used electricity, but only a small proportion of them could rely on REA high lines; most farm homes still used undependable wind- or gasoline-powered home generators. Unlike high-line, central-station power, home electric plants could not run machinery twenty-four hours a day. They rarely powered major domestic appliances because their capacity was too low and because running farm equipment took priority.

Nevertheless, advertisers of the late thirties continued to dismiss the economic and power-source problems of farm women. Noting that most American farms did not yet have high-line electricity, a 1937 ad for Briggs and Stratton gasoline motors told farm women, "there is no necessity to wait . . . for the comforts and conveniences of hi-line service when you can have them right now with modern gasoline motor powered farm appliances, such as washing machines." Editorials in *Wallaces' Farmer* also continued to promote farm home modernization. In a 1938 editorial entitled "Power in Kitchen and Laundry," the author noted that only 18.5 percent of Iowa farm homes had high-line electricity, but stated that this situa-

tion "need not keep mother from having labor-saving power machinery, since much of it can be secured with gasoline motor equipment."

Such messages kept alive Iowa farm women's desire for modern appliances until the liberalization of REA loan policies in 1944 and postwar prosperity began to allow them to purchase more household appliances. The enthusiasm with which women embraced these new appliances is a testament to the strength of the message that New Dealers and advertisers espoused. By 1950, 83.3 percent of Iowa farm women would have mechanized refrigerators, and most would cook with modern ranges. In that same year, a majority of Iowa farm homes would have running water, and 90.9 percent, electricity. Within another ten years, 96 percent of Iowa farm homes would own washing machines. The words of Amy Bilsland of rural Archer, Iowa, demonstrate the excitement of farm women who finally achieved the domestic ideal that had been set forth in depression-era advertisements and New Deal literature: "Electricity

went through in 1940-some. . . . Electricity, that was an awful wonderful thing. . . . I could iron whenever I wanted to; use anything I wanted to; had a toaster and a clock. . . . I got an electric motor on my washing machine — that was a great improvement."

Although subsequent time-labor studies would call into question the actual labor-saving value of such equipment, Amy Bilsland and other rural Iowans remained convinced of the merits of modern domestic appliances. For reasons of economic survival and political expediency, appliance advertisers and New Deal propagandists worked together to sustain the desire for mechanical household devices that USDA and state extension service advice literature had fostered in the decade and a half before the Great Depression. Playing on themes that farm women themselves had voiced for many years — economy, reduction of workload, resentment of farm men and city women — appliance advertisements and New Deal propaganda kept alive the ideal of mechanized domesticity in depression-era Iowa. □

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# Farms Have Changed ... So Have Washers!

FARM folks of yesteryear accepted hard work as a matter of course. Farms of today demand modern labor-saving conveniences in the home as well as in the field. The Maytag is a washer in step with modern farm progress.

MAYTAG AD, WALLACES' FARMER, OCT. 4, 1929, PAGE 23

## NOTE ON SOURCES

Farm life publications such as *Wallaces' Farmer* (1929-1938) and *Rural America* (June, Oct. 1936) were rich sources of advertisements, editorials, and letters from farm women. The original 1913 USDA survey documents have been lost, but the results were published in a 1915 pamphlet series by the Government Printing Office, bearing titles such as *Domestic Needs of Farm Women*, *Economic Needs* . . . , *Educational Needs* . . . , and *Social and Labor Needs*. Another USDA publication consulted was Lydia Ray Balderston, *Home Laundering* (1921). For

further discussion of Iowa extension service literature of this period, see Katherine Jellison, "Domestic Technology on the Farm," *Plainswoman* (Sept. 1987). U.S. censuses on housing (1940, 1950, and 1960) and on agriculture (1954) yielded statistics on modern conveniences in rural homes. The Amy Bilsland interview (July 26, 1978) is part of the Oral History Collection, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City). This article was originally presented at the Missouri Valley History Conference (Omaha, March 9-12, 1988).