

Archive gems 2 – A Pulsator Washing Machine in a Scrapbook

This instalment of our Archive gems series was inspired by a scrapbook kept by Sähkölähteenmäki, beginning in 1953. Among the newspaper clippings is an advertisement for the Huvi washing machine, which was sold at the company's electrical appliance shop in the mid-1950s.

Before washing machines became common, laundry was washed by hand in a wooden wash tub with a hand-operated agitator, or even earlier in rivers, lakes or the sea using a washboard. The electrically powered washing machine was invented in the United States in 1908, and it was first introduced to Finnish consumers by the Työtehoseura (Work Efficiency Institute) in 1948. In Finland, pulsator washing machines were manufactured by Rosenlew and Upo, while Hoover machines were imported from abroad.

In a pulsator washing machine, a rotating pulsator at the bottom or side of the tub created water movement that washed the clothes. Fully automatic drum washing machines began to arrive in Finland in 1958. At first they were not especially popular because washing programmes were long and the machines consumed relatively large amounts of water and electricity. By the 1970s, however, most Finnish households owned an electrically powered washing machine, and Upo had begun manufacturing domestic automatic models. As washing machines became more common, commercially produced laundry detergents also replaced the use of caustic lye.

Washing Machines Made in Finland

Rosenlew's best-known washing machine model was the Huvi, advertised with the slogan: "*pesu HUVI-ksi*" (Making laundry a pleasure). The archives show that these machines were particularly popular in Paimio, where they were frequently advertised by Iivari Lähteenmäki's electrical appliance shop. Another well-known Rosenlew model was the Mainio. Upo also continued to develop washing machine technology in Finland, improving on the limitations of the early pulsator machines.

Using a Pulsator Washing Machine

Pulsator washing machines became increasingly common during the 1950s and were well suited to Finnish rural conditions, where many homes still lacked running water. Water could be heated in large quantities in farm kitchens, often located next to barns, and water carried from outside could easily be used for washing.

Although the washing itself became electrically powered, nearly every other stage of the process remained manual. Water first had to be heated in a large boiler and then carried in buckets to the washing machine. Before rinsing, the water also had to be changed by hand. While the machines included a drainage hose, it was not connected to a household drain.

After washing, the laundry was still far too wet to hang up for drying. Many pulsator machines therefore included a hand-operated wringer attached to the side of the machine to squeeze out excess water. Upo machines later introduced a more efficient hydraulic wringing system.

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In many places, courses were organised to teach people how to use new electrical household appliances. These events also served as opportunities to promote new products and encourage the use of electricity.



The photograph below shows several brands of pulsator washing machines on display. It was most likely taken at an opening event, with Iivari Lähtenmäki himself present.

Photo: Photograph Archive of Paimio Electrical Museum

How Washing Machines Changed Everyday Life

Converted into today's currency, the purchase price of a washing machine at the time would have been approximately €950, making it a significant investment. Nevertheless, many families chose to buy one, as the time saved on household work more than justified the cost.

With the arrival of refrigerators, daily shopping trips became unnecessary, while washing machines reduced laundry work from many hours, or even an entire day, to a much shorter task. As household appliances eased domestic work, more women were able to enter paid employment, improving family incomes.

Advertisements of the period often targeted men, encouraging them to buy a washing machine as a gift for their wives with slogans such as "Save the hand you once asked to be yours." Many advertisements suggested that a woman's beauty and well-being could be preserved if she no longer had to perform physically demanding household labour.

The invention of household appliances had a profound impact on women's daily lives. Before washing machines, laundry accounted for roughly one-fifth of all household work and was one of

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the most physically demanding domestic tasks. Clothes had to be stirred with a wooden stick, turned with a hand crank or scrubbed against a washboard. The physical effort required has even been compared to forestry work, and in many households the water itself first had to be carried by hand to the washing area.

Sources

- Scrapbooks of Lähteenmäki Electrical Shop, Paimio (from 1953 and 1958)
- Kotikuva magazine: The Washing Machine Saved Women from Drudgery
- Yle Living Archive
- The Finnish Electricity Association 1926–1966

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