Labor-Saving Devices in the United States

Several changes that took place during the 1920s made the use of electrical household appliances more widespread.

- Wiring for electricity became common. In 1917, only 24 percent of U.S. homes had electricity; by 1930, that figure was almost 70 percent.
- Merchants offered the installment plan, which allowed buyers to make payments over time. That way, people could purchase appliances even if they didn’t have the whole price.
- The use of advertising grew. Ads praised appliances, claiming that they would shorten tasks and give women more free time.

Ironically, the new labor-saving devices generally did not decrease the amount of time women spent doing housework. Because the tasks became less physically difficult, many families stopped hiring servants to do the work and relied on the wife to do all the jobs herself.

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**Washing Machine**

To do laundry manually, women had to carry and heat about 50 gallons of water for each load. They rubbed the clothes on ridged washboards, rinsed them in tubs, and wrung them out by hand.

This early electric washing machine, photographed in 1933, made the job less strenuous. The casters on the legs made it easier to move tubs of water. The two rollers at the top of the machine squeezed water from clothes. That innovation alone saved women’s wrists from constant strain.

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**Refrigerator**

People used to keep perishable food in iceboxes cooled by large chunks of ice that gradually melted and had to be replaced. Electric refrigerators, like the one in this 1929 advertisement, kept the food at a fairly constant temperature, which reduced spoilage. Because food kept longer, housewives could shop less frequently.
In 1929, a survey of 100 Ford employees showed that 98 of them had electric irons in their homes. The same survey showed that 49 of the 100 had washing machines at home.

Before electrical appliances, women heated irons on a stove. The irons cooled quickly, and as they did so, women had to push down harder to press out wrinkles. Early electric irons also had inconsistent heat. This 1926 ad offered an electric iron that stayed evenly hot, so women didn't have to put so much force into their ironing. Therefore, they could iron sitting down.

The electric coffee pot shown in this 1933 photograph was a vacuum pot. The water in the bottom chamber would come to a boil and bubble up into the top chamber, where the grounds were. The resulting vacuum in the lower chamber pulled the liquid back through the grounds and into the lower chamber.

This 1920 ad promised “Twice as many rooms cleaned. . . . twice as much leisure left for you to enjoy.” However, women rarely experienced that benefit. Because the new appliances made housework easier, people began to expect homes to be cleaner. As a result, many women vacuumed more often and generally used their newfound “leisure” time to do even more household chores than before.


2. Comparing and Contrasting  Ask two or three adults about the way that technology has affected their work life and whether modern technologies are “labor-saving devices.” How do your findings compare to the effect of electrical appliances in the 1920s?