

Clothespin Chic

In search of the perfect pegs.

BY ANITA LAHEY FROM MAISONNEUVE MAGAZINE

ON MY OFFICE wall is a framed photo from the Toronto Department of Health. Dated 1914, it depicts a family living in squalor, their laundry strung up around them. Six years before this photo was taken, it was possible to order an exquisite 80-foot “India hemp cable laid sash clothesline” for 20 cents from Sears, Roebuck & Co. A superb 100-foot manila line sold for 43 cents. A lovely 100-foot galvanized, rust-resistant six-wire line went for 23 cents. The people in my photo, however, used plain old rope.

The family’s straight wooden clothespins might have been ordered by the box—five dozen for 58 cents—but had likely been salvaged and passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter. Some might even have dated back to the days when clothes pegs were either

painstakingly homemade or purchased from a peddler, back when one had to undergo what a 19th-century diarist described as “the great domestic dread of the household”: sorting, soaking, scrubbing, hauling, boiling, rinsing, wringing, starching and hanging the laundry.

With the drudgery of washday largely behind us, the clothesline is now regarded either as an emblem



of poverty that ought to be banned—thousands of communities in North America have done just that—or a call back to so-called simpler times, when the pinning up of damp garments was a wholesome, home-baked art (read: Neighbours shunned women who hung shirts

Richard Plante has taken the clothesline back to the drawing board at Ben-Mor.

sloppily). Members of the latter camp are now inspiring the innovators at places such as Ben-Mor Cables, a company at the forefront of a new age in clotheslines.

The Ben-Mor factory is a collection of solar-heated warehouses located in St-Hyacinthe, Que. The surrounding neighbourhood is made up of narrow two- and three-storey mid-century homes; some are brick, some are covered in siding, but almost all have balconies that anchor plastic-coated steel cords strung from nearby trees, telephone poles and fences. It's November—it's frigid—but many of the lines still sag under the weight of sheets, blankets, jeans, jackets and shirts hung out to dry.

Inside the warm Ben-Mor showroom, hundreds of clothespins of

various shapes, sizes and colours are jumbled in pails and bags. There are pulleys. There are lines: ordinary, heavy-duty, green, blue or clear. There are also winches, hooks, drying racks, pulley elevators, spacers, clothespin bags and those outdoor umbrella dryers with webbed tops

that fold down neatly around their stems when not in use.

This is where Richard Plante has taken the clothesline back to the drawing

board. The vice-president of sales and marketing for Ben-Mor is dressed in a pristine white button-down shirt that has never

seen the inside of a dryer. "I

always hang a shirt like this to dry," he says, tugging at the crisply ironed fabric over his chest. Plante is a man who thinks deeply about laundry. One day in 2004, he experienced an epiphany while contemplating his barbecue, deck chairs and other balcony accoutrements—including his Ben-Mor clothesline. "The most ugly product," he says, pausing to catch my eye, "was my product!"

Enter Ben-Mor research and development, a crew usually asked to create, say, a more durable cable for a construction firm or the U.S. aerospace industry. The team tackled Plante's balcony brainstorm and, tada! in spring 2006 a new clothesline kit rolled off the factory line. Dubbed Harmony, it contains all the ingredients for setting up your own



outdoor manual-drying system: a 45-metre line with a vinyl-coated galvanized aircraft cable (capable of holding at least a quarter tonne of laundry), two zinc ball-bearing pulleys, one zinc spacer, one zinc mini-winch and two hooks.

The contents of this kit are colour coordinated. Anything in the box made with zinc—normally silvery grey—has been painted either Sahara Beige, Gold Antique or Moka. It took 24 months of trial and error to select the most durable paint and to perfect its application on zinc so that the colour would not chip with use or fade under the sun. The clothesline, meanwhile, is covered in a coordinating shade of PVC plastic, with just enough translucency to reveal its steel core. “So people don’t think it’s an electric cable,” says Plante, “or a cheap rope.”

IT’S AS if Martha Stewart got her hands on these utilitarian objects and set about correcting their offensive habit of looking more functional than decorative. And why not? As Plante points out, if people will pay dearly for a glistening stainless-steel barbecue—“to show off to their neighbours”—why wouldn’t they spend a few extra bucks for a better-looking clothesline?

The only thing missing from Harmony was the clothespins. To remedy this, Ben-Mor helped develop sturdy plastic clothespins with colours and shapes designed to

Flavour the moment

NEW Kiwi-Strawberry Splash
& Tropical Fruit Splash

0 calories

Nestlé
Pure Life
Kiwi-Strawberry Splash

0 calories

Nestlé
Pure Life
Tropical Fruit Splash

Naturally-flavoured, sugar-free,
zero calorie water beverages.

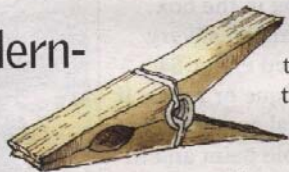
Thirst for Life.™ Pure Life.®

©2007 Nestlé Waters Canada.
NESTLÉ & design and PURE LIFE are registered
trademarks of Société des Produits Nestlé SA, used under license.

complement the clothesline kit. Today's clothespin innovations are all about vanity.

It wasn't always this way. Early clothespin advances stemmed from wanting to alleviate hard labour. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office issued the first peg patent on

In 1853 the modern-looking clothespin appeared: two wooden legs and a spring.



the minds behind the eight-track. He developed the first plastic clothespin during the Sec-

ond World War, reportedly after discovering the shortage of wooden pegs while on an errand to buy some for his wife. His factory subsequently produced more than a million pins a day to meet wartime demand.

March 22, 1832. The design looked promising enough: a six-inch strip of hickory bent to form a clamp. But according to Barbara Suit Janssen, an associate curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and the force behind the museum's 1998 exhibition "America's Clothespins," it was a dud. "It used a wooden screw to hold the two sides together," she tells me. "It wasn't very practical. If the clothespin got wet, the screw would swell and you wouldn't be able to operate it."

It wasn't until 1853 that the first modern-looking clothespin appeared: two wooden legs that could open on a metal spring. All told, between 1852 and 1887—coinciding with surging advances in manufacturing capabilities—146 different

clothespin patents were issued in the United States. A few were feasible enough to put into production. Credit for the last major clothespin innovation goes to the Italian-American entrepreneur Mario Maccaferri, also the creator of a plastic reed and a plastic guitar, and one of

That was 60 years ago. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office website records some 170 patents issued between 1946 and 2006 for clothespins or clothespin-related items, with little evidence of eureka moments. Some designs resemble your ordinary wooden clothespin, but with more toothy, formidable jaws. One looks like a pliable, plastic U; another like a distorted thimble. One pin, patented in 1984 by Raymond L. Woodley of Leeds, is like a tiny, armless plastic doll with nubby legs, outward-curving feet and a flat, faceless head, all of which combine somehow to convey a perky playfulness. These new designs claim more constant pressure, cheaper or simpler construction, greater resistance

to the forces of wind and less likelihood of breaking in two or leaping off the line without warning.

The more recent the patent, the more likely it is that appearance trumps function. The Clip 'n' Stay clothespin, created in New York by Bruce E. Ancona and Louis Henry in 1999, represents one of the first such "advances." It's a one-piece plastic specimen with a hairpin curve and jaws that click together at two circular knobs, giving it a sleek, teardrop shape. During its brief period of availability, the clamp came in translucent blue, green and clear—what one design critic described as "a palette of contemporary colours." Indeed, the pin earned brief fame when it won a host of design awards and was named one of *Time Asia* magazine's top ten designs of the year. But because EKCO, the company it was concocted for, retreated from the clothespin market, the Clip 'n' Stay is no longer manufactured.

Forgive me if I don't shed any tears.

Recently, I bought a bag of the very latest pins—a January 2005 patent by a pair of inventors from France—from a shop in my Ottawa neighbourhood. These plastic pins (soft yellow, coral blue, delicate candy orange) sport wide thumbs, a

straight spring rather than a hinge and a "soft-touch grip system" that will caress rather than dent your clothing (yes, "caress" appears on the packaging). At \$6.69 for ten pins, a pack of these Euro Collection clips won't get you through a fifth of your load of laundry. And yet the space given over to them on the clothespin wall at Home Hardware is surefire evidence that there is a market for Plante's Harmony clothesline kit—and that companies are trying to get in on the clothespin action.

I'm one of those people who considers a loaded clothesline a fine, bracing, soul-enriching sight. What could be better than a row of bright colours and patterns lifting on gusts of wind, held in place by tiny, straight-backed soldiers, teetering this way and that, working their little hinges? But these newfangled designs, late-breaking tools, upper-class pulleys and happy little bits of moulded plastic only make me look at my bucket of old wooden pins and think, "What's wrong with you, old friends? What have you—all 50 of you for \$1.99—done to deserve this flogging?" It makes them seem out of it. Left behind. Let's face it, they're pushing rustic.

Which, when you think of it, is just this side of cool.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

"There were thirteen kids in my family. We were so poor we had to eat cereal with a fork, so we could pass the milk to the next kid."

BERNIE MAC in *African American Humor* (Lawrence Hill Books)