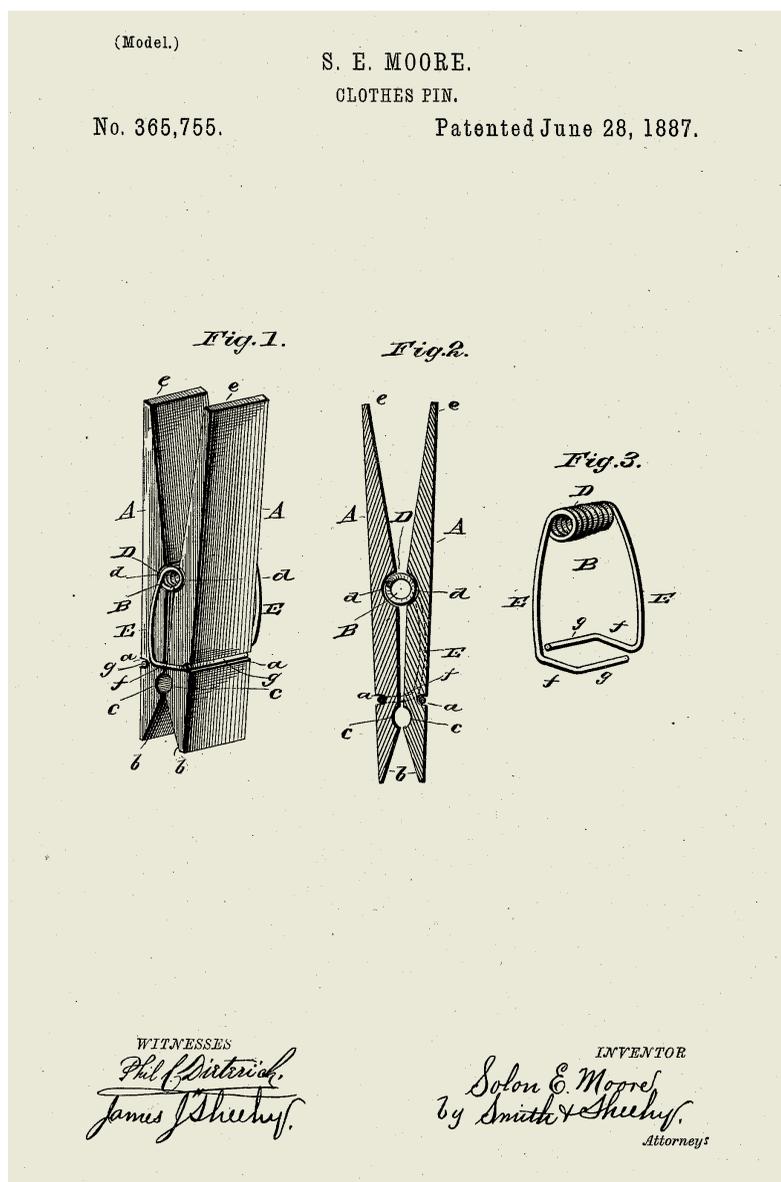


Clothespin Equals Kiss

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“These clothespins are a great invention and one that every housekeeper will appreciate, and after once seeing these in use will have no other, and wonder how they have done without them so long.”

—*Industries and Wealth of the Principal Points in Vermont* (1891)

Try this: stand a clothespin up on its end, and observe it from the side. What do you see? From this angle, what is otherwise a purely utilitarian household tool looks very much like two figures embracing.

I would not have noticed this if hadn't been for a passing comment regarding the world's largest clothespin—a 14-metre-tall (45 feet) steel sculpture located in Philadelphia. When Claes Oldenburg created the public art sculpture in 1976, he was inspired less by laundry than by another sculpture found in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Constantin Brâncuși's *The Kiss*—“Cpin=kiss,” Oldenburg scribbled on a print of Brâncuși's sculpture before making his own.

I tell you all this because there is more to the clothespin than doing your laundry. Or, rather, there is more to laundry than simply doing laundry. “Cpin=kiss.” Now that we have the electric automatic dryer, we have no real need for breeze and sun, and yet the laundry line persists, both in our backyards and in our imaginations. It is, somewhat inexplicably, good for the soul—an embrace of sorts with something necessary and good.

We are often guilty of romanticizing the act of hanging out our laundry. It does, after all, take time and effort. You could even argue it is inefficient (as if efficiency was always the point). And yet, as with all things done by our own hands, when we do it we understand: it is a task worth doing.

You'd think that something as useful as the clothespin would be an ancient tool, and yet even its earliest incarnation—a single piece of wood, split down the middle—is a surprisingly recent invention.

The clothespin didn't make its entrance until the early 1800s, prior to which laundry was often simply spread out on the grass or draped over hedges. In winter, or when the weather wasn't cooperating, households also had drying racks or ropes hung indoors (one type of drying rack was even called a “winter hedge”). The outdoors was preferred, however, because the sun was needed to help bleach clothes white. Washing and drying was often a communal activity, and many villages and large estates had a sheltered, grassy area set aside as places for drying laundry, called a “drying green.”

All of this must have left laundry vulnerable to the whims of winds and sudden rainstorms, not to mention the trappings of wandering livestock, and yet nobody seemed to care enough to do anything about it for most of human history.

Finally, around the early 1800s, the clothespin (or clothes peg) made its appearance. These early pegs were simple objects, a short section of branch, split most of the way down the middle—vaguely anthropomorphic with their rounded head and two legs. Perhaps because they looked so much like human figurines, they were known initially as “dolly pegs.”

The first patent was taken out for a dolly peg in 1809, though not much changed after that—at least not right away. Though a split section of wood remained the favoured form for the time being, this was the era of mechanization, and industrial mass-production was just around the corner. It was also an era of urbanization: more and more people moved into cities, into crammed and often squalid slums, where hedges and “drying greens” were in short supply, and where laundry lines now crisscrossed muddy lanes and alleyways. Suddenly the clothespin was in great demand.

In Britain especially, the clothes peg was an item famously made and sold by the Roma and Travellers, a tool they hawked as they moved (or were forced to move) from town to town. The Roma made these handmade pegs chiefly from two types of wood: willow and hazel (both of which were also used for fencing and basket weaving, as well as “dowsing” for groundwater, and willow for making such things as flutes and cricket bats). Romani pegmakers would harvest branches and cut them down to size, then split them down the middle, tapering the ends of the two legs. The split wood was dried, and the ends reinforced with a ring or coil of salvaged metal.

The design was simple, and served sufficiently to hold laundry to a line. Still, it was a handmade object, and this was the new age of industrialization: nothing was worth its salt if it couldn't be mass-produced. In America alone, the national patent office issued a whopping 146 patents for the clothespin between 1832 and 1887.

We have Vermont to thank for the modern clothespin. In 1853, Vermont resident David M. Smith took out a patent for a “spring-clamp for clothes-lines”—the first modern design of significance. Smith's clothespin featured two pieces of wood joined in the middle by a hinge, along with a spring that forced these two wooden legs, or levers, into a clamp.

“Unlike the common wooden clothes pin in common use,” wrote Smith in his patent, “[this instrument] does not strain the clothes or injure them when it is used.” Not only that, “it cannot be detached from the clothes by the wind as is the case with the common pin and

which is a serious evil to washerwomen.” These were lofty goals: Smith wasn't just changing the laundry game, he was thwarting a serious evil.

Then in 1887 another Vermonter, Solon E. Moore, came up with a notable improvement: instead of a spring he used a tight coil of wire, placed sideways against the wood. Moore's “coiled fulcrum” was made from a single wire, with two extended arms, each end bent inward to fit into grooves in the wood. This innovative coil did away with the need for a hinge, making the clothespin even simpler (and thus cheaper to manufacture), and added a great deal of sturdiness.

And that was that. Moore's design has remained more or less the same ever since.

Vermont became the site not just of clothespin invention, but of clothespin manufacturing as well. First came the United States Clothespin Company, then the National Clothespin Company, both operating out of Montpelier, Vermont, the latter establishing itself as the national supplier of American-made wooden clothespins for over a century. It was also the last to manufacture clothespins in the US, closing its doors in 2009.

Jack “Crow” Crowell owned the National Clothespin Company from 1967 until his retirement. Evidently it was a source of some pride: his grave is marked by a tombstone-sized granite clothespin. Carved below is the inscription: “Here lies old Jack Crow, it was too bad he had to go / While on this Earth he was Hell bent / And we knew some day he would up and went.” The man, at least, had a sense of humour.

Things have not always been rosy for the clothespin, however. Electric appliances, including the clothes dryer, became all the rage in the boom years following the Second World War. Wood also gave way to plastic as the material of choice, despite being notably inferior in terms of durability.

Today clotheslines remain the exception rather than the rule, though they are making a comeback. Wooden clothespins are back in demand, and an environmentally conscious public has rediscovered the benefits of wind and sun. The “Right to Dry” environmental movement played a role in pushing eight US states to overturn clothesline bans made by condos and apartment complexes.

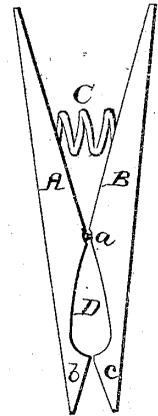
Machines are exceedingly useful, but many of us still want to be able to do things ourselves, with our own hands. The benefits, even the small ones, are hard to dismiss. My mom reinstated a laundry line in her yard in 2008 after decades without. It was the smell, she said. The laundry smelled like the breeze.

Kissed by the breeze, you might even say.

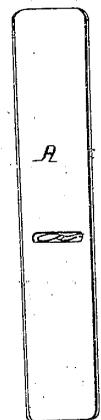
“Cpin=kiss.” ☺

*D. M. Smith,
Clothes Pin,
Patented Oct. 25, 1853.*

Fig; 1.



Fig; 2.



Fig; 3.

