

The Kaiser Dishwasher

Lincoln Cushing
Heritage writer



Henry J. Kaiser with dishwasher and model, circa 1946 World War II was not yet over, and Henry J. Kaiser was already anticipating the need for postwar housing ? and houses need appliances. Henry J. Kaiser was one of the prominent American industrialists of the early 20th century who built everything from dams to ships to airplanes. Did his range extend to humble home appliances? Yes, it did.

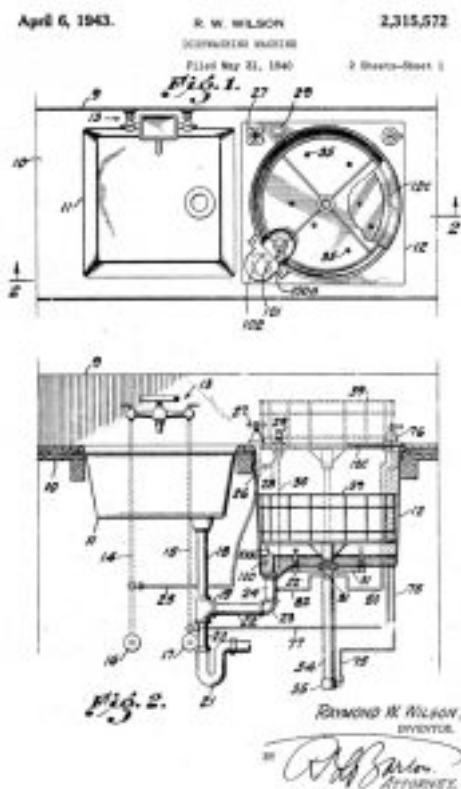
The news broke on October 16, 1946:

"First Kaiser Cars Go on Display Here," *Berkeley Daily Gazette*:

In the appliance line Kaiser Motors soon will distribute a machineless [motorless] dish-washer, now in production at Bristol, Pa. The dish-washer, which operates entirely by

water pressure, is being produced in two models ? a "chassis" type that will cost about \$176 and can be made a permanent fixture of the home, and a "cabinet" dish-washer that can be moved from house to house. The "cabinet" dish-washer will sell for approximately \$101.

The Kaiser-Frazer dealers have been offered franchises on the appliance and farm equipment lines in order to have something to sell the year round until new cars become plentiful.



Raymond Wilson's dish washing machine patent, 1943As with most of his accomplishments, Henry J. Kaiser didn't invent the dishwasher ? he looked at what was needed, found out who knew how to make it, and did it better.

The origins of the Kaiser dishwasher begin with Raymond W. Wilson, an inventor in Glendale, Calif. In 1943 Wilson was granted a patent for a dishwashing machine whose primary feature was that it was entirely operated by water pressure ? no electricity was

needed. "As easy to install as a new sink ? your plumber will gladly make three simple connections." The washer used standard municipal water pressure and hot water from a residential hot water heater (assumed to be 140 degrees F.) A basket would raise for loading and lower for washing with spray jets at the bottom.

Wilson began producing these machines under the "Q.E.D." brand name in 1939 and applied for his patent in 1940. The patent rights were later purchased by Mr. W. J. Schworer of Alhambra, Calif., and the product name changed to "Steril-Dry."

Unfortunately for the new dishwasher, soon the United States was deeply involved in World War II, and manufacturing capacity for consumer products was marshaled for the war effort. But by September 1944, Kaiser had started partnering with real estate developer Fritz B. Burns to build modern housing projects, and Burns wanted to include the Steril-Dry in new homes. So, in November they installed and tested one of the dishwashers in their Latham Square Building offices in Oakland.



AUTOMATIC DISHWASHING is done in a new sink accessory without a motor, belts, or a whirling spray arm, operation being simply on city water pressure. The machine is a product of Q. E. D. Dishwasher Co., of Alhambra, Calif.

Q.E.D. item in Popular Science, November 1944 Although Schworer had begun negotiations with the Crane Company, the Kaiser Company managed to beat them out and buy the rights on November 10, 1944.

Arrangements were made to assemble and purchase six Steril-Dry machines from Schworer for installation at test locations including the Kaiser Steel mill in Fontana, Calif.; the Kaiser Cement plant in Permanente, Calif. (south of San Francisco near Cupertino); and the Fleetwings aircraft plant in Bristol, Penn. One was also set up at the residence of Eugene Trefethen, Jr. (1910-1986), a longtime Kaiser Industries employee who later rose to become president and vice chairman of Kaiser Industries.

And another one was installed at the Kaiser Richmond shipyard number 3 cafeteria, where it ran for more than 300 hours and washed 129,106 dishes. A report on that test included these findings:

The dishes are washed satisfactorily when the water is at the proper temperature (150-170 degrees F.), and they dry immediately. The same results occur when washing glassware. There has been absolutely no breaking or chipping of the dishes or glasses. If the water gets below 150 degrees the dishes are not washed as satisfactorily. The dishes and glassware come out clean with the exception of those that have lipstick on them. Other types of grease are easily removed, however.



Steril-Dry brochure cover, circa 1945; uses same photo as Q.E.D. item above. The pressure of the water does not seem quite sufficient. It is about 60 to 65 pounds. The only objection to the pressure is not from the dishwashing angle, but from trouble with the hydraulic lift.

Results were very satisfactory considering that the operators were untrained, unskilled people. They had no difficulty in operating the machine. It only takes a few minutes of instruction to the most unskilled person for her to understand the operation of the machine.

Another model kitchen and laboratory were set up to further test the machines. An extensive list of proposed modifications was drawn up, including everything from design (locating knobs in the front, making the top flat and square to serve as a working surface) to technical (jet redesign to minimize clogging, automatic soap dispenser).

By early 1946, the Kaiser Fleetwings Division of Kaiser Cargo in Bristol began manufacturing four models of the long-awaited Kaiser dishwasher.

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Powered by water, only
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— Only 2 connections

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Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
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Kaiser dishwasher ad, Better Homes and Gardens, 1948
Research by dishwasher historian (yes, you read that correctly) Mike Haller of Peoria, Ill., describes what happened next in the "automaticdishwasher forum": Two major flaws existed: (1) Distribution was turned over to the Kaiser-Frazer Sales Corporation (the car division of the Kaiser conglomerate). The Kaiser-Frazer division was ill prepared to market and demonstrate the dishwasher. (2) Lack of adequate field testing did not pick up on the fact that not all water sources were able to deliver the required minimum water pressure [or temperature] for adequate operation.

Mainly because of customer dissatisfaction and the high cost of the dishwashers ? upwards of \$200 plus freight and taxes, ? the sales started to decline...in early 1948, Sears Roebuck & Company was searching for an automobile that could be sold as a house-branded item. As part of the deal, the Dishwasher line became part of the package, along with factory floor space. However, Sears needed the floor space for other contract work, so the Kaiser Dishwasher line had to go.

In 1948 Fleetwings was renamed Kaiser Metal Products, where they continued to manufacture a range of consumer products. But Kaiser's short venture into the world of dishwashers went down the drain.

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