

Gadgets Galore – Transforming the American Household

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Everyday household and personal use items are a quick visual way to measure changes in society. Compare anything to its counterpart from 20, 50 or 100 or more years ago. Many times, as with the smart phone, the changes are quite dramatic. At one time, you needed to get help from a human operator to reach your desired number. Now we might speak to AI.

Of course, this can apply to most everything we see, like cars and airplanes. Our new exhibit Gadgets Galore concentrates on certain things inside the home that most people made use of. Everything was new at a certain point, causing excitement in consumers and transforming everyday life. The modifications over time can consist of materials used, places they were made, and technology becoming more sophisticated and improving the function. Some of these gadgets are indicative of values that have shifted over time, making an object once commonplace and essential now obsolete.

The industrial revolution transformed the American Household between 1860 and 1960. Those first fifty years were a time of unparalleled advances in manufacturing. Due to new creation processes and the discovery of electricity and steam power, many items did not have to be “homemade” any longer. Mass production, fast communication, advertising and better transportation started the path of many different gadgets we rely on today. They could be purchased in a store or get delivered for a reasonable price through big mail order catalogs, which changed the lifestyle of rural homes like the early Cupertino farming families.

In our exhibition, we are looking at some selected items like home entertainment. The family gathered around the big radio to listen to shows of all kinds from Women’s “Soap Operas” - so called because laundry soap was the usual sponsor - to kids adventures like Little Orphan Annie and Captain Midnight. These shows offered things kids could send away for, like decoder rings to figure out the secret message given over the air. Usually, it turned out to be telling the kids to consume the sponsors’ product like Ovaltine! These shows are the ancestors of the streaming series so many today are hooked on. We also show a gramophone, cameras and a stereoscope 3D picture viewer. Today, we can get all this in one Smart Phone.

Many home appliances have changed over time like the toaster, coffee pot and curling iron. Buttons are still used but not to the extent they once were, as today we have the likes of Velcro and snaps. And laundry has undergone some pretty marked changes, giving modern people a lot more free time.

We also have some humorous vintage ads that show a bit about how men and women’s roles were once very differently viewed by the society and advertising industry.