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Phone: 972.335.1181  
Toll Free: 877.781.7067  
Fax: 214.722.2313  
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*Antique Singer sewing machine and radio*  
photos by Chris Fritchie



## How Old-Timers Stayed in Shape

By Bob Warren

**HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT** how many things are powered by electricity today, which, in the old days we had to push, pull, crank, pedal or jiggle? Then it was muscle power, not electric power that made things move. Perhaps that's why old timers didn't have to go to the gym to stay in shape.

A recent news article about giant wind generators brought to mind times when electricity was still a novelty in small towns like Frisco and was yet a dream for most farm families. Thinking about those times, I asked my wife, Wanda, if she remembered the little wind-chargers

which some farm families had before electric lines made their way to the rural areas in this part of the country. She said, "Sure! We had one when I was a young girl living on a farm west of Frisco."

She recalled an adventure she and her younger sister, Ruby, had. She said their wind-charger powered a six-volt battery that furnished just enough electricity to light one light bulb and run the family radio. On windless days the battery soon "ran down." It was such a day that brought crisis to the lives of the sisters. They liked to listen to a special story on the radio and one calm day as they turned

the dial hoping to hear their program – no power. The battery was dead!! Dismayed at the prospect of missing their story, they put their little heads together and came up with a plan. They crawled out an upstairs window onto the roof where the wind-charger was mounted and began feverishly spinning the propeller by hand, hoping to charge the battery enough to power a thirty minute broadcast.

After twirling the propeller a few moments, they climbed back through the window and ran to the radio only to find their effort had failed - - still no power. Such were the woes of the days before

electricity was available at the flip of a switch.

That story set us to thinking of all the things we used to do by muscle power which are done for us today by just pressing a button or flipping a switch. The list is practically unlimited, but here are a few we thought of. See how many more you can add.

First, the automobile, which without today's power features required a lot of muscle power just to brake and steer. Before the electric starter we cranked cars by hand. The engine sometimes "kicked" back hard enough to break the cranker's arm. To fix a flat tire you jacked the car up, loosened the lug nuts, put a cold patch on the inner tube, tightened the lug nuts, pumped the tire up with a hand pump and jacked the car back down. Car windows had to be cranked up and down and the earliest windshield wipers were hand operated.

In the home, we cranked telephones to call the operator, wound phonographs and pedaled sewing machines. The tanks of some lamps and flatirons had to be pumped, clocks and watches were wound, and water was either pumped or drawn by hand from the well. Before remote controls we had to make the long trip from our chair to the television set every time we changed stations or adjusted the volume. Not much channel surfing in those days!

Doing the laundry also required muscle power. Clothes were boiled in a wash pot heated by a wood fire, were agitated by punching them with a stick, were rubbed on a rub board, wrung out by hand, rinsed, wrung out again and hung on the line to dry. Early washing machines had hand cranked ringers. After clothes were dry and gathered from the line, many of them had to be ironed.

Early kitchens had few labor saving devices. We chipped ice with an ice pick and cranked the ice cream freezer. Women and children churned butter, cranked the cream separator, the food grinder and eggbeater, twisted the can opener, ground coffee and turned the canner-sealer. To make biscuits, they



kneaded dough, rolled it out with a rolling pin and cut it to size with a biscuit cutter. The life of a cook was not easy!

Farm families arose early to feed, milk, chop wood and build fires. Practically everything was done by hand. Fields were plowed with mules, cotton was hoed, chopped and picked as corn was gathered and shelled by muscle power. Fences were built and repaired and hay was cut, baled, hauled and stored in the barn. Farm families didn't need to visit the gym.

In the office we cranked pencil sharpeners and adding machines, used manual typewriters and made copies with a manually operated mimeograph machine.

I have some antique tools – all hand operated and long since replaced with power tools. There are old hand saws, a brace and bit, a drawknife, hand planes and screwdrivers.

Before air conditioning we worked

hard to stay cool in church. While the preacher stirred up heat by preaching about "hell fire and brimstone" the congregation waved little "funeral home fans" to generate a breeze.

Yesterday I started to say, "Wanda, would you turn my electric toothbrush on? My fingers are tired from flipping channels." But, luckily I caught myself in time. Guess I was just tired from thinking how things were in the early days!

*Frisco native Bob Warren is an award winning humorist, historian and former Frisco mayor.*

