

# Electric Appliances

A brief history of

From a single light bulb to a know-it-all virtual assistant, the past century has taken us on a roller coaster of innovation

By Ed Crowell



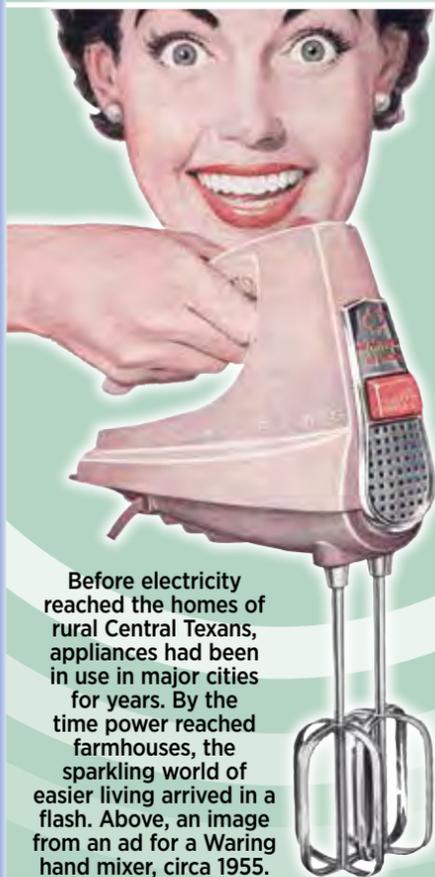
When Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative powered the first light bulbs in rural Central Texas in 1939, the World's Fair in New York was unveiling an all-electric home with a dazzling kitchen, complete with a refrigerator, electric range, dishwasher, coffee maker, garbage disposal, food mixer and an automatic toaster.

To allow buyers in Texas and other states to get a close look at these life-changing devices, the federal Rural Electrification Administration outfitted a traveling show of circus tents filled with innovative home appliances. The caravan of dreams drew crowds by the thousands, and by the early 1940s, appliance sales were skyrocketing.

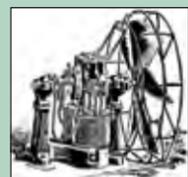
Wood-burning stoves, clothing washboards and heavy hand irons heated by a fire — all of which required backbreaking labor — were pushed aside for these conveniences of modern living.

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## A TIMELINE OF ELECTRIC HOME DEVICES



Before electricity reached the homes of rural Central Texans, appliances had been in use in major cities for years. By the time power reached farmhouses, the sparkling world of easier living arrived in a flash. Above, an image from an ad for a Waring hand mixer, circa 1955.



**1882**  
Summer relief comes with electric fan invention by Schuyler Skaats Wheeler, a New York City engineer.



**1889**  
Singer company introduces first practical electric sewing machine.

**1891**  
Carpenter Electric Manufacturing Co. in Minneapolis-St. Paul introduces electric oven. Its 1893 catalog tells how to bake pies: Place pies 'in the oven, turn on the electricity for thirty minutes, then take the pies out. They will always be done.'

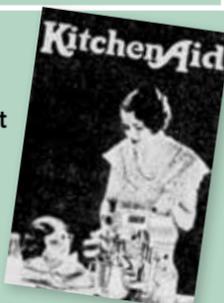


**1908**  
Hoover vacuum cleaner goes on sale after James Murray Spangler, a night janitor in Canton, Ohio, whose asthma worsens from dust, invents device using fan, tin box, sateen pillowcase and broom handle. He sells patent to Hoover.

**1916**  
GM buys first self-contained electric refrigerator from Alfred Mellowes, who developed it in a backyard in Fort Wayne, Ind. GM names it Frigidaire and begins mass production; 'fridge' enters the lexicon.



**1919**  
KitchenAid produces first household electric stand-up food mixer.



**1908**  
Alva J. Fisher invents electric washing machine called the Thor, made by Hurley Machine Co. of Chicago.

**1920s**  
Armstrong Electric Co. unveils Perc-O-Toaster, which makes toast and coffee in one. Its ad touts, "Your complete breakfast prepared in one appliance."



**1926**  
Toastmaster, first electric pop-up toaster, goes on sale. Invented by Charles Strite, who didn't like burned toast served in cafeteria of Minnesota plant where he worked.

**1926**  
C. G. Johnson, founder of Overhead Door Corp. (now based in Lewisville in Dallas-Forth Worth area), invents electric garage door opener in Hartford City, Ind.



**1927**  
Architect John W. Hammes of Racine, Wis., develops first garbage disposal, nicknamed 'electric pig' by manufacturer Emerson Electric Co.



**1929**  
Former U.S. Army Lt. Col. Jacob Schick develops electric shaver after having trouble shaving in below-zero weather while mining in Alaska.



**1937**  
First Waring Blender debuts as Miracle Mixer at National Restaurant Show in Chicago, demonstrated by Fred Waring himself.

**1938**  
Ross Moore, who hated hanging wet laundry as boy in North Dakota, invents clothes dryer but can't find company to build it until Hamilton Manufacturing in Two Rivers, Wis., embraces idea and begins selling first 'June Day' dryer in 1938.



**1940**  
CBS researchers invented first mechanical color TV system in 1940, based on 1928 designs. Federal Communications Commission approved unrefined system in 1950, but first color TV sets did not hit market until early 1950s.



**1946**  
Raytheon Corp. engineer Percy LeBaron Spencer discovered microwave cooking by accident when he got close to magnetron in lab that melted candy bar in his pocket. He experimented by cooking popcorn near magnetron, then built crude metal box for magnetron — the initial microwave oven — to heat his lunches. Practical microwaves for home use appeared in 1960s.



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The consumer race for electric appliances gained momentum as World War II ended in 1945. The post-war housing boom increased consumer demand for kitchen appliances as well as electric radios and then TVs.

By the 1950s, color televisions were available, though most popular TV shows aired in black-and-white until the late 1950s or early 1960s. General Electric made its household appliances pop by adding color such as Petal Pink and Canary Yellow (a design trend that may have influenced the future Apple CEO Steve Jobs in the late 1990s when he unveiled colorful “flavors” of the iMac personal desktop computer: blueberry, strawberry, lime, tangerine and grape).

At Bluebonnet’s then-headquarters in Giddings, electric appliances could be viewed and touched, just like in a retail showroom. Bluebonnet held appliance demonstrations in small towns and communities across its service area.

The 1960s and 1970s brought the ability to save substantial time on cooking. Microwaves, Crock-Pots and Mr. Coffee — the first automatic drip machine — were unveiled and embraced by consumers. Cuisinart food processors and hot-air popcorn poppers also made kitchen time less onerous.

Again, Bluebonnet took center stage to

help consumers understand how all those new appliances could change lives. Bluebonnet hired Lavonne Morrow to demonstrate microwave cooking, and some events drew more than 100 eager learners. She shared recipes for microwave casseroles, three-minute fudge and even a tiny birthday cake baked in an ice cream cone. To consumers’ amazement, she showed how an entire meal for six people could be prepared and cooked in a microwave in just 30 to 45 minutes.

Clearly, electric appliances were changing American culture. The convenience of a microwave, washing machine or vacuum cleaner freed more time for work outside the home. Growing numbers of American women joined the workforce for a paycheck.

America turned its attention to the environment in the 1970s, as oil and gas supply crises brought long lines at the gas pumps and prompted President Jimmy Carter to ask Americans to save energy by turning thermostats to 65 or lower in the winter.

It’s no surprise that the 1980s and 1990s saw advances in energy efficiency in home appliances and a big turn toward automation. In 1992, the Environmental Protection Agency introduced the Energy Star program to promote the purchase of energy-efficient appliances.

Today’s digital age is bringing increas-

ingly “smart” electronics into the home that merge internet connectivity with phones, computers, artificial intelligence devices and appliances. Alexa, the voice-activated virtual assistant in the Amazon Echo device, was unveiled in 2016, and 100 million had been sold by the end of 2018, according to the company. A seemingly endless stream of other new devices can connect with the Echo or its top competitor, Google Home. Virtual assistants can turn on and off smart appliances and timers, stream music and read books to you, and each adds new skills regularly. A glut of smart security cameras that allow you to view the outside or inside of your home on your phone are popping up everywhere.

In the living room, consumers are making way for big-screen televisions with curved displays, screens that roll up and down and technology that illuminates every pixel in the screen. That means viewers can sit at any angle to the screen without a distorted image.

Some of today’s refrigerators have cameras inside to show whether you need to buy milk or eggs when you check from a smartphone while at the grocery store. Samsung’s \$4,100 fridge also has a computer screen on the outside door for searching recipes, displaying family photos and keeping lists and calendars. GE’s new Kitchen Hub is a smart screen on a stove ventilation hood. It

controls the thermostat and lights, security cameras, and other smart appliances. Users can stream movies and music and have video chats.

Or, there is always the option to just ignore all of these chatty, mind-boggling innovations.

Today’s refrigerators are a long way from the Giddings High School “home ec” classes that Shirley Hannes began teaching in 1961. She commanded four kitchen nooks filled with stoves, refrigerators, washers and dryers, all loaned by Bluebonnet. Hannes made certain her students knew how to use the latest in home appliances, some of which must have glowed in mid-century hues of Harvest Gold and Avocado.

Hannes, who now lives south of Houston in Pearland, doesn’t want a virtual assistant like Alexa, but she loves the two-door refrigerator she bought in 2018 because it makes and dispenses ice.

She’s not one to replace appliances just to have the newest model. “We built our house in 1976, and the stove was new then,” she said. “It’s still in good shape, so I’m not planning to replace it yet.” □



Women gather at an appliance showcase in the Bluebonnet region in the mid-1940s. Appliance shows like this, put on by the federal Rural Electrification Administration, drew large crowds across the country. Join us at our Annual Meeting on May 14 in Giddings to see a lineup of vintage appliances, our large appliance timeline and other nods to our 80th anniversary. The event is open to all Bluebonnet members.

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1950

Zenith develops first TV remote control, the ‘Lazy Bones,’ connected to TV by cable. Some customers complained of tripping over cable on living room floor. Similar corded remote controls came out shortly thereafter, including Emerson Model 1158, left.



1955

Kitchen appliances pop with color as General Electric introduces first rainbow hues: ‘Petal Pink, Canary Yellow, Cadet Blue, Turquoise Green and Woodtone Brown.’ Mid-century Coppertone, Avocado and Harvest Gold arrived in 1960s.



1960

Japanese inventor Kazuo Hashimoto begins U.S. sales of ‘Ansafone,’ first commercially successful telephone answering machine.



1967

Amana unveils first countertop microwave, the Radarange, left, with \$495 price tag. Product demonstrators cook Lazy Maple bacon to entice buyers. ‘Never ever lie or exaggerate about this machine,’ team leader says. ‘You don’t have to. It’s a marvel.’



1968

Claire’s True-to-Light Makeup Mirror allows women to put their glam on with lights simulating day, office or evening.



1970

Conair introduces popular pistol-grip hair dryer.



1972

Invention of Mr. Coffee, first in-home percolator with automatic drip process, turns homes into personal coffee shops.



1978

Fresh popcorn spills into home kitchens when Presto and Wear-Ever introduce hot-air poppers.



1973

Home chefs slice, dice and purée food like professional prep cooks as Cuisinart unveils electric food processor.



1987

Bread Maker machine by Panasonic turns U.S. kitchens into corner bakery.



1992

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency introduces Energy Star program to identify and promote energy-efficient appliances.



2001

Swedish company Electrolux introduces disc-shaped Trilobite, first robotic vacuum cleaner that uses sensors to find its way around room.



2010

Japanese company Joybond offers portable mini-fridge for watermelons or other fruits. Device can be switched to heat setting, too.



2015

Five Elements Robotics unveils Budgee, \$1,400 robotic personal assistant that can follow person and carry 50-pound load.



2016

Amazon offers Echo speaker, voice-activated virtual assistant named Alexa — an instant consumer hit. Alexa recites weather, traffic and news reports; turns on and off smart appliances and timers; tells jokes; plays music; reads books; and schedules rides. Other brands of virtual assistants soon follow.



2019

GE introduces Kitchen Hub, smart screen and virtual assistant on stove ventilation hood that controls thermostat and lights, security cameras, and other appliances. Users can stream movies and music and engage in video chats.



2019

Electronics giant LG unveils TV with flexible 65-inch screen that rolls up for viewing and rolls out of sight when not in use.



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