

Laundry Case Cover

Spring break begins this weekend for University of Iowa students and many are headed home with piles of laundry in tow. Some may have let their dirty clothes collect anticipating that they'll have more time at home to do laundry or feeling that doing their wash at home is more convenient than the dorm laundries or local laundromat. Others may be secretly (or openly) hoping that once arriving home, their parents might assist them with this chore.

When Geraldine Busse formerly of Iowa City attended the University of Iowa during the late 1930s, her parents (probably mostly her mom) helped her with laundry as well. During the five years Busse attended the University of Iowa, she sent her dirty laundry home via the U.S. mail. In the 1930s, dorms and apartments didn't have their own laundry facilities and laundromats with modern washers weren't commonplace. Many University students found it cheaper and easier to send laundry home rather than pay local cleaners to do their wash. In fact, sending laundry home via parcel post was so common between the 1910s and the 1950s, that special "laundry cases" were produced for just that purpose and these laundry cases made up a large portion of the Iowa City Post Office's parcel post delivery. "No Iowa City resident needs to be told of the use made in this city of Uncle Sam as a laundry delivery man," reported the October 5, 1923 Iowa City Press-Citizen.

Busse purchased a laundry case with the canvas cover pictured here in Iowa City in the fall of 1935 when she was a freshman. We don't know where she purchased it but an ad from the September 19, 1940 Press-Citizen shows that Montgomery Wards sold laundry cases with canvas covers like this one for 88 cents at their store on College Street.

When she was ready to send her washing home, Busse placed her dirty clothes into the cardboard case and enclosed it with this four-flapped cover to protect the lightweight box from being damaged on its journey. Then she secured everything together with the two cotton straps attached to the cover. Busse would then slip an address card with her home address in Fayette County into the pocket on the outer most flap making sure that it was secure. A lost address card could mean that her laundry

would end up in the dead parcel post office. Mom would then put her clean, pressed clothes back into the box along with a few well-wrapped goodies, if Busse was lucky, slip in an address card with Busse's University address, and send it back to Iowa City.

After graduating from the University of Iowa with a Bachelors of Science degree and nursing certificate, Busse attended the University of Minnesota where she eventually received a Master's degree in public health and based on the address on the piece of corrugated cardboard that is now in the address pocket she took her laundry case to Minnesota with her.

Did you send your laundry home when you were in college? Do you remember purchasing a laundry case like this one? If so, we want to hear your stories. Drop us a note at JCHS, PO Box 5081, Coralville, IA, 52241 or send us an e-mail at leighann@johnsoncountyhistory.org.

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