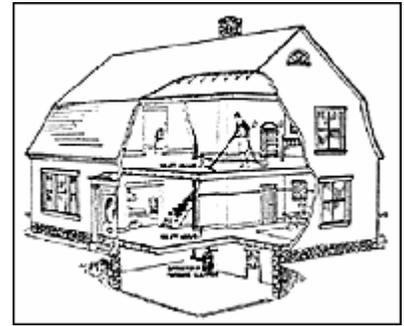


In Search of Central Vacuums

By Gordon Bock

Mention vacuum cleaners, and most people think of electrically powered machines they push or pull around the house. In today's cordless age, many folks take advantage of battery-powered vacuums that can be wielded with one hand, free from any 120-volt umbilical cord. What they may not realize, however, is that the vacuum cleaner goes back more than a century, and its earliest incarnation was not as a mobile appliance but a built-in system that like running water or gas lighting was piped and ported throughout the house the central vacuum cleaner.



While portable electric vacuum cleaners date to at least 1908 (the year Hoover manufactured its first model), the first central vacuums were around as early as 1902 or before. Besides being one of the period's appealing new technological marvels, such as inventive bathroom equipment or automobiles, a central vacuum system made good economic sense to owners of large suburban houses in the years before World War I. Lots of rooms required lots of upkeep, and in a time when domestic help was already finding better opportunities in the workplace, a vacuum on every floor would help close the servant gap. Industrialist Franklin Sieberling installed such a system in his Tudor Revival mansion Stan Hywet Hall in Akron, Ohio, in the 1910s. Public buildings, such as auditoriums, were also experimenting with the system at the time.

The heart of central vacuum cleaners was in the basement. Pipes from throughout the house terminated at a pump, fan, or turbine that pulled air through a crude filter system and exhausted it outdoors. The power was often supplied by early electric motors but not always. Gasoline engines sometimes provided the motive power. Even more surprising to the modern world, illuminating gas companies, scrambling to hold their market against upstart electricity providers by offering new appliances, were pushing gaspowered central vacuums by 1914. In these devices, similar in construction to hot water heaters, the draft created by an open flame provided the suction. In fact, they actually incinerated the collected dust and dirt before it was discharged out the flue. Whatever the design, in two or three locations on upper floors pipes ended in springloaded valves or caps that opened to accept cleaning hoses and wands, then snapped shut to seal the tube.

Architects and domestic science critics often early technophiles themselves applauded the systems as being both practical and hygienic. Many new houses are now equipped with vacuum cleaners in the basement quite as a matter of course, wrote architect Charles E. White Jr. in 1914, for one does not have to drag a machine around. Another writer waxed, The thoroughness of the central system in day-to-day cleaning has completely vanquished spring cleaning. In an era when eliminating dust and dirt was hailed as a primary offensive against disease-spreading microbes, vacuum cleaners of all sorts were quickly crowned as hygienic marvels and the most popular electrical household machine that there is by 1927.

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The popularity of the central vacuum waned dramatically when the boom years of the 20s gave way to the depression. House construction came to a near-halt in the 1930s and seems to have taken an equal toll on central vacuum installations, primarily a new-construction item. In any event, by the 1940s the vacuum cleaner market was overwhelmingly portable. Central systems were regarded as specialties at best, and relics at worst, that is, in the United States.

In Canada, however, the picture was quite the reverse. It seems that many Canadian households, with their strong cultural ties to France and England, favored not only European tastes in furnishings, such as tile floors, but the cleaning habits that went with them. This often translated to a preference for large, upright canister-style vacuum cleaners, and from here it was a short step to permanently installing a large cylindrical vacuum cleaner in the basement. On top of this, after 1940 many Canadian house builders regularly outfitted all new houses with the piping for central vacuums, saving the equipment for later hookup. With this practice the builder could offer an inexpensive sales perk, and the buyer could defer some appliance costs. The result is some 80 percent of Canadian houses incorporate central vacuum systems, and several manufacturers are based there.

Central vacuum cleaners have been slow to return to American houses, but in recent decades the picture has been changing. Besides their traditional advantages of quiet operation and ease of use, they have enjoyed a renewed popularity for health reasons. Rather than recirculating exhaust in a room, central vacuums discharge it outside of the building an asset for allergy-sensitive individuals. Today, they're no less convenient for cleaning the many rooms of a large Tudor or late Queen Anne house than they were in 1902. So if you're opening a lot of walls in the near future—that is when you are not playing cook, chauffeur, and maid—give some thought to adding a historically appropriate central vacuum.

Special thanks to The Hoover Company and the Hoover Historical Center, 1875 Easton St. N.W., North Canton, OH 44720-3331. For a tour schedule call (330) 499-0287.

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