A Passion to Preserve

Fellows, Will

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Robert Seger was born in 1963 and grew up in East Brunswick, New Jersey. It was after moving to Minneapolis that he discovered his uncommon restoration calling, which blends his devout domesticity, design-mindedness, and love of drama.

MY MOTHER SAYS the very first word I could read was “Sears,” because I just loved looking at the pictures in the Sears catalog before I learned to read. I was helping my mother do the laundry by the time I was four. We had a 1962 bottom-of-the-line Kenmore washer that my dad bought my mom when I was born. I loved to watch the agitator swirl the clothes around; I could only imagine what the spin cycle was like because the safety switch on the lid didn’t allow me to see it. My mother loved it that she didn’t have to do our family’s wash, because I would always do it for her.

It was a real treat to go to my grandmother’s house and help her do her laundry in her 1958 Frigidaire Pulsomatic. It had no safety switch, so I could watch the entire cycle, including spin. I was completely fascinated by this machine: its agitator bobbed up and down rapidly, and when it went into spin, all the water was drained out in a matter of seconds, even though the wash tub had no perforations. I wondered where all that water could go so fast! When my other grandparents replaced their 1957 Kenmore with a 1970 Whirlpool, my grandfather took the agitator out of the old machine and gave it to me as a present for my eighth birthday. I still cherish it.

Loading the dishwasher when I was about six, I’d say, “Mother, do you honestly expect that glass to get clean there? Move it!” I was always fascinated by machines that used water, the water movement and the mechanics of the machine. Reading the ratings of automatic washers in my dad’s Consumer Reports when I was about nine, I saw that the magazine listed the manufacturers’ addresses. So I started writing to them, asking them to send me operating instructions and service manuals for their washing machines. Just reading those materials was fascinating. My first Frigidaire washer repair manual answered my question about where all the water in my grandmother’s washer disappeared to so fast: It was spun over the top of the solid tub by centrifugal force.

My fascination with washing machines continued through my teenage years. When my parents were away from home, I would take the panels off the appliances and take them apart a little bit, trying to see how they worked. Hopefully, I could get everything back together by the time the car pulled in. My parents tried somewhat to downplay my strange interest, but my
enthusiasm always came through. When I was fifteen I convinced them to buy a Frigidaire washer and dryer; my grandmother had left her 1958 Pulsamatic behind when she moved to an apartment, and I wanted to use a Frigidaire again. The 1978 Frigidaire my parents bought was interesting to look at, but it wasn’t nearly as dramatic as the vintage models. I realized even then that I totally preferred the vintage machines to the modern.

In my twenties I moved to New York City, where apartments were so small I certainly didn’t have room for a washing machine. I kept my washer passion to myself, concerned that people would think I was a complete nut case. But I saved all the service manuals I had collected as a kid, and my love of washers secretly lived on. At the Twenty-Sixth Street flea market, I would buy vintage issues of *Life, Better Homes and Gardens*, and other women’s magazines from the 1950s: the appliance ads in them were absolutely wonderful.

It wasn’t until my early thirties, when I moved to Minneapolis and had the space to start collecting, that I discovered that vintage automatic washers still existed. My first was the 1955 Westinghouse Laundromat that came with my former partner’s house. He saw how much I loved those machines and kind of encouraged me to start collecting. On our way to Grand Forks, North Dakota, one day, we ran across a 1959 Philco. He said, “Go ahead. You can put it in my basement. You’ll have fun playing with it.” We had no idea what that would lead to.

When I would go to secondhand appliance stores in the 1990s looking for 1950s washers, they would laugh me out of the store. They would tell me they hadn't seen anything like that in years, and if they had it would have gone right to the crusher. But when I started going to estate sales in the older neighborhoods of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, I discovered that many a little old lady had saved her very first automatic washing machine in a basement corner, even after purchasing newer models.

I now have about thirty-five machines, most of them in my basement, hooked up and operating. A few are in the garage, on the restoration waiting list. For me half the fun of collecting these machines is restoring them back to brand-new condition. My collection of service manuals has been an enormous help in teaching myself how to fix the machines. Until I started collecting, I didn’t realize how mechanically inclined I am. Through the Internet I’ve found lots of places to get parts that I once thought were no longer available, and I’ve learned how to clean the porcelain and how to paint things properly using my compressor gun.

You wouldn't believe the before and after pictures of some of these machines. I’ve restored Frigidaire washers, dream machines, that sat outside for twenty-five years. I plucked a Frigidaire dream machine off a farm
in South Dakota where they have ten acres covered with ten to fifteen thousand old appliances. I’ve had all my friends come out from the East Coast, and we’ve pretty much picked the place clean of anything really old and rare.

I’m only interested in the earliest automatic washers, 1938 to 1960. If you ask any vintage appliance collector to name his favorite automatic washer, it would be a Frigidaire. We like the exciting stuff, the drama, not only of the aesthetics but of the washing action. Machines with a standard back-and-forth agitator don’t put on much of a show. The Frigidaire agitator bobs up and down. The ABC-O-Matic is another high-drama machine: Its agitator moves like an old mixer, causing a huge amount of splashing. It looks like there’s a huge fire hose up against its window. I just found the very first ABC-O-Matic model, from 1949, which is very exciting.

 Someone in Ohio called me recently with the absolute dream machine on top of everyone’s list: a Frigidaire washer from 1947. I’m taking a drive out to Toledo to pick it up. Incredible: the very first production Frigidaire washer, the very first year! The original design, with the most primitive mechanics that Frigidaire ever had. Restoring that machine is going to be a pleasure. I hope some of my rarest pieces will end up in a museum someday.

My favorite colors are pink and turquoise. I have a 1958 turquoise Frigidaire washer and a 1959 turquoise Frigidaire dryer. I also have a 1960 pink Maytag washer and dryer set. Those are highly desirable, especially by gay boys. A majority of the members of our Classic Appliances club on the Internet are gay, and I’ve found that our experiences as kids are similar to the point of being almost creepy. Stories from all over the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia, about going into the appliance section of stores, just to look innocently at the washing machines and dryers and dishwashers, and being chased away by salesmen who told us that we should be in the toy section. And lots of stories about how our parents were always trying to downplay our interest because it was out of the ordinary and made them nervous.