

Whirlwind History of Ceiling Fans

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The ceiling fan that today can be such a boon to making it through a steamy summer has its roots deep in the past.

The first ceiling fans were hand-operated--usually by servants--and were conspicuous for their somewhat-erratic, low-speed operation. Such was the punkah that originated in the early 17th century in India, a palm frond or cloth-covered frame hung from the ceiling that moved when a servant pulled a cord.

Not until 1886 did technology take a big step forward, when John Hunter and his son, James, of Fulton, N.Y., devised a water-powered, belt-driven ceiling fan with whirling blades. The invention transformed the pair's shotgun-manufacturing business into one of the largest fan companies in the United States: the Hunter Fan Co. of Memphis.

Electrical ceiling fans were introduced by the 1890s, although not for use in the home, where electrical current was used mostly for illumination. Factories began to install ceiling fans to keep products and employees cool, as did hotels and restaurants for customers and workers.

In 1897, Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s annual catalog did not offer any electrical fans, even though New Yorker Schuyler Skaats had developed a table model in 1882 that would be widely available by century's end.

Ceiling fans did not make their home debut until the 1920s, and then mostly in upscale Southern houses with the high ceilings that were required for their safe use. The advancing technology of that decade also led to mass production of the device, as well as innovations such as variable-speed motors.

Popular acceptance of the ceiling fan was slowed by the Great Depression of the 1930s, when many households had to postpone purchases of electrical appliances.

But the market began whirring again during World War II, when wage-earners bringing home overtime pay could afford the appliance and the electricity to run it--although the 1942 movie "Casablanca" featured a scene-setting model with languid rotation rather than a more-modern, utilitarian version.

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By the 1950s, the rise of home air conditioning--for those who could afford it--was putting ceiling fans on hold. Room air conditioners, the biggest sellers, jumped from 194,000 units manufactured in 1950 to 1,353,000 in 1954.

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In the 1960s, central air-conditioning systems became big sellers. But the oil embargo of 1973 and escalating energy costs in the years that followed boosted ceiling-fan sales

again--from a few hundred thousand per year to several million by 1980.

Since then, ceiling fans have made steady inroads into the home market, appealing to consumers for their contribution to energy conservation and their increasingly stylish design.

In an August 1994 issue of *Stores* magazine, which surveys retail-store activity, ceiling fans lead all fan sales in the United States. The total ceiling-fan market has grown to 14 million units sold annually, according to Steve Martin, marketing services manager for Hunter Fan. Hunter now markets more than 350 models--nine times the number offered in the mid-1980s.

Ceiling fans remain popular because they allow users to raise their air-conditioner thermostats, lower their energy bills and stay comfortable.

And fans are much cheaper to use--and replace--than air conditioners; many models cost less than \$100 (some, depending on size of the blades, less than \$50) and last from 10 to 15 years.

To be sure, ceiling fans aren't perfect. Many models come with fans and lights, with a separate chain mechanism to activate each function, a characteristic some consumers find annoying--although some expensive models offer remote controls.

Wobbling blades can make a distracting noise and necessitate tightening and balancing of blades. And fan blades collect dust and require regular cleaning (made easier by applying furniture polish on the blade side closest to the ceiling, creating a slick surface that minimizes dust collection).

Still, the ceiling fan is environmentally sensible and relatively easy to install by do-it-yourselfers, and it can be a real friend during a heat wave.

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