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Good Things for Life: Winston L Shelton, Inventor at GE Appliances

“Innovating for the sake of others is how we ‘pay our rent’ for our time on Earth; it’s how we give back to something that’s given us so much.”—Winston Shelton

LOUISVILLE, Ky.—May 8, 2019—Winston Shelton was driven by the idea that he “had the potential to change things, to make life better for others through innovation.” This is what he did during two decades at General Electric as he reinvented how laundry was done. He inspired several generations of inventors and engineers at GE Appliances who today honor his legacy by the driving force of finding a better way.

Shelton, who passed away at the age of 96, was one of the most brilliant, accomplished and prolific innovators of his generation, bringing revolutionary advances in the home appliance and food service industries. His work at GE culminated in U.S. Patent 3257830, simply titled “Washing Machine,” which earned him the title “inventor of the modern washing machine.” Engineers at GE Appliances and beyond still reference his patents today, more than 50 years later.

Winston Laverne Shelton grew up in rural West Virginia, served in World War II and graduated as an electrical engineer from Princeton University. He joined GE at the age of 26 and began a lifelong career designing and perfecting the best home appliances and restaurant equipment in the world. Shelton’s laundry inventions earned more than 20 patents and transformed a largely manual process requiring the consumer to determine the amount of water and time necessary to clean clothes into the automatic process consumers recognize today.

His creativity, curiosity and technical mastery was well-known in the area, catching the attention of Colonel Harlan Sanders, the founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Winston was asked to evaluate a cooking timer for Sanders’ company, but he did not stay within the confines of the original question. Instead, he saw an opportunity to improve the entire process and would go on to invent the first pressurized fryer that filtered shortening while cooking without interruption. This invention enabled Sanders to franchise his famous chicken.

Today, engineers at GE Appliances continue to nurture the legacy of innovation left by Shelton. In 2018, engineers at GE Appliances received the most utility patents in Kentucky, ensuring GE Appliances puts the most innovative technologies and connected appliances into the hands of U.S. consumers.

A Selection of Winston Shelton’s General Electric Patents:

- The mechanism to automatically provide the correct water level(s) at a desired water temperature during a washing machine’s cycles (patent US 2934928 A).
- Addressing the need for better controls for the automatic washing machine, in 1955 Shelton took a clock motor and built a geared, timing control mechanism around it. Patented as the “Timing Mechanism for Conducting a Selected One of a Plurality of Sequences of Operation,” the control is still in use on many appliances (US 2870278 A).



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- An easily removed and cleaned soil trap that strained insoluble dirt and debris as the unit's water was filtered through it during the wash and rinse cycles. GE marketed Shelton's invention as the "Filter-Flo Basket." The unit fit on top of the washing machine's agitator post and rotated during use.
- Shelton's inventions also included an anti-siphonage inlet system (US 2638112) to avoid back-contamination of a water supply and a drain overflow arrangement for built-in washing machines that provided a safe means of dealing with excess water during operation.

About GE Appliances

Today, GE appliances are in 50 percent of all U.S. homes, and our business is committed to serving every family in the country. We are a purpose-rooted and passion-driven organization that believes there is always a better way. We sell products under the Monogram[®], CAFÉ[™], GE Profile[™], GE[®], Haier, and Hotpoint brands. Our products include refrigerators, freezers, cooking products, dishwashers, washers, dryers, air conditioners and water filtration systems. For more information, visit www.geappliances.com.