

The History of Soap Making





Soap making dates back thousands of years. There is actually scientific evidence that the Mesopotamian civilization (3200 BC) actually used a concoction of animal fats and tree ash to produce a basic soap. Although there is still debate on who actually invented soap, there is no denying that it existed then and it is still very popular now- thank God! Yea for personal cleanliness! There is no denying that some kind of washing had to occur before the times of commercialized soaps. However, it is still hard to determine the actual creation of soap. Clay pots with a soap-like material were found from the Babylon era (2800 BC) but the fact that it was soap is still debated; the same soap-like material was also used for hair styling products.

The Egyptians were believed to be the first group of people that bathed regularly. Now that is one trend that thankfully caught on. Their soap recipe was found on Ebers-Papyrus (1500 BC), which was a medical document. This recipe was multi-purpose. It was used to treat skin diseases and for personal cleansing.

Biblical accounts also point to the strict mandated laws that the Israelites were given from Moses on personal cleanliness for health and religious purification reasons.

Besides the Mesopotamians and the Egyptians, the Greeks also had a form of soap that they used to clean the statues of their Gods and dishes. This soap was made as a combination of lye and ashes. When the Egyptians bathed however, they did not use soap. They used other items like clay and pumice and scented themselves with oil.



The word Soap is actually derived from a Roman Legend. There was a mountain, Mt. Sapo, where many animal sacrifices took place. Then, when the rains came, all of the animal fats and tree ash would run down the mountain in acumination with the rain. The Roman women would then use the clay at the base of the mountain to wash their clothes. The cleanliness of the clothes was effortless. With these findings, he Roman's took it up a notch using Goat's Milk as the base for their soap. Through their soap testing and creating, they were the first to make both a hard and soft soap.

Soap making soon became a craft in Europe in the seventh century. Europe soap making guilds were also established. These guilds were highly secretive and they guarded their trade secrets extremely closely. The European soap making guilds were the first group of people that fragranced their soaps.

Flash forward. Trees were very important to the soap making process. It is due to this fact that soil became a deciding factor in where Soap Plants were established. Marseilles (Europe) is considered to be one of the first soap plants. It had amazing soil that was very productive for olive trees and vegetable sodas. Prior to this, olive tree oil and vegetable soda was imported. The main importers were Spain and Italy. Soap making plants then caught on like wild fire and various plants started sprouting in both countries simultaneously.

The race was now on. This soaping battle went on until late in the twelfth century, when France stole the spotlight with its olive oil soap whereas the other soaps were made with a variety of components. From that point, the business of soap was on the rise.

In 1622, King James I monopolized soap artisans for \$100,000.00 a year and special privileges. This occurred well into the 19th century. Up until this time, all soaps were considered luxury items and taxed very heavily. This tax prevented the availability of soap to the common man, thus halting the cleanliness standards of the ordinary people. It was not until the high tax was removed that the health and cleanliness improved for the masses.

The first solo name to be tied to soap was Nicholas Le Blanc. He was the first person to find an inexpensive way to extract soda from common salt in 1791. This new wave of soap themed inventions spread, and as time went on more and more discoveries were made to help soap making become easier. This in turn led to the expansion of popularity in soaps.

In the year 1780, for the first time, there is mass distribution of soap bars. This started in general stores. From there, soap bars were found being sold at Stage Coach Stops, and even became available in city hotels.

Then, in 1811, Eugene-Michel Chevreul became the next big name in soaping history by determining the exact amount of animal fat, glycerin, and fatty acids that are required for quality soap. Before this date, the recipe of soap making was simply a guess at ingredient measurements. This was yet again another discovery that helped in the popularity of soap.

By the 1850's, soap making was one of America's fastest growing industries. It is also during this time that soap took on the label of being a necessity as opposed to a luxury.

With all of the new inventions and discoveries that were taking place in the soap world, with it too, expansion in the soap varieties and supplies occurred. A milder soap recipe was developed, and there became a distinct difference between body soap and detergent for clothes. But it did not stop there. In 1938, the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act was passed. This act allowed for soap to be more regulated and in the various forms that we know today.



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