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# A Soap Opera

By Bob Warren

**HAVE YOU EVER USED LYE SOAP?** A friend recently told of looking at her collection of cleaning supplies and thinking, “Seventy-five years ago the only cleaning product we had was lye soap. It did the job of all this stuff.”

She’s right, cleaning products have come a mighty long way in the last seventy or eighty years. Today, most of us have bath soap, shampoo, liquid hand soap, laundry detergent, dishwasher detergent, a foaming cleanser for the tub and shower, toilet bowl cleaner, etc. In our early years lye soap had to do all that and more. In the days of “waste not - want not,” used, soapy laundry water was poured on the floor for “mop water,” but one of the primary uses of lye soap was for bathing. That’s when the number three washtub was dragged up close to the stove for the once-a-week, Saturday night bath. Now, lye by itself can remove paint, so between the soap and a strongly wielded, mother-driven washcloth, it’s a wonder kids had any skin left.

History tells us that Ancient Gauls made soap from tallow and wood ashes, but soap was not introduced to England until the fourteenth or fifteenth century. During America’s early days, soap was made at home by boiling fat with wood ashes or some other alkaline substance such as lye. That is essentially the way I remember my Mother making our lye soap. As a child, I helped by building a fire under the old wash pot and stirring a mixture of hog lard and lye with

a broomstick. After it was thoroughly cooked, it was left to cool and solidify, then was cut into bars. It was an ugly, tannish grey color, and it didn’t smell a bit good.

My wife, Ann, grew up using lye soap, and when we were preparing to move back to Frisco for retirement she thought, “I want to make some lye soap. When we get to Frisco I will ask some of the ‘old women’ for the recipe.” But after we got here she began to ask around, and found that she was one of the “old women” and that no one she asked had the recipe. We later bought a can of lye and found the recipe on the can, so, remembering a few things about making soap, I volunteered to help, saying, “The first thing we need to do is to kill a hog and render its lard.” Ann quickly pointed out that the recipe on the lye can said tallow or other greases can be used, so we didn’t have to butcher a hog, nor did we have to build a fire under the wash pot. She was able to cook it on the stove, so we had lye soap again.

Our children have fond memories of visiting their grandmother (my Mother). She showed them how to carve figures of animals or people out of soap, and then gave each of them a bar of lye soap, a knife, and some paper to catch the shavings so they could carve to their hearts’ content. They didn’t know until later years that they were doing their grandmother a favor by making soap chips for her to use in the laundry.

By the 1920s homemade soap was on its way out and was being replaced by commercial brands. The soap industry was one of the first to sponsor some daytime serial radio – and later TV - programs, which came to be known as “soap operas.” One of the earliest soap operas was “Ma Perkins,” a radio show sponsored by Oxydol. Through the years soaps have been a big advertiser with lots of catchy slogans and cheery jingles. Do you remember when Ivory managed to make their bars of bath soap float rather than sink to the bottom of the tub like all the others? Their slogan was, “Ivory Soap – It Floats.” Then came Lifebouy,



the ultimate body odor eliminator. Their radio ad sounded like a fog horn, saying, "Beeeee Oooooo."

In television's early days laundry detergents came with "premium gifts" ...drinking glasses, dishtowels, and silverware stuffed in the boxes. There was Tide, Cheer, Dreft, and Duz. Duz ads said, "Duz does it all," and they sponsored the Porter Waggoner Show with Dolly Parton. You old timers may remember Dolly pulling one of those gifts out of a Duz box and saying, "Well lookie here, Porter." A set of those Duz drinking glasses might be worth something today. Then, I believe pink Dreft sponsored the Ernie Ford Show with Miss Molly Bee. Why Dreft was pink, I don't know, but the girls said it made a good bubble bath.

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But wait. I almost forgot another early-day use for soap, one that today would be termed "child abuse." It was not uncommon for a mother to wash her child's mouth out with soap as punishment for saying a "bad word." In addition to punishment, this was, no doubt, an attempt to wash away the child's sin. One washing, especially with lye soap, was all it took to make a more saintly believer out of most kids.

With recollections of the foul taste of soap in my mouth, just let me say, "That's the way things were with some of us in Frisco's early days."

Frisco native Bob Warren is a humorist, historian and former Frisco Mayor.



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