

# the Fact Sheet

from the Consumer Information Service

## Personal Care – The story of soap

### The history of soap

Records on ancient papyrus and clay tablets indicate that soap was known to those early civilisations which gave us the alphabet and laid foundation of today's commerce, engineering and law.

The Sumerians, who lived in the fertile delta between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, made soap out of animal fat and wood ash alkali at least as far back as 2,500 B.C.

In ancient Babylonia, which later included Sumeria within its borders, the ashes of many plants were used for their alkaline substances. All of the recipes, recorded on these clay tablets, have the same cuneiform sign to indicate potash, the calamus plant (a soap plant), and the fundamental idea of washing.

Medicated soaps were of prime importance in the therapy of the third millennium BC.

The pharmacological tablet, circa 2,200 B.C., prescribed that salts, cassia oil and powdered asafoetida (a gum resin used as an antispasmodic) be kneaded together, to which fine beer and boiling water was to be added, and the resultant concoction sprinkled on the patient. This treatment was followed by a massage with tree oils. The afflicted person then departed, hopefully with improved health.

One of these recipes involved the use of myrtle root, pulverised fir bark, powdered resin, alkali ash, barley, the skin of the water snake and other ingredients which, when boiled, filtered and applied, were designed not only to cure the patient's ailments but to improve his or her smell.

About the same time that the Sumerians were making their various kinds of soaps, the Egyptians discovered some soap. Most renowned of these was a perfumed product made from

palm and olive oils, mixed with the natural soda of the Nile Valley (trona).

It remained for the Romans to be the first to make the most of soap and bathing. The cleansing property of soap was discovered in Rome about 1,000 B.C when the melted fat from burnt animal offerings to the gods, ran down the sides of the altar and mixed with the wood ashes of the sacrificial fires. This mixture then found its way down the hill to the clay banks of the Tiber where the Romans discovered it made their clothes cleaner with considerably less effort than the beating and pounding method of washing.

A few years before Julius Caesar rose to prominence, the Romans discovered the detergent qualities of soap and began to make it commercially. There is an historical reference to a 'soap boiling shop'. In the ruins of Pompeii, Italy, a shop boiling soap still stands preserved after the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD.

By the 2nd century, soap was recommended as an agent for the removal of dirt from clothes and bodies but the general use of soap by the people was not prevalent for several hundred years. Then the product was carried to the far corners of the vast empire. On the Iberian Peninsula, the olive trees were a valuable source of the oils widely used in soaps, salves and cosmetics.

By the 7th century, soap making had become so extensive in Italy that its manufacturers formed craft guilds to protect their interests. Even then however, and for hundreds of years to follow, bathing with soap was a luxury to be indulged in by the rich and then only as a hobby.

In England, by the 12th century, 'sope-boylers' were practising their trade in Bristol and Coventry, as well as in London. The soaps they made were white, speckled or black, depending

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on the new raw materials used. Fern ash, unslaked lime and the ashes from green oak limbs produced different hues in the finished product. Whale blubber was also used and English whaling ships began to ply the waters off Greenland and Newfoundland, Canada.

Most soap produced in England in those days was made in the home, although in the 14th century commercial manufacture began. This soap was used principally for laundering and not for personal hygiene. Peasants almost never bathed or washed their hands and the nobility depended on liberal doses of perfume to make themselves socially acceptable.

Despite the importation from Spain of soap, the English soap business prospered. Royal recognition of its value was highlighted when King James granted a monopoly in 1622 to the firm of Jones & Palmer for a sum equal to \$100,000 a year today.

It was about this time that tax began to be levied on soap, and in time brought as much into the royal treasury as the equivalent of \$5 million a year in today's currency.

Soap taxation and the monopoly system was practiced in France, too, about this time. An aggressive Lyons merchant named Pierre Regal persuaded Louis XVI to give him the soap making rights for twenty years and in a very short time he controlled all soap manufacture in France. He made such a great deal of money from soap that the then-King taxed his sales heavily.

Production was curtailed as a result and the French started bootlegging soap. In 1669, when Pierre Regal's patent rights were revoked, a number of soap making firms were founded. Despite the resumption of trade in France and

the fairly heavy taxation in England, the British soap trade flourished.

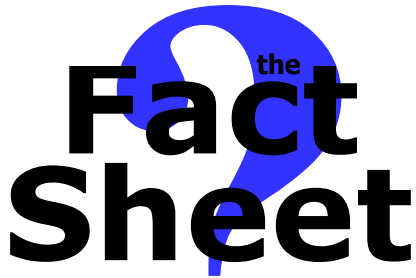
On his elevation to power, Oliver Cromwell (an English general and Lord Protector of the Commonwealth) frowned on the idea of people using soap and imposed extremely severe taxes on the product. Later these taxes were lifted but subsequently a tax was reimposed.

In 1815 the tax rose to three pence a pound but this was halved some 18 years later, whereupon the English manufacturers turned out more than 136 million pounds of soap a year for a considerable period thereafter.

England's burgeoning textile and soap industries had been given a boost in 1791 when a French chemist named Nicholas Leblanc invented a process whereby common sea salt could be converted into caustic soda, an excellent alkali. This meant it was no longer necessary for soap makers to burn wood and boil ashes for their product, and the textile industry was given a source of cheap alkali for the dyeing of cloth.

Early in the 17th century, when bodily cleanliness wasn't generally regarded as a required practice, the Pilgrims considered personal hygiene to be of major importance. When they landed in America in December of 1620, one of the first tasks undertaken was the manufacture of soap.

In a short while, the exportation of ashes to England for soap making was a thriving business for the American colonists. By 1795 there were soap making establishments in most of the large towns, although the bulk of the colonists' soap was made laboriously in the home in iron kettles. Fat drippings from the kitchen and wood ashes from the stove were used to concoct the detergent.



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A famous American helped promote the use of soap by importing a new means for using it. Benjamin Franklin was charmed in the 1780s by the small oval tubs of the French and introduced the first bathtub to America. It was a copper model of the French 'sabot' with a grate built into the heel to heat the water.

It was however in 1823 that a giant step in soap manufacturing occurred, when French chemist Geoffrey Chevreul discovered that every fat is composed of two substances: hard tallow (or stearin) and liquid oil (or olein). In soap making, these fats are transformed into myristic acid, stearic acid and oleic acid. The salts from these three acids, which are soluble in water, become the main elements in soap and, in combination with lye, are able to weaken and penetrate the surface tension of water, permitting soap to do its cleansing.

As a result of Chevreul's discoveries, soap making entered a new and scientific phase which persists today.

In the late nineteenth century, booklets were produced which told consumers how to use soap in relation to the mineral content of their local water supply. Colourful cut-out cards were soon dangling from the ceiling of grocery stores and shopkeepers were eager to show their customers a variety of soap products and call attention to the labels which could be redeemed for all sorts of valuable and attractive articles.

It was at this time too, that slogans sought to impress the value and usefulness of soap on the public mind. "Cleanliness is the scale of civilisation" is representative of the slogans of the period.

At the close of the nineteenth century, soap companies were doing business on a large

commercial scale. Chemical and engineering advances, the application of steam and mechanical energy to manufacture, and the mass-production of caustic soda all moved the industry to the forefront of commercial enterprise.