A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOAP

Long Ago… People were Dirty

Soap has been around for a long time, but not in the same form that it is today.

The first evidence of possible soap making dates back to 2800 BC. Clay cylinders, constructed by early Babylonians and recently unearthed by archaeologists, contained traces of a substance very similar to soap.

Discovered during another excavation was a clay tablet from 2200 BC. It contained what appears to be a soap recipe consisting of water, scented oils, and alkali. However, the tablet made no mention of whether the soap was for medicinal or cleansing purposes, and the name “soap” did not appear until much later.

The Legend of Mount Sapo

According to an unlikely ancient Roman legend, soap got its name from Mount Sapo, a sacred place where people sacrificed animals to the goddess Athena. When it rained, a concoction of animal fat and ashes washed down the side of the mountain, where it mingled with the clay soil in the Tiber River. People in this legend discovered that cleaning was far easier and less time-consuming when using this mixture, although chemists today believe that the diluted concoction would not make a good soap.

Pliny the Elder

In his famous writing Naturalis Historia, Pliny the Elder mentions that soap was likely an invention of the Gallic people. He describes both a liquid and a solid version made from goat
tallow and oak ash, but he does not mention they washed with the substance. Instead, he notes that they used the berry-laden soap, or *sapo*, to color their hair red!

   True soap, similar to the luxurious, scented bars we know today, was still many centuries away.

   **Good Medicine**

   In the 2nd century AD, a Greek physician named Galen described a substance made of tallow and ashes. He claimed it was good for washing, and he prescribed it to people as medicine. A few records indicate that people used soap in the popular and luxurious Roman bathhouses, but there is not enough evidence to show that soap use was widespread among the people of this era.

   Soap use and cleanliness of any kind fell by the wayside when the vast Roman Empire began to crumble.

   **The Filthy Ages**

   It was not until around the 8th century that soap making became a well-established profession in Europe. Guild houses were established later. Even then, with soap being relatively common, most people could not afford it because it was a luxury item and thus highly taxed.

   In addition, bathing was unfashionable. It is unlikely that people would have bathed even if they had access to soap. Thanks to these filthy, unsanitary living conditions, plagues such as the Black Death swept across Europe.
The Modern Era

The removal of the high tax in the 18th century allowed more people to afford soap. Demand for soap soon increased, and soap makers were eager to oblige their customers. Soap makers such as Colgate and Johnson & Johnson went into business. The market for soap soared.

Cleanliness improved, and so did people’s health. Today, it is impossible to imagine life without the simple luxury of soap.

WHAT IS THE SAPONIFICATION PROCESS?

Saponification, from the Latin *sapo* (soap), is a fancy way of saying “soap making.” Simply put, this process is a chemical reaction that happens when oils (fatty acids) combine with sodium hydroxide (a base) and water. The result of this chemical mingling is soap and all-natural glycerin.

Glycerin is beneficial to the skin. It actually draws moisture from the air and helps to soften and moisturize. Most commercial soap factories actually *remove the glycerin* to use in their more expensive lines of lotions and moisturizers.

REASONS TO USE HANDMADE SOAP

Why should you choose a handmade soap over a commercial bar you find at the drug store? The list is exhaustive, but the most important reason to use handmade soaps is for the health of your skin.

Commercial soap makers use petroleum-based products. This causes skin irritation in many people. Handmade soap, gentle and natural, can relieve the itching and pain created when these large companies opt for a cheaper way of making their soap.
Some commercial soap that is antibacterial and claims to be “good for you” contains a substance called triclosan. The EPA has registered triclosan as a pesticide. Do you want this on your skin?

Keep in mind that the skin absorbs what it touches. For your health, make sure what you put on your skin is made from natural ingredients.

**FIVE BENEFITS OF HANDMADE SOAP**

- **Mild** and soothing when compared to commercial soap – great for sensitive skin and people with skin conditions, such as eczema and psoriasis.

- **Glycerin**, an all-natural, skin softener, is a by-product of handmade soap making. Helps moisturize!

- **Absolutely no detergents** – commercial soaps are harsh on the skin because they are not soaps at all: they are chemical detergents masquerading as soap.

- **Environmentally friendly** – handmade soaps are never tested on animals, and they contain no harsh chemicals.

- **Customizable** shapes, sizes, designs, and scents – you actually get what you want for a change.