

Soapmaking
an Oral History

Mary Allen, Interviewee
Of Wyanet, Illinois

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Narrator's Name: MARY ALLEN
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Interviewer's Name: MERLE ROUTT
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Q: My name is Merle Routt and I'm visiting today with Mary Allen, who is the wife of our pastor at the Congregational Bible Church at Wyanet, and we're talking about homemade soap. Our ancestors used a great deal of it and then we've sort of gotten away from it but I think there's a lot of people that are using homemade soap and Mary can tell us a lot about it because that's one of her hobbies. Mary, tell me a little about the history of homemade soap.

A: Well, soap is made from three basic ingredients. These are lye, fat, and water. And the pioneers had to provide all three of these from scratch. The fat was rendered out by frying or cooking the meat fats when they butchered. This liquified the fat when it was in a warm state, and it has to be liquified to make soap. Lye was obtained from pouring water through a barrel full of wood ashes and the resulting water was caught and was considered strong enough if it made an egg float. A friend of mine who did missionary work in China told me that she copied the Chinese way of pouring the water through a suspended basket of ashes and this had a result of a yellowish color. This was cooked with the rendered fat and probably cooked a long time to strengthen the lye, and she said it wasn't the best soap but it was the only kind available out where they were. And a Mennonite lady told me that they cooked theirs all day long and if it wasn't good they had to cook it the next day and if they had to recook it, it would turn brown. I asked her if she made her own lye, but she said no, they bought it at the store (laughs).

Q: It's more convenient. How do you make soap?

A: Well, soap is much easier to make and more exact to make it at home these days. All one needs is a thirteen ounce can of lye that you can get from the grocery store and five cups of distilled or rain water and six pounds of cleaned, strained cooking fats. Now I don't buy distilled water; I get them out of a humidifier -- is it called in the summertime?

Q: Dehumidifier.

A: Dehumidifier, yes, and that makes good distilled water. You can use regular tap water but they say it's -- at least the recipes all say that it's best to use soft water with lye. I have used the other but I like to follow directions when I can. One can render out the fat from suet or lard -- suet's from beef and lard's from ham or bacon and you can render it out by putting -- roasting it in the oven. That's the way that I usually do it and that's not as dangerous as trying to fry it out, much simpler. A mixture of suet or tallow, as it's called once it's rendered, is hard fat, and lard or bacon fat is soft fat and the two mixtures together make the best hand soap and it's the easiest to make it work out, too. Also, collecting drain fats from cooking makes a good combination like when you fry hamburger or bacon, just pour off the fat or what you collect from the top of the gravy. And all these mixed together make a very good combination. These should be heated and strained and if they're discolored or rancid, they can be cleaned by boiling in an equal amount of water with a cup of vinegar to every six cups of fat. Then when it's cold and hardened, the fat is easily removed from the dirty water and if it isn't clean enough, you can

repeat the process. The clean fat should then be melted on low heat and one should be very careful not to catch fire because it's kind of like paraffin. I usually melt my fat over a pan of water on the stove. And you don't need to -- you shouldn't get this real hot, just enough to be melted. Then pour it into a plastic container, bucket, or enamel container and the temperature should be about 110°. It's wise to have a candy thermometer. The lye is mixed with five cups of soft water and cooled to 85°. It must be mixed in a plastic or enamel container and then I set the container in ice water to cool it quickly. The lye mixture must be ~~must be~~ handled with extreme caution or it burns caustically, and if it's splashed in the eyes it can blind you. My grandmother once splashed some in her eyes and had to run for the water.

Q: I know it can be dangerous.

A: I believe I did splash a little in my eye and quickly got cold water into it and fortunately didn't get hurt by it. Many little children were seriously injured in our great-grandparent's day by lye water left accessible to them. This is why I prefer to cool the lye mixture immediately in ice water and use it rather than leave it in the refrigerator for someone to accidentally spill or drink. When the lye or fat -- and fat are both the proper temperature, I pour the lye very slowly into the fat, stirring with a wooden or plastic spoon, and I stir it until the temperature lowers to about 75° and it's thick; it appears more opaque in color. One recipe says that when you're stirring it, it should get thick enough to leave tracks in the water and that takes about twenty -- or I mean in the mixture. That takes about twenty minutes. Then it's poured into molds and it's covered for 24 hours to retain the

warmth. I've collected my own plastic molds by cutting off detergent bottles. These have the advantage of being pre-shaped into an oval bar and they didn't have to be cut up like when you pour it into a big square pan. Now they used to line cardboard boxes or if you don't have enough molds, you can use your Tupperware cake pan -- plastic cake pan and pour it in there and cut it up.

Q: I've seen some of your soap and it's very pretty.

A: And I find that it sets better with less separating when it's put in these individual molds while it's hardening. It seems to make a nicer finished bar, too, when it's cured in the -- two to three weeks. Whereas when if it's poured in large blocks, I don't feel it makes as good a soap and it tends to separate easier. If I want colored and scented soap, I add candle color to the hot fat before cooling it to 110°. And this candle coloring you can get at most hobby stores and that should be melted like chocolate over low heat because it acts just like chocolate and can be wrecked. This is the only color I've found available that will turn out well at this point, if you want to add it before you pour it in the molds. If the soap has to be ground up and recooked, food color will work then after soap has been made and cured. And then the food color can be added, but I don't care much for reprocessed soap because it's a lot of work to reprocess it and a lot of water has to be added to cook it up. And then by having a lot of water added to it, naturally it's going to dissolve away pretty fast and I like a bar of soap to last. Sometimes I grind up oatmeal very fine in my blender and pour in the soap before I pour it in the molds. Oatmeal soap has a lot of advantages.

Q: It's a complexion soap, isn't it?

A: Yes.

Q: Are there any more advantages to homemade soap?

A: Well, the advantages to homemade soap are many. Since it can be made without additives, sensitive people find it great for them. I have several people that don't tolerate perfumes and they like my homemade soap. It's also very creamy and non-drying. That may surprise people; they think of it as drying, but homemade soap has the natural fat glycerin left in it whereas commercial soaps take this out because it's more profitable for other uses and then that's why they have to add creams and additives to make it moisturizing and creamy.

Q: Well, that's very interesting.

A: And I'm in my forties and I think I've got a pretty good complexion; it's not dry and I've used it for fifteen years.

Q: You have a beautiful complexion.

A: It lasts far longer than commercial soaps and I feel like it cleans my skin better; when I've had to use soap in the hospital or visiting someplace I never feel like it quite gets all the grime off. Then another advantage is that it's more economical. There are recipes for stronger laundry soaps but I don't feel they're worthwhile to me because I don't have a water softener and also when I have even used it at the laundramat I don't feel it cleans permanent press fabrics too well because you can't use real hot water on them and one should use very hot water on homemade soap to get it to dissolve well.

Q: How'd you first get interested in soap making?

A: There's something else here.

Q: Oh, you want to tell me something else? Okay.

A: Oh, I'll tell you that in just a moment. There's some things I want you to know about soap. If soap separates when you're making it, it may be caused by too much and too long stirring. If the soap doesn't thicken in twenty minutes or there's a greasy layer on top, it can be because it's too warm so cool the container in cold water and keep the bottom and sides stirred. That's why it's good to know what temperature to lower it to; I think about 15° and it should be ready to pour. If it's lumpy it needs slight warming in warm water. Crumbly soap is caused because the lye mixture is too strong; greasy soap is lacking lye. One should have some vinegar on hand to put on your hands and face so that the fumes don't burn you or if you splash it on your skin even the soap mixture will burn and wipe it off with vinegar. Then fresh soap will burn when you're removing it from the mold so one should use gloves. Two or three weeks are needed for soap not to burn and to lose its greasiness. It isn't even good lathering if it isn't cured. Now manufacturers don't let their soap leave the factory for at least four weeks.

Then back to your question about how I got into soap making. About fifteen years ago my husband and I were at home mission's work in Northern Wisconsin, in a little church there and all of the northern women made their own soap. They cleaned their own chickens and they thought every other woman worth her salt ought to be able to do these things and so I learned how to do some of these things. I had one of them teach me how to make soap because we needed it for economic reasons, and I could get all the suet I wanted for free at the local locker

there. I'd render it out and get my soap. At first my husband didn't like our using it because I made it in the old-fashioned chunks and would break it up and put it out on the sink to use and people would ask what kind of soap that was and he was embarrassed so I decided to try out some molds and that was when I first poured it into these detergent molds from doing the dishes.

Q: Well, that's interesting. I think that we were talking a little while ago about some of the unusual ingredients that are used in soap other than the basic oil and lye and water.

A: Well, as I did mention how to color it [rustling of pages] or scent it or some of it that you wanted scented or oatmeal for the complexion but I've got some recipes here from the Agricultural Extension Service in Arizona and Maryland and they give recipes that call for things like -- one recipe calls for borax which many people have put in to make it whiter and suds. And by the way, if your fat's white, your soap will be white; if the fat is dark or smoked, then that's the color the fat will be. One lady out there got some soap from the restaurant and when it's been fried quite a few times, it's brown and it really makes brown soap. That could be filtered by charcoal filter, I understand from these directions, to get it cleaner. But most restaurants aren't too happy to give you their grease because they sell it to soap manufacturers.

Q: I see.

A: I have checked into that. But anyway the borax makes it white and some add ammonia which is supposed to make it clean better. Some add kerosene, of all things. Another recipe calls for some sugar and

baking powder and let's see, salt is another thing that's added to it. So that's some of the strange things that are added. One recipe here for granulated soap -- you keep stirring it and that's what makes it crumble. And it says stir frequently for one whole day. I suppose you just have it someplace and give it a stir every now and then.

Q: And didn't you tell me something about floating soap?

A: Oh, if you get a bad batch of soap that just doesn't -- kind of separates or is too crumbly and you want to recook it, you add a certain amount of water -- I have the directions here on how much water; I've forgotten, anyway, it takes quite a bit of water and cook it on the stove. I grate it up and cook it and then I take the beater and beat it so it won't be lumpy then pour it into -- in that case I pour it into my Tupperware pan because it hardens up so quickly and then I ~~put~~ it into bars and that will float but that makes it dissolve a lot faster when you have to add that much water to it but it's the beating that makes it float.

Q: The air that gets mixed in with the gas. Now you told me that the recipe is on the lye can if anyone really wants to make soap and probably they could get more recipes from their home extension department wherever they're -- whatever state they might be from.

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: Mary, this is so interesting to hear about your hobby and I know there's a lot of people that are interested in homemade soap. Thank you so much.

Janet Kankaala
Transcriptionist

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