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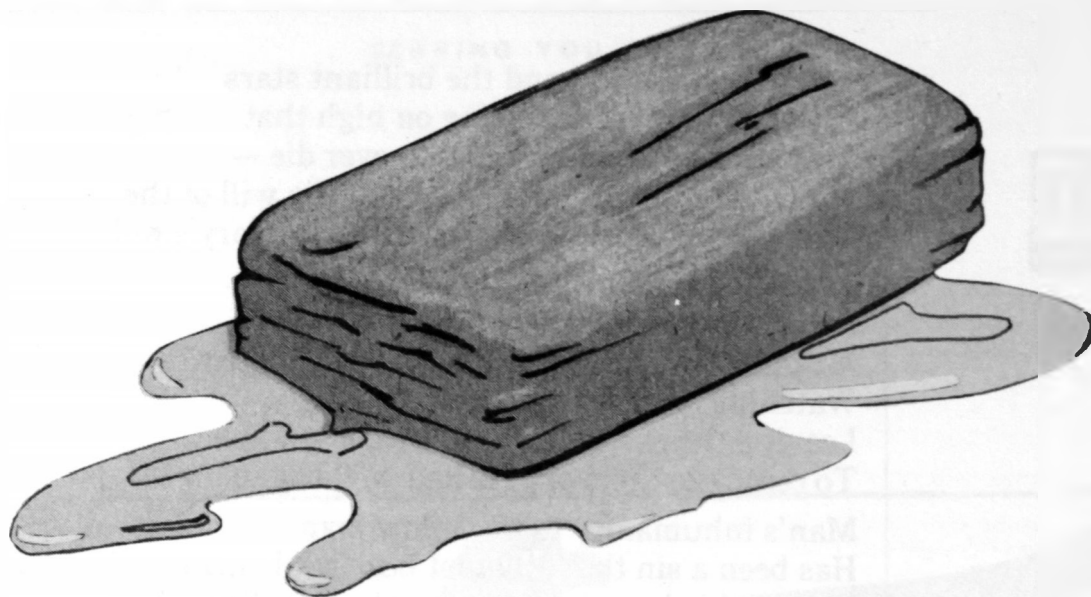
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Lyeing For The Lord

by Jane Janzen



"If you have dandruff, just wash your head with good old lye soap. That will take care of your problem."

"This grease is ready. Where are the lyers?"

"There's nothing that gets clothes whiter than washing them with lye soap."

"Aunt Millie always made the prettiest, whitest lye soap. Mother's soap was more cream color, and we never did know why."

"Lye soap will sure cure a case of athlete's foot."

"This batch of soap is setting up fast! Are the cartons ready for pouring?"

And so went the conversation on Valentine's Day, 1984, when 24 members of the Herold Mennonite Church met to make soap to send to the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) for foreign distribution.

Herold Church, "the country church with the caring heart," is located ESE of Bessie, Oklahoma, and has its church office in Cordell. The 60-75 people who participate in the Sunday services drive from Bessie, Cordell, Corn, and Clinton to be with their church family. For the past 16 Februarys, various persons from this

congregation, under the direction of the Women's Mission Society, have gathered in the home of Louis and Ann Horn, Corn, for a soap-making project.

Most of these men and women helping remember when their parents made soap for household use. In the days of home butchering, the raw fat from the killed hogs was always rendered to produce cooking lard. (Beef fat cooked down in the same manner was called tallow.) This lard was first used for cooking and then for laundry. Louis remembers, "Mom saved all the lard after frying meat and when she had about a dishpan full, she made a small batch of soap. If Dad butchered again before the kitchen grease had been used, Mom made washing soap from the old lard and cooked with the new."

This year the Herold people produced 1980 pounds of soap, not enough to beat their 1980 record of 2500 pounds, but definitely more than a dishpan full.

When the workers began arriving at 8:30 a.m. on February 14, Louis had several 5-gallon buckets of grease heating over a wood fire in the basement. The buckets were sitting in steaming water

PHOTOS BY REV. JOHN SPRUNGER

inside a big black kettle which is built into a brick chimney. This is the same kettle that Louis' dad used to render fat in days past, and Louis' mother used to heat water for washing family clothes.

When the grease has been melted enough for pouring, Louis grabs the top of a bucket with two pairs of pliers and carries it to a holding barrel where the grease is kept at a constant 80 degrees ready for the next step. This warming barrel, which was a creation of Louis', sits in a horizontal position over a propane burner. There is a spigot at one end so workers can release 6 pounds of grease into a pre-marked pail.

By 9:00 in the morning the lyers are at work in another well-ventilated area of the basement. In addition to being able to withstand a number of jokes about church-going lyers, these men have to tolerate the toxic fumes that come from mixing the powdered lye with water. When the dry lye is poured into room temperature water, there is a chemical reaction that heats the mixture to over 160 degrees. The solution has to be stirred to bring the temperature down as well as to dissolve the lye. When this liquid is



Stirring warm grease and lye water.

cooled to 75 degrees, it is ready to be mixed with the warm grease.

It is interesting that 60 years ago area grocers stocked large quantities of Lewis Lye or Eagle brand lye, but today the stores will carry only a few cans at a time. When the church special-ordered 240 cans of Lewis Red Devil Lye at \$1.00 per can, the store manager was a little anxious. Since he could not imagine anyone using that amount of lye, he was worried he would be stuck with a 20-year supply.

Now that the lye and the grease are both at best temperatures, it is time for action at the stirring table. Long boards, years ago used on butchering day, have been laid across saw horses and are now

covered with large metal dishpans containing warm grease. The lye water is slowly poured into the grease while the stirrers use small wooden paddles to immediately begin combining the two ingredients.

In stirring, it is important to scrape the sides of the pan as well as to muddle the



Soap molds.

middle to get a thorough honey-like blend that will make good soap. Knowing how long to stir is much like knowing when it's time to pick the green beans; it takes experience. The process has to be judged by appearance and not by time because time will vary with the quality of grease, the temperature of ingredients, and the ratio between the stirring and the talking of the stirrer. It has been observed that some people stir as fast as they talk while other people can do only one or the other.

Stirring grease in a circle while standing in a circle of friends doesn't sound like the most difficult task, but these people must constantly be alert to the danger of lye burns. Although the workers wear rubber gloves and long-sleeved shirts to protect themselves, there are times when someone's skin is irritated. It may happen when a glove finger is unknowingly punctured or when a person unthinkingly scratches his itching face. Vinegar and clean cloths are kept handy at several spots in the basement and used to neutralize the acid burns. Often heard is, "Would someone with dry hands dab some vinegar on my nose?" In a day filled with slick lye and slippery grease, occasionally a pan slips through someone's hands, and there is potential for a severe burn to skin or eyes. However, in the 16 years this group has met, there has been only one member who required minimal medical attention beyond the vinegar treatment.

When the soap soup is "ready," it is poured through a trough funnel into half-gallon milk-carton molds to cool and to set up. Over the years the Herold people have washed, saved, and recycled the milk cartons that they bought in the grocery store. This year they had a donation of 300 never-been-used cartons from the

Borden Milk Company in Oklahoma City. The Herold recipe of 1 can of lye, 5 cups water, and 6 pounds of grease will fill 2 milk cartons and make 9 pounds of soap.

The morning goes on.

"Louis, which can of grease do you want to melt next?"

"Where is the measuring pail, John? I'm ready for more grease."

"Tell the lyers to speed up. We're waiting for lye."

"The weather is too warm today. The lye isn't cooling very quick."

"Be sure you stir along the edges or the lye won't get mixed into the grease."

"This is making beautiful white soap this year."

"Linda, my pan is ready to pour."

"How many cartons have we filled?"

"It's time for the first shift to go up and eat lunch."

"That's me. I've been waiting all morning for some of Ann's creamy lima beans!"

"You can have those. I've got my appetite set for Erna's egg custard pie."

Upstairs Ann has extended her dining room table to full length and covered it with her company china and the fine food that each family furnished for the occasion. The plentiful potluck meal invites second and third helpings, but no one lingers long. This is soap-making day, and the stirring must go on.

During the afternoon, friends drop in to see how the project is progressing. Conversation turns to past experiences.

"Remember one of our first years when we made 695 pounds of soap and thought we had a big day?"

"Remember the year Leonard spilled lye on his new \$40.00 shoes? He was the only lyer with holey shoes."

"Remember how frustrated we were last year when the grease was bad and we couldn't get the soap to make?"



Pouring lye water and stirring.

"I remember a different year when the soap wouldn't set. Then we discovered we were stirring straight grease. Someone had forgotten to add the lye."

"Remember the year the preacher dissolved lye and poured a pan of lye

water on his pants? He borrowed some slacks while his were in the washer and then kept borrowing them when his clothes came out in pieces. We told him that's what happens to lyers."

Sometime after 5:00 the clean-up begins. Even though there are a few cans of lye left, the grease has been used. All of the pails, pans, and paddles have to be washed in hot sudsy water.

"Hey, we need some soap to wash all this stuff."

"You need soap? You've got to be kidding, Aaron!"

"Where should we put all of this equipment?" Are we going to use it again next year?"

"Do you want us to clean the floor now, Ann?"

"When should we come back for soap cutting? Will it be set up by Friday?"

The big day is over once again. This day of love was spent with caring friends who were demonstrating their love for people they will never meet.

After the church people leave, Louis and Ann collapse over coffee and leftovers from lunch. The day's work was happily hectic, but it was more than this day that wearied them. Their involvement started shortly after last soap-making day when people of the community began calling them and offering grease and milk cartons for the next project. The Horns collected these materials and stored them along with all of the equipment that is

kept from year to year. (many of these stowed-away items, such as the warming barrel and an electric stirring device, as well as wooden paddles, pouring troughs and storing trays, were designed and built by the Horns during the last 16 years particularly for the work days.)

In January Louis and Ann began bringing everything out of basement and barn storage in preparation for February. They spent several days washing the grease, so that it would later make clean soap. This energy-consuming process required digging the given grease out of containers that ranged in size from 1 pound coffee cans to 20 gallon crocks, heating the grease over a wood fire, stirring in water, and sometimes bleach, to float away the impurities such as salt, and then pouring the pure product into 5-gallon buckets.

They asked for discarded packing crates at furniture stores so that they could cut the boxes open and have large flat pieces of cardboard to tape to the basement floor.

The floor covering was to speed the clean up afterwards; but now while Louis and Ann munch, they meditate about the mess and wonder, "Will we ever get all of the grease film washed away?" They decide not to even try until after soap-cutting evening has passed.

Within 4 to 7 days some of the Herold men and women will come back to the Horn home to tear away the paper cartons and to cut the large chunks of soap into 4"

by 4" bars—two per mold. These bars are then stored in the basement for about 6 weeks so they will harden.

When the curing process is complete, Louis and Ann will haul a trailer load of soap to the Mennonite General Conference Office in North Newton, Kansas. There the bars are weighed and then sent to Akron, Pennsylvania, where the MCC headquarters is located.

MCC will ship the lye soap to impoverished countries such as Cambodia and Bangladesh where it is used in hospitals, orphanages, clinics and schools. Last year the church received a copy of a letter that praised the people who send soap, because this product is truly needed for cleaning and for disinfecting. The letter was written by Sister Teresa.

Knowing the need makes the work worthwhile for the Mennonite members. Knowing the need has helped the Horns do the yearly preparation for the official work day. Although the church as always expressed their appreciation for the efforts of the Horns, this year they presented a permanent thank you. On March 11th, the church surprised Louis and Ann with a plaque for their "Labor of Love." The inscription concludes with a portion of the Bible verse found in Matthew 25:40, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Surely it will be only one of the rewards they earned lying for the Lord.

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