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Berks County Home Made Soap

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BERKS COUNTY HOME MADE SOAP.

4-27

The housewives born 100 or more years ago, who lived on a farm, were known far and wide for the home-made soap they made. The following is what I remember how my mother Mrs. Richard M. (Mary Ann) Gruber made her soap on the farm in North Heidelberg Twp., Berks Co., Pa., about 1874 to 1892.

The fat accumulated on the farm from left overs in cooking and frying which was no more suitable for that purpose, and excess fats on meats, was dumped into a can or earthen crock and stored away. When rendering lard during the butchering season, that part left ~~over~~ after the lard had been pressed out on a lard, or fat press, was also put away with the waste fat. (Des hut mer Griive keese)--(What is the English name?)

After enough waste fat was had, a big iron kettle was hung in the fire place at the bake-oven in the yard, as most farms had such a bake-oven, and this fat dumped in the kettle, some water added, and a certain amount of caustic soda put to it. Just in what proportion the fat and soda was mixed I am at a loss totell. A certain portion of salt was also added. A fire was then kindled under the kettle and the boiling begun, slowly stirring this mixture almost continually. The boiling was continued until the caustic soda had dissolved every bit of fat and the contents were a heavy mushy substance, and was then left to get cold.

While cooling this mushy substance separated into two parts. The top part was hard soap, about 3 inches thick; and the bottom part was a heavy mushy mixture containing all the waste boiled out. The top part was cut out and laid to a side until the bottom part had been removed and the kettle cleaned and washed out.

Now these top pieces that were cut out were put back in the kettle, some water added and a small amount of caustic soda again. Another fire was started and melted the contents and a little boiling for a short time; and left get cold. While cooling, this again separated into two parts; the top part was the finished hard soap, which was cut out in nice blocks, neatly trimming the edges and set away to dry hard. These pieces were about 3" or 4" thick and as a rule were cut out in that length and width. The bottom part was not near as much as in the first boiling, and had a light brown color; was put in tin boxes or small crocks. This was soft soap (Schmir seef) and was used for the most soiled and dirty wash, such as overalls, or your every day pants when badly soiled.

The bottom part of the first boiling was put around the trunks of fruit trees, especially peach trees, which were infested by those tree borers. Often the ground was removed around the tree trunk to the roots and then poured it on the roots, replacing the ground. There were rare instances that this treatment did not bring back the tree into a rich green foliage and again bore the nicest fruit.

That hard soap was the only soap had on the farm by many families. It was even used in the place of now-a-day toilet soap. It frequently was as white as chalk.

Before caustic soda was used a certain kind of lye was made of wood ashes, but, just how it was produced I could not tell, as I was too young when my mother used it, and only know that such ashes were used to make soap.