

# Betty Geib enjoys making homemade soap

BY SALLY BAIR

Making homemade lye soap is a custom which is quickly fading into oblivion. Not too many people wish to take the time to make their own soap when they can walk into any supermarket and find 20 varieties to choose from.

But for Betty Geib, 44 South Main Street, Manheim, making soap is just one more chance for recycling. She makes soap at least once a week, and she does it because she enjoys it.

"I am a recycler," she says, "I really enjoy making something useful out of what someone else throws away. It is a conversation peice. It's not work if you enjoy doing it."

Many readers will remember having watched their mothers make soap, and probably remember it as a dangerous project - children frequently had to leave the room where the soap was being mixed.

"You have to treat lye with respect," Betty says. "It is dangerous to splash it on your skin or to breathe the fumes." Nevertheless, Betty has never had an accident with the solution. Her balcony makes a perfect spot for mixing it.

She makes the process look and sound easy, but part of that certainly comes from her experience. She made her first soap in 1963 when her older sister taught her. Last year she made a total of 112 batches, and already in 1984 she has made 36 batches.

The principle ingredients for homemade soap are lye, fat and water. The fat must be solid shortening, not oil, but can be any kind of vegetable or animal fat.

"A lot of people know I do this and bring me their used fat," Betty explains. She gets donations from the local school cafeteria, and from others who know of her need for it.

The water is also free, since Betty uses only rainwater. She prefers it because it contains no chemicals. When there is no rain she purchases spring water.

The third ingredient, lye, she

always purchases. To make one batch, she uses one 12-ounce can of lye. Betty now pays 93 cents per can for the lye, compared with 15 cents when she began making soap. Nevertheless each batch produces about 9 pounds of soap, so it remains inexpensive.

First you melt the fat, after which it must be strained. In her true conservative manner, Betty was using the lining from an old coat she had taken apart as the strining cloth. It takes six pounds of fat per batch.

Although Betty melts the fat in aluminum, she says that containers which come in contact with the lye should be enamel. The utensils she uses to make soap are used exclusively for that.

The can of lye is then mixed with five cups of rainwater. As the lye is added, it causes the water to heat up. The lye solution and the fat must both be cooled somewhat before they are mixed together. Betty says the containers in which they are cooling should be "comfortably warm to the touch" from the outside.

While some people prefer mixing the lye in a crock, Betty feels this is not satisfactory because you cannot guage the warmth of the material through a crock. "You can't feel through a crock," she says.

The lye is carefully poured into the fat, stirring as it is poured. It must be stirred until it begins to solidify. When it looks like pudding, it is ready to be poured into molds.

The amount of time this takes varies with the fat being used. Mutton fat is hard fat, and quickly reaches the desired stage. Beef tallow is also good, hardening fast. Pork and poultry fat are really soft, so when she is using those she mixes them with other fat to speed their hardening process. Also she points out, "I know from experience that you can't use rancid fat."

Betty makes both laundry soap and general purpose soap, and it depends on its final use which kind of mold she will use. What doesn't



Betty Geib pours lye into the fat as the first step in making homemade soap, a process she goes through at least once a week.

vary is that every mold is a recycled product.

For laundry soap, she adds borax to the solution and pours it into frozen fruit juice containers. These containers can be easily torn away from the finished soap. She then cuts it into thirds, and grates it in her Mouli grinder.

This laundry soap can be scooped and used in the same manner as powdered commercial products. "I gets diapers nice and white and is great for stains," Betty asserts.

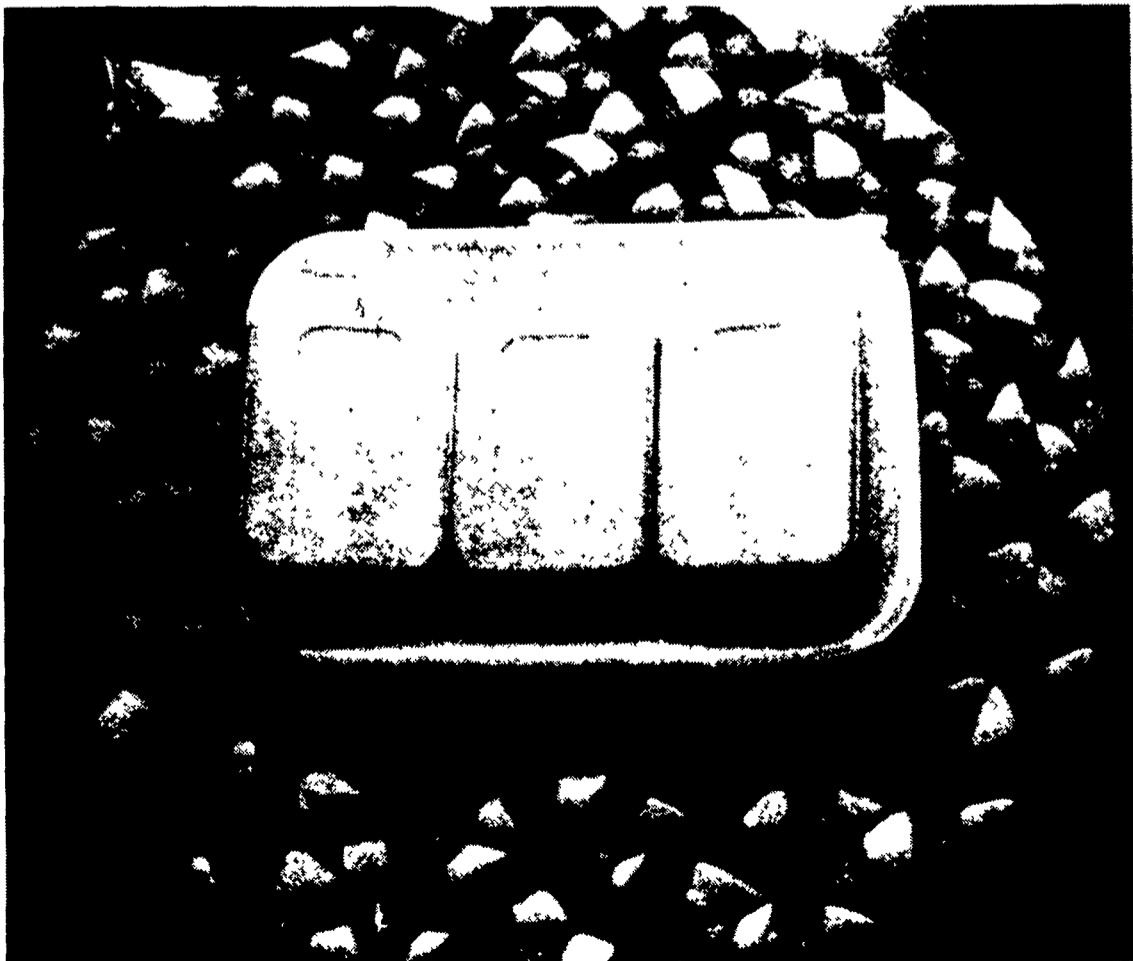
If the soap is general purpose soap, Betty will probably add an oil scent to it, and perhaps color, although only oil base materials can be used to color the soap. She

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## Homestead Notes



Betty opens one of the many containers of fat which friends and acquaintances give her to help in the soap making process.



These three cakes of soap are general purpose soaps and have been slightly scented. Betty grouped the three as a gift and presents them on a recycled meat container covered with plastic from a local newspaper.