Soap For The Needy

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MEYERSDALE (Somerset Co.) — Enter the home of Naomi Yoder on soap making day and the first thing you smell is the odor of rancid fat wafting throughout her house. It's rising from the basement of the 149-year-old, well-preserved, structure where she has old cooking fat melting to use in her soap recipe.

Working by herself, Yoder makes and donates approximately 500 to 800 pounds of soap annually to Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Akron. It is later distributed in economically poorer countries of the world for use in personal cleanliness and laundry.

Making the soap at home is a good way to recycle used cooking fat and lard since it is a main ingredient in the soap. Yoder gets the leftover fat from officials of the Springs Folk Festival, after it is first used in deep-frying many goodies during the celebration of local history and crafts. The amount of fat she is given determines how much soap she can make.

"You can't let it go to waste," declares Yoder who has been using the fat to make soap for 11 years. "Somebody has got to do it," she says. For now, though, it seems that she is the only local person doing the job.

"I wish somebody else would do it," she says emphatically. "I've got some problems in my hip."

Indeed, when one observes Yoder going about the soapmaking routine, one instantly realizes this is a very physical job.

After heating the lard to strain it — it is mixed half and half with beef tallow donated by an Amish farmer — Yoder puts the 12 pound combination in a big plastic bucket. In a corner, on the cool cement floor, sits an ice cream bucket in which is 10 cups of water and two cans of caustic lye. The water must be cold to begin with, for when the lye is added it immediately heats to almost boiling point. It has to sit and cool to a much lower temperature.

When it is ready to pour into the fat, Yoder adds two tablespoons of Borax to soften the water and add

Naomi scores the soap block before cutting it apart.

cleaning power. She pours the lye water into the fat slowly so it doesn't separate.

"There were times when it would separate," she says, "and that's a nuisance when you have to heat it to get it back together."

Stirring her mixture with a long handled paddle or wooden spoon, Yoder says she also has used the orangish tallow from sloppy joe mix. Its impurities settle on the bottom of the pan as she heats it.

Yoder has found that using all lard makes a product that is too soft while using all tallow produces one that is too hard. Using equal amounts of each makes the ideal soap.

The Oakdale Mennonite Church near Salisbury, pays for the lye that Yoder uses to make soap. Yoder teaches Sunday School and holds an office in the ladies sewing group at that church.

Yoder has to stir the thickening liquid until her wooden spoon will stand by itself in the center of the bucket. The color has gone from a darker brown to the shade of brown gravy.

Then it is ready to pour into the plastic-lined, shallow rectangular boxes, or half-gallon milk cartons. Clip clothespins on the box edges work well to hold the plastic in place. Hardening of the soap occurs almost instantly, before Yoder can completely scrape out the bucket. If it starts to chip she puts the pieces into a small container for her own laundry use.

Later the boxes are stacked and covered with cardboard and heavy rugs for at least 24 hours. It is then ready to be scored and cut in blocks with a large-blade knife. The blocks are stacked on boards balanced between two chairs. They must cure for two weeks.

"After two weeks," says Yoder, "there's nothing caustic about it. I wouldn't be afraid to use it for a bath," she says.

Her work area is a long ping pong table that is well-protected with a covering of plastic and newspapers. Nearby is a small bowl with brown vinegar for burn precaution. She says the pungent acid works like a charm to bring relief from burning caused by accidential contact with the lye solution.

"You don't have to stir constantly," she says. "You can go and do other things. I can go upstairs and set the table. But I have to figure an hour and a half for one batch," she says. "It's a messy job," she adds.

"The hardest part is with the buckets and dumping them. They are very heavy," says Yoder.

One basic recipe usually yields 18 pounds of soap, according to Yoder. She always has several batches mixing in different stages at the same time which keeps her busy. When she makes soap, it is her major occupation of the day.

"What I often do is have something light to read like ***Reader's Digest*** or ***Guideposts,"*** she says. That way she can take a breather from all the stirring.

It seems rather amazing that the dark brown fat could turn into such a creamy white soap during the curing process. Yet that's what happens.

Yoder unwittingly played a joke on herself, recently, which she discovered when she found the lovely white blocks of soap decorated with imprints of green Christmasy-looking ivy. She realized that the imprints had transferred off the Christmas-edition, dry-cleaning, plastic that she had used to line her boxes. Chuckling,

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Naomi pours the liquid soap from the bucket into plastic-lined boxes.