

Brains On (APM) | When baths met soap 01G6NKGPVMPC67X6QT28KE66K4

MAEVE: This is *ForeverAgo* where we explore the before.

JOY DOLO: Maeve, remember how Menaka started a soap stand a while back?

MAEVE: Oh yeah. I wonder how it's going.

JOY DOLO: Have you seen her new commercial?

MAEVE: Uh, no. Show me.

JOY DOLO: Get ready, because it is really something.

[HAPPY MUSIC]

Come on down to the 'Storical Soap Stand.

MENAKA: Hi. I'm Menaka, and I'm here with a bunch of soaps at the 'Storical Soap Stand. You might not have heard the word 'storical before, and that's because we took the word "historical" and shortened it so that all the words in our store name could start with an S.

[CROWD LAUGHTER]

And if you like that, you'll love what we've got at our stand. It all starts with S. It's all kinds of special soap.

AUDIENCE: Woo!

MENAKA: Because normal stores have normal stuff. Maybe they carry liquid soap. That's pretty exciting. Maybe they have some modern day soap bars. OK. Maybe they also have a special section of high fiber cereal.

AUDIENCE: No!

MENAKA: But us, at the 'Storical Soap Stand, you won't find any cereal. What you will find are soaps from the past. We can tell you all about what washing was like way back. So come on down. We'd love to show you around.

SPEAKER: We'll see you soon at the 'Storical Soap Stand. Yeah.

MAEVE: Whoa.

JOY DOLO: We have to go over there, right?

MAEVE: Yes, immediately.

[FUN MUSIC]

JOY DOLO: Hello and welcome to *Forever Ago* from APM studios. I'm Joy Dolo.

MAEVE: And I'm Maeve.

JOY DOLO: And today, we're meeting *Forever Ago* producer Menaka Wilhelm at her 'Storical Soap Stand, partly to make sure she's OK.

MAEVE: Yeah, that was quite a commercial?

JOY DOLO: But also to find out about baths and soaps of the past. So, Maeve, do you have a favorite soap smell?

MAEVE: I like this body wash that was vanilla scented. And the thought that passed me is, what if Lions mistake us for food because we smell like this?

JOY DOLO: Yeah. What if lions smell vanilla and they're like, oh, ice cream-- yum. Or like candy?

MAEVE: That's me. I smell ice cream. Are you ice cream?

JOY DOLO: Yeah, I told you that story about when I was younger and I had that strawberry soap and I was like, oh, it smells good. I better eat it. And I did. And that was the end of the story.

MAEVE: Oh.

JOY DOLO: That's OK.

MAEVE: Don't eat soap, kids.

JOY DOLO: Yeah. So do you find soap relaxing?

MAEVE: I mostly find the hot water running down my back relaxing. It feels nice to scrub myself and feel clean, but it's mostly the water that does it for me.

JOY DOLO: So you're mostly there for the water, not so much for the soap.

MAEVE: Yeah.

JOY DOLO: Yeah, I hear that. I like a little bit of both too.

MAEVE: Oh, here comes Menaka to show us around. Hi, Menaka.

MENAKA: Hey, you two. It's so good to see you both. Are you here thanks to our great new commercial?

JOY DOLO: Yeah, we did see it.

MAEVE: It was-- hey, look at all these soaps.

MENAKA: Yeah. We can feature all kinds of soaps here, because soap has been around for thousands of years. You can make it from a mix of ashes, water, and fat. We specialize in soap bars here at the soap stand, but I'll also say some plants have helped people scrub a dub dub throughout history.

Like in ancient India, people made body scrubs from a tree called the Soapberry tree. And in China, people use the Chinese honey locust plant for its suds.

JOY DOLO: Ooh, I can't wait to add historical soap to my nighttime bath routine. I've been in a lavender rut.

MENAKA: Well, I hate to disappoint a visitor such as yourself, but many of the soap bars you see here were never used for baths. I'll let the soaps tell you more about that. I won't steal their thunder.

GREENY: May I take over for a moment, Menaka? Sure I'm soap, but I've never been in a bath. So I think I can help out here.

MENAKA: Please. So this is Greeny. She's a little over 1,000 years old.

GREENY: That's right. I'm a bar of Aleppo soap. That's the type of soap I am because I'm from Aleppo, Syria. But, like Menaka said, I go by Greeny.

MENAKA: I love your nice pale green color.

GREENY: Thank you. I'm made of olive oil and laurel oil, which comes from bay leaves. And those oils give me this nice hue.

JOY DOLO: So you're from roughly the Middle Ages or medieval times.

GREENY: Yep. Usually we think of medieval times being in Europe. I'm from the Middle East, and historians call my time the Islamic Golden Age. It was a great era.

[MIDDLE EASTERN MUSIC]

People were building big temples called mosques, learning a lot about astronomy, and medicine, and math, writing books on paper, and, of course, making soaps like me.

JOY DOLO: So many achievements.

GREENY: Yeah. People made me in Syria for a long time. Normal people used me for my lovely smell. But mainly, people took baths and scraped themselves off to get clean. They had special tools for scraping and scrubbing.

I was part of hygiene, but not the star of the show. Eventually, about 1,000 years ago, I was brought to places like Europe, where I was used in small doses, almost like an ointment or a perfume. People rubbed on a little soap to smell better or to clear up a skin rash too.

MAEVE: So, Greeny didn't help people wash up in the shower?

GREENY: I don't really know what you mean by that word, shower?

MENAKA: Oh yeah, those were invented way after your time.

GREENY: Figures. But people did wash. In Europe, for example, people washed their hands and faces every day. In many cities and towns in Europe, there were bathhouses where people could go soak together in a big wooden tub.

The vats of water reminded people in England of stew, like the food. So there, they called the bathhouses the stews. But it wasn't really about getting clean, it was more like a chill activity to do with other people. Bath tubs were more like bath clubs.

JOY DOLO: That gives me a little bit of the ews. Were they going to bath houses or the stews every day?

GREENY: No. Once every couple of weeks. But people in the Middle Ages in Europe just thought of cleanliness differently than we do. There were a lot of smells around. People lived close to farm animals. The toilets didn't have lids. Nobody thought their whole body needed to smell like soap.

JOY DOLO: I guess if everything smells, a smelly body fits right in.

GREENY: Well said. Now, time for me to go. I'm joining a few other soaps for a salami sandwich lunch.

MAEVE: OK, bye. Have fun, Greeny.

Oh, wow. That's so wild.

JOY DOLO: Yeah, I can't believe a bar of soap can eat a salami sandwich.

MAEVE: Oh, I was more surprised that Greeny is from a time where baths didn't include soap.

JOY DOLO: Oh, right, yeah, same.

SUDS: Hey, over here. Baths without soap is nothing. I'm from a time when people thought baths would kill them.

MENAKA: Oh, yeah, that's our 1600 soap. He's pretty cranky.

SUDS: Don't call me cranky, Menaka. Call me Suds. Nice to meet you.

JOY DOLO: Howdy doody, Suds. What was life without baths like?

SUDS: Well, I'm from about 400 years ago in North America. In my time, Native Americans had already lived there for millennia. And they were familiar with bathing. They'd hop in water and use sweat lodges where people held religious ceremonies and got clean.

But people from England were new. They lived in wooden houses with thatched roofs. They lit fires for warmth and slept on straw mattresses. And they made me, a soap, out of animal fat and ashes. But they didn't have baths.

JOY DOLO: Right. Back then, there was no running water or bathrooms in the home.

MAEVE: So, Suds, if there was no baths, how did European people wash with you?

SUDS: Oh, they didn't. See, for a colonist, the best way to get clean was to wear a white linen shirt.

JOY DOLO: White linen shirts instead of baths?

MAEVE: So just fabric? No water at all?

SUDS: In colonial times, European people thought warm water made you sick.

JOY DOLO: Yeah, no one really knew about germs yet.

MAEVE: Oh, right. That came later.

SUDS: So instead of water, they put on linens and figured the clean cloth would draw dirtiness away. So they'd get dirty, put on linens, linens would soak up the dirt, and then they'd wash the linens with me, a harsh, strong soap that loves a good chore.

MAEVE: Wow. You love chores?

SUDS: Who doesn't? Now, if you need me, I'll be over here reading a magazine that's all words and no pictures.

MAEVE: Oh, OK. Have fun. Bye.

JOY DOLO: Menaka, I have to tell you, I thought historical soap stand would have way more soaps that people used for washing their bodies.

MENAKA: Oh, don't worry. We have those too. Eventually, bathing did change to look more like the hygiene we know today. And I know just the soap to tell you about that.

JOY DOLO: Perfect. But first, we got to take a quick break to play--

AUDIENCE: Backstage first.

JOY DOLO: It's the game where we try to put things in order from oldest to newest. Our three things today are kids bubble bath, rubber ducks, and shower caps. So, Maeve, which came first in history? Which came second in history? And which came third in history?

MAEVE: I think shower caps came first, maybe rubber ducks, and then kids bubble bath?

JOY DOLO: Why do you think shower caps came first?

MAEVE: Oh, because they seem old because, I don't know, it always seems like that people who are old use them or especially when swimming. I don't know.

JOY DOLO: Yeah.

MAEVE: I don't know, they just seem like a thing that would happen to keep your hair nice-- how women like would do it while cleaning maybe.

JOY DOLO: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Also, I think I remember seeing older cartoons with people with shower caps. And so definitely times when that was around. And then kids bubble bath-- I guess if we think about it, the suds, and the soap, and everything, it's a liquid soap, so that would be like a newer thing.

MAEVE: Yeah. And then rubber ducks is rubber and duck. Quack.

JOY DOLO: Exactly. Yeah. Rubber ducks I think is what's up in the air for me. I can't figure out when that would have been-- first, second, or third. Because rubber is old. Rubber has been around. It's part of the Earth, you know?

MAEVE: Technically, rubber is part of the Earth, but we kind of mold it into something.

JOY DOLO: Yeah. Yeah. OK, so you said shower caps, rubber ducks, kids bubble bath?

MAEVE: Yeah.

JOY DOLO: I'm going to say rubber ducks one, and shower caps two, and kids bubble bath three. So we agree on that. We'll be back with the answer in just a bit.

Here at *Forever Ago*, we're building a time capsule.

MAEVE: It's a collection of things to show people in the future what our lives are like today.

JOY DOLO: And we want to know what you'd put in that time capsule. What things really capture the essence of today?

MAEVE: Record yourself telling us about the item you have in mind and why you want to save it. And send it to us at foreverago.org/contact.

JOY DOLO: Maybe you've got a killer recipe for bath bombs, or a photo of your favorite rubber duck, or your favorite shower cap. Maeve, what would you put in the time capsule this week?

MAEVE: Probably the bath bombs that have been sitting on my drawer for four or five years-- or four years.

JOY DOLO: Yeah.

MAEVE: Yeah.

JOY DOLO: What do you think the bath bombs would tell people about today?

MAEVE: Maybe what things are made out of along with the types of smells people are really into.

JOY DOLO: Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's kind of interesting because bath bombs, they have a certain use, right? It's a thing in the bath.

MAEVE: And a bath makes you smell good.

JOY DOLO: People in the future would probably take baths. You think?

MAEVE: I hope they do.

JOY DOLO: I hope they don't just walk around without a bath.

MAEVE: More *Forever Ago* in just a moment. Don't go anywhere.

JOY DOLO: This is *Forever Ago*. I'm Joy Dolo.

MAEVE: And I'm Maeve.

JOY DOLO: And it's time to find out which thing came first. Are you ready for this, Maeve?

MAEVE: Am I?

JOY DOLO: We'll find out. OK, drumroll.

[DRUMROLL]

MAEVE: --be surprised if shower caps are first.

JOY DOLO: Guess what's first? Shower caps.

MAEVE: Yo.

JOY DOLO: You're right.

MAEVE: I was correct.

JOY DOLO: The first shower as we know it was invented in 1767 and shower caps soon followed after that. So they were made to protect hair and block the sensation of water falling on the head.

MAEVE: But I like the feeling of water hair.

JOY DOLO: Well, I guess some folks back then did not like that. In fact, back then some people thought washing your hair might be bad for you. They've got all the germs and stuff you want to keep them in your hair.

MAEVE: Lies.

JOY DOLO: Early shower caps weren't like the plastic mushroom shaped ones people wear now. They were made from water resistant cloth and were cone-shaped like really tall birthday hats.

MAEVE: Conehead.

JOY DOLO: An upside-down ice cream cone, perfect for a party in the shower.

MAEVE: Shower party.

JOY DOLO: So that was the first one. And guess what the second one was?

MAEVE: Uh oh.

JOY DOLO: It was rubber ducks.

MAEVE: I was right.

JOY DOLO: You were right. You were totally. You hit it three times in a row. The classic bath time rubber ducky we know and love was invented in 1947. The inventor was a dude named Peter Gannon. And even back then, lots of kids didn't like taking baths, but rubber ducks made bath time super exciting.

MAEVE: Squeak squeak. Quack.

JOY DOLO: Squeak squeak, quack, get in the tub. *Sesame Street* made rubber ducks extra famous when Ernie introduced this bath time bop in 1970.

ERNIE: (SINGING) Oh, rubber ducky, you're the one. You make bath time lots of fun. Rubber ducky, I'm awfully fond of you. Boh, boh, bo-di-oh.

JOY DOLO: So last and not least at all is kids bubble bath. That was most recently in history. Bubble baths for kids became popular in the 1960s Thanks to brands like Mr. Bubble. Bubble baths first started showing up in the 1930s or so, but it wasn't until later that they were marketed towards kids. And this is a cool fact-- bubbles trap heat, did you know that?

MAEVE: I guess that would make sense.

JOY DOLO: And they help keep the water warmer for longer so you can have a nice long bubble bath.

MAEVE: Oh, plus it makes sense-- when you blow the bubbles, you're technically putting your hot air--

JOY DOLO: Inside the bubble so it can float. We all learned something today.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

All right, back to our tour of Menaka's 'Storical Soap Stand.

MENAKA: Where you can always count on the soaps to surprise you.

JOY DOLO: Definitely. All these times without baths and baths without soap, my brain's all bubbly with these new bath facts. So people in Europe in the Middle Ages washed some, but didn't use much soap.

MAEVE: And when Europeans came to America, they hardly washed at all.

MENAKA: Right. Meanwhile, around the world, baths were more common. People in India bathed as part of their daily routine. And in Western Africa, people were making a soap called black soap and using it to wash up regularly, too.

JOY DOLO: So it was kind of the Western world, Europe and the United States, that had something against scrubbing.

MENAKA: Yeah. But eventually in the United States, baths became way more common. Meet ivory soap. And just a heads up, she's a little dramatic.

NELL: Yoohoo, I'm ivory soap. I go by Nell.

JOY DOLO: Oh wow. Hey, Nell. Ivory soap-- like the bars that you can still buy in stores today?

NELL: Yep. But I'm much older than those young bars. I'm from the 1870s.

MAEVE: Whoa. So like my great, great, great, great-grandparents could have used you?

NELL: Yes. That's a lot of greats, just like me. So here's the lowdown on my lifetime. Cars aren't around yet, but trains are. And so are factories. And everything is about to change for me and lots of other soaps.

MAEVE: Really?

NELL: Yeah. Soap before my time was for luxury or laundry-- not exactly primetime news. But me, I knew from the beginning I was meant to be famous-- like everybody knows my name, have to wear sunglasses to the grocery store famous.

JOY DOLO: Wow. How'd you swing that?

NELL: Two big reasons. The first one is that people have changed their minds about baths. Remember how the colonists were worried that getting in a bath could make them ill? For baths to get big, people had to start thinking about diseases differently, and they did.

MENAKA: Yeah. Scientists started figuring out how sickness really spread, and it wasn't just in water. So they started telling people that washing in water was OK, even good.

NELL: That's because scientists were getting really into a new tool called the microscope. And with better microscopes, they could look at all kinds of stuff very closely. And under the microscope, they saw little tiny living things like bacteria and microbes-- germs.

There was an important idea cropping up about disease. It's called germ theory.

MENAKA: Ooh. Get ready, you two. Whenever Nell says germ theory, she bursts into a newsy paper boy-inspired monologue about it. So I give it 3, 2.

NELL: Extra, extra, front page news. Germ theory. Is germ theory real? We are under attack by invisible organisms. That's how sicknesses actually spread. Little tiny bacteria and viruses make us ill.

The only way to fight them off is with a wash. No, not just once a month, wash at least once a week. Illnesses do not come from getting into water, they're from germs. And they travel around all the time. They get you whilst you pick your nose and when you sneeze on your friend-- or when your friend sneezes on you.

[SNEEZING]

MAEVE: Oh so people stopped thinking baths will let illness in through their skin.

JOY DOLO: And they started working out that even though you couldn't see infection causing germs, you could wash them away.

NELL: Exactly. So people are getting acquainted with the idea of germs and getting more into baths. But here's my favorite part-- the second thing that really catapults me, body soap, to stardom, it's factories. Companies at this time are making more stuff in factories, including soap.

They can make way more soap in a big factory than anyone has ever made at home. And so--

MAEVE: Yeah?

JOY DOLO: Tell us. Tell us. Your charisma is so magnetic.

NELL: These soap companies decide to improve people's soap-buying skills with something called advertisements.

MAEVE: Like ads on TV or video commercials?

NELL: Right. But the radio isn't even invented yet. In my time, the ads are printed in magazines and newspapers. And they make me look great. Seriously, I look amazing.

These advertisements really sell the soap out of me. And they tell people, you've got to take baths with soap way more often.

MENAKA: So my 'Historical Soap Stand commercial is actually just one small piece of a very long historical tradition of advertising for soap.

NELL: Yes. Soap companies wanted people to know that without soap, little old me, they'd have no friends. Soap advertisements made people feel like they were dirty. They needed soap. And then also deodorant and shampoo.

MAEVE: Wow. So in this present day moment, people do use a lot of soap and baths, because soap makers told them to?

NELL: Pretty much. You humans really listened to the message. And it wasn't just advertisements, actually. When the radio did get invented, soap companies sponsored radio plays, and those dramas were called soap operas. That's where the term actually comes from. I'm famous in many different ways.

MAEVE: They really worked everyone to a lather about hygiene.

JOY DOLO: But I've heard some people say these days we might be washing too much.

MENAKA: That's true. Some scientists think we're way too clean-- that we're washing off too many helpful microbes and drying out our skin.

NELL: Oh. Don't burst my bubble. I'd be better off using my time to run lines for my next performance *A Hand Washing* on Broadway. Bye bye.

MAEVE: See ya.

So, Menaka, how come there aren't any price tags on anything? Doesn't your soap stand sell soap?

MENAKA: No. I thought the name was pretty clear. This is a place where we can stand and talk 'storical soap.

JOY DOLO: Right, a soap stand. Where we stand.

MAEVE: Well, let's stand by for the theme music in 3, 2, 1.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

JOY DOLO: The way we think about cleaning our bodies is definitely a cultural thing. It depends on who you are and what you've learned from other people.

MAEVE: But soap is really helpful for washing. It washes away bacteria and viruses, which is great when we wash our hands.

JOY DOLO: Yeah. And overall, using more soap than we did in earlier times is a good thing.

MAEVE: It's just that we might not need quite as many baths as we take now.

JOY DOLO: Right. It depends on you as a person. But most people can probably go at least a day without a bath.

MAEVE: But don't go too long.

JOY DOLO: This episode was produced by Menaka Wilhelm, Sanden Totten, and Molly Bloom, with additional production support from Anna Goldfield, Grace Tatter, Kalaisha Totty, and Tara Anderson. Sound designed by Eduardo Perez, theme music by Mark Sanchez, Beth Pearlman is our executive producer, voice acting by Anna Weggel, Melanie Renee, and Rosie duPont.

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And now, it's time to add things to our time capsule.

MAEVE: Here's what we're putting in this week.

AUDIENCE: I would put a koala in the time capsule because they're endangered and they're really cute.

AUDIENCE: I would put it in my first edition Pokemon card, because you can't get first edition Pokemon cards in like 100 years.

JOY DOLO: Thanks to Sully and Henry for those excellent time capsule suggestions. Maeve, would you please do the honor of telling our listeners how they can have the chance to hear their time capsule submissions?

MAEVE: Send us your time capsule ideas at foreverago.org/contact. We'll feature new answers in every episode.

JOY DOLO: And of course, as always, we'll go way back.

MAEVE: Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC PLAYING]