

HISTORY HAPPENINGS

with Vanessa

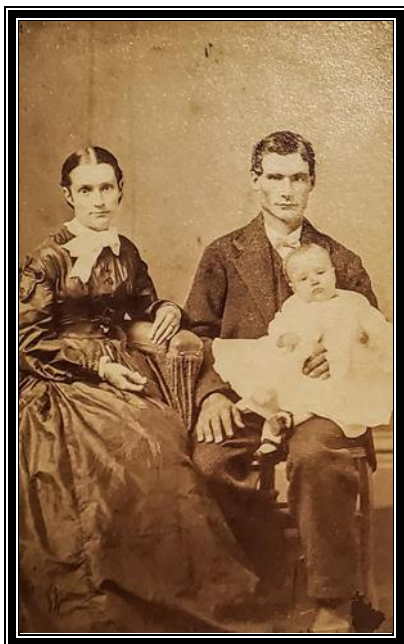
MAKING DO

PART 3: LARD FOR YOUR HAIR AND CHARCAOL FOR YOUR TEETH

Naturally, the first thing that comes to mind with lard is cooking. For southern civilians during the Civil War, lard also came in handy as a replacement for several items no longer available. When southerners were unable to obtain candles or oil for oil lamps, lard was a source for lighting, and sometimes in ways we would never think of today. One example was the combination of lard and the dry prickly gumballs from the sweetgum tree. (Who knew they could be good for something and who even thought of trying that one?) Discovering this, it was the job of children to go out and gather the gumballs. Parthenia Antoinette Hague from Alabama described this in her journal, *A Blockaded Family Life in Southern Alabama During the Civil War*:

“In absence of any of the ordinary materials for lighting, the good woman of the house had gone to the woods and gathered a basketful of round globes of the sweetgum tree. She had taken 2 shallow bowls and put some lard, melted, into them, then placed 2 or 3 of the sweetgum balls in each of the vessels, which, soon becoming thoroughly saturated with the melted lard, gave a fairylike light, floating around in the shallow vessels of oil like stars.”

As a historian, I will try almost anything, so I tried this and can testify that it does indeed work to create about the same amount of light as a multi-wicked candle and I admit that they were rather pretty. However, do not try this at home. I repeat, do not try this at home. It smells terrible. I do not know if it was the lard, the gumballs, or a combination of the two that smelled so bad, but my house was quite stinky for two weeks.



Today women use gel, mousse, and/or spray to hold their hair in place. During the Victorian era, ladies held their hair in place with scented hair oils. Once the war began and southern women could not get these products, they turned to what they had to create their own: lard and rose petals. Another job of the children was to gather rose petals. Placing the petals into a crock of melted lard and letting it “infuse,” they now had rose-scented hair oil. In case you are wondering, no, I did not try this one. Staying on the topic of beauty products, the ladies found that rice flour made a “suitable” face powder and long dried out thorns became hair pins.

Another item no longer available or affordable was shoe polish. By 1863, shoe polish cost \$8 a bottle in Richmond, Virginia. That converts to \$203 today! However, crushed charcoal and lard made a useful substitution. Collecting cooled charcoal from the remnants of a previous fire, children crushed it into powder then mixed it into lard. They now had boot and shoe polish.

People realized back then that charcoal absorbed odor. Unable to get tooth powder, they knew if they brushed their teeth with it, it left their breath “pleasantly sweet.” Yes, their teeth were black but what was worse was what they did not know: charcoal is highly abrasive and removes the enamel from teeth. The 1863 *Confederate Receipt Book* also states: “Charcoal powder will be found a very good thing to give knives a polish.”

As clothes and shoes wore out, women created solutions. New items were unavailable, as were the materials to make them. When the hem of a dress was ragged, the women “turned” it. Removing the skirt from the bodice, what was once the hem was sewn back onto the bodice. Yes, the skirt length was a little shorter so they either wore it as it was or added extra fabric at the bottom from another item already repurposed. When a dress was no longer wearable, it became fabric for children’s clothes or a man’s shirt. A work dress (something worn at home) held nine yards of fabric and a day dress (one worn to go out) had eleven (sometimes more) yards, providing women with lot of fabric to repurpose. When hoops wore out, they inserted reeds into the casing of the undergarment. Large seeds, wood, bone, horn, and pine bark became homemade buttons and the hides of squirrels and deer as well as carpets became shoes. Nothing went to waste.



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**Next Week
Nature’s Pharmacy**

