

Notions of Health and Hygiene in the Depression-Era United States: Apex, Arizona

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Abstract: The United States' views on health and hygiene have been developing for centuries, undergoing several major changes. At the turn of the 19th century and into the early-mid 1900s, new fields of health sciences emerged and beauty standards evolved, impacting American consumption and perception of toiletry items. Many items are now household staples, such as deodorant, toothpaste, laxatives, and topical cosmetics like moisturizers and makeup, while some are a bit outdated, such as Lysol as a feminine hygiene product. This culture of cleanliness was very pervasive as shifting notions of health, hygiene, and appearance reached the laborers and occupants of the Depression-era Saginaw and Manistee logging camp of Apex, Arizona, despite being largely isolated from major towns and cities. Based on the artifacts found on site in Apex, it is apparent that residents bought into emerging and popular ideas of health and hygiene, such as the unacceptability of body odor, irregular bowel movements, and unkempt appearances.

Digestive Health

- Gastroenterology grew as a field during the 1930s and 1940s, and with this came increased public interest in the digestive system's inner workings.
- A major theme in gastroenterology included 'curing' various afflictions via purgation with a focus on constipation; constipation was seen as an 'American' disease that reflected sedentism, laziness, and an over-processed, over-indulgent diet (Whorton 1993).
- Purgation using laxatives emerged as a health fad to cleanse the bowels. Advertising posited that constipation and built-up fecal matter would poison the bloodstream and lead to body odor (Whorton 1993).
- It appears that residents of Apex bought into these ideas, as there were numerous laxative bottles found on-site, including pepsin syrup (pictured middle left), Charles H. Fletcher's Castoria Oil (pictured bottom left), and magnesium citrate/milk of magnesia (top left, image found on Ebay, depicts two possible embossments).
- Since there were several brands and formulas of laxatives found on site, it is likely that people had their 'laxative of choice' that was not being provided by the company store. This reflects the prevalence of this health fad.



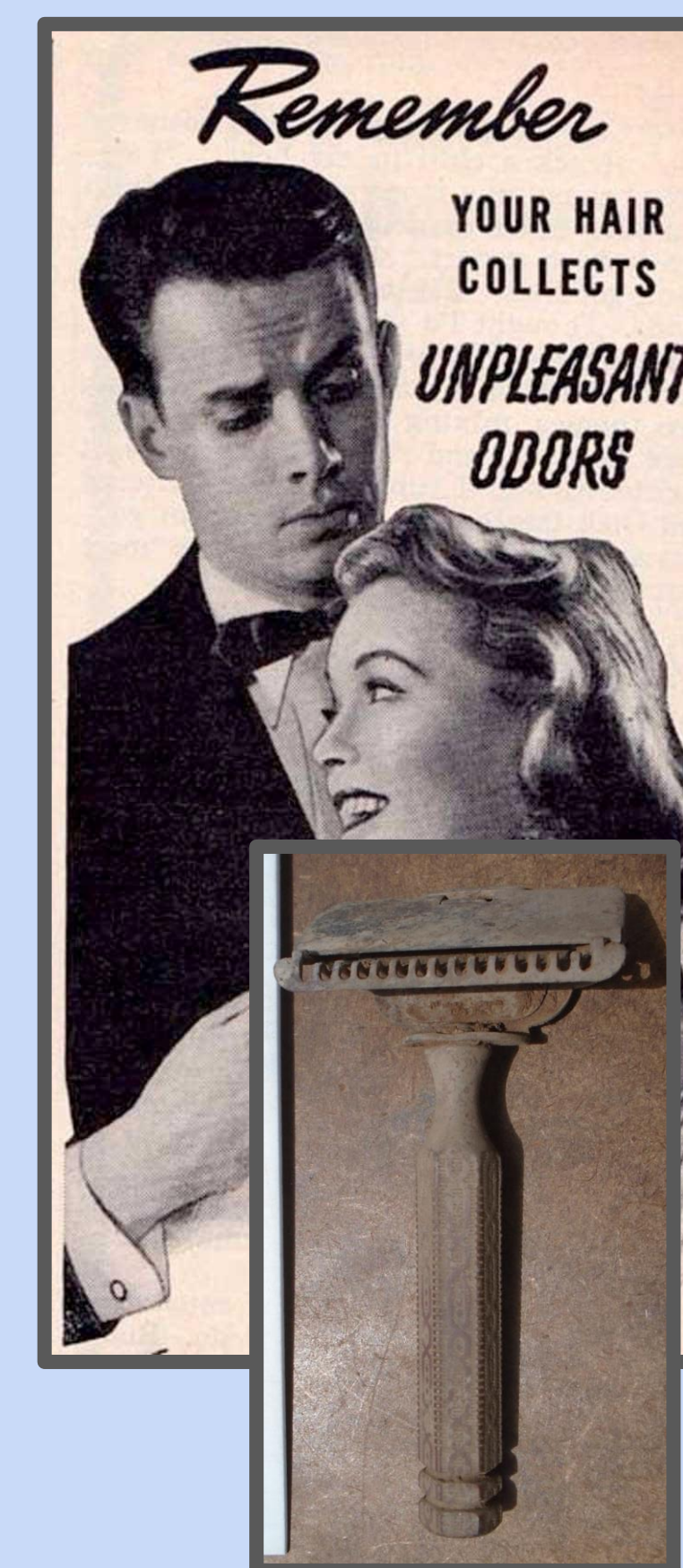
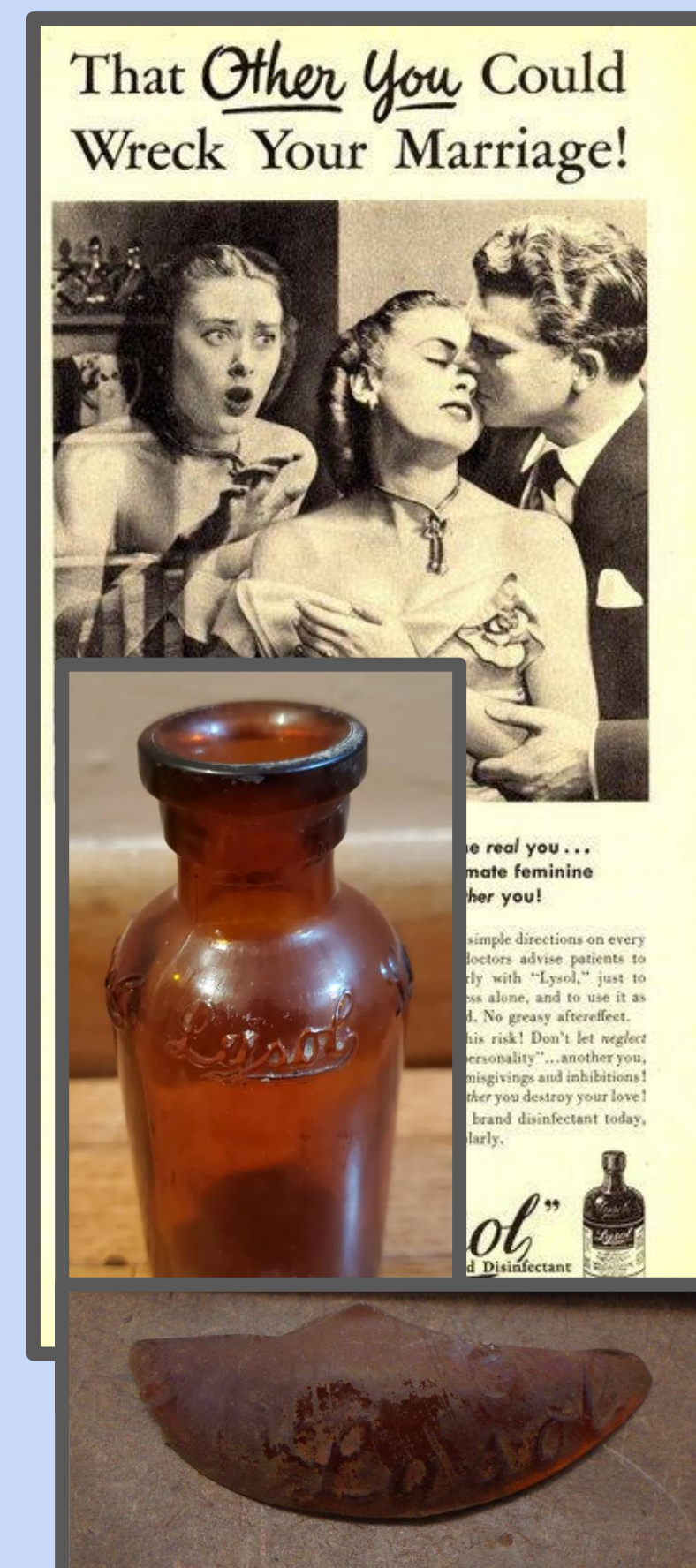
Body Odor

- By the Great Depression, Body odor was generally accepted as unhygienic. Products like mouthwash, flavored toothpaste, and deodorant were marketed en masse.
- Body odor was associated with poor hygiene because it implied bacterial growth—this reflects the growing acceptance of germ theory.
- By the 1920s, "halitosis," or bad breath, was invented as a medical condition and the cure, mouthwash, was marketed incredibly successfully (Clark 2015). A Lavis mouthwash bottle as well as Pepsodent toothpaste (1915 packaging pictured middle right) were found on-site, both mint flavored. A Listerine mouthwash bottle was also found.
- Two milk glass containers of antiperspirant deodorant, pictured bottom right (the "Mum" brand from Bristol-Myers) were found on-site. This deodorant was marketed towards women for armpits and genitals, as women's body odor was especially unseemly. It meant that one would be unable to form female friendships nor garner male attention ("Alleviating Body Odors").
- Even though routine bathing would have been rare at Apex due to lack of running water or showers, it appears people were still conscious of their body odor.



Feminine Hygiene

- Chloride of lime lids, Old Dutch Cleanser cans, and multiple clorox bottles were found at Apex, which were likely used as disinfectants for community hygiene purposes to sanitize communal privies and kitchens.
- However, a separate shard from a smaller bottle of Lysol was found (pictured bottom right), indicating it had a purpose apart from cleaning/community hygiene.
- Throughout the 20th century, Lysol concentrate was marketed towards women as a feminine hygiene product/vaginal douche to remove odor, as well as a spermicide (Eveleth 2013).
- The shard found on-site (pictured right, image below the bottle) has a label similar to the cursive label/watermark found on whole bottles in advertisements marketing lysol as a feminine douche. The glass bottle pictured right is a full-sized version of a Lysol bottle found on Ebay whose watermark appears to be placed on the shoulder, which is where the shard appears to come from as well.



Body Hair Removal

- Body hair removal was popularized for women in the 1920s with the era of flapper attire, where the legs and armpits would be exposed by short, sleeveless dresses ("Hair Removal").
- Men's facial hair removal was already part of basic hygiene by the early 1900s due to the trapping of lice, oil, dirt, odor, sweat, and bacteria in beards and moustaches ("Hair Removal").
- A Gem "butterfly" style safety razor, patented in 1904, was found on-site (pictured bottom left) which could be used to shave at home, whereas straight razors were commonly used in barbershops ("Gillette U.S. Service Razor Set").
- The shift from facial hair removal being a service to something accessible at home reflects the expectation that facial hair upkeep be part of basic hygiene routines, an idea that was evidently adopted by Apex residents.
- Other relevant artifacts found on-site include a shaving mug, a Lifebuoy shaving cream jar, and a safety razor blade.

Conclusions:

- By the time Apex was occupied, the association between health/hygiene and bacteria, body odors, and presentability had been established in mainstream American culture—occupants of Apex bought into these ideas, and seemed to follow and keep up with expectations of cleanliness.
- The fear of smelling bad, and the idea that the body's natural tendency is towards decay, bacteria, etc. was an effective marketing strategy for laxatives, toothpaste and mouthwash.
- There was a general acceptance that body odor is unpleasant, even offensive, and people naturally smell bad, which needs to be cosmetically altered.
- Despite the site being rural and isolated from major cities, and the fact that many laborers were Swedish immigrants, these emergent American trends of health and hygiene were so compelling that they kept up with them.

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Photos of Apex artifacts were taken by Apex, Arizona Archaeology Project personnel

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- Lysol advertisement: <https://antiquatedantidotes.blog/2019/06/26/lysol-a-contraceptive-horror-story/>
- Body hair advertisement: <https://hellowisp.com/blog/8-vintage-ads-that-show-whats-changed>
- Pepsodent packaging: <https://www.madeinchicagomuseum.com/single-post/pepsodent/>
- Magnesium citrate bottle: https://www.ebay.com/itm/2-Different-Embossed-Citrate-Of-Magnesia-Crown-Top-Medicine-Bottles-Clear-1920s-/183758786334?_u=IL
- Lysol bottle: <https://i.ebayimg.com/images/g/HRAAOSwGeVi8V3n/s-11600.webp>