

# The Maine way of Tom's Soap

by Joanna Rotté



I lived out the past year alone in a cabin in the woods of New Hampshire. That's an easy way to live, except for the cold. Through many winter days I leaned on, sat on, or snugly embraced the wood-burning stove. Several nights I considered climbing into it. Some of the newspaper crumpled up for kindling told staunch accounts of long-time survival, even enjoyment, of northern New England's frigid temperatures. The most powerful descriptions were written by Maine state folks, particularly along the coast, who abided in measured peace not only with the snows but with tall waves and massive rocks. Before I set fire to those stories that set the fire of admiration in me, I copied some sentiments from John Cole's "Countryside" in the *Boston Sunday Globe*:

*"Here in Maine, the cold is elemental and absolute, even the sea has been congealed. Snows can still isolate and immobilize, fires must be built and care taken, otherwise we shall freeze. None of us can make light of the cold, its intensity is awesome and purifying. There is in its cleanliness a kind of religious dedication. By its very persistence the cold seeks to convert us to an acknowledgment of nature's might."*

Snowed into the center of New Hampshire, many dirt roads from the border of Maine, I shared that acknowledgment. Then, on Valentine's Day, during an inclement month of February, while visiting Kennebunk, Maine, I was invited for a hike along Ogunquit Beach. With a chilly fear of having my vegetarian blood ice up in the aorta, I clad my veins in thick woollens and rose to the adventure. The scene was extraordinary. It was also stinging, awful cold, but extraordinary. The sand was frozen. And even through steel-shanked, insulated, lined, waterproof boots and double-duty ski socks, my feet felt a sensation so strange, as if treading on slightly flaccid rubber. But when my mind lost communication with the nerves in my feet, I struggled, imagining I would never dance, maybe never walk again. And when I became convinced my fingers would be lost to amputation, I cursed all New England and my own languid circulation. I cried. I released. I relieved and relaxed. I accepted, and felt no cold as the wind struck



a smile on the scarlet of my face. Cole came to mind again:

*"Then came winter's long darks—a kind of test of our spirits, a cold tempering and annealing of the Yankee soul that brings such an awesome recognition of mortality that we either flee to warmer climes or begin the subtle process of acceptance that makes such gracious spirits of so many of this region's old. It is the natural force of the seasons that does this, nothing else; it is this particular place."*

I was whole and I was alive. The holiday over, I maneuvered my pet Delta 88 home through eight inches of raining snow, wondering, Why do they do it? I pictured cod fishermen enjoining their dories through tricky waters, obdurate farmers drawing corn and wringing burdock from stony soil; craftspeople whistling and needling by fire light and heat. And I wondered, Why did they come? And why do they stay?

In July I returned to Kennebunk, on assignment for the *East West Journal*, to interview Tom Chappell, creator of Tom's Natural Soap. It was different because it was warm. There were tourists, many outsiders, but even they were subject to the spirit that is Maine. They seemed to have come more to get to something than to get away from anything. If they experienced what I did, what they were getting to—through painting, writing, sporting, exploring, or just mingling with the natives—was the self. Aided by the power of the land, air, and sea, visitors could strip themselves to that essential particle of energized rest deep inside. Towns and beaches were crowded without being busy. Motels were full without being flush. I stayed the weekend in a corner room hedged by grass, trees, and a laundry line, and shared beer, vegetables, bread, and exercise with a friend on the sand, the lawn, or the porch of a country inn. In three days I was as vitalized as I had previously been after treading the beach on that past feast of Saint Valentine.

On Monday morning I entered the impeccably clean premises of Tom's Natural Soap. The office portion, a hugely high-beamed expanse of planked wood, had been a grainery. The giant stainless steel vats, in which shampoos are mixed, were once local dairy tanks. The employees, mostly young, were lighthearted: with a tone of amazement they explained the workings of, for example, a machine that injects, pinches, and seals toothpaste tubes.

Right: Tom Chappell. Below, left to right: Sarah, Tom, Eliza, Kate, Matthew, and Chris Chappell.





Recycling, the habit of early America, was in evidence. I thought of Tom's Natural Soap as an expression of Nouvelle Yankeeism, and remembered:

*"The trembling seasons that rolled from summer's drought to bitter winter molded the Yankee in this sparse land. New Englanders had to 'make do' because there was only so much they could 'do' with. It was a heritage of thrift, of caution in times of plenty, of repair, re-use, invention, and of wearing out rather than throwing away."* The young man, Tom Chappell, who helped pioneer our Modern Age natural soap, met me in his office. Although he does not favor magazine interviews, he was gracious and receptive, composed and friendly, but guarded while giving. Our conversation ran somewhat as follows:

**EWJ:** What attracted you to settle in the state of Maine?  
**TC:** We located here because this is where my wife and I wanted to live and raise our family. I'm a native New Englander; I spent a lot of my life in Massachusetts, was educated at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, graduated in 1966, and as a child had summered here in Kennebunk with my family, so I was familiar with the area. While my wife, Kate, and I were living in Philadelphia, where I was in the insurance business, we vacationed in Kennebunk and found it an environment in which we could lead healthy lives.

At the time we moved, people were just beginning to come to Maine for the higher quality of life. Maine doesn't offer many jobs, so people find themselves developing their own. This is a very creative environment, sort of like San Francisco. You can just look through the state and find all kinds of businesses and crafts that have grown up because people who wanted to live here needed an outlet for their energies. Many out-of-state people have come in, but they are working with the natives, which is important. There has been a kind of marriage in philosophy. The natives have had a tradition, a culture, and products such as fish and woodcrafts for many years but just never really developed them or understood how they related outside the state. So many of those who have seen other parts of the country have come in here and said, "You people have a wonderful place. You've got some great talent and native things. Let's plug those into some ideas that I know about beyond the state." There is, for example, a very well organized organic farmers' and gardeners' association, perhaps one of the best in the country; they certify soil, have meetings, work together. There are also organized crafts going on all over the place.

**EWJ:** How do your products (natural soaps and toiletries) relate to the state of Maine?

**TC:** Although our products are not native, the people working here are. We haven't come right out and sold Maine, but what we sell fits comfortably with everyone's image of Maine. They see this as a nice place from which a nice product such as Apple Shampoo or Spearmint Toothpaste would come. The letters we receive daily talk about the good vibrations that come all the way through the system of our products. Whether it's the label or the product itself or the fact that it's made in Kennebunk, Maine—these things are all tied together in their minds. Our motivation is one of wanting to take Maine to the rest of the country. Right now soap and shampoo are our medium to talk. But we have a lot of talent and imagination here. As time passes, our expression will be in other things—native products, native cultures—so I feel as if the personal care line is just our beginning.

**EWJ:** How did you choose to work in the production of natural soaps?

**TC:** My father has a business located nearby primarily involved with manufacturing pollution abatement products for tannery, textile, or any kind of industrial waste. After two years of working with him, I became more interested in the "prevention" end rather than the "clean it up afterwards" end. From that I got into the nonphosphate issue, and in August 1970 I began to manufacture environmental-oriented cleaning compounds. With one tank and a two-by-four we started to make nonpolluting cleansers for dairies to wash up their milk processing equipment. Eventually we got into our first consumer product, Clearlake, a nonpolluting liquid laundry detergent. We found that the people who really liked it were

those concerned about health, particularly diet. Many people—specifically the Erewhon organization—asked us to make natural products for the body. That, about four years ago, began our relationship with the natural foods trade.

**EWJ:** People who were already eating whole and natural foods initially requested and have since supplanted your products. But have your products had any effect in turning people from a conventional diet to a healthier one, from a consciousness of "What am I putting on my body?" to "What am I putting in my body?" Ultimately, do you feel you have changed people's awareness and subsequent changes in lifestyle?

**TC:** Philosophically, the diet has to come first. I think people's choice of food is the beginning of their consciousness of other things. I do think, though, that because of our label Tom's Natural Soap has been a bridge between a lot of middle America and a small part of the society called the natural foods movement. We have unquestionably moved people in that direction.

**EWJ:** Is that a goal of yours?

**TC:** No. I'm not judgmental in that regard at all. I believe people have a right to lead their own lives. Period. They have their own expression and make their own choices. If they want natural foods—great! I'm pleased when I see movement in that direction, because I've seen a lot of people feel better when they start eating natural foods. But many people that we're relating to with our products don't know how to get into natural foods; they don't know how to begin. They don't know whether it means vitamin pills, "health food," or unprocessed foods. But I think the kind of information that has begun to appear in popular magazines, linking cancer of the lower intestine to lack of roughage and whole grains, is working in our favor. Still, our products are not designed to tell people they should eat natural foods.

**EWJ:** But it would please you if that were a result of using your products?

**TC:** That would be fine.

**EWJ:** And you would like people to use your products regardless of whether they're eating natural foods?

**TC:** Yes. In terms of what people put on their bodies these days, I'm very pleased that people are turning to our products, because they happen to be high-quality and sensible things to use on the body as compared to the junk that's generally available.

**EWJ:** Since anything put on the skin is absorbed into the bloodstream, it is important that consumers be cognizant of the ingredients. Isn't it true that the federal government



Chemist Blaine Tewksbury and Tom Chappell.





now requires that all manufacturers label their ingredients?  
**TC:** As of May 31, 1976, manufacturers have been required to make a full disclosure on their labels of what they are using in their products. However, if a company has a large inventory of labels, they may be used up until November 31, 1976. After that, labeling must conform to a very strict law.

**EWJ:** How does that law affect your labeling procedure?  
**TC:** We're delighted, because we've been putting our ingredients on the labels for four years. And for four years we've been saying that we use a detergent in our shampoo which is derived from coconut oil, while everyone else in the natural foods industry has been dancing around saying they don't use detergent. That's just nonsense, and we're a little sick and tired of it. But it's going to become quite evident to the consumers when they see these mile-long chemical names on the new labels that someone has been ripping them off. We use the label as our place to talk about what we've been putting into our products and why.

There is some detergent base in all of them, providing varying degrees of cleansing for from delicate to oily hair. Then somewhere in between we add conditioning ingredients such as coconut oil or lecithin. The Chamomile Creme is a unique shampoo in our full line because it really does condition while washing the hair. The problem is, it doesn't foam a lot. Foaming is a mental thing. People think their hair is not clean unless the shampoo lathers. With our shampoo, when the hair is clean, it will lather. For example, on the second wash with Chamomile, there will be a little lather. That's because the dirt has been emulsified and made rinsable. That's really what these detergents do—make oil rinsable without stripping the natural oils from the hair.

**EWJ:** You call your products "natural," a word often misused and much abused. Could you please define it in the context of your manufacturing process?

**TC:** Sure. To us, "natural" means items that you could eat: olive oil, coconut oil, herbs, apple cider vinegar—these are all things being put on the table right now. That's why we're hard on the issue of stating publicly we use a detergent in our shampoo. We don't think of the detergent as something you could eat. So where do we go from there? Well, we have only one alternative, which is to identify it so that our customers can get a grasp of what we're using. For example, we pay an incredibly high premium to get glycerine derived from a vegetable rather than animal base. There's really only one source in the country, so we have to buy tank wagons of it—four thousand gallons of glycerine at a time. We could buy five drums of glycerine made by Dow Chemical from the local supplier, but we choose not to use that. Likewise, our toothpaste flavors are not artificial, but are oils pressed from fennel seeds or



spearmint leaves. Similarly, with the fragrances: even though in some cases, as with honeysuckle, we do not use pure oil because we can't afford to spend a thousand dollars a pound, what we use is still an essential oil, not a synthesized fragrance.

**EWJ:** Where do you obtain the extracts for your products?

**TC:** It varies. We buy herbs and oils from Celestial Seasonings and Rocky Hollow Herb Farm. If we were to call a local supply house in New York or New Jersey for what we wanted, they would say, "Oh, we'll give you a natural fragrance." And we'd say, "What do you mean by a natural fragrance?" And they'd say, "Well, it'll conform to the law." They don't know what the hell they're doing. We stick to distributors that we trust.

**EWJ:** Do you feel that customers trust your company?

**TC:** Yes. False or negligent labeling is just plain inexcusable on the part of the manufacturer. Let me tell you what I think people want. First, to be told the truth. Second, they want natural products. We intend first to be straightforward in what we do, and all the rest follows. You've got to deal straight, or eventually you'll be picked off. That is the basis of our philosophy. We've often asked tough questions, but usually we have already had to deal with those questions ourselves so we have thought through the rationale. One example is our advertising. A lot of people think our ads are too slick. My answer to that is that we have some good products and intend to do a first-class job of making that known to people. And we think the way to do that is with some fine-looking informational-oriented advertising.

**EWJ:** You've distributed a brochure, "The Natural Soap Story," in which you allude to another soapmaker as "my friend Dr. Bronner." Are his products also "edible"?

**TC:** You can eat the raw materials. In making soap, you begin with a vegetable oil. We use, for example, coconut, olive, or palm oil. He may use corn oil, though I'm not absolutely certain. Now, those edible vegetable oils have to be reacted with a very strong alkali called potassium hydroxide. That's how you make soap—subject a weak acid, the oil, to a very strong base under heat and pressure until they totally offset each other and form something entirely different called "soap." Of course, you can make detergent based soaps by reacting petroleum derivatives with vegetable oils or animal fats to get so-called "amine" soap. But in our opinion, these are synthetic soaps. Dr. Bronner is not doing that; he's making real soap. I think he's a man of integrity and conviction and intelligence and I think very highly of him. I think he's a good soapmaker, too.

**EWJ:** How about your toothpaste? What goes into that?

**TC:** Chalk, which is calcium carbonate, a mined mineral, provides abrasion. Glycerine, the second-largest ingredient, keeps the system moist; otherwise, as it comes out of the tube it would cake up and dry out. A cleansing agent



Right: Chuck Nelmes, labeler and packing conveyor. Below: George Cheney, plant manager.





derived from coconut oil provides the foam, so that the product moves to the back of the mouth (also, people want to experience foam when brushing their teeth). Irish moss, a seaweed from off the coast of Maine, provides binding properties, and the flavor is from pressed oils. We worked on the toothpaste one and a half years before putting it out: it was our most researched product. We're selling more of it now than anything in our line.

**EWJ:** Your newest product is deodorant. How did you get into that?

**TC:** We had no intention of doing deodorant, but this year the retailers asked us to come out with one. I guess there are people shopping in health and natural foods stores who buy deodorant, and many have been buying a competitive product. I examined that product and found out that it's alcohol-based. I knew the natural foods trade doesn't like alcohol, and it also doesn't like bactericides. We were able to make a stick deodorant that did not use alcohol. It's based on propane glycol, which is basically an innocuous material, a food-grade medium, halfway between alcohol and glycerine: it doesn't stain, irritate, or change bodily functions. And we're not using a bactericide, per se. Bactericides are very tricky ingredients: they can be extremely toxic and deadly in high quantities, and in minute quantities they kill microorganisms that cause odor. We were able to get the propane glycol to perform enough of that function. Then we coupled it with a pleasant fragrance—honeysuckle, spicy herbal, or apple.

**EWJ:** Who originates your products?

**TC:** I do. Blaine Tewksbury, Ph.D., is our chemist. He's a wonderful guy who's been with me almost five years. I'll tell him, "I need a natural this or a natural that," and, because he's a chemist, he'll say, "Well, good God, that's impossible." So we struggle through a formulation together. I conceive what I want, based on my knowledge of the marketplace, and Blaine will go through the mechanics of putting those items together and finding out where certain things have to be in conjunction with others. Eventually he starts handing me samples, which I take home. When I'm happy with the product, we send it out and get other people's opinion on it, so by the time it finally goes on the market we've usually had a fair amount of input from a broad section of people.

**EWJ:** When you're trying out a new product, how do you prepare yourself for that? Do you go into any kind of fast or meditation?

**TC:** No. I just go into our bathroom. You ought to see it. It's an incredible pile of samples. And our kids are into testing now, too. They really like trying out new products. But I'm the first guinea pig.

**EWJ:** I understand that many companies who advertise their ingredients as "natural" in fact use animal derivatives such as mink oil. Have you somehow managed to avoid that?

**TC:** Many people write asking us if we really do stay clear of animal ingredients, and we really do. We've just received a letter from Beauty Without Cruelty, an organization in London that recommends lists of nonanimal products for its members. They said, "We realize that there are some products which may be on nonanimal origin but frequently involve the death of animals," and they wanted to know our testing procedure. Well, this is kind of a bind: the FDA uses test processes that involve rats, but we don't do that—we use ourselves. Because, in the final analysis, even the FDA admits that human experience is the ultimate authority. For that reason we don't like to work with highly sophisticated synthetic ingredients: you can never really predict what's going to happen with them. With something very basic, something you've been using all your life on your table for salads, you can make predictions.

**EWJ:** What is your dream for the future? Where are you going?

**TC:** I think we may still be a mystery to a lot of people, so it's important to reiterate where we're coming from: we're coming from our own indigenous culture. Although we embrace the natural foods movement wholeheartedly, we're not telling people how to eat or how to think or what spiritual life to choose. The state of Maine is *individual*.



Warren Huntman, labeling operation.

**EWJ:** Do you feel that this culture and the natural foods movement are in any way opposed?

**TC:** Not at all. They are totally compatible. Our involvement with the natural foods community has helped contribute to our overall health and total philosophy of why we're here and why we want to stay here. We continue to be very much moved by Maine as being an environment in which we can lead very healthy lives, work with very interesting people, and have an outlet for our energies in a private business. It has been a great decision for us in our lives. And we love it here.

With free samples and a nice feeling I left. There was a nip in the air, a hint of fall. Winter would follow, inexorably. I asked myself again, Why do they stay? For some the reason may be mesmerization by the sea; for others the challenge of rigid soil, the dark of forests, the peaks of mountains. There are cities, too, of course, and industry and multitudinous signs of technology; yet there is an abiding health singing through the air, reflected in the Mainers' complexions. They carry the face of freedom—not license, but freedom. Their government, by town meeting, is their own; their professions can be the expression of their talents; and their souls are as yet unclouded by pollution, mass transportation, and the inevitable banalities of avant-garde sophistication. In Maine can be found clear beings—crisp as the wind, cool as the ice, and salty as Mother Sea. They know their roots, the dignity of those roots, and the danger of disorder in straggling away from roots. I remembered John Cole's counsel, that we seek the strength implicit in hardship, the lessons and energy to be derived from living amid nature unbound.

*"We can not long be ignorant of the wind's direction and significance, or that wind will blow our structures down around us. We must develop again a sense of the seasons, of making do, of simplicity, of thrift, of culture, of creation and ingenious invention. If we know the truth of 20 below, we may also know the necessity for integrity, simplicity, and humility."*

For freedom, for creation, they stay. Industrious people like Tom Chappell intend to bring Maine to the rest of the country. This goal is essentially at variance with the mode of progress as practiced in most up-and-coming states nowadays. The procedure in New Hampshire, for example, attributable to the shortsightedness of its governor, Meldrim Thompson, is to bring the rest of the country—via business, industry, nuclear reactors, and tourism—to the state. It seems much more ecological, efficient, economical, and, primarily, orderly to tap, refine, and cyclically replenish the gifts of one's home base rather than engage in importation and imitation. Although the grass may appear greener across the border, ultimately we must cultivate our own garden. □



Jeanne Rotte, who was a professional actress and teacher of acting in New York City for the past seven years, and a frequent contributor to EWJ, has recently moved to Japan to study yoga with Master Masahiro Oki.