

SCIENCE & INDUSTRY

# kosmetikos\*

## Cosmetics: The Lost Years

Notable women who paved the way for today's cosmetic industry.

By Steve Herman

*The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
Burned in the water. The poop was beaten gold;  
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that  
The winds were lovesick with them...  
—Shakespeare, Anthony and Cleopatra*

**W**e all know that cosmetics existed thousands of years ago. Cleopatra used a heavy arsenal of beauty aids to help her shake the foundations of the Roman Empire. Yes, cosmetics and perfumes have a long history, but the consumer industry we live in is relatively recent, a creation of the decades 1890 through 1920. The products hawked in the 19th Century by druggists, perfumers, barbers, physicians, and a colorful assortment of other enterprising individuals were primitive by our standards. Certainly, active ingredients were used with abandon, notably arsenic, lead, and mercury. These were products that really made visible differences, and the consumer was well-advised to be wary of the majority of these mysterious concoctions.

The transition to modern consumerism involved not just the introduction of responsible product formulation, but fundamental transformations of social behavior. Women were at the heart of this development in the cosmetic industry, and we will consider the contributions of two of them: Annie Turnbo

Malone and Madame C. J. Walker. These women and their contemporaries paved the way for Estée Lauder and Mary Kay Ash in our time.

It is essential to recognize the relative perception of beauty products and hair treatments for different ethnic groups at the time in question. For the white consumer, the use of makeup was the major issue; the disreputable view of the painted lady had to be overcome. The black woman had a more complex situation regarding the products being offered. Hair-straightening and skin-lightening products could be viewed as an attempt to seem more

**Spot quiz:**  
*Florence Nightingale Graham, like Sarah Breedlove, changed her name. By what name is she known today?*

*The answer is at the end of this column.*

white, and use of these products was thus charged with racial overtones within the black community.

Into this seething cauldron of social and economic change, two remarkable women seized the challenge, each becoming millionaires in the process. Each was born into poverty, endured grueling manual labor, and lived in a society with intense racial discrimination. The women, Annie Turnbo Malone and Madame C. J. Walker (born Sarah Breedlove), proved that in an America more than half a century before the civil right movement, opportunity indeed existed for all.

Each developed a hair-care formula. Walker based her product on lore obtained from an aunt who was a herb doctor. Malone took the approach many modern bench chemists use: Her formulation came from a large African man in a dream—or directly from God, whichever version one prefers.

Malone entered business first, anchoring her line with Wonderful Hair Grower. Access



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\*Greek kosmEtikos, skilled in adornment or decorating.

to traditional distribution through chain stores was denied to blacks, so the products were sold door-to-door. Business prospered and in 1902 manufacturing settled in St. Louis, with its vibrant black community and active toiletries trade. Within a few years, the line was distributed nationally.

Then as now, success breeds imitators, and by 1906 it was necessary to rename the product. The trademark protected the name Poro, the Mende (West African) word for a devotional society. These minority companies viewed their products as more than a mere business, but the focus of a way of life.

Malone's competition came from a former Poro sales agent, C. J. Walker. After experimenting with those hair-care staples, sulfur and capsicum, she came out with her own Wonderful Hair Grower. By 1910, from her headquarters in Indianapolis, Walker also achieved national distribution. The basis of the new hair-pressing treatment

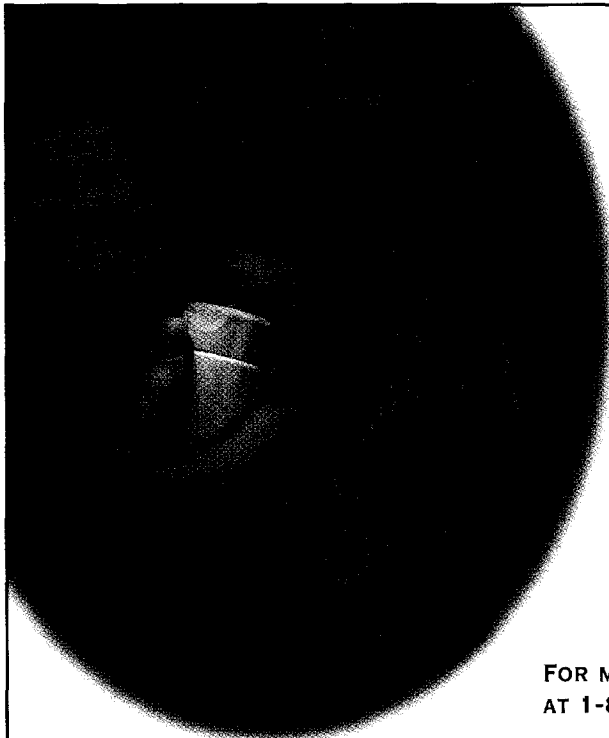
was light oil and a wide-tooth steel comb. The comb was heated on a stove, and the design placed less strain on the scalp than the tongs or pullers previously used. The result was long, styled hair.

With distribution forced outside the conventional wholesale-retail network by racial discrimination, reliance was placed on salons, mail-order, and door-to-door. As an example of this approach in mainstream America, a book salesman named David Hall McConnell established the California Perfume Company in 1886, when the perfume samples he gave away were better received



**Madame C.J. Walker**  
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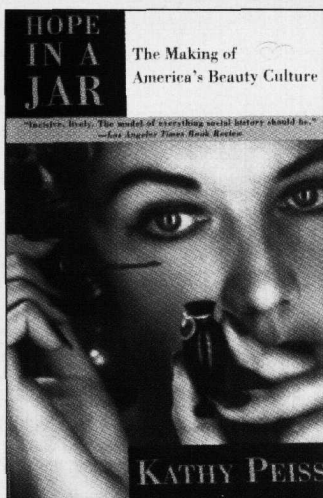
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CIRCLE #119 ON READER INQUIRY CARD

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Kathy Peiss' *Hope In A Jar*

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than his books. Depot agents were recruited for house-to-house sales. The company he founded is better known to us as Avon.

In 1917, Walker constructed a lavish, \$350,000 estate in the prestigious Hudson River village of Irvington-on-Hudson. Dubbed Villa Lewaro by tenor Enrico Caruso (!), the mansion was proof of the economic opportunities for anyone with

energy and vision. Walker went on to become more than a leading businesswoman, but a leader of the black community. Her activities earned her a commemorative stamp from the U.S. Postal Service in 1998.

Prior to the 1950s, records and formulas are scarce, history fragmentary. Many important participants have been lost in

## Spot quiz answer:

*Florence Nightingale Graham is better known today as Elizabeth Arden!*

obscurity. We will probably never learn who made the first hair relaxer, a technical feat beyond the grasp of the pioneers we have been considering. The sum

of their efforts left an indelible impression on the cosmetic industry and American society in the 20th Century.

This column has been based on *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, by Kathy Peiss, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. ■

## References

1. Peiss, Kathy, *Hope in a Jar*, Henry Holt, 1998
2. A lecture delivered by Dr. Peiss, *American Women and the Making of Modern Consumer Culture*, is online at [www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol1no1/peiss-text.html](http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol1no1/peiss-text.html) or [www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol1no1/peiss-text.html](http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol1no1/peiss-text.html)
3. The Madame C. J. Walker Website is at [www.madamcjwalker.com/index.html](http://www.madamcjwalker.com/index.html) or [www.madamcjwalker.com/index.html](http://www.madamcjwalker.com/index.html)

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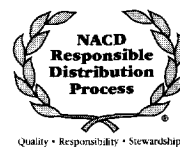
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