

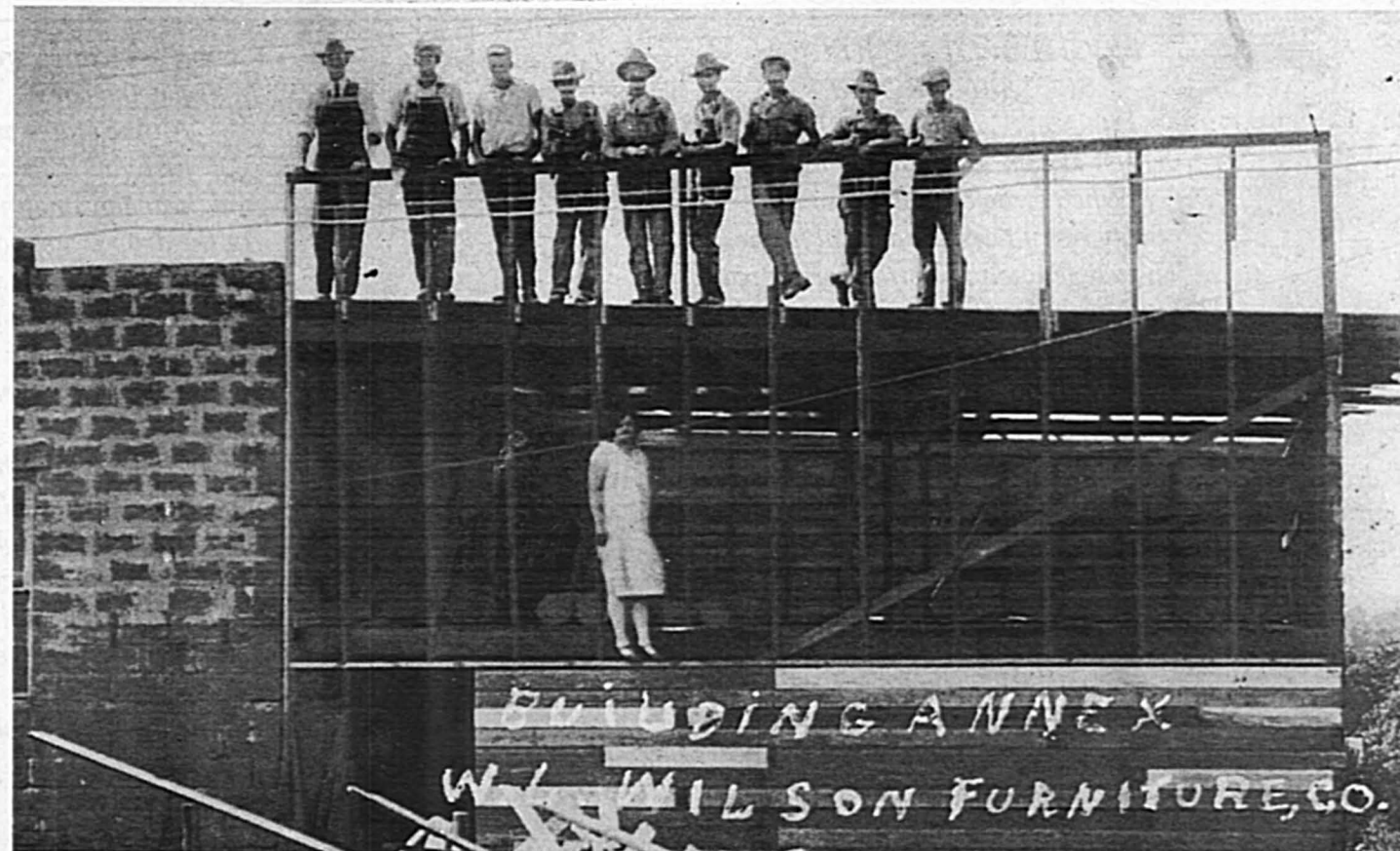
## Oldtimers Used Lye For A Variety Of Reasons

Once considered a necessity by rural women, lye is rarely used today. In fact, the name itself has just about disappeared from the common vernacular. It was used primarily to make soap for washing clothes and dishes and for bathing. Another common use around the homestead was in loosening the husks on dry corn kernels to produce hominy.

Lye, or more properly sodium hydroxide, is a byproduct of wood ashes. When water is applied to the ashes, this alkaline salt leaches out of the solution. Oldtimers constructed ash hoppers to catch the lye in containers. Collected lye was stored and used very carefully because of its caustic properties.

Lye soap usually was made outside in an iron or granite kettle over a wood fire. Its only ingredients were animal fat and ash lye, or concentrated lye from a can. The fat often was cooking grease that was poured out of a frying pan through a strainer into a container. Lard and suet also worked well. It took two pints of ash lye to about six pounds of fat to produce the desired effect. Or, it was possible to mix one can of lye to two-and-a-half pints of water and combine it with the same amount of fat.

Extreme care was observed when using the lye. Soapmakers were careful



Workers take a break from constructing an annex to W. L. Wilson Furniture Company in Crocker sometimes in the late 1920's. Lee Wilson is the first person on the left and Jim Kinsley is the third person from the left. The woman in the picture is Flossie Wilson. Wilson Furniture, located at the present site on the Old Depot, burned down in the 1960's. Photo courtesy of John Kinsley.

not to splash any of it on their skin or in their eyes. They also carefully avoided inhaling fumes produced by the reaction of the boiling lye and fat. They would stir the hot liquid with a wooden paddle or spoon. When they thought the process was done, the soapmakers would let a lit-

tle of the mixture drip off the stirring utensil. If the mixture stringed or beaded up similar to jelly, it was ready to pour into a flat container to cool. Before the soapy substance completely hardened, it would be cut into squares. These would be used in washing dirty clothes on a

wash board, handwashing and in bathing.

Many housewives preferred a soft lye soap mixture for dishwashing. They could have this in sufficient quantity by dipping the desired amount out of the boiling lye and fat solution before the jelly-like stage was reached.

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