

The Lordly Loofah

by Bud Webster

I wonder how many of us, as we lie luxuriating in our bathtubs, think about the romance and mystery of the loofah? I know I certainly never had until the mail brought me a brochure from the Loofah Institute of America (Box 3819, Piltdown, IL 97584). Along with it came a letter from Bob Cranepool, LIA Vice President in charge of Promotions, inviting me to visit the huge loofah quarry in Piltdown.

Knowing very little about the production of these fascinating objects, I took advantage of his hospitality and flew into O'Hare. After hopping the Piltdown shuttle bus ("Visit Piltdown and See What Makes America Great!"), I checked into Doris and Milo Blavatsky's Bear-in-the-Woods Bed and Breakfast. A press pass and hard hat were waiting at the desk, and after dropping off my luggage, I rented a Yugo and headed for the outskirts of town.

After only a few minor difficulties (I'm delighted to see that towing charges are coming down), I finally arrived at the front gates of the Stanko Loofah Works and was met by Bob Cranepool and the president of the company, Greg Stanko. There, in a short but moving ceremony, I was presented with a key to the middle-management washroom, a tee-shirt with the legend "My Parents Visited Piltdown and All I Got was a Lousy Chunk of Fibrous Matter", and a replica of Mount Rushmore molded from loofite.

"You know, Bud," Bob said as we trundled up to the loading docks in an electric golf cart, "there's a lot of misinformation floating around about loofahs, and we're certainly glad to have an opportunity to set the record straight."

"Darn right, Bob," said Greg. "As someone who's spent his entire life in the loofah business, I just don't understand how some of these stories get started." He shook his head ruefully. "Why, I was reading in the New York Times just the other day some report about McDonald's using loofahs as filler in their hamburgers, and I'll tell you I was on the phone to their editor toot sweet."

"They'd probably be the better for it, Greg," laughed Bob. "But seriously, that's the sort of thing that we see twice a year at least. Sometimes three."

"They printed a retraction," Greg added with a shrug, "but it was in the cooking section below a recipe for Hunan eggplant and nobody saw it."

Of course, I'd heard the "urban legends" about loofahs: spiders laying eggs in loofahs and bathers being bitten, the loofah exploding in the microwave, the loofah picked up by the side of the road late at night and later disappearing. The list is almost endless, and they're all, according to Bob and Greg, untrue.

"There's just no way," Bob told me, "that drying a loofah in a microwave can cause it to explode, and nobody with a firm understanding of how loofahs are processed would give such a story any credence."

"Which brings us to the first step in loofah production," Greg interrupted good-naturedly as we turned a corner. "'Sounding' for loofite."

In front of me was a huge platform surrounded by workers. As I watched, a cage was lowered onto the platform by a derrick. "That's the most important part of this industry, Bud," Greg said proudly. "That cage is full of little Mexican hairless dogs. We spray 'em down with used motor oil and then let 'em loose in an area we're testing for loofite. If they come back all pink and clean and happy, we know we've struck it."

"They sure are making a lot of noise, though," I remarked.

Bob clapped me on the shoulder. "That's why we call it 'sounding', Bud!" he laughed.

Greg took us through the whole process of exploration, from the original geosurveys ("We look for taconite. They're frequently found together," Greg revealed), to the core samples brought up from hundreds of feet beneath the surface, to the actual quarrying and refining of the loofite.

(A word about this: contrary to popular belief, loofite is not mined, but quarried from open pits. In the past, these unsightly pits would take years to recover, but with the continued greening of American industry, most loofah processors have adopted various kinds of recovery programs; for instance, the Stanko Loofah Works plants mullet groves and nematode beds in played-out loofah pits, which not only make Piltdown a nicer place to live, but are a healthy tax write-off as well.)

From the first, the struggle between the quarrymen and the loofite has resembled that between miners and coal; there's danger in the pits, and if too much dynamite is used to bring down a wall of loofite, quarrymen can be buried under dozens of pounds of loofite for hours. How often have we seen shocking news footage of loofite workers (or "loofers", as they're called in the industry) pulled from the rubble of a cave-in, skin pink from their ordeal and suffering from intense boredom?

Thanks to modern technology, this tragic scene is repeated less and less. Today, loofers wear special OSHA-approved worksuits and hard-hats which not only prevent the annoyance of being scrubbed raw each day (they refer to this as "the pinks"), but include powerful radio receivers so that, if the worst does happen, they have a choice of five radio stations to keep them company while awaiting rescue.

The last step of the process is refining the long cylinders of loofite into what we know as loofahs. Here, in a clean room equaling NASA's, the rough ore is subjected to high temperatures and pressures in a huge, rotating stainless steel tank called a render. The loofite is spun to dislodge any loose fibers and insects, then soaked in a combination of brine, boron bi-sulfate, and sodium salicylate to purify the resulting spongy mass. This "soup", as the workers call it, is slightly radioactive, but well within government regulations. The actual proportions are a closely guarded secret. Greg Stanko says: "This formula was developed over decades of experimentation by my grandfather, Jedediah R. Stanko. A lot of loofah manufacturers have tried to copy it, and a few have tried to steal it, but there's only three people who know everything that goes into it, and they all work different shifts."

Finally, the finished loofahs are dried, cut to length, and glued to sticks, blocks of wood, or what have you before being packaged in brightly colored boxes for shipment to department stores and shopping malls all over the world.

After the tour, I was treated to an elegant brunch of squash, turbot, and spongecake – courtesy of the Stanko Loofah Works kitchens – and asked to sign their guestbook (I noticed that the earlier pages held the names of such illuminaries as Lord Gordon-Gordon, van Meergeren, and P. T. Barnum). After returning the key to the middle-management washroom, I shook hands all around and climbed back in my Yugo.

And so, the mysteries of the loofah stand revealed, and we say a grateful "thank you" to Bob and Greg for their time and hospitality. Then, back to Doris and Milo's for an evening of local baseball on the color television in the lobby (Piltdown Men 37, Cardiff Giants 35), and a long, luxurious bath – complete with loofah – before returning home.