

Man of ideas
lathered
his cleansing
product
with messages

By **ELDON KNOCHÉ**
of the Journal Sentinel staff

There are hundreds of stories about Emanuel Bronner, and many of them are probably true.

He was the inventor, producer and promoter of Dr. Bronner's Peppermint 18-in-1 Pure Castile Soap and Dr. Bronner's All-One-God-Faith.

The soap is the less complicated of the two and has been adopted by millions of users in the United States, thanks to word-of-mouth advertising started by hippies in the late 1960s.

The faith, plastered in 3,000-plus words on every quart bottle of soap, has likely been adopted by some, though it's unclear whether anyone but Dr. Bronner understood all of what is printed there.

That's the way it is with a philosophy of peace, unity and environment that simultaneously pays tribute to the qualities of Jesus, Karl Marx and Mark Spitz.

"He never thought small," said his son, Ralph, a longtime resident of Menomonee Falls who taught English and reading at Milwaukee's Muir Middle School for 32 years. "He was a brilliant soap chemist trying to unite the world."

Bronner wasn't a doctor, if that makes any difference. Growing up in his family's business in Germany, he gained a soapmaster's degree, which he considered the equivalent of a doctorate.

He wasn't really a rabbi, either, though he sometimes called himself that in later years, using

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In a circa '70s photo, Emanuel Bronner displays a bottle of his "pure castile soap."

On his soapbox

Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap

the meaning of teacher.

He was Jewish, all right, even though he had his three children baptized Lutheran. Two sons and a daughter were born when Bronner was living in Milwaukee, but that was before he was forced into an Illinois mental institution and long before he habitually greeted visitors in California clad in leopard-print bathing trunks.

Bronner, among the biggest self-promoters in the nation, and blind the last 30 years of his life, was a self-proclaimed visionary.

But think what you will about Emanuel Bronner, he manufactured great soap.

Anyone can use it, but consumers are weighted toward vegetarians, backpackers and environmentalists. The soap is stocked in health food stores and outfitter shops.

Dr. Bronner's also is becoming popular among models in New York City and can be found in some of the finer cosmetic shops there, Ralph Bronner said.

The soap has been touted by the doctor and his fans as good for bathing, washing dishes, cleansing clothes, scrubbing dentures, deodorizing diapers, cleaning vegetables and brushing teeth. It can be used as a shampoo, pet cleanser, after shave, mouthwash, deodorant, mosquito repellent or for birth control - there's a recipe on the label for that.

Sold in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Holland and Australia, Dr. Bronner's soap has been featured in such magazines and newspapers as *Cosmopolitan*, *Esquire*, *Mirabella*, *GQ*, *Natural Health*, *Dirt Rider*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Wall Street Journal*. *Young and Modern* magazine lists the soap as one of the "50 best beauty bargains ever," and *Seventeen* showed a model washing her long hair in a stream, a bottle of Dr. Bronner's in her hands.

Bubbling With Ideas

Despite the popularity of the soap, for Bronner it was merely the messenger for his ideas. And what ideas they were. The rambling, semi-religious, semi-science fiction labels speak of peace, unity and nature.

Bronner, 89, died March 7 in Escondido, Calif. He left before he could save Spaceship Earth, as he liked to call our planet, but before he left, he had one heck of a ride.

The trip started Feb. 1, 1908, in Heilbronn, Germany, where his father, Berthold Heilbronn, was the third generation of a family that had been making soap since 1844. Emanuel was to be the fourth generation, but he turned into the black sheep of the family when he mixed politics in with the soap by promoting a Zionist state.

After words with his father, he left for America at age 21, arriving with little money but a vast knowledge of soap-making.

At first Bronner hired on at various soap-making companies in the East, but he had relatives in Milwaukee and moved here in about 1930, according to his son. At some point Emanuel Heilbronn dropped the first syllable of his surname, partly to protest the use of the "Heil Hitler" phrase becoming popular in Germany. He also may have wanted his name - and that of his children - to be less Jewish-sounding, for he feared the persecution was spreading.

During the '30s he began to send the first of his more than 200 telegrams to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, advising him about "peace on Earth through one God" and sharing his thoughts on ending World War II.

"He was fed up with his orthodox, Hebrew-praying Jewish father," Ralph Bronner said. "He felt the world should know all religions had the truth."

Clubbing and Waltzing

Emanuel Bronner loved to dance and he longed for his native culture, so he joined several Germanic groups in Milwaukee, with the Bavarian Club being his favorite. Strauss waltzes were the epitome of music to him and, years later, he would write on his soap labels that cows that listened to Strauss waltzes gave more milk.

A one dance he met Paula Wolfahrt, a Catholic

and a maid at the Schroeder Hotel, and they married in 1933. Three children, Ellen, James and Ralph, were soon born. The Bronners lived in Milwaukee and he earned a living as a consultant to soap factories around the Midwest.

The situation in Germany was worsening for Jews, and Bronner arranged for one sister to emigrate to America. Now a retired German professor, she lives in Boston. His other sister also left Heilbronn and lives in Israel.

Their parents did not fare so well. Bronner wanted them to come to the U.S., but Berthold Heilbronn refused, confident Hitler would soon be gone. Both parents were to die in concentration camps.

Things were not going well with the Bronner family in Milwaukee, either. Paula was sickly and spent time in hospitals before she died in 1943. Emanuel, who was trying to bring peace to the world and soap-making expertise to manufacturers, farmed the children out to whoever would keep them. Ralph Bronner believes the three of them may have lived in as many as 15 different homes.

Bronner would frequently drive his black Buick to visit his children and "he would let us ride on the hood of the car and hold onto the hood ornament," Ralph recalled. That fun ended one day when police officers pulled the auto over and ordered Bronner to stop the back-road recreation.

By the early 1940s, Bronner had moved to Chicago. The children lived with him for a while but, when their mother died, their father found them a stable home in the Milwaukee area with Jacob and Mary Galli, near Port Washington and County Line roads.

Dental Dropout

Bronner began spending more of his time trying to save mankind, sending letters to world leaders and speaking against Communism and fluoridation and for one God. He was proselytizing his message of peace in his heavy German accent and organizing students at the University of Chicago in 1946 when he refused to leave the dean's office and was arrested.

He was taken to a mental hospital in Elgin, Ill., placed in straitjackets and given shock treatments, which he later claimed caused his blindness. After six months, he stole \$20 from a purse, escaped from the grounds and bought a newspaper to search the classifieds for someone looking to share a ride. Bronner picked Los Angeles because no one knew him there.

On the way, the driver stopped in Las Vegas to do a little gambling, and Bronner decided they had become good enough friends for him to confide he had escaped from a mental hospital. They weren't that good a friends, it turned out, and the driver dumped Bronner in Las Vegas.

He used his slim bankroll to raise enough money at the roulette table to get to L.A. Once there he was out of cash, so for several months he stayed at the YMCA, not in a room but on the roof, with pigeons to keep him company.

He volunteered to help fight fires for pay, and with that income rented rooms in a dilapidated downtown tenement hotel and purchased the ingredients for mineral salt, which he made and sold.

With the formulas he had kept in his head since the 1920s, he began making soap in 20-gallon drums, stirring the mixture with a broom handle and bottling it by hand.

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The soap labels evolved slowly, first with a few sentences. Eventually the labels on millions of bottles would include such exclamation-pointed statements as:

Only hard work-God's Law can save us, but if we teach only our clan? We're all hated then! So, we must teach friend & enemy, the whole Human race, the full-truth, hard-work, free speech, press-&-profitsharing Moral ABC's All-One-God-Faith, lightning-like, 6-billion strong, for we're All-One or none!

Or:

What God does send receive in glad wholesomeness! To strive for greater wealth fortells thy fall. Here is no home, here is but

wilderness. Forth pilgrim, forth!

Or:

For we're ALL-ONE OR NONE! ALL-ONE! LISTEN CHILDREN ETERNAL FATHER ETERNALLY ONE! EXCEPTIONS ETERNALLY? ABSOLUTE NONE!

Or:

A great teacher, must first a self-supporting hard-worker be, like Alesen-Baeck-Carnegie-Cousteau-Hammer-Liebman-Paine-Pike-Sanger-Spinoza-Strauss-Szasz-Wilke-Yadin-Zamenhof, or he'll turn our greatest teaching into spades, to bury our people! "All people!" added Carpenter Jesus entering manhood! Manhood!

Bronner's labels changed constantly as he developed his ideas, but they always contained instructions on how to use his soap, including admonitions such as: "DILUTE! DILUTE! OK!"

In the mid-'50s, Ralph visited his father at the combination home and factory.

"It was like a cave with copies of thousands of documents he sent (to political leaders) around the world," Ralph said. Bronner, still producing mineral salt, was "sleeping on huge mineral salt drums."

In the 1960s, soap users began spreading news of the product by mouth and from health food store to store. "Customers would want it for their friends," Ralph said. "Distributors would call." However, Emanuel Bronner, who was a philosopher, not a capitalist, often wouldn't respond and would not even send invoices to customers who wished to pay for the soap.

Ralph Bronner said it was not particularly easy to work with his eccentric father.

Emanuel Bronner, his skin dark brown from the California sun, often wore his leopard-print bathing suit as he discussed business and philosophy with visitors. He stayed at the hotel for two years after developers wanted to tear it down, and they had to sue to get him out.

By then he had married Gladys Peschelke, a native of Chetek, Wis., and they bought a house in Escondido, northeast of San Diego. He put his company's headquarters in one bedroom and moved his factory to a small cottage on his 3 acres of land. The plant grew to several trailers where different types of soap were manufactured.

The product took off in about 1968 when hippies in the Haight-Asbury district of San Francisco began to promote the soap with many uses in the bottle with the unusual label. Bronner was spending most of this time on the labels, constantly revising them and developing what he called the Moral ABCs.

Today annual sales are \$3 million to \$4 million, and bottling is still done by hand by three to five people in the single-structure factory. A hose from each 3,000-gallon tank on the roof - one for each kind of soap - leads into the building and a worker puts the end of the hose into the plastic bottle, opens a spigot and the soap flows into the container by gravity. Then she pastes on the colorful label, also by hand.

Peppermint is still the biggest seller, with almond, eucalyptus, lavender and unscented also available. A quart plastic bottle costs \$9, a pint \$5.50, and a bar of Dr. Bronner's soap is \$2.75.

Sons Still Soaping

James Bronner, who has been working with Dr. Bronner's All-One-God-Faith for about 15 years, has become president. Ralph, who inherited his father's promotion skills, is the vice president and traveling salesman/ambassador. Their sister, Ellen, died about 10 years ago.

For the first time in decades, Emanuel Bronner's philosophy is static. The brothers say they will not alter the label, except for technical changes required by the Food and Drug Administration.

That should please fans who send testimonials for the cleansing product and the philosophy to Dr. Bronner's factory.

"We love your soap and especially the beautiful message written all over the label," one letter said.

Another user, who adopted Bronner's religion and his punctuation, wrote: "Until I read one of your soap labels, I was an atheist. Now I have found the words in which I can believe!"