

Cold Cream: The Cosmetic Cure of Apex

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Abstract

From 1928 to 1936, the logging town of Apex outside Tusayan, Arizona was situated almost directly next to what is now the Grand Canyon Airport. Numerous cold cream brands, including Ponds, Elmo, Jaciel, and Daggett and Ramsell, have been found across the site. Some of these brands were sold only in outside stores, while others may have been available through the company store. The cold cream jars and lids still present at Apex reveal preference for specific brand due to the dry winter climate and the intense need for skin care at Apex.

History of Apex

The company town of Apex is located on the Kaibab National Forest outside of Tusayan, Arizona. Apex was established by the Saginaw and Manistee Lumber Company in 1928, and was dismantled in 1936 (Maddock 2024: 1). The buildings at Apex consisted of boxcar-sized housing that prioritized mobility and efficiency; they could also be assembled and disassembled smoothly (Maddock 2024: 3). The residents of Apex were very diverse according to the 1930 United States Census. Swedish workers made up a large percentage of the non-American workers who lived at Apex throughout its active years and made up most of the overall workforce when Apex was first established. (Maddock 2024: 62). According to the same census, there were also 45 women who lived at Apex. The only paying job for a woman at Apex was a schoolteacher, so all other women living at Apex was a wife and/or mother.

Cold cream brands found at Apex, largely used by and advertised to women during the 1920s and 1930s, point to Depression-era women in rural America keeping up with beauty and hygiene trends (O'Donnell 2024).

Pond's

Pond's was founded in Utica, New York in 1846 by Theron T. Pond (Bennett 2022; Pond's 2026; Figure 1). Their first product, "Golden Treasure," was witch hazel extract, which strengthens the skin barrier from below the surface and heals minor cuts on the skin barrier. In 1904, the company updated Golden Treasure as rebranded as Pond's Cold Cream (Figure 2). They ran marketing campaigns for their vanishing cream and cold cream, stating that "Every normal skin needs [these] two creams" (Bennett 2022). This campaign was highly successful between 1916 and 1925, with profits increasing by 27% for the cold cream and 60% for the vanishing cream (Bennett 2022). As a result, Pond's became a leading product on shelves. By 1924, women started valuing cold creams imported from Europe, so Pond's launched a testimonial marketing campaign with endorsements from three European Queens, titled ladies, six princesses, and leaders of American society (Gartrell 2010). Advertisements ran in multiple magazines, including Vogue. This marketing campaign solidified Pond's as a leading brand, allowing them expand and continue to make products.

At least four Pond's milk glass cold cream jars and one lid have been found at Apex at several areas of family housing. Both round and oval-shaped bottles were recorded, possibly pointing to different dates or products. This shows the wide distribution of Ponds, as the market reached rural America during the Great Depression. During the time of Apex, Pond's was also adjusting its prices to be more affordable for women during the Great Depression. The cold cream jar shards attest to the popularity and affordability of Pond's.

Daggett and Ramsdell

Daggett and Ramsdell introduced their version of cold cream in 1893 (Bennett 2018b; Figure 4). The ingredients included beeswax, petroleum, rose water, and borax. They branded their cold cream as "The Perfect Cold Cream" and were the first company in America to manufacture this recipe on a wide scale. Daggett and Ramsdell were known for a metal screw-top lid on their containers, because Standard Oil acquired Daggett and Ramsdell.

Even though the only visible writing is "COLD CREAM", the unique shape of the logo identifies it as the unique lid of a Daggett and Ramsdell cold cream jar.

History of Cold Cream

Cold Cream is an emulsion mixture of fat and water. The first cold creams were created during Roman times, attributed to Roman Physician Galen (Bennett 2018a). The ingredients used in the first cold creams were molten beeswax, water, and olive oil. The process of making the first cold creams was laborious and required a lot of attention because the mixture would separate while sitting. This meant many of the first cold creams were made either at home or in small quantities. Its primary use over time has been for protecting and moisturizing the skin (Gulliver 2024) Rose water or oil would also be added to the cold cream to give it a scent during the mixing process and cause a cooling effect on the wearer's face, giving cold cream its name (Bennett 2025).

Eventually, almond oil replaced olive oil, which in turn was replaced by mineral oil and petroleum. In 1869, Robert Chesebrough, the creator of Vaseline, extracted petroleum from petroleum crude oil, and borax was added to the cold cream ingredients list for better emulsion (Bennett 2018a). Mineral oil and petroleum held a long shelf life, giving the manufacturer the ability to ship products across countries, states, and seas. In the late 1920s to early 1930s, the ingredients used in cold creams were beeswax, almond oil or mineral oil, rosewater, and spermaceti. Some companies, such as Ponds (Figure 1) and Daggett and Ramsell have used petroleum and mineral oil since the late 19th century. Some of these companies' products appear at 1920s and 30s logging sites such as the company town Apex.



Figure 2
Left: 1923 Elmo product packaging. Note the price of \$4.80 per dozen (Bennett 2023).
Right: Fragment of an Elmo cold cream jar. Photo by Lorna Baker.

Elmo's and Jaciel

Elmo Cosmetics was founded and trademarked in 1908 by two sisters (Bennett 2023; Figure 2). The brand had a variety of different products on the market, including cold creams, face powders, lipstick, rouge, and eye makeup. In its earlier years, Elmo sold four cold creams: a cleansing cream, tonic astringent, tissue builder, and cucumber cream.

The milk glass Elmo jar at Apex was likely a cleansing cream, tissue cream, or cucumber cream, based on the size of the threaded glass shard and its milky white color (Figure 6). Cleaning cream removed dust and dirt from pores, tissue builder prevented the skin from getting dry and wrinkled, and cucumber cream could bleach the skin from a tan and freckles (Bennett 2023).

Elmo limited the sales of their products before 1930, preferring to sell only in big department stores, and during the Great Depression, expanding to drug stores. It was unlikely, then, that the Elmo jar found at Apex came from the company store. Similarly, Jaciel, another cold cream brand found at Apex, was sold exclusively at J.C. Penney between 1927 and 1934 (Figure 3). Apex's women may have travelled to the Flagstaff J.C. Penney, which opened in 1917, to purchase these two brands (Figure 5). The store stayed open late on the 6th and 21st of every month because those were pay days for the lumber mill workers (Adams-Ockrassa 2020).



Figure 3
Right: Jaciel jar base. Photo by Emily Dale.
Left: Flagstaff's J.C. Penney in 1953 (Adams-Ockrassa 2020).



Conclusions

Northern Arizona is known for its cool and dry weather, which is historically unforgivable to the skin, no matter who you were. Other cosmetics brands found at Apex that sold cold creams include Princess Pat, Marinello's, and Harriett Hubbard Ayer, and bottles of A.S. Hinds Honey and Almond Cream lotion point to other products used to protect against the weather.

All these products have been found across the site, meaning they were used by women across the company's economic spectrum. The wives of both management and laborers chose cold creams that best fit their budgets and needs. Marketing campaigns also influenced what the people living at Apex were buying as a whole, since certain companies, like Pond's ran advertisements in popular magazines. This could explain why Pond's is the most common cold cream brand found at Apex. It was likely the most accessible cold cream and the most affordable compared to Elmo's or Jaciel that were only available in department stores.

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Figure 4

Left: Daggett and Ramsdell "Perfect Cold Cream" lid. Photo from Etsy.
Left: Daggett and Ramsdell lid with knife cut. Photo by Emily Dale.



Learn more about the Apex, Arizona
Archaeology Project at our website by
clicking the QR code.