

The Evolution of Bedtime Beauty Routines from the 1920s to the 1950s

By Paige Towers • October 2, 2016 at 6:28pm

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Women — excuse me — ladies

have long received instructions on taking care of themselves before bed. “Wash your face in a circular motion!” “Don’t brush your hair when it’s wet!” While prebed beauty tips do get passed down through generations (some young women still layer on cold cream and crack eggs in the shower to let the yolks coat their hair), they also change to reflect the trends and realities of the time, as we can see from looking back at bedtime ladytasks from the 1920s through the 1950s.

So while pinning your curls with a few dozen metal bobby pins every night may seem bizarre now, sanding down your skin with an at-home microdermabrasion tool

may very well seem like crazytown a couple decades down the line.

To make sure these nighttime beauty routines aren’t lost to history, here's a peek at how women got pretty in decades past.

THE 1920S (AND SLIGHTLY BEFORE)

Oh the roaring twenties: jazz was born, speakeasies were abound, flappers tooted into town behind the wheels of wildly unsafe cars and, as this 1920s silent film displays, women wasted hours of potential sleep each night styling their hair into pin curls or finger waves.

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Try watching this video on www.youtube.com, or enable JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser.

Women weren't just encouraged to stay up prepping their bobbed hair. As shown in a 1916 article in , nightly routines were focused on perfecting, umm, everything. The article refers to a woman readying herself before bed as a "pseudoscientist who repairs the damages of freckless exposure to sun and wind, makes the skin white and satin again, trains the eyebrows, multiplies the eyelashes, reduces pores, eradicates crow's feet, keeps her face fit and in condition."

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Photoplay

That's right, why leave home and be a real scientist when you have so many pores to examine, girls!

Directions for the flawless bedtime routine also called for every lady to be “wholly addicted to cold cream and auxiliary astringent lotion.” Bleach cream should have also been applied at night, as well as porereducing cream, and a “special muscle oil” to build up the delicate tissue about the eyes.

THE 1930S

Enter the age of the Great Depression, when budgets were cinched tighter than hourglass waistlines. Far less money was spent on lotions and bleach creams so people could buy, you know, bread. But some basic trends continued for the middle class and wealthy, including wavy hair

and moisturizer, which, in the 1930s, became known as “skin food.” (The act of moisturizing was even referred to as “feeding the skin,”

which — in our post “Silence of the Lambs” world — sounds totally disturbing.)

Bedtime beauty routine guides (like this

from the Australian newspaper, also suggested pinching skin, which was a free (!) way of perking up your face. With fingers and thumbs, women with “plump” faces were instructed to massage with a good amount of force so as to thin out their faces, and women with “faces too thin for beauty” were to pinch and knead their skin so as to “encourage their cheeks to fill out.” Because that’s how faces work.

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June 1931 guide Examiner)

It's also important to note that the vast majority of these instructions were doled out to white women: women are told to protect their "porcelain skin" with sunscreen and almost all of the advertisements feature lilywhite powder and foundation. Even when beauty advertisements for women of color popped up — as the 1930s ad below illustrates — it was mostly for skin bleach, or advice on how to straighten hair.

THE 1940S

World War II brought about the totally insane idea that middle class women could work outside the home; thus, more modest styles became the norm.

In this 1940s instructional video, “Hair Style for Safety WWII,” the male narrator states: “In a changing world however, a change of hairstyle was indicated. [...] This [hairstyle] is entirely out of place in a war production plant. Valuable time is lost on a futile gesture. Uncontrolled hair will never stay in place. The operator is exposed to the constant threat of hair caught in the machine.”

But despite working in a war industry factory all day, ladies were still supposed to be rubbing a whole lot of cream into their face before bedtime. (Was there such a thing as overfeeding

skin?) Then, instead of washing it off with water or just, like, leaving it there — they're expected to wipe it off with tissues, which seems like a lot of time no one ever got back.

In a 1944 Queensland Times article

about beauty and the great outdoors (because what's a girl to do when she sweats or her face looks oily from sunscreen?) the writer reminds ladies not to sacrifice beauty for sleep: "Just because your [sic] tired after a long day in the open air, you can't neglect your bedtime beauty routine. The welfare of your skin is worth a few extra minutes' sleep."

THE 1950S

The 1950s is famous for the “happy housewife” trope. Women were back in the home making

jello molds and fruitcakes

(while smiling), and always wearing either circle skirts or starched and ironed printed day dresses. Thus, unsurprisingly, bedtime beauty advice was often geared towards the married woman whose job was to please a

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husband — or the single woman whose job was to find a husband.

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In a 1952 article from

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The Sydney Morning Herald “Beauty for Young Marrieds: Here Is Your

Routine for Good Grooming!”

the writer sums up one of women’s most stressful decisions: “Bedtime is when you’ll be faced with the problem of your hair. To pin or not to pin? To be pretty tonight or tomorrow? [sic]” (Spoiler alert: you can be pretty both tonight and tomorrow if you cover those ugly pins with a freshly pressed hankie.)

The writer also advises how much “skinfood” to apply after cleansing one’s face because that’s unfortunately still a thing, in addition to a new term in the 1950s beauty vocabulary: “Complexion milk.”

Luckily though, hair care might have been a little less time consuming. or used hot rollers, but the style of the curls wasn't nearly as tight as they were in previous decades. Also, according to one 1950s beauty guide film, hair washing wasn't as intense an exercise as it seems today.

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Women still pinned their hair

“A healthy scalp has plenty of oil to which dirt will cling,” says the narrator. “So wash your hair frequently if you want to keep this constant accumulation of dust, oil and sweat at a minimum. Your hair should be washed once every two weeks with water and a mild soap.”

All the more time to spend inserting bananas and tuna salad into jello molds.