



America's Oleaginous Affectation - Wax Lips Origin

[Wax lips originated in QM's Hometown ☺ It's a little unknown fact that QM's maiden name is "Shields." The same name as the teacher's name in the classic movie]

When Ralphie Parker's 4th Grade class dejectedly hand over their wax fangs to Mrs. Shields in the perennial holiday movie favorite, "A Christmas Story," legions of grownups are reminded of what a penny used to buy at their local *Woolworth's* store. But there is far more to these paraffin playthings than a penny's worth of fun.

It is hard to recall a time when there were no wax fangs, lips, moustaches, or harmonicas for kids to smuggle into school. Most of us remember the peculiar disintegrating flavor of Wax Lips from bygone Halloweens and birthday parties but we don't know where these long-enduring icons of American culture actually started. The answer, oddly enough, can be found by way of the oil patch.



The 1859 birth of the oil industry and introduction of kerosene for illumination changed America. "This flood of American petroleum poured in upon us by millions of gallons, and giving light at a fifth of the cost of the cheapest candle," wrote British chandler James Wilson in 1879. Kerosene sales devastated the candle business; much like widespread use of electricity would impact the kerosene market at the turn of the century.

A byproduct of kerosene distillation, paraffin, soon found its way from refinery to marketplace in the form of sealing waxes and even chewing gums. By 1900, tallow candles were history as ninety percent of all candles were made from paraffin. The new century brought other new and surprising uses as well.

"Crayola" crayons were introduced by Binney & Smith in 1903 and were instantly successful. Edison's popular new phonographs needed paraffin for their wax cylinders. Then an inspired Buffalo, NY confectioner used fully refined, food-grade paraffin and a sense of humor to find a niche in America's imagination.

John W. Glenn had come to the United States from England at age 15 in 1888 and grew up in his father's wholesale candy business. When the elder Glenn passed away in 1912, son John continued the business as *J.W. Glenn Co.* There he introduced America to paraffin "penny chewing gum novelties," delighting children everywhere. His products' popularity grew quickly and by 1923, *J.W. Glenn Co.* employed almost 100 people, including 18 salesmen traveling nationwide from offices located at 65 Carroll St.

In 1927, Franklin C. Gurley, Sr. left his position at Buffalo's *National Aniline & Chemical Co.* to build a candy business of his own. He purchased Robert White's new confectionary company, *W&F Manufacturing Co.*, which had incorporated only the year before to produce, "...all kinds of candies, chocolates, ice cream dainties and paraffin (sic) novelties." Gurley reported his occupation as "confectioner" by the 1930 census.

Just a few blocks away, *Glenn Confections* was busily engaged in producing their popular paraffin novelties, and continued to do so after becoming the wax candy division of *W&F Manufacturing Co.* Wax horse teeth (said to taste like wintergreen), and other novelties chattered profitably down Glenn's production line while Franklin Gurley explored further expansion opportunities for his rapidly growing company.

"W&F Mfg." began producing novelty candles for *Socony-Vacuum Oil Co.* in 1939, using paraffin from *Socony's* nearby refinery at Olean, NY -- once home to the world's largest crude oil storage site. *W&F's* "Tavern Candles" Santa's, reindeer, elves and other colorful Christmas favorites are still prized by E-Bay collectors as are *Gurley's* elaborately molded Halloween candles. Decorative and scented *Gurley* paraffin candles soon became "W&F Mfg.'s" principal product, accounting for 98% of sales, but production of *Glenn's* wax candy novelties continued. A field of metal tanks, some holding 20,000 gallons of paraffin, stood adjacent to *Gurley's* Buffalo factory.

As "W&F's" wax candy division, *Glenn Confections* produced the popular ancestors of today's *Wack-O-Wax* and *Nik-L-Nips*. In the town of Emlenton PA, a few miles south of Oil City, the *Emlenton Refining Co.*

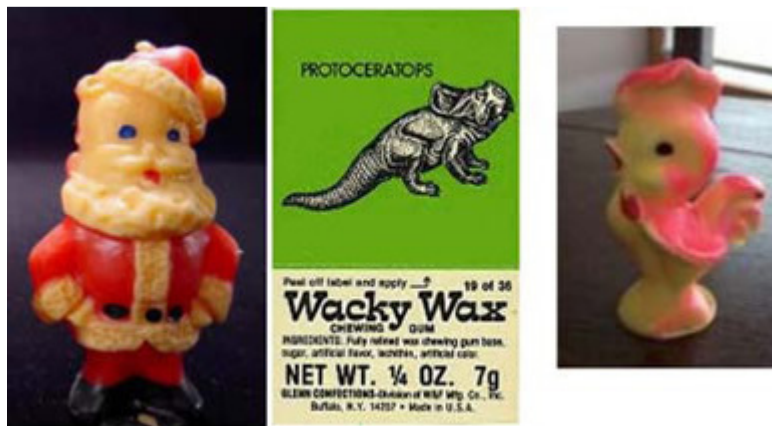
(and later the *Quaker State Oil Refining Co.*) supplied fully refined food-grade paraffin to "W&F's" for these bizarre but beloved treats.



Quaker State veteran Barney Lewis remembers selling Emlenton paraffin to W&F Products. "It was always fun going to the plant in North Tonawanda, [Hey..Hey... your QM was born and raised here ☺] they were very secret about how they did stuff, but you always got a sample to bring home... Wax lips, *Nickle NIPs* - little coke bottle shaped wax filled with a colored syrup. Other companies supplied "W&F's", one

being now the IGI Group in Canada." (International Group Inc., founded in 1943 as International Waxes Ltd. of Toronto.)

At its peak, "W&F's" produced about 30-million novelty wax candies annually, but the company's principle product, decorative candles, fought an uphill battle as import competition became fierce. The price of paraffin went from 7¢ to 50¢ per pound during the 1982 oil shortage. "W&F's" Products struggled. In 1994, after almost 70-years in business, the company failed. Its attorney summarized, "Unfortunately, competition from China and other Pacific Rim countries that rely on cheap labor ultimately forced "W&F's" decision to close its doors." Among the 250 former employees, rumors persisted that "W&F's" was driven into bankruptcy by a failed pursuit of the Guinness record for "world's largest candle."



"W&F's" Products' creditors scrambled for assets. The company was sold piecemeal, including the proprietary hardware that Glenn Confections had long used to produce their strange assortment of paraffin candies.

Ben Shepherd owned *Challenger Candy Co.*, 650-miles away in Secor, IL where he produced bagged cotton candy. Shepherd bought *Glenn Confections'* unique wax candy equipment and hauled it from Buffalo to Secor, where he continued production of the nostalgic favorites. Despite a continuing national sweet tooth and the predictable Halloween demand for the novelties, *Challenger Candy Co.* lasted only a few years before going bankrupt. *American Candy Co.* of Selma, AL, in business since 1900, stepped in to once again rescue Wax Lips from oblivion.

Employee Earnest Shears traveled to the tiny community of Secor ("South East Corner" of Roanoke, IL) to help move the wax candy production machinery over 700 miles to the *American Candy Company's* 36,000 square foot plant in Selma. "In Secor, there was a post office, a tavern, and the *Challenger Candy Company* and that was all there was to the whole town, nothing else. It took two or three months to move it all to Selma," Shears recalls.

American Candy Company's Wax Candy Division continued the long tradition of producing Wax Lips and other popular novelties that John W. Glenn had begun back in Buffalo, NY over 80-years earlier. But only briefly.

In 2002, after over 100-years in business, *American Candy Co.* fell to intense marketplace competition and filed for Chapter 11 protection. The company had once employed as many as 500 people. Wax Lips appeared doomed again as the company was sold off.

Then *Concord Confections* of Ontario, Canada came to the rescue. Concord purchased the Wax Candy Division for \$3 million and moved it over 1,000 miles back to Concord, Ontario - only about 20-miles from the IGI Wax plant and "across the river" from Carroll Street in Buffalo were the novelty originated. Today as a small part of Tootsie-Roll Industries, *Concord Confections* continues to produce Wax Lips (Wack-O-Wax) and other paraffin candies for new generations of schoolchildren.

Despite a 2,000 mile itinerant business history and a long series of owners, Wax Lips survive to delight kids and prompt memories in the rest of us. Today, the petroleum industry produces an astonishing range of products for modern consumers. But among the many products that find their history in the oilfield, few are as unique, peculiar, and revered as Wax Lips.

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