

# The New York Times

## A True Blue Tribute

### The Smithsonian Celebrates Barbicide, A Barbershop Germ Killer Born in Brooklyn

By Douglas Martin

Fifty years ago, a wizard with bushy eyebrows hunched over the bathtub in his Brooklyn apartment intensely mixing poisonous chemicals. Gradually, a deep blue emerged. It stained the bathtub, but it would also come to revolutionize barber shops across America and, ultimately, the globe. Barbicide had been born.

And hundreds of missions of coiffures would be the better for it. No longer would barbers wipe dirty combs on a handy rag, or perhaps, their trousers. Forever after, combs and scissors would hang in suspended animation in foot-high cylindrical jars in which no germ or fungus could survive.

The father of Barbicide, Maurice King, also improved the lot of haircutters everywhere by inventing another liquid, one that dissolves the hair off synthetic brushes. But Barbicide is his enduring achievement – a Brooklyn invention that claims an exalted place in the borough's bounty of business ingenuity, whose products include Ex-Lax, the teddy bear, Brillo pads, and, depending on your history book, the hot dog.

Ben King, Maurice's son and the president of King Research, Inc., wrote the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History to inquire if it would like to exhibit a jar of Barbicide – combs and scissors included – and followed up with a donation to the museum's upkeep, the size of which remains private. On Friday, the company made its gift in a ceremony that included a barbershop quartet. (The Smithsonian refused to permit a toast with the blue Kool-Aid in Barbicide Jars)

For half a century, Barbicide has been produced in a sprawling one-story factory set where Park Slope can slope no longer and ends hard against the Gowanus Canal.

The old man was not big on glitz. His idea of a sales incentive was to give good customers a steel pail. He declined to celebrate Barbicide's 40th anniversary because he wanted people to think it had been around forever.

The success of Barbicide, now 50, can scarcely be exaggerated. The company churns out about 18,000 gallons of the stuff a month, and the substance has become so ubiquitous in tonsorial habitats that it has attained that ultimate status for a consumer product: it has become invisible. In pictures of squalling young boys enduring their first haircut, the Barbicide jar is what you don't notice in the background. If the universal signature of the shearing profession is a striped pole, the 12-inch high jar of blue might be, well, the initials.

King Research pulls in annual revenues that have been increasing by 15 percent a year as the fluid oozes inexorably through Europe, Asia and South America. Though King Research has dozens of competitors, mainly regional, the trademark Barbicide is inevitably requested.

"If you want a cola drink, you ask for a Coke," said Carole Cona, the executive director of Georgette Klinger Salon on Madison Avenue. "With fungicides, it's Barbicide. I think every salon uses it."

Mitchell Pine, co-owner of Peter Coppola, the salon where Julia Roberts and Meg Ryan have their hair done, said customers demand that a comb be dipped in Barbicide if dropped. John Verza, owner of the 85-chair Astor Place Hair Stylists, said customers will criticize if even one station does not have a jar.

To be sure, disinfectants are hardly a topic about which barbers and hair dressers romanticize.

"There are certain things you've got to do," said Vito Flumefreddo, who started cutting hair at Park Slope Barbers at age 18 and is now 56. "Other than that, there's not too much to be said about Barbicide."

But there is plenty to be said about the creator of Barbicide, a chemical engineering graduate from the University of Minnesota who found himself teaching chemistry at Manhattan's Central Commercial High School in the late 1930's. Maurice King would not erase his formulas from the blackboard, and the marketing teacher whose class followed his, Ryta Fisher, blew her stack. They were married two weeks later.

Mr. King did not relish the city school system. He came back from World War II Army service to Brooklyn, where he had relatives, determined to make his mark as an entrepreneur. He started working with detergents and disinfectants, mixing concoctions in the bathtub because his first factory lacked water.

He harbored an abiding irritation: barber shops. As a teen-ager, Maurice had suffered from scalp sores and loathed the way the teeth of a barber's dirty combs would prick them. He was appalled that barbers cleaned combs and brushed only by running water over them. Sometimes barbers would simply bang the counter to knock the precious customer's hair out of a comb.

The key to the breakthrough was a new breed of disinfectant, an ammonium compound that is an ingredient in the mud used in drilling oil wells. It was strong enough to kill germs, but mild enough for everyday use.

But how to package the liquid, which has to be diluted with 31 part of water to each part of Barbicide? The jar idea came from Mr. King's experience selling some of his detergents to restaurants. He noticed the glass jars in which straws were kept and deemed them in ideal container for this barbershop cleanser.

Then came the decision to color the clear liquid blue. "It could be any color, but Dad chose a brilliant crystal-clear blue because of its purity," Ben King said. "It's refreshing and clean to look at."

And then the name. Given his teenage scalp miseries, "He hated barbers," Ben said. "Barbicide meant to kill the barber. It was his secret joke."

Finally came the marketing – or the creation of a market. Maurice and his brother James made repeated trips to state capitals asking that disinfectants be required in barber shops for the public good. They traveled vast distances in a Dodge sedan – a blue one, of course – and were successful almost everywhere. Indeed, many states once required it by name – the result of Maurice's dogged lobbying – and two still do.

Ben King, not eager to upset money carts, won't say which ones. And he was simply unable to answer the domestic tranquility question: During those long-ago days of experimentation, did Mrs. King complain about her husband's blue bathtub rings?