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When a Trusted Brand Disappears

By RICKI MORELL

MY mother discovered Camay soap 64 years ago, when she immigrated to New York from London at the end of World War II after marrying my father, an American soldier. She has seen much change in her 86 years, but her devotion to Camay has remained constant.

When she recently realized that her local ShopRite, in Plainview, N.Y., no longer stocks Camay, and that she has only eight bars left in her linen closet, she called me in, well, a bit of a lather. “What am I going to do?” she asked me. “What am I going to do?”

I went online to do some research and found that my mother wasn’t the only woman desperately seeking Camay. On Amazon.com this week, Camay was selling by the case, like a particularly sought-after wine: 48 bars for more than \$50. “I have been looking all over for Camay soap,” one customer wrote. “I was afraid I would never wash again.” “Memory bars is what I call them,” wrote another.

Procter & Gamble introduced Camay in the United States in 1926 as “the soap of beautiful women.” The original wrapper featured a cameo of an elegant lady, her silhouette in profile. Advertising campaigns focused on young brides marveling at their soft complexions. Camay evoked feminine luxury, even sensuality, at a time when other soaps such as Ivory were utilitarian.

Camay was still popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Tish Stoker Signet, 58, a psychotherapist in Davidson, N.C., remembers that, as a child, she and her mother would paint the soaps’ cameo imprints gold, then give them as sachets to older women at Christmas.

But by the turn of the 21st century, Camay, pink and lightly perfumed, had lost its mass appeal in the United States. Procter & Gamble now sells Camay to online distributors and abroad, mostly in Eastern Europe, though it may also still be available in some mainstream stores in the United States, said Kate DiCarlo, a spokeswoman.

These days, the company is more focused on its Olay bars, which compete directly with the Dove Beauty Bar, made by Unilever. These products contain synthetic detergents that are less irritating than soap, said Dr. Amy Derick, a dermatologist in Barrington, Ill. But Camay,

which is a traditional soap like Ivory, may feel less irritating because it contains glycerin, Dr. Derick added.

Still, for a certain vintage of American woman, Camay soap remains a cultural touchstone. “I love the perfume smell,” said Billie Brown of Cove, Tex., who declined to give her age. “It’s lightly fragrant. It’s totally feminine.” Ms. Brown remembered her mother setting out the Camay on the bathtub of her childhood home near Lake Charles, La.. Because the soap disappeared from her Kroger supermarket, she now buys it online.

At CleaningProductsWorld.com, based in Norwich, Conn., Camay accounts for more than half of bar-soap sales, said Jessica Fischburg, the company’s e-commerce manager. She said no other beauty product sold on the site inspires such loyalty. “If you’ve used just one soap for 50 years, you identify that one soap with cleanliness,” said Ms. Fischburg, 24.

Linda Eshleman, 62, of Jersey Shore, Pa., buys Camay online and goes through about a bar a week. “No matter where I go, it always goes with me,” Ms. Eshleman said.

Nancy Durbin, 69, who lives in Houston, recently bought a case of Camay as a Christmas present for her older sister in Cincinnati. “When you get to be my age, and her age, products start disappearing,” Ms. Durbin said.

Chris T. Allen, a marketing professor at the University of Cincinnati, predicted that Camay could have a second act if it follows the lead of another Procter & Gamble brand, Old Spice. That went from being an old man’s after-shave to a hip young man’s deodorant and body wash, thanks largely to this year’s advertising and viral-video campaign, “Smell Like a Man, Man,” featuring Isaiah Mustafa.

Prell shampoo, a former Procter & Gamble brand now owned by Ultimark Products, is also trying to remake its image. Ultimark recently signed Alexa Ray Joel, the daughter of Christie Brinkley, the model, and Billy Joel, the singer, to be the new face of Prell. (Ms. Brinkley was a “Prell Girl” in the 1980s.)

“There’s a strong theme of nostalgia,” Mr. Allen said, talking about consumers: “If these are brands they used when they were younger, you never lose interest.”

My mother, a brand loyalist, has used the same kind of Rimmel mascara for over seven decades, and visited the same hairstylist for more than 40 years. She says she chose Camay 64 years ago not for its status as a beauty totem, but because it was the only soap that didn’t irritate her skin.

Only a few weeks ago, a man half her age admired her youthful looks and kissed her on the cheek. Although she doesn't own a computer and is wary of new technology (she calls the Internet the "Yenta-net"), she will go there if she has to. "O.K.," she said. "Buy me a case of Camay online." When she heard how many bars she'd receive, she thought back to 1946, when she'd buy Camay at a drugstore on Amsterdam Avenue, one precious bar at a time.