

THE UNENDING HISTORY OF WHALING - ARTICLE 2 - MARGARINE

How whale oil created Unilever



IN THE BEGINNING - WHALES PROVIDED LIGHT - See Article 1 <https://wp.me/p9NeX5-TX>

Once, homes and streets were lit with whale oil and the 19th century whaling industry was the major force in the world's energy markets, until kerosene was invented and oil wells started shooting up in Pennsylvania. As petroleum began to boom and kerosene became a popular lamp fuel, the world had surplus of whale oil, looking for a new market.

It went to the makers of margarine.

Margarine was invented in 1869, just as whale oil was on the verge of falling out of use as a fuel. To simulate butter, margarine must contain some kind of fat. That might come from a variety of vegetable oils—as in most margarines today—or beef fat. But in the first half of the 20th century, since whale oil

was no longer needed for illumination and a large amount became available, as one researcher wrote in the 1960s, most of the world's supply was being whipped into a spreadable butter substitute.

The whale oil industry poured its product into margarine, creating, in the process, a multinational company now worth billions of dollars.

Margarine manufacturers swept in to buy whale oil at low prices. In 1929, two companies—Lever Brothers, a British firm, and Margarine Unie, a Dutch company—discovered how to improve the chemical process used to harden whale oil into a margarine ingredient. As a result, margarine could be made with whale oil as its only fat. Rather than competing, the companies quickly merged and became Unilever, today one of the world's top companies, valued at more than \$40 billion and responsible for everything from Axe Body Spray to Ben & Jerry's.

Unilever became the world's largest purchaser of oils and fats and by 1935, 84 percent of the world's whale oil was going directly into margarine. Unilever bought up all the whale oil that Norway produced, for instance, and sent it directly to its factories in Germany.

As tensions in Europe increased, though, whale oil became an increasingly contested commodity. In the years leading up to the war, the product had become a major part of the food supply in Britain, and in 1938 the British government named it a "national defense" commodity. (Beyond its use as fuel and food, whale oil was also made into soap, used as motor lubricant, and helped protect soldiers from trench foot in World War I.) "That tells you how important it was," says Epstein. "It was a matter of national security."

Nazi Germany once sent an expedition all the way to Antarctica in search of whale oil to make margarine. But once the war was over, the importance of whale oil in margarine production began to decrease, and the ethical concerns about whaling started to escalate. The whaling industry crashed so badly that General Douglas MacArthur encouraged Japan to buy up boats for cheap and start up a whaling economy there. At the same time, margarine producers had figured out how to make it cheaply with vegetable oil and phased out whale oil as an ingredient. Today, the only fishy thing about margarine are any claims about its health benefits. (Modified from "[Gastro Obscura](#)")

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