

The Registry

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Reviving the stories of historic female managers and entrepreneurs

Playing the Long Game



The makers of the Ivory Soap, Procter & Gamble, Ivorydale, Ohio, have been engaged in the manufacture of Soaps for over fifty years, and the "Ivory" is the happy result of their long experience, and is unquestionably the soap to be used by all who value the advice (quoted below) of Ellen H. Richards, Instructor in Chemistry, Woman's Laboratory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who says: "In the purchase of soap, it is safest to choose the make of some well-known and long-established firm who have a reputation to lose if their product is not good."

This ad, promoting Ivory Soap, looks sedate to 21st century eyes. But when it appeared in the August 1888 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, it probably prompted many reactions—curiosity, disbelief, anger, and hope, among them. At that time, most Americans considered women too psychologically and physically frail to take part in higher education, much less study science. Some might have disbelieved that the depicted scene was real. It was real.

The female instructor is chemist Ellen H. (Swallow) Richards, the first woman admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, its first female graduate (1873), and its first female instructor (1876). She's leading a class at MIT's Women's Laboratory, a facility created because Richards understood the need and persuaded those with money and power to build it. The students are some of the hundreds of women who studied at the lab during the seven years it was open.

What brought Ivory Soap and female scientists together in the mid-1880s? Possibly it was the opportunity to build a positive image to improve future results.

Procter & Gamble, Ivory's maker, developed its new white, floating soap in 1879 and started advertising it the same year. The earliest newspaper ads were often a single line of text listing a use or an attribute: Ivory Soap for laundry or Use Ivory Soap for bathing or Ivory Soap lathers freely. Soon the ads were larger and wordier. Some included testimonials about the soap's purity from scientists at Princeton and University of Michigan, plus analysis by a Yale chemistry professor. Being able to reference a female expert might add to the

product's credibility with women—or at least get their attention. P&G did that with the Women's Lab ad. It was one of a large portfolio, each with its own illustration and text, that P&G copyrighted in 1886 and released over the next few years.

In the ad, Richards does not endorse Ivory over other products. She offers advice to readers:

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Ledger December

Dec. 2, 1984

Alicia Elizondo de Lozano dies. Lozano was a founder and director of Beneficencia Mexicana, a San Antonio, TX women's association which, in the 1930s, established medical clinics to serve the poor. In 1953, after her husband's death, she took over management of *La Prensa*, the Spanish-language newspaper he founded.

Dec. 10, 1870

Elizabeth Daingerfield is born. She was a successful thoroughbred racehorse breeder and farm manager.

Dec. 13, 1986

Ella Baker dies. Baker used her skills as a leader and manager to further civil rights. She was organizer and manager for the NAACP, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and a human relations consultant for the YWCA.

Dec. 19, 1916

Catherine B. Cleary is born. She was chairman, president, and CEO of First Wisconsin Trust Co., and the first woman to serve as an officer of the firm.

Dec. 28, 1887

Edna Murphey Albert is born. She built a company around the deodorant her father created, Odorono.

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In the purchase of soap, it is safest to choose the make of some well-known and long-established firm who have a reputation to lose if their product is not good.

Unlike the male scientists whose stature might be increased by an association with P&G, even if their analysis was weak or their conclusions exaggerated (and there is no indication that either was true), female scientists would lose credibility and stature with the slightest mistake or perception of favoritism. Ellen Richards understood this and proceeded cautiously. Her advice gave readers a way to evaluate soap and it burnished the fifty-year-old P&G's reputation as a manufacturer and marketer.

While it might have been risky for Richards to participate, there was a reward: The opportunity to spotlight her laboratory and the women participating in science education. The Ivory ads, running as they did in newspapers and general interest magazines, could reach thousands of households, far more than Richards's lectures, scientific papers, and books. Possibly some of those seeing the ad would begin to realize that women had many talents and abilities.



Ellen Richards at her desk in the lab. From *The Life of Ellen H. Richards*, by Caroline L. Hunt, 1912.

Some of her MIT professors had realized just that. Her precise work and easy-going disposition won her the respect of many male faculty members. Two even involved her in scientific work while she was still an undergrad. Prof. William R. Nichols—who had been against Richards's enrollment—chose her to assist him with water quality analysis for the Massachusetts Board of Health. She also worked for Prof. John M. Ordway in his consulting practice, which later led to her own consulting work. Richards's believed that her successes improved other women's chances for the same or better opportunities.

The Women's Laboratory was the result of Richards trying to help other women get the science training they desired. Working with a newly formed Boston organization, the Women's Education Association (WEA), Richards began giving chemistry lectures to women in 1873. Laboratory time for her students was inadequate, so she put together a solution.

WEA raised funds for lab equipment and the construction of a small building. MIT provided land for the building and permission for women to be admitted as special students in chemistry. Richards designed a flexible program for full- and part-time study. Prof. Ordway headed the lab and Ellen Richards was the instructor. Both worked without pay and both donated hundreds of dollars to support the lab. Twenty-three women started classes in November 1876.

Over the next few years, Richards taught not only at the lab, but also through a correspondence program for women interested in education and improving their lives. The myriad of problems, issues, and questions raised by her students motivated her to write her first book. In *The Chemistry of Cooking and Cleaning* she sought to give non-scientists practical information about how scientific principles applied to tasks in the home could improve life. Published in 1882, it may have contributed to Proctor & Gamble asking Richards to participate in the Ivory Soap ad.

Ironically, by the time the Ivory ad was published, the Women's Lab was gone, a victim of progress. Thanks, in part, to Richards's example and leadership, MIT began admitting women as regular students in 1878. Five years later, the lab closed to make room for a new chemistry facility which was open to all students "without distinction of sex." Ellen Swallow Richards taught male and female students in that facility for twenty-seven years.

—Mary Goljenboom

Jan. 2, 1895

Marion E. Wong is born. An actor, screenwriter, and producer, she started the Mandarin Film Co. in 1916.

Jan. 5, 1939

Margaret Haley dies. Haley was vice president of Chicago Teacher's Federation and its business manager from 1900 until her death.

Jan. 9, 1933

Catherine Anselm "Kate" Gleason dies. Gleason was eleven when she began working as a bookkeeper in her father's company, The Gleason Works, of Rochester, NY. She eventually became secretary-treasurer and headed sales. After leaving the Works, she became president of the First National Bank of East Rochester. In 1998, Rochester Institute of Technology renamed its engineering college for her.

Jan. 12, 1970

Hortense M. Odlum dies. Odlum had a short but successful career as president of the women's specialty store Bonwit Teller. She took over in 1934 after studying the business as a consultant at the behest of her husband, who had controlling interest in it. By 1940, when she left the presidency to become board chair, sales had risen from under \$3.5 million to over \$10 million.

Jan. 15, 1864

Frances Benjamin Johnston is born. She was a freelance photographer, writer, and lecturer.

Jan. 18, 1984

Gladys Anderson Emerson dies. For fifteen years Emerson headed the nutrition department at the Merck Institute for Therapeutic Research, leaving to join UCLA as a professor and chairman of the home economics department. She received her Ph.D in 1932 and conducted research into the impact of vitamins on the body.

Jan. 25, 1889

Neysa McMein is born. She was a freelance commercial artist.

Jan. 30, 1853

Beatrice DeMille is born. To support her three children after her husband's death, she went to work as a play broker, eventually selling her New York company and joining son Cecil B. in Hollywood.