# The surprising story of Vaseline’s origins in 19th-century oil drilling



The surprising origins of Vaseline, a staple in many people's skincare routines, have left audiences both intrigued and bewildered. This revelation was highlighted during a recent episode of the BBC's quiz show QI, where host Sandi Toksvig explored the unexpected history of this widely used balm. Viewers learned that Vaseline is actually a refined form of petroleum jelly, with its origins tracing back to 19th-century America.

The story begins with Robert Augustus Chesebrough, an English-born chemist who had initially established a career in the production of sperm whale oil. However, his business faltered, prompting him to seek new opportunities during the oil rush in Pennsylvania in 1859. It was during this period that he discovered how oil workers used the residue accumulating around drill rods, affectionately dubbed "rod wax," to treat cuts and burns. Intrigued, Chesebrough dedicated a decade to perfecting a distillation process to create a usable form of this substance, resulting in the birth of Petroleum Jelly. By 1872, he trademarked the name "Vaseline."

Chesebrough's journey to public acceptance was not without its challenges. He reportedly took to the streets, riding on horseback to market his creation. To demonstrate its efficacy and win over sceptical customers, he famously burned his own skin, applying Vaseline to the lesions to highlight its healing properties. Ultimately, his unconventional marketing paid off, leading to robust sales and the establishment of Vaseline as a household name.

While the story captivated many viewers, it also stirred up questions about the source material of Vaseline. Some were left wondering about the origin of the "gunk" that workers used, indicative of the public's curiosity about its ingredients. People on social media expressed their astonishment, with comments ranging from, “So interesting!” to inquiries about the natural sources of the petroleum base.

Since its genesis, Vaseline has evolved from a single product into a brand renowned for its range of skincare offerings. The company has built upon its foundational discovery, continually innovating to enhance the healing properties of petroleum jelly while expanding into diverse product lines that cater to skin health. The commitment to quality and effective skincare solutions has solidified Vaseline's place not only in homes but also in the broader cosmetics industry.

Moreover, as part of its storied legacy, Vaseline was acquired by Unilever in 1987, further boosting its visibility and distribution worldwide. Despite the simple origins of a 'gunky' byproduct, the brand’s journey reflects a blend of scientific ingenuity and savvy marketing that resonates with consumers even today.

The narrative of Vaseline serves as a reminder of the often-unexpected paths that lead to successful innovations. For a product that started in the tumultuous landscape of 19th-century oil drilling, its evolution into a beloved skincare staple illustrates the power of resourcefulness and curiosity.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-14767561/Do-YOU-know-Vaseline-comes-People-left-shocked-discovering-popular-balm-made.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.vaseline.com/uk/who-we-are/our-history.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-14767561/Do-YOU-know-Vaseline-comes-People-left-shocked-discovering-popular-balm-made.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Chesebrough)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.unileverusa.com/brands/beauty-wellbeing/vaseline/), [[6]](https://www.cosmeticsandskin.com/companies/chesebrough.php/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaseline)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.cosmeticsandskin.com/companies/chesebrough.php/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-14767561/Do-YOU-know-Vaseline-comes-People-left-shocked-discovering-popular-balm-made.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.vaseline.com/uk/who-we-are/our-history.html> - This official Vaseline website provides a comprehensive history of the brand, detailing its origins in 1859 when chemist Robert Augustus Chesebrough discovered a natural, waxy substance with skin-repairing properties in Titusville, Pennsylvania. After refining the substance, he patented his purification method in 1865, leading to the creation of Vaseline Petroleum Jelly in 1870. The brand has since become a staple in skincare, offering a range of products that harness the healing power of petroleum jelly.
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Chesebrough> - This Wikipedia article offers an in-depth look at Robert Augustus Chesebrough, the English-born American chemist who discovered petroleum jelly. It details his journey from clarifying lamp oil from sperm whale oil to his exploration of petroleum in Titusville, Pennsylvania, where he identified rod wax as a skin-healing substance. The article also covers his development of the purification process and the subsequent creation of Vaseline, along with his marketing strategies and the brand's evolution.
4. <https://www.unileverusa.com/brands/beauty-wellbeing/vaseline/> - Unilever's official page on Vaseline provides insights into the brand's history and its commitment to skin health. It highlights Robert Chesebrough's discovery in 1859 and the subsequent development of Vaseline Petroleum Jelly in 1870. The page also discusses the brand's expansion into various skincare products and its dedication to quality and innovation over the years.
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaseline> - This Wikipedia article explores the history and development of Vaseline, from its origins in 1859 when Robert Chesebrough discovered rod wax in Pennsylvania to its patenting in 1872. It discusses the brand's growth, its acquisition by Unilever in 1987, and its status as a household name in skincare, offering a range of products that utilise the healing properties of petroleum jelly.
6. <https://www.cosmeticsandskin.com/companies/chesebrough.php/> - This article provides a detailed account of the Chesebrough Manufacturing Company, founded by Robert Chesebrough. It covers the company's production of various petroleum jelly-based products, including Vaseline Cold Cream and Vaseline Cosmetique. The piece also delves into the company's marketing strategies, product innovations, and its impact on the cosmetics industry.
7. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/vaseline-inventor-ate-petroleum-jelly-daily/> - This Snopes article investigates the claim that Robert Chesebrough, the inventor of Vaseline, consumed a spoonful of petroleum jelly daily. It examines various sources and concludes that while Chesebrough did promote the health benefits of his product, the specific claim about his daily consumption lacks direct evidence and remains unsubstantiated.