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Clorox Co.

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Introduction

Clorox Co.: The Story of an American Company chronicles the journey of one of the most recognized and enduring names in American consumer goods. From its humble beginnings in 1913 as a small startup in Oakland, California, Clorox has evolved into a multinational powerhouse, shaping not only home cleaning routines but also the trajectory of American entrepreneurship, innovation, and corporate responsibility. This book explores how Clorox's commitment to quality, resilience in the face of adversity, and fearless embracing of new opportunities propelled it from a single-product company into a diversified global enterprise.

The Clorox Company's story is deeply intertwined with the fabric of American history. Emerging in a period when the concept of household liquid bleach was unheard of, Clorox confronted persistent challenges, from the skepticism of the public to the economic hardships of the Great Depression and the transformational years of World War II. Bold decisions in marketing and product development, accompanied by unwavering dedication from its leaders and employees, allowed Clorox not only to survive periods of turmoil but to redefine industry standards and consumer expectations.

Central to Clorox's enduring success has been its ability to adapt. The company's willingness to diversify, innovate, and strike strategic partnerships has kept it at the forefront of market trends for more than a century. Its remarkable acquisitions—from brands like Pine-Sol and Brita, to ventures into wellness with Burt's Bees and RenewLife—reflect a dynamic approach to growth in response to changing consumer lifestyles. Behind every product, from bleach to probiotics, is a philosophy rooted in meeting real needs and delivering trust.

Yet, Clorox's journey has not been without controversy or challenge. The company has navigated the complexities of antitrust litigation, shifting regulatory landscapes, and the increasing scrutiny that comes with being a large, publicly traded corporation. Its engagement with corporate social responsibility and sustainability, alongside the setbacks and course corrections, offers valuable insights into what it means to be a responsible corporate citizen in the modern era. Clorox stands as both an innovator and a steward, publicly accountable for its impact on health, community, and the environment.

As consumer habits continue to change and the world faces new global challenges—be it public health crises, supply chain disruptions, or the imperative of environmental stewardship—Clorox remains a bellwether. The company's IGNITE strategy and investment in digital innovation provide a lens for how legacy brands can reinvent

themselves for the digital age, prioritizing purpose alongside profit.

Clorox Co.: The Story of an American Company invites readers to look beyond the iconic bleach bottle into the world of strategy, science, market competition, and responsibility that underpin the company's longevity. Through this narrative, we gain not only a better understanding of Clorox's remarkable past and present but also a glimpse into its future as it continues to navigate the ever-changing landscape of American and global business.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Birth of an Idea: Founding The Electro-Alkaline Company

The story of The Clorox Company, a name synonymous with cleanliness and disinfection in homes across America, begins not with a gleaming bottle of household bleach, but with a daring entrepreneurial spirit in Oakland, California, during the early 20th century. It was May 3, 1913, when five ambitious businessmen, pooling their modest resources, laid the foundation for what would become a multinational consumer goods giant. Their initial venture was called The Electro-Alkaline Company.

These founders were an eclectic mix of professionals: Archibald Taft, a banker; Edward Hughes, a purveyor of wood and coal; Charles Husband, a bookkeeper; Rufus Myers, a lawyer; and William Hussey, a miner. Each of these men invested a sum of \$100, a significant amount at the time, to bring their shared vision to life. Their collective investment amounted to \$500. In an era before widespread public awareness of liquid bleach, their goal was revolutionary: to produce sodium hypochlorite bleach from brine, or ocean water, using an electrolytic process. This method was considered quite advanced for its time.

The choice of location, Oakland, California, was strategic. The readily available brine from the salt ponds of the San Francisco Bay provided a crucial raw material for their innovative production method. The electrolytic process involved passing an electric current through the saltwater, causing a chemical reaction that would yield sodium hypochlorite. This compound, a powerful disinfectant, was the core of their first product: Clorox liquid bleach. The name "Clorox" itself was a clever portmanteau, combining "chlorine" and "sodium hydroxide," the two main ingredients in their bleach.

Initially, The Electro-Alkaline Company's product was not aimed at the average household. The nascent company packaged its Clorox liquid bleach in large, five-gallon returnable containers. These substantial quantities were then delivered by horse-drawn wagon to local industrial clients. Breweries, dairies, and laundries were among their first customers, utilizing the bleach for its powerful cleaning and disinfecting properties. The early focus was entirely on these professional and institutional markets, where the benefits of a potent cleaning agent were immediately apparent.

Despite the innovative nature of their product and the advanced technology they employed, the early years were a struggle. The public at large was largely unfamiliar with liquid bleach, and the concept of its widespread use was still nascent. The company's initial sales were dismal, and it faced significant financial headwinds.

Directors often had to provide personal loans to cover mounting corporate debts and ensure that expenses, including employee paychecks, could be met. The dream of the five founders, while ambitious, teetered on the brink of collapse.

One of the challenges was the sheer concentration of their initial product. The original Clorox liquid bleach contained 21 percent sodium hypochlorite, a potent solution well-suited for industrial applications but perhaps too strong and unfamiliar for general consumer use. The company recognized the need to adapt and, by 1916, they began selling a less concentrated version of their liquid bleach, with a 5.25 percent sodium hypochlorite solution, specifically for household use. This move signaled a crucial shift in their nascent marketing strategy, aiming to introduce their product into the everyday lives of American consumers.

The company's packaging also reflected its utilitarian beginnings. The product was initially sold in amber glass bottles, a practical choice for containing the chemical. The labels proudly proclaimed that the product was "made by electricity," highlighting the modern and innovative electrolytic process that set them apart. This early branding, including a diamond-shaped logo that has persisted in various forms throughout Clorox's history, aimed to convey a sense of scientific advancement and efficacy.

The initial stock issuance in 1914, consisting of 750 shares at \$100 each, raised \$75,000 in startup capital. While this provided a necessary infusion of funds, it was clear that capital alone would not guarantee success. The Electro-Alkaline Company needed more than just a good product; it needed a way to introduce that product to a wider audience, to demonstrate its value, and to overcome the public's unfamiliarity with what was, for many, a completely new concept in cleaning. The stage was set for a pivotal moment, one that would redefine the company's trajectory and bring liquid bleach out of the industrial realm and into American homes.

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