Chapter 4

MULTICULTURAL CONNECTIONS

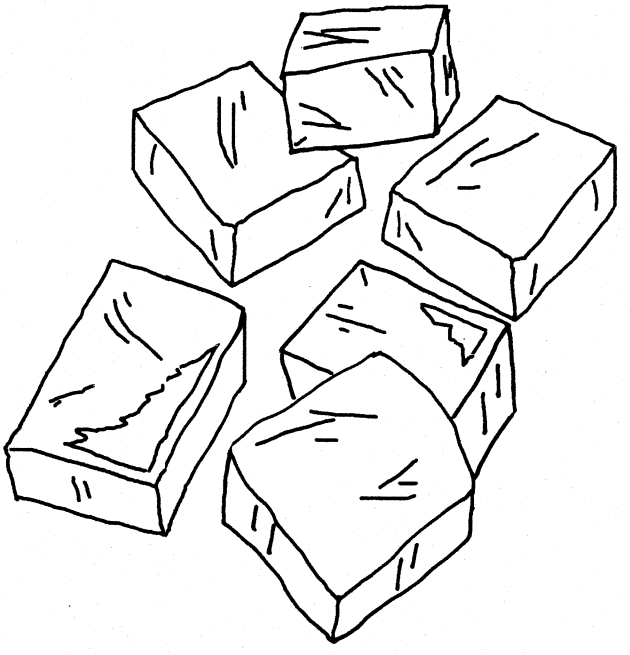
• Serious About Salt

You probably know that you need some iron and calcium every day. But did you know that you can't live without salt? Salt is made of sodium and chloride. The sodium and chloride in salt carry electrical impulses that tell your nerves and muscles what to do. Salt helps to maintain the water content of the cells in your body—without it, your cells would burst. Salt also helps you to digest your food.

In ancient times, people didn't know why they needed salt, but they knew that they needed it. Throughout history, people had to make sure that wherever they lived, they would be able to get salt.

Salt was once so valuable that it was traded for gold. The ancient Chinese made their coins out of salt, and the Roman soldiers who built roads were often paid their wages in salt. This practice was so common that the English word for wages, *salary,* comes from the Latin word for salt, *sal.*

Traditional Sources of Salt



Solar evaporation is the oldest method of obtaining salt. Seawater is about 3.5 percent salt. In many places around the world, seawater is let into shallow ponds and allowed to evaporate, leaving the salt behind. In a hot, dry environment, water will slowly evaporate without assistance from humans. The ancient Maya and the Chinese had a method for speeding up the process, however. They boiled the seawater in thick bowls. When water is boiled, it turns to a vapor very quickly.

When oceans dry up, they leave beds of rock salt. These beds of salt have been found both underground and aboveground. In parts of Saharan Africa, there is so much rock salt that people used to make houses out of it. In Spain, a lake called the Mata fills with seawater in the winter and dries up in the summer, leaving salt beds behind.

Trading in Salt

Since there is so much salt in the world, why was salt as precious as gold? People who lived in coastal areas had plenty of salt, but people who lived in inland areas had to trade for it.

Historic records suggest that the Romans built so many roads because they wanted to make it easier to transport salt to Rome. Spain, Italy, Greece, and Egypt traded salt throughout Europe and the Middle East. The Italian cities of Genoa, Pisa, and Venice became centers of the trade. Salt was also traded from areas that were formed by the evaporation of oceans, such as the Danakil Plain in Ethiopia. Residents of the Danakil Plain cut salt from the plain into bars, loaded it into packs, and traveled the country by mule selling it.

In Central America, the Maya traded salt from the coastal areas of Belize to inland parts of southeastern Belize between the years 250 and 900. In return for salt, inland communities traded ceramic pots and whistles.

Salt Taxes

Because salt was valuable and everyone needed it, governments considered salt to be an ideal substance to tax. The governments of Rome, Syria, Egypt, and China all regulated the salt trade. The Chin Dynasty in China began to tax salt in about 200 B.C.E., probably becoming the first government to do so. By the 9th century, salt had become the T'ang Dynasty's most important source of money. The T'ang Dynasty also sent unemployed people to work in its saltworks.

Multicultural Connections (continued)

Most European governments began taxing salt much later. France began to tax salt in the 1600s. The French government required every person over the age of eight to buy a certain amount of salt every week at a fixed price—and to pay a tax on it. This rule was hard to enforce, and some historians think it added to tensions in France, contributing to the French Revolution of 1789.

Salt Smuggling

Most governments were not able to tax salt very successfully. People living near the coast could make their own salt, and people inland bought salt from smugglers. In France, guards regularly searched people entering the city of Angers to see if they were bringing in salt. In 1494, Spain decreed that anyone caught smuggling salt could be shot to death with arrows. But smugglers were rarely caught, and governments were unable to stop the smuggling.

Making the Connection

Solar evaporation is still used today to produce salt for the salt trade. Try producing your own salt through solar evaporation or by boiling salt water until the water boils away. Write a report analyzing your production process. Note the percentage of salt in the salt water, and the amount of water you must use to obtain a teaspoon of salt.

1. Why do you think that salt is no longer as valuable as gold? _____

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2. Do you think that Earth could ever run out of salt? _____

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