

Lesson 5
READ THIS STORY #2, Basic

Plastic

Can you envision living in a world without plastic? Plastic is viewed as the most useful product ever invented by chemists.

The plastics industry in America began in 1860 when chemists were challenged to fabricate a substitute for ivory. Billiard balls were made of natural ivory, which came from the tusks of elephants. The game of billiards had become increasingly popular in the United States, but sources of ivory had dwindled. A prize of \$10,000 was offered to the person who could fabricate the best substitute for ivory. That was the start of the plastics industry.

The first commercially successful plastic material in America was called Celluloid. It was used to manufacture toys, collar stiffeners, film, and even dentures. As chemists continued their research, they discovered new compounds that could be molded and formed into many popular products.

Some plastic materials were discovered in experiments gone awry. For instance, Nylon started as a sticky mass that was almost discarded as having no useful purpose until a chemist put a small amount on the end of his stirring rod and drew out a filament of strong, silky thread. Teflon was discovered when a container full of it was emptied, yet the “empty” container weighed more than it should. Instead of throwing it away, the curious chemist cut it open and discovered the material we now call Teflon.