Bayberry Candles Burnt At Christmas Bring Good Luck To House.

By Constance Chisholm.

This season promises to carry the revival of the bayberry candle—made once again, as in Colonial times, in old New England kitchens—to an even greater degree of popularity than it reached last year, for the general public has become thoroughly imbued with the idea that it brings good luck to the recipient to burn one of these fragrant green dips on Christmas Eve, and a gift is doubly a gift if it bestows good fortune as well as good cheer.

Everyone agrees that this revival came at the psychological moment and as an inspirational opportunity both for its feminine originators and those other women who hailed the good luck symbol as a happy substitute for the hackneyed Christmas card.

A very few years ago the average person had never heard of bayberries nor that candles made of them were the means of lighting the homes of their ancestors, but this year—the third since bayberry candles became widely adopted as a Christmas symbol—they prove themselves so firmly established as part of the holiday adjuncts that countless numbers of them are being daintily wrapped and fitted into gay little boxes to bear the message of good will from friend to friend all over the country and for burning in candlesticks on the home dinner table on holy night.

Just as Deerfield revived the art of weaving the old-style rugs that are now so eagerly sought for the homes furnished in antiques, so the women of this old Massachusetts town have also revived the early art of making bayberry candles, although it was in Hingham, another quaint town of the same State, that the dips were first made in recent years; while they are now also a home product of Cape Cod, made by the Cape Cod people.

The bayberry grows only near the seashore, never inland, and in the early days candle dipping was carried on to such an extent that there was a tax levied in New England on bayberry wax.

We not only find the tiny dips revived and those the size of ordinary candles but a still larger and taller kind for special decorative and illuminating purposes.

They are of a rich olive green color that adapts them for Christmas decoration and when burning they emit a soft light and an indescribably pleasing odor, burning steadily and without making ridges of wax down the sides, as other candles do.

After much searching of English authorities on old Christmas beliefs and customs one fails to find any relating to the bayberry and its luck-bringing powers as associated with the advent season, and, knowing that the Nativity was ignored as a festival by the Puritans, one wonders—and smiles—at the rapid growth of a superstition that had its inception so recently as the revival of the candles; yet this now widely current good luck prophesy, so well adapted to the fitness of things, has somehow got its lasting hold upon us, and with every one of our candle gifts goes a little card bearing a lighted taper and the legend, artistically lettered in red and green:

ON CHRISTMAS EVE.
A bayberry candle burnt to the socket
Brings luck to the house,
Food to the larder
And gold to the pocket.

A prediction, this, that we would fain credit in these times of soaring prices, and which has proved so convincing to many persons who received one of these candles last Christmas that they attribute to it all the good fortune coming to them since; even staid and practical business men being of the number.

The Bayberry Protects Its Wearer From Lightning.

And yet, while we do not find that in old English or early Colonial times the bayberry was associated with Christmas, we do find that the bay leaf was considered a charm against many evils, one old book telling us that "He which weareth the Bayleafe is priviledged from the prejudice of thunder," and Leigh, speaking of Tiberius Cæsar, says, "He feared Thunder exceedingly, and when the Aire or Weather was anything troubled, he ever carried a Chaplet or Wreathe of Lawrell about his Neck because that (as Pliny reporteth) is never blasted with Lightning." The bay being a species of laurel, the terms are interchangeable with these writers, just as they are in the sense of crowning a poet or a victor with the laurel or the bays; and a branch of either, presented to a person, was the same as wishing him long life and happiness.

An Old Candle Mold.

In the days when our early settlers were coming over here this superstititon that the bay or laurel protected one against lightning—and thunder as well—was a long-established belief in the mother country; and yet our colonists seemed to prize the bayberry far more for producing light for the home than for protecting them from too great an excess of it in the fiery bolt from the skies. In all the coast colonies from Rhode Island to Carolina they found the bayberry bush ready to yield its waxen pods for their candles even as they had known the use of the same, in addition to tallow and wax, in parts of the land they were leaving, where it was also called the candleberry.

The excellencies of our early bayberry candles were sung in 1748 by a Swedish *naturalist*, Professor Kalin, who wrote of them that "they do not easily bend, nor melt in summer as common candles do; they burn better and slower, nor do they cause any smoke, but yield rather an agreeable smell when extinguished." And Beverly, the old Virginia historian, was so appreciative of this subtle aroma that he unconsciously suggests an æsthetic use of our revived bayberry dips when he tells us that "if accident puts a candle out it yields a pleasant fragrance to all in the room, insomuch that nice people put them out on purpose to have the incense of the expiring snuff."

The berries were gathered in the fall, covered with water and hung over the fire in huge pots, boiling till the wax separated from the pods. This wax was collected in a mass and afterward melted again for the dippings and moldings; a bushel of berries being required to make four or five pounds of wax. The wicks of twisted string were hung over short sticks and these dripped, six at a time, letting each coat dry before repeating the process, the candles slowly enlarging to the desired size.

Dipping being tedious and laborious work, it was, as a method, to a great extent superseded by molding when tin and pewter candle molds came into use early in the eighteenth century. But both the dips and the molded candles have been revived by the feminine descendants of those busy housewives who used to spend many weeks of the autumn in preparing for the frugal lighting of the old homes when to burn one candle unnecessarily was considered a shameful and shocking waste of a hard-earned luxury.

In the South, as well as in New England, there are still a number of these old candle molds in the possession of families to whom they have descended; and with them have come down the old "lanthorns," candlesticks and candle tables so coveted by collectors; the type of illuminator that was called for by the "rattle watch" in instituting the Great White Way of those early days in New York when, at nightfall, he went about the town calling "Lanthron, and a whole candle. Hang out your lights!"

Send The Candle Instead Of A Christmas Card

Surely the pungent, sweet-smelling bayberry candle is a revival that fits most admirably into the scheme of our Colonial houses and their furnishings; and the present fad of making it a good-luck symbol and substitute for the overdone Christmas card is a happy thought that must owe its genesis to some long inherited, though forgotten and subconscious, memory of the ancient belief in the sacredness of the bay or laurel and its potency in bringing the joys of life to the one to whom it is bestowed.

Though the candles are not now presented at the season when danger from thunder threatens us, who knows but that we shall, in the course of events, come round to that revival, too?

But in the meantime, the bayberry candle solves many a little problem for the Christmas shopper who is tired to death of turning over countless stacks of cards in search of one expressing good wishes in a novel and yet Christmassy way.

They are appropriate to all Christmas Eve festivities as well as the day following; and at dinner an individual one should be placed, burning, just beyond the plate of the person who has recently achieved some success or distinction.

A mother, for instance, has one hidden away that she intends to bring out and burn in honor of her son who has entered college, without conditions, at a very youthful age; and this boy is secretly treasuring a large bayberry candle, in an antique brass candlestick that he himself hunted, to burn as a symbolic offering before his devoted mother on the same auspicious occasion. And what a love feast that will truly be!

There was one charming old conceit in regard to the occult powers of these tapers that lovers, of poetic temperament, might well put to the test on Christmas Eve.

Tradition says that the pretty maiden and her absent swain both lighted a bayberry dip on a concerted evening, and that if absence had not weakened their devotion the intangible sweetness of the burning wax was wafted from each to the other—even across the world.