

'Theme' stocking stuffers are easy

BY CHANDRA ORR
Copley News Service

Consider creating themed Christmas stockings, suggests marthastewart.com.

"Christmas stockings are often filled with lots of trinkets, but rarely does a stocking center around a particular idea or a person's specific interests," states the Martha Stewart Web site.

Choose a theme to match each recipient's interests, or create all the stockings in the same theme, mixing them up with slightly different gifts.

WONDERFUL WICKS

Candle-lovers, new homeowners and a college student in her first apartment will appreciate these wonderful wick-inspired stockings.

Include a selection of vibrantly colored and sensually scented candles and classic wood, silver or copper candleholders. Add interesting matchbooks or a refillable lighter inscribed with the recipient's initials. For the true candle aficionado, include a candle extinguisher and a wick trimmer, available from candle specialty shops.

To add a thoughtful homemade feel to the stocking, choose a selection of candles of the same shape and size, suggests marthastewart.com. Wrap two, three, four or six candles together with a strip of tissue paper. Secure the paper with a dot of glue or a small piece of tape. Wrap a large bow around the tissue paper.

CHRISTMAS CANDY

An appropriate gift for just about anyone, candy is a classic holiday pleaser. Instead of purchasing ready-made boxes of chocolates or candy bars, why not put together personalized candy selections?

Choose any kind of candy, from chocolate-covered peanuts to jelly beans, and a selection of holiday themed cookie cutters and gelatin tins suggests Better Homes and Gardens.

Outline each cookie cutter on lightweight cardboard, cut the shape out and tape it to the back of the cookie cutter. Fill the cookie cutters and the gelatin molds with candy pieces or nuts for those who can't have sugar. Wrap each candy concoction in a cellophane bag and tie it closed with red or green ribbon.

Wrap three or four different candies and nuts in a variety of cookie cutters and gelatin tins and combine all the items in a stocking.

Message behind 'The 12 days of Christmas'

BY MATT BUEDEL
Copley News Service

Type "The Twelve Days of Christmas" into almost any Internet search engine and the results will no doubt include a Web site that details the origin of the famous song.

Followed soon after will probably be another site refuting the contents of the previous one as a hoax, possibly with an explanation of its inaccuracy.

But regardless of the song's birthplace and time and its intended meaning, there are those who welcome the tune's popularity as a lasting remnant of a traditional Christian celebration nearly lost in their opinions to the commercialization of the Christmas holiday.

"I'm indebted to (the song)," said Bishop Keith Ackerman, head of the Episcopal Diocese of Quincy, Ill. "It may be the only thing left in the culture that reminds us of the 12 days of Christmas."

Ackerman attributes the "appalling" conversion of a long-standing religious holiday season from sacred to secular to factors driven by the culture. He specifically cites the breakdown of family in America as it relates to business.

As mom-and-pop businesses shut down in the face of mighty corporate competition, the big company's view of the holiday dominates the social psyche, Ackerman explains.

"In my lifetime, I have seen the 12 days of Christmas go literally from being the 12 days after Christmas, and degenerate into the 12 days before Christmas, leading up to a white sale on the 26th," Ackerman said.



Traditionally, each of the 12 days was celebrated, and "virtually every single day had a festivity related to it," he added.

The 26th, the first day, corresponds with the feast of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Dec. 27 is the feast of St. John the Evangelist, an apostle and the traditional author of the fourth Gospel.

The 12-day Christmas liturgical season ends with Epiphany on Jan. 6, the feast which, among other events, celebrates the visit of the wise men to the young Jesus, symbolically representing the world's recognition of the Son of God.

Ackerman has hope that the religious significance of the 12 days will surpass the commercial aspects of the modern celebration of Christmas.

"At some point, the culture is going to realize how empty it has become," he said. "We would return to the idea of giving something of ourselves, not something that the department store says we can't live without." Until then, the song, no

matter what interpretation, carries a special significance for Ackerman.

"One day, someone might ask, 'What's that song all about?' It might lead them to discovery," Ackerman said.

One interpretation of the song, and the version with which the Rev. Chris Layden is familiar, compares the lyrics to those of underground railroad songs — apparently innocent words intended to impart a hidden message.

Layden, assistant pastor of St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Ottawa, Ill., first came across accounts of the song's origins while studying for his license in sacred theology with a specialization in sacraments and liturgy at San Anselmo in Rome.

"In Europe, the tradition of giving gifts on all 12 days is still a very much alive celebration," Layden said. "Liturgically, it doesn't make sense to put up a Christmas tree right after Thanksgiving."

The song supposedly held hidden meaning for

Catholics persecuted in England at a time when openly practicing their faith was a violation of the law, and could result in penalties as stiff as death. According to that theory, the lyrics served as a memory aid for children learning the tenets of their faith.

The "true love" sung at the beginning of each verse referred to God, and each gift given to "me" is given to every baptized person.

The partridge in the pear tree represented Jesus Christ. The symbol of the partridge was chosen for the bird's actions when defending its young. It feigns injury to draw a predator's attention from helpless newborns.

Two turtle doves represented the Old and New Testaments. Three French hens stood for the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Four calling birds commemorated the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and the gospels they authored. Five golden rings represented the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, which records the history of man's fall from grace.

Six geese a-laying stood for the six days of creation. Seven swans a-swimming equaled the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the sacraments. Eight maids a-milking represented the eight Beatitudes in Matthew 5. Nine ladies dancing stood for the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Ten lords a-leaping equaled the Ten Commandments. Eleven pipers piping commemorated the 11 faithful apostles.

And 12 drummers drumming represented the 12 points of the Apostle's Creed.

Other interpretations of the song classify it as a parlor game, a playful way to test a child's memory that has nothing to do with the Catholic faith. Those findings claim the lyrics first appeared in "Mirth Without Mischief," a book published in the late 18th century in France.

The point of the song was for a leader to recite a verse. A child would then say the subsequent verse, until someone made a mistake and had to pay a penalty, be it a kiss or a piece of candy.

According to Rick Peterson, associate director of public affairs at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wis., the song made its way to the United States via Emily Frances Brown, a professor at Milwaukee-Downer College specializing in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English literature.

Peterson said Brown, who was known as "the official spirit of Christmas" for the annual Yuletide celebration at the college, found a yellowed manuscript containing the song in a bookstore in Oxford, England.

"The Twelve Days of Christmas" made its American debut in the dining hall of Milwaukee-Downer College in December 1910, and launched an American tradition, Peterson said.

The meaning of the song is, at best, murky, and the historical accounts are varied, lending it a mythical status. But the purpose of the song, at least for Ackerman and Layden, is definite.

"For us, this song is nostalgic. We may not really know the meaning," Layden said. "It has to do with ritual, and ritual is how we celebrate our faith."

Making memories: Use keepsakes to create heartwarming a 'family tree'

BY LIZ POPPENS
Copley News Service

Twinkling with lights and ornaments, Christmas trees are the stuff memories are made of. So how about a tree exclusively devoted to favorite memories?

A memory tree could either be the main Christmas tree in the household or a smaller tree in another room — it's the decorating that sets this tree apart. Anything that bespeaks or inspires a memory is fair game to adorn a memory tree. The

result is a unique tree, a one-of-a-kind sure to create memories just in the making.

The most straightforward is a "family tree." This tree, which celebrates family history, starts with lots of photographs. Make photocopies of snapshots and old family photos, glue onto stiff cardboard or foam board and cut out. Leave an edge to decorate or cut to the edge of the photo, then hot-glue a ribbon loop at the top. Hang the photos throughout the tree. (If you don't want to make your own ornaments,

consider buying ready-made photo ornaments or a hanging decorative frame.

Look for family keepsakes, such as baby booties, to nestle into branches. Scour thrift and antique shops for items reminiscent of family events or history.

Invite family members to contribute items for the tree, especially items relating to a family's ethnic heritage. If there are vintage Christmas ornaments that have been in the family for years that you can find, they would be a great addition.

To finish off the family

tree, make or purchase a plain tree skirt and create a keepsake family tree skirt, such as that created by Catherine Newman in Family Fun magazine. Pour gold or silver fabric paint into a bowl and have family members dip their hands into it, then "stamp" a handprint somewhere on the skirt. With a gold or silver paint pen, write the name of each family member under his or her handprint. Also write the year somewhere on the skirt.

Consider placing a blank book near the tree for visit-

ing relatives and friends to record their own favorite Christmas memories. Or set up a basket with colored strips of construction paper and silver and gold pencils. Have each holiday visitor write a favorite memory on a strip. When you have a basketful of completed strips, loop and glue them together into a paper chain to hang on the tree or drape across the fireplace mantel.

A memory tree is a creative way to document family history and to cherish the ties that bind.

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