

The Story of Candles



At first some families had only the light from their fireplaces. A few people burned pine knots or candlewood. Pine knots were the part of the pine tree where branches grew out of the trunks. They were full of pitch and burned brightly. They were usually burned in the fireplaces or over a flat stone so that the sticky pitch would not drip on the floor. The inside of the trunk of the pine tree was called candlewood. It was cut into little sticks that were burned for light. Pine knots and candlewood makes a smoky, dripping light because of the pitch in them, but they gave brighter light than other kinds of burning wood. The inside (or pitch) of plants called rushes was sometimes soaked in grease and burned. Such a light was a rushlight.

As soon as they could, people tried to make lamps. An early lamp was made by getting a wick and twisting it around a stick in an open dish or saucer filled with some sort of grease or oil. This was called a saucer lamp. If there was no dish that could be used for a lamp, a vegetable lamp was made by hollowing out a turnip, beet, or potato and putting in a wick. The hole was filled with grease and the wick was lit. Some lamps were made of metal or clay. Some had spouts in which to put the wick and chain hooks so that they could be hung. The hooks could be stuck in the log wall of the cabin. Some of these samples were called Betty lamps.

People found that the best type of candles were those made from tallow or beeswax. They were shaped with a wick down the center. Tallow came from the fat of sheep, cows, or deer. Sometimes beeswax was added to tallow to make the candle harder. One method was to dip a piece of string called the wick into hot tallow. It was dipped again and again. Each time it was dipped, a little more tallow stuck to the wick until the candle was the desired size. These candles were not made one at a time. Wicks were doubled, twisted, and hung on smooth wooden sticks called candle rods. Six or eight wicks were put on each rod. Two straight back chairs were set with the backs facing each other. Two long poles were placed parallel to each other across the backs of the chairs. The candle rods were laid across the poles like the rungs of a ladder. Boards were laid on the floor underneath to catch any wax that dripped down.

Most of the candles were used in the winter. In summer, people got up very early in the morning and went to bed when it was too dark to see without light. Even in winter, candles might not have been used expect for very special occasions. Candles were sometimes placed in lanterns that could be carried from place to place. Some lanterns had glass sides. Other lanterns were made of tin with little holes through which the light was emitted.