



Halcyon Days

➤ "HALCYON DAYS" is an expression we are very likely to hear about now, whenever a spell of calm, warm, "Indian summer" days makes us forget for a while summer storms that are past and winter weather that is still to come. Most of us do not stop to think of its origin.

The phrase dates back to a belief of the ancient Greeks, that during calm, bright days that sometimes intervene in the midst of the Mediterranean winter a bird called the halcyon, usually identified as the kingfisher, made a floating nest on the quiet waters and there reared its young. The word "halcyon" itself is a combination of two Greek roots mean-

ing "seaborn." Many old-time superstitions have survived into our own time, but this one has died out completely, leaving only its name as a literary tag.

There is reason enough for supposing that the kingfisher actually was the halcyon of the ancient Greeks. It is of necessity a water-side dweller, and thus would have been familiar to sailors and especially to fishermen. The latter may well have admired its skill at their own craft. It is quite unlikely that the Greeks, who were on the whole not very observant naturalists, would have noticed the kingfisher's habit of occasionally vanishing into a hole in an earthen bank or bluff, so that the whereabouts of its nest remained a mystery. And where facts do not presently come to hand to explain a mystery, a superstition is very likely to take their place. Hence the story of the floating nest.

There was another superstition about the kingfisher, that apparently survived at least into the Renaissance. Sailors believed that a reliable wind-vane could be made by hanging up a dead kingfisher by the neck: its long beak was supposed to point steadily into the wind. Marlow, a contemporary of Shakespeare, alludes to this in one of his plays: "Into what quarter peers my halcyon's bill?" Whether sailors actually did use dead kingfishers for this purpose may be doubted. Kingfishers aren't easy to catch; and anyway sailors usually have better means for telling wind direction. Perhaps the belief only survived the better because everybody held it and nobody put it to the test.

Science News Letter, October 12, 1946

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CHEMISTRY

Series of New Glucose Compounds Is Developed

➤ A WHOLE series of new compounds made of glucose and other simple sugars has been developed by William C. Griffin of Tamaqua, Pa., assignor to the Atlas Powder Company. The sugar is mixed with one of the glycols and heated mildly in the presence of a little sulfuric or other strong acid. The resultant compound is viscous, sticky and hygroscopic. It can be used as an adhesive or as a conditioner for such diverse things as synthetic sheeting, tobacco and gelatine products. Three patents cover this invention, nos. 2,407,001 to 2,407,003.

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PHYSIOLOGY

Growth Factor Research Leads to Treatments

➤ WATCH FOR new treatments of disease and better understanding of human ills to come from inquiries into about 20 mysterious vitamins and growth factors.

The Princeton Bicentennial Conference on growth received from Dr. Karl Folkers, Merck research director, a list of unidentified food factors that are additional to the ones that you read about or take in pills.

Latest of these include an antistiffness factor that shows up in guinea pigs, an unnamed feeding factor needed by chicks, and unrecognized vitamins that pigs must have.

One of the most recently discovered vitamins that has been put to use is folic acid. It formerly was thought to be something that only bugs needed. Then it was discovered that it plays an important role in warding off many kinds of anemia.

Scientists now expect that other little-understood food factors will turn out to be necessary for well-being or useful in treating disease.

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CHEMISTRY

New Treatment Lessens Fire Hazard in Lumber

➤ FIRE HAZARD in lumber construction can be lessened materially by chemical treatment, impregnating the timber with solutions of ammonium salts, borax, or boric acid, the National Bureau of Standards finds in recent tests. In fire-tube tests, treated wood lost an average of 40% and untreated wood lost 80% of their weights.

The added expense of chemical treatment, the Bureau states, may double the cost of the lumber. This tends to limit its use to applications where there is a special fire hazard.

In the Bureau investigation, eight solid walls of select Douglas fir lumber were subjected to fire endurance tests, four loaded and four unloaded. The chemical treatment added 17% to 23% to the failure time of treated walls under load in contrast to the untreated walls. For the walls without load, the treatment increased the failure time from 29% to 33%.

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