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It's witching's hour

Oct. 31 – er, Samhain – Wicca adherents get ready to party like it's New Year's Eve

BY JENNIFER WILLIS
The Portland Tribune Oct 29, 2006

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In medieval Europe, men and women accused as witches were rounded up and tortured into confessions of witchcraft.

By the time of public execution, the appearance of the condemned person was so drastically altered by battered, defied flesh and broken bones and teeth that they looked more monster than human – an image handed down in the green-faced, humpbacked hag we recognize today as the Halloween witch.

There are no exact figures for how many men and women met such gruesome ends in the witch hunts, but the stereotype of the witch as a Satan-worshipping, ugly old woman lives on.

In reality, many – but not all – modern witches are followers of Wicca, a relatively young but increasingly popular religion, practiced in private by individuals and in groups called covens. Some capitalize the word “witch,” others don't, but with so much prejudice attached to the word, why would people want to identify themselves that way?

Sally McSweeney lives in Aloha and operates an online herbal apothecary business. She has been a practicing witch for nearly 30 years.



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"I use the term 'witch' to remember and identify with those healers who went before me," McSweeney says. "Prior to the medieval European witch hunts, herbalists, midwives, healers and the like were valued and revered members of the community." They posed a threat to the church and medical profession, she says, and so were labeled witches.

VALLEYTIMES

ClackamasReview

Those persecuted as witches centuries ago have little in common with people bearing the title now.

EAST COUNTY NEWS

"Modern witchcraft is a unique combination of folk traditions, fragments of pagan celebrations, ceremonial magic and other eclectic spice," McSweeney says.

EstacadaNEWS

NEWS-TIMES

She says most people think a witch "worships the devil and flies about on broomsticks creating havoc and doing evil." She is more likely to call herself a pagan "because it embraces so much more."

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Even in pagan-friendly Portland, the word "witch" still brings to mind "The Wizard of Oz," the witches in "Macbeth" and Ichabod Crane's mother in the movie "Sleepy Hollow." Other stereotypes include the beautiful, "good witches" on television's "Bewitched" and "Charmed" and the scary, goth witches from "The Craft" – not to mention Harry Potter.

Lifestyles

OregonCityNews

Many witches practice their craft alone, and with no central, organizational body for witches, the exact number of witches in Portland is unknown.

Regal Courier

They may no longer be burned at the stake, but once "out of the broom closet," witches might lose their jobs, be physically attacked or have their property vandalized.

SANDY POST

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When McSweeney opened her brick-and-mortar store, Triple Aspect Herbs, in Beaverton, she had a great relationship with her landlady, but not with some of her landlady's customers.

Sherwood Gazette

"They boycotted her store and threatened to continue the boycott until she stopped renting to 'evil witches,'" McSweeney says. "They made assumptions about me – what I believed, what I do – based on pure hearsay. Invariably their objections involved the words 'devil worship,' and the threat that I was going to hell."

THE SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY CONNECTION

McSweeney turned her business into an online-only store in 2001.

TheTimes TIGARD | TUALATIN | SHERWOOD

She is careful about discussing her personal beliefs. "If someone asks me, 'Are you a witch?' I respond by asking them what their definition of a witch is."

West Linn Tidings

An earth-based religion, Wicca is drawn in part from the traditions of agricultural communities in pre-Christian Europe. Wiccans celebrate eight major solar holidays – including the equinoxes, solstices, Beltane/May Day and Halloween – and observe monthly rituals following the phases of the moon.

Wicca first started gaining popularity in the mid-20th century, thanks largely to the 1951 repeal of Britain's Witchcraft Act of 1735 – which allowed for the prosecution of anyone claiming to be a witch or to have magical powers – and the 1954 publication of "Witchcraft Today" by British civil servant Gerald Gardner.

Wicca is not a dogmatic faith with sacred texts. Each Wiccan is required to develop his or her own definition of, and relationship with, the divine. Just as there are many Christian denominations, there are different paths within Wicca and witchcraft.

There is, however, a kind of golden rule, called the Wiccan Rede. "Harming

none, do as you will” obligates Wiccans to take into account the good of all – people, plants, animals and planet – before taking action.

This conscientious concern resonates with the core principles of most other religions, including Christianity. Under Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church upholds what is true and valid in non-Christian faiths, yet the church holds a negative view of Wicca.

“It regards witchcraft/Wicca as contrary to faith in Jesus Christ,” says Matthew Ogilvie, director of pre-ministry studies at the University of Dallas. He says the church has very little, if anything, in common with Wicca because of the church’s belief in a personal god.

“We most certainly do believe in God,” McSweeney says. “The difference is that we also believe in the goddess, that deity has both male and female aspects.”

Halloween – or Samhain (pronounced SOW-en), as it is known to Wiccans – marks the end of the old year and the beginning of a new cycle. This is a time for honoring ancestors and loved ones who have died during the previous year, and for setting goals for the coming year.

A day of both solemnity and merriment, Samhain is many Wiccans’ favorite holiday – so it’s no wonder that Halloween is associated with witches.

Quakers deem Wiccan OK

Even with the legal protections of freedom of religion, it can be difficult to shake centuries of prejudice.

“I was fired from my job of 20 years when a gang of fanatic Christians took over my company,” says Ansur (his coven name), a 70-year-old retired engineer and self-identified witch in Milwaukie.

In addition to rejection, he’s encountered surprise and disbelief when he has revealed his beliefs. “Most wondrous of all, a Quaker church accepted me as being at a ‘different but OK point with God.’

“As a very young boy, I dabbled in magic, mostly protective,” he says. “I considered myself to be a sort of apprentice wizard.” He later served as the youngest deacon ever at his Congregational Christian church, but he became disillusioned with church politics and proselytizing.

He met practicing witches and found that he felt very much at home with their ideas and practices. That was more than 35 years ago.

“At first, I was very uncomfortable with the title of witch,” Ansur says. “The word brought up visions of green-skinned, ugly females with warts.”

Ansur sometimes calls himself a Wiccan, wizard or sorcerer instead of a witch. He also likes the terms neopagan, intellectual mystic and rational religious thinker.

Interest in paganism is growing: A 2001 American Religious Identification Survey by researchers at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York found the number of Wiccans in the United States had increased from 8,000 in 1990 to 134,000 in 2001. But the word “witch” still raises eyebrows.

“For the past 10 years or so, it has been the religion of choice in the ‘alternative’ community,” McSweeney says. “Many people feel the need to tell all and sundry that they are a witch, sometimes to see what type of reaction they get and sometimes just to be recognized as being different or one of the in crowd.”

One of the biggest misconceptions about witches is that they are in league with Satan, a stereotype reaching back to medieval Europe and to the witch

trials in Salem, Mass. Wicca contains no concept of Satan, who plays a prominent role in Christian faith, yet many people automatically make the link.

"It might have been better to pick a title that didn't bring up a vision of an evil old woman cavorting with the devil," Ansur says. "Yet at the same time, I can understand the witch title as a pre-emptive strike against the horror of the witch burnings and lessen the chance of other nasty reactions.

"The title witch became a symbol of opposition to religious oppression and persecution," he says. "Perhaps we need titles that are upsetting to what can be a very ugly status quo."

McSweeney says witches are just like everyone else. They have jobs and families, join the PTA, watch reality shows on television, shop at Costco and drink lattes. She stresses that witches are very simply not a threat to anyone or to any other religion.

A witch, McSweeney says, is someone who takes complete responsibility for her beliefs, the choices she makes and the actions she takes. "I've had many students voice surprise at just how much is involved with being a witch. It goes far beyond what you see on 'Charmed' or 'The Craft' or in many of the books in Barnes & Noble.

"Being a witch is a way of life to me, not a hobby or a label," she says. "It is about living your life in a conscious way, combining your energies with those of the world around you on a daily basis."

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