

Witches' Return

'Wise Ones' Say It's Time for Them To Come Forward and Heal the Earth

By TOM BAXTER

It is the day of what they call the merry meet at the House of Ravenwood. The house has been blessed, the table lined with holly and mistletoe, and the punch spiked with vodka. But there are still a hundred details to attend to, and the first guests are arriving.

You could say the house has a Christmasy feeling about it, but the old goat looking down from the mantel might disapprove. This is a house of witches, and while its members say they have no fight with Christians, they traditionally haven't gotten along.

There are witches and there are witches, of course, especially in the current age of occultism. But Ravenwood at 522 Moreland Ave. NE is the new Atlanta home for the Brotherhood and Sisterhood of Wicca, a group that traces itself back to an old pagan religion that is a prime source for most of the legends about witches.

Wicca is a Gaelic term meaning "wise one" or "old one." And a surprising number of those standing around the punchbowl this Thursday afternoon claim they learned the craft, as it's called, from older family members who were carrying it down through generations.

"My grandfather taught me the craft, but he never put the word 'witch' on it," says Wes McKewin, an Atlanta witch. "It hasn't been the safest term to use in the past."

These days, however, witchcraft is coming out of the closet.

Ravenwood, a combination meeting place, temple and crafts shop, is buzzing by now with berobed Wiccans. There's the lord of the house, Malschi; the lady, a bewitching redhead named Sintana; and a pretty blonde priestess from Ohio named Artemis. Cleo, a black cat with a white flea collar, is curled up in a dining room chair.

But the true grandam of the party is only now making her entrance at the stairs. She is Lady Circe of Toledo, who went public 14 years ago and was responsible for

getting Wicca official recognition as a religion by the state of Ohio.

"Witches were the first ecologists, and the first women's libbers," she says. They are coming into the open now, she says, because this is the time when it was foretold that the craft would return to the earth to heal its wounds.

In fact, Wicca, in its original form, does preach a respect for the balance of nature and gives status to women.

Since they don't believe in him, Wiccans don't worship Satan. But they do celebrate Halloween, their new year, and at that time they pay homage to the goat, Pan, the bloodletter, the Lord of Misrule and Winter.

In the spring they honor his female counterpart, who is sometimes pictured with a broom. But it was probably the goat, with those conspicuous horns, that gave them the most trouble with the early Christians.

Circe says one of her ancestors was tortured to death in 1556, and she says there are still problems with Christians.

"The Jesus freaks are out on my front lawn every day, shouting and calling me a daughter of the devil," she says with disgust. "My witches are constantly harassed, and some of them have been fired from jobs."

Circe, who takes credit for predicting Watergate (she claims a similar scandal will befall the Vatican), also has foretold another widespread witchhunt, in 1989.

"But we'll not be burned out this time," she warns. "We do not turn the other cheek. We are not our brother's keeper. That's a sick philosophy."

Witches do have magic, she says, but use it for harm only when threatened. And Circe, who claims never to have participated in an orgy, holds that witches also have high moral standards.

"We don't have any scapegoats," she points out. The old goat on the mantel seems to nod approvingly. "We can't say the devil made us do it."