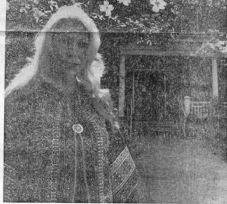


She lives in the House of Ravenwood. But being a witch still carries a stigma, and there have been problems for Lady Sintana and her cohorts in the Wiccan order.



Clayton Kopp/Associated Press

Witch tries to be neighborly But Lady Sintana and her cohorts 'must always defend what we are'

By JEANNE REINMAN
News correspondent

ATLANTA — Viewed from a car last night, the Victorian house on Moreland Avenue resembles a haunted house, and there is a black cat within and a cauldron. But there the similarity to the traditional concept of witchcraft ends.

The House of Ravenwood is a "public house" of Wicca, a pagan religion that dates back to the time of the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons. The first Wiccans lived close to the land and from this came their religious beliefs.

They believed in a "Creative Life Force" and its male and female aspects, the Mother Goddess, called Diana or Hecate, and the Father God, Pan or Morpheus. The two highest holy-days celebrate these deities, with Beltane, April 30, the day the goddess comes into power, and Halloween or Hallowmas, October 31, the day the god takes over.

That "old religion" has come down to the present virtually unchanged, according to Ravenwood's leader, Lady Sintana.

Practice in secret

Sintana — who was born Candace Huxton — and her congregation of approximately 80 people are among an estimated 4,000 Wiccans nationally. Many Wiccans have had their religions handed

down to them, but most practice it in secret. Though Wicca has tax-exempt status in Ohio and finally achieved the same in Georgia, there is usually some harassment when a coven goes public. Ravenwood has the distinction of being the only public house to remain open for longer than six months.

Sintana, an attractive strawberry blonde in her early 40s, bristles at the suggestion that she is running a "cult community." Her group does not actively seek new members, though anyone may come to the Friday evening "love-fests" to satisfy their curiosity.

Many of those who come, she notes wryly, "find Wicca far too tame for them." Of those who profess a sincere interest, "25 percent come for the wrong reasons" and drop out when they discover how much sheer work is involved in becoming a witch.

"There's a difference between incense and magic," Sintana points out. A person must be a member of the group for a year and a day before he or she is accepted into the craft and then the minimum length of instruction is four years. It is a life that demands self-motivation and self-discipline.

Have been problems

Though the Wiccans of Ravenwood have many supporters in the community, there have been problems. Prior to becoming a recognized church in Georgia, the house was raided and Lady Sintana

and a visiting witch, Lady Circe, were arrested for fortunetelling and operating a business without a license.

Then there was a minor run-in with the fire department, when a department captain accused Sintana of threatening him with a knife. And finally, last May a tragic shooting incident occurred at the house and a young girl died. Neither the girl nor her slayer were Wiccans, but because the shooting took place at Ravenwood, there was a certain amount of negative publicity. The Wiccans are still recovering from it.

Sintana has sought to build goodwill among her neighbors by lecturing at Georgia State and Georgia Tech and allowing Ravenwood to serve as a drug rehabilitation and crisis center for troubled teenagers. She has been a mother to four foster children, as well as to a daughter of her own.

This year, for the second time, Ravenwood will play host to the annual Witcher Convention, to be held May 8, 10 and 11 at the Atlanta Biltmore Hotel. Anyone who is interested in the occult and psychic phenomena is welcome to attend.

Ravenwood's future plans include establishing a retreat on 200 acres 50 miles north of the city that have been deeded to them.

In spite of their apparent success, there is an air of uneasiness about Ravenwood. As Lady Sintana explained, "We must always defend what we are."