

WICCA WITCH OF THE SOUTH



Staff photo—Wes Wright

Guardians of the hearth

A our car pulled into the parking lot near Ravenwood, I nervously asked Signal photographer Wes Wright for a Vantage.

I hadn't smoked for six months, but then Ravenwood isn't my normal beat. Ravenwood, you see, is a witches' coven.

Puffing anxiously, we stepped closer.

A man smoking a pipe and wearing a pentacle around his neck greeted us.

Images of bats, owls and the Black Mass rumbled through my nicotine-craved brain. Actually I knew better than that, having researched my article beforehand, but I wasn't taking any chances.

I despise bats. They are truly hideous creatures! We sat down. A black and white portable television blared out the UGA/Vanderbilt game.

"How 'bout them Dawgs?" I said half-jokingly.

No answer. I was going to have an angst attack. Control the panic, man. Just control the panic.

Halloween is one of my favorite holidays. Its history is one of bizarreness, the unusual, pranks, paganism, festivals and weirdness.

As I sat waiting for Lady Sintana (the founder, an elder and the High Priestess of Ravenwood) to start the interview, I reviewed my notes.

Halloween probably developed from the Celtic festival of Samhain.

The Celts were a pagan people who lived in Britain, Ireland and northern France some 2,000 years ago. Their New Year occurred on November 1, so the night before, they honored the death of the old year, Samhain, their God of death and the beginning of winter, darkness and decay.

The Druids, who were the Celtic priests and teachers, ordered all families in the community to extinguish their hearth fires on October 31. They then lit a public fire of oak branches (considered to be sacred) and sacrificed animals, crops and possibly even humans. Afterwards, each family relit its hearth fire from the New Year's fire. Fortunetelling and other forms of magick (the original spelling) were practiced then too.

In A.D. 43 the Roman emperor Claudius I conquered the Celts and part of Britain. For the next 400 years the Romans would rule and try to "civilize" the pagans. Knowing that old ways die hard, the Romans simply combined two of their own holidays with Samhain. Feralia occurred in late October to honor the dead. Pomona, the other festival, honored the goddess of fruits and trees. This festival is probably why apples are associated with Halloween.

By the year 800 A.D., most of the Celts were Christians and it was at this time that All Saints Day (November 1) came into being.

On this day a mass was said which was called

As the Christian churches grew in power and members, they found it necessary to wipe out the old ways of the Celtic pagans.

Systematic persecutions of witches didn't begin until 1484, the first year of the reign of Pope Innocent VIII.

It is estimated that from that time to 1782, some 300,000 people were killed because of their alleged ties to witchcraft.

The last American witch trial is the most famous one. Twenty people were killed and 150 more were sent to prison in 1692 in Salem, Mass., because of a West Indian slave's voodoo tale had frightened some children and their hysterical parents.

But what of the Druids, the Celtic rituals, nature worship, magick and witchcraft? What happened to "the old religion"?

Well, "the old religion," or Wicca as it is known, still exists.

Though they were persecuted for their beliefs, much as the early Christians were, the adherents of "the old religion" simply took it underground where it secretly survived for almost 500 years.

The British government did not repeal their centuries-old witchcraft laws until 1951.

Partly due to this move, many witches and covens (a local group of witches usually numbering between 5-50) became at least partially public during the '60s.

The coven is led by a High Priest or Priestess who teaches the others to keep the old holidays, to master ritual, magick and psychic development.

Witches worship within a magick circle that is inscribed on the floor. The tools of their trade include an athame (ritual knife), a pentacle (a metal disk inscribed with magical symbols), a chalice and a sword. All witches use a grimoire (a book of spells) and a book of shadows (a book of ritual).

Witches are not satanists or devil worshippers, but are actually closer to pantheists (nature worshippers). They believe that the force of life exists everywhere and is the greatest force known.

They don't believe in personified gods, or that people are naturally sinful and must forever seek salvation for their sins. They are tolerant of other beliefs and respect the rights of others. They have faith in themselves, others, and in life itself. They do not seek power through the suffering of others. They recognize a physical and spiritual world and believe that it is the intersection of these two worlds which is the basis for the paranormal and their magical exercises.

Without warning Lady Sintana entered the room.

"Wicca in the old tongue," she said, "meant wise. A witch is similar to an Indian Shaman, but is