

VOYAGERS IN THE NEW AGE

by Letitia Sweitzer

"We don't bite, we don't cast spells, we don't turn people into frogs." This assurance volunteered by a spokesperson for Ravenwood, the Church of the Old Religion, was more unsettling than reassuring. Actually, we just wanted to know if there would be any requests for donations, pressure to join, embarrassing silences . . . but it's good to know, while planning visits to Atlanta's New Age organizations, that this time we won't have to hop home.

Initiates of Ravenwood, also called the House of Wicca or witchcraft, hold open house one Sunday afternoon a month. Lady Santana, the head witch of the coven, as the matriarchical society is called, and her consort, Lord Merlin, try to dispel our doubts and make us feel comfortable.

We look at the other visitors and wonder if we fit in. On this particular Sunday there is a very old man with a cane and a cane, a middle-aged woman in a Villager sweater and an ATO from Emory who was sent by his history professor. There is an out-of-work transient with a disabled arm, an uneven haircut and jeans faded to an unnamable shade who asks earnest questions like, "What happens to your midnight ceremony when the time changes to daylight savings?" A striking young man with troubling dark eyes and a black beard turns out to be a computer science instructor at Control Data Institute.



Ravenwood Church, one of many local New Age organizations. Photo by Jane.

The initiates, some of whom live in the house on Moreland Avenue, are dressed in black. Lord Merlin's silver-gray page boy-length hair reaches below his clerical collar. He wears a gold star, the pentagram of Wicca, around his neck and carries a black ornamental cane. The initiates are friendly, patient and eager to explain their worship of Nature.

"It's just me," says Mark, a young unemployed restaurant worker who has come to several open houses. He plans to take the introductory course to become a member when he can raise the \$50. "I have a sort of psychic problem," he adds. "I know when things are going to happen sometimes before they happen — things there's no way I could guess, and then they happen. I've been wanting to talk to someone here about it, but I haven't yet."

When Mark gets up the nerve to ask, he will get support from Ravenwood. According to a member, helping others help themselves is the main purpose of Wicca; learning that the only one who is responsible for you is you is a central teaching.

This lesson is a familiar refrain in New Age organizations. You hear it at the Center for the Science of the Mind, you hear it from the Tarot card reader at a Psychic Fair, you hear it at evening meditations. Search within yourself. You are in control. Listen to your mind. Look at the psychic landscape. Develop your unlimited powers.

A palm reader who has come from Columbus to consult others of his persuasion says, "Your palm changes all the time. I developed an entirely new line in my hand through study and prayer and this," he says, gesturing to include the whole company of psychic advisors who have set up shop in the DAR house on 15th Street, which is also home to the Foundation of Truth. "I once met a lady with a short life line. I saw her many years later and said, 'You're supposed to be dead.' She said, 'Yes, I know.' Through prayer she had changed her fate."

Prayer is not the name of what happens at the Center for Science of the Mind services Sunday mornings, but the results are the same. The minister says instead, "Let us be silent and gather our thoughts," and then