

Witches

Continued from Page 1A

terms of B-grade movies ... and the best over old hags with the warts on their noses," said Lady Twilight, a 41-year-old executive secretary from Marietta and one of Ravenwood's 30 Wiccan elders. "We're doctors, we're lawyers, we're police officers. ... I can discuss my religion very openly with people as long as I don't say the 'w' word."

Unfortunately, that word has caused some conflict during Ravenwood's past 19 years. In the 1970s and 1980s, Ravenwood witches commonly guarded each others' homes against pranksters, said Lady Sintana, a.k.a. Candy Lehrman — the only member who allowed the use of her real name.

Just last year, Lady Sintana said, she faced a zoning battle, fueled by state Sen. John Parrish and ignorance, with her south DeKalb neighbors.

However, Rhuddlwm Gawr, High Priest of the Y Tylwyth Teg coven, said Cobb County police have protected his family from vandals during their eight years in Kennesaw. Kennesaw State College has permitted Gawr to share information on his faith, he said.

Gawr works a "normal" job as a computer analyst when he's not studying for his doctorate in psychology. But at each full moon, he dances sky clad (or naked) with the rest of his coven. Gawr's group, which averages 7 to 23 witches, feels clothing impedes the aura during this lunar ceremony.

However, the ritual is in no way sexual, he said. "It's about as exciting as going to Hidden Valley Nadist Camp," said Gawr, 54.

The Ravenwood witches' version of Wicca is a goddess-centered faith that traces its roots to the earliest belief that humans are inextricably intertwined with nature, the cosmos and the divine.

The Halloween ritual, which isn't performed sky clad, opens with a meditation on the coming new year and for those who have recently died. Then, the worshippers join the Circle — the Wiccans' outdoor church — which is surrounded by jack-o-lanterns to ward off evil souls. A cauldron sits in the middle of the Circle to symbolize rebirth and the power of wisdom.

Prayers welcome the Wiccan God into power and bid farewell to the Wiccan Goddess. Witches sing and dance to celebrate the souls' departure from this life and their journey to the next life. The ritual also includes a healing ceremony for those in need. The Circle is broken after an offering of cake and wine.

Rituals, beliefs and traditions might differ according to the coven, but all Wiccans reject the concept of Satan, believe in reincarnation and abide by the rule: what you give comes back to you three-fold. Casting spells is no more than meditation or a healing ritual, according to Gawr.

The faith, Wiccans say, pre-dates Christianity and is solar and agrarian-based. The Wiccan holidays, which revolve around the seasons, include Yule around Dec. 21; Candlemas on Feb. 1 or 2; spring equinox on March 21; Beltane, April 30-May 1; Midsummer on June 21; Lammass July 31-Aug. 1; and the autumn equinox

on Sept. 21.

Since the pagan (Latin for peasant, or country people) tradition is oral, there is no "Witch's Bible" or "Book of Shadows," according to the coven.

The concept of a 13-member coven emerged when pagans met in small groups to avoid confrontation with the community. "The word 'coven' is not relative today," said Lady Sintana, whose group hosts celebrations with as many as 150 people. However, Gawr feels smaller groups enhance the worship.

Becoming a witch is not a hereditary or overnight process, assured Lady Sintana and Gawr. Ravenwood requires one to two years spent studying the metaphysical sciences, philosophy, healing and theology. Ravenwood elders have studied Wicca for at least three years.

"[Wicca is] a religion of responsibility," said Lady Twilight. "The first six to nine months, you're immersed in ethics, tenants and laws."

Children under 17 can ask for initiation only with the consent of both parents, said Lady Twilight, mother of five teen-agers. Only her 15-year-old daughter has shown interest in Wicca, she said.

Since the explosion of interest in witchcraft during the late 1960s, many splinter groups emerged calling themselves Wiccans, but practicing a faith unlike the true religion, said Lady Sintana.

"There were a lot of charlatans," she said. "Wicca is much more accessible in diverse forms than it was 20 years ago. Some are healthy, some are not."