

Dec 9, 1998

Praying to ancient gods  
and honoring the Earth,  
pagans call their  
worship a return to

# old-time religion



At a Wiccan ceremony, a woman identified only as Windy prepares to hand out apple slices, symbolizing their goddess and eternal life.

Story by Jeremy Martin  
Photographs by Christine Jacobs

Down a bumpy dirt road in Auburn, in an abandoned house, members of the Church of the Spiral Tree passed around 2-month-old Conner Steingraber, each placing a hand on his forehead to bless him.

Conner's mother, Kat Steingraber, serves as Alabama director of the Pagan Awareness League, an institution promoting religious freedom for modern-day pagans. She brought Conner to Auburn one day in November for a ceremonial Wiccaning, the pagan equivalent of a Christian baptism.

"I just want him to know that if he ever needs somebody in his life, he will always have a pagan home," said Steingraber, 24, of Montgomery. "These are people he can associate with and call his family."

For many people, the word "pagan" evokes Old Testament of followers of demons. Some

evangelists say that even today's pagans should be considered harmful cults. But to Steingraber, one of a handful of pagans in Alabama, paganism is simply a peaceful, normal way of living.

"Pagan is an umbrella term that encompasses a broad range of beliefs," Steingraber said.

Most pagans follow a nature-based spirituality and worship gods that preceded Christianity.

Linda Kerr and her husband, Craig, founded The Church of the Spiral Tree about a year ago to give people a chance to express themselves and their different religious beliefs.

Linda said members of the church are primarily solitary types who follow their own path.

"Everyone in the church gets a chance to share the particulars of their religious style with the rest of the group," she said. "We see it as a way to learn from other people." The Church of the Spiral Tree is the only incorporated pagan church in Alabama, allowing it the same tax-exempt status as conventional churches. It also has the same legal rights to perform baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Many church members were reluctant to reveal their full names for fear of being identified by co-workers and neighbors.

"It's a very misunderstood faith," said Jennifer, a short, light-skinned girl with dark hair. "I feel that I can't really be me around people who aren't pagan. The church brings me together with other people who have the same general beliefs that I do."

Tim Hayden, who lives in Troy, said some of his co-workers know he's pagan and say they will pray for him.

"I don't need to be prayed for," he said. "Spiritually, I'm where I want to be."

Hayden and his wife, Mel, were married in a Wiccan ceremony last month that featured "handfasting," in which the couple's hands were tied together briefly to symbolize how they are bound together emotionally.

Odessa, a robust woman with long flowing hair and a radiant smile, is the hospitality officer for the Church of the Spiral Tree. She said pagans are loving people whose main concerns are the environment and healing.

Vivianne Crowley, a pagan and author of "Phoenix From the Flame: Pagan Spirituality in the Western World," said the body has urges to fulfill its physical functions to eat, sleep, relieve itself and mate. Pagans don't consider these functions good or evil, just natural functions necessary to maintain the body and, species.

She said in earlier, more animalistic generations, all of these functions were fulfilled un-self-consciously. But as thinking functions developed, people realized they appreciated some foods better than others and some mates better than others.

She said sexuality developed into an experience that could lead to deep emotional bonding.

While for unattached pagan adults, there are no doctrinal barriers to sexual activity with other unattached adults, Steingraber said any relationship that hurts or damages another is



Newlyweds Mel and Tim Hayden of Troy are photographed after their handfasting ceremony, in which their hands were bound together with a rope, symbolizing their union. The couple was legally wed by a Wiccan priestess named Stormy.

unacceptable to pagans.

Crowley said paganism has roots with the beginning of the human race. Ancient man worshiped the gods that most affected his life, which ranged from the gods of the hunt to the sun god.

When Roman Emperor Constantine granted favored treatment to Christianity among religions in the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century, paganism began to die out, some say encouraged by persecution by Christians.

Crowley said from the late 18th century onward, industrialization and the rape of Europe's natural scenery and resources caused many people to think common sense was being sacrificed for material progress with potentially dangerous results.

The desire to return to the reverence of nature was evident throughout the 1930s, Crowley said, by a growing following for the naturalist movement and the founding of hiking and rambling societies and the spread of Scouting organizations.

The pre-Second World War period, however, saw a sinister form of paganism emerge.

The Nazis used the back-to-nature movement to prop up their political ideas with religion. She said the German culture and its traditional religion was used to justify an aggressive warrior cult.

Ancient Aryans used the swastika in their worship of sun gods. Adolf Hitler selected the swastika as the emblem of the racial purity to win over the working class, according to the Holocaust Teacher Resource Center of Newport News, Va.

Despite setbacks, the post-Second World War period continued to see a growth in paganism due to European immigration and the continued questioning of Christianity.

Crowley said immigration brought new religions and shattered the notion that there could be only one religion and one way of viewing God. She said young people were taught to question the wisdom of their elders, which led many to seek their own forms of religious expression.

In the 1960s and '70s, Crowley said, pagan teachings became more accessible. More people were exposed to the ideas and became interested.

Robert Ellwood, a visiting professor of religion at Auburn University, said the feminist movement also was a factor. Many people turned to goddess-oriented religions, seeking a greater expression of feminine ideals.

Pagans often are devoted to both a god and a goddess, but they often worship multiple deities, Crowley said.

Many pagans prefer using many sources to evolve their own spiritual practice, rather than subscribing to one ritual.

There are, however, distinct paths within paganism.

Steingraber, who considers herself a witch - a good one - chose the Wiccan path when she was 12. Her father was a Southern Baptist and her mother a pagan. Today, Steingraber runs her own coven in Montgomery called "The Elemental Circle of Spirit."

"As a Wiccan I revere the forces of nature," she said.

No one person or organization determines the practices of and beliefs of Wicca as a whole. "Personally I'm an elemental," she said. "I see the elements as representing the god and goddess."

Steingraber said the elements are earth, air, fire, water and spirit. A circled pentagram with one point up is the Wiccan symbol that represents these elements. She points to the one hanging around her neck.

This symbol is not to be confused with the inverted pentagram often associated with Satanists, she said.

In order to be a Satanist, one must subscribe to Christian beliefs, she said.

Tanya Luhrmann, a professor of anthropology at the University of California at San Diego and author of "Persuasions of the Witch's Craft," said she has never encountered a Wiccan group that she would consider satanic.

"These groups tend to be very tame," Luhrmann said. "They oftentimes get their inspiration from fairy tales and Greek mythology, rather than dark forces."

The Wiccan motto says, "An [if] ye harm none, do what ye will." In other words, Luhrmann said, do what you want but don't hurt anybody.

Another Wiccan belief is that whatever you do on this Earth, good or bad, will come back to you threefold.

Steingraber said this, rather than the Christian idea of hell, discourages Wiccan followers from causing harm to others.

Luhrmann said the Wiccan religion grew more popular in the 1960s and '70s because of the explosion of religious alternatives and partly because members weren't forced to believe anything.

Luhrmann said most mainstream Christian religions want an upfront commitment to God, which can be intimidating. She said Wicca offers religion without the commitment.

She said neither of her parents forced religion, on her. She said, though, that at an early age, she concluded that while men made temples, gods made the land the temples were on.

"It meant more to me to pray outside on the ground," she said.

The Wiccan temple is found in nature, she said, and members often meet in a circle under the stars.

She and the members of her coven celebrate eight festivals throughout the year.

The most recent festival, the Samhain, is a celebration of Halloween. Steingraber said pagans believe Halloween is the night when the veil between the spirit world and our world opens, giving us our closest connection with dead ancestors.

Steingraber said a typical celebration includes meeting with friends for fellowship and food.

"After eating, we get into a circle to chant and say prayers. At each meeting, we dedicate ourselves to the god and goddess. We share a drink together from a communal cup, known as a chalice, and before we finish, we pour some of it into the earth."

Steingraber's coven has about a dozen members. She does not seek out new members.

"We feel if the religion is right for you, you will find it," she said.

Her title in the coven is high priestess, a position she said that can take a decade to reach.

Steingraber's coven has six tiers or levels. The first tier is dedication, where you formally dedicate yourself to a path. In the last tier, members branch off and form their own covens.

Not everyone shares Steingraber's positive views of paganism. Craig Branch of Birmingham, vice-president of the Watchman Fellowship, a National Evangelical ministry that opposes cults, said Wiccans are a cult and can be dangerous.



During a rehearsal for Conner Steingraber's Wiccaning, a woman identified as Cathy dips an 'athame' into a cup, symbolically bringing the god (athame) and goddess (cup) together.

Meditation techniques often associated with the Wiccan religion can cause disassociative reactions and relaxation-induced anxiety, Branch said.

Dissociative reactions are when a person can't concentrate because he or she is in an altered state of consciousness, Branch said. Relaxation-induced anxiety is when a person suddenly feels



Christine Jacobs/Post-Herald  
While Kat Steingraber and son Conner wait for a saltwater at the house door. As people enter, she Wiccaning to begin, a woman at left holds a bowl of sprinkles them for purification.

tense for no apparent reason.

Steingraber said Branch's ideas about meditation are ridiculous.

As far as being labeled a dangerous cult, Steingraber said that every religion has negative elements but that there is nothing dangerous about the Wiccan path.

"A cult requires a leader," Steingraber said. "We don't have a centralized leader and we don't recruit new members. We aren't a cult.

Steingraber said that along with practicing meditation, her coven studies herbcraft and the history of other religions.

"I require that we study Christianity and other religions so that we know where everyone else is coming from," she said. "We are very tolerant of other religions. We are not however, tolerant of bigotry."

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SIDEBAR:

### **Pagan Religions**

Many pagans prefer to use material from a number of sources to develop their own spiritual practices. Within paganism, however, there are distinct paths.

Some of the most widely practices are:

- Druids: Based on Celtic deities such as Corniness, the horned lord of the animals and Medhbh, the goddess of war, the practices of modern druids vary. Some teach a wide curriculum of esoteric love. Others encourage the development of creative arts, such as music and poetry.

- Asatru: Norse gods, such as Odin, god of wisdom, and Frigga, the wise mother of the gods, form the basis of Asatru. The divine nature is revered in modern Asatru through seasonal celebrations. Asatru is more male-oriented than other pagan paths.

- Wicca: A nature-based religion whose members consider themselves witches and warlocks and worship one god and one goddess, which combine to represent a great divine spirit. The Wiccan temple is found in nature; members often meet in a circle under the stars. In addition to celebrating eight seasonal festivals, Wiccans also celebrate full moons.

Sources: "Phoenix From the Flame: Pagan Spirituality in the Western World" by Vivianne Crowley, "Hinduism" by R.C. Zaehner.