

# Witches here say they don't brew any evil

LAST WEEK, a handful of North Siders filed into a basement on Wellington near Racine to perform what may be one of the oldest rituals in history.

They began with a blessing of the four "elements"—earth, air, fire and water, heard a sermon on the importance of service to one's fellow man as a prerequisite for happiness, and prayed for the healing of a sick relative of one of the congregation's members.

The main purpose of the rites, however, was to put the worshippers in closer touch with the spirits of the dead.

At one point during the two-hour ceremony, leaders of the group leveled ceremonial daggers at the four points of the compass, calling on the departed to join them in the yearly rites.

For while others were celebrating Halloween, these worshippers were

marking the feast of Samhain, one of the most solemn days in their liturgical calendar.

They're witches-practitioners of the Old Religion they trace back to prehistoric times, long before it was forced to go underground during nearly 1,000 years of persecution.

And they're fed up with the image most people have of them as withered crones riding brooms at midnight or crazed orgiasts committing unspeakable acts in the name of religious freedom.

**YET MORDA**, the high priestess of the Temple of the Sacred Stone—one of at least two covens in the Lincoln Park/Lake View area—concedes that most people still cringe whenever she confides that she's a witch.

Perhaps even worse, she said, are people who try to join the coven (congregation) hoping for some cheap

thrills.

Because of this, Morda explained, she's afraid her job with a state service agency would be in peril if her real name were linked publicly with her witchcraft.

She acknowledged that it may seem strange for witches to fear harassment in permissive, late-20th century America, but noted that freedom for the Old Religion is still a relatively new development.

**ONLY A FEW** years ago, she said, there were still laws on the books in some states forbidding the practice of witchcraft and until 1950, it was a criminal offense in England.

Only in the last 25 years or so, Morda said, have many witches felt secure enough to come out and admit who they really are.

But even today, she said, the persecution continues in the form of ridicule

and misunderstanding.

"The fact is that we're not Satanists and we don't sacrifice babies or black cats at the full moon," she said. "Our rituals are not orgies and those of us who are serious about this resent the kind of people who are so hung up they have to use our ceremonies to act out their sex fantasies."

Satanists, she explained, worship the devil. Witches don't.

And in her coven at least, sex, nudity and blood sacrifices are as taboo as they would be in any other church on the North Side.

The fact is, the high priestess said, most of the coven's eight initiated members and the 20 to 40 who show up for the major public ceremonies are about as conventional as anyone else.

**"IF ANYTHING**, she said, "our members are probably a bit better educated than the general population. At one time, the seven initiated mem-

bers included three with doctorates, three with masters' degrees, and one psychiatric nurse.

"The people who come here tend to have grown up in a religious background, but couldn't find what they were looking for. About 75% are former Roman Catholics. I suspect they feel more at home here with the ritual than many Protestants would," she said.

Morda said she herself first became interested in "The Craft," as its devotees call it, about 12 years ago and has been an initiate for at least as long.

During that time, the high priestess said, she studied under acknowledged leaders of the sect both here and in England.

She and her husband became the leaders of their Lake View-based coven when the previous high priest (a Protestant minister, incidentally) moved

*(Continued on page 13)*

# North Side witchcraft lives

(Continued from page 1)

to California.

**MORDA EXPLAINED** that covens like hers are led by both a high priest and priestess, usually selected by both the members and acknowledged heads of other covens.

Their duties, she added, aren't that much different from those of any other churchmen—to officiate at ceremonies, preach, and prepare new members for initiation—a process Morda said could take three years or more.

She said the high priest and high priestess also represent the coven on a national Pan Pagan council, which is scheduled to hold a major meeting next August in Baraboo, WI, partly to resolve issues dividing American witchcraft today.

**FOR PAGANISM** as witches sometimes call their movement, must now deal with its share of pressures for change and "modernization" like almost every other denomination today.

Morda said that a number of ethnic groups - blacks, Latinos, Eastern Europeans and WASPS - each have its own distinctive forms of worship and beliefs, and that while each coven is free to make some of its own modifications,

most WASP groups, at least, have tended to follow the same tradition.

She noted that today, however, some feminist covens contend that only women should run the congregations despite the tradition among WASP witches that leadership should be divided equally between men and women.

Then too, she said, there are those who argue that participants in the rituals should be naked so the power can emanate freely, while the more conservative groups argue that if magic powers aren't blocked by walls or even distances, they certainly aren't going to be blocked by a few layers of clothing.

**MORDA EXPLAINED** that witches believe everyone has the ability to become adept at things like psychic healing, foretelling future events, and even speaking with the dead on the Feast of Samhain. But she said they must work to develop those powers and remember they must only be used in the service of mankind.

"We don't believe in sin the same way the more conventional churches do," she said. "But we do believe that whatever you do will come back to you three-fold. Because of this we emphasize ethical behavior in any magical work done and sometimes even come off as appearing a little goody-goody."

As a result of this belief, she said, many witches are deeply involved in anti-pollution and animal welfare campaigns and tend to avoid smoking or drinking.

"At one point," she said, "our coven even did some magic work to try to halt the harp seal hunt in Canada and during the Vietnam war, we performed

rituals for people we knew in danger of being drafted."

The high priestess recalled that out of the 20 or 30 draft-eligible men who called on the coven for help, none was summoned for service in that war.

On the other hand, she said, there is a story that during World War II, a group of English witches formed a "cone of power", to help resist Hitler during the Battle of Britain.

**BUT MOST OFTEN**, she said, the coven is asked to use its collective powers on behalf of seriously ill friends or relatives.

In addition, Morda said, the group has a "wicking" or christening rite, conducts funerals, and is empowered to hold "hand-fasting" (wedding) ceremonies recognized by the state.

"About the only thing we won't do is use our powers in a way that would deliberately hurt someone," she said. "We don't do curses and we don't turn men into toads."

The high priestess explained that her school of witchcraft believes these powers come from a Supreme Being who manifests Himself in the form of both a God and Goddess, who in turn show their attributes through the natural elements.

As a result, she said, the coven's liturgical year is built around the birth, maturity, and death of these deities in a way that roughly coincides with the seasons for planting, tending, and harvesting crops.

**MORDA REFUSED** even to try estimating how many witches there really are on the North Side today, explaining that many people secretly practice the

Old Religion, while still others could be considered witches even though they themselves may not realize it.

She noted that many traditions and superstitions subscribed to by various ethnic groups in this country today are really carryovers from the days when their ancestors practiced pre-Christian religions like Druidism, whose beliefs were often carried on as "folklore."

Morda conceded, however, that witchcraft or Paganism is not likely to become the country's dominant religion.

A few years ago, she noted, there was a resurgence of interest in the Old Religion, partly because witches were more of a "novelty" then.

But today, she added, anyone interested in joining a coven has to make a real effort, since few reputable groups believe in proselytizing.

"It's definitely not a religion for the masses," she pointed out.