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We wish you a merry Yule ritual

Shining Lakes Grove Druids keep ancient tradition alive

by Charmie Gholson

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The man dressed in robes purifies himself and the members of the congregation before setting forth the invocation. They chant. They pray. They ask for blessings.

No, this isn't a Catholic Mass; it's the yearly Yule Ritual observed by The Druids of Shining Lakes Grove. And while it may be a December celebration, it's got nothing to do with that other holiday many Americans associate with this time of year. In fact, it has nothing to do with Christmas.

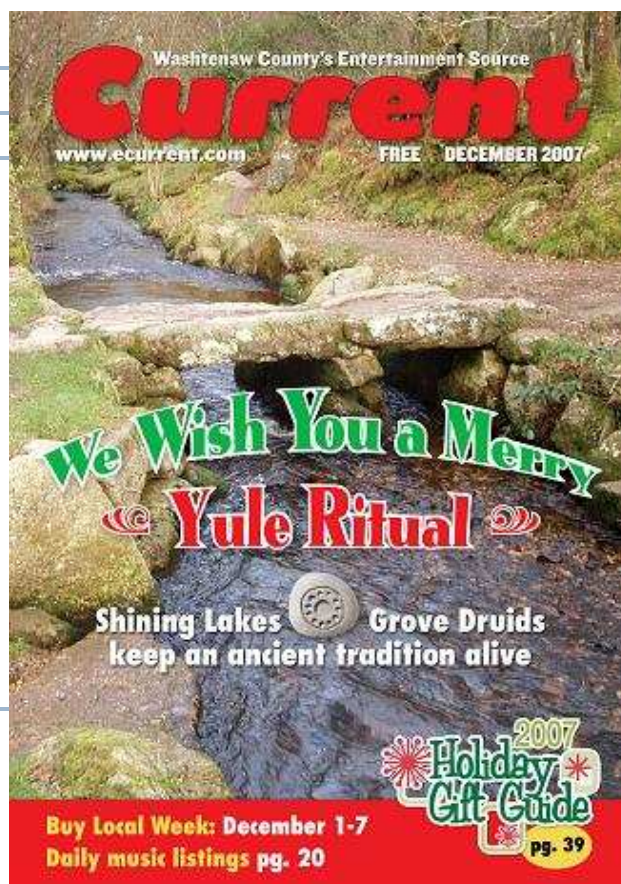
Pagans in the Grove

If you ask Robert Henderson, the man who ordinarily leads the Yule Ritual, he'll tell you that many common traditions held this time of year are pre-Christian European practices. Take lighting a Christmas tree, for example. "This is an early pagan practice," he says. "Although some say Martin Luther created Christmas trees, which is amusing, unfortunately it isn't true. Pagan people were putting lights on Christmas trees for centuries before he was born."

Henderson was introduced to paganism (?) in college. "I looked into it," he says, "and it was interesting. I haven't stopped since." Today, he's the Senior Druid at Shining Lakes Grove, a local branch of Ár nDraíocht Féin, A Druid Fellowship, Inc (ADF). Ár nDraíocht Féin is Irish and translates to "Our Own Magic" or "Our Own Druidry".

Although paganism itself is a very general term and not organized—just as there is no one universal governing body of Christianity—ADF is an organized, international church, and although there is no actual Shining Lake, the name refers to this area's many lakes in the watershed.

Being pagan essentially means you are polytheistic—a belief in multiple gods. Although not everyone has to agree on the specifics of paganism, Henderson says, "I have better things to do with my time than go to



everyone's house and check to make sure that they believe what I do. What we do as a group is more important than the beliefs people have."

The Shining Lakes Grove Druids don't consider being a literal descendant to be the most important thing. "If these gods are important to you, that makes you a part of it, whether you're really a Celt or not," Henderson says. "I'm part Scottish, part Italian, but it's the Greek gods that call to me and they're the gods I honor in my home and my personal practice."

The Shining Lakes Grove Druids perform ritual in the way that the "ancestors and the ancients did, as best we know how." This is a little tough, considering the ancestors they honor are Indo-European or Celtic and most of them didn't leave instruction manuals.

Phone call for Mr. Druid...

Through ritual, meditation and other processes, two Irish gods, Bel and Danu, have identified themselves to Henderson and his congregation. This is the way it used to be for many ancient cultures. Bel was a fire god and Danu was a water goddess. They've taken on the role of the grandparental gods of the Grove. And because some legends recognize their union created the world, the Druids consider them to be the primal source of everything.

Yule is another world for winter solstice. The solstice occurs twice a year, when Earth's axis tilts the furthest toward or away from the Sun. For us Northern Americans, the summer Solstice occurs when the Sun is farthest north; in the winter, it's the farthest south.

While the Shining Lakes Grove Druids honor both Bel and Danu during both holidays, the summer solstice, when the sun is highest in the sky, focuses more on the fire god (?) Bel, The winter solstice is Danu's holiday because of the literal presence of Danu in the form of snow.

What to expect

ADF has eight high days a year. Five are held outdoors, but, says Henderson, "the three winter rituals we do inside because we're not insane."

The Druid conducting the Yule Ritual sets up sacred space, invites in the gods, honors them and asks for blessings. "That's a basic tenet of ADF," he says. "You give to the gods and if they're pleased with what you give them, they will give you blessings in return. It's reciprocity."

A tree will be decorated, but not with little candles. Blue ribbon is used and cranberries are strung, the children can help with that. The group checks in every now, using divination tools, to make sure the spirits are pleased with their offerings. "Usually it's fairly clear," Henderson says. "If the blessings are accepted we say goodbye, close the ritual area and have our potluck."

The Yule ritual occurs Saturday, December 15th at the ICC

Education Center at 1522 Hill Street at 2pm. It is kid and family friendly, free and open to the public. www.shininglakes.org.

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