

April 21, 2006
Ahead

Maypole Festivals: Dancing to Celebrate Spring

By RICH BEATTIE

NEVER did the woods ring to such a merry peal as we of the Maypole shall send up!" cry the pagans in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Maypole of Merry Mount." In the story, set in the 1630's, Puritan spoilsports soon arrive to chop down the pole. But for today's maypole dancers, things usually go more smoothly.

The May Day dance may seem a trifle outdated, but every spring in communities here and there across America, celebrants follow the ancient custom, erecting a maypole, usually cedar or birch, and dancing around it, typically weaving colorful ribbons around the pole as they go. Sometimes the dancers are just celebrating springtime; other times the revelry is explicitly tied to pagan fertility rites or ethnic history.

The maypole dance has seduced people in [Europe](#) and America for centuries. And, as Hawthorne illustrated, it has attracted its share of scorn. While its origins are obscure, medieval Celts are known to have danced around the pole to ensure a fruitful planting season — to the disapproval of the Christian church, which was angered by the ceremony's pagan roots and obvious phallic symbolism. The disapproval was appeased only when Victorian England transformed the maypole into a celebration of maidens, virtue and other 19th-century ideals of womanhood.

Yet even in the age of "Sex and the City," some still follow the custom. "There's something primeval about the maypole," said Chrystelle Bond, a professor of dance history at Goucher College in [Baltimore](#). "It continues to speak to us across generations."

The changing fortunes of the maypole dance are exemplified in Long Beach, Calif. April 29 will mark the first time it has been performed there since 1949, when Soviet parades of military hardware had become regular features of international labor day celebrations on May 1, making the occasion "a show of arms," said Karen Clements, who works for Long Beach Heritage and is chairwoman of the event. "The community didn't want to be associated with that."

But the dance, along with a parade and the crowning of a May Day queen, was a longstanding tradition in Long Beach, and this year community leaders decided to revive it. A Girl Scout troop will weave ribbons around the maypole and children from the neighborhood will be invited to follow suit.

Older maypole traditions have their adherents as well, some of them much older than either Long Beach or the [United States](#). Outside French Lick, Ind., on May 6, Our Haven, a community that welcomes pagans, Wiccans and other religious groups harking back to a pre-Christian past, will include the dance as part of its festival of Beltane, named for the springtime fertility festivities of the Celts.

Beltane is celebrated, the Our Haven Web site says, "in honor of our Celtic brethren from eons past and in the spirit of fertility and all that is erotically sacred to the coming of age of the new year." In the ritual, 13 women wearing jeans and black turtlenecks will perform a sword dance, ushering in the god of fertility. Then the maypole will be put up and everyone invited to participate in the weaving of the ribbons. The larger festival runs May 3 to 7 and includes drum circles, fire spinners and dances around bonfires.

Some maypole dances proudly celebrate European roots. For Swedes, the raising of the maypole marks not springtime but the summer solstice. So on June 17, the American Swedish Institute in [Minneapolis](#) celebrates "Midsommar" with arts and crafts, food and the pole. Here the dance is different: the pole, which includes a crossbar, is already adorned with wreaths. Instead of weaving ribbons, performers in traditional Swedish costumes simply dance in a ring around it.

Most maypole dances stick to the springtime calendar while adding some modern touches. In [Austin, Tex.](#), on April 29, the dance will be part of a popular spring festival that's in its 43rd year: a birthday party for the "Winnie the Pooh" character Eeyore, which attracts at least 10,000 people and raises money for local nonprofit groups. This year's festivities will include music, face painting, costume contests and several maypoles.

But for some, the tradition itself is enough reason to celebrate. On May 6, the Buffalo Springs Herb Farm, in Raphine, Va., two hours west of Richmond, will hold nature walks, lectures on herbs and festivities around a maypole. "It's such a tradition around here," said Mary Johnson, the farm's office manager. "Come spring, you just always do the maypole dance."

Details

LONG BEACH, CALIF. Drake Park, 951 Maine Avenue.

What: Drake Park Spring Celebration; 562-493-7019; www.lbheritage.org.

When: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. April 29.

AUSTIN, TEX. Pease Park, 1100 Kingsbury Street.

What: 43rd Annual Eeyore's Birthday Party; 512-448-5160; www.eeyores.sexton.com.

When: 11 a.m. until dark April 29.

FRENCH LICK, IND. Our Haven Sanctuary.

What: Beltane Ritual with Blue Moon Circle, Beltane Festival; 812-936-7656; www.ourhaven.info.

When: Maypole 3 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. May 6; festival May 3 to 7

RAPHINE, VA. Buffalo Springs Herb Farm, 7 Kennedy-Wade's Mill Loop.

What: May Day Ceremony; 540-348-1083; www.buffaloherbs.com.

When: 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. May 6.

MINNEAPOLIS American Swedish Institute, 2600 Park Avenue.

What: Midsommar Celebration; 612-871-4907; www.americanswedishinst.org.

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. June 17.

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