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MiniPresentation24

MIDSUMMER FEST

Midsummer Fest

The Norwegians celebrate Midsummer Eve on June 23 or the Saturday closest to this date. The Midsummer fest originated in the ancient Norse society long before Christianity was introduced and has been observed ever since.

The Old Norse honored the sun with pagan ceremonies at summer solstice. The turning of the sun was believed to be a perilous event. If the sun failed to take the right course, mankind was doomed to perish. At this critical time, the world of the living was open to the beings of the nether world. Trolls, ghosts and other creatures roamed the earth.

When Christianity was introduced, the ancient sun festival was replaced by the celebration of the birthday of John the Baptist. The Church realized that a mere ban on the pagan fest would not dispel the deep-rooted folk beliefs connected with this day. So while the celebrations were given a new purpose, the customs and superstition surrounding Midsummer Eve existed hand in hand with the Christian tradition.

Fire has always played a significant role in the midsummer celebrations. The old Norse kept blazing bonfires going to give renewed power to the sun. The bonfires were also believed to drive away the supernatural beings which threatened both man and beast at this time.

In our time, the bonfires still flame all over Norway on Midsummer Eve, but the celebration has taken on a new meaning. The superstitious beliefs seen in connection with the fest are half forgotten. Instead, Midsummer, or St. Hans ('Sahnkt 'HAHNS) as it is called, is a celebration of the blonde, Norwegian summer, the short, light summer nights and nature in general.

Along the coast, bonfires blaze on every islet and skerry. Boats filled with high-spirited and cheerful people gather together and form long processions which parade along the coast to the accompaniment of accordion music. There are evening picnics served in every little cove and on every rock shelf along the shoreline. Laughter and music drift through the summer night. In some places, people meet for a community celebration of midsummer, build a huge communal bonfire and have grand festivities with entertainment programs, good food and dancing.

Norwegians decorate with birch twigs at the midsummer festivities. This custom is of ancient origin. To the old Norse, the birch twigs symbolized the life force which awakened in Nature in the spring and early summer. Another ancient tradition which might have had some influence on the present tradition is the custom of using birch twigs as a symbol for peace and armistice at the places where people came to trade.

According to folk belief, evil was a constant and realistic threat at midsummer. But also good forces were believed to be especially strong at this time. It was for instance the best time of the year to collect medicinal plants and herbs. These were believed to possess strong healing properties at summer solstice.

The ancient celebrations were surrounded by mysticism. Even a modern-time Norwegian will admit that the St. Hans night still has a touch of the mysterious to it. Everyone who has experienced the magic of a Nordic Midsummer night will be under its spell forever.