

SANTA LUCIA DAY



Early on the morning of December 13, a young woman appears, dressed in white and wearing a crown of blazing candles. She is attended by a group of young boys and girls, and brings light into the dark winter at homes, hospitals, schools, and offices, serving steaming coffee with ginger biscuits and saffron bread. The young woman is portraying St. Lucia and this is Luciadagen, Santa Lucia Day, a particularly Swedish festival that has spread throughout Scandinavia.

Story has it that Lucia was born in Sicily to a wealthy family in the year 284, a time when Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire. She was a young girl engaged to a wealthy man, but instead of marrying she gave her dowry to the poor and devoted her life to Christ. Her fiancé turned her in to the police, she was accused of witchcraft, and was killed on December 13, 304. Her captivating story helped her to become a saint in the Catholic church. Her name, Lucia, was derived from the Latin word lux, meaning light - a light that brings hope in the midst of darkness.

One harsh winter, the people living on Lake Vänern in Sweden were said to be so hungry that they were grinding up tree bark to make bread. The people saw a ship on the lake with a maiden standing on the bow surrounded by a heavenly light. According to legend, it was Santa Lucia bringing the starving people food and light in the middle of winter. She became a symbol of light and the return of spring in the dark winter land. Since then, Luciadagen has become one of the most important winter celebrations in Sweden and has spread all over Scandinavia.

Throughout the country, thousands of girls play the part of Santa Lucia, bringing light and food to their families and others. Lucia songs, Christmas songs, and other winter songs are sung at these celebrations. Lucia is attended by other girls in white and boys dressed up as star boys wearing tall, pointed hats. Many of the Nordic countries hold beauty pageants in newspapers to find an official "Queen of Light" for the country, to bring in not only the Christmas holiday but also the longer, brighter days of spring.

Courtesy of Christmas in Scandinavia-Nordic Heritage Museum, 2005

Printed by:
Swedish American Historical Society of WI, Inc.
www.sahswi.org