

An early American account of Swedish Midsummer

by Harry H. Anderson

The Swedish Midsummer celebration was introduced to a large segment of the American reading public over 140 years ago through an article appearing in the January 1871 issue of the then widely read Harper's New Monthly Magazine. The article "Folk-Life in Sweden," by A. H. Guernsey, a travel writing contributor to Harper's, was accompanied by what must have been the first illustration to appear in an American publication of the Swedish Midsummer festivities showing ring dancers and dominated by a towering 1870 version of the traditional *Maj-stang* (Midsommar pole). The accompanying text also provided some background about Swedish Midsummer's origin in earlier heathen times and the festive bonfires and dancing that were features of it almost a century and half ago.

That portion of the text follows here:

St. John's Day which comes at Midsummer is ingrafted upon an old heathen festival held in honor of Balder, the god of light, or the Sun. St. John's Eve is the most joyous night of the whole year, and is signaled by bonfires blazing on every height, around which the people dance, through which they jump, little thinking that the custom dates back to the old times when their heathen ancestors passed through the fire in honor of Balder, Baal or Moloch. The great attraction of St. John's Eve is the *Maj-stang*, usually translated "May-pole," although it appears to have nothing to do with May-day. It consists of a tall spruce often the size of a man's body, stripped of its branches, and hung from top to bottom with ornaments, hoops, branches, flowers, flags and streamers. Each hamlet and nearly every considerable homestead has its *Maj-stang*, around which on St. John's Day all the population, old and young, dance and sing. Every care is laid aside and all give themselves up to the enjoyment of the hour. On St. John's Eve, also it is held that the curtain between the visible and invisible worlds is partly lifted, and various forms of divination of the future are practiced.

Conclusion—a note on the source:

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, Harper's Monthly was among the leading literary publications in the United States, offering readers fiction, history, current affairs, and travel narratives such as the description of "Folk-life in Sweden." The original Harper Brothers relinquished their control in 1962, and the magazine continues today under other ownership.

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