

THE HISTORY OF MIDSOMMAR



Celebrating Midsommar, one of the two most popular holidays in Sweden – the other being Christmas – is a very ancient practice, dating back to pre-Christian times. It has its roots in Pagan rituals to welcome summer and the season of fertility. In Sweden, midsummer festivals have been around for at least 500 years. Even in agrarian times, people in Sweden welcomed summertime by decorating their houses and farm tools with foliage and raising tall May poles to dance around. It was the time to put the cows out to pasture and begin milking.

Though there are some variations in the interpretation of its origin, all seem to agree that it is linked to the summer solstice, the year's longest day and the fact that warm weather and the growing season have begun.

However, Midsommar did not become the most Swedish of all traditional festivities until the 1900s. And today, the rituals are certainly even more widespread. There are several customs associated with Midsommar that have been around a long, long time and still continue today.

The maypole or majstång is an example. The earliest mention of the maypole in Sweden is from the Middle Ages. And some say the maypole has its roots in German Paganism. Continental countries in medieval times already had early summer celebrations and the tradition of a maypole. It was part of the May Day celebration in ancient Rome and medieval France and Germany. Perhaps the German merchants coming to Sweden brought the custom with them. But remember the practice was to decorate the maypole with flowers and greens to emphasize the onset of the growing season. However, May is a little early for flowers and a lot of greens in Sweden, so some think the tradition was just delayed a bit ...until June...when the weather is better. Thus the term for the maypole or "majstång" is now more commonly referred to as the midsommarstång, or midsummer pole.

To decorate with greens was called "att maya" (to May) and may have something to do with the origin of the word majstång. No matter the origin of the name of the pole, decorating and raising the midsommarstång provides the centerpiece for much music and dancing to be enjoyed.

Gathering herbs is another tradition because of the belief that herbs are at their peak potency during this time, so gathering them and storing them up to be used to cure people in the coming year is important.

The tradition of bonfires linked with midsummer celebrations were popular around Europe dating back to the 6th century. It is still a strong tradition in some of the Scandinavian countries and in some areas of Sweden. It is believed the fire chases away witches and evil spirits but also warms, or “awakes,” the ground for encouraging a good growing season.

Midsommar is the time when magic is the strongest. Water can be magical. Some have believed that the midsummer dew has magical powers to cure diseases and water from springs could have healing power. (This being a reminder of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan.)

Flowers are an important part of the traditions. Flower crowns or wreaths are worn by women and children. Long ago it was believed that everything that grew contained special magic powers. Then there is the tradition of the 7 (or 9) flowers. Young women are to pick 7 or 9 different flowers and put them under their pillow on Midsommar night and they will surely dream of their future spouse. It has been said, “Nowadays the young women drive to a Midsommar dance and decide for themselves who their partners will be.”

There are traditional songs....like the children’s “Små grodorna ar lustiga att se” The little frogs are funny to watch.

Certain foods are typically served at Midsommar – herring of various kinds, new potatoes cooked with dill and served with sour cream and chives, fresh strawberries and cream. It is also typical to serve schnapps and cold beer.

It should also be mentioned that historically in some of the Scandinavian countries, probably especially in Norway and Denmark, Midsommar and St John’ Day have been intertwined, St John’s Day being the celebration of the birth of St John the Baptist. Prior to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church celebrated June 24th as St John’s Day and the tradition continued after the Reformation. The summer solstice was also celebrated on June 24th so you can see how the two celebrations have come to be blended together. In Sweden, Midsommar was celebrated on June 24th until 1953 when it was determined that it would be celebrated the Friday and Saturday between June 19th and 26th each year.

That is a brief summary of Midsommar. Suffice it to say it should be a time for fun, merriment, music, dancing, good food and Magic. Let’s see if we can continue some of that magic as we convene the Midsommar celebrations.

References

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Prepared by:

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