

# Chips

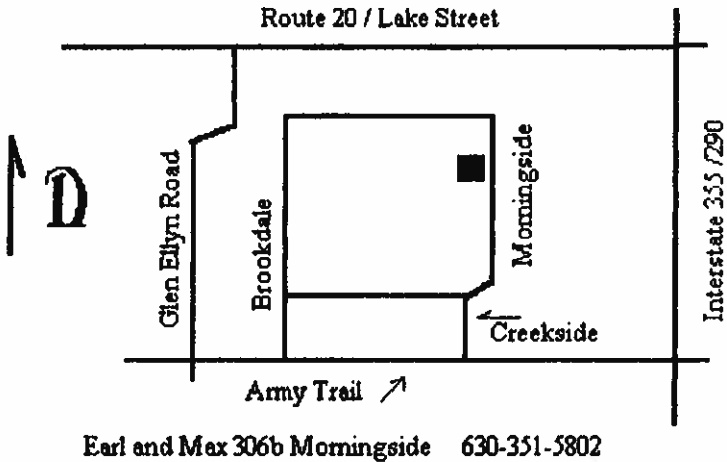


bianca

January 1998

# Next Shire Moot

The next shire moot will be held on Sunday January 11th at the home of Earl and Maxine Bless, 306 b Morningside Drive, Bloomingdale, starting at 6:30pm.



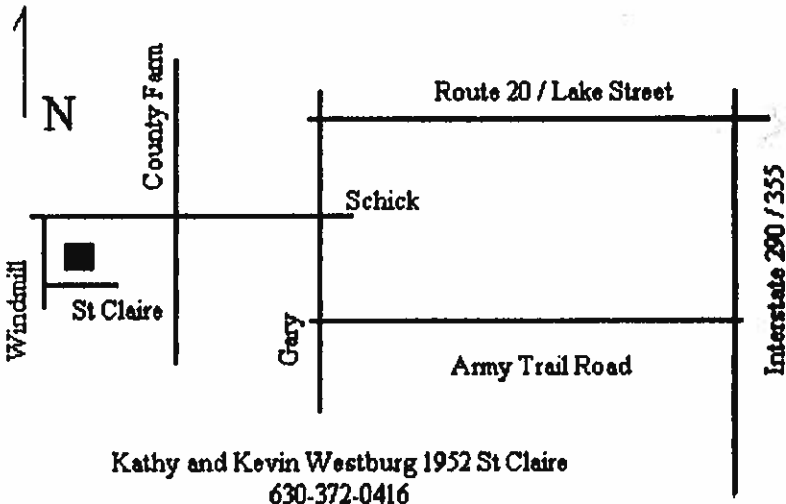
# Costumers Guild

The next costume guild meeting will held the same day as the moot on January 11th at the same house starting at 4pm



# Cooking for the Event

Kathy will need help cooking stuff for the event. If you would like to help, come to her and Kevin's home, in Hanover Park on January 18th at 4pm to cook. Also, Kathy would like to know who has electric cooking implements (wok, crock pots etc..) that can be used for the event.



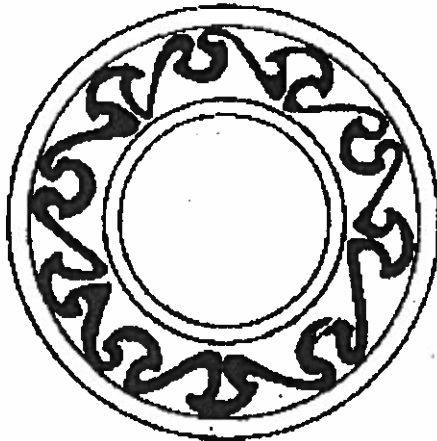
# From the Nursery

The Shire is happy to announce the anticipated arrival of either Charles Edward or Sarah Jeane Strong to our own Talbot and Freydis. More information can be found on the Strong's web page at <http://members.aol.com/Strong1964/little.html>

Although, if the little one is due July 4, would George or Martha been more appropriate names?

## Rememberance

Also, it is with great sadness that we must inform our readers that His Royal Highness, Prince Jafar al-Safa passed away from an illness on December 26, 1997



# Shire News and Notes:

Since Culwyn could not come to last month's moot, I have some notes to share.

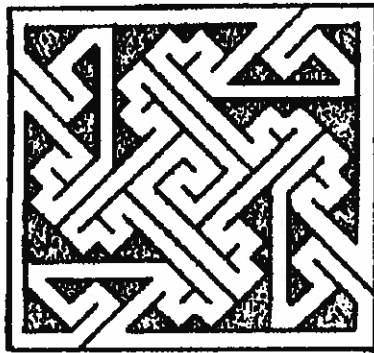
1. Chris would like to step down as herald next quarter (March). If you are interested, please call Greg, 630-260-9233.

2. Dayle still has a few job openings for the shire event next month. Please call her at 630-378-5413 to volunteer.

3. I would like to welcome Michelle Dvorak, a new member who joined us from Markland (east coast), a hearty welcome back to Melissa who is back from Houston and Becky who was just recently found again!

4. The event will be at the Lord's Park Pavillion. The event flyer will be in the next issue of chips or can be downloaded from the event website: <http://users.aol.com/vwoodevent/download.html>

*Ethelwulf Rildare*



## ho ho ho! Who was that Santa fella

Periodically (usually every time I sit down to write "Chips"), I find myself thinking, "What am I going to write about?" Fortunately, with the Christmas season upon us, any good medievalist can come up with *something* to write about.

But I decided against quaint, long-forgotten medieval Christmas customs, or strange Nordic Yule feasts. Instead, as I listened to some awful mall-music rendition of "Jolly Old St. Nicholas," I was struck by an idea: Just who was this St. Nicholas fellow, anyway? More importantly, how did a nice Catholic saint find himself wearing a ridiculous red suit, flying through the sky, and sliding down chimneys?

The answer would appear to be a long, strange trip that may extend back to man's hunter-gatherer days. But for SCA purposes, let's just say that in period, our favorite cherubic elf seems to find his ancestry in an early Christian bishop, the devil, and that most mysterious of Norse gods, grim old Oðinn himself. (OK, you all knew that in this shire, there'd be a Viking connection sooner or later.)

### **An American Santa Claus:**

To begin at the ending: Around the end of the nineteenth century, the "cult" of Santa Claus spread from America to the UK, and during World War II, to most of the world.

However, contrary to popular belief, Santa did not emerge full-blown, in Clement C. Moore's 1823 poem, "A Visit From St. Nicholas" or as most now think of it "Twas the Night Before Christmas."

Rather, Sinter Claes, or the Dutch nickname for St. Nicholas, "arrived" in the New World in 1624, with the founding of New Amsterdam.

As with post Dutch ships, the prow figure of those early colonial vessels were adorned with a carving of St. Nicholas, patron saint of sailors. These colonists brought their customs with them, and those traditions were eventually absorbed into the British colony of New

York, which absorb and supplanted New Amsterdam.

It was 150 years later, when the essayist Irving Washington wrote about the Dutch Santa Claus legend, that Clement C. Moore was inspired to write his poem, and gave us the description we know so well. Forty years later, when Thomas Nast was hired to illustrate the poem for Harper's Magazine, he had no idea what this "elf" was supposed to look like.

Drawing from the legends of his own native land, Nast drew Santa Claus as a legendary winter holiday figure: a rather scary gnome, dressed in animal skins, and carrying a broom which he used to threaten girls and boys who were mischievous or disobedient.

Over the years, Nast's Santa got a little pudgier and jollier, until 1931, when Coca-Cola contracted the artist Haddon Sundblom to create an image of Santa that would appeal to children, hopefully increasing it's sales to a youthful market. (Until the 1930's, Coke was considered inappropriate for children, presumably due to its earliest days, in which it had contained coca extract.) Sundblom came up with the great belly and bright red suit with white trim — the Coca-Cola colors.

And so, in World War II, a triumphant Santa Claus and Coca-Cola helped liberate the world from the tyranny of Hitler's Germany.

OK, by now everyone is groaning, and saying, "Please say it's not so. Please say there's more to Santa Claus than this!" Don't worry Virginia, there is.

## **The Birth of a Legend.**

### St. Nicholas:

Obviously, the Christian connection to Santa Claus comes via St. Nicholas, patron saint of children, sailors, unmarried women, perfumers, and travelers. But who was Nicholas?

Bishop Nicholas of Myra was a 4th century Church leader, who took part in the Council of Nicea, and was a leading opponent of Arianism, the first major Christian heresy. He died in 350 AD, and by the time of Justinian in the seventh century, already had a basilica dedicated to him in Constantinople.

According to legend, a citizen of Padua had lost his fortune, and because he could not raise a dowry for his three daughters, he was going to give them over for prostitution. After hearing of this, Nicholas took a bag of gold, and threw it through the window of the man's house at night. The eldest daughter's dowry was thereby paid. He did the same on the next two nights for the other two daughters.

A similar story tells of how he used his own

fortune to provide the poor with the wealth to sustain themselves during a plague, by dropping gold, food, or gifts down their chimneys, or through open windows, at night. His feast day, December 6, was celebrated with the giving of gifts, particularly alms to the poor. Presumably, this tradition, combined with the Feast of the Magi, is where the Christmas gift giving tradition began.

St. Nicholas is still revered in Holland and several other northern/northeastern European countries. He appears as a tall, dignified, bearded, white-haired old man, usually dressed as either a Catholic bishop or in a great hooded robe and carrying either a pastoral crook-staff, or a long walking stick. He also has the very un-saintly tendency to fly about the air on a white horse, or sometimes a team of horses pulling a sleigh.

### Zwarte Piet:

Obviously, this description looks nothing like Thomas Nast's Bavarian gnome. However, the German illustrator may have known what he was doing, albeit unconsciously.

According to folk (as opposed to Church) legend, St. Nicholas is often accompanied on his rides by a horrible, misshapen little troll, dressed in skins and carrying a broom. This troll, sometimes called Zwarte Piet (Black Pete), Boga (from the Slavic word for "god", and

from which we get "Boogey Man"), or just, the Dark Helper, is forced to carry the huge sack of St. Nicholas's gifts. As a "reward" the little, soot stained, mischievous dwarf is allowed to terrorize naughty children, use his broom to cause impotence in cheating husbands, and periodically, have his way with adulterous wives! To appease Black Pete, an offering of fresh baked bread would be left out with a saucer of cream or a mug of good beer.

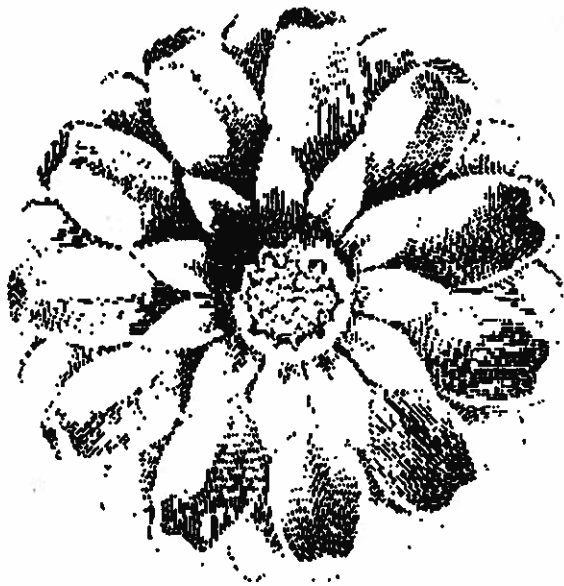
Many modern mythologists, cultural anthropologists, and students of paganism, see in Dark Pete the last vestiges of a Wild God archetype. This figure, has ranged from the powerful Celtic god of nature, Cernunnos, to the unpredictable English Master of the Hunt, Herne, to the mischievous, drunken Pan. In all cases, these gods are depicted as wild and unpredictable, dressed in skins, and boasting great powers over fertility (often symbolized by the broom). Indeed, in many artworks depicting St. Nicholas and Black Pete from the 15th -



17th centuries, the Dark Helper is even shown with the goat or stag horns usually associated with the old pagan nature god.

Christian belief ultimately changed Black Pete into a devil, even sometimes *the* Devil forced to serve the saint on his yearly mission.

Strangely, however, this same demonic figure has been known, since at least the 11th century as "Nick," "Old Nick," or "Black Nicholas," and the Devil continued to be periodically known as such up through the nineteenth century. Why the imp should assume the Saint's name remains unclear.



The Dark Helper occasionally appears as a "Christmas" witch, such as in Italy, where he is known as "Bofina." To this day in Holland, St. Nicholas pageants have both the Saint and his Dark Helper portrayed by actors, Zwarte Piet often being portrayed by an old woman in men's clothes. Even this little bit of traditional transvestitism, can be connected to shamanic fertility customs still alive amongst primitive cultures today.

It's reasonable to assume that the Bavarian "winter gnome" that inspired Thomas Nast comes from the same root source as Zwarte Piet, and that the artist essentially began a fusion between the two characters which ultimately led to the cherubic dwarf we think of today.

### Oðinn

The St. Nicholas myths are most developed in Germanic countries, which were amongst the last to convert to Christianity. Most interesting, is the connection of St. Nicholas and Zwarte Piet, to the Germanic Oðinn or Wotan, and his slave, Eckhart.

Oðinn is said to ride across the world on his eight-legged horse Sleipnir. Like St. Nicholas, he is a patron of travelers, and is also usually

portrayed as tall and stately, with a long white beard; dressed in long robes, and a wide brimmed hat. Rather than a shepherd's crook, however, he carries a long spear.

In Germanic versions of the myth, the god is accompanied by a slave named Eckhart, who is nearly identical to Black Pete. This mysterious pair travel on unknown business, but occasionally also lead the Wild Hunt, whose victim's spirits are said to be caught by Eckhart in the huge sack he carries.

In this guise, Wotan has been know by a variety of names, including "Old Grimm," and "Black Grimm," and in one form or another, his cult proved very hard to eradicate. As late as the nineteenth century, a group of Robin Hood-



like bandits called Bokkerrijders (goat riders) led guerrilla uprisings against wealthy landowners and churchmen. They wore horned masks, operated out of the forest, and in their rituals gave the "horned hand" signal of a fist with little and index fingers up. Their leaders often went by the name "Eckhart" or "Nick Grimm." They were denounced as Satanists, and the movement was eventually put down or dissolved, but the exact truth of the Goat Riders and their connection to the old Germanic beliefs may never be known.



### **A Santa for All Seasons:**

This article has really just scratched the surface of possible sources of the Santa legend. A full treatment probably cannot be made without delving into such Christmas customs as the Christmas tree, the Yule log, and the wreath, as all of these traditions weave in and out of one another in a continuous thread.

Even the most innocuous of customs, such as children's letters to Santa, can be traced to an early custom. Up until the 1940s, letters to Santa Claus were usually written and then burned by in the flame of red or green candle. In a similar manner, requests were made to Oðinn by carving a small stick, and then burning it in a hearth flame. Prayer offerings have been used in this manner by religions the world over.

As both Santa, and various other Christmas traditions roots become better recognized, there seems to be a trend by the devout Christian to denounce those traditions as un-Christian and therefore inappropriate, on the one hand, and by the neo pagan to claim these traditions as entirely their own, on the other.

"Chips" is hardly the place to enter that debate, and to be honest, it seems a pointless one. Rather, I close with these thoughts on our favorite "jolly old elf"

“Not believe in Santa Claus? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are, unseen and unseeable in the world.....

“No Santa Claus! Thank god he lives and lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.”

— Francis P. Church, *The New York Sun*, 1897

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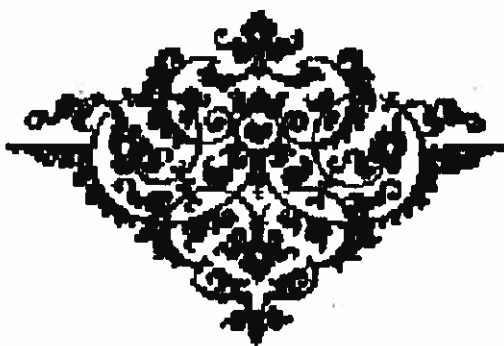
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## Upcoming Events

### January:

17 12th Night, Chicago IL

24 Festival of Maidens, Champaign IL

### February:

14 Ethel in Love, Springfield IL

21 Search for Ivan Goroth, Elgin IL (our event!!!!)

This is **Chips**, a publication of the Shire of Vanished Wood of the Society for Creative Anachronism Inc. **Chips** is not an official publication of the Society for Creative Anachronism, and does not delineate SCA policy, nor necessarily reflect the views of that organization at large. Subscriptions are \$5.00 for 12 issues US mail or 18 issues E-mail and may be obtained by contacting Earl Bless, 306 B. Morningside Drive, Bloomingdale, IL 60108. [Ebless@aol.com](mailto:Ebless@aol.com)

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