

Walpurgisnacht and Beltane

*A German (and Northern European) Festival
that has not survived in the New World*

In North America we know only a few 'paired holidays' - two holidays that are 6 months apart - and they are no longer really celebrated as a pair. There is the onset of winter on December 21st paired with the coming of summer on June 21st and there is the arrival of spring on March 21st combined with the arrival of fall on October 21st. In a way, Christmas and early July holidays are at least a reminder of winter-summer pairs while Easter and Thanksgiving are the spring and fall markers. Paired holidays once were important for agriculture (planting and harvesting) but also were culturally important. In northern European lands with four distinct seasons, these celebrations were particularly important and in those same lands, these paired holidays continue to survive, to some extent.

Most of our German ancestors settled in the northeastern United States, particularly in Pennsylvania, which has four distinct seasons. Yet paired holidays did not survive immigration. This may be because most settlers lived an isolated life, far from their closest neighbors and celebrating alone or with one or two neighbors just was not the same being with a big crowd of family, friends and neighbors. Moreover their new neighbors might have their own traditions and combining them was not always successful. Somehow Walpurgis and Beltane were lost.

Walpurgis is celebrated on the last night of April, exactly six months from Halloween and has many of the same aspects, spirits walking the earth, witches, and the need to keep evil spirits at bay. While Halloween is the North American relic of these spooky superstitions, in northern Europe it is Walpurgis. Unlike Halloween, Walpurgis does not lead into the

dark and cold part of the year, rather it heralds the coming of light and warmth and goodness. It is the last wild fling of witches, demons and goblins before going into hiding for six months.



Fig. 1. You Tube screen shot of present day Walpurgis called *Wolfshäger Hexenbrut Walpurgistanz*, an updated version of a very old pagan celebrations <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YL52PSXEyac>.

In pre-Christian times people believed in and feared a night of roaming ghosts, demons, hellhounds and evil spirits. For protection they gathered around bonfires which had light and warmth and kept wild animals at bay. A huge Walpurgis bonfire is still lit on Brocken Mountain where a meteorological phenomenon made this peak in the German Harz Mountains a center for supernatural beliefs. (See Fig. 2)

All over northern Europe bonfires were (and still are) built on hills and in meadows and fireworks can be thrown into the flames to make things more exciting. People danced around the fire, sang songs, and partied for the whole night. This has been commemorated by some of the greatest classical composers including "*Walpurgisnacht*" by Brahms.

Fires had protective powers and mimiced the Sun to "ensure a needful supply of sunshines for men, animals and plants" as well as to symbolically "burn up and destroy all harmful influences".¹ When the bonfire died down, people lit torches from the remaining flames and carried them home where they walked around the perimeter of their fields and the outside of their homes. Ashes were collected and dabbed on themselves. They carried home buckets of the sacred ash to be sprinkled on the fields and on animals as protection and good luck.

According to a recounting of Walpurgis celebrations, it was important to ward off the roaming hellhounds! To do this, *Ankenschnitt* was prepared. It is a traditional sweet of buttered bread coated with honey that was eaten by the family and, importantly, some was left outside for the hellhounds to find and enjoy with the hope they would leave the inhabitants of the house alone.²

Houses were, and often still are, decorated inside and out with fresh flowers from hawthorn trees, as well as primrose and gorse flowers combined with birch and oak



Fig. 2. *Brockengespenst* the magnified shadow of a figure cast in mid air on a cloud. If the cloud has water droplets, backscatter results in a halo of colored rings around the figure. This happens when the sun is low on the horizon and shines up through a haze or cloud catching the silhouette of a person hiking on the mountain. It occurs often on Brocken mountain. No wonder this the place to light bonfires to drive off the devil.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brocken_spectre

¹ Frazer, James George (1922). *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Chapter 63, Part 1: On the Fire-festivals in general Archived 12 October 2013 at the Wayback Machine

² <https://www.oldstyletales.com/single-post/2018/04/29/how-to-celebrate-walpurgis-night-7-traditions-to-try-for-spring-s-halloween-holiday>

leaves. These were protection against evil spirits, but also were welcoming in the good spirits of the season of light.

Another custom of Walpurgisnacht was to stick brooms into the ground, upside down. This was believed to prevent witches from taking broomsticks to fly through the night sky. Many people tucked flowers into the bristles of the broom. This may be part of the origin of the May pole although more likely is that decorating poles in spring time with flowers and leaves (and later with ribbons) is a relic of tree worship.³



Fig. 3. Saint Walpurgis, painting on the fixed wing from the former side altar of the St. Martin Church in Meßkirch, Germany.

Drinking to the point of drunkenness, was an important part of celebrating Walpurgis and the following day called Beltane, or May Day. Mead was the traditional choice of drink although in Germany it was supplanted, or supplemented, by sweet wine mulled with herbs called Maibowle.

The name of the holiday, Walpurgis, is of Christian origins and comes from Saint Walpurga, who was born in Devon, England in 710 A.D. She died in 777 and was canonized on May First in 870. St. Walpurga spoke out against the belief in witchcraft, which was used to put innocent women to death. She also fought against a belief that pest, rabies and whooping cough were evil spirits. Walpurga was sent with her uncle and brothers to Thuringia as missionaries to the heathen Germans. She became a nun in the monastery of Heidenheim where she was buried. After death, prayer to her was reputed to result in many miracles. In her honor, and in hopes of receiving her protection, the newly Christian Germans gave her name to the night of witches - Walpurgisnacht.

Walpurgis leads directly to the celebration of Beltane or May Day. They are different but related celebrations.

Beltain or May Day is still widely celebrated across northern Europe. Beltane is thought of as a Gaelic festival, while May Day is synonymous with military parades in Russia. Today, in Germany Beltane is a national holiday with two origins, one in pagan roots, the other only 120 years old and involving worker's rights and demonstrations.

³ Frazer, James George (1922). *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Chapter 10: Relics of Tree Worship in Modern Europe Archived 9 May 2013 at the Wayback Machine.

In Germany Walpurgisnacht/Beltane celebrates the bright half of the year - driving away winter with huge fires, gathering together, giving thanks to and offerings to Mother Earth. It is traditional to go for long walks in the afternoon of May First although it's most likely because walks help to recover from the previous night of partying. In cities in Germany, this day celebrates workers revolts and current working conditions that need to change.

To reconnect with your German roots - make mulled white wine for a German Mai Bowl, light a bonfire tonight and drink mulled white wine with family and friends. A bit of honey spread on bread and left outside on your doorstep wouldn't hurt.



INGREDIENTS for German May Bowl - white mulled wine

½ cup dried woodruff (also known as "Waldmeister")

1 cup boiling water

2 cups confectioners' sugar

1 cup cognac

4 quarts moselle wine or 4 quarts rhine wine

crushed ice

2 quarts chilled champagne or 2 quarts club soda

1 cup fresh strawberries, washed and hulled

DIRECTIONS

Place dried herbs in small bowl; add boiling water. Let stand 1 hour; strain.

Place 3 tablespoons in punch bowl. Stir in sugar, cognac, and wine; add ice.

Before serving, pour in champagne and float strawberries in the bowl.

Source: German Girl in America

<https://www.food.com/recipe/deutsch-mai-bowle-strawberries-in-may-wine-bowl-a-german-tradi-223207>