

Minnesota Unraveled

EP 202 - Llewellyn Worldwide and New Age Religious Movements in the Twin Cities

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Chantel Rodríguez:

It's a warm Saturday morning in late September and I am doing one of my favorite things. Walking around a bookstore and browsing shelves for anything related to Minnesota with an iced latte in hand. The shop is celebrating the spooky season – around the café are tables with pumpkins, black cats, skulls, and other Halloween decor. Nearby is a display with books like “How to Read Tea Leaves” and “Witchy Watercoloring.”

But as I look closer I realize the display isn't just for Halloween. It is an entire book aisle labeled “self-transformation” with subjects on astrology, tarot, magic, paranormal encounters, witches, and more. Curious, I grab the book “True Tales of Ghostly Encounters” off the shelf. It is a re-publication of firsthand encounters submitted to a magazine over several decades. But what catches my eye is that the book was published by a Minnesota company I'd never heard of—Llewellyn Worldwide.

I take a step back to assess the rest of the aisle and realize that every single shelf has books published by the same company.

I decided to do a quick Internet search on Llewellyn Worldwide. And was surprised to learn that this Minnesota company based in Woodbury is the oldest and largest independent publisher of books for body, mind and spirit in *the world*. It publishes on a wide variety of topics, like astrology, magic, the paranormal, tarot, and earth-based spirituality, to name a few. Llewellyn owes its legacy to late owner Carl Weschcke.

How and why did the world's oldest and largest publisher on these topics end up in Minnesota? And how has it shaped Minnesota's spiritual landscape?

Welcome to *Minnesota Unraveled*. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

To answer these questions, I spoke with two people who are knowledgeable on these topics.

Sandra Weschcke:

My name is Sandra Weschcke and I'm the president of Llewellyn Worldwide Limited.

Murphy Pizza:

My name is Dr. Murphy Pizza. The name is spelled like the pie, but pronounced like the Leaning Tower. And my doctoral degree is in cultural anthropology. And my area of scholarly expertise is new American religions, American paganism and the occult. And currently I actually work in the registrar's office at St. Catherine University here in St. Paul.

I was born and raised in Beloit, Wisconsin. Stayed there through college. And then after getting into graduate school, I moved to Milwaukee, spent 10 years there and then when I would travel to the Twin Cities and to all of these festivals to collect data and to interview people and to do the work. And then when I was dissertating, I moved up here to the Twin Cities and stayed.

Chantel Rodríguez:

First, I spoke with Sandra to learn more about how Llewellyn Worldwide came to be. Sandra's late husband was Carl Weschcke, the visionary behind the Minnesota publishing company.

Sandra Weschcke:

Llewellyn originated in 1901 by a man named Llewellyn George, and he was an astrologer in Wales, UK. And he came to America and started his company, very small, publishing astrology books. Once he passed away, it passed to a printer who continued to do it. Then one day Carl saw an ad in *Publishers Weekly*, and this was in 1961, and he always wanted to be a publisher, so he pursued it and ended up purchasing it. He always wanted to be a publisher.

He was interested in the occult, as we called it, magic, Wicca, astrology. So it was a perfect fit for him.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I asked Sandra what Carl's life was like before he bought Llewellyn.

Sandra Weschcke:

He was born in 1930 in St. Paul. He grew up in an established family. His family owned the Adlerika company, which was a company manufacturing pharmaceuticals. Carl was a student at St. Paul Academy, and then he went to Babson University. He thought he wanted to go into the family business, but changed his mind.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Carl was also involved in various civil rights organizations, serving as President of the NAACP's Minnesota branch in 1959. The organization continues to be an interracial endeavor to advance justice for African Americans. He also served as Vice President of the American Civil Liberties Union, Minnesota branch in 1964.

Carl's interest in the occult goes back to his early childhood. His grandfather, Charles, was a theosophist and a founding member of St. Paul's NAACP chapter in 1919. Theosophy is a spiritual movement drawing heavily from Buddhism and Hinduism that looks for a unified worldview. Its core beliefs include universal brotherhood, reincarnation, karma, and the spiritual evolution of humanity. Carl's Roman Catholic parents shared with him ideas about meditation, telepathy, and reincarnation. This, alongside his interest in publishing, led him to purchase Llewellyn and move it from Los Angeles to St. Paul. Llewellyn was first headquartered at his home on Summit Avenue. Which rumor had it was haunted. It even received national attention for its paranormal activity. But Llewellyn didn't stay there for long.

Sandra Weschcke:

So this was in the seventies, he was starting to grow, and he bought a building in Minneapolis on Laurel. The building is gone now, but it was a mortuary, a two-story small mortuary. He painted it purple, and he opened a bookstore called Gnostica bookstore. He had his business offices such as they were on the top floor, and he had his shippers on the bottom floor. And then he started to outgrow that building and bought a building in Minneapolis on Fourth Street across from the Depot. And we were there for about 10 years or so. And then he bought a building across the river on Wabasha that used to be the old Coca-Cola building. And we were there until we moved in 2005 to our current headquarters in Woodbury.

Chantel Rodríguez:

What was it about Minnesota in the 1960s, or what was it about the community here or the landscape that really drew Carl to want to have that here? I mean, he could have moved it anywhere, but he chose to stay here. So I'm curious about what was it about this place that really had him committing?

Sandra Weschcke:

Well, it may not have been the best place to open a metaphysical publishing company. I mean, certainly California would've been a better choice, but Carl loved his birth family, and he really didn't want to leave. There was no question in his mind, but to do it here.

Chantel Rodríguez:

When Sandra met Carl, he had owned Llewellyn for about 10 years. Their paths crossed on July 16, 1971, when a mutual friend set them up on a lunch date at a Mexican restaurant in Minneapolis.

Sandra Weschcke:

I grew up in a family in Minneapolis. I'm an only child, nothing really remarkable. I think about some other people, and they've had dramatic

childhoods. Mine just felt very normal to me. I mean, no big deal. I attended a community college for a while because I was interested in accounting, and I always enjoyed working. And so I had a variety of jobs before I met Carl. My last one was the accounting manager for a collection agency of all things. So I guess I just, I met Carl when I was in my early thirties, and I was just going along with life until I met him. And then everything changed for the better. A lot more purpose in life.

Chantel Rodríguez:

They were married in 1972 wearing custom lavender robes Carl had designed. Sandra has been an integral part of Llewellyn ever since. She has served at various times as President and Treasurer of the company.

But in those years before Carl and Sandra became life and business partners, Llewellyn was basically a one man show.

Sandra Weschcke:

So it's 1961, and he buys the company and he gets it here. And I think people would be interested in knowing, he's one man and he had a publishing company, and he did everything himself to make it work. He had a book called the *Moon Sign Book* that we still publish today, and he did most of the writing in those days. He had a calendar, the Astro calendar, he did that. He tried to find new authors. He was by himself until he started hiring a few people throughout the sixties.

Chantel Rodríguez:

At the same time that Carl was working hard to re-establish Llewellyn's name in publishing, counterculture spirituality was sweeping the nation. It rejected mainstream organized religion for its perceived rigidity and sought out alternative spiritual paths. It favored personal spiritual experiences that drew on folk beliefs and customs.

The counterculture of the 1960s led to the rise of New Age Religious Movements—a diverse and decentralized number of beliefs and practices. Some examples include: astrology, channeling, modern paganism, and

various ideas drawn from Eastern religions like meditation and yoga. Because New Age religions are deeply personal, the terminology that someone uses to identify their practice varies from person to person. Some may embrace certain labels, and reject others.

New Age Religious Movements, however, faced a big hurdle. Information about many of these spiritualities was not readily available to the public. Carl hoped to fill that gap with Llewellyn and his other business ventures, like Gnostica Bookstore. Gnostica had the Twin Cities' largest selection of books on the occult, divination, witchcraft, tarot, and astrology. It also carried the supplies required to practice these religions. Things like candles, herbs, and altarcloths.

Sandra Weschcke:

He wanted a bookstore, that was part of his thinking to make, he was wholesaling books at the time as well from other publishers. And so he had enough books to stock a bookstore. And this was, see, that's another thing when we think about Minnesota and Minneapolis, because it became a central location for people to come. He had readers there, tarot readers, astrology readers, so that you could come and get a free reading, or maybe you had to pay, you probably had to pay. But anyway, he really had a lot of people on Sundays coming in for these events. So when we think about how did he grow the business, that was part of it.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So it was just really attracting the community and giving them a space to do some of this practice together.

Sandra Weschcke:

Exactly, yes. Well put. Yes.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In addition to readings, classes, and talks, Gnostica briefly held the annual Gnostic Aquarian Festival in Minneapolis. It is fondly known as Gnosticon and

drew hundreds of people from across the United States. While it drew many from New Age Religious Movements, it especially attracted people interested in the occult and modern paganism. Here's Murphy.

Murphy Pizza:

If you think of a science fiction convention or some of these other kind of cosplay conventions, that comic book conventions that people go to, it was a similar sort of thing.

And by running a bookstore, he managed with these cons to get writers and authors and folks from all over the world to come to the Twin Cities, and they were special guests and they would do workshops and people would sign books. And it was this meeting place literally for people around the country to come and just dig occult books and occult culture. And this is why a lot of folks eventually thought, well, the Twin Cities must be where it's at if you're into Paganism and the occult. And then they all moved here and it has been ever since.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Gnosticon attracted diverse spiritual practitioners, especially Wiccans. Today, Wicca is the largest and best-known contemporary witchcraft-oriented religion.

Murphy Pizza:

This is a religion that was founded in England by Gerald Gardner in the 1940s. And it is sort of a hybrid of British lore, witchcraft, folk magic. He was a member of Masonic Lodges. So there's ceremonial aspects that he took from ceremonial magic and from Masonry that kind of turned into this new kind of religious innovation that came out of England. And it has a liturgy, it has a calendar, it has roles for the priests and the priestesses. And there are definite, when somebody says they're Wiccan, that speaks to what they believe in and what their creed is and what liturgy they use. And you can usually trace the lines of Wiccans back to those few teachers in England.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For Sandra, Gnosticons contributed to Carl's goal for Llewellyn. To make information accessible.

Sandra Weschcke:

By publishing the books, by finding authentic authors, we did help tremendously to open up the subject for all people. I know that people were very interested in Wicca and wanted to be a part of it. And so to find that that many people came to an event that we were sponsoring was a very wonderful thing. And it opened up things for the people who came because they were able to meet like-minded people and begin their own journey into the craft. We had festivals, the first one, it was a gathering of maybe 20 different authors who were presenting on different subjects. And it was advertised extensively in the newspapers on television, and many people came to those events, So all of these things made the subject open for more and more people, which is what Carl wanted and what I wanted also, very, very much

So as we grew, so did everyone else. Carl always wanted – his whole mission was to make knowledge available for people.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The authors publishing with Llewellyn were not just local. They were from around the world. One of the most influential was English occultist Aleister Crowley. His mystical writings and rituals would go on to influence important authors in the Wicca tradition.

Sandra Weschcke:

So some of the early authors are very familiar to Llewellyn readers, and I'm sure some of those people will be listening to this. Scott Cunningham, Ray Buckland, Chic and Tabitha Cicero, Richard Webster, Silver RavenWolf, those are some of the early ones. And Ray Buckland, he was one of Carl's first authors. Another interesting one is Israel Regardie, which Carl knew Personallyi was the secretary at one time, to Aleister Crowley. And Carl bought

his books from another publisher, Aries Press in the sixties, and that helped him get going.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Carl didn't stop at Gnostica Bookstore. He secured mainstream distribution for Llewellyn's works in big name bookstores like Barnes and Noble.

Sandra Weschcke:

So we can be proud of Minnesota because it's a Minnesota company. And what this company did. When Carl was, I think this would've been in the late seventies, and he's trying to build the business. And one of the things you have to do is get your books in bookstores. And that wasn't happening. All of your listeners are familiar with Barnes and Noble. However, prior to that, we had B. Dalton and B. Dalton was absorbed into Barnes and Noble. Carl wanted to be in B Dalton. B. Dalton was headquartered in Minnesota in those days. And so Carl, somehow he knew someone. He developed a relationship and he went to B. Dalton headquarters and presented our books, and he got some of our books in B. Dalton, which of course got our books into Barnes and Noble.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Llewellyn also grew its business by buying up other publications, like *Fate* magazine.

Sandra Weschcke:

So we bought this magazine about the paranormal established in 1947, and its original home was in Chicago. The owners were retiring. And so we bought it in 1988 and published it here physically here for many years up until the early two thousands. So I think that's kind of a hooray for Minnesota. We did that.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Remember that Llewellyn published book I picked up off the shelf at the top of the episode? It was called "True Tales of Ghostly Encounters", edited by

Andrew Honigman. It brings together firsthand accounts re-published from Fate Magazine. Some of them go back to the 1960s.

Sandra played a lot of different roles at Llewellyn in those early years. One of the things she did was publicity.

Sandra Weschcke:

We had an author, his name was Noel Till, and he contacted us when he lived in Germany because of Carl's interest in his writing, and he was an astrologer. He moved from Germany to St. Paul, Minnesota for our benefit, and he wrote a series of 12 books called *The Principles and Practice of Astrology*.

Carl wanted me to go to Walden and present those books, and they were in Connecticut, and so I packed my bag and went to Walden and presented them, sold them successfully, and got those. Actually, it made the series a huge success because they were in the Walden stores.

Chantel Rodríguez:

By the early 1970s, Carl's endeavors through Llewellyn and Gnostica Bookstore made the Twin Cities an attractive place for people taking part in New Age Religious Movements.

But it was modern pagans who were becoming the fastest growing spiritual community in the Twin Cities. I asked Murphy to tell me more about it.

Murphy Pizza:

Paganism is sort of the umbrella term. That's sort of pretty much anybody who identifies as any of these other things I talked about or under this umbrella of modern paganism, contemporary paganism. Some folks will say Neo paganism, some folks don't like that word. I think it's perfectly fine. It just means that you are modern, basically. So that's sort of the umbrella that all of these other traditions are under. So if you are a witch, you're a pagan, if you're a druid, you're a pagan. If this is sort of the cultural umbrella that they're all under.

The plurality of paganism is full of people who are religious. This is their spirituality, this is their religion. This is how they ascribe meaning to their lives. This is how they create relationships with the world around them, loving relationship with the world around them on this incredible spinning ball of mud. And it's also how they transmit values and culture to their kids and their grandkids these days. We've got several generations of pagans now, and they celebrate holidays together, celebrating the seasons, and that this is what you walk into if you decide you want to be part of the community is a culture and an overlapping of cultures. It's not just the doing of the stuff. It's not just the buying of the crystals. So I think that's where it's at right now. There's a real push to kind of make it a market niche, and we're religious people, we're just unconventionally religious.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Broadly speaking, modern paganism emphasizes connections with the personal experience, nature, and the sacred. Often, practitioners seek to revive pre-Christian pagan traditions and rituals. There are more than two dozen strands of modern paganism in Minnesota. Some of the largest groups practicing in Minnesota are druids, heathens, and individual practitioners.

In fact, Minnesota is the birthplace of the Reformed Druids of North America, established in 1963. Here's Murphy.

Murphy Pizza:

There was a group in Northfield, Minnesota at Carleton College that decided to start the new reformed Druids of North America in response to being forced to go to Vesper services on Sundays they didn't want to do that. So they formed a druid group and said, on Sundays, we're going to do druid rituals. And the school got it, and they dropped the Vespers requirement, but they went on to kind of be like an occult campus club and also kind of were the branches for people that identify as American druids these days. Same thing, they looked Celtic culture and mythology. They celebrate again, the calendar of the year, the wheel of the year. They have a liturgy, and druids tend to have a really good sense of humor because they remember their roots as a protest action. So you'll bump into folks and typically folks that are druids

tend to prefer, like I said, Celtic influence. They tend to be writers and artists and interested in that sort of ritual expression.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The Reformed Druids of North America started as a humorous protest. It was never intended to be an alternative religion. Many of the students who started the group belonged to other religions—like Christianity and Judaism. Nevertheless, it remains an active religion to this day.

A decade later, another important group formed in Minnesota. In 1973, more than 70 witches gathered in Minneapolis and established the American Council of Witches. Carl helped organize the group and became its chairperson.

Murphy Pizza:

So this American Council of Witches was held in Minnesota basically because Gnostica was here and because this is where the Gnosticons were. So it seemed to be a good meaning point in the middle because this was a place where they've successfully come from around the country before, and they knew of it. Trustworthy community, trustworthy method. But the American Council of the Witches was moribund a year after they met because they just, this was, and when you get right down to it, American paganism, any kind of paganism, any of the versions, the traditions that I talked about are fundamentally itchy with the idea of being institutionalized and coming together and agreeing on everything.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Carl and others advocated for the American Council of Witches to produce the first public statement of belief for this faith. The hope was that the statement would publicly distance their group from Satanists and to help dispel misunderstandings about witches and modern pagans. The statement of belief was published in 1974. It included ideas like the importance of *nature* to their system, striving to live in harmony with nature, and a rejection of hierarchy. But not all witches and modern pagans were willing to accept the statement.

Murphy Pizza:

There was an attempt at that time to see if he could get all these different witches in Wicca and practitioners together to agree on something. It's funny, this document is still in publication and kind of passed around, but really it was kind of agreed that a year after they had this, it was moribund, they just couldn't get on board with everything on the paper that they were wanting to agree on. In particular, there was an emphasis as one of the aspects of that charter to acknowledge that witchcraft, Wicca and Paganism was essentially kind of a polytheistic, polymorphic, basically your envisioning of the divine could be any old way you want the Wiccans in particular, look at a binary God and goddess, that expressive polarity that gives life to the universe.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Llewellyn and Carl were not the only reasons that modern pagans flocked to the Twin Cities. The University of Minnesota was also a big draw.

Murphy Pizza:

There's a lot of students that came from Minnesota, but also all over the place to attend the university. And they were interested in Paganism, they were interested in occult studies and magic, and they wanted to have a campus group. So they started one in the late seventies, early eighties that they even now say, was very unfortunately named Children of the Night, they immediately started to create a nickname and make fun of it. And so it eventually became called Kiddies in the Dark, and it was just a way for folks that were students but also off-campus folks who were interested to just come and just hang out. And it was, again, very much, it was a social group. It was a place to just be comfortable with each other, share books, share ideas. If they wanted to give ritual a try, this is where they would practice. And this was where also they would do the work of finding teachers in town that were doing classes and courses.

The earliest legally recognized Wiccan church in Minnesota was Minnesota Church of the Wicca, and they were founded in 1976. They were actually used to advertise in the phone book in the Yellow Pages for students, which is

something considering the attitude core people who were witches and engaged in the occult can't really go back to that,

But they learned what they knew from guests coming to do lectures in stores that came from other parts of the country. So it was very much an attitude back then, A milieu back then, we really want to know this and we've been reading a lot about it and we're interested, but we feel like we need to find a teacher to teach us how to do this. So anytime an author or a teacher or somebody would come to teach method of any kind or philosophy or pagan spirituality, it tended to be attended by the same batch of people. And it also tended to be very popular. But then after a while, there were some folks that said, well, I mean, it's not like we really need a teacher. We can figure this out on our own.

Chantel Rodríguez:

It was in this moment of the New Age Religious Movements of the 1970s that Sandra started to learn about Wicca through her relationship with Carl.

Sandra Weschcke:

I learned that it was a very personal, meaningful religion. And I'll tell you, well, I liked the rituals, I enjoyed what it was like, but this was a very active time. We were running a small business. And for me, you must understand, Carl was the driving force of Wicca and magic. My exposure was in the early days working with him, we did a lot of ritual work. We were very involved in Wicca in the early days of Wicca, and yet my focus and my need was on the business side. And Carl's was, at that time and place, was reaching out to the Wiccan community. And so there was already a split in our roles, and I was also expecting our first child, only child at that time. And so there was such a difference when Lady Sheba came into our world. I became very involved with Lady Sheba's form of Wicca, and she taught me the rituals. And we in turn, as a group practiced those rituals privately as well as publicly.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Lady Sheba was a prominent witch in the mid-1900s. In 1971, she published her spellbook and descriptions of her rituals through Llewellyn. This led to

controversy over whether this knowledge should be shared publicly. She visited Minneapolis for Gnosticons and taught people in the Twin Cities. Sandra shared with me a communal ritual she used to practice.

Sandra Weschcke:

You have a gathering of people and you draw a circle and you concentrate on the four quarters, starting with the east. So you have the east, the west, excuse me. This has been a long time since I've done this, the east, the south, the west and the north. And you typically open the circle, at least we did to the east. And you use an athame and you draw around the circle to open the circle, and then the participants walk into the circle because the priest has opened this circle. And then you may do a meditation, you may do offerings, you do have wine to help you with offerings. You may use crystals, you may use other tools. And basically you have a celebration. And then when you finish, you close the circle.

I think I felt at peace and I learned something that there's an essence of that ritual that is still within me today. And so in my own calm way, in my own personal way, I still practice that. And so it might be a blessing to the goddess. Certainly Wicca is a nature-based religion, and so it's respect for mother nature, for goddess worship, and that's what it taught me. And again, even though you see a part of Wicca is being able to practice on your own. And I do not have an altar at home or anything like that, but in my heart, I still carry this. And so as a natural aspect of my life, I still do some of those things.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Together, Sandra and Carl also practiced rituals with Wiccan groups in the 1970s.

Sandra Weschcke:

We worked with Wiccan groups that were active in the early seventies. We did so much with those groups. It was a small amount of people.

We did a lot of ritual by ourselves. We had a small group. And then Carl was also interested in something called Path workings, which is kind of a

meditation process. It's going on a trip without drugs. And I might add, we never used drugs. Looking for altered states of consciousness, looking into your subconscious. He did a lot of work like that.

Chantel Rodríguez:

But as Llewellyn continued to grow, Carl had less time to spend on his spiritual practices.

Sandra Weschcke:

I think it's interesting, important, when we think about the history of Llewellyn, Carl's interest in Wicca never faltered, but his participation did because of Llewellyn. And so it's really important if people are interested in a small growing company that did, as much as Llewellyn has done, he had to step aside. He had to make a decision, am I going to be involved with Wicca for the rest of my life, or am I going to make Llewellyn into the great company that it became? And his decision was he wanted to make Llewellyn into the great company it became, and he just didn't have time for everything. And so there was that point in time where he had to pause and move toward Llewellyn as we both did together.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For Murphy, her academic interest in the subject matter stemmed from her personal interest in magic, tarot, and the occult.

Murphy Pizza:

When I was an undergrad at Beloit College, I discovered Wicca and Paganism and got a spirituality, sort of that whole subculture and that whole kind of way of being as a young seeker. I was raised kind of mixed up Roman Catholic and the paradigm just wasn't working for me anymore for a whole lot of reasons in college. I had several friends in college who identified as pagans and as witches and recommended books to read in particular books that are still influential today, *Drawing Down the Moon* by Margot Adler, *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk and *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* by Zsuzsanna Budapest. And then they just kept coming. You're a book person when you're

a pagan. We have a friend in the community who says, pagans aren't people of the book, like other religions we're people at the library.

So that was what kind of kept me going as a seeker and got me interested in my own practice. But I was really craving community more than sort of casting circles or learning spells. It was definitely the doorway that I entered at that time was feminist politics and environmental politics. And I wanted a spirituality that lined up with that. Where things also got a little more serious was that I went through a period where it kind of got out of a very damaging family situation and was adrift. And so the pagan community, particularly at that time in Rockford, Illinois, I was in Beloit, Wisconsin at the time and in Rockford, Illinois was very welcoming. They had a public space in the form of a coffee shop. They had grown up witches in pagans who were really wonderful people. And that's kind of what started more of the serious plunge.

Chantel Rodríguez:

She had a transformative moment during her undergraduate studies in August of 1999 when some of her teachers invited her to attend the Return to Avalon festival.

Murphy Pizza:

There were so many different shades and methods and ways to do witchcraft and paganism represented. And it was beautiful and it was vibrant and it was exciting. And there were drums and there were fires and there were long conversations at night and whiskey. And then people would get up and put on their finery and walk down to the fire and have these incredible rituals. And admittedly, I was a little spoiled at first. Many of these ritual designers at this festival did have background in theater and had background in the arts, and some of these rituals were just gorgeous over the top incredible things.

It was August when this festival was going on. And so this is the first harvest. And so they were celebrating kind of the culling of the herd and the cutting down of the first crops. And that symbolized in a lot of European lore, especially British lore, by cutting down John Barleycorn. If anyone remembers the song of John being cut down and turned into beer, he's the metaphor of the harvest god. And so they had actors get up and there was a gentleman

who was the Corn God, and he kind of sang a song and he looked at the goddess who was dressed in black and carrying a sickle, and he said, I want to live. And she said, and you shall. And she took her sickle and acted like she was slitting his throat, because she was cutting down the crops

And he collapsed and they wrapped him in the shroud and carried him around in the dark. And we all kind of put our hands on him and then came back up on the stage and there was this real dramatic moment of light, and then in the chair where he had been sitting as the old man, reappeared a young boy who was the reborn crop who came back at the spring. So the mystery there, being that you never truly die, you're always reborn and life and death are part of a never-ending cycle, and that's the secret. It was done very "Greek tragedy" dramatically and I was just absolutely stunned.

It was incredible. And I went into the bathroom and I threw up. It was just so intense. But then it also made it clear that other folks should know about this, but this is also really special, so you don't just want to throw it around.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This powerful experience helped convince Murphy to earn a doctorate in cultural anthropology. She gained an understanding of these communities from a personal as well as an academic point of view.

Murphy Pizza:

Pagans and witches tend to do their celebrating, especially in the summertime for week-long fellowships where people get together when they camp for a week and that's when they engage in fellowship and workshops, learning spiritual technologies, rituals, all sorts of things. And guests come from around the country. And I went to my first one with my Milwaukee teachers and realized at that moment something very, very incredible culturally was happening here and not a lot of people knew about it. So when I got into the doctoral program, I said, well, I know exactly what I want to study. And I spent a good seven years formally collecting data and then writing a dissertation about, in particular the community here in the Twin Cities, which is nicknamed Paganistan by one of the priests here because it's the land of witches.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So what was it that made you want to stay in the Twin Cities?

Murphy Pizza:

The incredible community. I mean, it was also like I really needed to finish the dissertation and I didn't need to take coursework anymore. And it just meant that, well, traveling to festivals and coming up for Pagan Pride Day for weekends and camping out with friends is one thing. But to immerse in the actual urban community here, which is vibrant and has been since around 1976. The community is so large here in the Twin Cities that you could, if you wanted to entirely spend your company in nothing but pagan company, I don't recommend it. I think everyone should have lots of different kinds of friends, but if that's what you want to do is stay within your own tribe, you can.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The community Murphy joined in the 1990s was more open and public, but it had not always been this way. The climate of fear and misunderstanding of modern paganism had been rampant since the 1960s. Many people had to hide their identities and beliefs for fear of being outed—at work, with their families, or within their communities.

Murphy Pizza:

When I talked to the elders, when I've interviewed the elders, they were a tight enough community that they all knew each other by, well, by magical name, if not their real name, to the point where they saw each other on the bus. They could kind of wink and nod, and they would all know who each other were. As the community grew. And it grew because in the seventies and the early eighties, it was still tradition, but also still a matter of safety, that folks that practiced Wicca and occult religions of various sorts needed to keep it secret and private. It was a very real fear because it did happen to people where if you found out that people found out that you were a witch or found out that you were a pagan, well instantly they lumped you in the camp with satanists. I have no gripe with satanists either. I

mean, they're legally allowed to worship anything, anybody they want to. The First Amendment allows you to worship anything, anything you want to and call it a religion. But very real consideration, real fear, real panic. Back in those days.

I heard many stories from the elders that when people were discovered to be witches, they lost their jobs. They were fired because those protections weren't there. They lost custody battles and often lost their children. People's homes were, windows were broken or firebombed, very real concerns for safety if you identified that way. When things started to change, when we started having some legal victories as a community and as a culture, when judges started saying, no, there's a first amendment that protects pagans and witches, and there was more education going into schools and into legal situations, and more and more experts were coming forth to kind of explain, and scholars were coming forth to explain that this isn't what you think it is, and there's no danger to be had here.

Chantel Rodríguez:

People participating in New Age Religious Movements found comfort and support through their specific communities. Carl helped to found a Wiccan church in 1973 to do just that. He explained that his goal with the church was to show the world quote, "These aren't just strange people. They have a religion, and they deserve respect!" The church was short-lived, but it served as an example and an inspiration for witches to seek and gain equal protection under the laws of religious freedom.

In 1976, a group of Wiccans established the Minnesota Church of the Wicca. They became a federally recognized religious organization in 1987. The 501(c)(3) status gave them some legal and tax protections from persecution. And they could freely practice their religion under the First Amendment. By 1989, Minnesota was also home to a second organization, the Wiccan Church of Minnesota.

But legal status did not completely shelter them from conflict and misunderstanding. In 1991, the Minnesota Church of the Wicca held an event at Hidden Falls park in St. Paul that led to a clash with police.

Murphy Pizza:

So there was some folks just looking for a cult crime, I think. So MCOW was having their ritual, and they had one fellow who was kind of, there's a job with somebody called the Tyler that kind of parolles the outside of the ritual to make sure nobody bothers anybody, and he saw lights, and it turned out that they got shook down that night by Minneapolis Police, St. Paul Police, State Troopers, just all these different branches of law enforcement thinking that something dastardly was going on. And really nothing was. The thing that kind of brought it to a pitch, which was a mistake that the high priest made is that one of the ritual tools used by traditional wiccans is called an athame, and basically it's a knife and it's basically, it's not used to cut anything in ritual. It's used to kind of like direct energy and to cast the circle, it's used as a tool. A wand is used in a knife as used one is to draw on, one is to push. And the high priest saw the hubbub with law enforcement, and so he cut himself out of the circle and then walked toward the police still with his knife in his hand, bad move, bad move. They drew their guns. So it was kind of a really messy affair.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The witches at Hidden Falls did not get arrested that night. But they wanted to avoid future misunderstandings. So they set up a meeting with local law enforcement. About 300 witches showed up to dispel myths about their community and beliefs.

Murphy Pizza:

And the police after that big meeting basically said, look, just let us know that you're coming. We'll put you on dispatch so we know now that we know who you are, you can't drink booze in the parks, so no booze. And if you're going to bring these weapons for ritual, keep 'em scabbarded and peace bonded. So nobody, there's no pointy things in the air, and they've had a really good relationship with the police ever since. So when there are groups that want to have a public ritual in the park, they just give the police a call and it's cool, which was a big deal because they had to be very, very public. There are folks that came to that meeting that never told anyone that they were pagans or witches, but for that, they just dropped it and they showed up, and that changed a lot here.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Beyond sharing basic information about themselves, the witches also established the first community liaison with the police department.

Around the same time of the Hidden Falls incident, modern pagans were beginning to openly celebrate their community and beliefs with an event known as Pagan Pride. Becky Munson is one of the organizers of Twin Cities Pagan Pride, currently serving as the organization's treasurer.

Becky Munson:

So the original Pagan Pride was on the University of Minnesota campus. We're not sure if it was 1989, it was '89 to '91, somewhere in there. And we've been here since 2001 in Minnehaha Falls Park. The organization is Twin Cities Pagan Pride. We're a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that does educational events around paganism and earth-based religions. And we run this event, which is one of our public outreach events. We're in a public park, and then we also run an indoor convention in March called Paganicon, which is a ticketed event, more focused on learning and development in the pagan community.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Murphy told me that Pagan Pride was inspired by pride celebrations in the LGBTQIA+ community.

Murphy Pizza:

The thing to do is to be public, to be out, to be celebratory of who you are. And lo and behold, come to find out that when pagans started going public about spirituality, more and more people were really interested because more and more people were getting kind of fed up with whatever paradigm they grew up with or were rejected by it. And there's a big Venn diagram overlap between pagans and witches and folks in our community, and folks in the queer community a lot of times because we embrace them when they enter, and a lot of them were rejected by whatever religion they grew up in for being queer. Happens a lot. We have a lot of people that enter our

community rejected from religions, and then we're a place where they can be as wacky as they want to be, and they're seen as a gift.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The annual event has taken place at Minnehaha Falls in Minneapolis since 2001.

Murphy Pizza:

Yeah, there are many people here whose veneration points are Minnehaha Falls, the Mississippi River, Nine Mile Creek. There's definitely a reassessment these days knowing that we need to acknowledge who the first peoples were on this land.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Minnehaha Falls and the surrounding area is Dakota homeland. The Dakota name, Mnihaḥa, means waterfall. It is important to Dakota people. Both as a place for ceremony and gatherings with other bands, or tribes near Mni Owe Sni or Coldwater Spring, a traditional health giving ceremony site. All water is sacred to Dakota. It was, and continues to be, a gathering place for Indigenous people. Back to Murphy.

Murphy Pizza:

The decolonization conversations have been happening in the community for a few years, but they also are, well, this is where we are now. This is where our feet are. We're not indigenous, but we were born and raised here and we need to honor this place as sacred as well. So definitely the landscape of Minnesota and some will teeter over the border into Wisconsin a little bit where some of the pagan land and 501(c)(3) churches are. There is definitely an acknowledgement of, in particular in Minnesota, what they call the Theater of the Seasons. A lot of folks have said Paganism, really in any expression that you have, is a religion that celebrates the theater of the seasons. And what better place to be a Pagan than Minnesota where we have the most dramatic of seasons. There's a real celebration of how intense our climate is and how intense our seasonality is, and some will attach mythic

archetypes to it, some won't. It's just nature and it's just Minnesota. But there is definitely a sense of this is a sacred and holy place to be. It's amazing that we've landed here. Cold Water Spring is not that far away. It's one of the only freshwater springs left. Definitely a sacred place, but definitely the seasonality of Minnesota is definitely celebrated here, and some people have made up new mythic stories about it too.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And for the landscape, you mentioned a lot of bodies of water. Is it really focused on water here? Are there other aspects of the landscape that really play into it?

Murphy Pizza:

There are others. What's really kind of terrific about the Twin Cities if you're a Pagan, is that they've done a really good job of maintaining really remarkable green spaces and parks and that sort of thing in the middle of a couple of really big cities. So for those of us that require the city for work and for the amenities that we require, to be able to pop into someplace that is lush and that is green loaded with wildlife where you can sit with your relationship with the natural world, pretty close at hand. You don't have to drive out to the middle of wherever in order to get back to nature. It's here and it's woven into the city, definitely is appreciated and definitely venerated. But there's definitely a focus for a lot of folks specifically on the bodies of water because they are so tremendous here. We're surrounded by these great lakes and the Mississippi River and all of the lakes, all of the lakes in Minnesota. I mean, for a lot of folks, this is what's really unique and special about this place that a lot of parts of the country don't have the blessings that we do, and we definitely honor the blessings of water here, for sure.

Chantel Rodríguez:

A 2022 national survey estimates that 87% of Americans held one or more New Age beliefs, such as reincarnation and spiritual energy. But the number of active practitioners broadly ranges from 700,000 to 2.5 million. The Midwest—especially Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Chicago—has become home to a number of active modern pagan communities. Comprehensive numbers

for New Age practitioners, especially modern pagans, are difficult to come by. Nonetheless, we do have some information for Minnesota.

One study estimates that the Twin Cities metro has at least 20,000 witches who meet in more than 200 covens or groups. This does not include individual practitioners. Carl's early and public sponsorship of New Age Religious Movements through Llewellyn undoubtedly contributed to the community's growth in the Twin Cities. Llewellyn continues to do so through its ongoing sponsorship and presence at festivals.

Sandra Weschcke:

So in Minnesota, once a year, there is something called Paganicon, and it's held in March of every year. It was in Plymouth. It has been in Plymouth, and it's going to be in Bloomington next year. Going further, we have another one called Mystic South, held in Georgia, Sacred Space in Baltimore, Convocation held in Michigan. So there are these events that helps Llewellyn and everyone who's interested, because we send authors to them. And Paganicon that's held here in Minnesota, which is really a big event, and it's growing every year. There's a lot of participants, some of them come to visit us.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Llewellyn may have been the largest publisher of New Age books in the area, but it was not alone. There have been local bookstores and publishers throughout the decades that served the community. Since 1992, Magus Books and Herbs in Minneapolis has honored the idea that all spiritual pathways are valid. It is a one-stop shop for magical, spiritual, and herbal supplies. You can find new and used books on the metaphysical, the occult, and other thought-provoking books to the community at large.

New Age Religious Movements can also be found in Greater Minnesota. Duluth, for example, has a number of witchcraft stores like Zenith Bookstore, Lady Ocalat, and the Village Witch. The pagan community in Minnesota is working to preserve their history through the Cultural Archive of Modern Paganism, a searchable online database documenting the history and culture of modern pagans in Minnesota and the United States more broadly.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I asked my guests to share what they hope listeners will learn from hearing their stories. Here's Sandra.

Sandra Weschcke:

It's a fascinating story because we grew the business within Minnesota, and we're quite successful, and we're successful in bringing information to people who want the information. We are not successful proselytizing. We are successful bringing information to those who want it.

It was a progression. If we think about something starting, even a plant, where you start, you plant the seed and it grows. And so for us, the seed was Carl's vision, the authors that he found. And it was always so important that we found authentic authors who understood the subject. And in the meantime, there was the business and the growth of the company and making the right decisions, the right business decisions to keep Llewellyn whole and financially able to do the job it had to do. And so it was just over the years, and each year we published a few more books. We had a few more events, we hired even better people. That's my best explanation really, of how it all happened.

If your listener, a particular listener, finds that they don't know anything about my subject. First of all, Llewellyn, I hope you've enjoyed hearing about how a Minnesota company has grown into success over 50 years of working in the state. And as far as our subjects, I hope that I've been able to say something that will make you feel comfortable about these subjects and that they're not scary. And if you are familiar with the subjects, then hello, and I'm glad you're listening.

Murphy Pizza:

It's really important for Minnesotans, I think, to learn about this remarkable history of this community. And why I thought it was remarkable to study is that this is given such a flavor to Minnesota culture generally. It's again, a reminder that with the stereotype of Minnesotans being Scandinavian Lutherans, that Lake Woebegon kind of myth, that there's a lot of folks that

are expressing other cultural realities, other spiritual realities, and are venerating this land that we're walking around on that got the name Minnesota.

You've got something very, very special and beautiful here. I knew it when I was sitting in Milwaukee watching just the listservs and watching the Minnesotans call it Paganistan and talk about all the things that they did and the creativity they're engaging in and just going, there is something so special going on there. How do they do it from a pagan perspective? But then also this is such a real special gift of a community to this place. That's what I'd like people to understand is that right in the middle of their schools, in their backyards is this really incredible batch of people who are doing incredible spiritual work and passionate about it, and who are really smart and who are really caring and accepting.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Back at the bookstore, I find myself looking more closely at the books in the “self-transformation” section. There are so many spiritualities and beliefs represented. And many of them have been made available through Llewellyn Worldwide.

Speaking with Murphy and Sandra, I now see that the story of Llewellyn is not simply a business history. It weaves together histories of print culture, New Age Religious Movements, and community formation.

Carl Weschcke established Llewellyn as a world renowned new age publisher. He helped put Minnesota on the world map. But his vision for Llewellyn also contributed to the growth of New Age Religious Movements in Minnesota. This includes the Twin Cities modern pagan community – one of the largest in the United States. Their intertwined stories are a reminder that Minnesota's spiritual landscape has always been complex.

You've been listening to *Minnesota Unraveled: pulling on the threads of Minnesota history*. I'm your host Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources and MNopedia articles at our website mnhs.org/unraveled

Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Rose Productions. Our research team is Ari Fields, Alex Magnolia, Hayden Nelson and me, Chantel Rodriguez. Our production team is Brett Baldwin and Meghan Buttner, with recording, sound design and editing by Chris Heagle and Zack Rose.

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Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious, and remember, the tapestries of history are all around you, just waiting to be unraveled.