

# **Augustana Lutheran Church's Traditional Santa Lucia Festival**

**Original by Marion Moline's reading of 1975**

**Adapted and edited by Jeanne Emmons then read on December 8, 2024**

What I'm going to present tonight is adapted and shortened from a reading written and delivered by Marion Moline at our church's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 1975. It's a history of Santa Lucia and of our Augustana Santa Lucia Festival.

Like many a good story our Augustana Santa Lucia Festival Story begins "Once Upon a Time"...long ago... in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century... in a country far, far away in Italy on the Island of Sicily in the town of Syracuse. A beautiful girl was born in a marble palace. When she was a child, her wealthy father died, leaving her mother a widow. Her mother raised Lucia as a Christian, which at that time, was dangerous. In 4<sup>th</sup> century Italy, Christians were persecuted, tortured and put to death. Lucia's mother became ill, and, fearing she would die, arranged for her daughter to marry to secure her future.

But Lucia had prayed for her mother to recover, promising to remain unmarried if her mother was healed. When her mother survived, Lucia distributed the jewels and riches of her dowry to the poor. She also brought food to Christians hiding in the catacombs. Her disappointed fiancé was angry and turned in his future young bride to the Roman authorities. She was arrested, persecuted, and eventually condemned to death by burning at the stake on December 13 in the year 304. According to legend, the wood refused to light and she had to be killed with a sword. Other accounts say her eyes were gouged out. Afterwards, she was transfigured by such an inner intense light that she was "clothed in white and crowned with light."

She became known as the bearer of light on the darkest evening of the year, the winter solstice in mid-December, after which the days begin to grow longer. Though Lucia was Sicilian, she was revered by the Scandinavians. There is an old Swedish legend that Lucia appeared on a winter night along the shores of Sweden's largest lake, Lake Vänern. There was a terrible famine in the land, and she brought food and clothing to the Swedes who were starving. By the way, it was during this famine that the recipe for Korv, or potato sausage, was developed, to stretch the meat. It became a staple of all smorgasbords, including the one we are enjoying tonight.

According to legend, Lucia continued to be seen each December 13, between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning, clothed in white with a crown of lights, moving across the icy lakes and snow-covered hills of Swedish parishes carrying food for the starving. Eventually, a custom evolved in which the eldest daughter of a Swedish family, dressed in a white gown belted with a red sash, a necklace of red berries, and a crown of lighted candles, served saffron buns and coffee to her parents while they were still in bed at the break of day on December 13. This was how the Swedes began their Christmas celebration.

How did the Lucia Festival tradition come about at Augustana Lutheran Church?

ONCE UPON A TIME ... In 1875, Swedish immigrants established a church in Sioux City, naming it the "Swedish Evangelical Augustana Lutheran Church of the United States of America." After outgrowing two facilities, they completed a red brick church at the corner of Sixth and Court Streets in 1890.

As Swedish brides came to America and married the sons of these immigrants, the pastor's wife, Mrs. O.N. Olson, established a women's organization called the "Miriam Society" to help these women, who knew no English, acclimate to their new country and church. As the group grew, they began serving luncheons and suppers and raising money for the church by selling towels, cookbooks, aprons, hot pads, spices, Rick Rack earrings, and chore boy scouring pads. With their funds they were able to purchase many things for the church, including the altar upstairs. The group organized into circles, and at one time there were 12 circles of 15 women each. These were much later folded into WELCA, the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Miriam Society held the first Lucia luncheon in 1954, and the first Lucia was Bethel Forsling Nettleton.

As it grew in attendance, the Santa Lucia Program was opened for all the women and men of the congregation to attend and then, as this evening, it became a Swedish Potluck Smorgasbord for the whole family and their friends. Cookies served tonight by Lucia's court took the place of the Lucia buns served so long ago at the break of day in Sweden.

The first Augustana Lucia Crown, a brass one with lighted candles, was bought for \$8.00 by Mrs. J.E. Johnson in 1953 on her trip to Sweden. A wired crown was purchased by Tom and Margaret Ericson in 1978 on their trip to Sweden, and the one with batteries was a gift of Audrey Mook in 1990. The Lucia chair was made by Don Moline and painted by Marion Moline in 1982. The Lucia Cabinet on the landing to the Sanctuary was built in 1954. In 1977 "Star boys" robed in white with cone-shaped hats topped with a star and star wands were introduced to escort Lucia and her procession. Each year the girls of the confirmation Class are eligible to become "Santa Lucia."

Beginning with the first Lucia, that young Sicilian girl martyred in 304, Christian girls and women have given of themselves to bring the love of Christ to the poor and to strive to be bearers of light in the darkness of our world. This long tradition remains alive tonight. Just as it began "Once upon a time," we believe it will continue "happily ever after."