

The History of Halloween

For most cultures, the beginning of Autumn's dying season traditionally initiates a time of reflection about those who have passed away. In Northern Britain, the words ghost and guest (geist) are the same word. In isolated and mountainous Celtic villages, dead relatives were disinterred and their skulls reverently painted, so they could rejoin the family during October "dumb" feasts. With little space to spare for burial, these skulls would be stacked and saved for future in eerie rooms.

Other world cultures celebrate the end of harvest with a nighttime wander to either welcome or frighten away roving spirits, while some festivals include door-to-door begging to benefit children and the poor. Mexico's Day of the Dead on November second wondrously combines honoring the dead--by tidying graveyards and offering food to ancestors--with the playful and macabre preponderance of sugar skulls and paper mache skeletons. In the United States, the sacred Autumn aspects of divination and communication with the spirit world are a legacy of the Celts; while American Halloween activities descend from the British Isles, focusing on parties and nighttime mischief.

19th Century Halloween parties involved play acting, costumes and whimsical fortune telling. Parties were fun for the children and gave courting couples an excuse for romantic nighttime walks and visits. Victorian-era lovers revived the ancient practice of bobbing for apples, as well as parlor pastimes like the provocative game where couples together bite into suspended donuts with their hands tied behind their backs. Edwardian postcards featured classic Halloween images: witches, cats, bats and owls, and little charms and chants to attract sweethearts and foresee the future.

In Germanic Pagan tradition, taxes and wages were collected in person at this time of year. In Scotland, this practice turned into playful door-to-door begging called "guising." The ancient art of communing with the spiritworld evolved into "souling" in England: wandering about at night, disguised, welcoming the ancestors back with lights held in carved out turnips. Later, with the rise of the church, seeking contact with the other side was discouraged, and folks attempted to frighten ghosts away. In America, successive waves of European immigrants in the 1800's diluted British traditions, and when nighttime mischief-making began to be practiced by the newcomers, it fueled native prejudices and fears of juvenile delinquency.

By the turn of the century, Halloween had become an ever more destructive way to "let off steam" for crowded and poor urban dwellers. As Stuart Schneider writes in *Halloween in America* (1995), vandalism that had once been limited to tipping outhouses; removing gates, soaping windows and switching shop signs, by the 1920's had become nasty--with real destruction of property and cruelty to animals and people. Perhaps not coincidentally, the disguised nighttime terrorism and murders by the Klu Klux Klan reached their apex during the decade. Schneider writes that neighborhood committees and local city clubs such as the Boy Scouts then mobilized to organize safe and fun alternatives to vandalism. School posters of the time call for a "Sane Halloween." Good children were encouraged to go door to door and receive treats from homes and shop owners, thereby keeping troublemakers away. By the 1930's, these "beggar's nights" were enormously popular and being practiced nationwide, with the "trick or treat" greeting widespread from the late 1930's. The 1900's through the mid 1960's was the golden age of Halloween-themed Americana. Paper cast jack o' lanterns and candy containers, die cut decorations, wooden rattlers and tin noisemakers, postcards and party idea magazines abounded and featured wacky, mischievous pumpkin-headed kids or goofy characters composed

of vegetable shapes. Cats and owls had grinning teeth and rolling eyes. Witches were fierce and strong characters, often retaining a realistic old-woman-quality about them. Devils were particularly gleefully fierce, and represented naughtiness, or lack of conscience. Many of these pieces were made by women in German cottage industries before World War II and later expanded in Japan. American companies such as Luhrs, Dennison and Beistle dominated the party accessories market in the United States. The decorations of those decades reveal a society secure enough to get pleasure out of being spooked, apparently reserving fear for real enemies and actual threats. Our Grandparents understood and tolerated such fun for children on one night of the year: to run through neighborhoods and across country lanes, without supervision, getting a generous stash of homemade sweets from neighbors and friends: cookies, popcorn balls, muffins and wrapped cakes. And to experience that creepy, thrilling rush of being outside at night, with spirits and ghosts all around.

Social changes during the last thirty years have diminished much of Halloween's innocence. During the 1960's, the rise in cults, the Manson murders, and movies such as Rosemary's Baby and The Exorcist fleshed out satan's vague biblical character. The popular culture's expression of satan gave life to it: literally invested it with fear of evil, where there was little previously. Hollywood created the satanic cult. The well-publicized acts of loading brownies with pot or LSD by a few demented individuals insured that Halloween treats are now exclusively pre-packaged, store bought candy. Later scares of candy loaded with pins or razor blades further lent a sinister possibility to Halloween. Ironically, most Halloween decoration and paper products today are benign and fluffily cute, while "acceptable" scary entertainment features convulsively violent bloodbaths. Mystical spirits and ghosts are gone from the scene.

Yet Halloween survives as an exciting part of the harvest season. Perhaps our society will learn to effectively challenge every-day threats and dangers, leaving alone those traditions that make childhood magical, and restoring the myth and whimsy.