

GHOSTS, GOBLINS, AND JACK-O-LANTERNS: THE STORY OF HALLOWEEN

By Eric Kimmel

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A GLOWING JACK-O'-LANTERN sits in the window. Eerie shapes flit through the night. Witches and skeletons knock on the door crying, "Trick or treat!" What day can it be? Why, everyone knows: it's Halloween!

Halloween wouldn't be any fun without spooks, costumes, and sweets. These three things have been part of the holiday since it started thousands of years ago, when people known as Celts inhabited most of Europe. The Celtic New Year began on November 1st, which marked the end of autumn and the beginning of winter. This was the time of the Samhain festival. The Celts believed that, on the night of October 31st and the early morning of November 1st, Samhain, God of the Underworld, permitted the souls of the dead to return to their homes. So on Samhain Eve, October 31st, all the hearth fires were put out. Then the Druids, who were the Celtic priests, kindled huge bonfires on the hilltops to help the wandering spirits find their way home. Live sacrifices were made in these flames, and the Celts lit torches from the sacred bonfires and carried them home to make new fires in their own hearths to herald the new year.

Bonfires have been a part of Halloween since that time, especially in Celtic countries such as Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. In Scotland, huge fires are lit on Halloween night to drive away witches and evil spirits. In Wales, people write their names on stones and throw them into the bonfires. The next morning they look for their stones, and if a person's stone cannot be found, it is a sign that he or she will die during the coming year. The word "bonfire" itself comes from "bone-fire," because the bones of the sacrifices remained in the ashes after Samhain was over.

Food and costumes also played a part in the ancient festivals. When the Druids lit their fires, it was the custom for people to dress up in animal skins, pretending to be deer, bears, and wolves. In Ireland a parade was held in honor of Muck Olla, god of

fertility and plenty. The leader of the parade wore a white robe and a mask made from a deer's head and antlers. Those following behind begged food from the people and houses they passed—an early form of trick or treat.

When the Romans conquered the Celts and moved to Gaul (now France) and Britain in the first century A.D., they brought with them their own late-October holiday, the Feralia, an occasion of great feasting in honor of the dead. October was also the season when nuts and apples were harvested, and special ceremonies were held in honor of Pomona, the patron goddess of fruit bearing trees. It was only a matter of time before these Roman customs merged with those of Samhain, and the end of October became a time for going to parties, eating nuts and sweets, and—what else?—bobbing for apples!

However, this autumn festival wasn't called "Halloween" until centuries later, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and all pagan rituals were banned. The Church changed the old holidays into Christian celebrations, and, in 800 A. D., two new holy days were created to take the place of the ancient Roman Feralia. They were All Saints' Day on November 1st, and All Souls' Day on November 2nd.

Each day of the Christian year commemorated a particular saint, but there were always more saints than days. All Saints' Day, sometimes called All Hallows Day, was created to honor any saints who might have been left out. ("Hallow" was an early form of the word "holy"; hence, a day for all those who were holy.) All Souls' Day, like the old Samhain and Feralia festivals, was celebrated to honor the dead. The actual celebration of these two holidays began on the night of October 31st, the evening All Hallows Day, which was called All Hallows Even or Hallow E'en, now known as Halloween.

Because of its association with the dead, Halloween has always been a time for telling ghost stories. One story told in Scotland and Ireland has to do with a spirit called Jack of the Lantern. According to the tale, this Jack was a wicked fellow who did one evil deed after another. When cautioned to mend his ways, he laughed, saying he had no hope of Heaven and no fear of Hell, for he no more believed in one than the other. When Jack died, neither Heaven nor Hell would have him, and so he was condemned

to walk the earth forever. Thus, his ghost wanders the roads at night, holding a lantern to light his path.

In Ireland the country folk used to make simple lanterns by hollowing out a gourd or turnip, cutting a few holes in its side, and sticking in the stub of a candle. Sometimes they cut a grinning, scary face to shine in the darkness. When the first Irish immigrants came to America, they found that the native pumpkin made a capital “jack-o’-lantern” —much bigger, brighter, and scarier than a turnip could ever be.

The Irish also brought the custom of trick or treat to America. In Ireland, Halloween was a good time for getting back at people you didn’t like or for just plain making mischief. Bands of young men and women would roam around in the dark, playing tricks on their neighbors—and sometimes doing real damage. The next morning, when the policeman came around asking who opened Mr. O’Brien’s barn door or stole Mrs. Cleary’s hen, the only answer he’d get would be, “Oh my, it must have been those wicked ghosts!” People soon realize that a good way to avoid trouble was to pay off the local bullies *before* Halloween. But soon these gangs were so bold that they came knocking at the door—masked, of course—demanding a bribe, or else! The householder had his choice: either be tricked or hand out a treat.

Today nearly everyone enjoys dressing up in masks and costumes and going from door to door on Halloween. But trick-or-treating still has its lawless side, and anyone who goes out should understand the difference between having fun and breaking the law.

Halloween has been a night of darkness and mystery for thousands of years, and we wouldn’t have it any other way. But should you be alone at night and get the feeling that someone—or something—is watching you, remember the words of this old

Scottish rhyme:

“From ghoulies and ghosties
And long-legged beasties
And things that go BUMP! in
the night, Good Lord, deliver us.”