

# Halloween: Once A Matter Of Life And Death

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If faith can move mountains, belief did a pretty fair job on one country road in County Mayo, Ireland, in 1959. Rather than build the road as planned, construction workers went on strike because the proposed route would have destroyed a fragile fairy palace in its path.

Even a positive environmental impact report could not have paved the way for this particular road. Older country folk in Ireland still strongly believed in fairies, just as their Celtic ancestors worshipped spirits of the forest and streams centuries before them. The county commissioners, not wishing to disturb either the fairies or the folk who believed in them, re-routed the road.

Many of our contemporary holiday celebrations are rooted in just such a rich soil of older beliefs. In America today, Halloween is trick or treat. More than 2,000 years ago, in what is now France and the British Isles, it was a matter of life and death. For the Celtic people of Gaul and Britain, the night of Oct. 31 was one of thanksgiving, and, at the same time, one of terror.

Firsthand descriptions of the Celts come from Julius Caesar, who wrote an especially vivid account of the Druids of Gaul - the Celtic priests who were the guardians of worship and the arbiters of human sacrifice.

Celtic worship centered around the chief Druid god, Baal, whose visible emblem was the sun. The festival of Samhain (Saveen) or "summer's end," which fell on Nov. 1, the Celtic New Year's Day, rejoiced in Baal's harvest gifts but also mourned the sun's fading powers. Soon the sun would be weakened by his enemies and the powers of darkness would prevail in their season, the people believed.

"Life was a constant state of flux for these early peoples," Jack Santino, a Smithsonian Institution folklorist, observes. "Omens that foretold the future were their attempt to bring order to the world."

Omens sometimes took gruesome shapes. On Oct. 31, the last night of the old year, it was believed that Saman, the lord of death, gathered the souls of all those who had died the past year and decreed what form they would take in the coming year. Bonfires, which were literally bone fires, lighted the hills. Animals and human beings - usually criminals and prisoners of war - were burned alive as sacrifices to Baal and the now-ascendant evil spirits. From their appearance in death, the priests saw omens foretelling the future.

Did their omens foretell the Druid demise? Caesar conquered Gaul and Britain and made it part of the Roman Empire, and subsequent Roman rulers outlawed human sacrifice and cut down the Druids' sacred oak groves. They forbade the practice of the Druid religion as well and banished or killed many of the priests.

Roman festivals, like the November harvest festival honoring Pomona, goddess of fruit, blended with Samhain. Apples and nuts, not human beings, were offered to Pomona. Nevertheless, many Druid customs lived on for hundreds of years until Christianity became a force in that corner of the world.

Christianity gave Halloween its name, if not its customs. In 835, Pope Gregory IV established the first day of November in the Christian calendar as All Saints Day, or Allhallows. The festival honors all of the Christian saints and martyrs, known and unknown. Oct. 31, is Allhallows Even (Eve), shortened to Halloween.

It was likely no accident that the very day chosen to honor Christian saints was the Druid Samhain. Old gods and beliefs are not willingly surrendered. The Christian church adopted the policy of incorporating what it considered harmless pagan folkways in an effort to win over the folk. New branches were thus grafted onto the old Druid oak.

In the Middle Ages, however, church opposition to non-Christian practices stiffened. In response, witchcraft and satanic cults spread throughout Europe in defiance of the church. On Halloween, especially, the witches gathered in eerie rites at Sabbaths to mock the festival All Saints.

The figure of the witch is as old as the Bible, which tells the story of King Saul seeking the advice of the Witch of Endor about the outcome of his impending battle with the Philistines. The witch called up the prophet Samuel from the dead for his prediction. Angered at being summoned by a forbidden practice, Samuel predicted that Saul would lose the battle and his life. Samuel was right.

Witches - wise women sought after for charms, herbs and fortune telling - were an accepted part of Greek and Roman society. In the Middle Ages, as Christianity struggled to eliminate witchcraft and satanic cults, witches were held to be an evil force that must be erased.

Long after witchcraft had any significant impact in Europe, witchcraft persecutions continued, reaching their height at the 16th and 17th centuries. Harvard historian George Lyman Kitredge wrote in 1928 that, in calculating the number of people who died as a result of these persecutions on the Continent from the 14th to the 17th centuries, "...half a million is thought to be a moderate estimate." Other estimates have ranged from 1 to 9 million. There were thousands of other victims in England, Scotland and America.

The first execution for witchcraft in New England was not, as might be believed, in Salem, Mass., but in Hartford, Conn., where Else Young was hanged on May 26, 1647. From the first settlement to the end of the 17th century, 34 people died as a result of the witchcraft

persecutions in New England.

The Salem witchcraft trials began in February 1692 and ended in January 1693, having claimed 22 lives. More than 400 others, including John Alden of Boston, 70-year-old son of the Priscilla and John Alden of Plymouth, were accused but survived the ordeal. In the end, a trial judge, a group of jurymen and one of the accused recanted. A short and unhappy chapter in American history was near its close.

If the Puritans brought an abiding belief in witchcraft to America, they didn't bring Halloween. The Puritans rejected church holidays such as Allhallows and would have branded the boisterous antics of the folk holiday as the work of the Devil. Other English colonists kept old world Halloween customs like apple ducking and telling ghost stories, but Halloween became a nationally observed holiday in America only after the great Irish and Scottish immigration in the mid-19th century.

These newcomers brought their Halloween celebration as a bonus - a Halloween treat. Americans learned to play games of divination with the apples and nuts of Pomona's festival. Halloween party-goers bobbed for apples to find out if love were true, tossed apple peelings over their shoulders to read in their shapes the initials of future husbands and placed seeds on their palms to tell fortunes. Couples carefully watched blazing nuts in the fire. If a pair of nuts burned to ashes together, a couple could expect a happy life, but if they crackled or flew apart, quarrels and separation were in the offing. After 2,000 years, people were still looking for omens in the fire.

The Irish and Scottish brought a bagful of Halloween tricks as well - some of them the shadowy survivals of Druid rites. In the late 1800s, Halloween pranks reached new highs - goblins and evil spirits were blamed for buggies on the roofs, front gates in the treetops and overturned outhouses - and new lows, as teachers found snakes instead of apples in their desk drawers. At the turn of the century, young people built bonfires, rang doorbells repeatedly, threw unmentionable objects in front halls and flour in people's faces.

Inevitably, civic conscience reared its righteous head. Communities all over America started to organize Halloween. By the 1930s, Halloween had become a regular safe and sane epidemic. Los Angeles, naturally, offered dramatic events at its playgrounds. Chicago's municipal playground regulations required directors to

provide games, costumes and a big bonfire. With barely an autumn leaf in sight, Miami Beach presented its annual Halloween Frolic.

During World War II, the Army warned Halloween celebrants off city streets. Jack-o'-lanterns would have violated the dim-outs. Revelers might be taken for saboteurs.

Today, costumed figures are back on city streets in full force - but with a difference. In the last few years, the pint-sized witches and ghosts have been joined by lots of grown-ups. The streets of such cities as New York, Boston, Washington, San Francisco and St. Louis have swelled with adults staging impromptu Halloween parades.

"Halloween is no longer just for kids," folklorist Santine says. "In some urban areas, Halloween is becoming very much an adult holiday."

"Halloween gets bigger and bigger each year, even in the recession," Kensington, Md., costumer Genevieve Showalter said. "It costs, on the average, \$50 to rent a costume for a night, but by close of business on Halloween, I'm cleaned out of Cleopatras, Judy Garlands, Southern belles, riverboat gamblers and Roman soldiers."

Washington makeup artist Diana Binder has more customers each Halloween who want full-face makeup jobs such as 'The Kitten,' 'The Daisy,' 'The Star,' 'The Panda,' 'The Double Face' and the 'Tutti Fruitti.' Each job takes about an hour and a half.

"It may not be so profitable," Ms. Binder said, "but I enjoy it because it's fun, and there aren't that many things that are fun any more."

For children and adults alike, Halloween today is just for fun in spite of its frightening beginnings. Certainly, no one believes in witches, goblins, ghosts or other supernatural creatures any more. Well, perhaps only in fairies.

Et tu, E.T.?