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All Hallows' Eve: The Evolution of Halloween

Call it Halloween, End of Summer, All Hallows' Eve, or even a satanic holiday. Halloween has its primitive roots and has considerably changed since with great influence over the past twenty years. Celebrated in fear and fun for over 3,000 years Halloween is "Seductive as it is scary; sparking passion and controversy everywhere it is celebrated" (The Haunted History of Halloween). Halloween has come far from its ancestral roots of Ireland and the Celtic tribes who gazed into the night of their ancestors.

Halloween has had many different faces and starts in Ireland predating Christ. The Celts started their own agricultural community, living off of the earth knowing nature "could be friend or foe, they were at the mercy of the elements and winter was the scariest time of all" (The Haunted History of Halloween). What was harvested for winter was all the Celts had, there was no way of getting more and no way to determine how the community and winter would manage together. Before winter would come to pass, the Celts would ask their priests known as druids, to pray for them and the community. Praying occurred in late fall, the last day of the harvest and the first day of winter, on that night the Celts believed the veil between the world of the living and the spirit world was thin. Thin enough that the spirits of the other world could roam freely back and forth between worlds. They believed this night to be of great importance and called this night

Samhain (pronounced sow-en) “Gaelic for November” (The Haunted History of Halloween). The spirits, who had died in the past year, walked the earth once more and they knew not all the spirits would be friendly. The Celts created ways to “appease the spirits” (The Haunted History of Halloween), from troubling and haunting by parading to the edge of the villages with offerings, coaxing the bad spirits away from the village homes. They would leave food and sweets as gifts for the dead, a tradition that would later become Trick or Treating.

Samhain was also known “as one of the four fire festivals of the Celtic calendar, perhaps the most important” (The Haunted History of Halloween). The Celts believed the gods controlled the sun and because daylight is shorter in winter they believed it was a sign of their extraordinary power and built huge bonfires to honor the gods and pray for the return of the sun. “Unless the life of man be repaid for the life of man, the will of the immortal gods cannot be appeased” (The Haunted History of Halloween). To thank the earth they would offer the gods blood sacrifices. Cows, horses and other animals were thrown onto huge bonfires because the earth gave up its riches and considered it “only polite to offer back some of their own life essence to the earth” (The Haunted History of Halloween). This would offer clues to who would die and who would prosper in the coming year, than the druids would read divination from the sacrifices and believed the sacrifices and Samhain night to be the best time to predict the future. During the festival of Samhain, men would dress as women and women as men. “Farmers’ gates were unhinged and left in ditches; people’s horses were moved to different fields” (Bonewits) people would do things they would not dream of doing on any other night.

On the other side of Europe, ancient Romans were celebrating Pomona. The Romans worshipped Pomona the goddess of gardens, fruits and harvest in a festival that took place around November 1st. To thank Pomona for a favorable harvest Romans left out apples, nuts, grapes and other orchard fruits. Apple bobbing on Halloween today comes from the Romans tradition of Pomona. In fifty B.C the Romans had conquered much of northern Europe and spread Pomona to the land of Samhain, these traditions began to merge, honoring the dead and the harvest. Just as the trend of early Halloween began to take shape “a new force bitterly opposed to all things Pagan, was taking root all across Europe” (The Haunted History of Halloween). Christianity was beginning to emerge and Samhain would soon find its self in the middle of a war, Pagan versus Christian.

Pagans worshipped natural spirits and were not part of any formal or organized religion. Christianity began to sweep across the land, Christianity would attempt to conquer everything non Christian in its path. The belief began that the natural spirits the Pagans worshipped such as Pomona, were of “demonic nature, evil, hostile and belonging to the world that is opposed to god” (The Haunted History of Halloween). The Christians soon found out that converting the pagans from their evil ways would in fact not be easy. The regular folk were not interested in Christianity the “idea that you had to wait until the next life to have a good life was not exactly a popular idea. So the Christians had to make Christianity more attractive to the Celts and so they basically graphed on new religion onto the practices of the old religion” (The Haunted History of Halloween). By the eighth century, the Christian church had enough of playing nice and trying to accommodate the pagans. Pope Gregory the Third decided to “challenge pagan beliefs

head on by turning their most important holiday, Samhain into a day of the church” (The Haunted History of Halloween).

November first was claimed All Saints Day, a day to honor the Christian saints who did not already have a saint’s day of their own. All Saint Day is also known as All Hallows’ Day, Hallow is equivalent to the word Saint. It was the eve of All Hallows’ that became known as All Hallows’ Evening, which over time evening has been contracted to even and contracted even further to e’en and became the contemporary word Halloween (hallowed or sacred). In the attempt of turning Samhain into a day of the church, many pagans continued to celebrate the beliefs and practices anyway. In the tenth century, the church had taken their conversion process a step further by declaring November second All Souls Day, a day to remember everyone who had died, saint or not. It would take more than that to undo the practices and celebration of age old tradition.

The Christian church began to focus its troubles elsewhere, the practice of Witchcraft. Witches were a long time symbol to the church of the very worst part of Paganism, especially on Samhain time. The word Witch comes from the old English Wicca or wise one, usually a woman and seen by the church as unruly women who tapped into the darkest aspects of Halloween. Witches were considered evil and part of the pagan problem, engaging in sinful behavior and sabbats (meetings) that included “wild orgies, cannibalism and made fun of Christian sacraments” (Fremon). It was believed Witches could take the shape of animals, birds and the most iconic symbol, the black cat. It was believed Witches were permitted to fly, among most popular a broomstick, chair or pole. Witches would anoint their broomstick or chair with “the devils instruction,” (Fremon) from the limbs or fat of children whereupon they were

carried up into the night sky. The broomstick is a traditional representation of the age old stereotype of the modern housewife and the “most common household tool” (Morton).

In 1486, Pope Innocent the Eighth published a book “claiming a direct link between Witchcraft and the devil outlawing the pagan Celtic religion all together, because of its link to Witchcraft” (The Haunted History of Halloween). Witches were put on trial all over Europe and Catholic Protestant differences began to rise. The Puritans who settled in New England “brought a fully developed fear of witchcraft and a long tradition of persecuting witches to the colonies” (Bannatyne) and “were bitterly opposed to Halloween” (The Haunted History of Halloween). The Puritans considered the holiday “too pagan and too catholic,” (The Haunted History of Halloween).

On Halloween in 1517, Christian revolutionist Martin Luther posted his famous thesis attacking church dogma by launching the Protestant Reformation, Luther changed the face of Christianity and Halloween forever. He rejected all those symbols that stood between worshippers and God including Popes, Priests and Saints. So when Saints went out of favor so too did All Saints Day and of course all Hallows’ Eve. The holiday was too popular to go away completely. In England, the Protestants would use Halloween to exploit their battle with the Catholics. (The Haunted History of Halloween.)

In 1692 two girls in Salem Massachusetts fell ill and began exerting “strange behavior such as blasphemous screaming, convulsive seizures, trance-like states and mysterious spells (Salem Web). Doctors were unable to find any physical cause for their

symptoms and declared them under the influence of witchcraft and “concludes the girls are bewitched” (Salem Witch Trials). Those found guilty of Witchcraft were first stripped and examined for markings of the devil, which included “marks that could be scars, pimples, moles or freckles” (Summers). Upon discovering a devils mark, the accused was found guilty and if markings were not enough, often the accused was forced to confess and than hung or burned alive.

On June 10th 1692, Bridget Bishop was the first to be sentenced and was hung on gallows hill (Salem Witch Trials). By the end of the sixteenth century, twenty- four people had died, nineteen hanged on gallows hill and a dozen others perished in prison awaiting their fate (Fremon). By the end of the seventeenth century, witch hunts were on the decline and the church recognized they were being “swept along by the frenzy,” (Fremon). The hideous and historical events of the witch frenzy, have been contemplated often and some theories include; “Petty jealousies, land grabs, political instability, disease and even pranks” (Fremon).

Halloween got its biggest boost when Irish immigrants began coming to America and brought traditional Halloween Irish customs. In the 1900’s, home spun traditions including “neighbors and families, would get together and share scary stories and play fortune telling games” (The Haunted History of Halloween). In the midst of the Industrial age, the Irish and their nostalgia of the old country brought a feeling of traditional early life and values of an easier simpler time. As the old Irish customs began to blend with modern Halloween customs, some did not quite fit and were adapted to modern American traditions. The American pumpkin was much easier to carve into Jack-o’-lanterns than the turnips used in Ireland.

“When the Irish immigrants arrived in America, they delighted in the size and carving potential of the native pumpkin” (Bannatyne). Carving a scary face into a harmless pumpkin turned the darker sides of the earlier known Halloween, taming and turning its darker sides into light - hearted fun. In the early 19th century, witches and evil were nearly gone; Halloween became a holiday the whole family could enjoy.

Just as Halloween became light - hearted fun, World War One and its horrible events in 1914 would cost America its innocence. Adults were growing up and becoming more practical and Halloween had to grow with it. Halloween events for adults slowly went out the window and stay at home Halloween parties began to take place, kids began to dominate Halloween. As children grew tired of the indoor festivities, they took Halloween to the neighborhood, but as children were let loose, the darker side that plagued Halloween for centuries began to take hold once again. In the 1930’s, pranks and vandalism took hold and in Queens New York for example, one thousand windows were smashed on Halloween and even resulted in three deaths. Vandalism also included “slashed tires, windshields pelted with eggs, gas caps stolen and false fire alarms” (Bannatyne). As pranks and vandalism became a popular Halloween pastime, Halloween was getting out of control and the communities needed to tame it once again. Parents had a clear goal, “tame the children” (The Haunted History of Halloween). Communities began Halloween parades and events to tame the chaos that was Halloween and America began to embrace the new - found Halloween.

The new - found Halloween was short lived, in the early 1940’s the Second World War broke out. America was not in a festive Halloween mood and “Halloween

celebrations were subdued due to the great demand for resources overseas” (Bannatyne). Despite the cancellations of Halloween “there was an effort by many communities to keep up public celebrations, it was a good excuse to get together” (Bannatyne) not to mention keep it safe.

After World War Two, America was once again prosperous and a feeling of “well being brought on a surge in buying and a baby boom” (The Haunted History of Halloween). The new generation embraced Halloween, costumes and parties became a favorite Halloween pastime. “Children everywhere took part, and Trick or Treating was a rite of passage. Events like organized Trick or Treating and Halloween parties helped subdue Halloween’s more mischievous side” (The Haunted History of Halloween). The darker side that plagued Halloween just centuries before would once again reemerge.

In the 1970’s “Rumors began circulating of children dying from razor blades and poisons in trick or treat candy” (The Haunted History of Halloween). Parents began to panic and X raying Halloween candy became a common occurrence on Halloween night.

The offer of many local hospitals to x-ray children’s candy, begun in many cities during the 1970s, took on a new momentum, though some hospital officials remained skeptical about the efficacy of x rays. One Kansas hospital ultimately backed away from the idea, because it might give parents a false sense of security. Poisons and drugs after all, could not be detected by x rays. (The Haunted History of Halloween)

It turns out there were razor blades found in some apples but did not cause any deaths. As for poisoned Halloween candy, some children “did die from it, but

investigators drew the same shocking conclusion from each case, these children were poisoned not by strangers but by members of their own families” (The Haunted History of Halloween). On March 30, 1984, Ronald Clark O’Bryan was put to death by lethal injection for the murder of his ten year old son Timothy and the attempted murder of four other children. On the eve of Halloween 1974, Ronald took his children trick or treating and later that night allowed Timothy a Giant Pixy Stix. “When the contents proved to be too clumpy to trickle out of the straw, Ronald rolled the wand between his fingers to break down the contents so his son could better enjoy them” (Skal).

Timothy complaining that it tasted bitter, Ronald allegedly went to the kitchen to fetch some Kool-Aid to wash the Giant Pixy Stix down. Returning to Timothy, he was “in the bathroom, convulsing, vomiting and grasping” (Skal) before he suddenly died. “Timothy had ingested enough potassium cyanide to kill three adults, poison acts as a chemical asphyxiant” (Skal), in other words blocking oxygen from reaching the brain. “Ronald Clark O’Bryan earned his sweet-sounding nickname, Candy Man, distastefully: He killed his eight year old son with cyanide-laced candy after a night of trick-or-treating, for \$20,000 in insurance money” (Babineck). During the investigation, Ronald was found guilty of the purchase of potassium cyanide in the month before Halloween. Halloween hoaxes were afoot, lots of hoaxes as it turned out.

Most of the reports involved only alleged discovery of pins, needles and razor blades, no follow-ups or arrests, much less physical harm done to anyone. Actual cases involving minor injuries do occasionally occur, but they are so rare and scattered that they do not constitute a significant pattern (Skal.)

On top of the Trick or Treat candy scare, Hollywood was taking its toll on scaring the fun right out of Halloween, with films like “The Exorcist,” “Candy Man” and the popular John Carpenter 1978 film, “Halloween.” In the book *Death Makes a Holiday*, David J. Skal notes “John Carpenters film Halloween, played to the public’s ready receptivity to the idea of a faceless Halloween murderer, and made a fortune” (Skal). Halloween preyed on the fears of a faceless killer as close as a persons’ own neighbor or family member, it was a frightening and disturbing notion for parents. “Urban legends about the dangers of Halloween – poisoned candy, razor blades in apples, and so forth – were casually accepted as fact across America” (Skal).

The celebrations of Halloween have come far over the last century, including the modern day Witch. The Pagan beliefs that the Celts helped spread over 3,000 years ago, still exists today. Today, Covens exist all over the United States; a coven is a group of witches who gather regularly to celebrate their faith and to work together to perform magic rituals. Covens exist all over the United States and modern Witchcraft still holds some of the same practices as the ancient Celts. In celebration of death during a Samhain ritual, contemporary pagans invite loved ones who have passed on with “fire light, prayer and even the sacred symbol of the harvest, the apple” (*The Haunted History of Halloween*).

“Throughout its history, every culture that celebrates Halloween has stamped it with its own local flavor,” (*The Haunted History of Halloween*). The celebration of death that exists in Mexico’s Day of the Dead, also known as *Dia de los Muertos*, is a good example of how Halloween has adapted its self over time. A festival on All Souls Day, Day of the Dead combines Christian and Pagan elements, encouraging the celebration of

passed loved ones. Day of the Dead includes story telling at loved ones graves, skeletons in the form of bread and candy as well as decorative alters covered in remembrance of loved ones.

As modern Halloween has adapted its self over time, the chaos that once was Halloween is no more. The efforts to tame the holiday and keep it safe have had the biggest impact on the way Halloween is celebrated today. “The range of Halloween celebrations that exists in America today has produced a holiday full of dichotomy: it is a holiday for children and for adults as well” (Bannatyne). Today, Halloween is the second largest commercial holiday. Americans “spend some two and a half billion dollars a year” (The Haunted History of Halloween), just behind Christmas. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center buildings, marked a horrible and grief stricken day all over the world. September 11, not only marked a day “with a cataclysmic force that the United States mainland had never experience or even imagined” (The Haunted History of Halloween), but caused a social impact on the meaning and celebration of Halloween. Halloween events were canceled everywhere and companies participating in Halloween related events had to rethink titles and themes that were completely inappropriate due to the recent events. The events of September 11 had an impact on Halloween in the following years, with threats of bombs and violent related happenings Americans were not in the mood to celebrated death and horror. Halloween once again adapted to Society.

In an Interview with Charles Matson owner of the retail store “Halloween Headquarters,” Charles made some interesting points and commented on the past and

modern celebration of Halloween. The following is an interview I conducted on Thursday April 21, 2005 with Charles Martin:

Q: Do you think Halloween is still considered evil by some people?

A: “Some people might. The biggest participates in Haunted Houses, (affiliated in Santa Cruz), was church groups. Some people think everything is evil or certain things are evil. People believe different things are evil.”

Q: My Sisters middle school would not allow any Halloween costumes, why do you think public schools are starting to forbid costumes?

A: “I’m not sure; some schools have concerns about being politically correct and those changes with the times and peoples’ different beliefs at different times. Just like I could not wear jeans in high school, it was considered taboo and part of the dress code. It’s part of American life.”

Q: Do you feel poison candy and the razor blade myth is still a problem that should have focus today?

A: “No, it was an urban myth.”

Q: Do you feel witches today are still misunderstood?

A: “No, again it’s another thing, another religion of sorts and I think it does not have much to do with modern Halloween.”

Q: Do you think America still has problems facing the reality of death?

A: “I suppose that there are still some costumes that are traditional, grim reaper, death coming. I do not believe that old Halloween has a lot to do with Halloween today. Death is something that all societies throughout time have had to deal with. Anymore difficultly today, has not a lot to do with Halloween. Halloween today is

an excuse to dress up and party. Kids get to eat candy and have a party. Some cultures and some countries do not celebrate Halloween. There are other holidays where people dress up world wide, new years, Jewish culture etc. Kids dress up in costumes.”

Q: Do you think Halloween will continue to change and adapt accordingly to society?

A: “Yea, as most holidays do, it evolves; it is interesting that Halloween does not have a religion base in our culture.”

Q: Who started Halloween headquarters and Why?

A: “That would be me, Charles Matson. I started in about 1986 and it evolved from retail gift stores, whole-selling Halloween products.”

Q: Why do you think people want to celebrate Halloween?

A: “People find Halloween their favorite, it is kind of a holiday about ones self, not about fantasy, not like other holidays about other people. Halloween is more about a self indulging holiday. People enjoy the holiday for that reason; it doesn’t have any heavy social message, fun and exploring fantasy if you will.”

A: “It probably is more celebrated by children, but in terms of money it’s the adults.”

Q: Do you think vandalism is still an issue on Halloween?

A: “Tipping over the outhouses my father used to say. I do not think it’s an issue anymore. The Society that had to pay for it back than, is not part of our society anymore.”

Q: Do you think September 11th and the rumors about Halloween influenced the last few years of Halloween?

A: “I think that 911 changed a lot of psyches in people. People were fearful of what might happen, how in control and how out of control. I think people have realized that you cannot live in a cave and that life goes on.”

Q: Do you think movies like John Carpenters Halloween and Hollywood pertaining to fear contribute to celebrating or not celebrating Halloween?

A: “Hollywood has been able to tie into Halloween and has capitalized off the fact that people like to dress up and like to be scared. Not sure which is the cause but no, I’m not a fan of scary movies (he laughs).”

Q: How has Halloween changed since your childhood?

A: “It is more of a commercialized holiday today. I think parents used to (participate more); more women work today and have less time (as apposed to when I was young). I was part of the baby boom.

Q: I hardly get any Trick-or-Treaters; do you think Trick-or-Treating has declined over the past few years?

A: “It really depends on your neighborhood, I am in an area that if we have 3 or 4 that’s good. Go three blocks away, and the streets are packed.

“Though the past few decades have turned Halloween into a kid’s holiday, it is now soaring in popularity among adults as well” (The Haunted History of Halloween).

Halloween is a time for people to be wild, to show their wild side for one night.

Halloween allows for this wild side to come out one night a year, clearly society needs it or million and millions of people would not participate. Halloween has been called a

devils holiday, a night of mischief, or a time when the veils between worlds are thin and spirits walk among the living. Over the past twenty years, Halloween has survived many attacks and has spread all across the world adapting and changing as society has, sparking fear, fun and controversy. Perhaps Halloween will always be viewed as threat to some, but as for the rest, Halloween will be a night of mystery and playing with the things that scare people most.

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