

# HALLOWEEN



## Spooky traditions rooted in customs of Celts, Druids

By Kevin Myers

Halloween, although it is the eve of All Saints' Day, strikes most people not as a religious holiday, but as a night to slip into the darkness and celebrate, perhaps even masquerading as the devil.

Yet Halloween's roots are based on pagan religious tradition. Religious customs, meshed and eroded through hundreds of years, created what we now know as Halloween.

Jack-o'-lanterns, masquerading, fortune telling, bobbing for apples and even the bogeyman can be traced directly to various religious customs.

Although Halloween originated as the eve of All Saints Day, once called All Hallows, most modern customs are not related to that Christian feast day. It is the ancient pagan spiritual beliefs, filtered through hundreds of years, that have shaped modern Halloween.

Observances connected with Halloween are believed to have originated among the ancient Druids, who believed that on the evening of October 31, Saman, the lord of the dead, called forth hosts of evil spirits. The ancient Celts of the British Isles and northern France begged the

powers of evil to have mercy on their worshipped sun, fearing that the cold weather meant the sun was burning out. Each first day in November, Celts and Druids celebrated Samhain — the day on which the souls of people who had lived bad lives entered animals, and the souls of the good entered humans. Druid priests are believed to have performed cruel religious rites on this day, which was also the last day of the Druid year.

The "bogeyman" we speak of today originated in Wales. Storytellers in ancient Wales told of spirits called bogeys that walked the earth on Halloween night. "On the eve of November," said the storytellers, "there is a bogey in every stile."

Seances, today, are a popular Halloween custom. But contrary to the ancient pagan origins of the custom, today's seances attempt to make contact with spirits. The ancient pagans attempted to scare off the spirits of the dead, which they

believed revisited their earthly homes each Halloween night. Hilltop fires in Wales lit up the skies to scare off those evil spirits. In Scotland,

cautious farmers carried torches to discourage witches from destroying their crops. To protect themselves, the children of Scotland carried jack-o'-lanterns called "bogeys," which were carved from turnips.

Jack-o'-lanterns originated with an Irish legend about a man named Jack. According to the legend, Jack played a trick on the devil, and was therefore allowed to enter neither heaven nor hell. He was forced to walk the earth, carrying a lantern until the day of judgment.

Although hollowed-out pumpkins have replaced turnips as modern Halloween lanterns, the jack-o'-lanterns now placed on front porches and in windows each Halloween night are derived from the Irish legend. Similarly, in England, children once paraded the streets on the last Thursday of October, carrying candle lanterns called "punkies," made from mangets, a type of beet.

Among the pagan Scots and Irish, Halloween was believed to be the most propitious time for predicting the future. Cabbages and nuts were used in ancient customs to bring visions of future spouses. Objects baked into cakes were believed to predict the future for those who received them. If a thimble was found in a girl's portion of cake, she would supposedly become an old maid, but according to custom, if she received a ring, she would soon be married.

Masquerading also came from a Celtic custom. Adult "mummers" of ancient England and "guisers" of Scotland paraded through the streets wearing peculiar costumes and chanting rhymes. Today, guisers still stalk the streets of Scotland on Halloween night,

but these guisers are children carrying jack-o'-lanterns made from turnips, asking at each doorway: "Anything for the guiser?" And in the United States, homeowners open their doors to chants of "Trick-or-treat!"

When the Romans invaded Britain, their influence crept into Celtic customs. On the same day as the Celtic celebration of Samhain, the Roman invaders observed a holiday of their own, called Feralia. This Roman holiday was a day for praying for the dead, especially for those heroes of Rome who died for their country. The day later became known as Halligan.

From the Roman harvest festival, the tradition of bobbing for apples was added to the Halloween customs. Bobbing originated as a festive way of worshipping Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruits and trees.

And with the spread of Christianity in northern Europe, Halligan became known as All Hallows. The eve of All Hallows became known as Halloween.

It has been a custom of Christianity to observe Christian holidays on the same day as other local religious holidays, according to Bishop Dennis W. Hickey. This merging of traditions was done, he says, as a method of converting members of other religions to Christianity.

All Hallows is now called All Saints' Day. It was instituted by Pope Boniface IV, in honor of all holy people who have not been assigned days on the church calendar.

On this day, Christians celebrate the "Communion of Saints." We remember all who lived good Christian lives and recall that we too are all called to become saints. Similar to the ancient Roman celebration of Feralia, we honor heroes who have died. Through God, the saints are believed to have a spiritual union with all of us living today.

