

Halloween

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I INTRODUCTION



1. Halloween Witch

The Halloween witch riding her broom past the moon is a continuation of ancient Druidic and Celtic beliefs that on the evening of October 31, evil spirits and the spirits of the dead were called out by the lord of the dead. Black cats were associated with witches. Today, dressing up in fancy dress and trick or treating has become one of the main observances of this celebration.

Halloween, holiday observed on the evening of October 31 in most areas of North America and in some areas of Western Europe. The holiday is symbolically associated with death and the supernatural. Halloween falls on the eve of All Saints' Day, also known as Allhallows or Hallowmas, a holy day in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. Originally a pagan festival of the dead, All Saints' Day was established by the Catholic Church in the 9th century to honor Christian saints. All Souls' Day, a holy day established by the Catholic Church in the 10th century, is also closely linked to Halloween. All Souls' Day, on November 2, is observed to help purify the spirits of the dead.

Halloween is historically related to similar folk holidays celebrated in other countries. The Day of the Dead, a Mexican holiday that coincides with All

Souls' Day, blends Roman Catholic and Native American traditions about the souls of the dead. On the Day of the Dead, Mexicans decorate their homes with playful imagery of animated human skeletons, leave offerings of food for wandering spirits, and tend the graves of their deceased relatives.

II CONTEMPORARY CUSTOMS



2. Trick-or-Treating

On Halloween many children dress in costumes and go from house to house to ask for candy by saying "Trick or Treat!" The saying implies that the children will play a trick on their neighbors if they are not given a treat.

Most Halloween festivities are based on folk beliefs concerning supernatural forces and spirits of the dead. Halloween decorations typically feature imagery associated with supernatural beings such as witches, werewolves, vampires, and ghosts. Images thought to symbolize bad omens—such as black cats, bats, and spiders—are also commonly featured in Halloween decorations.

The most celebrated Halloween decoration is the *jack-o'-lantern*, traditionally a hollowed-out pumpkin carved to resemble a grotesque face and illuminated by a candle placed inside. The jack-o'-lantern derives its name from a character in British folktales. According to these tales, the soul of a deceased person named Jack O'Lantern was barred from both heaven and hell and was condemned to wander the earth with his lantern. Orange and black, colors associated with pumpkins and darkness respectively, figure prominently in most Halloween decorations.



3. Jack-O'-Lanterns

The jack-o'-lantern is the most common symbol of Halloween. According to legend, jack-o'-lanterns set on

porches and windowsills cast a spell of protection over the household while spirits of the dead roam the Earth.

Dressing in costume is one of the most popular Halloween customs, especially among children. Traditional costumes usually represent witches, ghosts, and other supernatural beings. However, costumes inspired by contemporary popular culture, such as politicians or movie characters, have become increasingly common in recent years. Adults often favor costumes with satirical or humorous overtones.

Trick-or-treating is another Halloween tradition, in which costumed children go from house to house soliciting candy or other treats from their neighbors. According to this custom, children greet each homeowner with the cry “Trick or Treat,” suggesting that some sort of prank will be played unless treats are provided. Formerly, trick-or-treaters vandalized the house if no treats were produced or if the treats met with their disapproval. Since the early 20th century, however, the threat of tricks has been largely ceremonial. Beginning in the 1970s, the practice of trick-or-treating went into a sharp decline after unsubstantiated rumors spread about homeowners distributing poisoned Halloween candy to children. Many parents also became concerned about their children wandering through the neighborhood after dark. Today, many parents accompany children when they go trick-or-treating.

In some areas of the country, costume parties have replaced trick-or-treating as the favored form of Halloween entertainment. Hosts of these parties

often hold contests to select the best costume among the guests. Traditional Halloween diversions have also enjoyed renewed popularity as party activities. For example, many Halloween parties feature contests of *bobbing for apples*, a centuries-old game in which contestants try to retrieve apples floating in a tub of water using only their mouth. While children’s Halloween parties are generally held in private homes, many bars and nightclubs sponsor modified versions of such festivities for adults.

III ORIGINS

Many of the ancient peoples of Europe marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter by celebrating a holiday in late autumn. The most important of these holidays to influence later Halloween customs was *Samhain*, a holiday observed by the ancient Celts, a tribal people who inhabited most of Western and Central Europe in the first millennium BC. Among the Celts, *Samhain* marked the end of one year and the beginning of the next. It was one of four Celtic holidays linked to important transitions in the annual cycle of seasons.

Samhain began at sundown on October 31 and extended into the following day. According to the Celtic pagan religion, known as Druidism, the spirits of those who had died in the preceding year roamed the earth on *Samhain* evening. The Celts sought to ward off these spirits with offerings of food and drink. The Celts also built bonfires at sacred hilltop

sites and performed rituals, often involving human and animal sacrifices, to honor Druid deities.

By the end of the 1st century AD, the Roman Empire had conquered most of the Celtic lands (see Rome, History of). In the process of incorporating the Celts into their empire, the Romans adapted and absorbed some Celtic traditions as part of their own pagan and Catholic religious observances. In Britain, Romans blended local *Samhain* customs with their own pagan harvest festival honoring Pomona, goddess of fruit trees. Some scholars have suggested that the game of bobbing for apples derives from this Roman association of the holiday with fruit.

Pure Celtic influences lingered longer on the western fringes of Europe, especially in areas that were never brought firmly under Roman control, such as Ireland, Scotland, and the Brittany region of northwestern France. In these areas, *Samhain* was abandoned only when the local people converted to Christianity during the early Middle Ages, a period that lasted from the 5th to the 15th century. The Roman Catholic Church often incorporated modified versions of older religious traditions in order to win converts. For example, Pope Gregory IV sought to replace *Samhain* with All Saints’ Day in 835. All Souls’ Day, closer in spirit to *Samhain* and modern Halloween, was first instituted at a French monastery in 998 and quickly spread throughout Europe. Folk observances linked to these Christian holidays, including Halloween, thus preserved many of the ancient Celtic customs associated with *Samhain*.

Halloween traditions thought to be incompatible with Christianity often became linked with Christian folk beliefs about evil spirits. Although such superstitions varied a great deal from place to place, many of the supernatural beings now associated with Halloween became fixed in the popular imagination during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance (14th to 17th century). The jack-o'-lantern, originally carved from a large turnip rather than a pumpkin, originated in medieval Scotland. Various methods of predicting the future, especially concerning matters of romance and marriage, were also prominent features of Halloween throughout the British Isles.

Between the 15th and 17th centuries, Europe was seized by a hysterical fear of witches, leading to the persecution of thousands of innocent women. Witches were thought to ride flying brooms and to assume the form of black cats. These images of witches soon joined other European superstitions as symbols of Halloween.

IV IN THE UNITED STATES

Attitudes toward Halloween varied widely among the various European groups that settled in North America. New England was initially settled by English Puritans, members of a strict Protestant sect that rejected Halloween as a Catholic and pagan holiday (see Puritanism). However, other British colonists successfully transplanted Halloween traditions in southern colonies such as Virginia and Maryland. Irish immigrants helped popularize Halloween traditions

throughout the United States in the mid-19th century. As belief in many of the old superstitions waned during the late 19th century, Halloween was increasingly regarded as a children's holiday.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, young people often observed Halloween by perpetrating minor acts of vandalism, such as overturning sheds or breaking windows. Beginning in the 1930s, Halloween mischief gradually transformed into the modern ritual of trick-or-treating. Eventually, Halloween treats were plentiful while tricks became rare. Nonetheless, the tradition of Halloween pranks still survives. In some areas, October 30 (one day before Halloween) is called Mischief Night, and vandalism often reaches dangerous levels. In Detroit, Michigan, Mischief Night—known there as Devil's Night—provided the occasion for waves of arson that sometimes destroyed whole city blocks during the 1970s and 1980s.

Since the 1970s, Halloween celebrations have become increasingly popular among adults. The Halloween parade in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City features elaborate satirical costumes and drunken revelry. Especially popular among the local gay population, the Greenwich Village parade serves as a model for many other adult Halloween celebrations around the country. Similarly boisterous public Halloween festivities are celebrated in San Francisco, California; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Key West, Florida.
