

Ghosts of Halloweens Past

By

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One of my favorite holidays, over the years, has been Halloween. I guess there are any number of reasons for that. Christmas was the number one holiday when I was child, but as one grows older, the lure of presents somehow loses some of its luster. Christmas is more for memories, and the joys of the day I used to experience as a child shall perhaps never be matched again in the adult world. But Halloween, if you will, has been a holiday that has changed over the years in terms of the things I have done to celebrate it. It still retains that measure of excitement at what may happen this time around.

I had the fortune to be a child in the age of Halloween before fear gripped the American nation. It is ironic, considering the “scariness” of the holiday. But we lived in a day and age when we could go trick-or-treating *after dark!* And what's more, *without our parents!* Indeed, we lived dangerously.

But I get ahead of myself. Let's step back to the time a few weeks before Halloween. The weather had turned cold, and most of the trees leaves had already turned colors or were gone. Certainly, by Halloween the leaves would all have fallen. It would be time for our annual school field trip to the farm. And the highlight of this event, after seeing all the animals, would be when the students were all set loose in the pumpkin field to select our own pumpkins to carry home on the bus. A good amount of time would be spent searching for the biggest, shapeliest pumpkin we could find amidst a field of mud and vines.

Once this “dirty work” had been accomplished, and we gathered our prizes into the school bus for the journey back home. Maybe a week later, a few days before Halloween, the time would come to carve our pumpkins. We would put newspapers down on the basement floor and begin. First we cut a hole in the top of the pumpkin with a knife, then cleaned out all the guts and seeds with a spoon and put it all onto newspapers on the floor. We each (my brothers and sister) would carve our own design into the “face” of the pumpkin. Once finished, we would place a candle on the inside and take the pumpkin outside for display. Although traditionally one displays pumpkins (or Jack-o-lanterns) facing the street, at times we would put them in our back yard, allowing us to see our creations from the house at night as they glowed with the flickering light of candles in the cold breeze.

Halloween is a dark time of year. The trees are bare, and the sun has nearly set by 5:00 in the afternoon. There is not yet any snow on the ground to lighten up the atmosphere. So the face of the pumpkin stands out in the backyard, giving off its eerie glow, and just adding to the scariness of the holiday. And yet at the same time there was a comfort in that glow, as I would come home from my paper delivery route about that time, just before I'd enter the backdoor to the warm confines of our house.

And then the big day arrived. We kids would find some sort of costume, most likely

bought in a store, but sometimes made with some help from our mother. We would set out sometime in the mid-afternoon, and go trick-or-treating into the early evening. We would ring every doorbell of every house on our block, and also try to go to the other blocks in our neighborhood. In all likelihood we would hit about 50-80 houses. If most of them answered the doorbell, we would end up with quite a lot of candy!

The neighborhood would be swarming with kids out on their mission. It was a rather social thing – we would try to guess the identities of the other kids we met while trick-or-treating. Some houses would even be decorated rather elaborately, with phony spider-webs, ghosts, etc. I remember seeing a ghost hanging from high in one of the tall old elms near our house and wondering how the neighbors had gotten it up so high.

Once home, we would dig into our loot! Of course, we couldn't eat too much. A few candies would be allowed us before dinner, and after the holiday, one each after lunch and dinner. That way, the candy would last about a month.

We got chocolate bars, candy-corn, licorice, home-made popcorn balls, and even apples on occasion! As children, we didn't much care for the fruit, though. And that all ended with the urban legend about the "razor-in-the-apple" got around. Apparently some sicko put a razor in an apple and a child cut his tongue biting into it. There has never been any verification of this rumor, but it spelled the death of Halloween as I knew it.

Suddenly, the years of living dangerously were over. No more apples, or even unwrapped candy. Trick-or-treating became a daylight-only event, between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. on the Sunday of the closest weekend to the holiday. Children were closely watched by parents. And gradually the festiveness of the holiday disappeared. I remember by the time I was in college, it would be rare to even have many trick-or-treaters come to the house. Those were dark days for Halloween. A fear of the unknown, a desire to protect our children against anything and everything, had sapped the holiday of its vitality.

Sadly, I don't really know if the spirit of Halloween was ever recaptured for the children of this day and age. But the spirit did live on, only it was directed more towards adults.

I remember my senior year in high school I went to my first Halloween dance. Of course, everyone had to dress up. Using some props and some help from my mother, I went as Han Solo of *Star Wars* fame. It was a lot of fun, and the tradition dances and parties fortunately continued in college. One of the universities in my state, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was famous for its rowdy street party, with tens of thousands of costumed students from all over the area drinking in the streets of the city.

The adult parties and dances were interesting, I suppose, in the way that *Carnival* is interesting in other countries. It is a chance to go out and change your identity a bit, be someone who you are not, cut loose and all of that. And it was a darned good excuse to have a party, especially at a time of year when the weather was getting darker and more dismal.

Halloween has traveled well, and it has become a bit of a tradition in Japan as well, especially (but not exclusively) among the foreign community. I've been to some really great

Halloween parties here, and still look forward to them every year.

But I miss the Halloweens of my childhood, the feeling of the cold and darkness surrounding you, penetrated only by the candlelight from the jack-o-lantern on the tree stump at the back of the yard. Halloween may have been scarier then, but it was set against the comfort of family and friends and a world that didn't seem so terrifying. The world seems a much scarier place these days. It is perhaps the nostalgia for those days that is the ghost of Halloweens past which still haunts my memory.