America

“I know the rod to be good: I’ve try’d it’s virtue--‘Twas cut on All Hallows’ Eve, at twelve o’clock at night, with my back to the moon…”-- a line from America’s first opera, “The Disappointment,” written in 1767 by Andrew Barton (pseud.)

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries Scottish and Irish immigrants entered the United States by the thousands and brought their Halloween folklore with them. Other groups added their own cultural influences. The Germans, for example, brought an especially vivid witchcraft lore; Haitian and African blacks brought their own superstitions about black cats, fire and witchcraft; and the English and Dutch brought a flair for masquerade. Late at night in the kitchens of the American South, Irish girls new to American likely whispered with slaves brought from Africa and the Islands: would a black cat’s bone make you invisible? Could you hear the bone scream as you passed it through your lips? Was it true that on All Hallows Eve, if you placed an egg front of the fire and it sweated blood, you’d attract the man you loved?  In the mountains of Virginia, people said that on Halloween you could hear the future whispered in the wind; and in Louisiana, some said that if you made a “dumb supper”--a meal cooked backwards and in total silence-and waited until midnight, a ghost would slip in and sit at the table.

Halloween celebrations first depended entirely on the religious and folk fabric of each region. The Caledonian Society in Canada, founded in the mid-19th century, kept the Scottishness of Halloween up front, and people gathered to read Scots poet Robert Burns’ poem “Halloween” (1786) each October. Children in Scottish-influenced Kingston, Ontario went out "guising" in their neighborhoods [the first North American media mention of a trick-or-treat-like custom comes from here, in 1911), and Ruth Edna Kelly reports in her Book of Hallowe'en (1919) that it was the custom in her area--very Irish Lynn, MA--to go souling, among other festivities. In the Ozarks, Halloween could mean a barn dance; in New York City, parades and firecrackers; in Philadelphia's history, tavern-hosted costume parties.

If there was a commonality, it was this: Halloween--being the night the spirits were out--was a time for anarchy. To those who rail at seeing toilet paper in the trees, consider these Halloween pranks: Kids in 1879 collected teakettles, boots, and stones, and piled them in a neighbor’s vestibule, knocked on the door and bolted. They coated chapel seats with molasses (1887), exploded pipe bombs (1888), built huge pyramids of stones on streetcar tracks, and smeared the walls of new houses with black paint (1891). The employees of a butcher shop in Albany, NY stole corpses from a nearby medical school and hung them in front of a rival’s shop on Halloween in 1894. Two hundred kids with bags full of flour attacked all the well-dressed folks on streetcars in Washington DC in 1894. They strung ropes across sidewalks and tripped people ambling along, tied the doorknobs of opposing houses together, broke trees, mowed down shrubs, upset swill barrels, poured crude oil on sidewalks, shattered windows, attempted to jack up churches, greased trolley rails, removed telephone poles, and once filled the streets of Catalina Island with boats. Although it might seem so, not all Halloween celebrations were rowdy.

A Victorian Holiday

By the end of the 19th century, the world had turned on its head. Darwin had published The Origin of the Species (1859), and archeology, spurred by excavations in Egypt and Greece, excited the public imagination. Victorians began to see history as a series of progressive layers, and set about finding old stories, ballads and poems as if they were fossils that could tell what life was really like in the past. Surrounded by factories and machinery, the world’s first industrial societies came to hunger for the country, for a simpler time they saw as more connected to nature, and a deeper truth. They sought comfort in ancient traditions, in things that did not change. Halloween, as imagined by Victorians—rural, colorful, otherworldly, and demanding a certain amount of innocence—was entrancing. It wasn't long before hostesses began holding Halloween-themed parties in their homes. They decorated with cornstalks and pumpkins, played the games they found in Robert Burns' poem "Halloween," and fed their guests apples, cider, nuts, doughnuts--seasonal foods we still use today.

In the late 19th-century—an age of reading dominated by the periodical press—how Halloween was described in literature became as important as how it was actually practiced. Where some people certainly marked the holiday as they had in their home countries, and many took advantage of this night as a time for mischief, a much larger number of people read Halloween stories and poems, and studied illustrations printed in magazines and newspapers. Halloween fell into the public domain as a night for romance and fortunetelling.

Halloween games had been geared towards finding out who would marry who since at least the 1700s, perhaps before. Magazine fiction published after the Civil War used the day’s fortunetelling customs to stir characters together. Halloween was the backdrop for passion unleashed in the dark, for a titillating brush of hands, cheeks, lips. Heroines, anxious to try the “ancient” divinations of the night, ate apples at midnight in front of a mirror, desperately searching for the face of a future husband.

A 20th-Century Holiday

The gilded age of American Halloween crested in the early decades of the 20th century. Vanderbilts and Rockefellers closed their summer homes and headed back to the city, and Halloween parties were the signal society events of the winter season. Debutantes danced waltzes at Halloween balls at the Plaza Hotel in New York City to a backdrop of jack-o-lanterns and yellow chrysanthemums. J.D. Rockefeller ducked for apples at a Tarrytown, New York, Halloween party, and the New York Times advertised Halloween-themed getaways at ritzy resorts. As the century wore on, lavish balls gave way to parades and parties sponsored by civic groups, and populist, more democratic Halloween celebrations took over whole towns. There were wild, all-night carnivals on the piers of Venice Beach, CA, and ragamuffin parades made up of thousands of costumed marchers traipsing through the Bronx, NY each Halloween.

An entire industry was set in motion: the first candy containers were made in Germany between 1919 and 1935 and imported to America by the likes of Woolworth's and Kresge. Dennison Manufacturing Company launched its very successful paper costume and decoration business along with its “Halloween Bogie Books (beginning in 1909), which were full of holiday party ideas. Popular stores such as Schrafft’s advertised orange and black “shadow cakes” for parties every year the week before Halloween. Oral tradition fell away; the market for Halloween grew; more and more products became available--and affordable--and the celebration crystallized. And although October 31st was still not an official, national holiday in America like Thanksgiving, or a religious one like Easter, no one raised an eyebrow when it turned up on mass-market calendars.

The Halloween “Problem”

As cities grew, as the American urban population increased, Halloween hell raising became a financial liability. Some cites, Los Angeles for one, had to hire several hundred extra police on Halloween night to keep an eye out for vandals during the 1920s. In Chicago of the same period, civic leaders gave out 100,000 free movie tickets in hopes of keeping children busy on Halloween. What was once excused as the exuberance of young boys was beginning to look—to the modern eye—like vandalism. Kids pulled fire alarms, threw bricks through shop windows and smeared painted obscenities on their principal’s home. Adults fired buckshot at kids who were only eleven or twelve years old. Deaths from Halloween mishaps, although not new, were reported with more seriousness, and organizations such as the Boy Scouts, police, Kiwanis, school, churches, or city councils set out to change the public face of Halloween. They provided refreshments and cooked up entertainment, hoping that the lure of free treats might keep kids from mischief on Halloween night.

Then came the war.

World War II shortages made everyone edgy, and towns clamped down on Halloween pranking with both curfews and notices sent home from principals and police. There was a national plea for conservation: any piece of property damaged during Halloween pranking was a direct affront to the war effort. In 1942 the Chicago City Council voted to abolish Halloween and institute instead "Conservation Day" on October 31st. (This wasn't the only attempt to reshape Halloween: President Truman tried to declare it "Youth Honor Day" in 1950 but the House of Representatives, sidetracked by the Korean War, neglected to act on the motion. In 1941 the last week of October was declared "National Donut Week," and then years later, "National Popcorn Week." As late as 1962, New York City's Mayor Wagner wanted to change Halloween to UNICEF Day.) Editorial pages coast to coast filled with warnings to young people and their parents, such as this one from the Superintendent of Schools in Rochester, NY in 1942: “Letting the air out of tires isn’t fun anymore. It’s sabotage. Soaping windows isn’t fun this year. Your government needs soaps and greases for the war…Even ringing doorbells has lost is appeal because it may mean disturbing the sleep of a tied war worker who needs his rest.” As early as the 1920s, and growing more vociferous by the 1940s, there were continual, organized attempts to calm Halloween celebrations; to move them indoors and away from destructive tricks; to give them over to younger and younger children. Interestingly, the more Halloween became especially for children, the more it was controlled by adults.

By the time the war was over and the country turned its attention towards festivity, there was a renewed effort to divert Halloween pranksters. A non-profit body called the National Halloween Committee set out to persuadeparents to throw at-home parties for their kids, with a goal of sparking 11 million indoor Halloween parties in 1948. (There is no follow-up for how many actually took place). Since kids would soap their windows anyway, shopkeepers got together and started running window painting contests, which became very popular in cities across the states. Tricking was increasingly discouraged in the press, although it clearly still existed. (A town meeting set on Halloween in Greenwich, CT was postponed in 1955 because members needed to be home to prevent vandalism.) Beginning as early as 1947 there were efforts to encourage children to go door to door in costume for charitable purposes (there was one movement to get costumed children to hand out leaflets advertising a drive to find homes for vets [1947]; also, the American Friends Service Committee asked children to collect supplies for those in need, rather than candy, calling it the "Friendly Beggar Project" [1956]). Between the 1930s and the 1950s, Halloween could be celebrated in a number of ways all at the same time: children were still tricking; some wore costumes **(**[**website**](http://www.purecostumes.com)**)** and begged for money or sweets; and millions went to parties.

Trick-or-treat!

Although people sent Halloween postcards much as we send holiday cards today, and although they feature thousands of images of children celebrating Halloween, postcard collectors say that there are no representations of children "trick-or-treating" on Halloween before the 1930s. Although Halloween begging existed in small pockets of North America before then, the custom didn't become ubiquitous until the 1950s. It took a bit of convincing to get the American public on board with the idea of kids begging house to house.

Early reactions to the idea varied. Some homeowners were downright hostile: a woman in Miami (1950) gave red-hot coins to a gang of kids who demanded money. Police in Greensboro, NC rode around on Halloween night with 5,000 packages of cookies to give to gangs of kids in hopes they wouldn’t bang on homeowner’s doors. There were angry pieces in newspapers claiming it was extortion, and even some of the kids themselves protested. The 1948 Madison Sq. Boys’ Club parade famously featured signs saying, “American boys don’t beg.”

A short ten years later, in 1958, Halloween trick-or-treating was no longer considered begging, but instead a fun custom that all children should be able to enjoy. What happened?

The shift from private Halloween party to neighborhood trick-or-treating happened over the course of a few decades with the help of American media, merchandising, and a brilliant charitable campaign by UNICEF. It wasn't just the town, school, or scout club that was encouraged to entertain children on Halloween, but now the homeowner as well. The company Mars, Inc. mounted an ad campaign as early as 1953 on television, radio, newspapers, and in comic books to remind adults to be ready for children looking for Halloween "tricks or treats." High-profile magazine articles appeared describing the new custom. Radio programs aimed at children (The Baby Snooks Show [1946]) and shows aimed at families (Jack Benny, Ozzie and Harriet) put trick-or-treating in front of a national audience (One Ozzie and Harriet Halloween plot centers around the adults not knowing what to do with the costumed children who arrive on their doorstep). So did the 1952 Donald Duck cartoon Trick or Treat, which played in movie theaters and then on television, reaching millions.

[Google's Ngram tool is especially fun to look at when it comes to the increasing popularity of trick-or-treat. Ngram measures the appearance of a specific work in thousands of publications. When you type "trick or treat," the graph practically flat lines until the later 1940s, then shoots straight up at a 750% increase.]

It was UNICEF’s brilliant “Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF” campaign (inaugurated in the early 50s and widespread by the 1960s) that also helped make door-to-door Halloween begging uniformly practiced and acceptable. The idea of trick-or-treating for UNICEF (originally known as The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund) came when a group of kids from the Philadelphia area sent a small donation of cash to UNICEF - money they’d collected at Halloween. The idea spread like wildfire: in 1954 500,000 kids raised $200,00. By 1956 Eleanor Roosevelt was the inaugural donor and the campaign raised $792,000. In 1961, John F. Kennedy kicked it off, and by 1965, the year UNICEF won the Nobel Peace Prize, 3.5 million children had raised $5.5 million. Trick or treat for UNICEF paved the way for trick-or-treating in general: it was considered uncharitable, almost un-American, not to open your door to kids collecting for UNICEF on Halloween night.

The food companies took notice of the growing popularity of trick-or-treating. Once the giants got into the candy business (Beatrice Foods, Borden, National Biscuit Company and eventually, even the tobaccos, like Philip Morris), Halloween profits became substantial, for example, $300 million in 1965. The baby boom was in swing and suburbs sprouted up to house burgeoning families. Trick-or-treating—child-oriented and perfect for suburbia--became synonymous with Halloween, and  porch lights blazed coast to  coast.

There is contention about whether it was adults or children who were responsible for trick-or-treating. It may well be a bit of both. Children accosted grownups on the street begging for money, and a few braver children demanded treats or money directly from homeowners under the threat of retribution. But it didn't end there. The adult worlds of commerce and media took the threat (trick-or-treat literally meant that -- give us something or we'll come back later), smoothed the edges, and created and marketed the fun, un-threatening trick-or-treating we know today.

Who Put the Hell in Halloween?

Rumors festered as early as the 1960s: people were lacing Halloween candy with drugs, or October 31 was the high holy day of an ancient Satanic cult. Within a few years newspapers warned about psychotic strangers burying razor blades in apples, kidnapping kids, and strangling black cats. John Carpenter’s movie Halloween hit the screen in 1978, leading off a re-imagining of Halloween that tied the holiday to violent death and unimaginable evil. The enormous box office success of Halloween begat a whole genre of slasher films, many with references to Halloween, the dead returning, Satan, even Samhain. To compound matters, practitioners of modern day witchcraft--an earth-based spiritual practice--were becoming more vocal about their own celebration of October 31st and fundamentalist churches even more so in opposition to it. The American public was confused: Was Halloween really dangerous?

Halloween poisonings and reports of razor blades incidents were largely proven to be hoaxes, and Hollywood was more responsible than anything for putting the hell in Halloween. Yet the celebration of Halloween changed anyway. Trick-or-treating became more concentrated in “safe” places –malls, town centers, familiar neighborhoods. Parents began to accompany their kids, fearful for their children’s safety. Look at any newspaper on the week before Halloween over the last 40 years and you’ll likely find a list of Halloween dangers to be wary of: fire, traffic, visibility, and strangers.

A Holiday for Everyone

But just when it was looking like Halloween would fall out of favor for all but the very young in their parents’ company, celebrations by adults, often spearheaded by the gay community, came to define Halloween in certain cities in the U.S. In San Francisco’s Castro district, Provincetown, and Los Angeles, impromptu costumed Halloween gatherings of the late 60s and early 70s grew larger and larger. More and more, adults were searching for Halloween entertainment giving rise to the huge celebrations we see today in towns like Salem, Massachusetts, New York City’s Greenwich Village, or Anoka, Minnesota (the self-proclaimed Halloween Capital of the World). By the 1990s, the haunted entertainment industry had exploded.

October had historically been a dead month for retail, a gap between Back-to-School and Christmas. When a few retailers started making money selling Halloween items, others took note. Sears, one of the first to host a Halloween store inside its walls, created a number of "The Halloween Shop at Sears" during the 1980s. Big chains like Wal-Mart and Macy's followed, stocking Halloween merchandise once they'd packed away Back-to-School. Temporary pop-up stores launched in the 1990s (Halloween Express in 1990, and Spirit Halloween in 1999), fed a growing interest in Halloween costumes and decorations.

By the turn of the 21st century, Halloween had ballooned to the second largest decorating retail holiday, right after Christmas. That’s billions of dollars worth of plastic axes, cornstalks, and black lights; pumpkin puree, liquid latex, rubber rats, fog machines, sugar skulls, foam tombstones and spooky sounds CDs. Not to mention a surge in vintage collectibles, theme park rides, haunted house admissions, pumpkin festivals, and cemetery tours. Halloween had become such big business that American companies started to export its products and rituals: by the early 21st century it was possible to find all the makings for a Halloween party in Tokyo, Helsinki, or in the holiday’s native Scotland, where American pumpkins were for sale in place of native turnips.

Medieval Irish monks would be shocked to see people blithely impersonating the dead on All Hallow's Eve. An 18th-century Scots sheep farmer would have popped a button to watch Victorians bobbing for apples in dress coat and tails. So too, those Victorians would blanch to know that an airbrushed bikini passed muster as a Halloween costume in Key West.

Halloween hasn’t evolved these past 2000 years in a vacuum. It’s always been about who we are and what we as a culture believe is important right now—what we value. For the early church All Hallows was about redemption of the soul. In the Renaissance it was about redistributing the wealth. In the first decades of the American 20th century, Halloween was a big, community-wide celebration; it was about assimilating the thousands of immigrants into town life. By the 50s it was about all those post-war kids: trick-or-treating became synonymous with Halloween. On Halloween, 2001, six weeks after 9/11, the New York City Village Halloween parade was lead by a giant phoenix puppet: Halloween reflects who we are and what we value. It's not important because it's old. Halloween is important because it's still relevant.