



The Story of Halloween

- Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

The origin of Halloween is said to be the 2000 years old Celtic tradition of "Samhain" in Ireland and Northern France. The first day of November was celebrated as the beginning of a new year – the day that summer ended and signaled the end of harvest time and beginning of winter. The night before November 1 was the time when the gates between the living and the dead were believed to be opened, so dead souls could come among the living and roam around. On this night, the Celts used to build a huge all-night bonfire, wear costumes of animal heads and skins, and druids (the priests) tried to predict their fortunes for the New Year. The druids believed that the dead souls could cause harm to people and harvest. So they used to offer food to the dead to please them. This is the origin of the custom of "trick or treat" we see today.

Later, in the seventh century, November 1 was designated by Pope Boniface IV as the All Saints' Day or All-hallows or All-hallowmas Day when people remembered and honored the saints and martyrs, and the night of October 31 as the All-hallows Eve, to honor the dead. Thus, a "pagan" festival merged with Christian celebrations.



Today, Halloween is celebrated all over North America, primarily by children who dress up as real or comic book animals (such as Mickey mouse or Tigger), ghosts, goblins,

vampires, pirates, princesses, fairies or even super heroes – like the widely admired Superman or the Spiderman.



Sometimes adults too have Halloween parties, where participants come dressed in costumes. As to the choice of costumes, the sky is the limit. The tradition is said to have arrived here with the Scottish and Irish immigrants. The children often carry a pumpkin-like bag or any ordinary bag to collect their candies, chocolate bars, apples or other treats. For the most part, it is a fun evening – the only time one is able to meet all the neighborhood children and in case of very young children, their accompanying parents as well.



The celebration of Halloween has acquired quite a bit of commercial flourish now. Stores not only sell costumes and a wide variety of candies, but display suitable figures like "Headless Harry" for Halloween home decorations and their sales people wear costumes and distribute candies to the customers.

The fronts of houses are sometimes decorated with paper/plastic skeletons, spider webs, bats, tomb-stones, witches on brooms, even other "mundane" characters such as a Hockey player, and Jack O' Lanterns to give them a ghostly appearance. Some homeowners or their children even enhance the spooky atmosphere by playing "ghostly" music. In many places, "haunted house" tours are offered to the not-so faint-of-heart

thrill-seekers and adventurers. Actors and actresses dress in scary costumes and produce appropriately scary sounds, laughs and blood-curdling screams in dark, shadowy rooms and fields, sometimes asking the unsuspecting customers to touch an "eye" – made of a broken egg.



Jack O' Lanterns are made by carving ripe pumpkins into smiling or scary faces and placing lighted candles in them. The legend says that Jack was an Irish villain. His haunted soul is always looking for a resting place because he could not go to the heaven and even the devil did not want him. Contemporary Jack O' Lanterns are even made to resemble famous people. This year, an innovative and talented artist has carved two Jack O' Lanterns that were shown on the television, in the likeness of the two American Presidential nominees – Obama and McCain.

Editor's note: All photos were taken by the author.