



An Ancient Celebration

Halloween — celebrated on October 31 — is one of the most ancient holidays still observed in the Western world.

Once it was the most important day of the year for the Celtic peoples, whose descendants include the Irish, Welsh, Scots and Bretons. Samhain, as it was known then, was believed to be a time when the souls of the dead were set free for one night to roam the earth. Bonfires were lit to help guide these souls back to the land of the dead and to frighten them away from the living. Offerings of food were made to appease potentially threatening spirits.

Throughout history, many agrarian cultures celebrated the harvest with festivals. The Romans, for example, honored Pomona, the goddess of orchards and the harvest, on November 1. It coincided with the Celts' Samhain festivities, and where Romans and Celts inhabited the same villages in Europe, customs intermingled.

When Christianity spread across the Roman Empire and beyond, church

leaders often found ways to assimilate existing pagan holidays into new Christian ones. Thus, Samhain celebrations were incorporated into the feasts of All Saints' Day on November 1, which commemorates early Christian martyrs, and All Souls' Day on November 2, when all the dead are remembered with prayers.

The evening immediately preceding All Saints' Day was known originally as "All Hallows' Eve" ("hallowed" means "sanctified" or "holy"), and it is from this title that Halloween derives its name.

Various immigrant groups brought their Halloween traditions to the United States. But the holiday really took root with the mid-19th century arrival of millions of Irish escaping famine in their motherland. The Irish brought with them the Halloween customs handed down to them by their Celtic forebears, and soon Halloween celebrations spread across America, merging with similar observances practiced by Africans, Germans, English and Scots.



Today, Halloween — although not a public holiday — is hugely popular with the American public.

Halloween Customs

Carving pumpkins

Jack-o'-lanterns recall an Irish legend about a man who tried to outwit the Devil and was condemned to wander the earth for eternity using as a lantern a lighted ember in a carved turnip. Today Americans delight in carving pumpkins into fantastical faces, and there are even competitions showcasing this unusual art form.

Top: Children dressed as ghosts, goblins, super heroes and bunny rabbits at a Halloween event in Vail, Colorado.



Dressing in costumes

During Samhain, masked Celts representing the souls of the dead tried to trick the wandering spirits by forming a parade to lead them out of the villages of the living. Today, Americans enjoy dressing up as witches, ghosts, goblins, politicians and movie characters each Halloween.

Trick-or-treating

Today costumed children go from house to house calling “trick or treat” — mostly a good-natured bribe that threatens some sort of “trick” if the children are not given a candy “treat.” The custom descends from “souling,” when the earliest Christians offered little pastries and breads to the poor, who, in exchange,

would pray for the souls of departed family members.

Halloween serves good causes, too. In 1950 the “Trick or Treat with UNICEF” fundraising campaign began in the United States as a way for schoolchildren to help their peers who are in need. It has since spread around the world.

Top: Dogs dressed for Halloween. Row 2, left to right: Skeleton puppets liven up a New York City Halloween parade; A four-year-old girl collects candy with other trick-or-treaters in Daytona Beach, Florida; Through Kiwanis Club, a partnership between Kiwanis International and UNICEF, teenagers raise hundreds of thousands of dollars annually during Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF.