

# Halloween



I start this blog on Halloween. It is an interesting day of the year and I did some research to find its origins. Kind of fascinating.

Back in the days of the Celts running around Ireland, Britain and France (pre-Roman Empire), the Celts celebrated November 1 (or thereabouts) as their new year. Exactly when that was is hard to determine, considering their calendars consisted of large stone slabs stuck in the ground. Their new year could have been noted as when the sun reached one thumb length on the stone slab, three from the end. But I digress.

The new year was celebrated by the festival of Samhain, where bonfires were lit and people dressed up in animal costumes and heads to scare away evil spirits and ghosts. It was believed that on this night, the ghosts of the dead returned to earth and needed scaring back to wherever they came from before they caused havoc among the living. With the barrier between life and death down, they also believed that their druid priests could make the best predictions of the future. Sacrifices to Celtic deities rounded out the evening.

Nice festival. Then came the Romans.

First off, druids scared the ever-loving out of Romans, so they were all killed off. That put a damper on predicting the future. Next, they imposed their calendar, the Julian one, drawn up by Julius Caesar himself with the help of some pretty smart astronomers. It was pretty accurate and came with Roman holidays that took place around Samhain. One, Feralia, commemorated the passing of the dead. The other, Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees. So, as the Romans weren't too concerned about religious differences, it was easy to blend different holidays together if they had a similar tradition. And really, who wouldn't want to dance around a bonfire wearing a deer hide.

Then the Romans left. In comes the Catholic Church.

An All Martyrs Day was initiated by Boniface IV in May of 609. Gregory III changed it to All Saints Day and moved it to November. As martyrs and saints were generally dead, it was a day to honour the dead. I believe Gregory chose November to coincide with late harvest festivals like Samhain because of these festivals generally had dead people aspects to them. If nothing else, the Catholic Church knew better than to take away a pagan's religious holiday when they could just change the name. Of course, dressing up as saints wasn't nearly as fun as wearing a deer hide, but they did keep the bonfires.

In 1532, Gregory XIII came up with his new calendar and All Saints Day landed on November 1. The night before, when all the bonfires were lit, was known as All Hallows Eve. You can see where that's going.

Leave it to the Americans to commercialize Halloween. It was just a harvest festival, with ghost stories and the like (everything in nature kind of dies off in the autumn). Then came the potato famine and a bunch of Irish immigrants landed on American shores. With them came some of the ancient Celtic traditions of the evening, like dressing up. But deer hides were passé by then. Since they were telling ghost stories, scary costumes were more appropriate and they had to be bought. Not sure when going door to door and getting candy began, but by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the commercialization a holiday to honour the dead was complete.

Personally, I've never been a fan of Halloween. Some people love being scared. I'm not one of them. As a kid, I used to leave the room when the Wicked Witch of the West appeared in the 1939 movie Wizard of Oz. I still avoid horror movies. I don't find them entertaining, especially when it's a bunch of teenagers making really dumb calls so the killer has an easy time killing them.

But I digress again.

Tonight, we will have a bunch of kids come up to our door, semi-yell trick-or-treat, and my wife will say something about how cute they look and give them candy. My job? Keep our dog occupied. She barks mean at the doorbell.