



The Story Behind Halloween

By Gina Pierce

October is here already, time to decorate our neighborhood for Halloween! But what is Halloween and how did it get started? Halloween is an annual celebration, but just what is it a celebration of? Is it as some claim, a kind of devil worship? Or is it just a harmless vestige of some ancient pagan ritual? Or is it just a way to slow down our busy schedules and spend time with our families getting to know our neighbors?

The word itself, “Halloween” actually has its origin in the Catholic Church. It comes from a contracted corruption of All Hallows Eve. November 1, “All Hollows Day” (or “Saints Day”), is a Catholic day of observance in honor of saints. But in the 5th century BC, in Celtic Ireland, summer officially ended on October 31. The holiday was called Samhain (sow-en), the Celtic New Year.

One story says that the custom of Halloween was brought to America in the 1840’s by Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine. At that time, the favorite pranks in New England included tipping over outhouses and unhinging fence gates.

The custom of trick-or-treating is thought to have originated not with the Irish Celts but with a ninth-century European custom called souling. On November 2, All Souls Day, early Christians would walk from village to village begging for “soul cakes,” made out of square pieces of bread with currants. The more soul cakes the beggars would receive. The more prayers they would promise to say on behalf of the dead relatives of the donors. At the time, it was believed that the dead remained in limbo for a time after death, and that prayer, even by strangers, could expedite a soul’s passage to heaven.

So, although some cults may have adopted Halloween as their favorite “holiday”, the day itself did not grow out of evil practices. It grew out of the rituals of Celts celebrating a new year, and out of Medieval prayer rituals of Europeans. And today, even many churches have Halloween parties or pumpkin carving events for the kids. After all the day itself is only as evil as one cares to make it.

Personally, I believe it was started by kids that didn’t have any sweets at home. So they devised a plan for one day a year to allow them to dress up in various ways and run with their friends to each neighbor’s house seeking the ever elusive candy. And what a joy it is to watch the face of a child as they take in the sights and ooh and ah. What developed in the small towns up north has become a major hit here in our neighborhood. So have a safe and Happy Halloween this year.