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Tattered Tidbits: Alpine Historical Society

ALL HALLOWS EVE: THE HISTORY OF HALLOWEEN

Halloween is a time of celebration and superstition. Celebrated on October 31st, today Halloween is no more than a fun holiday for children, families and mischief makers. It's a day when we can all be someone else, tell scary stories and indulge in candy without worrying about diets. Many of us have no idea why we celebrate Halloween and how it evolved into the holiday we celebrate today. Halloween is a mixture of ancient Celtic rituals, Roman pagan and Roman Catholic practices and European folk traditions—all blended together over centuries.

It is believed that Halloween has its origins in the Celtic holiday Samhain almost 2,000 years ago in the region that now is Ireland, Northern France and the United Kingdom. The Celts believed that on the eve of their November 1st new year, the veil between the world of the living and the domain of the dead was lifted and spirits could return to walk freely among the living. The Celts believed these spirits were the source of damaged crops and other sorts of trouble. They also believed that, because of the spirits' presence, priests were able to make predictions about the future. To celebrate the day, the Druids (Celtic priests) would light bonfires, burn crops and sacrifice animals to their gods. The Celts would wear masks and dress up to ward off the evil spirits which may have returned.

In the four hundred years that followed the defeat of the Celts and the take-over by the Romans, two Roman festivals mixed with the Celtic traditions of Samhain. One of these festivals was Feralia. On this day, in late October, Romans commemorated the passing of the dead. The second festival was Pomona, the day in which the Romans celebrated the goddess of fruit and trees. The symbol of Pomona, a celebration of the harvest, is the apple.

By the seventh century, when Christianity had spread throughout the Roman Empire, November 1st was declared All Saints Day in honor of Christian saints. All Saints Day was also known as All Hallows. Samhain became known as All Hallows Eve and today it is Halloween.

By the year 1000, the church declared November 2nd All Souls Day, in commemoration of the dead. On this day the Romans lit bonfires, dressed up as angels, saints and demons and held festivals. The celebration of All Souls Day made up Halloween, which dominated Europe for centuries.

Halloween would again change and morph with new traditions when European settlers brought their traditions to the New World—America. Those traditions mixed with Native American traditions to create the uniquely and distinct version of Halloween Americans celebrate today.

The symbols of Halloween are known to all of us. One associates the colors orange, black, purple, green and red with the holiday. The black represented death and night, red the life blood, orange fire, light and autumn, green the end of summer and the harvest and purple represented night, mysticism and the supernatural. One can't help but think of Jack O' Lanterns when Halloween approaches. The carving of pumpkins came from the Irish tradition of carving scary faces into turnips and placing them in windows to ward off a ghostly presence. The immigrants to America changed this from turnips to the readily available pumpkins.

Black cats were considered spiritual and were often linked to witches, the ability to sense good and evil and often thought to be reincarnations of people. Witches, bats, owls, ghosts, skeletons and spiders all symbolize this frightening holiday.

For me, Halloween is a myriad of memories of children gathered by the sewing machine as we put together one fabulous costume after another. This tradition was carried forward as I moved from our children's costumes to our grandchildren's costumes. Who knows if someday I'll be lucky enough to gather great grandchildren around that same sewing machine. Then the memories move to the garage—converted to a haunted house of epic proportions. Neighbor kids and cousins joined in to make this a memorable occasion for all, but most fun was had by those involved in its preparation. I'm sure the pioneers in Alpine had a marvelous time each fall celebrating the harvest and preparing for the winter. This holiday has truly evolved.

In honor of Halloween, Jack Innis will be telling amusing ghost stories at the annual Italian Feast, the major fundraiser for the Alpine Historical Society which is held in October annually. All are invited to attend this event—October 21st at 5:00 p.m. at the Alpine Woman's Club. Call Carol Morrison at 619-445-2544 for more information and hope to see you there!

Carol Walker and her husband Paul lived in Alpine for 19 years. Carol is the webmaster and newsletter editor for the Alpine Historical Society. She can be reached at cwalker@alpinehistory.org or 619-467-7766.