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Halloween: History behind the ghosts

Ghosts, goblins, monsters and witches; jack-o'-lanterns, costume parties and trick-or-treating — how did these strange traditions come to play such an important role in contemporary American society?

In her book *All About American Holidays*, Maymie Kyrth traces current American Halloween traditions to their roots in the Druid festival Samhain, the Roman festival honoring Pomona, and the Christian holiday of All Saints Day.

Druid Samhain

According to Kyrth, Halloween traditions stem from the Celts of ancient France and the British Isles. These people held two important feasts every year, one on Oct. 31 and the other on May 1.

The supernatural played a large part in the autumn ceremony, as the Druids "tried to placate Lord Death." Bonfires were lit atop hills as people danced around them in costumes and grotesque masks.

This ritual mimicked what the druids believed to be happening elsewhere on this same day. Witches were said to be dancing to the devil's music on other hilltops as the spirits of those who had died in the last year spent a few earth hours carousing about before moving on to the next world.

Roman Feast of Pomona

Romans, who later occupied the Celtic homelands, added to the festival from their Feast of Pomona. The celebration honored Pomona, the goddess of fruits. Kyrth writes she believes this is where the American traditions involving produce such as pumpkins and apples originated.

All Saints Day

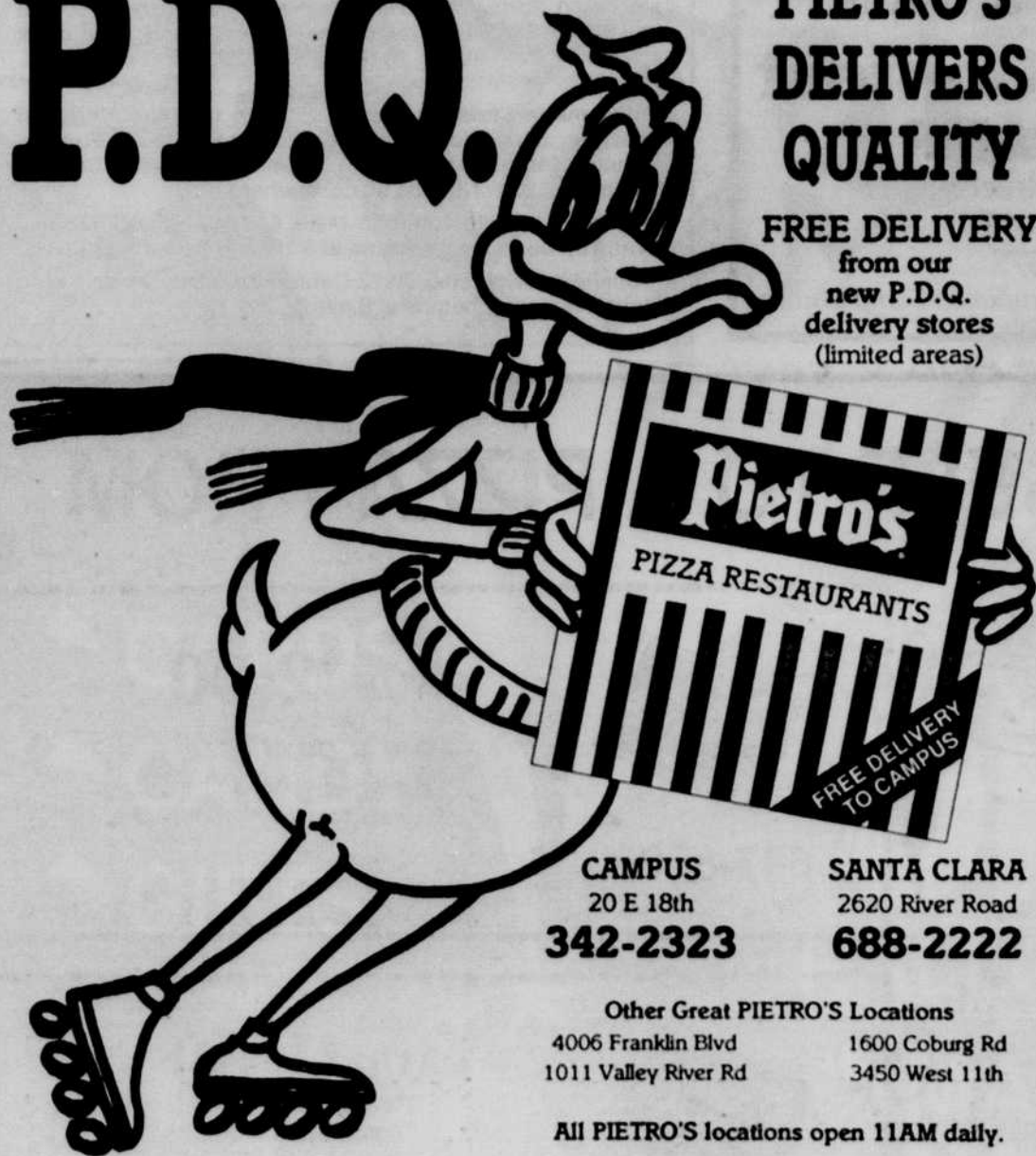
In the seventh century, All Saints Day began as a Christian holiday observed every Nov. 1. Oct. 31 is thus All Hallows' Eve (holy or hallowed evening).

According to Dorothy Spicers' *The Book of Festivals*, this day is honored in much of the world as a Christian religious festival, but the American traditions remain primarily of Druid origin.

Finally Gaelic immigrants brought the traditions of Oct. 31 to the New World. Kyrth states that trick-or-treating originated from the tradition of poor people going to the homes of well to do and asking for a "soul cake" on All Soul's Eve. Jack-o'-lanterns are said to be based on the story of a stingy Irishman named Jack who was condemned to wander the earth for eternity carrying a lantern.

— Andy Dunn

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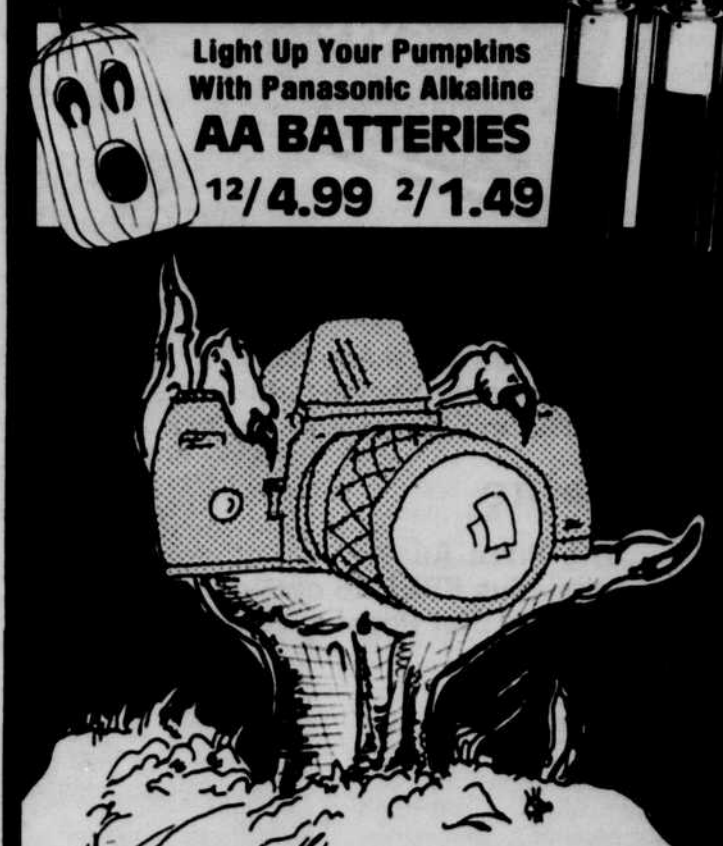


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