

The history and heritage of 'All Hallows Eve'

■ Halloween is an ancient holiday that has been celebrated different ways in different cultures

By Rosemary Ellen Guiley
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Originally a pagan festival of the dead, Halloween has survived to the present in popular culture as a night of trick-or-treating by children and others dressed in costumes of fantasy and the supernatural. All Hallows Eve is observed the night of October 31, followed on November 1 by All Hallows Day, also called All Hallowmas, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.

The ancient Celts called the festival Samhain and observed it to celebrate the onset of winter and the beginning of the Celtic New Year; "Samhain" means "end of summer." In Ireland the festival was known as Samhein, or La Samon, the Feast of the Sun. In Scotland, the celebration was known as Hallowe'en. Samhain was a solar festival marked by sacred fire and fire rituals. During the height of the Druids, the priestly caste of the Celts, all fires except those of

the Druids were extinguished on Samhain. Householders levied a fee for the holy fire which burned at their altars.

In ancient Ireland, the Druids sacrificed to the deities by burning victims in wickerwork cages. All other fires were to be extinguished and were relit from the sacrificial fire. Samhain marked the third and final harvest, and the storage of provisions for the winter. The veil between the worlds of the living and the dead was believed to be at its thinnest point in the year, making communication between the living and the dead much easier. On



the eve of the holiday, the souls of the dead freely roamed the land of the living.

The Romans observed the holiday of Feralia, intended to give rest and peace to the departed. Participants made sacrifices in honor of the dead, offered up prayers for them, and made oblations to them. The festival was celebrated on February 21, the end of the Roman year. In the 7th century, Pope Boniface IV introduced All Saints' Day to replace the pagan festival of the dead. It was observed on May 13. Later, Gregory III changed the date to November 1. The Greek Orthodox Church observes it on the first Sunday after Pentecost. Numerous folk customs con-

nected with the pagan observances for the dead have survived to the present. In addition to the souls of the dead roaming about, the Devil, witches and numerous spirits are believed to be out and at the peak of their supernatural powers. In Ireland and Scotland, the custom of extinguishing one's home fire and relighting it from the festival bonfire has continued into modern times.

Samhain, as it is still called in some parts, is a time for getting rid of weakness, as pagans once slaughtered weak animals which were unlikely to survive the winter. A common ritual calls for writing down weaknesses on a piece of paper or parchment and tossing it into the fire. Cakes are baked as offerings for the souls of the dead.

In some parts of modern Scotland, young people still celebrate by building bonfires on hilltops and high ground and then dance around the flames. The fire is known as Hallowe'en bleeze, and custom once included digging a circular trench around the fire to symbolize the sun.

The custom of trick or treating probably has several origins. An old Irish peasant practice called for going door to door to collect money, breadcake, cheese, eggs, butter, nuts or apples in preparation for the festival of St. Columba Kill. Another was the begging for soul cakes, or offerings for one's self - particularly in exchange for promises of prosperity or protection against bad luck.

Blair Witch up to old tricks

BURKITTSVILLE, Md. — The Blair Witch is haunting Burkittsville again.

The tiny western Maryland town is bracing for a second onslaught of "Blair Witch" fanatics with today's release of a sequel to last year's surprising box-office hit.

The town's road signs — stolen last year — have been replaced. The number of witch-seekers stalking through the cemetery has slowed to a trickle.

And you won't see any stick figurines, the trademark of the Blair Witch craze, among the cardboard Halloween ghosts and fake cobwebs hanging on houses here.

Still, Burkittsville's 200 residents expect more than just local trick-or-treaters after the opening of the new movie, "Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2."

"There's concern that the second one will bring in a larger number of people than last time," said Phil Stanley, 63, who moved to the town two years ago because of its obscurity.

Frederick County police, who do not patrol Burkittsville heavily, will post several officers in town from Friday through Halloween night.

Burkittsville's tranquility was shattered in the summer of 1999 when the low-budget "The Blair Witch Project" became a sensation. The mock documentary purported to show three film students who disappear in the hills outside town while searching for a mythical witch.

The Associated Press



Thirsty?