

The Legend Behind the Jack-o'-Lantern



By MARYA SAUNDERS
and ROBERT GAINES

WE ALWAYS take time out around Halloween to carve pumpkin jack-o'-lanterns for our homes. Our neighbors scoff at us. They say it's hard and messy work. We agree—and go right on carving.

What our neighbors don't know about jack-o'-lanterns is that they are functional as well as decorative. Any Irishman familiar with his ancestral legends can tell you why—whether you want to know the story or not.

The tale begins long, long ago (as all Irish tales begin) with a nasty farmer named Jack, known throughout the country for his drunkenness and meanness.

One Halloween—that night of the year when lost souls and other strange creatures are seen wandering in the bogs—Jack was slouched at his table in a tavern sipping potheen and chewing on a turnip from his field. He had almost reached the bottom of the jug when suddenly he had a fluttery feeling in his heart. He felt his soul start to slip away from his body.

"Now, me lad, it's time to go," a voice said, and Jack saw a man with a sour smile sitting at the table beside him.

"Who are ye? And what do ye want?" snarled Jack.

"There's some that call me Old Nick, and others call me Satan, and there's those that call me the Devil himself, but what's a name?"

I've come for your soul, Jack, boyo, and let's be on our way."

Jack thought about this, for he was a crafty man. Then, swallowing a bite of his turnip, he said, "Sure, and let's have a

drink before we go. If it's a long trip, we'll be destroyed by the cold and damp."

Said the Devil, "That's a grand idea. But I carry no money with me."

"Well, sir," Jack said slyly, "you can do most anything. Why don't you change yourself into a sixpence? As soon as I've paid for the two whiskies, you can turn yourself back."

The Devil laughed and slapped Jack on the back. "Tis a bright lad ye are, Jack, and glad I am to know you." There was a hiss of smoke, and a coin clinked onto the table. Jack snatched it up and slipped it into his purse, which had a catch in the shape of a cross; Jack knew demons could not pass over a cross.

"Let me out," the Devil shouted. "Tis a bitter hard thing you're doing. Oh, wirra, wirra, have you no pity?" But Jack only laughed.

The Devil whined and cursed. Finally Jack grew tired of the commotion and said, "Shut your noise and I'll tell ye what I'll do. I'll let you go if you promise never to come after me again."

"Impossible," shrieked the Devil.

"Them's me terms," said Jack in a hard voice. The Devil, realizing he was dealing with a shrewd man, decided to take the best he could get. "You've done me this time," the evil one said, "but don't be thinking this ends it." And he disappeared into the floor of the tavern like a draft of air.

These final words frightened Jack, and he had it in mind to lead a good life, go to church on Sunday, and no longer beat his wife. But being good was too hard, and he soon fell back into his wild ways.

After a time, Jack's body wore out and he died, but no one claimed his soul. He packed a large handkerchief full of turnips from his field and marched up the skies to heaven. But the man at the gate turned him away because of his dissolute life.

Jack then went to the gates of hell and shouted, "Oh, I'm sore weary with all this walking. Won't you let me in for a rest?"

The Devil peeked out. "Oh, it's you, is it?" he said. "You can't enter here. We've made an agreement."

"But where will I go?" asked Jack piteously.

"Back where you came from."
"How can I find my way in this fearsome dark?"

The Devil didn't answer. Instead, he threw a live coal from hell's furnace at Jack. Jack ducked and sat grieving until he noticed the coal was giving considerable light. He popped the coal into a large turnip, cut holes for light, and with this "jack-o'-lantern" he has been wandering the dark byways of the earth ever since, a lost and forlorn soul with no place to go.

Over the centuries, the Irish adapted this tale in their observance of All Saints' Eve. They carved jack-o'-lanterns from rutabagas, potatoes, or turnips and sat around a village bonfire built to frighten away evil spirits roaming the glens. But how would they get home safely when the bonfire died? The Irish had a solution: they put the last bright embers in their jack-o'-lanterns and dashed through the eerie blackness to their homes, shouting: "The cropped black sow seize the hindmost!"

So, dear neighbors, that is why we are inspecting the pumpkin crop this week. And one more thing, neighbors: don't be disturbed if, during the bleak and windy night this Halloween, you hear two tremulous voices calling:

"The cropped black sow seize the hindmost!"

The evil spirits of Halloween are rising—are you ready for them?

COVER:

Bob Taylor focuses on the perennial symbol of Halloween—bewitching jack-o'-lanterns. But they are also pumpkins with an eerie tale in their past. See above.

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