

# ACTIVITY 1A: THE ORIGINS OF HALLOWEEN

## HALLOWEEN - Teacher Information Sheet

### Halloween

For most ancient cultures, the beginning of Autumn signified the start of nature's dying season; it was the end of the harvest. The timing of our modern-day celebration of Halloween is no different. It is a time of reflection

about those who have passed away.

Over the past three-thousand years, Halloween has had many names and various pastoral and agricultural people have celebrated the end of the harvest in different

ways. However, our present-day

Halloween has its roots in the ancient Celtic feast of the dead: "*Samhain*" (sau-in). This makes Halloween one of our oldest holidays.

The Celtic regions of Great Britain and Northern France celebrated the close of the harvest, the Eve of Winter, and the start of the Celtic New Year, on October 31 and November 1. By this time of year, the last of the crops have been brought in and the cattle and sheep have been herded into the valleys for the winter, and the "*Samhain*" would begin. The Celts believed that during the nighttime hours between these two days, there was a "crack in time" when good and evil spirits were able to visit the living. Celtic tribes would light bonfires to scare away the evil spirits and light the way for the good spirits so that they may visit with their friends and relatives.

After the Roman conquest of Great Britain and the other regions inhabited by Celtic peoples, the "*Samhain*" was combined with the Roman celebration in honor of *Pomona*, the goddess of fruit and trees, which took place on November 1. Then in the 9th Century (835 AD), the Roman Catholic Church designated November 1st as a church holiday to honor all canonized and unknown saints. Originally, this day was known as the "Feast of All Saints," or "Hallowmas," or "All Hallows." Years later, the Christian church would make November 2nd a holy day, the "Feast of All Souls," to honor those people who passed away in the faith. These two days were celebrated with bonfires (bone fires), parades, and people dressed in a variety of costumes and masks. Over time, these days became known as "All Saints Day" and "All Souls Day" with the preceding night being referred to as "All Hallows' Eve" — the night when all unsaved souls came out to harass the living.

The origin of the present-day term, "Trick or Treat!" may be found in the Middle Ages. Since good and evil spirits were believed to come out during the night, people would leave an offering of food and drink on the doorstep. In this way, homeowners hoped to obtain the blessings of good spirits and chase away the evil spirits. People, usually dressed in costumes of saints — angels and devils — would go from house to house imitating the spirits and begging for treats. If no food or drink was offered by the homeowner, then a practical joke, "a trick," was played on them. During the 18th



century, children would beg for sweet soul cakes in return for saying prayers for the dead — this was the treat. For those people who did not offer the treat, a trick would be played on them.

The custom of Halloween was brought to America by Scottish and Irish immigrants in the 1700s. Halloween parties evolved where people, dressed in costumes, would gather together to dance and play parlor games such as “Bobbing for Apples.” Beggars would still go door-to-door asking for treats to benefit children and the poor; and practical jokes seemed to be limited to removing gates, soaping windows, and switching shop signs.

But times have changed! From the early 1900s through the mid-1960s was the “Golden Age of Halloween.” American industry produced a wide variety of party accessories that were displayed and used during the celebration. Over this 60-year period, Halloween costumes were no longer restricted to devils and angels, but expanded to include goofy characters, popular cultural figures, and wacky vegetable shapes. After World War II, the Japanese flooded the market with a cornucopia of Halloween products. However, Halloween activities have changed.

Due to American social influences, the rise of satanic cults, and Hollywood’s sinister characters possessed with evil, Americans have become fascinated with gore and death. All of this has manifested itself into many destructive Halloween trends. In the 1960s, pre-Halloween pranks turned into vandalism in some parts of the United States, with some people breaking windows and destroying property. In the 1970s, nationwide reports of candy being loaded with pins and razor blades permeated the airwaves. During the 80s and 90s, Halloween vandalism escalated to include arson, or the deliberate setting of fires, which destroyed private property and businesses.

Today, a safe and sane Halloween is being sought. Many Halloween decorations are fluffy and cute. Parents take their children to malls for “Trick-or-Treating,” and private parties have become the norm. Yes, the mystical spirits of the Celts are gone, yet Halloween still survives as a harvest season holiday and a magical time for children.