A Brief History of Halloween

2016-10-24 11:19:07 by Staff

Every year on October 31, Halloween is celebrated across the world. It is the one occasion that people can play with the idea of death, dress up in costumes, and participate in activities that wouldn't be tolerated during other times of the year.

Also known as All Hallows' Eve, the history of Halloween can be traced back nearly 2,000 years. While most records are incomplete and hard to find, many believe the ghostly holiday is related to a pre-Christian festival called Samhain held on November 1.

The festival of Samhain was likely created by the Celts, who once lived in the area now known as Ireland, the United Kingdom, and parts of France. It was an annual event signaling the end of the harvest season and a time to gather resources in preparation for the harsh winter months. The Celts associated the dark, cold winter with death and believed spirits of the dead returned to Earth on October 31.

After the Roman Empire conquered most of Celtic territory, many traditional festivals were combined with holidays of Roman origin. One in particular was Feralia, a holiday honoring the dead that was celebrated in late October.

While Pope Gregory III was the leader of the Christian church, November 1 was designated as the day to honor all saints and martyrs. This observance, known as All Saints Day, made its way to Celtic lands and replaced the older Samhain traditions by 1000 A.D. Most scholars believe the church deliberately replaced the Celtic tradition of celebrating the dead with the church-sanctioned holiday.

In some regions, All Saints Day was referred to as All-hallows or All-hallowsmas. The night before, October 31, was soon called All-hallows Eve, then Halloween.

The beliefs and customs associated with Halloween varied among ethnic groups across Europe, ultimately making their way to America during colonial times. The very first celebrations of Halloween were mostly public communal events that included singing, dancing, and stories of the dead. Over the years, the holiday spread throughout the new nation and new traditions were created.

The association of costumes and trick-or-treating with Halloween is somewhat shrouded in mystery. Most believe dressing up and begging for candy evolved from the ancient practice of "mumming" and "guising." Clothing themselves in disguises made of straw, people would go door-to-door asking for food. A similar tradition in Britain and Ireland called "souling" involved poor people going from house to house every November 1 asking for food in exchange for prayers for deceased loved ones.

In the United States, trick-or-treating did not gain popularity until World War II. However, the practice did not occur on October 31, but instead on Thanksgiving Day. Known as "Thanksgiving begging," children would go knocking on doors and request food.

The tradition of playing tricks on Halloween is older than trick-or-treating itself. In the late 1800s, pranks such as tipping over outhouses, opening farmers' gates, and egging houses became common on Halloween. Yet, by the 1930s, pranks escalated into acts of vandalism and local governments began cracking down on the tradition. There is even some who speculate that trick-or-treating was created specifically as a safe way to celebrate without the potentially dangerous and often annoying tricks.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, Halloween has been largely associated with children, but the holiday is getting more and more popular among adults. With the recent

commercialization of the Halloween, dressing up as a ghost or favorite political figure has evolved from marking the beginning of winter and gathering of the harvest to a mainstream celebration of collecting candy and playing harmless tricks on the neighbor.

http://www.mymidohio.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=180