The Mysterious Origins of the Halloween Pumpkin

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Grotesque grimacing faces and eyes glowing with a menacing light that emanates from deep within their soulless bodies. Soon they'll be everywhere. No prizes for guessing what. The Halloween pumpkin otherwise known as a jack-o'-lantern.

To find the origins of this unusual custom requires a journey back into the murky past, to the time when the Celts occupied Britain and Ireland about two thousand years ago. It seems that this is where the ghostly pumpkin head got its start, specifically in old Ireland.



The absolute truth may be a little hazy, but the origin of the term jack-o'-lantern furnishes a little light on the custom's beginnings. During dark and misty evenings on the Irish moors, mysterious flickering lights often appeared out of nowhere. It's easy to imagine how such sights were often attributed to supernatural beings. These enigmatic lights, or will o'-the-wisps, were believed to be the souls of those rejected by hell now sentenced to roam the earth equipped only with a piece of coal from hell itself to light their lonely path.

These spooky lights over the marshes are known today to be the spontaneous ignition of marsh gasses consisting mostly of methane, a by-product of decomposing plant matter.

When approached, a will o'-the-wisp would always seem to depart, and would very often result in overly curious travelers wondering into dangerous marshy areas. It is little wonder these fires, or ignis fatuus (foolish fire) in Latin, took on the mantle of sinister spirits in the minds of those ancient Celts.

In time, those Celtic peoples contrived an interesting legend to try and explain away the ghostly fires and flickering lights. From this legend it can be seen how the term jack-o'-lantern got its

origin.

The Legend of Jack of the Lantern

According to the legend, there once was a stingy Irishman called Jack who was a dab hand at playing tricks on people, and even the Devil eventually fell foul of his trickery.

Jack was drinking one evening in an old inn, when who should appear right alongside him but the Devil. In true diabolic fashion he demanded Jack's soul. Jack insisted, while in a slightly inebriated condition, that that would be perfectly fine just as long as he could enjoy one last ale.

The Devil thought this most acceptable (he'll never discourage overindulgence) and was even talked into assisting Jack to pay for his final ale of all time before handing his soul over.

In an incredible feat of metamorphosis, the Devil, after having been persuaded by Jack, turned himself into a sixpenny piece. The coin was then promptly deposited inside Jack's bag wherein lay a cross shaped lock. The cross, of course, is anathema to the Devil and stripped him of his power rendering him powerless in Jack's bag! Jack had tricked the arch deceiver himself.

Eventually our hero took pity on the Devil locked away as he was in his bag in the form of a sixpenny piece, and so he offered to release him on one condition. Jack demanded that he could have ten more uninterrupted years during which time he could get up to his old tricks before he finally came back for him. This was a small price to pay for his freedom, and so the Devil acquiesced in his demands.

The years rolled by, until finally Jack's time was up, and sure enough the Devil returned. This time the Devil meant business and Jack was to become his sole property. Jack gave in, but insisted on just one last earthly pleasure. He demanded to taste a delicious looking apple high at the top of a tree.

Unable to reach, he persuaded the Devil to get it down for him by standing on his shoulders, after which he would come with him without the slightest protest.

While the Devil was precariously balancing upon Jack's shoulders, the quick thinking Jack took out his pocket knife and with lightning speed carved a cross into the tree which the Devil was unable to pass. He would have to stay up the tree forevermore. But Jack mercifully allowed him down on the proviso that he would no longer come seeking Jack's soul. The Devil, realizing he'd been outwitted again, agreed to leave him alone.

The legend jumps forward to Jack's passing away and making efforts to enter heaven. St Peter made it quite clear that because of his trickery and tightfistedness, he would be better off trying elsewhere. With nowhere else to go, he went down to hell but he wasn't even welcome down there. Instead, the Devil saw fit to get his revenge.

He sentenced Jack to roam the earth in perpetuity with nothing but a lantern made from a carved turnip for company, and with a single piece of coal from the burning fires of hell itself to

light his lonely and forsaken way.

And so it seems was born Jack of the Lantern (jack o'lantern) and he became the symbol of forsaken souls. When those ancient Celts saw the strange light phenomenon over the lonely marshes, they believed themselves to be witnessing one of the forsaken, a ghostly apparition of an outcast soul.

Beliefs about Summer and Winter

The Celts divided the year into two halves, summer and winter. Their winter began on November 1st thus heralding in the long dark nights of winter, the time of year which they associated with death and by extension the afterlife.

On the night before the first day of winter odd things took place in the Celtic world. They believed that the usual separation between the spirit and physical world was somehow rent in two and the spirit and physical worlds were seamlessly mixed together for a short while. Ghosts of the departed, and more malevolent spirits too, would visit the natural world on this night. What could the living folk do to protect themselves?

To scare away any unwanted visitors from the other side, those ancient Celts would dress in all manner of ghoulish attire to frighten them away, or at least cause the spirits to think they were just looking at beings of their own kind and thus pass by. A jack-o'-lantern was perfect for this as any nasty entities floating around would think they were seeing one of those forsaken souls and thus be scared away. But how did the turnip jack-o'-lantern evolve into the pumpkin version which is the one most readily recognized today?

Turnip Becomes Pumpkin

The answer lies in another vegetable, namely, the potato. Strictly speaking, the Irish potato. It was the Irish famine of the 19th century that saw many Irish head far over the Atlantic to America and naturally enough they took their legends and customs with them.

Now turnips were hard to come by in the New World, but pumpkins were plentiful. They were not only plentiful, but they were huge compared to turnips and even easier to hollow out and carve into grimacing and menacing faces. So it was that the pumpkin edition of the Irish turnip lantern came into being and thereafter it spread around the globe.

So next time you see a self-illuminating pumpkin staring you rather menacingly in the face, you may perhaps recall something of its fascinating journey across the Atlantic and through the centuries of time.

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