

The History of Halloween

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

There's a ton of conflicting information out there regarding the origins of the Halloween tradition, and that's understandable because the origins of the holiday stretch back over 2000 years, before there was a source of reliable recorded history in the British isles. In America, Halloween is super popular—after Christmas, it's the holiday on which Americans spend the most money—so everyone has a hot take, and you have to pick and choose your sources carefully because many of them, I found, contradict each other. Halloween is also just a few days after my birthday, so I've always been a *tiny* bit resentful. You might not guess this, but a gigantic national holiday can slightly overshadow even an event as momentous as my womb-emergence commemoration. It's tough to compete with the lure of free candy and throngs of women wearing basically cat ears and

nothing else.

Anyway, my point is, if you're interested in learning more about Halloween after this episode, do your research. Not in a Qanon, angry uncle on Facebook sense, but just...be discerning. Some of the top hits for Halloween research are pretty epic. For instance, you'll inevitably be directed to that famous repository of knowledge, the website of "English Teacher Melanie," which will inform you that:

"Halloween is a community event. It's a combination of an ancient pagan festival from northern Europe and a religious holiday created by Christians in ancient Rome, but its name comes from Scotland. Now it's a day when children wear costumes and get free candy!"

Honestly, that's one of the most accurate sources I found. Pretty much sums it up. Thanks, teacher Melanie. See y'all next episode. Knowledge is power and occasionally brief.

But other sources will tend to editorialize a little. Another one of the top hits if you search for the history of Halloween comes from the official website of the Jehovah's Witnesses, specifically the bible teachings section at [JW.org](https://www.jw.org):

"While some view Halloween as harmless fun, the Bible indicates that the practices associated with it are not...The Bible says: "I do not

want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too." —

The lord seems kind of bitchy.

Share a cup, man. " I don't drink with Demons." Racist. Notice it only mentions drinks, though, it doesn't mention candy. Can I eat candy with a demon? Candy loophole!

More from the Jehovah's

Witnesses: The Celts believed that the dead could walk among the living at this time...However, the Bible clearly teaches that the dead "are conscious of nothing at all."

([Ecclesiastes 9:5](#)) Thus, they cannot contact the living.

I can't argue with that one. We finally agree on something, Jehovah's Witnesses. Dead people are indeed uncommunicative.

Newsflash, "dead people are dead, say cult members."

Of Ghosts, vampires, werewolves, witches, and zombies, the

Jehovah's Witnesses say: These have long been associated with the evil spirit world. The Bible clearly states that we should oppose wicked spirit forces, not celebrate with them. —[Ephesians 6: 12](#).

Kind of a buzzkill, these Jehovah's Witnesses. Maybe these spirit forces would be less wicked if you would celebrate with them every once in a while.

So Jehovah's witnesses don't let their kids take part in Halloween. But neither did my mom, btw, though she doesn't have the excuse of being a religious zealot or associated with a cult, she was just a hater. She didn't like commercialized holidays...my mom was a great mom, but no one is perfect, and this is where she dropped the ball for sure. For most of my childhood I was consigned to the role of candy distributor, I would staff the desk as it were, handing out candy at the door, and a few times every Halloween she would let me walk outside, knock on the door of our OWN house, and give me a piece of candy. That sounds really terrible, but it actually was, it was awful. I've forgiven her, and as I got older she did let me go trick or treating with friends, but she held out as long as she could. Christmas was also pretty grim at our place, but that's for another time. My mom was amazing, but she just hated the man, she wasn't going to be a corporate shill, and I get that.

So as you might have noticed from when we talked about the J-Dubbs, JWs, Jehovah's Witnesses if you're nasty, Halloween is based on an ancient Celtic celebration spelled S-a-m-h-a-i-n—is pronounced Saw-Win. And I'm already upset. Gaelic can go fuck itself. Remember the

name "Niamh" pronounced "neve"? So Samhain translates as Summer's End. There were four Gaelic seasonal festivals, corresponding to the four seasons, and Saw-win was the counterpart Beltane, the festival that marked the beginning of summer. November 1 was the Celtic new year, which makes sense to me, because the end of October is symbolic of change, it's the end of the harvest season, transitioning from the warmth and bounty of summer to the lean seasons of fall and winter. As you know from other episodes, the seasons are caused by the tilt of the earth, and when it's fall in the northern hemisphere, the earth begins literally tilting into darkness. What could be more symbolic of death and all things terrifying than the night overtaking the day and the cold defeating the warmth. So Saw-Win represented death and darkness and was often viewed as a liminal celebration during which the world experienced the thinning of the boundary between realms...on that night the spirit realm could be accessed by—or even begin begin bleeding into—the human realm. On Halloween night In the original Celtic version, celebrants extinguished their hearth fires, creating instead giant bonfires on hilltops around which they danced in costumes to ward off the evil spirits and fairies. I've never been intimidated by fairies, but Irish

fairies or a little bit different than what you might be picturing. We're not talking about Tinker Bell. These were the Aos Si, pronounced Esh-She (The Scotts by the way would spell it "S-i-t-h" which I have to assume was an inspiration for George Lucas). Scottish fairies included wailing banshees, malevolent water spirits, cyclops, satyrs, changelings, leprechauns, etc. we'll have to do a whole episode on this stuff. But these aren't fairy godmother's, these were critters you mostly wanted to avoid. Thus the festival participants wore costumes to scare them off. The costumes were mostly animal furs. Makes sense, they had limited options. You couldn't be a policeman or a TV character or whatever, you could pretty much dress up as an animal or a bush. And it's kind of dangerous to be a bush dancing by a fire. So animals make the most sense. You had like six options. You could be a deer or a wolf or a bear or maybe a rabbit. Multiple rabbits. You had to be a minimum of five rabbits. One rabbit wouldn't cover much. Maybe that's the origin of sexy Halloween costumes. I only caught one rabbit this year, so I guess I'm going as rabbit-jockstrap guy. Slutty dead-rabbit guy. Rabbit banana hammock.

The bonfire was also used as a pyre to burn animals and crops which

were offered as sacrifices to the fairies, and at the completion of the festivities, the villagers would each take an ember from the fire to relight their hearths. It was also believed that the souls of dead relatives would revisit their homes during the festival, so the villagers might set a place of the table for grandma or some other beloved zombie during the evening meal. And then really hope they don't actually show up. Mumming was also a popular activity, which is not related to mummification, it's really just carolers who don't sing. It's basically a group of theater kids who go door-to-door doing little skits. Like if Saturday Night Live came to your house, but probably less funny. Usually mummers would expect some type of tip or donation for the effort of putting on a performance that you had not asked for. It's like if the Broadway play *Cats* showed up in your front yard and put on a big production then retroactively demanded that you buy a ticket. It was like busking, but more aggressive because they were on your doorstep. They were artistic solicitors. Pretty annoying. And you can see how this eventually morphed into a bunch of little brats expecting free candy. In some areas the teenage boys of the village would lie down close to the fire, so that the smoke was rolling over their bodies, and other boys would

leap over the smoke and their prone peers. No real explanation as to why, but also why the hell not. Seems like a good time. Another common tradition was to build bonfires side by side and then walk between them, often leading livestock, as a cleansing ritual. Warm cows apparently were considered cleaner. Get over here you dirty, cold cow. Frigid cows... filthy. Due to the supposed thinning of the boundaries between worlds—and the resulting proximity of ghosts—Celtic priests, aka druids, believed that for one night they could tap into the powers of the spirit realm, and thus were more in tune with paranormal powers. So a major component of the festival involved prophesizing and predicting the future. That made Saw-Win a very important and eagerly anticipated festival, because this was a scary time in history. The world was a volatile place, and you were always one drought or lean season away from starvation. A positive report from the druids regarding the upcoming year could help calm and soothe the entire community. The druids were basically the groundhog from groundhogs day. If the druid sees his shadow, a thousand more years until the renaissance. "Damn it, he saw his shadow. Guess we'll all die in squalor. Hundreds more years of plague and filth and dark ages.

When the Romans swept over the British Isles, they brought their own festivals and traditions, and the two cultures began to bleed together. The Romans actually had a slightly similar celebration called Feralia which took place around the same time of year and was sort of like a Roman Day of the dead. Dia de los Muertos Y Caesar. They had another festival in honor of Pomona, goddess of fruit and trees, specifically focused on apples, which may explain the tradition of bobbing for apples, which apparently is a thing that people do on Halloween according to articles and no one I've ever met. Apples are the shittiest Halloween treats, we can all agree on that. Put an apple in my bag, you're gonna get tricked.

Next came Christian influence. In the year 609, The catholic "feast of all martyrs" was established by Pope Boniface the IV. His name is spelled phonetically like bony face and that's pretty amazing. Pope Boniface the fourth. That means three other popes voluntarily chose to be bony faces. It's a crazy world. One of his successors, the more-conventionally named Pope Gregory the third, decided it was a little weird to only celebrate martyrs, he wanted to include saints who didn't

have a death wish, so he declared that November 1 would be all saints day, A.k.a. all hallows day, from Alholowmesse, which is all saints day in middle English. Hallow obviously being etymologically similar to the word "holy." The church later established "all souls day" on November 2, which was really just a repackaging of Samhain, and the evening before became known as all hallows eve or All Hallows' evening, and evening is often pronounced in England without the "v" and even written that way, so the word was shortened over time to AllHallow'e'en, which eventually became Halloween. That's everyone's best guess. I just want to point out that no one knows 100% for sure how this happened, because the etymology of words and the origin of specific pagan celebrations and religious rights is super hard to conclusively determine. So again, take everything you find on Wikipedia or learn in school with a grain of salt. I'm giving you the supposedly official story, but let's be real, these are best guesses.

So let's talk about some of the specifics. The practice of trick or treating has its roots in a multitude of traditions, one of which was Christian and the others pagan. Way

back in ancient times on the Greek island of Rhodes, which I have visited, children would dress up as swallows and go door to door singing songs. Kind of annoying. Swallows are bad enough, waking me up in the morning, I don't need a gang of kids chirping on front porch. "Off my lawn, brat!" The Christian version of the tradition would come to be known as souling, named after so-called soul cakes, which are the inspiration for what would later become urinal cakes. No. They're shortbread cakes baked in honor of the dead. Souling often involved a kind of dystopian foundation: many times poor children would visit the houses of wealthier people and be given soul cakes in exchange for a promise to pray for the dead relatives of the rich people. Depressing as hell. So it was like buying prayers from orphans and destitute children, who really needed all the prayers they could get. The cakes aren't cakes in the modern sense. They're like biscuits filled with aromatic spices: cinnamon, ginger, currants and raisins etc.

A less tragic version of souling involved adult men singing songs and playing instruments in exchange for cakes and ale, which sounds like way more fun. Except I wouldn't want to be one of the houses at the end of the route. I

suspect that the quality of the musical performance degraded rapidly proportional to the amount of ale consumed. From Wikipedia: "The customs associated with Souling during [Allhallowtide](#) include or included consuming and/or distributing soul cakes, singing, carrying lanterns, dressing in disguise, bonfires, playing divination games, carrying a horse's head and performing plays." We're just gonna throw that in there with NO explanation. "Singing, dancing, costumes, and giant bloody severed animal heads." The soul mass cakes were considered good luck and were sometimes kept around for years; a woman in the 1800s claimed to have a soul cake over a century old. So, a hoarder, but of perishable goods. Not ideal.

Souling also may have contributed to the pumpkin carving tradition. Houses offering soul cakes might be identified by hollowed out "turnip lanterns" with carved faces and candles inside representing the soul trapped in purgatory. Have you seen these? They put pumpkin faces to shame. They look weirdly mummified and evil. "in parts of Yorkshire, "children still appear on door steps with turnip lanterns and disguised as witches, ghosts and skeletons." No thanks. You can fuck right off with a bunch of grim-reaper kids carrying nightmare turnips. I'm glad we've evolved to

Spider-Man onesies and cheap plastic baskets. We'll talk some more about pumpkin carving in a minute.

There have been so many regional versions of souling, it's super fascinating to see how these traditions evolve and become customized to a specific area.

"In the county of Cheshire, Souling plays were traditionally performed. This involved groups of soulers visiting farmhouses performing a death and resurrection play. One of the members would wear a horse-skull without which the play could not be performed." So we finally have our answer. Sort of. Like, why? Bring a horse skull or get the fuck out. The classic rule of thumb for any souling party. I don't know what YOUR house parties look like, but where I come from everyone knows. Horse decapitation or gtfo. An even more direct precursor to modern trick or treating is the UK tradition of "guising" which is like souling but specifically for kids in costumes, and the kids would put on a little performance to earn their treat. I think we need to reintroduce the "earning" element. We've been giving free treats to lazy-ass five year olds for far too long, it's time to earn that mini snickers. Liberal Commie Halloween freeloaders. Often the children would warn the occupants of the houses that misfortune would befall them if they

didn't provide a treat. Which evolved to the concept of "a trick"... which, that seems a little different. More extreme. It was very mafia, that was extortion. "Listen, I'd hate for something bad to happen to your house or pets. If you were to, say, put a couple candy corn in this little bag, I go away, we forget we even had this conversation."

The night before Halloween in many British communities has also long been associated with "mischief night," which is pretty self explanatory. Kids would throw eggs at houses, set off fireworks, basically annoy the shit out of everyone. Like for one night all of us childless adults basically have to put up with what these kids' parents put up with all the time.

I promised we'd talk more about pumpkin carving and obviously we have to touch on jack-o'-lanterns. The idea of creating a lantern out of some type of vegetable or gourd has been around forever, but the name "jack-o'-lantern" is believed to have a specific origin story. Some of our Irish listeners are probably familiar with the tale of stingy Jack. It seems like every country has some version of an "outwitting the devil" story. In America there's the Crossroads legend, in which you can summon the devil to a competition by standing at a crossroads, and of course we're all

familiar with Johnny from "the Devil went down to Georgia." Stingy Jack is similar, but there's a decidedly less happy ending. So stingy Jack was a lying, deceitful drunkard who went around scamming people and generally being a ne'er-do-well. The devil caught wind of his antics, and decided to drag him down to hell. He found Jack on a deserted road, and revealed both himself and his plan. Jack thought quickly. He asked the devil if he could at least have one final drink before the fateful journey. The devil acquiesced, because why not? Makes for a better story. That's why. At a nearby tavern, the devil realized he was flat broke, apparently he had left all his money in his other goat legs or whatever. So Jack convinced the devil to turn himself into a coin, with which Jack could pay for the ale, and then turn himself back into the devil when the bartender wasn't looking. Brilliant! Except when the devil turned into a coin, Jack slipped him in his pocket, in which he carried a crucifix which prevented the devil from assuming his original form. Jack told the devil that he wouldn't let him go unless the devil agreed to spare his soul for 10 years. Which, OK. Again, stories gotta story. 10 years later the devil came knocking, and Jack once again asked a favor before the devil could complete his dastardly deed. And of course the devil said

yes, because apparently there are no qualifications for being the prince of darkness. They just let any idiot run hell. This time Jack asked for an apple, and the goddamn devil climbed a tree to get one. I mean if you're apparently the nicest Satan ever, wouldn't you just say, "sure. But climb your own damn tree"? Anyway, obviously when the Devil went up the tree, Jack surrounded the tree with a bunch of crucifixes, I don't know, I guess when you've had a run-in with the devil you start carrying crucifixes, I'll give them a pass for that one. This time Jack made the devil promise to never come take his soul. Which should have happened in the beginning, except that it backfired spectacularly. Because when Jack died there was no way in hell (so to speak), that God was going to let him through the pearly gates. And the devil had promised to never take his soul, so Jack spent the rest of his eternity wandering through the netherworld between heaven and hell, his path lit only by a candle in a hollowed out rutabaga. Which would become known as a jack-o'-lantern.

In America, Washington Irving's story "the legend of sleepy hollow" cemented the pumpkin as a symbol of Halloween horror.

Although in the story the headless horseman never actually wears a pumpkin in place of his head, at the

end of the tale a shattered pumpkin is found next to the hat of Ichabod Crane, and subsequent artistic interpretations of the story have often depicted the headless horseman wearing a carved pumpkin.

So let's talk a little more in depth about trick or treating. In America trick or treating became established in the 1920s but the standard offerings were different. Nuts, toys, cookies, cakes, and coins were popularly distributed items on Halloween.

So if it all started with raisin cakes and ale and nuts and coins, how did candy take over? I bet you can guess. Greed, and effective marketing. Candy manufacturers saw an opportunity. With the mass-production of individually wrapped confections, candy became increasingly cheap, convenient, and is essentially non-perishable. Today, one quarter of all the candy sold annually in the U.S. is purchased for Halloween. Americans spend almost 3 billion dollars on candy every year during the holiday.

Candy corn btw is believed to have been created in the 1880s by a guy named George Renninger and initially marketed as "chicken feed," long before it had any association with Halloween. It was a popular penny candy sold at shops year

round. When candy became increasingly popular as a Halloween treat, candy corn, with its small size and association with harvest and fall-themes, was a natural choice.

Candy corn is made from sugar, fondant, marshmallow crème, corn syrup, food coloring and vanilla flavoring, all of which is combined into a mix known as a "slurry."

Mmm. That sounds like what you get when you chew a bunch of candy corn and then spit out a big wad of it. The mixture is poured into molds and combined with an edible wax. Which is all I taste or experience when eating candy corn. It might as well be *called* edible wax. Candy corn can last up to 9 months unopened, which seems surprisingly short. Only six months if opened. What does stale candy corn taste like? Candy corn is pre-staled. "More than 30 million pounds of candy corn are produced yearly — that's roughly nine billion pieces!"

The national confectioners association has deemed October 30 to be "national candy corn day."

Good luck with that. You're not going to make candy corn day happen. That's so ballsy to just claim a full day for waxy corn syrup. There are only 365 days in a year, every company isn't entitled to one.

A Few Random Facts about Halloween

More people, especially millennials, are buying costumes for their pets. Twenty percent did so in 2018, up from 16 percent in 2017.

Today, Americans spend an estimated \$6 billion annually on Halloween, making it the country's second largest commercial holiday after [Christmas](#).

I saw a couple different figures online, but it seems like the average bag of Halloween candy averages around 5000 cal.

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