

Deep Roots
By Wilma Heberling
“A Haunting We Will Go!”

“From goulies and ghosties and long leggidy beasties, Good Lord deliver us.” (An old Cornish prayer.)

With Halloween just around the corner, I thought I might explore the subject of Hallowee’n in days past, in Scotland.

In pre-Christian Scotland, what we call Hallowe’en was called *Sambuin*, and was regarded as the most awesome period of the year. It was a time when the creatures of the “other world” made themselves visible—and often dangerous—to humankind. It was a time of sacrifices—sometimes human sacrifices—to fend off the terrors of the fiendish creatures. Fires were lit and special foods offered to allay the evil ones. Post-Columba Christian Scotland adopted this holiday as the day before All Saints. It was called “All Hallows (holy) Evening.” This soon became shortened into Hallowe’en.

Sixty to seventy years ago, Halloween observances, especially in rural areas, was a far cry from the celebration observed here in south Texas. Nobody would ever dream of decorating their home on Hallowe’en, let alone a month before! Retailers blithely ignored the date because it was primarily just a nice night for youngsters to play “dress-ups” and for some older ones to create mischief.

Hallowe’en festivities in the country started out with the carving of the *neep*, or *tumshee* (turnip). No one really knew what a pumpkin was except for the one that turned into a coach in the storybook Cinderella. (Disney hadn’t discovered it yet!) A suitable turnip was usually the Swede turnip, better known here as a rutabaga. These grew in farmers fields to about the size of two-thirds of a football. Once the turnip had been secured, it had to be hollowed out and a face carved. This is no small task! Turnips are not easy to scoop out like pumpkins, and many spoons became ‘mysteriously’ bent. Usually parents took over from the struggling child, if for no other reason than to save the affected silverware! When it was suitably carved with a string handle in place, a candle was put inside--and did that ever stink when it was lit! If you haven’t smelled burnt turnip, you haven’t lived.

Next came choosing a costume. Since there was no such thing as a “party store”, or even anything closely resembling a Wal-Mart, all costumes were homemade and usually very hastily put together. Common themes were a ghost (an old sheet with holes), a tramp (hobo) created by cadging an old pair of dad’s or big brother’s “breeks” (trousers) with a battered cap and a suitably dirtied up face, and as a pirate—an old pair of striped pajama pants, a bandana and an eye-patch. These were the boys favorites—and some girls too! Otherwise girls dressed as witchies with a conical hat fashioned out of cardboard and whatever old dress mother could dig up, or a princess with a discarded ladies gown. Another favorite of both sexes was a “*tattie-bogle*” (scarecrow). No-one tried for reality. Some creative children with the help of fond mothers would get themselves up as some

screen star such as Charlie Chaplin. Ghosts were popular with both sexes because the sheet covered everything else, including the warm jacket.

After getting dressed up in the disguise, the “*guisers*” went door to door in the neighborhood. The chant was not “Trick or Treat,” but “Please help the guisers!” At this point the homeowner would ask the children to perform—a song, a poem or whatever—and then they would receive a penny, some nuts, or an apple. If you were very lucky, you might find a home where they gave out treacle toffee (toffee made from molasses)!

On returning home, there was usually some form of fun arranged such as “dookin’ for apples”—apples floating in a tub of water had to be grabbed by the teeth, or by dropping a fork held in one’s mouth—no hands allowed! In some homes, games of “fortune telling” took place (predicting who one would marry or the likes) which were remnants really of the old pagan culture. When the fun was over, and the mess cleaned up, children counted their “loot” with glee! I remember clearly my joy at discovering I had *nine* pence. I was rich!

Of course there were some, mostly boys in their teens, who used Hallowe’en as a time to make mischief—perhaps trying to re-create the “other world evil” of times past. Such youths would cut the ropes on farmers haystacks, move outhouses, or tip over carts. In the city, a favorite prank was to tie together the door knobs of adjacent apartments, ring the door bells, and run away. Although seldom if ever prosecuted, such behavior was frowned on by adults—perhaps remembering their own youth.

Today, when I see Michael's or Hobby Lobby stores displaying Halloween decorating ideas at the end of August, I smile to myself remembering the sweet, simple times of long ago.