

Halloween. . . What's with the Pumpkin?

What we consider Halloween started out about 2000 years ago as a Celtic festival, "Samhain" in the land now known as Ireland, celebrating the end of the harvest. It had nothing to do with pumpkins.

The Celts believed that the barrier between the spirit world and ours was opened during Samhain and they would dress as animals and monsters to keep from being kidnapped by the spirits.

Somewhere around the year 700 the Catholic Church made November 1st "All Saints Day" to honor the saints of the church. Three hundred years later the church created "All Souls Day" on November 2nd. Some say it was done to try and replace Samhain. All Saints Day in Middle English (what they spoke back then) was called "Alholowmesse" – pronounced All Hallows Mass. That became All Hallows Eve and over time became "Halloween."

Still, no pumpkins.

The poor people in England and Ireland back then would go from house to house on All Hallows Eve and ask for food and in exchange would give prayers for the souls of the family's dearly departed.

And then, around the 1800's, the legend of "Stingy Jack" emerged. Stingy Jack was a blacksmith who was often drunk and always so mean and so nasty that he was reputed to be worse than Satan. In fact, according to the legend, word reached the Devil that there was someone on Earth that made him look nice by comparison. And wondering who that could be, Satan came to Earth to find Stingy Jack.

It was on Halloween as Stingy Jack was staggering home that he came upon a man lying in the road. It was no man. It was the Devil himself. He rose up and confronted Stingy Jack and told him it was time for Jack to return with him to Hell. Stingy Jack was cunning and convinced the Devil that if it was his last night, he should be allowed to at least visit a pub for a few drinks first.

They drank for some time and when it was time to pay the bill Jack told the Devil he had no money. He convinced Satan to turn himself into a silver coin that could be given to the bartender. Once he had paid the bar bill Satan could change himself back and the bar owner would be out all the money. The Devil was impressed by how mean Jack could be and agreed. But once he turned himself into the coin, Jack slipped the coin into his pants pocket where he had a crucifix and the Devil could not change back.

Jack told the Devil he would release him but only if the Devil would grant him ten years longer on earth. The Devil had no choice but to agree.

Ten years later, Satan reappeared to claim Stingy Jack. He refused to go drinking with Jack again and as they were walking by an apple tree Jack convinced Satan that he was very hungry and asked him to climb up and get him an apple as his last meal. When Satan climbed the tree, Jack put crucifixes around the base of the tree and Satan could not come down. Jack made the Devil agree not to take his soul before he would let him go.

Stingy Jack may have been the meanest man in all of Ireland, England, and Scotland, but he was still a man. When he died and went to the Pearly Gates of Heaven, he was refused because of how he had lived and treated others. Jack went down to Hell and the Devil refused to take him in because of their agreement. He told Stingy Jack that he would spend Eternity roaming between the world of the living and the dark spirit world. Before he threw him out of Hell, the Devil gave Jack a burning ember from Hell inside a large turnip as a way to light his path.

Soon the people of the British Isles took to placing turnips and potatoes carved with scary faces in their windows and near doors to frighten Stingy Jack and evil spirits away from their homes. About this time, pranks (supposedly done by Stingy Jack and other spirits) like placing a farmer's wagon on his barn roof, uprooting gardens, or tipping over the outhouse were common happenings on Halloween.

The Great Potato Famine in the mid-to-late 1840's caused millions of Irish to migrate and many found their way to America. They brought with them their traditions, their superstitions, and their legends. And "Jack of The Lantern" (think turnip with a burning coal from Hell) became "Jack o' Lanterns" when people realized they could get rid of the lowly turnip and replace it by carving an American vegetable – the pumpkin.

So, there you have it. The Irish brought the legend of Stingy Jack, the practice of Trick or Treat, and the celebration of Halloween to America. And they forever turned a simple vegetable, native to our land, into an annual reminder that unless you are prepared to wander in the dark for Eternity . . . one should never try to cheat the Devil.

Happy Halloween!