

Archive

# Halloween Is For Dead People



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Why do we buy dancing skeletons and glow-in-the-dark ghosts at Walgreens for Halloween?

Halloween has its roots in two cellars:

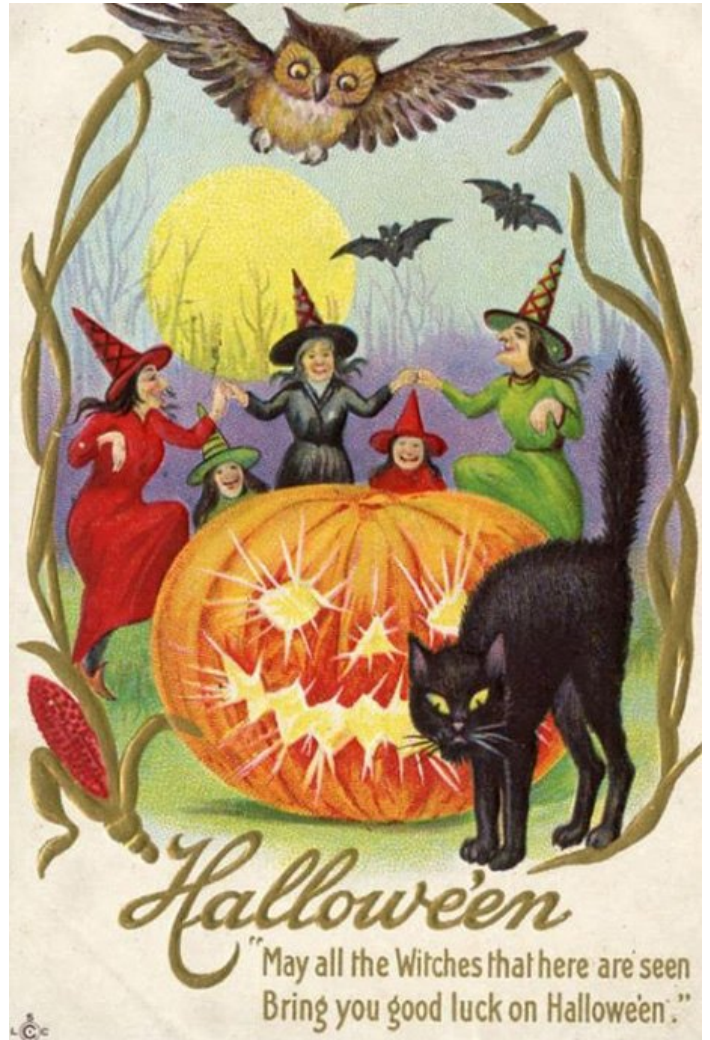
The Catholic holidays of All Saints Day and All Souls' Day, in which Catholics celebrate the lives of saints and the recently departed

Samhain, a pre-Christian Irish festival in which the Fey folk cross into the land of the human living.

Both Halloween and Samhain involve a simultaneous reverence for and fear of the dead, and both have elements of scaring away the evil spirits before they can scare the life out of you.



Photo of adorable Walgreens ghost by Tarin Towers



Slightly more terrifying vintage Halloween postcard

## Why are cartoon ghosts so adorable?

Because what's encrypted in cute representations of death is the adoration part. When we deck our houses with dancing skeletons, ghoulish faces, and bats with glowing eyes, we are—knowingly or not—carrying on a long tradition of venerating ancestors and preparing to survive winter.

Samhain falls halfway between Autumn Equinox and Winter Solstice—in 2015, that's November 7. Samhain, or "Summer's End," marks a boundary between short, dark days and the sun's return. Liminal—borderland—times are when ghosts and faeries can be seen by living people—and living people become visible to them.

As the last of three pagan harvest festivals, Samhaintide was when families brought in remaining crops and livestock that wouldn't survive winter were slaughtered. It's unclear whether human sacrifice, as long rumored, was ever part of Celtic Samhain, but the slaughter of goats certainly was.

Some tellings, such as James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, had it that in Celtic lore "the souls of the departed were supposed to revisit their old homes" and be fed by their families by the kitchen fires, but as *The Golden Bough* was published in 1890, it's unclear when that practice arose.





Vintage Halloween postcard

## All Hallows' Evening

*(The Night Before We Honor All the Dead People)*

When Catholicism came to Ireland, some pagan traditions were prohibited and effectively stamped out, some went underground, and some were incorporated into official church celebrations. Hallowtide, or the celebration of All Saints Day and All Souls' Day, was when families honored the newly departed until they passed safely from purgatory to heaven. As both benevolent and evil spirits could arise, reverent ceremony and mirthful pranks were both important to scare off harmful ghosts and let the right ones pass.

According to Nicholas Rogers, in his history *Halloween, From Pagan Ritual to Party Night*, crowds processed to the graves of friends and relatives, and "sometimes the cadavers were dressed in robes and placed in niches along the walls" of cemeteries.



Vintage Halloween postcard complete with creepy robe girls, pumpkins with faces, black cat



## Flickering Eyes and Bags of Candy

The Irish put candles in carved turnips, and the pumpkins we use today for jack o'lanterns represent crops maturing in autumn. The flickering light of the face's candle represented the will o'the wisp, the eerie fog that appeared over swamps. This fog in turn resembled the veil between our world and other worlds: the land of the Fey, the underworld, and Purgatory, any of which was a space from which the dead could speak.

Trick-or-treating descended from several traditions, including souling, in which poor folk processed door to door in exchange for food and even money, promising to pray for the relatives of the rich. Simultaneously, parades of mummers in costume, both holy and festive, were ringing bells and singing at dusk or at midnight to scare off devils. Imps not scared out of the fields could ruin unpicked crops, and stingy landlords who didn't give soul cakes or other donations to petitioners could find their fields raided by imps.

In addition to all that, young men scavenged wood for bonfires, and if you had none to give, they might steal boards off your barn or even burn your wheelbarrow. All of these threads syncretized through the years so by the 1940s, American kids in costumes were knocking on doors for candy and teenagers in masks desecrated their cranky neighbors' trees.

The feeding, tending, and costuming of pre-Reformation England and Ireland shows up today in Mexican and Southwestern celebrations of *Día de los Muertos*, Day of the Dead, which is celebrated on All Souls' Day: November 2nd. But it's not an unbroken line from Irish processions to Latino ones, for the church—this time the Church of England—once again decided to try to outlaw and suppress Hallowtide ceremonies and celebrations as “popish” and macabre.



Cute bat photo by Tarin Towers



Halloween candy baskets photo by Tarin Towers

## Cobwebs and Bats

The idea of a lost soul haunting a house has been around since Ancient Greece, but abandoned homes full of cobwebs and bats came into vogue during the golden age of the ghost story, in the late 19th Century. This period coincides with the abandonment of English country estates, when the landed gentry could no longer afford the upkeep of the homes and the small army of servants it took to manage the property.

Colin Dickey, the author of the forthcoming history of haunted houses, *Ghostland*, wrote on *The Paris Review*'s website about how shopping for a house among foreclosed homes in 2008 Los Angeles was like touring haunted houses. He points out that the *unheimlich*, the concept of the uncanny described by Freud—the spooky feeling and appearance of something that is neither alive nor dead, and less than normal—literally translates as “not of the home.”

Masses of indoor cobwebs, aside from showing disuse and decay, are creepy because spiders themselves have a deadly reputation, and their webs resemble veils. Bats, too, are considered liminal animals, because they're flying mammals who come out at dusk, and they live in caves and under eaves, neither above ground nor under it. Other spooky flying things include the uncanny owl, whose cries sound like a human's, and ravens, an intelligent scavenger said to augur death and carry messages through the veils.





Day of the Dead altar, San Francisco, 2014 photo by Tarin Towers



Vintage Halloween postcard

## What About Witches?

Their association with Halloween has much to do with the competing witch trials of the Catholic and Protestant Churches, and the latter's penchant for literally demonizing Hallowtide. Women were feared by those in power in part because of their healing work as herbalists and midwives. A witch's brew in a cauldron concocted to heal menstrual pain or help with menopause was so inconceivable to men and the burgeoning medical industry that her cauldrons were all said to contain poison and her spells demonic, for raising the dead.

The commercialization of Halloween, following its transplanting in the United States, is its own story, but its icons, cute or scary or both, have roots in practices of welcoming unearthly spirits *and* scaring them off.



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