

Little Known Facts about Halloween

“Hallow” is an antiquated term for a saint or a holy person, and the evening before All Hallows Day is All Hallows Evening — abbreviated years ago to Hallow Evening, then Hallowe’en, then Halloween.

But wait, you knew that. Here are a few lesser-known nuggets to drop in your bucket this sugar-coated holiday.



Jack and his lantern — We get the *lantern* part, but why jack-o'-lantern? Is he Irish? Well, yes — Halloween history crosses over with the Gaelic tradition of Samhain (pronounced *SOW-in*). “Jack of the lantern” has parallel origins to “Will of the wisp,” with both Jack and Will being characters from folk tales whose spirits were doomed to haunt the marshes for their misdeeds. Jack’s lantern and Will’s wisp of sticks were lit to shed light and tempt travelers off of a safe path. But you know, if you’re walking through a marsh on Halloween, you kinda deserve what you get.

Tricks before treats — Halloween is ancient but trick-or-treating is barely a hundred years old. Early in the 20th century, the mischief-making that had been part and parcel of Halloween was becoming a headache for homeowners. Police would post warnings against haunted little hooligans throwing corn and pepper, trashing people’s gates, and setting up trip wires. Some found that by playing host to potential pranksters — offering food and celebration — they were spared from the mischief. “Trick or treat” evolved as a sort of threat to extort candy from neighbors: gimme a treat or you’re gonna get tricked.

Holy sheets — In age-old storytelling traditions, ghosts — a.k.a. shades, shadows, specters, spirits, phantoms, wraiths — have been described as vaporous versions of human forms, often appearing to the living in their burial duds. So why do we have bedsheet ghosts? In some traditions, both ancient and current, a dead body would be wrapped completely in a shroud — a sort of ghost/mummy crossover. Presumably, real ghosts would be able to see just fine without cutting out eye holes.

An apple a day – It's never a good idea to eat candy or other treats from strangers that aren't safely sealed, but the vast majority of reports about sharp objects like razor blades being embedded in apples or other edibles have turned out to be hoaxes. Over the decades there have been a few terrible instances of children being poisoned by Halloween treats, most infamously when eight-year-old Timothy O'Bryan of Houston, Texas, died on Halloween night of 1974. Timothy's father had taken out a life-insurance policy on him, and with a neighbor gave the child Pixie Stix candy laced with cyanide. Ronald Clark O'Bryan received the death penalty. People, it turns out, are capable of far more frightening things than underworld spirits!