

Carve a turnip this All Hallows' Eve!

By John Arnott

Are you up for a challenge? Well then instead of carving a jack o'lantern from a pumpkin use a turnip ??original jacks were carved from this vegetable.

St. Alban's Anglican community in Nobleton notes that Halloween and many of its customs date back to pre-Christian Europe, when much of that continent was inhabited by the Celts. At this time of year, especially in Celtic Britain, farmers and herders began to gather in the harvest and bring their herds down from out lying pastures. Then it was time to elect or re-elect village headmen, review old laws and make new ones.

Once these tasks were done, a celebration called Samhain (SAH win) was held to mark the end of the old year with its long daylight hours and warily welcome the new year which began with longer hours of unfriendly darkness. Now villagers gathered together to feast and make merry. Great bonfires were lit to hold darkness and its associated evil spirits at bay for Celts believed this was the time when 'the veil' separating the world of the living from the world of the dead was extremely thin, thus allowing the souls of the dead to pass through easily and in the dark visit their former homes and so food was left out for them there. But witches and evil spirits along with an assortment of demons were also free to pass through unchallenged, briefly roaming the countryside wreaking havoc as they went.

Turnips carved to resemble skulls with lit candles in them were placed in windows or outside doors to discourage entry by these dreaded creatures.

Now came the Romans, introducing orchards of sweet edible poma (apples) into Britannia (England), their newest conquest now a provincia or province. These new masters also brought along the worship of Pomona the goddess of orchards and fruit, who was honoured during the autumn apple harvest.

To celebrate this harvest, there was a feast, much eating of apples, drinking of sweet as well as hard (alcoholic) cider and apple games ??most popular with the children was bobbing for apples in a bucket of water and trying to bite an apple suspended on a cord without using hands. Over the 300 or more years of Roman presence, the Celts began slowly to include this in their Samhain festivities.

In many parts of rural Britain and Ireland, this late October festival, called Snap Apple Day, is still celebrated. In Newfoundland-Labrador, Halloween is often called Snap Apple Night.

Once Christianity was firmly established across Europe, try as they might, early church leaders found it impossible to persuade people to give up the customs and celebrations of their ancestors so reluctantly. But wisely, they began to Christianize these events. Samhain and the Pomona festival became All Hallows' Eve, the last day in October, a time to celebrate all the holy (hallowed) people, especially family members who had died. In early Christian central Europe on this day, children went to the houses of families who had suffered a bereavement previously that year and recited a prayer following which they received treats.

In the medieval times, anyone venturing out on All Hallows' Eve, even to attend church, wore a costume or scary mask to frighten away evil spirits. In 15th century Europe, people often wearing costumes would on All Hallows' Eve visit friends or relatives and bring 'soul cakes' to be eaten in memory of departed loved ones.

European colonists brought All Hallows' Eve customs to the Americas. In eastern North America, the First Nations may well have shown those 'know it all' white people how much easier it was to carve a jack o'lantern from a native orange squash called a pumpkin than a turnip.

It was here in North America that All Hallows' Eve got slurred into Hallowe'en and lost its religious connection becoming a fun filled secular celebration.

Back in Europe, the event faded away completely, but in the past few years, due mainly to North American television, it is making a comeback in Britain. Thus, come Oct. 31, hordes of masked and costumed kids, including my two Worcester grandnephews, will storm through the hallowed streets of ancient British towns with cries of 'trick or treat' sending even the meanest of evil spirits back to safety behind 'the veil.'

Christian churches that have so long ignored Hallowe'en are beginning to reclaim this day, not to take away its fun, but to show it as part of Christian heritage.