

The ghost of Halloween past

By George Adams Parkhurst
Guest Columnist

The Halloween season is once again upon us — that time when all sorts of extraterrestrial beings, ghosts, goblins, witches and all manner of weird characters descend upon our otherwise serene community.

Once dominated by small children in their simple costumes and their pumpkin jack-o'-lanterns, this festival, like many others, has fallen prey to commercialism and the "gimme" syndrome.

By definition, Halloween is the eve, or night before, All Saints' Day, which falls on Nov. 1 each year, although it has become customary to sometimes celebrate it on a previous Sunday night when there may be less traffic to endanger the celebrants.

Chelmsford was a frontier town in the 1600's. There was no time for "trick or treating." The struggle to eke out a living from our rocky New England soil, while keeping a wary eye out for lurking Indians, was a full-time job. Also, the severe philosophies of the Puritans who settled here would never have condoned any such frivolous youthful activity.

There is little or no mention of Halloween celebrations in our history

before the end of the 19th century. Then the jack-o'-lantern, with its grotesque face illuminated by a wax candle, was the principal ingredient. This was not a plastic imitation with batteries and light bulbs but a real pumpkin carefully selected from the vines in the vegetable garden that was to be found in every backyard. After scooping out the seeds and pulp, the youthful artist, under parental guidance, carved eyes, nose and mouth to his or her fancy. Then the stub of a wax candle was stuck into the base of the cavity. With the coming of darkness, the candle was lighted and the pumpkin placed in the window to frighten away any marauding ghosts, or perhaps, it was carried to the next door neighbor's house to startle the unwary individual who answered the doorbell. Revelers were not, in those days, transported to distant neighborhoods in search of loot.

Churches and other groups sometimes used this occasion to entertain their young people with games and refreshments. Probably the favorite amusement was "bobbing for apples." A large wash tub — an item found in every household — was filled with water upon which were floated several apples from the family orchard. The contestants knelt

beside the tub and, with their hands behind their backs, attempted to pick up one of the apples with their teeth.

For another popular contest, a rope was stretched across the room near the ceiling with several strings hanging from it. Apples, doughnuts or marshmallows were attached to these strings. One contestant stood at each string and, on signal, began nibbling the suspended item while keeping his hands behind his back. The one who consumed the most in a given time was declared the winner.

Old standbys like "pin the tail on the donkey" and musical chairs were usually included in the program. "Spin the bottle" was popular with the older children while the really sophisticated ones preferred "post office." The standard refreshments were apples, doughnuts and fresh cider.

As the number of families with children increased, so did the number of automobiles on the streets of town, making it more hazardous for tots in dark costumes and with vision limited by masks. At the same time Halloween vandalism became more of a problem. Both problems were addressed by the Police Department under the aegis of then Chief Ralph Hulslander who instituted a program

in 1943 to protect the children without taking away their fun. Then the Chelmsford Grange, Westlands Improvement Association, South Chelmsford P.T.A., South Row Improvement Association, East Chelmsford P.T.A. and North Chelmsford P.T.A., cooperated with the police in running Halloween parties in the various schools, complete with costumes, games and refreshments. The expenses were met by volunteer donations. Reports of the parties continued to appear in the Town Reports through 1957. Later, a few schools renewed the tradition.

Some neighborhood Halloween celebrating sprang up. The annual Halloween costume parade by the Chelmsford Farms residents was a shining example. The Chelmsford Mall has been the scene of an observance, but this augments, without replacing, general trick-or-treating.

The after-high school graduation parties have been very successful as organized and supervised celebrations. Would it not be worth again doing something similar at Halloween?

George Parkhurst is a local historian and former Chelmsford resident who frequently contributes to the Chelmsford Independent.