

The ghosts and goblins of yesteryear

OCT 30, 1986

The Halloween season is once again upon us — that time when all sorts of extra terrestrial beings — ghosts, goblins, and... trick or treaters descend upon our otherwise serene community. Once dominated by small children in their simple costumes and their pumpkin jack-o-lanterns, this festival, like so many others, has fallen prey to the competition for the almighty dollar. Commercialism has taken over.

By definition, Halloween is the eve, or night before, All Saints' Day, which falls on November 1 each year.

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. And the severe philosophies of the Puritans who settled here would never have condoned any such frivolous youthful activity.

There is little if any mention of Halloween celebration 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. These were not plastic imitations with batteries and light bulbs but real pumpkins 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 and affixed the stub of a wax candle onto 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 marauders, or perhaps it was carried to the next door neighbor's house to startle the unwary individual who answered

The way It was

By George A.
Parkhurst



the door. Revelers were not, in those days, transported to other neighborhoods in search of loot.

Churches and other groups sometimes took 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. The contestants kneeled 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. Either 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.

By the 1920's it became usual for neighborhood groups of costumed children to go from door to door ringing doorbells. The resident who failed to enter into the spirit of the evening might find himself "tricked." The doorbell might be depressed and a common pin wedged into it so the bell would continue to ring after the prankster had beaten a hasty retreat. Or perhaps a rattler might be applied to a window. This was a wooden spool, with notches cut in the flanges, attached to a handle in a way that it rotated freely. A string would be wound around the spool which would be held against a window pane. Pulling the string caused the spool to rotate, producing a loud noise. A more malicious "trick" was the application of soap to windows.

With many more children in town in later years and the hazard of increased automobile traffic, the Police Department, under the aegis of then Chief Ralph Huslander, instituted a program designed to protect the children without taking away their fun. Each of the several PTA organizations in town ran a party on Halloween at its school, complete with costumes, games, and refreshments as part of a coordinated program financed by volunteer donations. Unfortunately, this very worthwhile program had been discontinued, until a few schools recently renewed the tradition.

Some neighborhood observances sprang up. When Chelmsford Farms I was first settled, an annual Halloween parade was held in that area.

And through the years, that's the way Halloween was.

George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.