

# Opinion: When Halloween mischief turned to mayhem

By Lesley Bannatyne

Imagine. Pre-electricity, no moon. It's late October, and the people whisper: This is the season for witchery, the night the spirits of the dead rise from their graves.

The wind kicks up, and branches click like skeletal finger bones. You make it home, run inside, and wedge a chair against the door. There's a sharp rap at the window and when you turn, terrified, it's there leering at you—a glowing, disembodied head with a deep black hole where its mouth should be.

It's just a scooped-out pumpkin, nicked from a field by some local boys and lit from the inside with the stub of a candle.

Halloween in early 19th century America was a night for pranks, tricks, illusions, and anarchy. Jack o'lanterns dangled from sticks, and teens jumped out from behind walls to terrorize smaller kids. Like the pumpkin patches kids love today, it was good fun—until it wasn't.

As America modernized, mischief turned to mayhem and eventually incited a movement to quell what the mid 20th-century press called the "Halloween problem"—and to make the holiday a safer diversion for youngsters. If it weren't for the tricks of the past, there'd be no treats today.

Halloween was born nearly 2,000 years ago, in the Celtic countries of northwestern Europe.

Immigrants from Ireland and Scotland brought their Halloween superstitions to America in the 18th and 19th centuries, and their youngsters became the first American masterminds of mischief. Kids strung ropes across sidewalks to trip people

in the dark, tied the doorknobs of opposing apartments together, mowed down shrubs, upset swill barrels, rattled or soaped windows, and, once, filled the streets of Catalina Island with boats.

But when early 20th-century Americans moved into crowded urban centers, pranking took on a new edge. Kids pulled fire alarms, threw bricks through shop windows, and struck out against adults in general. They demanded sweets and threatened vandalism if they didn't get them.

Some grown-ups fought back. Newspapers in the early 20th century reported incidents of homeowners firing buckshot at 12-year-old pranksters. "Letting the air out of tires isn't fun anymore," wrote the superintendent of schools of Rochester, N.Y., in a 1942 newspaper editorial. "It's sabotage. Soaping windows isn't fun this year. Your government needs soaps and greases for the war." That same year, the Chicago City Council voted to abolish Halloween and instead institute a "Conservation Day" on Oct. 31. The Senate Judiciary Committee under President Harry S Truman recommended Halloween be repurposed as "Youth Honor Day" in 1950. The House of Representatives neglected to act on the motion, but on Oct. 31, 1955, in Ocala, Fla., a Youth Honor Day king and queen were crowned at a massive party sponsored by the local Moose Lodge. As late as 1962, New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr. wanted to change Halloween to UNICEF Day, shifting the emphasis to charity.

By that time, the real solution was already gaining in practice. Since there were children already out demanding sweets, why not turn it into it a constructive tradition? Teach them to politely ask for sweets from neighbors, and urge adults to have treats at the ready. The 1952 Donald Duck TV cartoon "Trick or Treat" featured Huey, Dewey, and Louie, who, with the help of Witch Hazel's potions, get Uncle Donald to give them candy instead of the explosives he first pops into their treat bags.

The transition could be slow. On one episode of “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet,” costumed kids come to the door, and Ozzie and Harriet are baffled. But food companies—Beatrice Foods, Borden, National Biscuit Company—quickly took notice and got into the candy business, and even tobacco companies like Philip Morris jumped in. Halloween candy and costume profits hit \$300 million in 1965 and kept rising. Trick-or-treating—child-oriented and ideal for the emerging suburbs that housed a generation of Baby Boomers—became synonymous with Halloween.

For those nostalgic for Halloween mischief, all is not lost.

Query the MIT police about the dissected-and-reassembled police car placed atop the Great Dome on the college’s Cambridge campus in 1994. Or ask the New York City pranksters who decorated a Lexington Avenue subway car as a haunted house in 2008. The modern Halloween prank—be it spectacle, internet joke, entertainment, or clever subversion—is a treat in disguise, an offering that’s usually as much fun for the tricked as it is for the trickster. For that, Americans can thank the long line of pranksters who came before us

*Lesley Bannatyne’s latest book, “Halloween Nation,” was nominated for a 2011 Bram Stoker Award; “Halloween: An American Holiday, An American History” celebrated 25 years in print in 2015. In 2007, Bannatyne and collaborators set the Guinness World Record for largest Halloween gathering, a title they held until 2009.*