
BROOKFIELD HISTORICAL NEWS

by Jan Narwold

"I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

Why, so can I; or can any man:

But will they come, when you do call for them?"

Shakespeare

Hooray for the spirits who returned to the Fox Hill! They know what season it is. I am delighted to see that some of our local ghosts care enough to make us aware of their presence!

This may be somewhat different from the usual historical discourse, but after all, Halloween has long been a part of New England's past, and All Hallow's Eve goes back centuries.

Remember the Halloween parties with bobbing for apples and marshmallows on a string? We used to tell fortunes by printing such messages as "New Love", "Long Trip" or "Much Money" on dry pumpkin seeds and then everyone would draw one from the hollowed-out pumpkin.

I, for one, am a lover of Halloween. Other mothers may shudder but I revel in the season from the first appearance of candy corn and cider to the last bedraggled Trick or Treater. There's something about the crisp weather, the pagan Jack-o-Lanterns and the smell of wood-smoke in the air that makes my hand positively itch for a can of shaving cream. I can remember anguished cries of "But ma, I'm in 8th grade, you don't have to come trick or treating with me!" No, not really...but I've been very fortunate over a quarter of a century to con one of my children into letting me lurk in the shadows behind them.

Years ago, a neighbor of ours, whose children were grown, appeared every Halloween in a gorgeous devil's costume, complete with horns and tail. It was the highlight of his life to hide behind trees and jump out on the unsuspecting children, swishing his cape. Finally, one year, when the upmteenth preschooler had been scared into witless hysteria, the mothers banded together and asked him to refrain from his devil act. The poor man was dragged into the house by his wife and thereafter was relegated to doling out candy. Halloween was never the same for him again, and I always sympathized.

Actually, early Halloween Americana is becoming extremely valuable to collectors who will pay dearly for old Halloween books, costumes, poems, postcards, black cats, masks, etc. Butterick Dress Pattern Book of 1900 shows how an entire family could be transformed into such things as Japanese lanterns, frogs, monarch butterflies, or Etruscan vases. (Just what I always wanted to be-an Etruscan vase!) A 1903 copy of the Household Ledger magazine prints the Otto Auerbach song, "A Halloween Frolic", for "adults to sing around the parlor piano". Somehow I just can't picture my social group standing around warbling:

"A little witch in a steeple hat
Once tried to make a merry spell,

To make the hares come pit-a-

pat

From dingle and from dell."

But then, that was 1903....

On the subject of costumes, I always hated on sight those mothers who could sew! At every one of the thousand school Halloween parties I've attended, sooner or later some little miss would prance in wearing a gorgeous pumpkin, with green petaled hat and even orange curly shoes. The mother would smile modestly and say "Oh, it was really nothing-I just whipped it up last night while baking cupcakes for the party." That really sets my teeth on edge! My idea of the height of creativity is to stuff Charlie in a new, metal trash can with holes, and send him out as Artco-Detoo.

The Woman's Home Companion at the turn of the century was giving recipes for Black Cat Jelly, Wart Cake, and Devil's Draught, the latter made with spinach juice. Again, I think I'll go creative and serve my family Sand Witches.

Hurray, hooray, the season is here! Welcome back all spirits! And if Darth Vader appears at your door this Halloween, and the breathing doesn't sound masculine, and you spot a few wisps of gray hair, just give me an apple, a sympathetic smile, and send me on my way.

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