

## A GHOSTLY HARVEST CELEBRATION

*What we know as Halloween today is rooted in an ancient Celtic festival to celebrate the end of Harvest and the beginning of the Celt New Year (and, of course, to ward off restless ghosts)*



Our colourful Canadian Octobers are always made more spectacular by the arrival of Thanksgiving, an upbeat holiday that joins us together to give thanks for God's gift of life, the blessing of food and the unwavering love of family and friends both past and present.

October also plays host to a second, more ancient tradition that interestingly began in a similar way: Halloween. Today's elaborate costumes, scary decorations and bowls of candy have become kind of its own mask for what is, in fact, a one-night event filled with deeply-rooted, ancient traditions to celebrate the end of harvest season.

"All Hallow's Eve" pre-dates Christianity as a Celtic festival attached to Celt New Year celebrations on November 1st. Just as their season blended from one of Summer Harvest (Life) to Dark Winter (Death), so too they believed that the worlds of the living and the dead touched each other during this fragile time of year.

On the evening before the New Year, Celts would hold their *Festival of Samhain*: Bonfires were lit, sacrifices made and disguises worn to hide from ghosts wandering freely between the worlds. There were traditions of leaving bowls of food on doorsteps and windows open so that ghosts could pass through. Samhain was both a celebration of the earth's sunny bounty and a ritual to ward off the dangerous trials of an approaching winter.

The arrival of Christianity in the following centuries deeply influenced and transformed

the spirit of the festival, but not all traditions were lost. By the 8th century, Pope Gregory III designated November 1st as a time to honour all saints and martyrs (All Saint's Day), and some of the traditions belonging to the Festival of Samhain blended in. As Christianity spread into celtic lands Samhain became *Hallowmas*, a day to commemorate the souls of the blessed dead.

Time, and a bounty of other traditions and influences from various countries eventually transformed Halloween into what we see today--a relatively inexpensive community event drawing neighbours and children together for an evening of fun (and maybe a scary thrill or two).

So it looks like the reasons for celebrating Halloween have pretty much been left behind in the pages of history books, but its roots remain a fascinating tale. The Festival of Samhain after all, was never just a superstitious evening of fending off ghosts, goblins and witches: Like our Thanksgiving, it was also a festival to celebrate the bounty of harvest, be thankful for life, and to remember those whose spirits rest with us.

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(for more details about The Festival of Samhain, visit: [www.history.com](http://www.history.com), or [www.allsaintsbrookline.org/celtic/samhain.html](http://www.allsaintsbrookline.org/celtic/samhain.html))