

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why Do We Celebrate Halloween?

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[JL] This is *But Why: A Podcast For Curious Kids*. I'm Jane Lindholm. This week, things are getting a little bit spooky. Not really, but we are going to be talking about Halloween.

[Kids' voices] Why do we celebrate Halloween? Who invented Halloween? Why do we make Jack-o'-lanterns?

[JL] In the United States and Canada, Halloween is a big deal. Many kids and a lot of adults love it, too. It can be a lot of fun.

[00:00:51] We do know that some of the stuff that goes along with Halloween can be scary for some kids. There's a lot of talk of ghosts and monsters. Some people like to watch scary movies, people dress up in costumes, and sometimes that can actually be a little unsettling, too. I want to let you know in advance that there's nothing scary in this episode of the podcast. We're actually going to talk about how the Halloween we celebrate today, especially in the U.S., got started. It's a history show, and we're doing that because those are the Halloween questions you have sent us. A lot of you want to hear about the origins of this weird and sometimes silly holiday, and to get some answers, we found someone who likes Halloween so much, she wanted to study it.

[RH] Hi, I'm Regina Hansen and I teach at Boston University, and I am a scholar of all kinds of scary and creepy things.

[JL] That's not really her official job title, though. Regina is a college professor who teaches literature. The study of books and writing. But she's always been interested in scary and magical things. So that's the kind of stuff she likes to read and write about. Celebrating Halloween as a kid was actually one of the things that drew her to those subjects in the first place.

[RH] [00:02:08] I think, partially, it was, I enjoyed going off for Halloween ever since I was very small, being out at night where you couldn't always see what was going on, but you were out having an adventure in the nighttime, and the wind blowing ... and also the books that I read when I was little, even starting with a picture book when I was little, called *Georgie*, which was about a little ghost who lived in Vermont, I think? Those were the things that drew me when I was little.

[00:02:30] [JL] And Regina Hansen says her family really loved Halloween, too, so she grew up liking the holiday and the fun she had with her family and friends. What about you? Do you like Halloween? What's your favorite part? Dressing up? Maybe going trick-or-treating? When I was little, we used to have a party in my town where there was a big bonfire, and sometimes we would do things like bob for apples at someone's house. That's when there's a barrel or a bucket filled with apples that are floating in water and you have to grab an apple using just your mouth - no hands - sometimes your hands are even tied behind you. It sounds simple, but it's actually pretty hard and it's kind of funny to watch other people doing the bobbing for apples. When you're doing it, you tend to get water up your nose, and you just are frustrated until you get a hold of that apple and then, success! You feel like you've won.

Now, several of you were curious about why we do all of this Halloween stuff, and if you live outside of the U.S., this yearly celebration on October 31st might not be familiar at all. So, let's begin with how it all started. Here's 7-year-old Fern from Winooski, Vermont.

[00:03:39] [Fern]
Who invented Halloween?

[Nora] My name is Nora. I'm 7 years old. I live in (indistinguishable), Pennsylvania, and my question is, why do we have Halloween?

[00:03:50] [Oscar] Hi, my name is Oscar. I'm 7 years old. I live in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and my question is, how was Halloween invented?

[00:03:59] [RH] Probably, the first people to celebrate a festival that we now know was Halloween were people called the Celts, who were from the northern part of Europe. And if you're Irish or Scottish or Welsh, then you're a Celt, and they used to have special festivals when the season turned, especially um, they had one in May called Beltane, and that was when the summertime was starting, and then they had one on November 1st, which was called Samhain [pronounced SAOW-en]. And that was when winter was starting, and what's really interesting about it is, you know, we know this from the fall especially if you live in the northern part of the United States, in the fall, that's when everything grows and all the food is delicious food that's getting ready for Thanksgiving that we're going to eat and all that stuff ... that's happening, but also, the nights are getting longer and it's getting ready for the winter time. So, even for us, many people, especially if you live in the United States, you sort of say, "yeah it's a weird time" - it's filled with all kinds of great things but also, getting ready to get a little dark and sort of go into your house and cuddle up and everything's like that, and so, [00:05:02] it was kind of the same for them. Other people in other parts of the world were also celebrating the turn of the season and they're getting ready for winter and the harvest. It's a big deal. And what many of these celebrations had in common was, they were also thinking about death, because they're thinking about winter. [00:05:23] So, then they're thinking about, maybe this is a time of the year when the people who we went before us who we loved are coming back to, sort of, see us. You know, that it's a time when we could get to honor them a little bit more. So, this happens in Mexico - they have a Day of the Dead celebration - and other parts also of Latin America. In Italy, they have one. Also, the ancient Romans had a festival called Pomona and Pomona has to do with the goddess of apples and fruit trees. So, all of these cultures had some kind of harvest festival that, in many cases, was also a festival honoring the dead.

[00:05:58] [JL] This autumn festival Regina was talking about, Samhain, was celebrated 2,000, 3,000 years ago by the Celts, people who lived in Ireland, Wales and Scotland, and some parts of France. Samhain is the Celtic word for the end of summer. At this time of year, the Celts would have a big bonfire and celebrate the end of the harvest and the beginning of the long, cold, dark winter. And part of the celebration of Samhain was thinking about people who came before, people who had died. In addition to the bonfires, sometimes people would wear costumes and they'd all come together in these big community gatherings. [00:06:37] Sounds a little bit - a little bit - like Halloween, doesn't it? But, that's still a long way from where Halloween is today.

[00:06:46] [Kileigh] Hi, my name is Kileigh and I am 8 years old. Ontario, Canada. And, I have a question, WHY do we celebrate Halloween?

[00:07:00] [Maren] Hi, my name is Maren and I'm 7 years old, I live in (indistinguishable), Minnesota. And my question is, why do we celebrate Halloween?

[00:07:10] [JH] So, how did we get from the Celts and others 2,000 years ago, up to the modern day?

[00:07:16] [RH] These various people were celebrating their harvests/death, honoring-the-dead festivals. And what happened was the introduction of the religion of Christianity, which had its own traditions, also having to do with honoring those who came before.

[00:07:29] The Christians had an idea that some people, when they died they went straight to heaven, but other people didn't get to go straight to heaven; they went to a place called Purgatory, where they sort of waited around and then finally, they could go to heaven, but for them to get there you had to pray for them.

[00:07:42] So, what happened was, when the Christians came to what now are Ireland and Scotland and Wales, they brought with them this tradition and it got mixed up with the Celtic tradition of Samhain and a similar thing happened, also, in Latin America when the Christian missionaries came to those countries. Their Catholic religion, Christian religion, got mixed up with these ceremonies honoring the dead. The ceremonies weren't always held on the same day - they weren't always held at the harvest - but they put them on the harvest. It used to be that Christians celebrated the dead in May, but they changed it, at about, like, I don't know, maybe 900 A.D., something like that, they changed it to being on the same day in Europe as Samhain so that they could say look, we're doing the same, we're all doing the same thing together. Maybe you'd like to be a Christian.

[00:08:33] And, so the traditions changed in some ways, because now instead of honoring, sort of, the gods and things like that from before, they were honoring the Christian saints. So, on November 1st, that was called All Saints Day, and that was the day that you honored all the good people that were already going to heaven, and then November 2nd was All Souls Day, when you prayed for the people that weren't quite in heaven yet. So, the day before October 31st was the eve of All Saints or what they called All Hallows in English. All Hallows Eve or Halloween and that's how we get our day of Halloween.

[JL] Now, just like emptying the seeds from a pumpkin before you carve it, [00:09:14] there's a lot of history packed into what Regina Hansen just said. So, let's break it down and go through it. The Celts had special celebrations at the end of October. Other cultures also had festivals like this, to celebrate the harvest, but also to usher in the winter, and honor the dead. These people had their own spiritual beliefs or religions, but people who followed the religion known as Christianity became very powerful and started exploring other parts of the world and settling. And also, trying to spread their religion to these other people who were living in the parts of the world where the Christian explorers and settlers were moving to. One of the ways the Christians tried to get these new people to become Christian was to kind of blend these other holidays - these pagan holidays - into already existing Christian traditions. Christians celebrated something called All Saints Day on November 1st, honoring people who had gone to heaven. [00:10:13] All Saints Day was sometimes also called All Hallows Day. Hallow means holy, so the day before All Hallows Day, or All Saints Day, was All Hallows Eve. [00:10:25] Think about how words sometimes get shortened and joined together, like, instead of saying "do not", you might say "don't". Or instead of "we will", [00:10:36] you can say "we'll". Well, that's how we got from "Hallows Eve" to "Halloween". All Hallows Eve, the day before All Hallows Day, became Halloween. And, some of the traditions we still have for Halloween first became familiar in this holiday known as All Hallows Eve.

[00:10:56] [RH] They lit fires, they lit candles, they made special lanterns out of turnips that they poked holes in, and they carved faces on them to scare away the evil spirits. They made noises, like, with bells and banging pots and pans and things like that, to scare away the evil spirits. [00:11:13] And, they also honored the dead and gave them gifts, like, there were these things in the middle ages called soul cakes, which are kind of like cookies ... that people would dress up like they were the souls of the dead and they go around "souling" and then people would give them these cookies to make them go away, basically.

[00:11:30] [JL] Ah, hah. So, that's sort of the start of trick-or-treating, and maybe even the start of what, today, we now think of as dressing up. And, I mean, very different kinds of dress up because today, we're doing things like dressing like what we might want to be when we grow up, or dressing up like a dinosaur or like a character from *PJ Masks* or your favorite show. But, they were dressing up and getting treats even hundreds of years ago.

[00:11:54] [RH] Yeah. And, they just wore whatever they had. You know, even the first Halloween traditions when they came here to America from Europe, people just wore, like, sheets and pillowcases on their head. You know, put holes in them, and that's how you see, like, those ghosts. Like, the ghost looks like a sheet with holes in the eyes and things like that? [00:12:11] That's all. The kind of things that people used to wear when these traditions were beginning.

[JL] Halloween, at least as we know it in the United States, was brought to the country by immigrants - people who moved here from other places.

[00:12:24] [RH] So, immigrants from Ireland and Scotland and places like that, came over with their tradition, which was much more wild than the tradition that kids celebrate today, and they used to actually play a lot of pranks, and things like that. They came over here and they brought their tradition with them, and also people from certain Christian traditions, like Catholicism and Episcopalians and things like that, they brought their religious element over with them, too, so that they would have church on All Saints Day and they would pray for the dead and pray for the dead on Old Souls Day and things like that. [00:12:55] But, at the same time, there's also this old tradition of people going around making mischief on Halloween, on October 31st.

[JL] When Halloween changed into a celebration focused on children, and away from a wild, crazy night favored by young men, it started to take on a different kind of feeling. And it also became a holiday that candy makers got involved in. We're talking late 1800's, early 1900's, now.

[00:13:22] [RH] That was around the time, maybe the early 20th century, where they actually started making commercial candy, like, companies started making candy specifically for Halloween. And also, there started to be Halloween decorations that you could buy in stores ... Halloween cards that you could buy in stores. So, really, part of it was trying to tame the sort of wild element of Halloween, but also, was a good way for companies to make money.

[00:13:45] [JL] So, yes, Halloween has become a big moneymaker for companies. They sell costumes and candy, greeting cards and decorations. Those kinds of things can sometimes make adults roll their eyes, [00:13:57] but, a lot of adults really like Halloween, too.

[RH] Halloween really is for everybody. If we want to celebrate it as a religious holiday, [00:14:05] I think that's great. If you want to celebrate it as just totally for fun, and just for kids, that's great, and even nowadays, even grownups, many grownups have gone back to celebrating Halloween as a way to bring out the part of them that, maybe they hide during the year or maybe, they always wished they were a rock star, or maybe they always feel like a butterfly one day, they feel like being a butterfly, you know? They get to dress up like a butterfly on Halloween. And so it's also like that, too.

[JL] Coming up, we'll carve in to some of the other Halloween traditions like Jack-o'-lanterns.

[00:14:40] This is *But Why: A Podcast For Curious Kids*. I'm Jane Lindholm, and today we're talking about how Halloween came to be a holiday, with Professor Regina Hansen.

Halloween is celebrated all over the United States and Canada, and in some parts of Europe it's sometimes celebrated now, kind of a reverse of how it originally arrived from Europe. We've now exported it back to the U.K. and other places in Europe, and other countries have different but somewhat similar traditions around this time of year. In Mexico and some other Latin American countries, people celebrate El Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, when people honor and remember loved ones who have died, a lot like all Saints Day and All Souls Day. Other religions and cultures also have days honoring the dead, though they don't always fall on or around October 31st and November 1st. We're learning about some of the history behind this Halloween tradition today. So, what about carving pumpkins? Let's dig in to that favorite activity right now.

[00:15:43] [Matthew] My name is Matthew, I am seven years old. I live in Shorewood, Wisconsin. Why do we make Jack-O'-Lanterns?

[00:15:52] [Jacey] Hi, my name is Jacey. I come from Hilton, New York. I am nine and my question is, why do people carve out pumpkins on Halloween?

[00:16:07] [JL] This is one of my favorite stories because again, it's got a mystery to it, and although it's interesting because light is very important in ALL of the traditions around the harvest and around honoring the dead, the Jack-o'-lanterns specifically started with the Celts. They would carve creepy faces into turnips and they'd put a coal inside it. They'd walk around with these lanterns and it was supposed to scare away the spirits of the dead, just like I said before. But, also, this continued when Halloween and All Saints Day became a religious holiday, people kept doing that. It's one of the traditions that has been kept all the way along the line from the beginning of when it used to be called Samhain. But when the immigrants came to America ... two things: there weren't as many turnips, because people just didn't eat turnips, but there were lots of pumpkins and pumpkins are much, much easier to carve –

[JL] Because they're bigger, they're rounder, and they're hollow.

[RH] Exactly! And they make such a nice light, too, and they smell so good, so it was, like, well, you know, a good trade.

[JL] Right. And, you can roast the seeds and eat them. I mean, so many good things.

[RH] Oh, it's awesome, right? And then you can make a pie afterwards. That's what I do.

There's a mystery about why they call it a Jack-o'-lantern. Some people say that it's because of an Irish story where there was a guy who couldn't get into heaven or hell, so he has to walk the earth and he carries a lantern with a face on it. So, that's one of the reasons why people say, but there are other reasons, too. But yeah, pumpkins are a lot easier to work with and I think that's the main reason why we have pumpkin Jack-o'-lanterns now, instead of turnip Jack-o'-lanterns.

[JL] While we're on the subject of pumpkins, [00:17:38] Sydney from Skokie, Illinois has a question.

[00:17:41] [Sydney] I am 5 years old and my question is, where do pumpkins come from?

[00:17:45] [JL] Pumpkins are indigenous to North, Central and South America. I've mentioned that word indigenous and other episodes. It means "native to" or "originally from". So, pumpkins come from the Americas. Pumpkins have been cultivated for a long time, meaning grown specifically by humans, instead of just growing wild. Pumpkins are a member of the cucurbit or gourd family. The same plant family as squash, cucumbers and watermelons. We usually think of pumpkins as orange and roundish, but pumpkins are basically just a kind of squash, and there are lots of different kinds of squash - white or green, lumpy or smooth. Some are grown to be big and hollow for carving, and some are fleshy and sweet, for making pies. Some are grown to be huge. Where I live, and maybe where some of you live, there are competitions to see who can grow the biggest pumpkin. These pumpkins can't even be picked up by just one person. They're carried to a county fair on a big truck and sometimes picked up and moved by forklifts. This fall, a man in New Hampshire grew the biggest pumpkin ever recorded in North America. It weighed 2,528 pounds. That's the weight of about 36 average 10-year-olds. One pumpkin. Thirty-six 10-year-olds. The biggest pumpkin ever recorded in the world was grown a couple of years ago by a man in Belgium and it weighed about a hundred pounds more. Pumpkins are now grown all over the world and most of them are grown for eating, not carving or winning competitions. Before we leave Halloween behind, there's something to think about when you're dressing up in costumes and going trick-or-treating. You're taking part in a very ancient celebration.

[00:19:37] [RH] It's fine however you celebrate it, but I think it adds to the richness and excitement and mystery of it if we remember its roots, because it's in some ways, I think, very exciting and fun to know that people were doing some of the things that we do now, even a thousand years ago.

[00:19:55] [JL] What if, like me, you don't really like things that feel scary? [00:20:00] Do you have advice for people like me, who find Halloween a little bit creepy, about how to maybe think about it in a way that will make us feel more comfortable?

[00:20:09] [RH] Yeah, I think a good way to think about Halloween, and this is - also the ancient Celts did this - you know, you don't have to watch scary movies and things like that to enjoy Halloween. I think you can think about it as a celebration of the harvest, and happily make your pie and your pumpkin spice and all the things that people enjoy. Think about it as a way to get cozy before the beginning of winter. [00:20:32] I also would mention that there are some families that don't celebrate Halloween at all, and they have reasons for that. And we should respect those as well, and don't make children who aren't celebrating Halloween feel bad because they don't.

[00:20:44] [JL] That was Boston University professor, Regina Hansen, answering all of your Halloween questions. And, as she said, some families don't celebrate Halloween by choice. And for some of you listening, you might live in countries that don't celebrate Halloween at all. So, what do you think of this strange holiday? If you have a question for us, have an adult record you and send your question to questions@butwhykids.org.

[00:21:07] We'll do our best to get an answer for you.

Special thanks this week to Regina Hansen. *But Why* is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio. [00:21:20] Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.