

Hallowe'en in America

by Ruth Edna Kelley *from The Book of Hallowe'en*

The Book of Hallowe'en was published in 1919 and described Halloween customs around the world. This passage is about how the holiday was celebrated then.

While the original customs of Hallowe'en are being forgotten more and more across the ocean, Americans have fostered them, and are making this an occasion something like what it must have been in its best days overseas. All Hallowe'en customs in the United States are borrowed directly or adapted from those of other countries. All superstitions, everyday ones, and those pertaining to Christmas and New Year's, have special value on Hallowe'en.

It is a night of ghostly and merry revelry. Mischievous spirits choose it for carrying off gates and other objects, and hiding them or putting them out of reach.

Bags filled with flour sprinkle the passers-by. Door-bells are rung and mysterious raps sounded on doors, things thrown into halls, and knobs stolen. Such sports mean no more at Hallowe'en than the tricks played the night before the Fourth of July have to do with the Declaration of Independence.

Hallowe'en parties are the real survival of the ancient merrymakings. They are prepared for in secret. Guests are not to divulge the fact that they are invited. Often they come masked, as ghosts or witches.

The decorations make plain the two elements of the festival. For the centerpiece of the table there may be a hollowed pumpkin, filled with apples and nuts and other fruits of harvest, or a pumpkin-chariot drawn by field-mice. So it is clear that this is a harvest-party, like Pomona's feast. In the coach rides a witch, representing the other element, of magic and prophecy. Jack-o'-lanterns, with which the room is lighted, are hollowed pumpkins with candles inside. The candle-light shines through holes cut like features. So the lantern becomes a bogey, and is held up at a window to frighten those inside. Corn-stalks from the garden stand in clumps about the room. A frieze of witches on broomsticks, with cats, bats, and owls surmounts the fireplace, perhaps. A full moon shines over all, and a caldron on a tripod holds fortunes tied in nut-shells. The prevailing colors are yellow and black: a deep yellow is the color of most ripe grain and fruit; black stands for black magic and demoniac influence. Ghosts and skulls and cross-bones, symbols of death, startle the beholder. Since Hallowe'en is a time for lovers to learn their fate, hearts and other sentimental tokens are used to good effect, as the Scotch lads of Burns's time wore love-knots.

Having marched to the dining-room to the time of a dirge, the guests find before them plain, hearty fare; doughnuts, gingerbread, cider, popcorn, apples, and nuts honored by time. The Hallowe'en cake has held the place of honor since the beginning here in America. A ring, key, thimble, penny, and button baked in it foretell respectively speedy marriage, a journey, spinsterhood, wealth, and

bachelorhood.

The kitchen is the best place for the rough games and after-supper charms.

On the stems of the apples which are to be dipped for may be tied names; for the boys in one tub, for the girls in another. Each searcher of the future must draw out with his teeth an apple with a name which will be like that of his future mate.

A variation of the Irish snap-apple is a hoop hung by strings from the ceiling, round which at intervals are placed bread, apples, cakes, peppers, candies, and candles. The strings are twisted, then let go, and as the hoop revolves, each may step up and get a bite from whatever comes to him. By the taste he determines what the character of his married life will be,—whether wholesome, acid, soft, fiery, or sweet. Whoever bites the candle is twice unfortunate, for he must pay a forfeit too. An apple and a bag of flour are placed on the ends of a stick, and whoever dares to seize a mouthful of apple must risk being blinded by flour. Apples are suspended one to a string in a doorway. As they swing, each guest tries to secure his apple. To blow out a candle as it revolves on a stick requires attention and accuracy of aim.

The one who first succeeds in threading a needle as he sits on a round bottle on the floor, will be first married. Twelve candles are lighted, and placed at convenient distances on the floor in a row. As the guest leaps over them, the first he blows out will indicate his wedding-month. One candle only placed on the floor and blown out in the same way means a year of wretchedness ahead. If it still burns, it presages a year of joy.

Questions

1. Name one activity or feature of the Halloween customs in the past that is similar to Halloween customs today.
2. Name one activity or feature of the Halloween customs in the past that is not common today or is different today.
3. What does *presage* mean here: "If it still burns, it presages a year of joy."?
4. Does the party from the past sound fun to you? Why or why not?