

## Exploring heritage led to fun Halloween facts

**By Timothy Linscott**

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Halloween is just around the corner and it is one of my favorite times of year—but maybe for unconventional reasons.

My heritage is Irish and in my youth I really wanted to study and learn about where my family came from and the traditions around the culture of my roots.

Over the years I have learned that Halloween is an Irish holiday. It was originally called Samhain (pronounced sow-in). Gaelic is a very hard language to figure out (another example is 'Erin Go Bragh' means 'Ireland Forever.' Erin=Ireland).

The tradition began in the time of the Druids, or leaders in clans in Ireland that acted as doctors, clergy, sages and scientists, before Christianity was established.

These Druids believed that the spirit world and the world of the living came close together on Samhain, the Druid New Year. Samhain means 'summer's end' and was not only a time for the end of harvest, but a feast of celebration and a chance to spend time with deceased spirits of loved ones—and of evil spirits, fairies and creatures such as the Pooka.

The Pooka is an ancient Irish myth about a shape-changing creature that could bring good or bad luck.

If you treated the Pooka with respect, good fortune was bestowed upon you, if you did not, then evil would come upon you and your family. Many farmers left a share of crops in the field, the 'Pooka's share,' to appease the creature.

Once Christianity came into the country the clergy began converting the pagans. They incorporated All Saints Day (Nov. 1) and the night before, All Hallows Eve (Halloween) into the culture. Eventually the old ways died and gave way to the Christian ways, but some of the traditions lived on and evolved into what we do today for Halloween.

One of those traditions is dressing in costumes.

The Druids would dress as a tree or animal to fool the spirits. They could carry on their activities for Samhain without the spirits bothering them. This eventually led to the wearing of costumes as part of the celebration, which is still adhered to today.

An offering of food was left outside to appease the goblins, fairies and not-so-nice spirits, which eventually became trick-or-treating.

A candle was left in the window to call the dead home. A table setting would be set with food on it for the dearly departed to come have one more meal with the family.

Halloween was a time for preparing for the future. Colcannon (potatoes, cabbage and milk) or a soda bread would have different objects baked inside. Whomever received the piece of bread or plate of Colcannon with the surprise would have their future foretold. A ring would mean marriage, a coin wealth, a thimble spinsterhood.

A pot of water would be set out and wax from a candle would be poured through the back of a key, and whatever shape the wax formed in the water told the future of the participants of the game. The eldest in the household, usually a grandparent, would 'read' what the shapes were to the rest of the family.

A great bonfire and feast culminated the evening. All debts were to be paid and children would be rewarded with nuts and apples. Today the nuts and apples have been replaced with candy bars and trinkets.

Some of these traditions I do for my family as a means of connecting them to their past. It puts a unique spin on the holiday and strips away a bit of the commercialism that I think has crept into all holidays. There are deep Christian traditions associated with Halloween in Ireland and I tend to follow those.

Yes, I am aware Christmas decorations are already up, don't get me started on that. The entire holiday needs to be taken back to its roots, a celebration of the birth of Christ., but I digress.

Halloween, for me, is a time to reflect on the past and pay homage to my heritage.