

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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Halloween traditions passed down
by Joe Getty

Halloween reminiscences always lead to a discussion of trickery and practical jokes. As a child growing up in Manchester, I always heard stories from other boys about their favorite Halloween prank. In the 1960s, soaping up car windows and throwing corn on the porches of those who refused to provide treats was especially widespread.

Years later when I interviewed older generations of Manchester residents, I found that Halloween pranks are part of an oral tradition passed to each generation of the community. The jokes that my friends enjoyed were the same or similar to those of their fathers before them, and probably their fathers' fathers before that.

Weaving black thread into an imitation cobweb across the sidewalk was always successful in jolting unsuspecting pedestrians. A "tic-tac" was a popular prank for un-nerving the neighborhood ogre. It was made by suspending a weight from a long dark thread tied to a thumbtack placed on the sash of the living room window. Under cover from a distance, the weight could be tapped gently against the window to distract the homeowner. It always resulted in a disturbance that required the homeowner to make several trips outside to determine what was making that confounded noise.

Turn-of-the-century newspapers frequently described the treating as well as the tricking of Halloween. Household technology of the 20th century has eliminated the most popular of Halloween pranks – neighborhood boys enjoyed knocking over the outhouses in town, sometimes timing the prank for when the outhouse was occupied.

The excitement of young children attired in costumes for Halloween parties is also recorded in the newspapers. Traditional refreshments at a Carroll County Halloween party would include pumpkin pie, gingerbread, cider, apples and homemade candy.

I have a photograph of a New Windsor Halloween party that my father attended in the late 1920s. It displays the homemade costumes that nine children wore to Edgar Nusbaum's house on High Street in New Windsor.

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In my household, a traditional Halloween treat was my father's reciting of "Little Orphan Annie" by James Whitcomb Riley. Sitting around the dinner table, we kids were fascinated by the story of bad children and goblins. It was a story that my father would tell when called upon throughout the year, but it was especially appropriate at Halloween.

It's a family tradition that was probably practiced by his father before him, and perhaps his grandfather before that. And now, my children get chills when I tell them about:

"Little Orphant Annie

To all the little children: - The happy ones; and sad ones;
The sober and the silent ones; the boisterous and glad ones;
The good ones – Yes, the good ones too; and all the lovely bad ones.
Little Orphant Annie's come to our house to stay,
An' wash the cups an' saucers up, an' brush the crumbs away,
An' shoo the chickens off the porch, an' dust the hearth, an' sweep.
An' make the fire, an' bake the bread, an' earn her board-an'-keep;
An' all us other children, when the supper-things is done,
We set around the kitchen fires an' has the mostest fun
A-list'nin to the witch-tales' at Annie tells about,
An' the Gobble-uns' at gits you
Ef you
Don't
Watch
Out!

"Wunst they wuz a little boy wouldn't say his prayers, –
An' when he went to bed at night, away up-stairs,
His Mammy heerd him holler, an' his Daddy heerd him bawl,
An' when they turn't the kivvers down, he wuzn't there at all!
An' they seeked him in the rafter-room, an' cubby-hole, an' press,
An' seeked him up the chimbly-flue, an' ever'-wheres, I guess;
But all they ever found wuz thist his pants an' roundabout: –
An' the Gobble-uns'll git you
Ef you
Don't
Watch
Out!

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"An' one time a little gir 'ud allus laugh an' grin,
An' make fun of ever' one, an' all her blood-an'-kin;
An' wunst, when they was 'company,' an' ole folks wuz there,
She mocked 'em an' shocked 'em, an' said she didn't care!
An' thist as she kicked her heels, an' turn't to run an' hide,
They wuz two great big Black Things a-standin' by her side,
An' they snatched her through the ceilin' 'fore she knowed what she's about!
An' the Gobble-uns'll get you
Ef you
Don't
Watch
Out!

"An' little Orphant Annie says, when the blaze is blue,
An' the lamp-wick sputters, an' the winds goes woo-oo!
An' you hear the crickets quit, an' the moon is gray,
An' the lightnin'-bugs in dew is all squenched away, –
You better mind yer parunts, an' yer teachurs fond an' dear,
An' churish them 'at loves you, an' dry the orphant's tear,
An' he'p the pore an' needy ones' at clusters all about,
Er the Gobble-uns'll git you
Ef you
Don't
Watch
Out!"

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: A Halloween party at Edgar Nusbaum's house on High Street in New Windsor in the late 1920s.