

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



A spooky display of pumpkins appears out of thin air. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Halloween Ramble

Visits to the neighborhood pumpkin patch, scary movies, trick-or-treating, and more recollections of the season.

By J. Morton Galetto

I'd like to share a ramble of some Halloween memories (emphasis on "ramble") and I hope that some may resonate with you.

From the time I was a toddler our family tradition was to select a pumpkin a couple of weeks before Halloween. My sister and parents and I would go to a farm and pick out a pumpkin or two. I always wanted the biggest one the field had to offer. To temper

our enthusiasm my father had a rule that you could choose a large one but you needed to be able to carry it back to the trunk of the car.

Since I was young at the time I'm not sure how big the pumpkins that I selected actually were, but to me they seemed enormous. When we got home it was my father's job to scoop out the seeds from the interior. I know his arm was often in up to his elbow so I suspect the final choice wasn't too shabby.

We would draw a typical face – triangular nose and eyes and a toothy grin. Never anything scary or devilish since I couldn't even watch a 1931 Frankenstein movie with Boris Karloff without a blanket over my head. If I watched too much of it I would have nightmares. In that era there was a host of Dracula movies as well. Frankenstein used to be played around Halloween, just as the Wizard of Oz was played annually on American commercial network television from 1959-1991, between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

In our late 20s my husband and I led a children's group; together we planned a haunted house in which the teen members dressed up to give a mild scare to the smaller children. We borrowed reel-to-reel

movies: the Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954), and Frankenstein; from the Cumberland County Library. The little children laughed themselves silly because the old special effects were so inferior to those of the 90s. I wondered how it was that I was so frightened, while they were totally amused.

Our family never liked "scary" but that is not to say we weren't devilish. One year the children who tried to make toilet paper streamers on the trees in our front yard were lacking in technique, so my father accompanied a group of mischievous boys to show them how to toss rolls of paper over tree limbs for a better effect. Dad had a good arm and many of the streamers stayed perched up high well into November. The mothers in the neighborhood gave dad a good scolding; in his late thirties he was a handsome fellow and I suspect that most of them just wanted to interact with him!

This year I have already seen at least three ten-foot-tall lawn skeletons, complete with moving eyes! I looked up what they cost and found pricing beginning at \$300. We thought buying candy bars at five cents a piece was extravagant!

Speaking of which, I'm not certain when they downsized candy bars or declared that

children after having eaten candy “bounced off the walls.” But when I was young we would go door to door in a modest neighborhood to trick-or-treat, and our candy bars were ten times larger than those offered today; furthermore we filled two large shopping bags! Real booty. I can’t say we ate them with any restraint, either; it was an all-out feeding frenzy. [Yet we all survived the holiday].

Let’s go back to pumpkins, shall we?

How did these large orange squash become associated with Halloween? Their tradition apparently began in the British Isles. In Irish lore a character named Stingy Jack tricked the Devil for personal profit. When Jack died the Lord refused him entrance into heaven and denied him access to hell; an earthly purgatory was his sentence. His continual prowls caused people to carve demonic faces in turnips to frighten him away. Irish immigrants brought this tradition to the United States.



Carved Irish Jack-O-Lantern, a turnip. Photo: Carnegie Museum of Natural History – support Carnegie.

Scientists have traced the origins of pumpkins in North America to about 9000 years ago. Seeds have been found in Mexico and were dated between 7000-5550 B.C.. Indigenous people of North America grew pumpkins long before the cultivation of corn or beans.



Pumpkins are native to the Americas. Brassie's Farm Market in Vineland has a host of pumpkins to select from for your holiday arrangement. Photo: Michele Borek.

I still pretty much swear off all things scary
and candy is now judiciously hidden from

me, only to be doled out with some prodding. But pumpkins have continued to play a role in our autumn décor.

Being from a glass town, for many years we have had a special interest in handblown glass pumpkins. By the looks of the line at WheatonArts Annual Craft Festival's pumpkin patch, we are not alone. Hundreds of glass pumpkins are sold from atop haybales on which are perched these iconic squash, of all sizes, shapes, and colors, over two days' time.

This past weekend I worked with Skitch Manon, a local glass artisan of Working Man Handmade. Pumpkins are a staple for him this time of year, and no one is better at blowing them out. Skitch had set up his own patch in Millville, outside of his studio on Mays Landing and Hance Bridge Roads.



I asked him if he would lead me through the process so that I could make my own pumpkin. I use the word "lead" loosely, but I did get to gather the glass, roll it out on a marver table, and press it into an optic mold. I also blew out the bubble of glass. I come from a long line of glass manufacturers, engineers, and artisans, and this exercise of taking molten glass to form an object I

consider to be part of my DNA. But it was still a little scary shaping a blistering hot object.



The pumpkin that our columnist made with the expert help of glass artist Skitch Manion. Photo: J. Morton Galetto and P. Galetto.

So no matter what traditions you have at Halloween I hope it is safe, fun, and not completely without that scary touch!

(scroll for sources)

Sources

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Why do We Carve Pumpkins at Halloween?
www.britannica.com