

Pumpkins, Turnips & Halloween



Stephen G. Saupe

Biology Department

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

Collegeville, MN 56321

612-363-2782; 612-363-3202 (fax); ssaupe@csbsju.edu

Ireland is famous for many things including crystal, linen, horses, woolen sweaters, shamrocks and my personal favorite, Guinness Stout, a very dark beer prepared from caramelized malt. Another well-known Irish export is Halloween, which arrived in the United States in the 19th century during the massive Irish immigration spurred by the potato famine.

Halloween originated as a pre-Christian celebration of the Celtic New Year

(November 1st). This festival, called *Samhain* (pronounced

Sah-ween), celebrated the harvest of the crops and the preparation for winter. At this time, spirits, including ghosts, fairies, and goblins, were believed to mingle with the living on their journey to the "otherworld." The early pagans lit bonfires to help the spirits find their way and left out food to placate the spirits.

The early missionaries tried to rid Ireland of this non-Christian holiday. Try as they might, they had little success. In response, the church tried a different strategy. They reasoned that if a Catholic holy day was set on the same day as *Samhain*, the pagans would soon forget the original purpose of their celebration and adopt the Christian one. Thus, November 1st was designated as All Saint's Day, also called "All Hallows," in honor of Christian saints without a special day.

The Irish weren't easily fooled. They continued to

celebrate the new year in their traditional way on the evening before All Saint's Day, or in other words, on All Hallows Eve, which eventually became

"Halloween." In the 9th century the church added another holy day, All Soul's Day (November 2nd), during which the living pray for the souls of the dead. The church hoped

that this holiday would be more

philosophically aligned to the Celtic celebration. Ultimately this strategy worked, resulting in a secularized Halloween celebration lacking the vestiges of its pagan roots.

The tradition of trick-or-treating presumably arose when people symbolically mimicked the journeys of the spirits and went door to door dressed as goblins, ghosts and fairies seeking food and drink.

Pumpkins are a relatively late addition to Halloween. The quintessential symbol of Halloween, the Jack O'Lantern, was originally prepared from a turnip or rutabaga, two common Old-World vegetables. Pumpkins evolved and were domesticated in the New World, probably in Mexico. Thus, pumpkins didn't arrive in Ireland, or elsewhere in the Old World, until after the voyages of Columbus opened the Americas for botanical exploration.



Figure 1. A turnip ripe for carving

For many years I was dubious that turnips or rutabagas could be carved into a lantern. Though I wasn't familiar with rutabagas, every turnip that I had seen was solid inside and would have presented quite a challenge to hollow out. That is, until my wife grew some turnips to feed to our sheep. Linda planted the seeds early in the spring and allowed the plants to grow all season. By late fall, we harvested a small mountain of humongous turnips (**Figure 1**). When I cut one open the interior was spongy, not hard and solid as I had expected from my encounters with the smaller store-bought versions (**Figure 2**). Naturally I tried carving a lantern from one and realized that it was relatively simple. Obviously, the Irish knew what they were doing!



Figure 2. Spongy core of a turnip

As Irish legend has it, Jack's lantern takes its name from a clever blacksmith, not surprisingly named Jack, who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for becoming a master craftsman. Jack was happy with his newfound skill and bragged quite a bit about it. Jesus and Saint Peter paid him a visit and asked him to "cool it" and be humbler. Saint Peter even offered him three wishes in the hopes that Jack would use them to ask for eternal happiness in heaven. Jack surprised Saint Peter by wishing that if a person climbed his pear tree they would be stuck there until he gave them permission to come down. His other wishes were similar but involved sitting in a chair or changing into a coin in a purse. When the devil came to collect his soul, Jack tricked the devil into climbing the pear tree. Jack let the devil down in exchange for seven more years. This was repeated with the chair and purse. When Jack finally died, Saint Peter refused to let him through the pearly gates because he had misused his wishes. The devil didn't want anything to do with Jack either. Just as the devil was closing the gates to Hell, Jack scooped up a burning ember in a turnip he had been eating. This lantern serves to light his way as Jack wanders the earth waiting for his judgement day.

For a full version of this story, check out the essay I wrote from the CSB/SJU faculty journal *Symposium* (Saupe, 2002), which was later renamed *Headwaters*.