

Taking a Look

at

Halloween

Taking a Look
at
Halloween

by

Fred South
Prophetstown Area Historical Society
November 2024

Introduction

This past Halloween I got to thinking about, well, Halloween and how it has change through the years. It was commonly known as “Trick or Treat” time. If the kids got no “treat,” then a “trick” would follow, at least that was the idea. Customs have varied through the years and things have changed a bit. When I went trick or treating in the 1950’s we could trust all of our neighbors to give us treats that were safe – no pins in the candy bars and nothing dangerous in the popcorn balls. Parents have to be more careful today.

In Miles City, Montana, where I grew up, the night before Halloween was called “gate night.” Then most homes had a fence around the yard with an entry gate or two. Those who were so inclined would remove a gate from one fence and place it on another fence, or hang it from a flag pole, etc. there were a variety of things you could do with a detached gate.

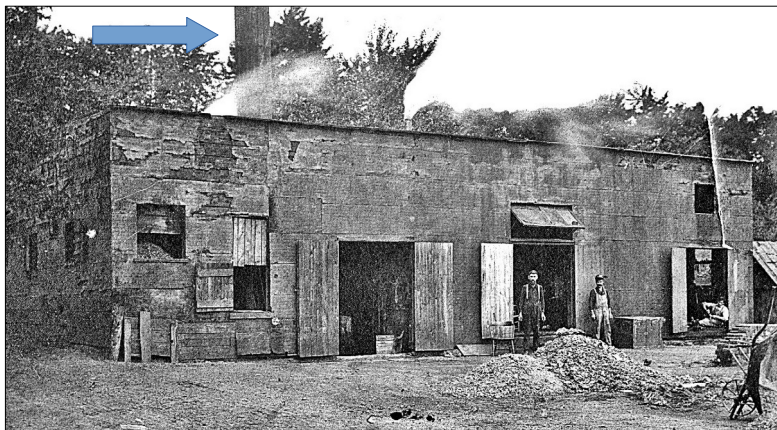
What you will read here are some memories about how Halloween used to be. Carl O. Swanson and Eleanor Brewer were elderly Prophetstown residents when they wrote down their memories and I, also an elderly Prophetstown resident, will recall some more of my Halloween experiences.

I remember When by Carl O. Swanson:

In the early part of this century there was one trick performed on a Halloween night that has never been solved, as to who did it or how it was done. Perry Kempster and Perry Arnett operated a hardware store and also sold farm machinery for the Moline Plow Company. The Plow Company's trademark was a "Flying Dutchman." The emblem was a man about six feet tall and made of steel with spread out wings painted red, white and blue. It stood in front of the store fastened to a post. One Halloween night it was removed and taken to the Electric Light Plant and placed on top of a 40 foot steel smokestack.



What you see here is the "Flying Dutchman" mentioned in the above story. I included the one on the left so you can see what the colors were like. The one on the right would have been in color. The thing that puzzled everyone was that the 40 foot smoke stack on the electric plant was made of metal with no way to climb it. Yet, someone got the Dutchman to the top and left him there. You can see the bottom of the stack in the picture below. This was our original electric plant on W. Railroad Street, across from what is now the funeral home.



I Remember When by Carol O. Swanson:

There were many houses in town years ago that had outside window blinds, and one trick on Halloween was to tie one end of a string to a blind and go to the other end of the string and rub it back and forth with a chunk of rosin to make the blinds rattle. The people inside would walk around the house carrying kerosene lamps trying to locate the noise. When they got to the right window the noise stopped. That was great sport. I was in on it.

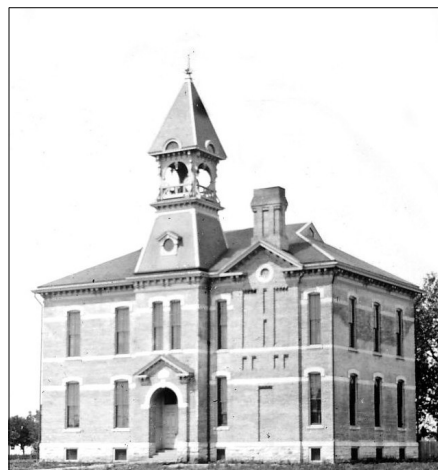
On the morning after Halloween a lumber wagon stood in the hall at the old school. The boys had taken it all apart outside and carried the parts inside and put together again. That must have been a lot of hard work.

Before automobiles, gasoline was sold in grocery stores in one, two and five gallon cans. The gasoline was shipped in large wooden barrels. There were two boys, Wilbur and Gerald Garrison, brothers of May Hotskiss, that were always looking for a thrill. They lived upstairs in a building that stood where the Texaco station is now. There was an empty gasoline barrel in back of a store where the Walker's parking lot is presently. They removed the large plug from the barrel and lit a 25 cent cannon fire cracker and dropped it into the barrel and ran away from it. The barrel almost instantly went into the air as high as the one story building. No one was hurt and no damage done.

Halloween was a time looked forward to by some of the boys. The boys got one window open at the school and one boy was helped up through the window and he got into the library where there was a door that led to a winding stairway to the belfry. We tied a heavy cord to the arm of the bell, threw the ball of cord over the railing to the ground. They then carried the ball unrolling it to the west side of the Warner house right west of the present Lutheran Church and rang the bell so people all over town could hear it. Finally, the cop, John Lewis, walked down to the school and stood on the ground begging whoever was up there to stop ringing the bell and come down, but there was nobody up there. The boys told about it the next morning

I Remember When by Eleanor Brewer:

Halloween was also lots more fun when I was little than it is now. It was really doing tricks, such as moving a chair from a front porch a block or two away. It was all tricks and no choice of "trick or treat" as it is nowadays. The day after Halloween, we were anxious to get out and see the tricks that had been played. Usually there were several outhouses pushed over. Hank Camp's little house up above the road to Lyndon, was often pushed over. Hank Camp was a very large man who had no visible means of support. I often wondered how he had room for a bed in his tiny little house. After one Halloween, a cow was found in the assembly room at the high school. Needless to say, there was no school the next day. I never did learn how the fellows got that cow up that long flight of stairs. I am sure that my brothers could have told me.



This was the old 1881 brick school that sat in what is now the Prophetstown grade school play ground. The new grade school was built while this one was still standing. Here you can see the belfry spoken of above. The other events mentioned above took place here, as well.

Some of my memories:

My dad, Vern south, was a teenager in southeast Nebraska in the 1920's. Back then most every family had an outhouse. If you have never used one of these, you have missed one of life's most unforgettable experiences. In the summer they were blistering hot and in the winter, during the really cold weather, you could get frost bite on a part of your anatomy that least needed it. Anyway, it was great sport for kids on Halloween to upset the little buildings. Dad said that in his Nebraska town the kids would go up and down the alley, upsetting every outhouse on the block. But they made a mistake by going in the same direction each year. One fellow had quite enough of their prank, so went out after dark and moved his out house about 4 feet away from the direction the kids came. Being a very dark night they could not see the situation and ended up in the hole standing in about 3 feet of you know what.

Another thing the pranksters did back then was place a "Tic-Tac" on a house. One Halloween Dad told my brother and I how to do it, giving every detail. Mom was not pleased. "Delmar!" she said, "you shouldn't tell the kids about that." Dad's name was Vernon Delmar. In the family he was always called Del or Delmar. Everyone else called him Vern or Vernon. My brother, Carroll, and I thought it would be fun to place a tic-tac on our neighbor's house. In those days people used wood-frame storm windows and screens, changing them as the seasons changed. So we got a nail and wedged it between the wooden storm window frame and the outside window trim, after having tied a piece of black nylon fishing line to that nail. We retreated to the bushes between our house and theirs, pulled the string tight and began to rub the string with rosin. In a short time the lights went out in the room and they began to look out of the window. Immediately we stopped the process. In a while the lights went back on and we again rubbed the rosin on the string. This time they came out the back door, walked to that window and gave it look. Of course, when the back door opened we stopped the process. Not seeing anything, they went back into the house. The black string they could not see at night and the nail was positioned way above their heads. Once inside we started rubbing the rosin again. A few minutes later the cop car pulled up in front of the house. We gave the string a pull, out came the nail and we hightailed it into our house. They never did find out what had happened, but am sure they talked about it more than once. When we tried it out we found that the person inside heard what sounded like rusty nails being pulled out of wood and it was very loud. Needless to say, mother was not happy, but Carroll and I thought it was a hoot!

I began my teaching career in Prophetstown in August 1964. Later that fall, about Halloween time, we arrived home late one Friday night to find the tree in our front yard draped in toilet paper. Leaving the lights off I removed all of it before going to bed. On the following Monday my home room class students acted quite different. I noticed a lot of whispering, with glances my way. Finally, one of the students approached me and asked if I had noticed anything different at my house on Saturday morning. "No," I said, "when I went our Saturday morning every thing looked normal. Why do you ask?"

Then what happened was most interesting. They began blaming each other for thinking better of what they had done, going over later Friday night and removing the toilet paper. By noon I had discovered who the perpetrators were. There was no punishment given, for I had outfoxed them and enjoyed every minute of it.

In 1965 we moved from our house on Riverside Drive to a house on Lafayette Street. That Halloween the kids soaped our windows, something that was done in Montana where I grew up. They would rub something like Ivory bar soap on the glass, rub it all over or place a large X on the glass or writing something. We found the best thing to take it off was a single edge razor blade. It scrapped the film right off the glass; no water needed.

About 1980 one of our local policemen wrote this thank you to Prophetstown young people:

“TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE of Prophetstown I would like to extend my congratulations. This Halloween was probably the most orderly in the many years I have served on the Prophetstown Police Dept. Certainly there were a few problems but not nearly as many as in past years. As for me, I am convinced there has been a change for the better in the attitude of the town’s young people. I think they are beginning to realize that the property they damage today is the same property they will have damaged for THEM when they become adults, homeowners and taxpayers. Vandalism to public buildings and the like generally comes from those young people who have not yet come to realize the connection between themselves and the welfare of the community and country. Those of you who now realize that relationship, and it seems to me that group is in the majority, should continue to try and explain it to those younger than yourselves. If you don’t, and the younger kids grow up thinking it is morally okay to damage or destroy property, keep in mind that it will be your property those younger ones are hurting. Irresponsibility makes everyone a loser and I was happy this Halloween to see that the percentage of responsible young people in this community is steadily on the increase. I thank you for your conduct and request your aid with the coming generations. I may be a cop but that certainly doesn’t make me your enemy.” Bob Farran