

## Halloween in Olden Times

By Harold Appel

Halloween, as it is observed in the 1990s along Palomino Drive, Eugene, is vastly different from what it was in the little town of LaCrosse during the 1920s, when I was a lad. Halloween, along with its predecessor night, "Clothesline Night in those years was a time for spooks, goblins, and parties for some, but also a time for mischief-makin', deviltry and down-right hell-raising for others. Some of the pranks pulled off then under the guise of fun would not get you an "A" in deportment.

When we were school youngsters, my younger brothers Don, Cal, and I were granted the privilege to go out together with our friends on Halloween night on the condition that our older sister, Frances, was sent along to see that we stayed out of trouble and that we got home by the 8:30 P.M. deadline set by Mom. For days ahead we busied ourselves making "rattlers" and other devices for creating noise or to scare people out of their wits. Just in case you don't know, a "rattler" is a homemade gadget consisting of a large old-fashioned wood thread spool on which notches have been cut out of the flanges on both ends with a pocket knife; then a strong string is tied firmly to the hub of the spool and its length of four or five feet is wrapped closely around the spool. A loop for the fingers is tied at the end — a tinker-toy stick serves for a spindle on which the spool can turn. Holding this little device by the spindle with one hand and applying just the right pressure against a window pane, while the string is pulled rapidly and firmly with the other hand, can create enough noise and vibration to shake the whole house and stand all the occupants' hairs straight on end. Anyway, that was the theory and the intent.

Each of us, armed with our own version of this tool, and miscellaneous other noise makers, plus a bar of soap for writing or scrawling on windows, sometimes carrying a candle-lighted jack-o-lantern to show the way, and with our faces blackened with a burned cork, and otherwise dressed and looking as ugly as we could, we would set out. Mom would insist that we used only soap to write on windows, and not use candle wax or paraffin, as some other kids did. The soaped windows were easily cleaned up the next day with a little water, she said, whereas gasoline or cleaning solvent had to be used to remove wax, and then the window washed with soap and water. Double trouble.

This was great fun-to make a lot of racket on some unsuspecting neighbor's front porch and then before they could get to the door, we would scurry around to the back to make trouble there, scrawling on the side windows as we went around the house. LaCrosse didn't have a lot of electric power in those times, with only a small street light about every two or three blocks, so it wasn't difficult to go undetected at night from one neighborhood to another. Small chance of getting caught! Porch lights were unheard of. It never occurred to us to demand a treat from anyone — that would be blackmail — nor we wouldn't have taken one if it had been offered — we were only out there to scare people and to be ourselves scared, and by the time of our 8:30 P.M. deadline we were usually ready to head for home. Besides, by this time of the night the teen-agers and older generations were beginning to prowling the streets and their style of Halloween stunts were too rough for us little fellers.

Our house was located at the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Star Avenue and this happened to be one of the few intersections in town where a street light was located. It was mounted high up on a cedar pole. A somewhat dilapidated white picket fence ran along two sides of our yard with a picket gate located right at the front corner. One of my early memories of Halloween is of that gate hanging 20 feet up that light pole the next morning after the Halloween goblins had prowled. I think it was the same year that Pop found one of Elbert Wise's dry team tied in the little barn a block away from our house when he went

there at six in the morning to milk our cow. Dray horses don't give very much milk, and not very willingly. Pop finally found our own cow in another barn on the other side of town along with some other mixed-up animals. This was probably the same morning that an old hack or buggy was found on top of George Hardy's livery barn. Then, there was the time another year when old Dad Smith (the school custodian) found a cow in the principal's office at five o'clock in the morning when he arrived there to commence his day's work. Cows aren't very careful about their personal habits — that office was a MESS!!

The older boys (teenagers on up) and some of the girls, too, observed Halloween by some pretty rough rules in those days. They planned their shenanigans days in advance. As a precaution against hanging themselves by the neck while running full speed in the dark through somebody's unlighted back yard while escaping from the scene of their most recent skullduggery, they would go around the neighborhood the night before Halloween and cut all the clothes-lines in the area where they planned to do their trickery. Hence the name "Clothes-line Night" for the night of October 30<sup>th</sup>. Householders had to be aware of this possibility and needed to take their clothes-lines down in advance. A good watchdog was a help in avoiding some of this property damage.

One of the favorite pranks of the Halloween vandals was the upsetting of outhouses. This was a wide-open field — every home and every business had one, or more, of these handy accommodations. There was no septic tanks or sewers in LaCrosse. The "biffies" were usually of light wooden construction set in place over an open pit dug in the ground, and generally could seat one, two or more patrons at a time, as befit the size of the family it served. They were rated as "one-holer," "two-holer," "two-and-a-half holer" (having two adult and one child size seats), etc. Most of them were located at the back of the property, next to the alley, but facing forward or to one side. Several strong boys, working in unison, could push one of the structures over, and then scatter before being caught. Some care had to be exercised, however, lest one or more, of the pushers stumble into the excavation — Heaven forbid!! To guard against this possibility, the demolition crew sometimes armed themselves with a suitable timber, or push pole, of sufficient length, so that several boys could all push at once without anyone being in danger of falling in. Some home owners did not think this little exercise in boyish frivolity was funny. And some folks even threatened to be waiting with their shotguns at the ready for any pranksters who dared approach their outhouses.

There was one time when old Mr. Bock, who had suffered this upsetting indignity two years running was absolutely determined that he would wait out there in his privy until they came, and then he would fill somebody full of buckshot. One little hard core of the vandals were equally determined to catch the old gentleman off guard and to tip the structure over on its face with him inside of it, before he realized they were there. Just why this faction had a grudge against Mr. Bock I do not know. He was an old German-born cobbler who migrated to this country years before — he ran a shoe repair shop in LaCrosse. His speech was heavily German accented and he was a little gruff in his manner at times. Some people may have disliked him for that reason. Whether or not the project to upset his family outhouse that night was successful I do not know — I was not there. Some of the boys later boasted that they had accomplished their mission, but I have always had my doubts. No shotgun blast was heard.

I would not want to imply that I, myself, did not ever engage in any of these hi-jinks described here. As I became a teenage hi-schooler I took advantage of a little more liberty and joined with my buddies on Halloween nights in some of the deviltry of the season. There was this particular year I remember real well — probably 1923 — I would have been 14 years old and a sophomore in school. My friends and classmates were a good bunch of guys — we had lots of fun together. On this night, after the 9 o'clock

curfew had chased the small fry off the streets, and after most businesses had closed for the day, a group of us found an old 4-wheel grain wagon, which we pushed and pulled and pared in the middle of downtown Main Street. At the same time, another contingent of us was bringing an old car body, while still another group of us brought a 3-bottom gang plow. Then things began to accumulate — old beat up and abandoned cars, a grain drill and some harrow sections, more wagons with or without wheels, a bob-sled, some heavy bridge timbers, a horse-drawn road grader, a grain binder and a mowing machine, most anything that was loose, and some that was not — why, we even “borrowed the O.W.R. & N. Railway section crew’s hand car. We would have brought one of their box cars if we could have moved it! By midnight, or thereabouts, we had a whole block of Main Street completely barricaded — the central part of downtown LaCrosse. Anyone wanting to drive through our town that night would have had to detour around by some other route. We were proud of our efforts. No clothes lines had been cut. No outhouses had been tipped over. No animals or livestock had been displaced. This was a different kind of Halloween pranksterism. We then contemplated what the business men would think and do when they came to open shop the next morning — and we had ourselves a good laugh. We went home tired and happy.

The next morning our school principal, Tom Kinsman, addressed the student body in the assembly hall as the first order of the day. Without fanfare, he directed that all boy students would meet at once in the gymnasium. As we filed into the gym we were met by the County Sheriff, Bill Humphrey, and one of his deputies. Now, most of us knew Bill Humphrey and we thought he was our friend — he had lived in LaCrosse and served as our town marshal before being elected County Sheriff a few months before. Also there was the current town marshal, Roy Hesner, and a few other familiar stern-faced adults. I think most of us boys felt like a band of sheep who suddenly found themselves surrounded by a pack of wolves. We were first told that a gang of hoodlums had attacked our town the night before and had created considerable havoc. We were told that the perpetrators were known by name and sight and that each would be held accountable for his part in the debauchery. However, if there were amongst us any who could conscientiously deny being a party to the frivolities of the night before, they could be excused at that point. I don’t remember than anyone responded to that challenge. The sheriff told us that we had committed a grave crime — not the unauthorized removal of property, but the blockage of a State Highway! And that was a serious violation of the law! We could all be arrested and placed in jail!

At this point we were marched like so many prisoners, in double file, from the school to the downtown area, a distance of perhaps a half mile. Once there, we were directed to get busy and return every single item of the blockade back exactly from whence it had come the night before. We had no choice, but we went at the task of clearing the street and restoration of order as energetically as we had in creating the mess. Under the watchful eye of the men of the law, the job was accomplished by 1 o’clock — just in time to get back to afternoon classes at school. However, before being excused we were marched again, this time to John Powell’s billiard parlor, where each of us was served a double ice cream cone, praised by the sheriff for our speedy and willing job of clearing the streets and putting things back in order, but warned not to ever do it again. We were then dismissed to our classes. A great lesson in civil behavior had been taught and well learned.

And that is the way Halloween was observed in LaCrosse in 1923, when I was a lad!

~ From *Writ in Remembrance: 100 Years of LaCrosse Area History* by Don Dorman, Ruth Dorman, and Dorothy Smith ~