

HALLOWEEN PAST AND HALLOWEEN PRESENT

By Marie Coady

**“Come friends of ours,
To the witching hours,
To be spent on Halloween.
To Stoddard Street,
Where the whist players meet,
And Jack o’lanterns gleam.**

”With this verse, the Misses O’Rourke of Stoddard Street in Woburn invited their dearest and closest friends to attend a party in their home on Halloween night, 1913. Friends arrived promptly and were greeted by a ghostly hand, which ushered them into a hallway lit only by Jack o’lanterns.

While witches peered and black cats snarled from the dining room walls and ceiling, guests stuffed themselves on “appetizing viands” amid the grotesque figures that make Halloween scary fun. Toward the end of the evening, guests drew out their fortunes from a Jack Horner Pie and read them aloud to the delight of everyone. At the witching hour, when graves yawn, the Misses O’Rourke bid their guests good night. So ended another Halloween in turn of the century Woburn.

All aglow at being included in the fun and festivities of an exciting time, none seemed aware the world was teetering on the brink of change. Soon the gracious parties of early twentieth century Woburn would give way to public celebrations and Trick or Treating. But before time inched its will upon Woburn’s unsuspecting citizens, two wars intervened and brought changes no one could have predicted.

Halloween of 1918 was marked by America’s involvement in World War I. While President Wilson drove home his Fourteen Points of Peace, battles raged in Europe and meat and butter were rationed at home. The Woburn Food Administration warned small boys to put away their peashooters and forego “shooting peas, beans and rice” at unsuspecting victims as a Halloween prank. Food, it was said, was in short supply and all attempts at conserving would help the war effort.

Shortly after that Halloween of 1918, Armistice Day welcomed an end to our participation in a war that robbed a whole generation of innocence. All over Woburn whistles blew, church bells chimed and people gathered in Woburn Center to celebrate. In the years that followed, change became a way of life.

Woburn’s gay Halloween parties were delightful and elegant, if you were among the invited that is. But not everyone was included in the festivities. If you didn’t receive an invitation to party in grand style at one of Woburn’s fine homes, you were left to watch from a distance or read about it on the front

page of the local paper.

One of the first notable changes in attitude took place in 1919 when the Gonsalves family of Belmont Street, Woburn, decorated their garage with “orange and black crepe paper and hung apples on strings” for all the children of “The Hill” in the Blueberry Hill section of Woburn’s Highlands. Fifty children, ages 5-15, enjoyed games, treats and scary fun. The Gonsalves String Quartet furnished the music for an enjoyable evening of dancing for everyone.

World War II brought even more change. But the Halloweens during World War II, once again brought admonitions to the young boys of Woburn to refrain from vandalism and pranks.

America was embroiled in a struggle that touched every family and called for patriotism and sacrifice. A public petition from town fathers to Halloween pranksters throughout the city in 1942 reminded them to forgo the usual pranks and abide by the “dim-out” laws. That meant the tradition of lighting bonfires by setting piles of leaves ablaze as a Halloween prank was not only against the law, it was unpatriotic. Blackouts or “dim-outs” during the World War II meant that every house must be in darkness. Light presented a target to the enemy.

The youth of the city were also warned that since so many of its young men had gone off to war, labor and materials were in short supply, and young boys inclined to vandalism should cease that activity as part of the war effort. It was expected that everyone would cooperate in hastening a successful conclusion to the war. The youth of Woburn were reminded that this was no ordinary time.

It wasn’t until the Woburn Lion’s Club brought together the businessmen of the community and offered a night of celebration for everyone that Woburn’s Halloween celebration became public. The first Halloween parade sponsored by the Lions Club was successful beyond their wildest dreams and has become a Halloween tradition in Woburn, bringing spectators into Woburn from miles around. That first parade attracted an astounding twenty thousand spectators, plus bands, floats and horse-riding units from all over. The crowd was dazzled and small children quivered with excitement.

As usual, there were Halloween pranksters who marred the evening with false fire alarms and vandalism. On Halloween night, 1955, the false alarms began at 5:50 p.m. and kept the fire department busy until well after midnight. But the greatest amount of damage by far was to the more than fifty streetlights smashed by roving bands of vandals in East Woburn.

By 1965, the crowds watching the parade wend its way along Main Street had swelled to fifty thousand. But on that Halloween night of 1965, two incidents marked the evening in some minds. The first was the fire that destroyed

McCue's Cider barn on Winn Street. This fire sparked the second incident: injury to one of Woburn's finest as he risked his life to save a child.

Patrolmen Donald Lyons was on parade duty in Woburn Center that Halloween night of 1965 when he was struck by the back end of the aerial ladder on a fire truck. The engine was responding to the fire at the McCue's Cider mill, and Lyons had just cleared a path for it at the intersection of Montvale Avenue and Main Street. Suddenly, a youngster darted into the engine's path, but the quick thinking Lyons whisked the child out of danger just in the nick of time. Unfortunately, his swift movement put him off balance, and he was whacked by the tail end of the ladder as it swung around onto Main Street. Luckily, the engine was moving slowly, and Lyons was not seriously injured.

Each year Woburn's Halloween festivities became accessible to more and more people due not only to the effort of the Woburn Lions Club, but also because of modern technology. In recent years, Woburn's Halloween parade not only drew large crowds from the surrounding communities, it was also televised by the local cable station for those unable to attend.

Some may mourn the passing of the genteel house parties of turn of the century Woburn, but no one can deny that today's Halloween celebration is more inclusive and community spirited. Now and then pranksters mar the evening with their youthful exuberance, but each year the city's police and fire department seem better prepared to cope.

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