

October 25, 2007

WITH THE KIDS

## Get Grandma's skull out, Halloween is almost here

Halloween tradition has its roots in the ancient Celts.

By Brenda Rees  
Special to The Times

IF you've ever nearly sliced off your thumb while carving a grinning puss on a Halloween pumpkin, blame it on the Celts and their obsession with skulls.

"Halloween as the Celts Celebrated It" -- a walk and talk in the woods of Franklin Canyon at 7 p.m. Saturday -- delves into the historical origin of our spooky season. Leading the two-hour excursion into the darkness is Lollie Ragana, a teacher of mythology and English at UCLA Extension, Cal State L.A. and Antioch College.

Ragana explains the ancient Celts had four seasonal holy days, with Samhain (pronounced *saw-when*) occurring around Nov. 1 as an end of the harvest celebration. "It marked going into a period of great darkness, because everything was dying and going back to the earth." The Celts were convinced that death -- like winter -- wasn't the end of life, but just another phase in the circle. "For them, people didn't die and were gone forever," says Ragana. "Their spirits often connected with the living, especially at Samhain."

These get-togethers were not freaked-out scare-fests, but rather "comforting visits from old friends. You would call on the spirits for advice and wisdom," Ragana says. "Samhain was a time when the veil between the living and dead was thin."

Rituals marked Samhain: The Celts would light bonfires, sacrifice animals and bring their ancestors' skulls out from safekeeping.

"Celts believed that the soul resided in the skull," says Ragana, who adds that dead bodies were either cremated or simply left to decompose, but skulls were reverently plucked and kept as holy objects.

When Christianity hit the scene, St. Patrick and St. Columba tried to get locals to shake their pagan beliefs and properly bury their dead. The Celts begrudgingly obliged but secretly keep the skull tradition alive by "carving turnips and squashes to look like their ancestors," continues Ragana. Voila! Tuber substitutes for the dearly departed.

Handed down for centuries and across continents, the vegetable-carving custom ultimately became our jack-o'-lantern.

Because the Celts stubbornly clung to their old ways throughout the centuries, exhausted Christian leaders finally compromised; they morphed these pagan holy days into Christian ones, turning Samhain into All Saints and All Souls Day, celebrating the dead, just like the Celts.

### **HALLOWEEN AS THE CELTS CELEBRATED IT**

**WHERE:** Sooky Goldman Nature Center, 2600 Franklin Canyon Drive, Beverly Hills

**WHEN:** 7 p.m. Saturday

**PRICE:** Free

**INFO:** (310) 858-7272, Ext. 131