

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 8, 2020: [HALLOWEEN SUPERSTITIONS](#)

It's a week of holidays here in quarantined-history-land. Today's run-down: how Halloween history is more about pranks and one's dating life than it is about fun-size Skittles.

THE STORY

For most of American history, Halloween was not a holiday for children. Quite the opposite: to the extent Halloween was celebrated at all, by the 19th century it was known as an occasion for [creepy seances](#) or [playful mischief-making](#) by the adolescent set, where "playful" is mostly a euphemism for "requiring the assistance of the fire department." (So intense was the prankster habit that one local fire chief [sighed that](#), while he had no problem with teens celebrating the holiday with some reasonable pranking, "when droves of youngsters march through the streets pelting citizens and houses with vegetables he will make somebody answer for it.")

People at the turn of the century would have had no concept of Halloween as the sort of holiday with small children playing charming dress-up, adults wearing potentially inappropriate costumes, and everybody just doing it all for the Snickers bars.

Folks during the 19th century definitely kept Halloween on their calendar, and for one reason in particular: many people believed it was a one-day license to get access to predictions about the future. It stood to reason: October 31st was a ghostly day, when all the spirits and dark forces came to earth to whoop it up before the sobriety of All Saints Day. All that supernatural activity allegedly lifted the veil that normally kept the secrets of the spirit world obscured from daily view. So why wouldn't you indulge in a little superstition (melting lead, burning hair, bobbing for apples) if it helped you figure out something about your future, to wit: who was Mr. Right, and where was he?

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

Why are superstitions compelling?
We've got a lot of time to think about it. Any ideas for your Halloween costume this year?

Why do you think dangerous pranking was tolerated to the extent it was in early Halloween celebrations?

Halloween combines religious, cultural and occult history. What does this blend mean to you?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

bgkellem@gmail.com

IG: @bgkellem

Visit Drinks With Dead People™ and subscribe for updates at:

<http://www.drinkswithdeadpeople.com>

READ MORE:

Samira Kawash, "[Gangsters, Pranksters and the Invention of Trick-or-Treating, 1930-1960](#)"

Primary source: "[Halloween: Take A Peep at the Future Tonight](#)," The Los Angeles Herald, October 31, 1897

"[Halloween History](#)," National Geographic (VIDEO)