

When Halloween mischief was carried to great heights

10-26-86
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HALLOWE'EN was celebrated with gusto in Santa Cruz 100 years ago. There were pumpkin patches in backyards all over town because families had milk cows and raised the pumpkins to feed the cows as well as themselves.

The largest and finest of the yellow orbs didn't last long as Hallowe'en approached. School-age boys who had been lurking in the pumpkin patches for weeks already knew which pumpkins they were going to steal and turn into grinning jack-o-lanterns.

They cleaned out and carved the pumpkins, then those juvenile works of art were placed in windows or front porches with a lighted candle inside. Decorations that are sold in stores today were unknown; kids made their own. Sheets and pillow cases made fine ghost outfits as they still do for some. A length of cheap black cotton fabric was fine for a witch's cape, and dried cornstalks were in almost every backyard along with the pumpkins.

Hallowe'en parties featured the usual games and horseplay. Bobbing for apples was popular, and the kids gobbled the usual refreshments — cider, cookies and pumpkin pie.

Youngsters in costume ranged the neighborhoods, ringing doorbells, yelling "Trick or Treat!" and then running off with their goodies. Doorbells were different in those days before electric chimes. The doorbell was activated by a small metal handle which turned and rang a bell directly attached, inside the house.

IT WAS A day more of tricks than treats for the kids who were high school age. Gates were tempting targets for mischievous boys who removed them from their hinges and carried them blocks away to the roof of a shed or a public building. Most families had gates somewhere, either at the front walk or in the backyard. Wary householders removed their own gates the day before Hallowe'en and hid them, although it was a nuisance.

Outhouses were a prime target, and many families had them. The boys liked to push them over and run, leaving the unhappy homeowner to contemplate the damage and the unsavory task of righting what was a stark necessity. Every year there were disgruntled adults who woke up the day after Hallowe'en to discover a gate was missing or an outhouse was tipped. Small platoons of giggling boys had been busy the night before.

The vexed citizen had no choice but to get busy, search out the missing gate and wheelbarrow it home, sweating and cursing with every step. For the outhouse, help would be needed, because that was a major problem.

Once I got a story firsthand from one of the boys who was born and grew up in the Santa Cruz of those Victorian days. When he talked to me he was an old man, reliving his boyhood memories and he laughed as he told me.

He was the son of a highly respected local businessman who owned and operated an office on Cooper Street (which this son would later take over.) The mother was a pillar of the First Methodist Church; she sang in the

A glance at history



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choir and the boy and his brother faithfully attended Sunday School. The mother also belonged to the Shakespeare Club, a group of culture-minded ladies who met regularly to analyze and discuss the Bard's great works. The boy's grandfather was a judge, and his uncle and aunt were active in local civic affairs. Very proper people, all of them.

The boy, whose nickname was Duke, hatched a grandiose plan and got several of his high school pals to help him carry it out. One of the pals was a banker's son; another grew up to become assistant postmaster — but that's all I will say because oldtimers will know who they were. The boys got together early on Hallowe'en night because what they had in mind would take hours of labor. In fact, if any of their parents had asked them to work that hard at home, they would have been indignant.

They "borrowed" a neighbor's buggy — that was no problem as buggies were usually kept in backyard barns or carriage houses. Duke wouldn't tell me which neighbor, but it could have been a Hihn or a McPherson or a Hinds or a Smith.

They dragged the buggy to a remote, vacant field where they worked for hours taking it apart. The wheels came off, the body was disassembled piece by piece. Nothing was damaged, they were careful of that.

When the buggy had been reduced to parts they could carry, they crept back down Church Street with it, piece by piece, to the First Methodist Church which stood where The Sentinel building is today. Working together (such teamwork!) they got the pieces up into the church belfry where

they reassembled it in very cramped quarters. Really a work of diabolical genius when you think of it. Then they crept home to bed, worn out but very, very happy.

OH, THE consternation the next morning when the deed was discovered. The buggy perched drunkenly but securely in the belfry, one wheel hanging over the edge.

The righteous indignation can be imagined: Which young whippersnappers could have done such a thing! How did they ever get the buggy up there in the first place? I'd like to get my hands on —! If I ever find out who —! And so on. Part of the town was laughing but trying not to, and part of it was cursing — softly under the breath.

And after all the smoke cleared, there was the sad but shocking realization that the buggy had to come down. The church bell was blocked by the straddling buggy and, besides, the family needed the buggy which was the 1880's version of today's Ford or Chevy.

I asked the "boy" if anyone ever found out who did it. He shook his head, still laughing. Then he said "We were lucky. Oh there were some who suspected — sure. We weren't angels and we did other things from time to time. But we kept as quiet as mice about that buggy. That was serious — they had a terrible time getting it down — had to take it all apart again of course. ... After all, when your mother sings in the choir and your father ushers on Sundays. ..." He began to laugh again. "We couldn't look the minister in the eye for a long time after that."