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Ghosts, Goblins, and Pranks

When I was young, all adults dreaded Halloween because of the creative mischief (now called vandalism) the local youth could inflict on the neighboring premises. There was no such thing as "trick or treat." in fact, the term "trick or treat" came from the idea that if the owner of the residence gave the children who rang his doorbell a "treat" the children would pass by and not commit a "trick."

The local teenagers looked forward with ghoulish pleasure to Halloween, even plotting far in advance the mischief they could do. The general idea seemed to be to inflict more mischief the present year than they had the former year. The older teenagers, able to talk their parents into letting them stay up late, were especially creative in committing mayhem. They would wait until most of the neighborhood had gone to bed and then "wreak their vengeance," so to speak. The later the night, the less the chance of being "caught in the act." If they were caught, chances were their parents would make them undo the damage or even (horrible thought) pay for the damage.

Carrying a lighted pumpkin and disguising ourselves in costume and mask, were what most of the younger children did--the idea being to frighten anyone they met, or to see if the costume worn would keep friends from guessing who you were.

Many people in our neighborhood had outhouses. An outhouse was a small wooden structure, tall enough for the man of the house to enter without stooping, and wide enough for a privacy door and two or more "holes." The outhouse was constructed over a deep hole to accomodate the sewage. Outhouses were especially targetted by pranksters. They would be tipped over, picked up and moved to a new location, and sometimes occupants of the outhouse were locked inside. Because the out-houses were not lighted, this could be a frightening experience.

One block west of our street was located the streetcar line. The end of the line was on top of the hill on Jefferson avenue and 33rd Street, which was only about half a block south of our house. When the streetcar would get to the top of the hill, the conductor would have to get out of the street and change the trolley wire that attached to the overhead electrical lines so that the street car could go the opposite direction.

One Halloween my sisters and some strong male neighborhood friends carried one of the neighbor's garbage cans to the end of the line at the top of the hill. After the conductor had changed the trolley wire on the overhead wire and returned to the inside of the street car, they hurried and tied the full garbage can to the back of the street car. You can imagine the clatter and the strewn mess of garbage when the street car started down the hill. Of course the conductor had to get out and untie the garbage can and take it to the side of the road, yelling at the kids at the top of his voice while he was doing it.

Another trick was to unhook the trolley line from the overhead wire while the trolley was in transit. This would cause the street car to stop. Of course the agitated conductor would have to get out and re-attach the trolley wire before he could proceed on his way. This trick could be repeated along down the line by cooperating teenagers.

My husband said that in Marriot, where he lived as a boy, the big farm boys would get together and lift light carriages onto the top of houses.

Car and home windows were also special targets. Most residents tried to stay up late enough at night on Halloween to wait out the Halloween pranksters who preferred to do their mischief after the neighbors had gone to bed and to sleep. This helped prevent being caught in the act.

My brothers and sisters and I had to be especially careful what mischief we got into, because our parents warned us that if they caught us soaping or waxing windows, we would have to clean the same.

To reduce Halloween vandalism, the schools and the local LDS wards started having costume parties and dances on Halloween. This helped a great deal, but there were always those youth who just could not resist doing their regular Halloween mischief, usually after the dances were closed.

"Trick-or-treat" tradition did not come into vogue until my own children were small. The miracle is that after a few years the "tricks" happened less and less. The object of Halloweening then became to garner as many goodies as possible. Commercially, Halloween is now second to Christmas for the amount of money spent on holiday food and decorations.

Nevertheless, on Halloween, my neighbors and I light up our homes as much as possible inside and out, stay close to home on that night, and hope the neighborhood teenagers are less creative than we were in our youth.