

I want a Halloween re-do.

By BRIAN ACKLEY
WIN Columnist

I want a Halloween do-over.

For the love of cider and frycakes, when did this honor-the-dead observation become a multi-billion dollar extravaganza?

I mean, there are suburban houses that could pass for Disney's Haunted Mansion. Macy's is envious of the inflatables that have lept up on lawns from Lawtons to Lancaster. Thirty years ago, the only thought that went into Halloween was conjuring up the annual mental map of the neighborhood, making sure to remember those who gave out Milky Ways and Snickers and passing on those who offered up the shabby assortment of Sweet Tarts and Dum Dums. The biggest worry was the cheap rubber band on the back of the even-cheaper plastic mask snapping and stinging your cheek, or whether the opening in the top of your plastic pumpkin was big enough in case someone wanted to drop in something really big.

Does anyone actually make a jack-o-lantern anymore? Roast pumpkin seeds? Our group festivities were highlighted by cold cooked spaghetti and peeled grapes. When the party was over, you ate the props. At least one company we've checked with has invested six-figures for their "scare the yell out of you" attraction. They've undoubtedly come up with a more high tech way of simulating the brains and eyeballs of the dead.

Within a 30-mile drive of any Buffalo suburb, here's a list of things that have been at least temporarily haunted this month: hay wagons, houses, quarries, trees, forests, manors, corn fields, barns, hollows, villages and cellars. One bucolic attraction advertises thousands of apples, gourds, hay bales, corn stalks and more, bring the kids and camera. One, something called "Brutal Planet" is not advised for kids under 12. Bring the Zantac.

As one national story succinctly put it, "Halloween has become Christmas." And you can't even blame this one on Hallmark. In fact, if you really want frightening, consider these numbers. Consumers will spend more than three billion dollars on Halloween this year, the sixth most costly holiday on the calendar. One in five, one survey reports, will dress up their pets. As what? And what do you drop in their bags?

Every single American household will spend, on average, about 43 bucks on candy and costumes. Six in 10 will decorate their homes and yards. Eighty-six percent of those over age 55 will pass out candy (no Smarties, please); more than half of those ages 18-24 will attend a party. In fact, this might be the hardest of all to fathom: Halloween has become the third largest party day in the United States, trailing only New Year's Eve and the Super Bowl.

In the pantheon of understatement is Tracy Mullin, CEO of something called the National Retail Federation. "Halloween fills an important retail void between back-to-school and the holiday season," he noted. "Many retailers are carving out quite a niche for themselves in the Halloween market."

Of course, someone, somewhere, would have an explanation. "The culture has lived with the threat of terror over the last few years and I think Halloween, in that context, may really have taken on greater significance." Anyone else think that sometimes those in academia have a bit too much time on their hands? "It's a holiday that gives people a chance to control the things they are scared of," according to Purdue University professor Glen Sparks, who claims to actually study people's reaction to horrific images. Perhaps he should get a gander at Buffalo's or Erie County's books.

Sometime, somehow, we've gone from "trick or treat, smell my feet, give me something good to eat," – OK, creativity wasn't real big in our neighborhood – to "trick or treat, retailers think it's neat, reach for your wallet then repeat."

Now where did I put those grapes?

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)