

Samhain: An Ancient Celtic Holiday

Name _____

Date _____

I. Who were the Celts?

For perhaps as long as 1400 years, the Celts lived in many parts of W__t__n Eu___. Among the places they settled were Ireland, Sc____d, Wales, England, and France. Ireland is an island. Because it was not attached to mainland __r__p__, it did not have to deal with as many inv____rs as other parts of Europe and the British Isles. And since there were fewer invaders of Ireland, Celtic traditions lasted longer there than in other pl____s.

II. What was Samhain?

Samhain (*pronounced SOW-en; the first syllable rhymes with COW*) was one of those C__lt__ traditions that lasted. We know about it because of the written descriptions that 6th-century Ch__st__an monks recorded. They went to Ireland to teach the people about their religion.

The Celts divided the year into f__r parts. They marked change from one part to another with special c__l__br__t__ons. Samhain was a 3-to-5-day festival that took place at the start of the new y__r. Although many other cultures believed that the new year started in the spring, the Celts thought the year ended with the fall h__rv__st and that the new year started with the “dead” time of w__nt__r.

The period from (roughly) October 31 through November 2 was the time of the Samhain festival. One of the things the Celts did at this time was put out all of their household f__res and l__ghts. This represented the shortening of the days and the long winter d__rkn__ss. (Most of these areas are further __rth than we are, so the winter days are much shorter and the winter nights are much l____r.) As part of the Samhain festival, the Dr__d “priests” lit special bonfires, and the lights of the houses were re-lit from those f____s. This helped to impress p__ple with the power of the Druids.

For the coming of winter, the Celts had to set aside food. They kept large herds of c____le in the warm w__th__r, but they had to kill and preserve the meat of most of the ani____s because they could not feed all of them through the winter. They stored fruits and vegetables such as ap____s and cab__ges along with grain in underground pits. After the food was harvested and stored, the C____ settled in for some serious celebrating.

In our calendar, the time of their new year would be the end of October to the b____n____g of November. This time was seen as a kind of gap in the normal cal__nd__r. It was a time that spirits moved freely from the Other-world into the world in which the Celts lived. N__rm__l rules of behav__r were suspended, and some of the c__l__br__ting got to be pretty wild.

At the end of the festival, the extra cat__ that they could not feed through the winter were killed. Their spirit-energy (in the form of blood) was supposed to renew the soil for the next year's cr__s.

3. Who were the spirits of Samhain?

According to Celtic legend, there were all kinds of m__g__c__l beings. One group was known as the *Tuatha dé Danann*. This means “the people of the goddess Dana.” The stories say that they defeated the *Fomorians*, which were said to be pirates or sea demons that raided the Irish coast. They

were locked in a constant struggle with human beings for control of the world. Sometimes the humans seemed to be winning, but the Tuatha dé Danann often played tricks on people and also seemed to be winning.

One year at Samhain a very long time ago, the Tuatha de Danann and the humans decided to divide the world, or so the story says. The fairy people went into the underground fairy mounds to live, and the humans stayed above. The two groups were not supposed to cross into each other's territory.

But during the Samhain festival every year, when there was a gap in time and the normal rules were not observed, the Tuatha dé Danann could roam as they pleased. The fairy mounds glowed with a strange light, and some humans disappeared and were never seen again above the ground! Children born during Samhain were thought to have special powers, particularly the abilities to see the Tuatha dé Danann and to predict the future.

On October 31, human spirits were said to walk the earth. This night was known as *Feile na Marbh*, or the Feast of the Dead. It was important to welcome your dead relatives into your home, the Celts thought. They put candles in their windows to light the way for them, and they kept food and warm fires available for their family guests.

Druids kept bonfires going to keep away the evil spirits that might also cross into the upper world. People carved scary faces on big turnips and put a candle inside. They put the turnip faces in their windows to frighten away any bad spirits. People often wore disguises when they went out so that they would not be recognized by any bad ghosts that might be looking for them personally!

4. Samhain Today

After Christians came to Ireland and other Celtic lands and taught the people about their religion, the holiday changed ... but perhaps not very much. It became known as All Saints' Day or All Hallows, a time to honor the saints of the Christian church. The night before was a time that human spirits were still believed to walk the earth. People continued to celebrate, to put candles in their windows, and to think that the line between the human world and the spirit world was weakened.

So when you carve a jack-o-lantern or put on a Halloween costume, you are doing things that an ancient Celt might think are perfectly reasonable things to do during Samhain, the festival of the Celtic new year.



