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Monster Mash

by BRIAN LOCKHART

One night just before Halloween, when I was a kid, there was a showing of the 1961 movie ?The Pit and the Pendulum? on television.

The film was very loosely based on the short story of the same name by Edgar Allan Poe and starred Vincent Price.

I don't know what the deal was with Poe, but he certainly had a dark mind, and he put it to paper.

In one rather particularly scary scene, Vincent Price breaks into the tomb of his sister, Elizabeth, to determine if the rumours that she had been buried alive were true.

Price and the others gather in front of the exposed coffin in the darkened crypt, lit only by their torches.

I was glued to the edge of my seat, holding my breath, and slightly terrified of what was going to happen.

Vincent Price put his hands on the coffin and slowly started to raise the lid.

Then, they cut to commercial. What? Why? Why would they cut to a commercial at that point in the movie?

Apparently, all my friends watched the same movie because it was the talk of the schoolyard the next day.

I don't know why people enjoy the macabre and scary things, but Halloween has become the time for spooky activities.

Halloween's history is rather murky, although the date is somewhat rooted in the tradition of All Saints Day. The rituals and everything that goes along with Halloween seem to be influenced by Pagan rituals, with celebratory practices tossed in by other religions or beliefs.

Some sources state the origins of Halloween go back to an ancient Celtic festival called Samhain, in which the day marked the end of summer and the harvest and the beginning of winter. Celts believed that on Oct. 31, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred.

Trick or treating goes back as far as the 12th century when children would go door to door to ask for ?soul cakes' in exchange for praying for the dead.

From there, this special night really took off as customs became weirder over time with the thoughts that ghosts and other unworldly spirits were present on this night, and people took special precautions to ward them off.

The tradition of trick or treating is largely a North American custom which really developed during the 1930's. Some other Western European countries have something similar, but not nearly on the level that it happens on this continent.

I've spoken to some European friends who have told me they don't have trick-or-treating at all. In Poland, it is the tradition that after Halloween night, people all visit the cemeteries where their families are buried. One Polish friend told me that on Nov. 1, the cemeteries are full of the living having picnics. It's a way of honouring deceased family and your ancestors.

Carving a jack-0-lantern is pretty much a North American thing as well. Some cultures used to carve various gourds, but the pumpkin provided the best shape and could be hollowed out for a candle to make a face with a spooky glow.

The use of costumes has always been associated with the festivities. And for some reason, skeletons, vampires, and assorted ghouls have always been a part of the fun.

I'm not sure what skeletons have to do with it other than they can be a little freaky and are a constant reminder that ?from dust you are created and to dust you will return.'

The costumes have changed a lot over the past few decades as well. At one time, costumes were usually based on a scary appearance. Any good Halloween party would have at least one vampire, a witch, and a few other standard creepy costumes.

Now, with many people carrying on a version of trick-or-treating into adulthood, many witches have been replaced by a sexy nurse or another version of a rather altered uniform. It's all good ? the idea is to have some fun.

I like giving out candy at Halloween. I like to see the kids having a little fun, even if some of the younger ones look terrified when you answer the door. However, the fear goes away when you offer them a Mars bar or a box of Smarties.

I like the homeowners that go to great lengths to decorate their yard to look like a cemetery or have witches on brooms flying over the yard. It just adds to a weird but fun time of year.

Oh, and yes, Elizabeth was buried alive ? you got to love Vincent Price.