ForeWord Reviews

Halloween Merrymaking: An Illustrated Celebration of Fun, Food, and Frolics from Halloweens Past

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"A big black witch and a little red devil, / Are planning a regular Hallowe'en revel. / Come at 8 o'clock up my dark walk / Wear a costume and don't dare talk." That's the homemade invite sent more than eighty years ago to the party guests of Thelma McDonald in celebration of October 31. With a bright orange moon stamped with the dark silhouette of a witch in the corner of the handwritten invitation, it's a visual example of this book's mission—to show and tell how important the day was to children and adults around the turn of the last century.

A freelance writer and lifelong enthusiast of all things Halloween, the author has previously published several similar works on the subject, such as 2000's *Halloween: Romantic Art and Customs of Yesteryear* and a subsequent tie-in book with antique postcards. Here, using the actual text from vintage crafts and women's magazines, she takes readers back to the "Golden Age" of the holiday, from roughly 1875 to 1935.

It's Party-Planning-101 as Arkins offers up chapters abundant with detail and history regarding invitations, decorations, locations, food, costumes, frolics, and soothsaying. One magazine from 1917 deemed those who possessed a cellar in their home as very lucky because such places could "be made 'woodsy' with evergreen boughs, branches of dried leaves, cornstalks and pumpkins."

It appears that nuts, especially of the walnut variety, played an important role in the season's superstitions. For example, walnut-shell fortunes were a favorite party-favor-cum-fortune-telling-device. Slips of paper on which a fortune was pre-written in milk, so it seemed to be blank to the naked eye, were hidden inside a walnut shell. Guests were delighted as brown letters appeared when the paper was held over a lighted candle: "Wish a wish; / 'twill come out right, / If you see a star to-night."

Though the author admonishes early on that the book isn't a "how-to" on Halloween decor, some of the ideas mentioned are bound to strike a creative chord in a few readers. For instance, the story behind table centerpieces known as "Jack Horner Pies" tells an interesting bit of social history. These containers—taking various shapes and forms—were composed of smaller containers, filled with party favors, which fit together as part of the whole but could be

individually removed by the tug of a ribbon trailing to each guest's supper plate.

More such narration on the author's part could have more evenly balanced the magazine excerpts she quotes. The majority of the book is excerpts, which can—although they are substantive and leave the reader with a new appreciation for an old holiday—sometimes seem rote.

Food, fun, and frolic—ingredients for perfect Halloween merrymaking circa 1915—are all here.