

# TRICK OR TREAT, SLAVE OR...

In a scene in the movie "Conrack" which was released over a dozen years ago, the young white male teacher assigned to teach at one of the all-black sea island schools off the Carolina coast asked his charges, less than two months into the school year, if they would like, as a class activity to go trick or treating on Halloween. The children were dumbfounded. They had no understanding of that which he spoke. He, in turn, did not understand their silence. The thought that they did not know what he was talking about did not, immediately occur to him. Through the subtle use of the inquiry method he was able to ascertain that they in fact had never been trick or treating, nor did they know about Halloween.

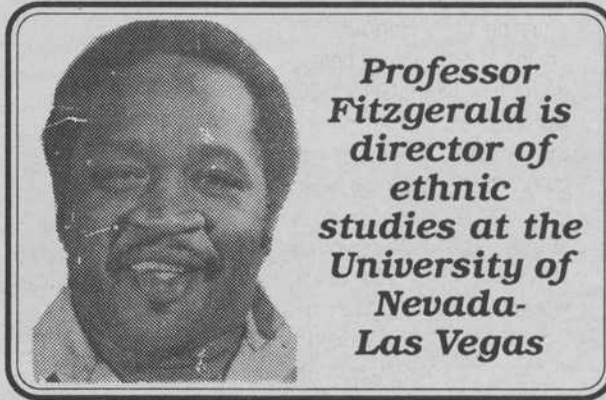
Conrack was shocked and decided that he would not only tell them about it, but that he would arrange to take them over to Charleston and allow them the opportunity, in costumes of their own making, to go house to house, door to door, to the homes of the wealthy of Charleston, South Carolina and participate, at least once in their lives, in that childhood experience of frivolity.

I don't remember if they went on the night before or the night after or if it was, in fact, Halloween night when they went, but I do recall that there were no white children about on the night when they were about. Perhaps they went earlier or later but there was no integration in the makeup of the pranksters who prowled the popular lined pathways. I imagine it was very scary for those black children, for those times, to go traipsing about in those neighborhoods on the scariest night of the year. Where did Halloween come from and why was it so scary?

All Hallows' Eve, or Halloween, was originally a festival of fire and the dead and the powers of darkness. It is the evening of 31 October, the night before the Christian festival of All Hallows' or All Saints Day. All Hallows' Day commemorates the saints and martyrs, and was first introduced in the 7th century. Its date was changed from 13 May to 1 November in the following century, probably to make it coincide with and Christianize a pagan festival of the dead. All Souls Day in the Roman Catholic calendar is 2 November. It is marked by prayers for the souls of the dead.

It is only in recent times that Halloween has been reduced to a minor jollification for children. Before the coming of Christianity, the pagan Celts in northern Europe held two great fire festivals each year - Beltane on the eve of 1 May and Samhain on the eve of 1 November - to mark the beginning of summer and winter. Those dates have no connection with the equinoxes or solstices, or with sowing and reaping, but seem to date from very early times when Celtic society depended heavily on cattle for subsistence.

Bonfires on high hills were a conspicuous feature of the old Halloween rites, though in England they have been gradually transferred to 5 November to mark the arrest of Guy Fawkes. Down to the end of the 19th century, fires played an important role in the celebrations. It was during that same century that the fires began to be intended to burn the witches. When it was set, the participants



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by Professor Roosevelt Fitzgerald

would shout: "Fire! Fire! Burn the witches!" When the fire extinguished itself, the ashes were scattered all around and when the final spark died, the shout: "The devil take the hindmost!" could be heard and all would run for their lives.

It is thought that originally the fires were intended to provide light and heat which would help the sun through the winter - a time associated with death and a dying time of the year. The dead stalked the countryside seeking heat and food and drink and these were put out for their use. Those ghosts always traveled in a westward direction of the direction of the dying sun at sunset. It is out of this that the association of Halloween with ghosts was born. October 31, Halloween. October 31, Nevada Admissions Day. What is it which sets the two events apart? Are they? Legend has it that on Halloween the fairies would be seen moving from one fairy hill to another with the music of bells and elf-horns. They were sometimes identified with the dead and the dead tricking the living into believing that they are not but only until such time as they would have drawn the unsuspecting in and then they would reveal that they are in fact the ghost of those long since dead, thereby tricking them.

Halloween and Nevada Admissions Day do have something in common. Even though there had been Native Americans living in the region we call Nevada for thousands of years, the first non Indians did not arrive until near the end of the last quarter of the eighteenth century with the first of the Spanish explorers. Fifty years later the first of the mountain men arrived. A few years later the Mexicans came and it was not long after that that the first of the black mountain men entered the state. By the midway point of the nineteenth century

the Chinese were evident and in the following quarter century many more of each of those groups and others arrived to what would be known as the "Silver State".

Statehood came in 1864, one hundred and twenty five years ago. We are not alone in celebrating a 125th birthday. Valvoline Motor Oil was also born 125 years ago and over the years it has changed to meet changing times. Would that we could say the same. The state's motto is "Battle Born" because it came into existence during the fourth year of the Civil War. Before we became a state, however, we were required to draft a constitution. It was partially because our territorial legislature had pledged that Nevada would enter the Union as a free state that President Abraham Lincoln signed the Enabling Act which made Nevada's entry possible. It is at this point that we begin to see the similarities between Nevada statehood and Halloween.

As stated earlier, the Halloween ghosts always traveled in a westward direction. Even though they had started their trek all the way back in the seventh century, it took them until 1864 to arrive to Nevada and they arrived just in time to influence our legislators to trick us with the provisions of our first constitution. You see, even though Nevada entered the Union as a free state, it denied any rights of citizenship to people of color. We were, not allowed to vote and that, in effect, denied us citizenship. Everything was segregated and since we could not testify against any white person in a court of law, we were at their mercy.

Yes, Nevada entered the Union as a free state, but that only meant that slavery was forbidden. It was not against Nevada law, however, to oppress free people of color. On October 31, while children roamed the streets of Carson City participating in their form of trick or treat, our legislators were playing their grown-up form. Trick or treat, slave or free - only the children got anything out of it, and black children didn't even get that.

Even until today, we have not kept pace with Valvoline.

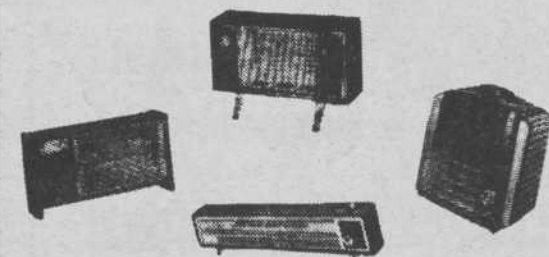
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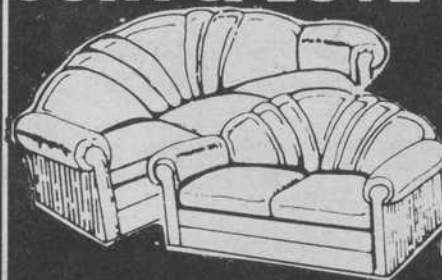
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