

This Day in History... October 30

Mischief Night

In parts of the US, Canada, and Great Britain, October 30 is celebrated as Mischief Night. It's a night for older children, teens, and adults to engage in a little mischief, and has a history dating back to the 1700s!

The first recorded mention of Mischief Night was in Britain in 1790. However, at the time, Mischief Night was celebrated the day before May Day. It was a day in which young people played pranks – moving around shop signs, turning over water tubs, and trapping people inside their homes. Even the British court approved of the celebrations, recognizing that it was a way for people to rebel and blow off steam, but reported that “clearly no serious harm was intended.”

In the 1880s, Mischief Night was also celebrated in Great Britain on November 4, the day before Guy Fawkes Day. One local newspaper in 1885 described pranks in which “the youths take upon themselves to remove many of the gates belonging to private residents. They seem to glory in the sport, and appear to think they have a perfect right to do so, through custom.”

Mischief Night seems to have made its way to the US by the 1930s, when newspapers reported young people causing trouble the night before Halloween to defy the more child-like traditions of dressing up and collecting candy. Some have suggested that the October 29, 1929, Stock Market crash may have influenced some to seek a lighthearted escape from their financial woes.

A Boston newspaper article from 1937 spoke of children “ringing false alarms, setting fires, breaking windows, and in general doing their best to annoy people.” Someone stole a horse and wagon, dumped out leaves, and rang doorbells. A group of children also had a fruit and vegetable fight they called the Battle of the Charles, which required police intervention.

For many years, the “holiday” was an inconvenience and annoyance for many. At times, celebrations grew violent. By the 1980s, Mischief Night in Detroit spread across three days and resulted in more than 800 fires. To curb the violence, a curfew was initiated in 1986 and volunteers were brought in to help discourage fires and destruction. The introduction of these volunteers led to a new name for the event, Angels' Night.

Mischief Night is largely a regional occurrence in the US, and it goes by different names in different areas. In New Jersey and the Northeast, it's called Mischief Night. In Detroit, it's called Devil's Night, and in parts of New England, it's Cabbage Night. Cabbage Night recalls a Scottish tradition during which girls looked closely at cabbages in their neighbors' gardens to learn about their future husbands. It's also called Devil's Eve or Goosey Night. In Quebec, they call it Mat Night, because they switch out people's door mats. In areas of the Midwest, it's called Gate Night because celebrants let livestock loose.

In recent years, communities have offered free entertainment such as movies or bowling to keep people out of trouble on Mischief Night.



Fires have been a common occurrence at most Mischief Nights.



The 1929 Stock Market Crash is believed to have brought about Mischief Night in the US.



Toilet papering and egging homes were popular Mischief Night pastimes.



Many communities had to call in more police to handle the trouble makers.



Throwing fruits and vegetables is another traditional activity.



Some communities have dubbed the holiday Angels' Night to counter the violent and disruptive acts.

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