

Festival days

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The orange Halloween lights went up early this year. And in our neighborhood, there seemed to be a lot more of them—along with tiny ghost dolls hanging from trees, cobweb-like fabric stretched across porches, plastic spiders perched on roofs, and bloody plastic hands emerging from cardboard gravestones. For some reason, Halloween seems to have become a bigger deal than it used to be.

It's not just an impression. In 1999 Halloween became the second-biggest American holiday, based on the amount of money spent on decorations. According to Unity Marketing, Americans spent \$659 million on Halloween stuff in 1999, pushing it ahead of Easter into the No. 2 spot. (Christmas is easily No. 1, with \$1.9 billion spent on decorating.)

If festivals reveal something about the concerns of our culture, we have to wonder about the meaning of this new emphasis on Halloween. What does it tell us about Americans at the turn of the 21st century?

Well, perhaps not all that much. In a consumer culture that is now enjoying a sustained period of prosperity, the expanded celebration of Halloween may simply reveal that Americans have found another way to spend money. Those cute witch-hat lights and glass Halloween ornaments sell because somebody has the money to make them and somebody else has the money to buy them. Leigh Schmidt of Princeton University, who has studied the development of holidays and their intimate connection to commercial forces, says that the market always works to expand and extend holidays, encouraging more elaborate ways to celebrate.

Yet the question remains: Why is Halloween the festival that is expanding now? We indulge in speculation: People (especially baby boomer parents) are more accepting of fantasy and play these days. There is no other nationwide occasion that allows people to indulge in a carnival atmosphere. The overworked, affluent folk who respond to Martha Stewart's upscale homemaking advice are also receptive to the sprucing up of Halloween—and Halloween provides an unusual array of possibilities, from the creepy to the cuddly, for re-creating an idealized version of the holiday one

remembers from childhood.

Surely it's of some significance, however, that Halloween is the one special day on the calendar without any religious, national or moral meaning (the vestigial connections to All Saints' Eve having vanished long ago). The festival commemorates no event, cause or person, whether sacred or secular. There is no "true meaning" of the day to be either enhanced or exploited by commercial display. Halloween is an invitation to pure, open-ended, individualistic play. For many people in a pluralistic society, in which public meanings are increasingly absent or contested, this kind of celebration may come as a great relief.