

**HALLOWEEN – A TIME FOR FALSE FACES,
MINI EXTORTIONS AND PRODIGAL RETURNS**

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‘Writer’s Corner’

Hog Pumpkins grew in the cornfields along with field peas and didn’t look much like the bright orange pumpkins bought at Walmart or the garden center today. They tended to be more pale in complexion and “squatty” in size, but they were hollow and had the icky “guts” inside along with seeds that stuck to your hand and arm when you hollowed them out. No one seemed to actually buy pumpkins back then, since virtually everyone had a friend or relative who lived on a farm and would gladly give one away.

For me, one Halloween started early when I got the bright idea of selling pumpkins door to door. I loaded as many as out old style metal wheelbarrow would hold at Pa Maberry’s farm and headed out, around Meyers Terrace, across Jackson and down Jefferson Avenue, stopping at numerous houses along the way. Apparently, no one was in dire need of purchasing a pumpkin, even though my price was a modest 50 cents. When I pushed the wheelbarrow up the hill to our house a couple of miles away, I still had every pumpkin with which I had left Pa Maberry’s. I gracefully brought to a close my door-to-door salesman venture, never to go down that road again.

Most Halloweens started with a visit to the Ben Franklin with a quarter in our pockets and candy on our minds. We would agonize over what kind of “false face” we wanted this year. If financial circumstances were particularly demanding, one might only choose a Lone Ranger type black eye mask for a dime and call it quits.

Next we would organize with whom we would be teaming on Halloween night. There was of course a strict social order and one must stay within that order, even on Halloween. In my case it was generally Don Taylor, Walter Booker, Sammy Wilburn and/or David Lollar. With the matter of teammates settled, we were ready to answer the big question of the night; what on earth will I wear?

No one I knew ever had a “store bought” costume, if indeed such things were to be had in Carthage. With our false face in hand we picked through Mama’s rag bag and found suitable attire with pirates, clowns, and bums being the most often chosen costumes. (Now that I think back on it, pirates, clowns, and bums all looked amazingly alike.) For the girls it was generally a gypsy dancer.

When Halloween fell on school night, there was a party in the gymnasium of the elementary school. There were heady games of chance such as picking up a floating duck, cake walks, where every person stepped from one number on the gym floor to another until the music stopped and the caller picked a number out of a fish bowl. If your number was called, you won a cake baked by some lady in the PTA (I don’t believe men found it acceptable to be in the PTA in those days.) Bobbing for apples was always a favorite but I liked to stay away from it because I invariably sucked water up my generous-sized nose and ended up with a sinus snort for the rest of the night. Finally came the judging of the costumes to decide what pirate boy or gypsy girl was the best dressed; no one I knew ever won, nor would have wanted to win.

When we had absorbed enough adult-created gym activities, we started out toward home, working our way from house to house trick-or-treating. “Trick or treat, money or eats,” we would offer at each door. Each of us had a chunk of soap in the pocket of his britches, determined to bestow due punishment on anyone bold enough to deny our demands for extortion.

In those days, no one worried about razor blades in apples. Razor blades cost money and why would anyone waste a perfectly good razor blade on a kin, beside we all threw the apples and other fruit away anyhow. Some families made us more wholesome treats in the form of popcorn balls, which we generally tied to avoid also since to eat one was to risk your false face sticking to your lips the rest of the night.

A few people gave us hard candy, the kind you see the grandpa and the little boy enjoying in the Werther's commercial. We generally tried to avoid those places too and regularly threw the hard candy into the shrubbery going for the sticky stuff like Three Musketeers, Baby Ruth Bars, Tootsie Rolls, and other such health foods.

I remember one particular Halloween when everyone had peeled off and I was walking home by myself. As I passed a building site, I noticed it was being watched by an old fellow I often saw around town – didn't know his name then and don't now, but I knew he was a friendly. He was there as insurance that no Halloween pranks would go awry and the building materials end up destroyed or damaged. He had a fire going, and was warming himself against the bite of the cool night. I decided to join him and offered him some of my loot from the night's plunder.

He began to tell stories and I have always been a sucker for a good story. The clock ticked and the time passed and I was comfortable until I saw Daddy drive up in the 54 Buick, roll down the widow, and inquire as to what I thought I was doing. My heart stopped and I wished for a quick and painless death.

He pointed out that everyone else was off the streets and, "Your mother is worried to death." It was at this point that I offered that I was just leaving for home and would walk, but he countered that I, "most certainly" would not and to "get yourself into this car now."

I thought it was much ado about nothing but the uproar lasted for several days which left me feeling rather mistreated and put upon.

Sulking and surmising that when I died early of some terrible malady cause by childhood stress and worry, then they would be sorry. Well, I didn't perish and they didn't feel sorry, and never again did a Halloween come and go without being reminded of the incident and instructed to arrive home at a reasonable hour. I thought it was dramatic overkill – until I became a parent.

I think many of use wear false faces at times other than Halloween. We put on a face of our best self in public but our face comes off when we deal with our children or our spouse. Or perhaps we spend time doing a form to trick-or-treat with the ones we love.

If you treat me the way I want, and do what I want, I will love you and show love to you, if not then you might find I have delivered a trick to you instead of a treat; emotional extortion of sorts. Certainly we spend much time making sure those we choose to partner with are of a like social status, you know, "like us."

The good news is that like Daddy, our Heavenly father comes looking for us, inviting us home, sometimes gently, sometimes with a more stern message.

Yeah, I think Halloween give us a chance to live out on a single night both the best and the worst of the false faces, mini-extortions, and prodigal returns we experience in a lifetime.



Bob Chaffin was born in the Roaring River Community of Jackson County, Tennessee during World War II, but soon moved with his family to the nearby town of Carthage; where he spent the balance of his growing up years. He was graduated from David Lipscomb University and Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan where he earned an MBA. Upon graduation from David Lipscomb he took a job with General Motors' Financial Staff and worked his way through varying levels of responsibilities in a number of GM locations.

In January of 2001 he retired while holding the position of Finance Director for the Information Systems Division of GM and returned with his wife Janice Lafever Chaffin to his beloved Tennessee. Today, he lives in Lebanon, raises Black Angus Cattle, and serves as an Elder for the Maple Hill Church of Christ.

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