

The free-spirited Hallows Eve, which seemed to grow and thrive through any century's chaos, was morphing once again into a holiday just as much for adults — and adult themes. At bars, clubs, discotheques and street parties, people openly displayed their inner sexy vampire or fairy, and cross-dressing didn't seem out of place. It was a chance to explore a secret fantasy life for one night, without reproach.

Whatever people decided to "go as," it was easier to cross the line on Halloween.

The holiday could be risqué, campy, perverse, funny and mysterious. It was also a more indulgent, narcissistic holiday, bowing to a great desire for candy, or other personal inclinations over more virtuous celebrations. Halloween might be considered the black sheep, or crazy drunken uncle, of the family of major holidays.

It's now also the second most profitable holiday behind Christmas — a \$6.9 billion per year industry.

At The Fun Tree, a 10,000-square-foot specialty costume shop lurking on out-of-the-way Thompson Street near downtown Fort Myers, Gov. Sarah Palin has been one of the most requested



COURTESY PHOTO

Mary Ann Muhly finds the right garment for a sorcerer's costume at The Fun Tree, a 10,000-square-foot costume store in Fort Myers.

masks this year. But she hasn't been around long enough to get a rubber mug.

"It was too late for manufacturers to make a mask," said owner Donna Faught. But they do have Gov. Palen's glasses.

Ms. Faught helped retired Fort Myers resident Michele Hughes find a sorcerer's outfit. Other costumes across the decades have mirrored mass culture as living pop art: a gas pump, a slice of pizza, a pack of cigarettes or a soup can.

Many still believe Halloween can be a fun, casual way to vent your pent up demons and desires.

"The psychological principle here is that of catharsis," wrote Russell W. Belk in a 1994 essay "Carnival, Control and Corporate Culture in Halloween Celebrations."

And community celebrations and traditions like trick-or-treat are still alive and thriving. The U.S. Department of Commerce said there were an estimated 36 million trick-or-treaters in 2007, ages 5 through 13.

Also, 93 percent of U.S. households considered their neighborhood safe as of 2003; another 78 percent said they wouldn't be afraid to walk alone at night within a mile of their house.

There were 110.3 million occupied housing units in 2007 — all potential spots to stop for candy. There's probably quite a few less this year.

But it's all a part of the sweet and sour passing of time. Just like the frightening moments and the mundane, the good years and the bad, ghosts appear

and fade away.

"I think Halloween is a fantasy holiday," said gallery owner Mr. Tincher. "It's more about stepping outside who you are."

Do you believe in ghosts?

Julie Essik, co-founder of Southwest Florida Paranormal Investigations, has studied haunted spots in Lee County for seven years. She investigated the Lee Civic Center, homes and the Buckingham Cemetery, among other places.

"It's a cool little graveyard," she said. "The (other) founder of the group actually saw an apparition out there. She saw a dark figure move from one tree to the next."

Ms. Essik said she has never seen a ghost, but still has an unquenchable curiosity for the supernatural.

"I actually believe in them less than I did when I first started it," she said. "I don't think they aren't there. There's just a lot that's unexplained. It seems like the more I learn, the more questions are raised."

She has used sophisticated sound and image recording equipment to investigate places in downtown Fort Myers such as the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center.

"We go to a spot, set up our equipment and the cameras," she said. "And then it's pretty much just sitting there, looking at the computer screen." She's also investigated a building on Hendry Street in downtown Fort Myers that used to be The Greystone Hotel next to Neo Lounge. Now it's unoccupied.

"We didn't really get much except for a couple of those EVP (electronic voice phenomenon)," she said. "We're still not sure exactly what it was. One of them sounded like a little boy saying 'Here they come.' Another sounded like a man saying 'Get Out.'"

Raimond Aulen, who owns the building that used to be The Greystone Hotel, said it's pretty spooky up there. Ms. Essik agreed.

"The inside of that hotel is so creepy," she said. "It has old sinks and tubs and there are some holes in the floor."

Mr. Aulen, who also owns a bar downtown called The Indigo Room, said he thinks old buildings have a certain undeniable energy.

"A lot more energy went into building an old building," he said. "A lot more hands and a lot more labor, a lot more sweat. Every brick has somebody's hands on it. Some of the energy is transferred into all those things. Energy is the only real thing that goes on forever..."

"I think that's the big difference between some of the bricks made in factories. Most of the bricks that are out there on the street have a thumb or handprint in them. Sometimes it's real soft; sometimes it's easy to see."

"I think people are sensitive to it, but they don't understand why. People do have a certain draw to historic buildings — a feeling. Some people are creeped out by the feeling, and other people like it."

Mr. Aulen said an odd object, which moved like a living thing and was about twice the size of a softball, was once caught on a video surveillance camera in The Indigo Room. But the video was later lost.

The object entered the room from a projection screen above the bar that sometimes shows old movies on television.

"It fluttered into the room," Mr. Aulen said. "As it got closer to the camera, it got bigger, so I know it had dimension to it."

Then it went under a table and disappeared.

"It was this wispy looking, weird thing," he said. ■



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