

Folklife Today Podcast

Season 5, Episode 1

October 2022 – Scary Stories for Halloween 2022

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

[Music: “Bonaparte’s Retreat” by William Hamilton Stepp.]

Stephen Winick: Happy Halloween, everybody, and welcome to the Folklife Today podcast! I’m Stephen Winick, a Folklorist at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, and I’m here with John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs for the Center.

John Fenn: Hi, Everyone! If you’ve been a listener to our podcast, or a reader of the Folklife Today blog, you’ll know that Steve’s a bit of a Halloween fanatic.

Stephen Winick: True story!

John Fenn: But this year, we have some other reasons to celebrate too.

Stephen Winick: That’s right! I actually launched the Folklife Today blog purposely on Halloween 2013, so this is the tenth Halloween we have celebrated with spooky or supernatural blog posts.

John Fenn: Wow, that’s true! And the Folklife Today podcast began on Halloween 2018, so that makes this the fifth Halloween episode of the podcast.

Stephen Winick: So Happy Blogoversary and podversary to us! To celebrate all this, we have revised and updated our Halloween collections guide, which is really a guide to fun Halloween content in the Library of Congress, from old books about witchcraft to pictures of ghosts. And of course, songs and stories from oral tradition, preserved in the American Folklife Center archive. You can find the guide at guides.loc.gov/Halloween. So now let’s get to some spooky stories. What should we start with?

John Fenn: How about witches? Nothing is more iconic of Halloween than classic witch tales. And in the American Folklife Center archive we have some great ones, recorded from the singer and activist Aunt Molly

Jackson in 1939. Alan Lomax made these recordings in New York City, where Jackson lived at the time. And for anyone who might not be familiar with her, Aunt Molly Jackson was one of the most documented traditional singers in American history, having recorded for Alan Lomax, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, John Greenway, Archie Green, and others. She was born in Clay County, Kentucky, in about 1880, and she began learning songs from her great-grandmother, Nancy MacMahan, at an early age. As a young teenager, she married Jim Stewart, the miner who told her the witch story we're going to hear. She became a nurse and midwife, which led to her having the nickname "Aunt" from a surprisingly young age. After Jim Stewart was killed in a mine accident, Aunt Molly married another miner named Bill Jackson. They also divorced but she kept his name as her professional moniker.

Stephen Winick: In 1931, Aunt Molly Jackson traveled to New York City to play benefit concerts for striking miners in Kentucky, and remained mostly based in New York from late 1931 until 1943. In this era she met her final husband, Gus Stamos, known to his friends as "Tom," and performed and socialized with many people in that era's folk music scene, including Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, Pete Seeger, Earl Robinson, and Alan Lomax. Her younger siblings, Jim Garland and Sarah Ogan Gunning, also frequently visited and performed with her. Aunt Molly Jackson and Tom Stamos later moved to the West Coast; Aunt Molly died in 1960 and is buried in Sacramento. Alan Lomax conducted extensive recording sessions with Aunt Molly in 1935, 1937, and 1939, leading to over 180 songs and spoken word pieces by her in AFC's disc-era collections. The 1939 sessions occurred in Lomax's apartment in New York, and included this witch story.

Aunt Molly Jackson: This witch story was told to me by my husband, Jim Stewart. His brother, youngest brother, Albert Stewart, he told me, begin to have some kind of strange fits. His father, Ike Stewart, he went and called the doctor in, and when the doctor come and looked at the child, he said there was nothing he could do for the child because that he was, uh, he was bewitched, and advised him to get a witch doctor.

So they called in a witch doctor. This witch doctor told the mother of the child there would be someone in that house to borrow something, or to try to get away with a little, just a little thread or a rag or something out of the house, and not to let anybody have anything out of the house.

And first and all, the old lady neighbor that lived near them, she came for a half a pint of cornmeal. And Mrs. Stewart refused her the cornmeal.

Then she come back for a needle full of sewing thread, and she refused her.

And when she refused her of the sewing thread, when she started out of the house, she uh, when she started out of the house, she grabbed up a string in the floor and tried to get away with it.

And, and Mrs. Stewart struck her in the...the mother of the child struck her in the back with a broom and knocked the, knocked the string out of her hands. And she run down the pathway, about fifteen feet from the house, and fell in the road, and begin to take the same kinds of fits that the child was taking, and died in the road.

But before she come, when uh, when this witch doctor was a-working with this child, why, uh, his elbows would fly out of joint and his knees would fly out of joint just like the child's, and he was all in a perspiration of sweat.

And as soon as this old woman fell dead in the path with a fit, well that was the last fit that the child had and the spell was broken. He never did have another spell like that in his life.

My husband told me this story to be the truth. Jim Stewart.

Stephen Winick: Again, that was Aunt Molly Jackson telling a witch tale from our collections. There are actually three interview segments about witches, witch doctors, and witchcraft in the collection. Aunt Molly told Lomax how people became witches, how witches could be killed, how witches rode people at night, and how witch doctors got the power to counteract witchcraft. The other segments are all presented along with the one you just heard, in the blog at blogs.loc.gov/folklife.

John Fenn: That's right, please visit the blog and take a look at the posts from this October—you'll find several Halloween posts. Not only witches, but a great ghost story too! This one is told by John Jackson, who is probably best known as a blues musician. He was one of the most significant Black Appalachian musicians to become part of the folk and blues revival. His roots in the Virginia mountains put him at the nexus of Piedmont blues, rural gospel, early ballads, and old-time string band music. This broad repertoire allowed him to fit comfortably in the category of "songster," but he also embraced the term "bluesman." He grew up playing

music, which he learned mainly from a very musical family in which everyone sang and played multiple instruments. He also learned from recordings of such masters as Mississippi John Hurt and the Carter Family. He played many house parties and dances in his teens and twenties, but he stopped playing in public in the mid 1940s after witnessing a violent fight at a party where he was playing. He just decided it wasn't worth it.

Stephen Winick: Right, and because of this, by 1960, very few people knew he played. But his mail carrier saw him in the yard playing guitar one day and asked him for a lesson. John Jackson obliged, and they agreed to meet in the gas station where the mailman had a second job. Luckily, the folklorist Chuck Purdue happened to be getting gas and witnessed the lesson, realizing Jackson was pretty special as a player. So he introduced himself, and they struck up a friendship in which Purdue worked to encourage and promote Jackson as a musician. This led Jackson to meet and play with most of the prominent blues musicians in his area, including John Cephas, Phil Wiggins, Archie Edwards, Warner Williams, and Jay Summerour. He was certainly a rare talent, and he was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship in 1986.

John Fenn: John Jackson was also a favorite here at the American Folklife Center during our formative years. He was one of several musicians to play at the reception celebrating AFC's founding in February, 1976. He also played in our Neptune Plaza Concert Series in 1983 and 1986.

Stephen Winick: But less well known than his musical prowess was John Jackson's talent as a storyteller. Although he occasionally worked tales into his concert performances, he particularly loved stories about the supernatural, which he mostly told privately. He was personally convinced of the existence of supernatural creatures such as ghosts and the Nightmare, based on his experiences and stories his friends had recounted to him. He might have had more occasion to experience the supernatural than most of us, since during a good part of his life, he made his living as a gravedigger in the Washington, D.C. suburbs!

John: Wow, that's real credibility—a ghost story told by a gravedigger!

Stephen Winick: Ha, yes! But we should say that this story is not from personal experience but a tale told to him by his mother. As is common in telling second-hand tales, Jackson begins many of the segments with the

word “said,” reminding us that this was something his mother said, not something he witnessed himself. So this is a story he called “The Preachers and the Spooks.”

John Fenn: Let’s hear it!

John Jackson: Mama told a tale one time about this haunted house, about nobody couldn't stay at it. Said they hired this preacher to go along and stay. Said he was gonna stay and find out what this ghost was. Said he got there and made him a good fire in the fireplace, and sat back smoking his pipe.

Said, finally, said a little cat come whining. Said he let him in and commenced to playing with him. Said the cat laid by the fire ever so long, and got warm, and stretched out, and said after he laid there a few minutes said, he sort of dozed off to sleep, this preacher did.

And said he happened to think about the cat, and looked over and was a great big, spotted dog with the biggest red eyes and red tongue looking at him. Said the preacher commenced to batting his eyes and looking.

Says he commenced to getting bigger, said all at once, said the preacher just rolled up and went right out the window and left.

Said it wasn't long, said the spook was too much for him.

He went and told what he saw, and there was another preacher come in and said he was going there and gonna stay.

Said he went on in and made him up a good fire and sat there. Said finally after he sat there a while and the fire got to going good, said all at once something rolled down the fireplace, and knocked fire all over the floor everywhere!

Said, the old preacher jumped up and took the broom and swept it back.

And he didn't see anything, so he sat down. Said finally, two little dogs came down and sat down on the fireplace by him, and said, after a while it turned in and got bigger and bigger.

Said the old preacher setting there kept a-looking at em smoking his pipe and singing a hymn: "Nearer My God to Thee." Said, he sat back and kept a-singing!

Said, finally, said, it finally formed into two little boys and then they formed into two men.

Said the preacher asked em, said, "What in the name of the Lord do you want?"

And said, "The people (the first people that was there) killed us, and buried us here, and buried us down underneath the floor."

Said, "If you'll dig us up and tell everybody where we're at, said, we'll go away and never come back no more."

And said the next day, he went and told the people what he found, and said sure enough, they did. They dug up and found two dead bodies down underneath that floor, why, the people had killed 'em and buried 'em down under all that.

And the house never was spooky no more after that.

Stephen Winick: Again John Jackson with a great ghost story. And we should say that this podcast features three storytellers with regional accents and you may not understand every word, but there is a transcript on the Library of Congress website. Go to loc.gov/podcasts, then look for Folklife Today and this episode, and there's a download link for a text transcription, which will tell you what I think they're saying!

John Fenn: Great! And the next story we're going to hear comes from the folklorist Jack Santino. It's the tale of Jack O Lantern.

Stephen Winick: Right, and the background to this is another of those great anniversaries. Jack Santino gave a lecture here about Halloween on October 29, 1982...40 years ago to the very day we release this episode! I saw Jack about two weeks ago and when I mentioned this anniversary was coming up he said "I thought you were going to say 25!"

John Fenn: Good old Jack!

Stephen Winick: Indeed, and this lecture has been the gift that keeps on giving for us. It became the basis of an article that Jack allowed us to put online. In the early days of the internet, we put it in gopherspace, if you remember what THAT was, and it has been one of the most popular features on our website since we've HAD a website. Now it has a home on the blog. A few years ago I got hold of the digitized audio and realized that it

was a real gem—much more detailed than the essay. And as part of the lecture, he even tells the story about the origin of the Jack O Lantern, which includes tricky spirits and the Devil himself.

John Fenn: So we're going to give Jack the last word in this episode, but that means doing our thank yous now. So thanks to Aunt Molly Jackson, Alan Lomax, John Jackson, Chuck Purdue, and Jack Santino. Thanks to Jon Gold our audio engineer. And thanks to our colleagues throughout the Library of Congress who help us with this podcast.

Stephen Winick: And again, the web addresses you need are guides.loc.gov/halloween for our fantastic Halloween guide, and blogs.loc.gov/folklife for the Folklife Today Blog. Thanks for listening to Folklife Today. This is Jack Santino and his version of the Jack O Lantern!

Jack Santino: In England and in Ireland and Scotland, the practice of carving Jack O Lanterns exists, as it exists here in the United States, but with a difference. The difference is that in Britain, the Jack O Lantern is considered to be a real person, a spirit, not unlike the ghosts and goblins that we've been talking about. A mischievous spirit. Somebody who will lead you astray.

And there are a great many folktales that surround the story of Jack O Lantern. There are many many stories which he plays a prank on a person who deserves a prank played on him.

We in America, of course carve out pumpkins. In England, they didn't have Pumpkins. Pumpkins were introduced to us by Indians, introduced to the colonists by Native Americans.

In Britain, they carved turnips and rutabagas and other large fruits, which probably comes as something of a surprise to many of us, and it's probably hard to imagine carving out a turnip in in the shape of a Jack O Lantern. But it's done. It's done to this day and it was done before the pumpkin was discovered.

But the story of Jack O Lantern is one I think I'll tell at this point.

There is a story as to how the Spirit became who and what he is. And it's a traditional folk tale. So...and there were various versions of it. So what I'll be telling you is one version of it. It does have other other versions.

But the story goes that there was a blacksmith at one point named Jack.

And he made a deal with the Devil, a Faustian sort of deal with the Devil, in which he promised the Devil his soul in return for great powers and abilities, particularly to be known as the best blacksmith on the face of the earth. So the Devil gladly granted him this boon in return for his everlasting soul, and left it that he would return in seven years to collect his end of the bargain.

Jack the blacksmith then held a sign—hung a sign up in front of the shop, which said, “Herein Lives the Greatest of all Masters.”

Well the story goes that in heaven, St. Peter brought this to the attention of Christ, who felt that maybe the blacksmith was getting a little uppity with his claim. So one day Christ and St. Peter visit the blacksmith in his shop, and challenge his claim that he is the greatest of all masters, and that they go back and forth, each performing miracles trying to outdo each other. And the blacksmith never does quite as well, but he never accepts the fact that he's not the greatest of the great.

Finally in exasperation, Saint Peter turns to him and says, “If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?”

So the blacksmith said, Well, he thought about a little bit and he said, “Well, the first thing I would wish for is that if I invited somebody to sit in my chair, that they would be unable to get out of it until I gave them permission.” He then wished that if he invited somebody to climb his pear tree or his apple tree, that they'd be unable to climb down until he gave him his permission. And finally, he said, if anyone ever get...put their hand into my purse, that it will be stuck there. The person will be unable to get out of my purse until I allow them to.

Peter turns to him and says: “You wish very foolishly, because you could have wished for everlasting peace in heaven.”

But the blacksmith says: “No, I know what I'm doing.”

So dejectedly St. Peter and Christ leave.

Seven years passes and the Devil comes to collect his due, and the blacksmith is working on a piece of iron and he says: “Well just go ahead and have a seat and I'll be with you in a minute.”

Well, of course, the Devil can't get out of the seat and, and the blacksmith tells him he's not going to let him out of the seat until he gives him another seven years of immortality.

Gladly granted. Seven years goes by, Devil comes back. Sends him up the tree to get him a piece of fruit while he's waiting. He goes up the tree, same story, right? Cannot get down. Another seven years.

The third time he comes back. He says "You're not going to trick me this time!" And they go off and they start walking the road to hell. And as they're going they come to a tollbooth and the blacksmith's [Audience laughter]

Right. The blacksmith says...he's tied. The Devil was...tied him up because he wasn't going to take any chances with him.

He said, "Well, perhaps you could shrink down and go into my purse and get the money out." Which of course the Devil does, and finds to his dismay that he cannot get out of the purse.

And at this time, the blacksmith frees himself and take some of his tools and starts beating the purse with his tools. The Devil screams and yelps and finally says: "Look, I'll give you complete freedom from your original promise. I will never ever come back for your soul."

So the blacksmith tricked the devil out of his out of his original promise.

Some more time went by, and eventually the blacksmith died as everybody must, and he went up to heaven. When he got to heaven, St. Peter says "No, I'm sorry. You had your chance. But you made a deal with the Devil. You did not live an honorable life and you're not allowed into heaven." So Jack decides "Well, there's only one place left." He decides to go down to Hell. As he approaches Hell, the Devil spots him and immediately starts locking all nine bolts to the gate of Hell. And as the door is closing Jack runs and says wait, wait, I have no home. I must...you must let me And the Devil said, "I'm sorry you gave me too much trouble while you were alive. Frankly, I never want to see you here again." And as he was closing the gate, Jack, who happened to be eating a turnip, scooped out a coal from Hell to light his way. Because he was not able to get in either to hell or to heaven and he was doomed to wander the earth as soul without a place of rest.

And that's the story of Jack O Lantern.