

A St. Augustine Halloween

Haunting's, since Washington Irving, have always taken on a decidedly New England air. Chilled nights, autumn leaves, pumpkins, witches, and deep dark woods all combine to give the backdrop of the sinister Halloween. But long before Icabod Crane's nervous trek into the woods, long before the War of Separation, in a land Older than the stories of New England, evil lurked in the swamps and scrub of Old Florida.

Founded by devoutly religious men and women who celebrated All Hallows Eve, many towns and villages of Old Florida steeled themselves against the Evil One and practiced many rituals to ward off his spirit. No village was more devout and more steeped in the rites than the small town of St. Augustine,

Within this hamlet lived many soldiers of the King. Stationed here to protect His possessions and the trade routes to Spain they served a hard life with but their families, their dreams, and their faith to sustain them. One of these insignificant yet determined men was a Sargent Sanchez. He had with him his wife Imelda, and beautiful young daughter Maria.

Also within the lands of Florida lived the native people, given a name of Indian by the settlers that perched upon this narrow strip of land. These Indians were rugged men and women who knew and lived well upon the lands their fathers and mothers had lived before them. Their strength courage and mysterious and savage ways were always a source of fear to the settlers and a cause for many rumors and suspicions.

Maria's custom when her father served the night shift at the old fort was to bring him a hot meal her mother had prepared and sit with her father until he finished. Telling stories and confiding in her dear father all her wishes and dreams. Sanchez loved his daughter deeply and these talks brought them closer together than he had ever believed. Maria adored her father and wouldn't have traded these moments for the world.

But this was All Hallows Eve, a night of ritual and prayer. A festival was alive in the plaza. Sergeant Sanchez could see it from his watch site in the Southwest corner of the ramparts. The Town was not too far from the entrance to the fort, a few hundred feet maybe more. The distance between the gate and the first house was a flat expanse of mud and scrub grass. The town itself was small, mostly single room huts, dirt roads and a few larger buildings. He could actually watch his daughter leave her home and walk all the way to the fort's front gate. He always looked for her. A smile stealing across his face at the first glimpse. He would hurry to meet her at the entrance then they would have their few minutes alone together.

This night she was running a little late. He knew she would, prayers at Mass, the festival and her friends. He thought she might not come. It would not be right for her to be out at this late of an hour. But sure enough, very late, at the height of the rituals and close to the witching hour of midnight she emerged from their modest home and carrying a basket

stepped carefully over the stubble field toward the old fort. He smiled and said he would have to admonish her for being out so late on such an evil night. But turned and hurried down to greet her at the entrance.

Her smile at his approach and her eager and excited looks about her stopped his admonishment before it left his lips. She rushed into his arms and held him tight. She explained how terrifying yet exhilarating it was to be out so late on such a night. The same ground she had walked many times before, the same night air she had felt over and over on her trips to her father seemed so alive and different this special night. So frightening, so evil, so exciting she explained to her father. He watched her face glow as she explained her feelings, first bursting with energy then sliding behind her cloak in fright. He smiled as he watched her, beginning to feel the same exhilaration and fears in his own blood as she exposed hers. Was that truly water lapping against the shore or demons on their way to steal souls? Was the wind just the wind or the witches on their search for layabouts and scalawags to have for their dinners and potions? He allowed himself to be caught up in her innocence and felt his own chill as he looked about in the dark for signs of the Evil One.

It was time for her to go back. Sergeant Sanchez assured his daughter that she would be all right on the short trip back to their home. He promised to watch her walk all the way back from his perch atop the battlements until she was secure with her mother. He kissed her on the forehead and turned and walked back through the gates to the fort. As they clunked shut behind him, Maria picked up her basket to head for home, wrapping herself tightly against the chilled wind.

His steps and his heart froze as he heard the chill scream from just outside the fortress walls, a woman's scream, high and long and full of fear. It pierced the night air and paralyzed the very blood in its course through the veins. The scream stopped abruptly and the complete silence carried the very essence of fear. Sanchez could feel the chilled humidity on his bones, smell the reek of the swamps close by, hear the waves of the ocean. It was crystal clear as no other animal or creature was making a sound. For the briefest of moments it was complete silence from all God's creatures in the wilderness. Then he heard it a loud long howl of agony. It came itself from the depths of hell. It was horrible to hear and frightened the very night from its shadows. It was only seconds, but it seemed like an eternity before Sanchez realized it came from his own throat. A sound so unearthly he could not believe he could have made it. But worse was his knowledge that the first scream had come from his loving daughter.

He tore at the gates to the fort beating and pulling at the men and chains until they could open the portal to his exit. He raced into the night with only the full moon as his companion screaming his daughter's name. Soldiers followed and a shout to his left drew him to a small group of men holding a few small torches and looking down on a form crouched upon the ground. Sanchez leaped forward to get a look and when he drew near the form stood up to reveal an Indian drenched in blood, a crude club in one hand and a lock of hair in the other. Upon the ground in front of them both lay the remains of his beautiful daughter. Her clothes ripped apart revealing the bloody mess that lay beneath.

Her eyes, her beautiful eyes, forever locked in a state of fear her lovely face contorted in her pain.

Sanchez's howl and grief consumed him. He fell upon the Indian instantly, his men and his friends joined in his revenge. They tore at the screaming Indian with bayonets and the blunt ends of their rifles. Before he could be killed Sanchez took his own knife and carved the Indians heart out of his chest, leaving a gaping ragged wound. As he expired Sanchez grabbed the Indians hair pulled back his head and made him watch him throw his still beating heart into the ocean. The Indian died and Sanchez and his men took his remains and threw them into the swamp. As the midnight bell from the Church tolled, they heard a gator begin to crush the Indians bones as he used his remains for his midnight snack.

Sanchez went back and picked up his daughter and carried her back to her mother and the priest. His comrades returned to the fort wiping their bloodied hands upon its walls as to mark a warning to any Indians that may try in the future to bring harm upon them. Sanchez and his wife mourned their loss through the night as they prepared for her funeral alternating sobs with hysterical crying.

Morning came and Sanchez walked to the place of his daughter's death, wishing to be near her, wanting to protect her, feeling the failure of a father. When he arrived at the ocean he cursed the sky and the God who brought them to this wretched land. He sat and tears fell from his swollen red eyes and through the grief he saw a mound of black fur lying in a ditch. He looked closer and saw it was a bear, dead and morbid. Its stench was filling the air around him and the flies already eating at its carcass. He sobbed once more then stood in horror. The cloak hanging in its dead paws belonged to his beautiful daughter, the fragments between its teeth matched the remains of the basket that bore his meal each night. He looked closer and saw the marks upon its skull and cuts across its neck and realized he had cut the heart out of a man who had risked his life to save his daughter. His horror was complete. He stood as if pierced with a burning spear. His face became a mask of white and his voiced paralyzed with disbelief. He turned and ran. Ran toward the ocean in which he had tossed his daughter's saviors heart. He jumped in and dove and surfaced and dove again. His friends called to him to come back,. He ignored their pleas. Then he dove one last time. It is sworn by all that a loud cackle was heard in the wind on his final dive.

Imelda went back to Spain. The soldiers, who helped Sanchez in his vengeance, never spoke about their part in his retribution again. A year later all seemed quiet, the festival in the square was active and a new Sargent kept the watch at the Old Fort. Then just before midnight a woman's form was observed walking towards the fort. It was observed by two of the guardsmen and they called down to open the gate. Just then a loud scream pierced the night and all fell quiet. Nothing could be heard, not the festival, not the birds, not anything save the wind and the ocean. Then a loud unearthly moan filled the depths of the fort. The guards looked out and saw a form outlined in the moon's glow next to the ocean, a crude club raised in one hand and a knife in the other. The Sergeant sent out two

men to investigate and as they drew near the moon disappeared behind a cloud eclipsing his view of their encounter with the form.

Suddenly a scream came from the area he sent his men and the moon reappeared. He went out with a squad with lanterns to investigate and what he saw horrified him. Both men had had their chests ripped apart and their hearts torn out. Their faces had been frozen in fear. Then suddenly he heard splashing at the edge of the water. He peered out as far as he could but saw nothing, but calm flowing waves. He instructed his men to take the bodies back inside the fort and lock the doors. As he led the way back they noticed a large red patch of blood on the wall next to the door dripping onto the ground and the men's hearts lying at the doors entrance. A loud cackle filled the air as the Church bell tolled midnight and the men still swear they heard gators gnawing on bones till morning.

Few who have encountered this specter since then have lived to tell about it. No one from the fort will leave its confines on Halloween night, not until they hear the cackle of the wind and the Church bells toll. Those that have witnessed the specter from afar at Halloween swear it is an old Indian smeared in blood with a gaping hole in its chest. Those that understand the Indians tell the tale that it is still searching for its heart and cannot rest until it finds it. The Indian is doomed forever to look in the souls and bodies of men for that which it lost.

To this day on All Hallows Eve, at close to midnight a woman appears walking towards the old fort, then the sights and sounds begin again. If you see her take cover. But if you dare you will see the blood stain on the wall of the fort. You will witness the Indian forever searching for his heart and you will hear the cackle of the wind.