

The not-so-scary story of my parents' Halloween wedding

By David McGrath | Oct 26, 2024, 5:00am CDT



Gertrude and Charles McGrath showered with rice on their Halloween night wedding in 1942. | Provided

They stayed married for 51 years, and local author David McGrath pieced together the details after his parents, part of the Greatest Generation, died.

Who gets married on Halloween?

Witches? Pagans?

Some couples may do so playfully, wearing costumes and thumbing their noses at stuffy wedding attire like tuxedos, cummerbunds and white wedding gowns.

On the other hand, there may be folks who so love Halloween, its pageantry, creativity and fun, that it makes perfect sense for them to celebrate what may be the most important day of their lives on All Hallows' Eve.

I was curious since my parents, Charles and Gertrude McGrath, got married on Halloween in 1942. And for the longest time, I did not know why.

As a kid growing up in Evergreen Park, I considered Halloween the greatest holiday of the year, since I could dress up as the loud, restless monster I felt my real self to be and fill my shopping bag with as much candy as possible before dark. That is also when my mother and father would, in turn, get dressed up themselves to go out to dinner on the greatest night of the year for married couples, which they called an anniversary'.

It wasn't till I was older, yet still young enough to trick or treat, that I realized a wedding anniversary' on Halloween was not the norm. Of course, I was tickled by the notion, having already been under the impression that everything about the McGrath family was special. Still, it didn't occur to me, as it wouldn't have to most children, to inquire about my parents' thinking in the foggy, faraway past in which I did not exist.

They stayed married for 51 years, and it was not, in fact, until after my father died in 1993, when it distressed me how little I knew about their lives before the eight of us barged in on them: What was their first date like? Who were Mom's previous boyfriends? What happened when Dad first met Mom's hyper-opinionated brother? How did Dad pop the question, and did he ask Grandpa first? In what ways did their plans go awry?

I regret never having asked those questions, for reasons I now chalk up to Harry Chapin's "Cats in the Cradle" syndrome, insofar as I didn't make the time or harbor sufficient interest, so consumed had I been with my own supposedly busy life.

A second reason might have had to do with the era in which we grew up, when propriety and discretion exempted a mother from revealing to her children intimate details related to marriage, courtship and romance between her and their father.

And later, a third reason was Gertrude's fresh caution about disclosing too much to a son who had already published a number of stories about family that did not always make her feel comfortable.

Finally, after both parents were gone, I tried to piece things together through the recollections of my siblings.

"I remember Mom telling me that Halloween was not as big a deal back then," said my sister Nancy. "She said no one trick-or-treated door to door."

My mother's observation had been spot on, since a check of historic sources indicated that trick or treating actually dried up during the war years because of sugar rationing.

Which meant that scheduling their wedding on Halloween would have been little different from scheduling it on, say, Lincoln's Birthday or on Arbor Day.

Besides, there was something way more pressing on their minds than plastic masks and popcorn balls.

My brother James, who had served in the Army in the late sixties, said that Dad was drafted in 1942 and that he and Mom wanted to tie the knot before he went in, which was very common in World War II, just as it also was later during the war in Vietnam. Married GIs enjoyed certain advantages, such as extra pay and subsidized housing, where wives could elect to live on base.

More significantly, there were two other and more grave unknowns confronting my parents, who were barely out of their teens. First, unsure how long they'd be apart, they figured that by cementing their bond, they might soothe their loneliness by knowing a spouse was waiting. And second, since they could not be sure Charlie would even make it back, as so many men of the Greatest Generation had not, marrying his true love might be the last thing he'd ever do.

So Charlie McGrath and Gertrude Cichoszewski settled on the soonest Saturday available for a wedding ceremony and reception.

That it fell on Halloween was coincidence, thereby draining most of the intrigue from my aforementioned questions.

But their decision — make no mistake — was absolutely the most crucial of their young lives.

Not to mention of mine.

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