

Halloween night in San Francisco 1977-1981

When I was growing up in California in the early-mid 60's, Halloween was a children's holiday – as younger kids we would go out trick-or-treating with bags to fill with candy, later as adolescents those same bags would be filled with things like water balloons and other devices intended for committing minor acts of mischief...

The evolution of societal roles/rules in places like the San Francisco Bay Area beginning in the mid-late 60's allowed Halloween to develop into an 'adults-too' occasion. It was the one time of year where grown-ups were allowed to dress up any way they wanted – to celebrate their current favorite film/TV/political/popular culture icon, or simply transform themselves for one night into a colorful, free-style alter-ego with no holds barred. You could even wear your costume to work the day of! The costumes and make-up became ever more elaborate and the evening Halloween parties ever wilder...

At the same time the gay community in San Francisco was opening up and coming out loudly and flamboyantly. Halloween was one of the ideal moments that gay community could act out their difference and celebrate by transforming themselves - without the danger of losing their 'day jobs'. The enthusiasm was such that certain streets like Polk and Castro were closed to traffic on Halloween night for massive street parties.

The straight community picked up on this and came along for the show, also creating elaborate costumes to participate in the celebration. It was a night where everyone was out partying. For me as an amateur photographer, it was one of my busiest working nights of the year. Donning a US marines dress jacket which I picked up second-hand on the street in Berkeley and which made me look a bit like Sgt. Pepper, I armed myself with my Nikon, Sunpak flash, extra battery packs and pockets full of slide film and went out there to document the happening.

Parallel to this was the "Hookers Ball", which was a paid-entry event originally started as a money-raiser by COYOTE, the aid association for the street prostitutes. Basically, it was just one huge wild party in a San Francisco convention center, and clothing was... somewhat optional.

In both places, people were there to see and be seen, everyone was posing unabashedly for pictures. The colors and textures were riotous. The height of the celebration was 1979-80; in the years that followed the AIDS epidemic with its tragic decimation of the gay community in San Francisco basically killed the street party; the Hooker's ball became a much less interesting commercial venue.

The Ektachromes I shot in 1977, 1978, 1979 and 1981 - somehow I missed 1980 - have remarkably survived more than 40 years of poor storage, bad handling by others when I lent them out for a show, and a narrow escape from being burned to a crisp during our house fire of 2014. I decided it was time to digitize them before they completely disintegrate, and to put together a collection of the best into a book. The following images are presented with no political or social statement whatsoever, but rather simply as a fun historical and visual documentation of those particular events and moments in time.

*Originals - Kodak Ektachrome slides taken 1977-81 with a Nikon F and Sunpak 611 flash
Lens and film speed unknown*

*Digitally remastered 2023 with Nikon Z7ii and 60mm Micro-Nikkor slide copy setup
Final editing in Adobe Photoshop (color/contrast adjustments)
All images uncropped, original Kodak cardboard slide mount edges are shown*