

Haywire Hayride

Spooky farms get set for Halloween scares

By Jim Bebbington

After eight years of success in the cottage industry of scaring the heck out of people, the operators of Bonnybrook Farms' haunted hayride this year faced a tough question.

How do you top a glowing green dinosaur and fake Medieval castle?

The dinosaur and castle were part of last year's scares at the Washington Twp. farm. Every year the owners try to build or bring something new to the operation for Halloween.

The solution was, appropriately enough, a ghost town. The Haunted Hayride is one of dozens of spooky farms and haunted houses that go into full swing this week.

And Skeleton Creek is Bonnybrook Farms' largest effort to date. The ghost town has 11 store fronts and is in the most remote part of the Bonnybrook hayride. Slamming doors, energetic butchers and roaring trains all make their appearance.

The haunted hayride opened Friday, and the ghost town is becoming more lived-in as this year's Halloween season continues. "You can still smell the fresh paint," said Bonnie Mercuri, the hayride operator.

The tale of the haunted hayride begins with Mercuri, who owns and operates the horse farm with her husband, Joe.

They began the haunted hayride on their 86 acres very "primitively." A cackling witch with a kettle here, and someone in a scary mask hiding behind the tree there.

"I am a real nature person and I wasn't sure I wanted all this stuff here," Mercuri said, walking through the heavily wooded area filled with masks, skeletons and assorted gruesomeness.

But she found she enjoyed helping people get scared. "It's fairly simple," she said. "It's the element of surprise... and sounds. Different sounds are good."

Over the years the number of screams, train whistles and hideously costumed actors have increased. Mercuri and her husband used to play the parts of headless horsemen, riding their largest horses quietly up to the carriages and letting the riders discover them at their leisure.

"You see them jump from one side of the wagon to the other," Mercuri said. "We're trying to get equal scares for each side."

Mercuri, walking past the ghoulishness on her farm on a bright, clear Sunday afternoon, said the outdoor work is always rewarding for a nature lover.

But, going into her ninth year of scaring people as a hobby, Mercuri has grown to appreciate other forms of beauty. Walking from the sunshine into a dark, shrouded tunnel of black plastic, she motioned to a bluish giant skull on the wall with one bloodshot eye larger than the other. "I like this one," she said.

