

ROAD TRIP TREASURES



FESTIVAL FERVOR

Pierogies, Circus Acts and Much More

By Charlee Beasor

The annual Parke County Covered Bridge Festival in Mansfield, about an hour west of Indianapolis along U.S. 40, is frequented by over one million visitors each year.

Indiana's largest festival – by attendance – is a celebration of the county's 31 covered bridges, accompanied by a massive flea market that descends on the small town each October (and stretches far beyond the county borders).

You might question why a celebration of old bridges summons so many to one county in west central Indiana. The answer is simple: It's tradition.

Each Indiana festival might commemorate something different, but there are common themes – tradition, heritage, camaraderie and food – that run through nearly all Hoosier celebrations.

Indiana also has more festivals than “virtually any other state in the country,” says Mark Newman, executive director of the Indiana Office of Tourism Development (IOTD). He puts the number at about 1,000 across the state.

“If you want to connect to the cultural life of Indiana, you visit during the fall months and during the fall harvest. That's when the vast majority of those events are taking place. They're centered around food and harvest, arts and craft festivals,” Newman notes.

“Food is a really important part of that. There are local tastes that are regionally defined,” he says, mentioning persimmon ice cream more than once during our conversation.

“These are unique local things that make the festivals in our state so special.”

Something for everyone

Do you strum the Hawaiian steel guitar? There's a festival for that in Winchester in July.

Are you a bacon lover? Check out the annual Indiana Bacon Festival of Carroll County at the end of August.

If you're into classic cars, there are too many antique vehicle options to list here.

Maybe you're a fan of Hoosier-born comedian Red Skelton. The annual Red Skelton Fest takes place in mid-July in Vincennes.

Possibly it's a specific type of food you're ready to indulge in? The 72nd Persimmon Fest takes place September 22-29 in Mitchell.

Or perhaps pierogies, the Central European filled dumplings, get your mouth watering? This writer got her first experience with the Polish treat when *BizVoice*[®] traveled to Pierogi Fest in Whiting.

Polish pride at Pierogi Fest

Setting: Six blocks of 119th Street in Whiting (just north of Hammond). A charming street lined with local businesses and a backdrop of industry on one side and

EDITOR'S NOTE: Each 2018 issue of BizVoice[®] will feature a Road Trip Treasure, highlighting Indiana destinations and activities.



Visitors to Pierogi Fest in Whiting can hear live music from five stages during the three-day festival in late July.

Put on by the Whiting-Robertsdale Chamber of Commerce, Pierogi Fest started 24 years ago with about 1,000 pierogies offered in front of city hall. Now, 300,000 people annually attend the festival.

Keep an eye out for Mr. Pierogi and the "buscia" (a playful homage to Polish grandmothers) as part of the self-dubbed "weird and wacky" festival and parade along Whiting's 119th Street.



Lake Michigan on the other.

Sights: Food vendors and tchotchke booths line both sides of the street. Throngs of people fill the space between, making it tough to move through the crowd when it gets busy. Watch out for the buscia (think feisty grandmothers) and Mr. Pierogi and Miss Paczki causing trouble. Find pierogi eating contests, a pierogi tossing contest, and a parade showing off all the weird and wacky of Whiting.

Smells: Sizzling butter, fried sugary dough, huge skillet full of meat and vegetables.

Sounds: Friendly reunions, shouts of food vendors enticing you to try their fare, live music from five stages, people enjoying time together and various “mmms” (myself included) from the delicious food offerings.

This is Pierogi Fest.

When I admit this is my first pierogi experience to three women standing next to me, I hear gasps of bewilderment.

After they recover from my admission and make sure I’ve sampled the potato-filled dumplings, Judy Harkenrider (sporting a t-shirt that reads, in part, “Polish Princess”) and her friends chat with me about being able to catch up with old acquaintances and celebrate their heritage during the festival.

“It’s a connection with my history, my heritage,” offers Sister Anne Marie. “My mother was born here and coming to this fest is just a good celebration. I appreciate how Whiting has made progress and advancements and a lot of the beautiful things that are going on. They’ve reconstructed the park areas and walkways.”

Adds Diane Losiniecki, “We always run into people we know, and everyone is so nice, even the people we don’t know. It’s nice to mingle with new people.”

Later, I meet Daniel Toleikis and his wife, Stefanie. The two live

in Kansas City, but Daniel is from Whiting and they both enjoy coming to the fest.

“You’ll never believe how this town of 5,000 swells to so many people,” he says. “There’s a great atmosphere and it’s packed, and everyone is having a good time.”

Approximately 300,000 people come into town throughout the three-day festival in late July.

As we make our way down the sidewalk behind the vendor booths, I spot one open business: SunCatchers, offering stained glass and gifts.

Owner Edie Rauner was elected Whiting-Robertsdale Chamber board president (the chamber is the organization behind Pierogi Fest) in January and gives me a little background on the history of the 24-year-old festival. Her shop has been here 30 years.

“When they first started this . . . I think they had like 1,000 pierogies in front of City Hall and they were gone in a couple hours,” she recalls.

“When I heard Pierogi Fest, I thought, ‘Psh, how lame is this?’ But look at what has developed from it,” she says, with honest amazement in her voice. “People come from all over the world to this festival. People travel and make their vacation here.”

When I ask Rauner about her favorite part of the festival, she doesn’t pull any punches.

“My favorite part? The sales. . . . When the Pierogi Fest comes in, if summer gets to be slow, this is what gets us over the hump to the holidays,” she asserts.

With a belly full of pierogi and kolacky (a delightful pie-cookie hybrid dusted with powdered sugar) and a silly souvenir t-shirt in hand, I head toward the shuttle bus stop and the sounds of Pierogi Fest fade away.

Road trip tip: Can’t find street parking? There are several parking lots with free shuttles that run all day; just remember which lot you park in!

ESCAPE THE ORDINARY

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The Peru Amateur Circus and Festival is approaching 60 years running. It turns the small town of about 11,000 people north of Kokomo into a living tribute to its heritage as "Circus City."

Acrobats from ages seven to 21 produce a two-hour show replete with heart-stopping tricks of bravery and dexterity – including a seven-person pyramid on the tightrope and high-flying trapeze skills. The show is set to live music from a 60-piece circus band.

The Circus City Festival Museum takes up permanent residence inside a building that was once a lumber company. Photos and memorabilia chronicle the circus history of the town.

Indiana festivals celebrate the diverse heritage of the state's people, from honoring famous Hoosiers – such as the Red Skelton Fest in his birthplace of Vincennes – to various ancestries, including Oktoberfest in Seymour.

Flipping through history: Peru Circus Festival

On a family road trip to the Peru Amateur Circus and Festival, we observe feats of dexterity and courage that make us go “Wow!” and “Why does this exist here?”

Watching a person walk across a tight rope is impressive; seeing it through the eyes of my children is even more spectacular. The fact that it is all taking place at an amateur circus, comprised entirely of young people between the ages of seven and 21 from Miami County, adds to the “wow” factor.

Dubbed the “Circus Capital of the World,” Peru has a rich circus heritage. About 90 minutes north of Indianapolis, the town of 11,000 people was once a winter base for circuses. The advent of the rail system and the availability of plentiful feed and animals in the “breadbasket of the country” made Peru a suitable winter home, says Tim Bessignano, caretaker of the Peru Circus Museum.

But the circuses eventually stopped coming, either as the warmer climate of Florida beckoned or because they became casualties of the Great Depression.

The circus heritage of the town was reborn in the late 1950s with the beginning of the Peru Amateur Circus and Festival, which will turn 60 years old in 2019.

The heart of the festival is in downtown Peru, about 10 minutes off U.S. 31, with one street blocked off for rides, games and food vendors. The circus gift shop, museum and arena are housed in a large, air-conditioned building that was once a lumber company.

The circus arena is bright and colorful, and banners honoring circus history hang from the rafters. Stepping carefully over a rigging, we find our seats on one end of the gymnasium-like bleachers and sit down close to the live, 60-member circus band. A clown passes out suckers on the arena floor.

All the acts in the three rings are impressive. My personal favorite is the juggling, especially when teenagers so confidently begin throwing flaming batons around. My 6-year-old says the flying trapeze was the most “amazing-est” part, in her opinion.



But it's the sheer number of volunteers that really sticks with you.

“Between the downtown festival, and we're talking the parade and the arena and all the stuff that goes unseen behind the curtain, you're probably looking at close to 2,000 volunteers,” Bessignano maintains.

Acrobats work on the show throughout the year. The transformation of the children and teens make is astonishing, he admits.

“When you first see them in February, you think, ‘They aren't ever going to make it.’ But they just do the transfer and change over, and it just works,” he says. “You'll see everything that a professional show has got to offer, and they maybe do as good if not better than some of the professionals. They just go for it; they are really geared up for it.”

The festival and performances draw crowds from all over Indiana, but Bessignano laments that, despite the nearly 60-year history, the circus is still a “best-kept secret.” He acknowledges losing some large sponsors has made an impact on the offerings over the last few years and attendance has lagged. But social media is helping to spread the word.

He notes attendance was up this year.

The day we ventured to Peru – even though it was pouring rain outside – we saw a sold-out show.

Ticket prices range from \$8 to \$15 and you can purchase them online or at the box office. Run time of the circus is just over two hours, and there is plenty of action to keep children and adults entertained the whole time.

Road trip tip: Do you dream of running off to the circus? Here's your chance to try it out: Bessignano offers that adults can pay for the opportunity to try some of the acts during the fall. Look for details about the opportunity from the Peru Amateur Circus on social media.

Spreading the ‘Indiana brand’

Larry Bemis is president of the Indiana State Festivals Association and has over 30 years of involvement with the group. The association, in cooperation with the IOTD, produces the *Indiana Festival Guide*, a listing of over 600 festivals around the state.

The resource is available both online and in hard copy format. It's popular and unique.



The Parke County Covered Bridge Festival in Mansfield is Indiana’s largest festival, attracting more than 1 million people annually.

Visitors to the Newport Antique Auto Hill Climb regularly fill local hotel rooms in Indiana parts of Illinois.



Bemis discloses that he’s heard from other states wanting to put together a similar publication.

The guide is one tool for the IOTD to utilize Indiana’s festivals as part of the state’s tourism marketing campaign “Honest-to-Goodness Indiana,” according to Newman. He offers that the festivals are part of the “Indiana brand.”

“(Festivals are) an important part of the Indiana identity; it’s part of our cultural life

here and we’re proud of it. It’s every bit of Honest-to-Goodness Indiana. It really is. It’s the values and virtues of our communities,” he shares.

While there are no comprehensive festival-related economic numbers available, Newman believes the IOTD sporting event populator can help parse economic impact through attendance.

“We don’t have the cumulative

economic impact but knowing that the Feast of the Hunters Moon (in Lafayette) has 36,000 visitors – the economic impact throughout the entire supply chain is about \$1 million,” he calculates.

“The Persimmon Festival, there are 30,000 visitors, and much less spending through the supply chain, but the economic impact is about \$400,000 to \$500,000. ... Greenfield, for example, has the James Whitcomb Riley Festival. There are jobs that have existed for over a half century because that festival has lasted (that long).”

Bemis adds that the festivals especially help in rural areas.

“Parke County is a perfect example. It’s rural; there’s very little industry. It does have three beautiful state parks, but the thing about the state parks being there, they’re off the property tax rolls. There’s got to be another revenue stream to support that,” he imparts. “The Covered Bridge Festival, it drives a lot of economy.”

Many of the proceeds from small town festivals go back into the community.

“They’re paying for town services. Scholarships for young people, all sorts of things like that take place,” Newman observes.

An example: There are 33 \$500 scholarship recipients this year because of the Peru Circus Festival, Bessignano reveals.

Keeping tradition alive

Bemis emphasizes that most festivals are run and organized by volunteers. And it’s increasingly difficult to find enough helpers.

“I look at our old Lion’s Club. I’m the third-longest serving member in our club right now and everybody kind of looks at me like I’m one of the younger guys. Getting the younger guys involved and enthused about volunteering – it’s very tough.

“At some point you have to give back to the community. Get out and volunteer and help celebrate what we’ve got going on in the state. We’ve got some really great things happening, but it takes people,” he concludes.

RESOURCES: Larry Bemis, Indiana State Festivals Association, at www.indianafestivals.org | Mark Newman, Indiana Office of Tourism Development, at www.visitindianatourism.com | Tim Bessignano, Peru Circus Museum, at www.perucircus.com | Pierogi Fest at www.pierogifest.net