

# Haunted Harvest

STORY BY MICHAEL RAPPAPORT



Halloween time brings a bumper crop to Saunders Farm; and we're not just talkin' pumpkins. Even the parking lot attendants are an essential part of the act during Haunting Season at Saunders Farm. Dressed up as ghouls with tire tracks across their shirts, they welcome visitors with pun-laced humorous greetings such as, "It's a GOOD YEAR to visit Saunders Farm!"

"We want to set the stage for a unique experience from the moment visitors arrive," attests Mark Saunders, the self-titled "Director of Fun." With short, cropped blond hair and a boyish gleam, Mark affirms: "The parking lot attendants are as important as the actors on our stage or in our haunted barn or hayride."

It's exactly that sort of attention to detail that has transformed the Saunders Farm—located in the aptly-named hamlet of Munster on the outskirts of Ottawa—into one of the city's most popular Halloween attractions. Every year over 50,000 visitors descend on the farm during the annual Haunting Season in October. As recognition for their success, the Saunders Farm was chosen as the International Farm Marketer of the Year by the North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association (NFDMA) in 2002—the first Canadian farm to win this award.

As Mark guides me on a tour of his 100-acre farm, he recounts the origins of Haunting Season. His family moved to the farm in 1976 and for the first 20 years grew strawberries. Back in the 70s and 80s picking your own strawberries was a time-honoured family outing, and city dwellers would drive down to the country to collect baskets of berries to bring home and make jams, jellies, and desserts. But as times changed, the popularity of this pastime waned. As well, the Saunders' trusted weeders, who happened to be their four kids, departed for university.

As the market for pick-your-own strawberries dwindled, the future of the farm's profitability hung

under a cloud of doubt. In 1991 at a conference, Mark's father Bill met farmers who offered hayrides in the autumn to entice city folk to come to the country and buy their produce. Inspired by their stories, Bill began to dream of a new vision for his farm: a haunted theme park. The first haunted hayride was offered that autumn. The next year, in October 1992, Haunting Season was born.

Haunted hayrides were the first attraction offered on the farm and remain one of the most popular draws. As the years progressed, many new attractions were added such as scary stage shows, a barn of terror, and pumpkin launchers. And to lure visitors to the farm during the summer and autumn the Saunders' planted the largest collection of hedge mazes in North America.

During the daytime, Halloween activities on the Saunders Farm are geared towards families and young children, with puppet shows, a monster parade, and the Hurricane Pumpkin, a giant 15-foot-high inflatable pumpkin that small kids can enter and chase around balloons. At night, the fear factor is ratcheted up. The farm is transformed into "The Big Scare," and is not recommended for kids under eight.

"Taking the haunted hayride is much scarier after it gets dark than during daylight," Mark says; "however, the scariness is based on suspense and surprise rather than blood and gore."

Thirteen hay wagons pulled by tractors transport visitors on spooky rides through a 40-acre forest, where thrills and chills lurk behind every tree. A tumbling boulder narrowly misses the wagon. A mechanical dog lunges from behind a tree. A rocket is fired overhead. The bridge collapses and the wagon gets stuck in three feet of water. A chainsaw wielding maniac chases the wagon.

The hayride drives through a ghost town, passes a UFO crash site, stumbles onto the skeletal remains of a farmer, and veers into the path of an escaped





## Spooks and goblins everywhere, bats are flying in your hair

"For many children, making it through the Barn of Terror is a rite of passage," Mark says. "We have families with young kids who come back every year. Each year some kids try to make it all the way through the Barn of Terror without fleeing through one of the many escape hatches before they reach the exit."

Un-dead entertainment is provided at the Ghost Town Stage, which features an original Monster Melodrama each year. The Ghost Town Stage was created five years ago with the expert assistance of David Aurilio, a former creative director at Universal Theme Parks in Orlando, Florida. The set is an elaborate contraption with trap doors, smoke and mirrors, and lighting and sound effects. David also started a "Ghoul School," to help train the cast and crew at Saunders Farm.

Audience members lounge on bails of hay while they watch the Munster Melodrama unfold. Screams, boos, hisses, and cheers erupted from the audience as Larry Scary and the Green Queen (played by

Bill. From the top of the tower, Mark points out a new maze that was designed by the world famous landscape architect, Adrian Fisher who hails from England. Named the "Canadian Experience Maze," it replicates our country's vast geography from the Atlantic to the Pacific in miniature with more than 100 large boulders, hundreds of trees and bridges, waterfalls, and natural indigenous plants.

Each maze has a difficulty rating that range from one to three and all have some object in the centre to reach such as a tree fort, a log cabin, or a teepee. The Spiral Maze has a rating of one and is designed for children; the hedges are trimmed to only three feet so that parents can see the top of their youngsters' heads bobbing along through the maze. Naturally, I attempted the most challenging maze: the Mile Maze, comprised of over 2,000 spruce trees with a difficulty rating of 3.5. Normally, it takes visitors between 30 to 45 minutes to finish. But with the expert guidance of Mark who shows me the emergency short cut, I

dinosaur—the fearsome Tyrannosaurus Rex. Naturally, he (or perhaps she?) is hungry and lets out a loud rumble.

In total the hayride is comprised of over 25 spooky dioramas and takes about 20 minutes to complete. Matt Ficner, a model maker who worked for the late Jim Henson of Muppets' fame, assisted with the special effects which are based on pyrotechnics and animatronics. Mark's father, Bill, who is very handy with a hammer, also had a hand in building the dioramas.

## The screen flickers. We hear muffled screams...stay away from the Barn of Terror

If you're not frightened off by the haunted hayride, you can test your courage in the Barn of Terror. The 150-year-old log barn has been transformed into a house of horrors with live actors and special effects.

While waiting in line to get into the Barn of Terror, visitors view a mock newscast on an overhead monitor. Breaking news: "We join our reporter live on the scene at Saunders Farm where unusual activities have been reported," the anchorman exclaims. The reporter begins to describe the horrible events that have occurred in the Barn of Terror, just a few feet behind where she is standing. The screen flickers. We hear muffled screams. The connection is lost. The anchorman warns viewers that if they are anywhere near Saunders Farm stay away from the Barn of Terror. "It seems," he intones, "to be the core of activity..."

Definitely not for the faint-hearted. Don't expect to see the Barn of Terror featured in *Better Homes* magazine anytime soon, with its mad scientist laboratory, hall of skeletons, crypt of the un-dead, and swirling black hole. Beware of the cast of ghoulish characters who inhabit the Barn of Terror since they may pop up from unexpected places, including the catwalk overhead.

Mark's wife, Angela) try to thwart the evil schemes of Mortimer Toad.

Haunting Season attractions also include listening to ghost stories told beside a roaring bonfire, playing mini-put in a cemetery, sliding down Witch Mountain, and the ever popular Pumpkin Chunkin'. Visitors can lob pumpkins at a target floating in the pond with a giant sling shot and win prizes. Pumpkins from the Saunders' 15 acre pumpkin patch that are spared the catapult are sold to the public to be carved into jack-o'-lanterns.

Do you know the difference between a maze and a labyrinth? Mazes have dead ends; labyrinths don't. If you found that question tricky, try finding your way out of one the many mazes spread over the Saunders Farm. Their six hedge mazes are the largest collection of hedge mazes in North America. They also have mazes of maize, grape-vine mazes, and puzzle mazes. The mazes are only open during the day and are open from the middle of July to the end of October.

Mark and I climb a three-story observation tower to get an aerial view of the mazes below. From above, the mazes look like crop circles created by extraterrestrials. In actuality, most of the mazes were constructed ten years ago by Mark's father,



reached the teepee in the centre in about two minutes.

Saunders Farm has won numerous tourism awards and accolades from local, national, and international associations. But Mark says that confirmation of the success of his unique attraction comes from his customers, especially the children.

"Last haunting season I came across a little boy crying in the courtyard," Mark recounts. "I thought maybe a monster had scared him or something. But when I spoke with the boy's father he said that he had just told his son that it was time to go. The boy was having such a good time that he didn't want to leave." ✈

**IF YOU GO:** For more information about Saunders Farm, please visit [www.saundersfarm.com](http://www.saundersfarm.com).