



It's all about 'fun at this Michigan conference

DIANNA STAMPFLER | THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2022



MFEA.

Every day, you're bound to find a festival or special event taking place in one of Michigan's many cities, celebrating everything from agricultural commodities and cultural arts to maritime heritage and holiday traditions.

Even the smallest villages host annual events that appeal to local residents as well as



thousands of visitors who spend money on flea markets, pancake breakfasts, concerts, midway rides, arts and crafts, face painting, pageants, caricature drawings, beverage tents and so much more.

In pre-pandemic years, Michigan hosted more than 800 festivals that were attended by 35 million people with a nearly \$1.9 billion annual impact collectively, according to Michigan Festivals and Events Association CEO Mike Szukhent. A study from Northwoods University had originally predicted that based on 2017-2019 data, festivals overall would generate upwards of \$3.2 billion in 2020 and 2021.

“Only about 30 percent of festivals were held in 2021, but those who were able to pull them off saw record-breaking attendance and revenue,” Szukhent says. “This year was better, and 2023 is looking to be on par with 2019 numbers.”

Events are a vital part of the state’s greater Pure Michigan tourism industry, with hotels, restaurants, retail shops, recreational rentals and other small businesses benefitting from the boost in the number of visitors and the dollars they spend.

For more than 65 years, the village of Munger (Bay County, population: 1,494) has hosted its Potato Festival in July, with attendance above 40,000 over the four-day event. The money raised during this celebration are reinvested back into the community for the volunteer fire department, parks and recreation, scout troops and other local organizations.

Colon (St. Joseph County, population 1,200) is known as the “Magic Capital of the World” and for more than 80 years has hosted an annual August “Get Together” of magicians and illusionists from around the world. John Sterlini, owner of Sterlini Magic Theater and Sterlini Magic Manufacturing, says the typical magician spends between \$1,000 and \$1,500 during the four-day celebration – and that’s not taking into account what other visitors and attendees may spend. Sterlini notes his store sales increase by 500 percent during the event.

According to an economic impact study by the Michigan State University Center for Economic Analysis, the U.P. State Fair in Escanaba set a new attendance record in 2018 with over 92,000 fairgoers (an increase of 6 percent from the previous record-setting year). Focusing on an estimated 57,741 attendees from outside the area, the study revealed that non-local attendees generated \$1.8 million in new money to the community and the recirculation of some of that money resulted in an additional



\$875,000 in spending.

The Ann Arbor Art Fair brings in more than a half million visitors over a three-day event in July, contributing more than \$100 million to that community. In 2018, nearly a half million visitors attended Holland's Tulip Time Festival in May (46% of those first-time attendees) spending \$48 million. In downtown Lansing, the Common Ground Music Festival was established in 2000 and since that time has welcomed over 1 million guests contributing upwards of \$70 million to the local economy.

Traverse City Horse Shows has reported a major increase in its event in recent years, attracting attendees from 46 states and 28 countries to Flintfields Horse Park. In 2017, the event ran for 12 weeks with an average attendee stay of 19 nights and an impact of \$8 million. By 2021, the event had expanded to 16 weeks with an average of 33 overnights and an overall \$120 million impact.

**The Blue Water Convention Center in Port Huron, the
host of this year's MichiganFun® Convention.**

This week (Nov. 2-5), over 350 event representatives from around the state will gather at the Blue Water Convention Center in Port Huron for MFEA's 30th Annual MichiganFun® Convention. The conference provides opportunities for attendees to network with other volunteers and to share tips, resources and inspiration, especially as festivals rebuild in the wake of the pandemic. Founded in 1992, the non-profit Flushing-based MFEA is the largest organization of its kind in the United States, with over 1,000 active members.

"Being at the Blue Water Convention Center is going to be unbelievable," Szukhent says, noting its location overlooking the St. Clair River provides a stunning backdrop. Opened in April 2015, this 34,000-square-foot venue sits a stone's throw from the iconic Blue Water Bridge—the twin span bridge which connects the United States to Sarnia, Ontario, Canada.

Friday's keynote speaker is Jacob "Jake" Brown with an inspirational session called "Embrace Your Aspirations & Fail Forward". Born in Saginaw, Brown is a former professional athlete turned businessman, entrepreneur and motivational speaker.



Keynote speaker Eric Patrick Thomas

On Saturday, Flint native Eric Patrick Thomas (aka Mr. Inspire) will be the keynote. Thomas, who suffered a spinal cord injury that paralyzed him from the neck down in 1997, will empower resilience and inspire change for people with barriers.

More than two dozen breakout sessions cover topics like social media marketing, active shooter awareness, sponsorships and grant writing, volunteer recruitment and training, paranormal tourism, planning a car show event and more.

Among the highlights of the conference is a Vendor Trade Show, where 30 exhibitors include entertainers for hire (clowns, magicians, musicians), special attractions (midway/carnival companies, bounce houses, pyrotechnics), media services and other service providers. Both Friday and Saturday night offers musical showcases where a total of 10 bands perform with hopes of being booked at one of the state's many events in the coming years.

Two special add-on sessions are also planned, including a Spirited Ghost Hunt at Fort Gratiot Lighthouse (3-5pm on Thursday) with Detroit Rock City Paranormal and a Techniques of Alcohol Management (TAM) certification (Saturday 9am-noon).

Registration is still open for the MFEA Convention, at \$195 per person (\$125 for one day) at <https://www.michiganfun.com/convention/>.

Dianna Stampfler has been writing professionally since high school. She is the president of Promote Michigan and the author of Michigan's Haunted Lighthouses and Death & Lighthouses on the Great Lakes, both from The History Press.

Don't fear paranormal tourism

Rural Innovation Exchange writer Dianna Stampfler leads a workshop Friday at the annual MichiganFun® Convention. Her topic: Paranormal tourism.

Stampfler, president of Promote Michigan, should know something about paranormal or dark tourism. She is the author of *Michigan's Haunted Lighthouses and Death &*



Lighthouses on the Great Lakes.

We caught up with Stampfler before her presentation Friday to ask her a few questions about dark tourism.

Why has dark tourism become so popular?

There has been a growing number of podcasts and shows on cable TV that focus on many aspects of dark tourism, whether that's true crime, haunted travel or paranormal investigations. And it's not just obscure networks, you have The History Channel, Discovery Channel, Travel Channel and NBC dedicating an increasing amount of air time to stories that are darker in nature. It has become more mainstream and less taboo to be interested in these subjects. You're also seeing more books on these topics and there is even a bookstore in Lansing's REO Town that is dedicated to this genre called Deadtime Stories.

Can dark tourism help local business?

There are key communities around the world who have built upon their dark histories to create thriving tourism economies – like Salem, New Orleans, London and many others. Instead of burying their darker history, they're embracing it and attracting avid solo and group travelers. Properties like the Stanley Hotel (The Shining) and Ohio State Reformatory (The Shawshank Redemption) have built in haunted tours as part of their regular schedule. Here in Michigan, The Whitney in Detroit offers an after dark haunted tour (which starts in their third floor Ghost Bar); Eloise Asylum hosts sold out haunted tours; before being damaged by fire this summer, The Holly Hotel was hosting seances every October (along with other spirited activities). There are several companies around the state that offer haunted walks and we even have at least three paranormal conferences held in the state each year. It's like Michiganders can't get enough of these experiences.

I recently learned about a collaboration of visitor bureaus that have created the Haunted History Trail of New York State and now my wheels are spinning on how we can develop something here in Michigan that is endorsed by tourism leaders willing to explore this potentially profitable niche. I can list dozens of venues in the state – hotels, restaurants, cemeteries, museums, theaters, lighthouses and more – that acknowledged and even promoted their ghostly side (and not just at Halloween). It makes economic sense that communities should bank on these stories as well.



What's the appeal of haunted lighthouses?

Lighthouses are among Michigan's most historic and iconic structures, dating back to the 1820s before Michigan was even a state. They're often romanticized for their waterfront locals for picturesque sunrises and sunsets, but they're often found in remote and desolate areas (especially in the 1800s when they were first constructed) and there are countless stories about men who drowned when their ships sank in the Great Lakes or lighthouse keepers who died when trying to rescue those mariners. There are even stories of keepers who took their own lives for one reason or another or men who were murdered mostly tied to robbery or alcohol related incidents. Or, there are simply tales of both men and women who served for decades tending to their respective lights, and even after passing from this world they're not willing to relinquish their roles as keeper. Michigan has more lighthouses than any other state (129) and over 40 of those have some type of ghost story attached to them.

What's your favorite lighthouse story?

I've visited many of the haunted lighthouses in Michigan, but one that has eluded me is Waugoshance Shoal Lighthouse near Mackinaw City. Built in 1850, it sits off a rocky shoreline area and today stands (barely) in ruins. One of the most noted keepers here was a man named John Herman. I first heard his story back in the late 1990s when I was working for West Michigan Tourist Association in Grand Rapids on their Lake Michigan Circle Tour & Lighthouse Guide. According to legend, John loved a good practical joke and a good stiff drink. On the evening of October 14, 1900, he reportedly had been at a bar in Mackinaw City and when he returned to the lighthouse, he thought it would be funny to lock his assistant keeper in the tower. Hours later, that disgruntled assistant was still confined to the tower while Herman had simply vanished. After sending a distress signal to a keeper of another nearby light, the assistant was finally released from captivity, and he was in search of John Herman (likely to wring his neck). Yet, he couldn't be found. In fact, John Herman was never seen again. Over the next 10 years, what was believed to be the ghost of John Herman remained active at Waugoshance, much to the chagrin of the living keepers who worked there. Rumor was it was so haunted that men refused to be transferred there and the lighthouse was ultimately put out of commission in 1910.

When I was researching for my 2019 book *Michigan's Haunted Lighthouses*, I learned an interesting bit of information about John Herman that sent chills through me. He



had actually had a heart attack on Mackinac Island (while visiting his twin sister) and died on Oct. 14, 1900, at 1:30 p.m. If the ghost story above did in fact happen, the possible reason the assistant keeper never found John Herman after being released from the tower was that it was his ghost that had been involved ... the first of a decade's worth of antics that are still talked about today!

How did your interest begin?

My interest in ghost stories dates back to my childhood, when my parents managed a restaurant that had a couple resident spirits. Years later, my own daughter had a similar encounter with the same ghost in the same restaurant and I think that impacted my willingness to believe. Since that time, my interest in the paranormal has grown. As a writer and historian, I'm interested in the history beyond the ghost stories. Who were these people that have lingered on after death, why are they still occupying a particular building or space, what happened to them to keep their spirits active and how can I responsibly share their story with others beyond the tall tales and local legends.

I think one of the most interesting places in Michigan is the former Traverse City State Hospital, which is being repurposed into The Village at Grand Traverse Commons -- home to amazing restaurants, coffee shops, wineries and breweries, high-end condos, offices and spaces for public events. While I'm aware of the dark stories that an asylum evokes, I'm intrigued by the architecture, grounds and stories of patients who helped keep this self-sustaining facility in operation between 1885 and the 1980s. I have several books in my personal library about this facility (both fiction and non-fiction) and often recommend it to people visiting Traverse City.

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