



Strolling Storytelling

DIANNA STAMPFLER | THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 2023



Candice Smith

Courtesy of Candice Smith

When it comes to sharing Michigan history, Candice Smith brings it to life like no other. She's been soaking up a wealth of knowledge about her own family as well as notable figures in the state's history since childhood. She was raised in the small town of Perry (Shiawassee County, population about 2,100), where her paternal great grandparents William and Ida Smith, lived.



“My great grandpa worked closely with Henry Ford, who liked his people to own farms,” she proudly notes. “So, my great grandpa bought the Perry farm, while continuing to live in Royal Oak and help manage Ford River Rouge.”

A century before that, Candice’s maternal great, great, great grandfather (Jacob Van Putten) came to establish the city of Holland with the Rev. Van Raalte. The Reverend even performed the marriage ceremony between her grandparents (Jacob and his wife, Jannetje) in his parlor in 1849.

Outside of Michigan, Candice notes she had English ancestors on the Mayflower (not pilgrims, but “strangers”), two ancestors accused in the Salem witch trials and Dutch relatives in New Amsterdam from whom descended the Kennedys, Roosevelts and Schuylers.

“I actually think most people have a fascinating family history,” she notes. “We were just able to find it. My great grandma (dad’s mom’s mom) wrote two books from family genealogy research in the mid-1970s, so it was a great start.”

In 2000, Candice moved to the town of Lowell (Kent County, population about 4,100) – home of the historic Fallasburg Covered Bridge and the Lowell Showboat. It was here that she shaped her future while remaining rooted in the past.

Her lifetime of storytelling and community networking are the foundation on which she built Tours Around Michigan in 2018. Over the years, she has guided hundreds of individuals through the downtown streets of Grand Rapids showcasing architecture, churches, homes and art along with sharing ghost stories, true crime and tidbits about the early city leaders.

In all, Candice offers more than a dozen Grand Rapids tour options for the public, many including local distilleries, breweries, bars and restaurants. There are also customized private tours that can be arranged almost anywhere in Michigan – from a quick jaunt to the lakeshore to multi-day excursions “Up North” or to urban hubs like Detroit, focused on each region’s cultural treasures.

Ghost Tour Grand Rapids is the most popular tour

Candice Smith offers.

“Our most popular public tour by far is our Ghost Tour Grand Rapids, followed by our Grand Rapids Riverfront Tour and our Grand Rapids City History Tour,” says Candice. “For private tours, many in large motor coach groups, they prefer a combined City History and Historic Home Tour. For the private groups, we also love customizing to make it extra special to them in subject matters like military, a specific culture, government history, urban renewal and more.”

Last year, Candice welcomed more than 1,600 people on combined tours (1,175 private and 400 public), a number significantly higher than 2021 (650 total) and 2019 (501 total). Much like other businesses, Tours Around Michigan was directly impacted by the pandemic. In 2020, she hosted just a few tours (for a combined 303 people) before the lockdown was implemented.

“Like many tourism companies, we lost a lot of business in 2020 [almost \$20,000] so part of our time was spent communicating with potential group tour company clients trying to reschedule,” Candice recalls. And there was a lot of business on the books that year, including a three-day Beer City weekend with a Wisconsin group tour company. Some bookings have rescheduled since, but not all.

**Breweries are among the dozen or so tours Candice
Smith offers in Grand Rapids.**

“Once people could be outside in groups under a certain size, we offered our Grand Rapids walking tours again, with mask wearing required. We used a speaker so everyone could hear us, while social distancing from other tour guests not in their household. Since downtown businesses still could not have people inside buildings and people were itching to get out to do something, our walking tours were one of the very few activity options in downtown Grand Rapids.

As public options opened in 2020 and 2021, we saw more interest in private tours once people could travel again. When people could not travel during lockdowns,

they planned what they wanted to do when they could finally explore. So, in general, post restriction tourism boomed.”

That year, Candice also began turning lemons into lemonade, planning, investing and pivoting. She created a new website which launched in 2021, along with a series of virtual tours targeted toward senior motorcoach groups.

Candice Smith has given tours to hundreds of people since starting her tour company a few years ago.

“A virtual tour series on Grand Rapids Churches was well received, and inspired participants to visit those churches in person with us once restrictions opened,” she says. “It was also fun to create a virtual tour Michigan Serial Killers, which allowed us to tell stories about the entire state, instead of being limited geographically.”

While anyone can book one of the many year-round public tours, Candice relies heavily on private group tours for local companies, conventions, churches and other organizations.

“We love our partnerships, including with Experience Grand Rapids, Circle Michigan and West Michigan Tourist Association, who are great for driving public and private tours our way,” says Candice. “Many of our private tours are initiated or referred to us by one of these organizations. While some of these private tours are repeat clients year to year, or from business relationships I’ve personally cultivated living and working in West Michigan since 1993.”

In addition to the motor coach tours companies, Candice has a growing number of corporate clients who hire her for customized private tours to educate and entertain job candidates who may be looking to move to West Michigan or run scavenger hunts as part of team bonding activities.

“We have so many great stories to be told here in Grand Rapids and Tours Around Michigan provides a way for our visitors to expand their trip experience while learning more about our community,” says Janet Korn, senior vice president for Experience Grand Rapids. “These unique walking tours are also nice for our group and convention

planners who are looking for unique opportunities for their attendees.”

Beyond her tour schedule, Candice maintains an active social life – attending theater performances, conferences, galas, media previews, holiday celebrations, meetings and other public (and private) events. She is among a growing number of “Social Influencers” who use Facebook, Instagram and TikTok to share stories with an expanded digital audience.

"Candice is more than just 'Tours Around Michigan,' she is an active presence in the West Michigan community and is one of key social influencers we engage with when promoting our consumer shows," says Dawn Baker, who, as a show manager for ShowSpan, helps produce popular events like the Grand Rapids International Wine, Beer & Food Festival; Michigan International Auto Show; and Cottage & Lakefront Living Show in Grand Rapids. "While her tours focus on the various chapters of our local history, her social network and enthusiasm for what is going on in the here and now make her a valuable marketing asset for our team."

It is this passion for her community and her company that landed Candice the 2017 Certified Tourism Ambassador (CTA) of the Year for Kent County, presented at the annual WAVE (Away Above Visitor Expectations) ceremony on the opening day of the Grand Rapids International Wine, Beer & Food Festival. Tours Around Michigan has been named among the “Top 50 Things to Do” by *ReVue Magazine* and was listed by the *Detroit Free Press* as “one to check out” amongst Michigan ghost tours.

Candice is also involved with a few local organizations, assisting with fundraising. A Tours Around Michigan donated auction item was one of the "most bid upon" for the Grand Rapids Public Museum gala auction. In the coming months, her donated tours will benefit other groups like Frederik Meijer Gardens, Friends and Families of Cystic Fibrosis, Leukemia & Lymphoma Society and Lowell's Crew Team.

“I love this community. There’s a positive energy here you don’t find elsewhere. It’s- magnetic,” she says. “It’s important for us, as a company, to be a positive factor in the community, to bring people together and hopefully make it better. That’s a win for all of us. I also really love meeting new people, which fits in very well with networking at different events and being out in the community.”

Inclusion and accessibility are vital to her business success. In addition to being LGBTQ+, pet and family friendly, Candice recently announced that Tours Around Michigan is the first U.S. tour company endorsed by Europe's Accessible Travel Press Online as well as the first tour company ever in AbleVue/AbleEyes accessible resources.

"We always try to do better for our guests who rock life on wheels, use sign language interpreters, love a guide dog or see life through neurodivergence or a mental (dis)ability," she notes. "With so many historic buildings and unique experiences, its common to have barriers. We're always checking for alternative routes, how to get someone onto a Lake Michigan cruise or join us in a haunted building."

This one-woman operation (who hires added guides as needed), never slows down and is always looking for ways to share more of Michigan with guests in new ways. She is currently working on:

- Partnering with Pedego for EBike Tours of Ada History (beginning this summer).
- Fostering relationships along the lakeshore, all the way up to Traverse City, to add options for private group tours.
- Building a network of Michigan tour guides to help small tourism businesses support each other.
- Expanding our paranormal experiences, both in additional public ghost tour options and possibly allowing people to experience a paranormal investigation with equipment.

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.

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