

Nebraska Geographic

with ALAN J. BARTELS

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I don't know if May Day is still a thing (nobody has left candy at my doorstep in a long, long time), but for some reason it just occurred to me that we are half-way to Halloween.

Nebraska is no slouch when it comes to Halloweenish tourism. Pumpkin patches and haunted houses entertain statewide. I have visited many of these annual attractions and I repeatedly find myself shockingly surprised by the creativeness of their owners and staff.

Sandhills Corn Maze sprung up west of Ainsworth not long after JW and Becky Bowen moved to Nebraska from a large city in a nearby state to raise their children in a community with a slower pace. Their 17-acre attraction features a twisting trail of dead ends, twists, turns, and surprises in their cornfield maze that threw me for a loop in broad daylight.

The attraction includes a growing list of activities including a sandbox-like corn pit adventure for children, feed wagon basketball, duck races, cornhole, and a two-lane slide down the raised bed of an old farm truck. Decorated hay bales adorn the property. As the sun sets in the evening, Sandhills Corn Maze transforms into a haunted version that trades daytime laughter for nighttime shrieks. Visit facebook.com/sandhillscornmaze to learn more.

KneeKnocker Woods is billed as "Central Nebraska's only Halloween theme park." The attraction west of Gibbon along U.S. Highway 30 was created by the owners and family members of Icon Poly, a Gibbon-based company known for its custom 3D sculptures. Unlike most Nebraska Halloween attractions, KneeKnocker Woods features state of the art amusement park quality animatronic creations to scare the jeepers out of visitors.

2024 marks 11 years for this zombie-infested roadside community known for laughs and screams and a scrumptious variety of concessions that has previous visitors longing for the shorter days of harvest season in Nebraska. Visit kneeknockerwoods.com to get the skinny on this entertaining experience.

To me, Nebraska's most unique Halloween attractions is also one of the newest – well, it will be the newest – when Chris and Pam Winer of Atkinson, and a helping handful of their family members get finished building the Trailer of Terror.

The 53-foot-long trailer is what the Winers call a mobile haunted house theatre. Pam's interest in haunted houses manifested itself when she was a child, converting her great aunt's basement into a haunted hollow with the help of her

cousins. Plastic heads were popped off of baby dolls, and bottles of ketchup were abducted from the refrigerator for use as fake blood.

Pam's interest led to family trips to Omaha years later with her own children. For a decade the family made annual treks to the Metro visiting every haunted attraction they could find. Pam always had ideas for her own haunted house banging around in her creative mind. When she discovered during their 2023 trip that two of their favorite haunted attractions had closed, she told her husband, Chris, "If we're ever going to do this, now is the time." Later that night, Chris found the 53-foot-long trailer for sale only 30 miles from their home. The rest is haunted history.

There will be no gore or anything grotesque in this attraction. The Winers plan to use "fun fears" such as startles, phobias, and storytelling, as well as special lighting and sound effects to shock and awe their visitors. There will also be 40 feet of entertainment space outside of the trailer.

The Trailer of Terror will set up in communities and also travel for special events. See their calendar and more at trailerofterror.com or find their Facebook page. Trailer of Terror also provides fundraising opportunities for organizations.

Pumpkin Patch fans don't have to wait until September and October. Poppy's Pumpkin Patch hosts visitors each May for special fun days. The attraction near Norfolk will have a petting zoo of goats and donkeys, as well as baby ducks and chicks for children to enjoy. Playground equipment fashioned from farm implements will entertain those kiddos to the point of exhaustion, but what about parents and grandparents? Don't worry, wine slushies and other adult offerings will be available for these special spring days on May 18, 19, 25, and 26. Visit poppypumpkinpatch.com for all the delightful details.

You don't have to be a fraidy cat to have a hauntingly good time in Nebraska.

Safe travels – and watch for deer.