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WARREN DILLAWAY

Ryan Ribblett, back to camera, takes a picture of his wife, Kelly, and their two children, Max, 3, and Quinn, 1, at the Smolen-Gulf Bridge in Plymouth Township during the 2019 Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival.

Covered Bridge Festival ready to go under slightly different format

BY WARREN DILLAWAY
warren@starbeacon.com

JEFFERSON — The Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival will not have a centralized location this year, but will feature the county's 19 covered bridges, as people come from all over the country to experience the mystique of rural Ohio.

The festival, scheduled for Saturday and Sunday, has been a focal point for county tourism for nearly

40 years, with activities taking place at the Ashtabula County Fairgrounds or Giddings Park in Jefferson. That will not occur this year, ACCBF Executive Director Ginger Whitehead said.

Instead, activities will be featured at almost all of the 19 covered bridges spread throughout Ashtabula County. One of the key driving forces to make the change was a lack of volunteers to properly operate the cen-

tralized location, which was at the fairgrounds last year.

Whitehead said the new format will bring the festival back to its roots to celebrate each bridge and its unique character.

While the bridges will have a variety of community events planned, the county's two largest, Harpersfield and Smolen-Gulf, will host the largest amount of activities, Whitehead said.

SEE **FESTIVAL**, 10

Covered bridge tour includes more than 100 miles of rural beauty

BY WARREN DILLAWAY

warren@starbeacon.com

The Ashtabula County Covered Bridge festival, scheduled for Saturday and Sunday, provides a map for people interested in venturing out to experience history and unique architecture by checking out the 19 covered bridges.

The county's bridges are spread out over well more than 100 miles of roads, from Conneaut to Geneva to Windsor Township.

Many motorcycle groups come to town to check out the bridges and get a good, long ride along the way.

Each bridge has its own charm, and non-profit groups are scheduled to provide food for sale and information about the bridge,

Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival Executive Director Ginger Whitehead said.

She said moving the festival back to its roots at the bridges, away from a centralized location, will be a good experience for participants.

The Caine Road Covered Bridge has a rich history, and a nearby venue will host a car show, Whitehead said of Red Hawk's Landing in Pierpont Township. She said there is a beautiful view of the bridge from the site.

Whitehead said festival merchandise, including sweatshirts, calendars and other items will be featured at the Smolen-Gulf Bridge and the Harpersfield Cov-

ered Bridge. She said the proceeds return to help operate the following year's festival.

As the event gears up, activity in the basement of the old Ashtabula County Courthouse — where the festival's office is located — increases, with Whitehead answering calls from around the country regarding where to stay and what to eat.

The office includes a variety of merchandise and information about the festival and other county attractions.

The Southeast portion of Ashtabula County is bereft of covered bridges, but the Southwest, Central, East and Northwest portions of Ohio's largest county are well represented.



WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

Kelly Insana, left, of Brecksville, and Maxwell Swanson, of Ashtabula, complete a visit to the Denmark Road Covered Bridge during the 2023 Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival. More activities are planned at the county bridges during this year's festival.

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Ashtabula County covered bridges

1. Netcher

1544 Netcher Rd, Jefferson
CLEARANCE: 14' 6" (2.7 mi. from Center of Jefferson)
 The bridge over Mill Creek was open to traffic in 1999. It features a timber arch with inverted Haupt Trusses. The "Neo Victorian" designed structure is 110' long, 22' wide, and 14' 6" high.

2. South Denmark

2670 South Denmark Rd, Jefferson
CLEARANCE: 9'0" (2.7 mi. from Netcher Road Bridge) Built in 1890, this Town lattice bridge spans Mill Creek. The 81-foot structure was bypassed in 1975.

3. Caine

4699 Caine Rd, Pierpont Township
CLEARANCE: 11'0" (6.7 mi. from S. Denmark Rd Bridge) This first Pratt Truss bridge in Ohio was built in 1986 in honor of Ashtabula

County's 175th Anniversary. The 124-foot long bridge traverses the west branch of the Ashtabula River.

4. Graham

4646 Graham Rd, Pierpont Township
BYPASS (5.9 mi. from Caine Rd Bridge) Built from remnants of a bridge washed downstream in the 1913 flood, the bridge now sits in a small park on the south side of the road.

5. Root

4680 Root Rd, Conneaut
CLEARANCE: 8'4" (3.9 mi. from Graham Rd Bridge) A 114-foot-long Town lattice built in 1868, Root Rd Bridge was raised 18" during the rehabilitation in 1982-83. New laminated girders and a center concrete pier were also added.

6. Middle

910 Middle Rd, Conneaut
CLEARANCE: 13'6" (8.3

mi. from Root Rd Bridge)
 This 136-foot-long Howe Truss bridge was built in 1868 over Conneaut Creek, which is a favorite Stealhead Steam. It was rehabilitated in 1984 with the help of seven volunteers.

7. Conneaut Creek

5899 State Rd, Conneaut
CLEARANCE: 16'2" (5.1 mi. from Middle Rd Bridge) Containing 97,000' of southern pine and oak, the State Rd. Bridge was erected in 1983 across Conneaut Creek. This 152-foot-long Town lattice was the first covered bridge designed and built by County Engineer John Smolen, Jr. A four foot opening spans the length.

8. Creek

371 Creek Rd, Conneaut
CLEARANCE: 11'4" (3.4 mi. from State Rd Bridge) The construction date of this 125-foot-long Town lattice



WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

A train ride was just one of the entertainment options during the 2023 Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival at the fairgrounds in Jefferson. The festival will not have a main focus area but activity will be distributed to covered bridges throughout Ashtabula County.

bridge is unknown. It sits 25' above Conneaut Creek and was renovated in 1994.

9. Benetka

4500 Benetka Rd, Sheffield

Township

CLEARANCE: 11'0" (11.5 mi. from Creek Rd Bridge) A 138-foot-long Town lattice with Arch bridge, Benetka was built about 1900. It was

renovated in 1985 when a laminated arch 9" wide, 38" thick, spanning the length of the bridge, was added.

SEE **COUNTY**, 11

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WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

A car show was just one of the many attractions on during the 2024 Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival at the Ashtabula County Fairgrounds in Jefferson. The festival will not feature a centralized location but will include activities at the county's covered bridges.

Covered bridges changed over the years

BY WARREN DILLAWAY
warren@starbeacon.com

Covered bridges are part of the central fabric of Ashtabula County, starting in 1867 with the building of bridges in Windsor Mills and Mechanicsville, according to the Ashtabula County Convention and Visitors Bureau website.

While most of the bridges have roots in the 1800s or early 1900s, there have also been newer covered bridges, including the nation's longest in Plymouth Township, which

rises high over the Ashtabula River.

The Smolen-Gulf Bridge, brain-child of former Ashtabula County Engineer John Smolen, was built from 2006-08 but the idea was first considered in the mid-1990s.

The trip down memory lane includes the construction of the Riverview Bridge beneath the Smolen-Gulf Bridge in 2016, and the building of the 18-foot West Liberty Street Covered Bridge in 2011.

Over the years, the bridges saw major technological

improvement in construction, reconstruction and renovation.

Smolen, in previous interviews, shared how he was made aware of the importance of covered bridges for tourism by fellow employees that mentored him at the engineer's office.

While engineer, he found ways to maintain existing covered bridges and create new ones.

Seventeen of the county's 19 covered bridges are still in operation and have created places for area residents, and visitors,

to experience life. Many of the covered bridges have been the background for wedding photos and tourist selfies.

The Benetka Road Bridge and the Olin Bridge are relatively close together, while others are many miles apart.

On a trip to all the county bridges, it is important to make sure your gas tank is full and you have scouted out the best spots to eat.

Another good way to prepare for the event is schedule your bridge-to-bridge plan to maximize the experience.



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Pumpkin sales have long been part of the Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival at the Smolen-Gulf Bridge in Plymouth Township.



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Waylon Hurst, 4, of Jefferson, carries a large umbrella during the 2023 Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival at the fairgrounds in Jefferson.

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Visitors to the 2024 Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival check out the Harpersfield Covered Bridge.



WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

Visitors to the 2024 Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival react to Bigfoot at the Ashtabula County Fairgrounds. The event will not feature a centralized site but people can participate at the county's 19 covered bridges.



WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

Matt Wintz, a WKYZ weatherman, was the 2024 Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival Grand Marshall.

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Harpersfield Bridge to be a big focus for redesigned festival

BY WARREN DILLAWAY

warren@starbeacon.com

HARPERSFIELD TOWNSHIP — This weekend, the Harpersfield Covered Bridge will be a focal point of the 2025 Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival, which highlights the county's 19 covered bridges.

The historic bridge was built in 1886 and has been a highlight of the area for decades, with improvements added during the last five years.

The 228-foot bridge spans the Grand River and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The bridge has experienced many changes over the years with one of the first being a steel addition after a 1913 flood diverted the Grand River,

according to the festival website.

ACCBF Executive Director Ginger Whitehead said a noon ceremony on Saturday will celebrate the metal portion of the bridge with the help of the Ohio History Connection.

In 1992, a walking path was added to the bridge for the enjoyment of visitors, and two major projects related to the bridge were completed during the last five years.

A major reconstruction project, which took more than a year and a half, was completed in spring 2024, after extensive work that included new concrete piers to support the historic bridge. Some of the former wood was used in the reconstruction project, which

split the community in half for a period of time when Route 534 was also under construction.

Whitehead said the focus of activity will be on the south side of the bridge, where entertainers will perform and craft vendors show their wares.

She said Huffman Acoustic will perform from 1-3 p.m. Saturday, and Simply Us from 3-5 p.m. Sunday. She said County Seat Reclaimed Ministries will host a church service at 10 a.m. Sunday at the Harpersfield Metropark.

The Friends of the Park will also host activities, Whitehead said.

The organization was formed to help maintain the bridge and provide programs to benefit the



WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

The Harpersfield Covered Bridge was reopened in June of 2024 after a major re-construction project.

community. There is often a Christmas program centered at the bridge.

Beneath the Harpersfield Covered Bridge is a major fishing area that is cultivated throughout the year.

On the north side of the

bridge, Whitehead said there will be a Native American teepee and other events.

On Sunday, a 5K race is scheduled for 8:30 a.m. from the bridge, Whitehead said. More information can be found at Stasny

Road Racing website or the Ashtabula Distance Runners website.

Stewart's Smokin Backyard BBQ and Rollin' B Cowboy Cafe food trucks are scheduled to be at the bridge, Whitehead said.

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Smolen-Gulf Bridge to be a central location of 2025 festival

BY WARREN DILLAWAY

warren@starbeacon.com

PLYMOUTH TOWNSHIP

— A reconfigured Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival will include a greater emphasis on the Smolen-Gulf Bridge, ACCBF Executive Director Ginger Whitehead said.

The nation's longest covered bridge is named in honor of John Smolen, still an engineer working with areas throughout the country regarding covered bridges.

He served as Ashtabula County Engineer for decades, and was a major proponent of maintaining — and in some cases rehabbing — covered bridges throughout the county.

In the mid-1990s, Smolen came up with the idea of spanning the more than 600-foot gap over the Ashtabula River and creating the nation's longest covered bridge.

The road previously wound down into the gulf and a much smaller, non-covered bridge crossed the river.

The bridge was completed in 2008 after two years of construction, and Smolen participated in the celebration at the completion of the project.

The day included 40 minutes of speeches, and instead of cutting a ribbon, a cross cut saw was used to complete the celebratory process by slicing through a log, according to Star Beacon accounts from the event.

Former ACCBF Executive Director Betty Morrison also participated in the ceremony, and described Smolen as "Mr. Covered Bridge." In previous interviews, Smolen discussed how his predecessor spoke about the importance of covered bridges and he eventually realized how the bridges could help bring people to the county.

SEE **BRIDGE**, 10



WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

The Smolen-Gulf Bridge became an eatery in 2022 during a fund raiser for the Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival. The bridge will be a focal point of activity during the 2025 Covered Bridge Festival.

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FESTIVAL FROM PAGE 2

The Smolen-Gulf Bridge is the longest in the United States, and the West Liberty Street Bridge, in Geneva, is the shortest.

Whitehead said all 19 bridges can be reached on a driving tour found on the festival's website.

"Each bridge can be enjoyed through a scenic driving tour that takes you through the heart of our charming rural communities," the festival website states.

The website also points to the festival's mission, which includes the promotion of the county, supporting the maintenance and preservation of the covered bridges, and educating the public about their rich history.

Whitehead said there have been calls for information about the festival from all over the United States, including visitors

intending to come to Ashtabula County from California.

Over the years, guests have come from all over the United States and even Europe. There are often motorcycle and driving tours that arrive at bridges looking for a unique experience.

While a parade will not occur this year, many unique experiences are scheduled for visitors ranging from traveling musicians to bean soup to a large variety of craft vendors.

The festival website urges visitors to come hungry, curious and ready to celebrate the county's unique relationship to covered bridges rooted in rural American history.

Whitehead said there will be food and educational opportunities at the individual bridges, which are located throughout the county.

BRIDGE FROM PAGE 9

The Smolen-Gulf Bridge was the 17th covered bridge in the county.

The former steel bridge included a hilly dip down to a bridge and another steep climb to get back up the other side. The new bridge not only created new opportunities for tourism, but made the trip safer for those using the bridge on a regular basis.

Whitehead said a big addition to the festival this year will be craft vendors staged along the pathway to the Riverview Covered Bridge, beneath the Smolen-Gulf Bridge.

The Riverview Bridge was created after the Smolen-Gulf for walkers and bicyclists to enjoy the surrounding natural beauty.

Whitehead said there is plenty of parking, and with attractions at the top of and below the bridge, people can park in both locations to enjoy the experience.

"At the top lot, we will have the miniature bridge," she said of a rolling bridge replica that is usually stationed at the central site and pulled in the parade. She said Evie's Luau food truck will be



WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

Piper Duthie, 10, of Painesville, looks for a pumpkin in October 2023 during the Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival at the Smolen-Gulf Bridge in Plymouth Township. The Smolen-Gulf Bridge will have a lot of activities this year.

at the bridge from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. both days.

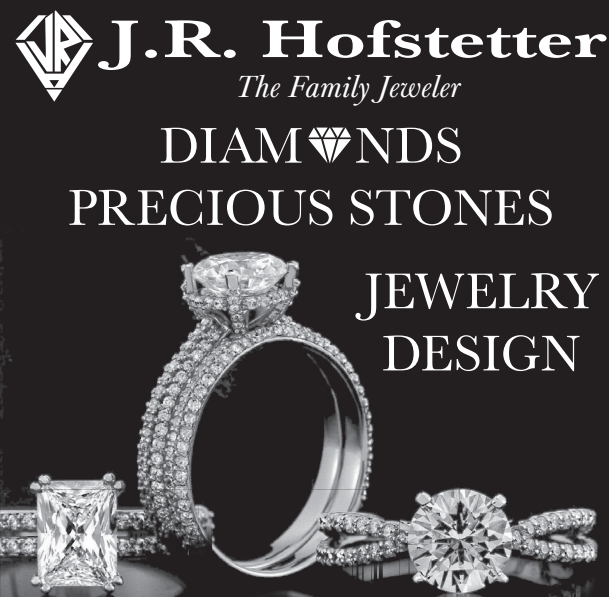
Entertainment will also occur at the Smolen-Gulf Bridge, and bean soup will be served.

The upper pavilion details the history of the bridge. There is a walkway on both sides of the 613-foot bridge that many people use to view the river and valley below.



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**COUNTY
FROM PAGE 4**

10. Olin

1880 Dewey Rd, Plymouth Township

CLEARANCE: 12'0" (2.5 mi. from Benetka Rd Bridge) Olins have owned property next to the bridge since it was built in 1873. The 115-foot-long Town lattice structure over the Ashtabula River was renovated in 1985.

11. Smolen-Gulf

7001 State Rd, Ashtabula CLEARANCE: 14'6" (2.6 mi. from Olin Bridge) The longest covered bridge in the U.S. is of Pratt Truss construction. Engineering and structural design by John W. Smolen, Jr. (former County Engineer) and architectural design was done by Timothy J. Martin (current County

Engineer). Dedicated in 2008, it is 613' long and stands 93' above the River. With clear width of 30' it will support full legal load traffic and has a life expectancy of 100 years.

12. Riverview

Indian Trails Park, 4761 State Rd, Ashtabula This bridge is 150' long and 14' wide, making it one of the larger bridges, yet it carries only pedestrian traffic. It mirrors the Pratt arch design of its big brother, Smolen-Gulf, which rises above. Both cross the Ashtabula River at Indian Trails Park. Riverview, dedicated in 2016, provides exercise trials and a place to enjoy the beautiful river scenery.

13. Giddings

1400 Giddings Rd, Jefferson CLEARANCE: 15'6" (8

mi. from Smolen-Gulf Bridge) Pratt Truss construction was used for this 107' bridge built in 1995. It crosses Mill Creek in Jefferson Township.

14. Doyle

1300 Doyle Rd, Jefferson CLEARANCE: 13'6" (1.8 mi. from Jefferson) A 94-foot-long Town lattice bridge built in 1868, Doyle spans Mill Creek, a tributary of the Grand River. This bridge was renovated in 1987 when a laminated arch was added.

15. West Liberty

94 West Liberty St, Geneva CLEARANCE: 15' (10.6 mi. from Doyle Rd Bridge) The shortest covered bridge in the U.S., Liberty spans only 18'. The structure is supported by a single Kingpost and its roof is a scissor Truss which gives the bridge a light, open

feeling. Timber for this bridge was harvested from county land owners. The bridge was modularly constructed by students of Ashtabula County Joint Vocational School (now A-Tech).

16. Harpersfield

1122 Harpersfield Rd, Geneva CLEARANCE: 10'9" (3 mi. from Liberty St Bridge) This two span Howe Truss bridge is 228' long and is the second longest bridge in Ohio. Built in 1868, it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A 1913 flood altered the river, requiring a steel bridge to link the covered bridge to the north approach. A walkway was added in 1992, and additional work was done in the last several years.

16. Mechanicsville

1153 Mechanicsville Road, Austinburg.

CLEARANCE: 10'9" (3 mi. from Liberty St Bridge) This two-span Howe truss bridge is 228' long and is the second longest bridge in Ohio. Built in 1868, it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A 1913 flood altered the river, requiring a steel bridge to link the covered bridge to the north approach. A walkway was added in 1992.

18. Riverdale

3349 Riverdale Rd, Rock Creek CLEARANCE: 10'9" (3 mi. from Liberty St Bridge) This 114' Town lattice bridge sits high above the Grand River. It was built in 1874. The floor was rebuilt in 1981 and glue laminated wood girders were added. Center steel bracing had been replaced under the

bridge in 1945. The road at the east end of the bridge washed out in 1987 and a new concrete abutment was built for added support.

19. Windsor Mills

7696 Warner Hollow Rd, Windsor CLEARANCE: 11'3" (14.5 mi. from Riverdale Bridge) Windsor Mills is 120' long and spans Phelps Creek, a tributary of the Grand River. Built in 1867, the Town lattice bridge rests on abutments of sandstone (quarried nearby) and creek stone. The field stone center pier was replaced with stone-look concrete when it was renovated in 2002-03.

Information from the Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival and the Ashtabula County Convention and Visitors Bureau.



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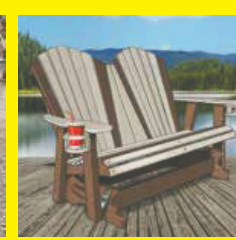
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