

Legends and Lanterns



It's Saturday, October 15th, 11:30AM, on historic Main Street in St. Charles, Missouri. On any other Saturday, you'd find shop owners opening their doors for business — or, more likely, having already had their doors open for several hours. It is almost noon, after all. You'd find some people window-shopping on the sidewalk of one of the quaintest Main Streets in Missouri and others enjoying a treat from one of the many tasty eateries. In those respects, today is no different. However, on this warm morning the shoppers are joined by a cluster of costumed performers and imaginative exhibits to celebrate the season of Halloween and commemorate the first day of Legends & Lanterns, an annual celebration that is the envy of many towns and a key draw to the historic district of St. Charles. Halloween has been a beloved season in America since 1921, when the nation's first citywide celebrations took place in Anoka, Minnesota. However, the gregarious town of St. Charles just loves it a little more than most!

Initially conceived by the Convention & Visitors Bureau as an effort to attract visitors on the weekends leading up to Halloween, Legends & Lanterns has quickly become an October staple of the city. Started in 2016 by Special Event Producer Ryan Cooper, this festival is a thriving pageant that celebrates everything from Halloween's origins to the theatrics of dressing up, telling ghost stories, and appreciating the aesthetics we associate with the season in a family-friendly environment.

The street performers sprinkled throughout Main Street are some of the event's star attractions. Characters range from historical figures like Edgar Allan Poe to mythological characters like Medusa and Stingy Jack. Not familiar with Stingy Jack? Well, there's no need to haul out your compendium of Irish and Celtic mythology. The actors aren't just performing bit parts — they are bona fide experts in whichever character they perform. "We usually audition at the end of May," said Cooper, "There's no script. No instructions on where to move. How to move. We're an improv street performance festival."

The festival merges a collection of both entertaining and informative events. Best of all, it is predominantly free of charge. For instance, kids can go to La Plaza del Dia de Los

Muertos and get their faces painted while they learn about the cultural facets of the Day of the Dead.

On the flip side of Spanish traditions of Halloween, there are also Victorian traditions for celebrating the dear departed. Visitors taking a stroll through Frontier Park who enter the Historic Katy Depot will step foot into the Victorian Mourning Museum. There, they will find a collection of Victorian obsequies, such as tear vials, hair wreaths, and post-mortem photography of the recently deceased. There is a section dedicated to fashion, too; visitors will learn how they might dress depending on their relation to the dead, as well as general etiquette and the historical practices before the advent of funeral parlors. This venue is considerably more structured for informing, which was a deliberate choice on Cooper's part. "The characters on the sidewalk are the foundation, but I wanted the event to have layers. More of an exhibit or a museum. It's fun to

watch people leave at the end of the day and say, 'Wow, I never knew about that.'"

This just scratches the surface of what happens at the festival. There are also live musical performances, horse-drawn hayrides, and a scarecrow competition. There's even another attraction in Katy Depot called the Tinseltown Terrors. The depot is modified into an old-time movie house and

projects trailers and movie clips from B-movies and monster movies from the 1930s and '50s. It is bound to be a nostalgic experience for some and an eye-opening experience for others.

However, none of these events could exist if it weren't for the contributions of the event committees and the Halloween-loving volunteers and performers. In 2017, they had 20 performers. This year, 60 individuals will be divided into onstage actors and behind-the-scenes organizers. This is a point of pride for Cooper. "Having those who attend who don't consider themselves Halloween people and showing them the fun of the holiday and changing their mind is one of the best feelings of organizing this event."

So, whether Halloween is your cup of tea or not, this month, pay the friendly town of St. Charles a visit to soak in the history and culture surrounding one of the country's most colorful holidays.

