



**BALL'S FALLS THANKSGIVING FESTIVAL:**

# *A 40-Year Niagara*

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# Tradition

By Gloria Hildebrandt Photographed by Mike Davis

**B**ALL'S FALLS THANKSGIVING FESTIVAL in Jordan will celebrate its 40th anniversary from Oct. 10 to 14 this year. The hugely popular annual event on the historic grounds of Ball's Falls Conservation Area attracts on average, 20,000 visitors each year. With usually 125 vendors participating, there is always plenty to explore, but for this special anniversary, there may be 150 craftspeople, artists and food providers.

"It's so beautiful. You can smell apple fritters. It's one of the last chances to get out and enjoy the weather," said Margaret Cunningham of Toronto last year, who with Steven Kelvey had come to the Festival for the second time. The first time they went, they drove by, saw a sign and decided to check it out. This time they had their bikes on the back of their car and were going to have a ride after seeing the festival. ▶

Thousands of people come each year to experience the incredible beauty of a 19th-century industrial hamlet in the majestic Niagara Escarpment of Niagara Region.



▲ The Centre for Conservation treats water carefully: cisterns store rainwater for dual-flush toilets, with excess rainwater feeding the natural pond surrounded by drought-resistant landscaping.

**“We’ve never had such interest as we’ve had this year. We’ve been coming here for years and the interest this year has been phenomenal.” — JUDY GAUDIER, NIAGARA BRUCE TRAIL CLUB**

“It has an old-time country feel,” added Kelvey. “What impressed me was the steam-powered exhibit. You just don’t see it anymore.”

The first Thanksgiving Festival was held at Ball’s Falls in 1975, organized by Jozina Goldring, wife of Francis Goldring, then chairman of Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA), which owns and operates Ball’s Falls. The intention was to raise money for programs that were not otherwise funded. This remains the purpose today; with an average of \$40,000 raised each year, funds go to NPCA programs and projects.

“From its humble beginnings as a one-day show, the event has become a

family and Niagara tradition,” says Mary Stack, NPCA’s supervisor of marketing and community relations. “Visitors come from far and wide each year to partake in the festivities and in addition to the many items available for purchase — and many actually do their Christmas shopping here — guests enjoy the incredible beauty of this 19th-century industrial hamlet, set amidst the majestic Niagara Escarpment and Twenty Valley.”

#### **Centre for Conservation**

While most of the action takes place down the hill among the heritage buildings of Ball’s Falls, the Centre for Conservation is worth exploring. Opened in 2008, it

is an award-winning example of sustainable architecture, and was built to LEED gold standards. Well insulated, it used building materials with high recycled content, has a ground-source heat pump, maximizes natural daylight, has a sophisticated water/wastewater system, and more. It’s also beautiful. Interactive exhibits highlight the history of the Niagara Escarpment. There’s also a popular gift shop.

#### **Exhibitors**

Vendors, artists and craftspeople populate the large grassy areas downhill and over the bridge. Paintings, pottery, textiles, toys, carvings and much more are on display. Interested artisans must apply for consideration

by a jury which determines the best fit for the festival.

Niagara Bruce Trail Club was also exhibiting last year as part of their 50th anniversary celebrations, and volunteer Judy Gaudier observed “We’ve never had such interest as we’ve had this year. We’ve been coming here for years and the interest this year has been phenomenal.”

#### **Heritage Buildings**

The heritage buildings come alive during the festival: the Ball family home, chapel, blacksmith shop and grist mill can be explored or toured. There is also a pioneer garden which at this time of year has fall flowers

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▲ Up to 150 vendors, selected by jury, are expected to exhibit their goods at the 40th festival.



▲ Jim Bucknall makes the steam traction engine produce dramatic whistles and clouds of steam, to the pain and delight of visitors.



▲ The pioneer demonstration garden is in its ripe stage at the festival, with “three sisters” plantings of corn, beans and squash among herbs and flowers.



▲ Inside the heritage barn, woodworkers demonstrate their skills along with weavers and chair caners while handmade items are for sale.

## “We try to educate the public about the way it used to be. Life was simple then.”

— RON BAER, NIAGARA ANTIQUE POWER ASSOCIATION

and produce ripening for harvest. Last year the heritage barn had demonstrations of woodworking, chair caning, weaving, and reproduction furniture and pioneer toys for sale. The grist mill was grinding flour for sale for \$6.00 a bag.

Old-time carnival music may draw you to the 1911 military band organ that can play 150 rolls of Wurlitzer-style music. Bought in 1956 by John Leonard of St. Catharines, it is now operated by his widow, Pauline Leonard. She points out the brass horns in the front, explaining that it can make the sounds of 123 instruments. She also declares that it was used in the 1983 film *The Natural*, starring Robert Redford. Claiming she goes everywhere with the

organ, she adds “It’s my baby too. She’s in perfect tune. If it wasn’t, I wouldn’t play it.”

### Antique Power

Men and boys of all ages flock to the large display of engines by the Niagara Antique Power Association. Strange machinery grinds and chugs and puffs and rattles amid smoke in a bewildering array of big and small toys.

“We like the old stuff,” says Ron Baer, member of the association. “These engines will run on regular gas, kerosene, anything. We try to educate the public about the way it used to be. Life was simple then. We go to all the local fairs in the summer. This is the last local event.”

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◀ Margaret Cunningham and Steven Kelvey of Toronto in front of Ball’s Falls last year.



▲ The grist mill formerly used the water of Ball’s Falls for power. Now there’s not enough flow for that, so electricity powers the grindstone and other mechanics. The workings of the mill can be explored, and preservative-free, freshly ground flour can be bought.



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The biggest attraction is the steam engine. Used for sawmill work, it has a locomotive-style boiler and mobile, powered saws to cut lumber. Jim Bucknall operated it last year, showing the firebox that could use coal, although he prefers wood, and demonstrating its two truly spectacular whistles, a loud one and an even bigger one, for different signals. When he yanks a cord, the ear-splitting sound is accompanied by clouds of steam that silence all observers,

impressing everyone with the power of this machine. **NEV**

#### 40th Festival Facts

**Dates:** Oct. 10–14, 2014

**Hours:** 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**Admission:** Adults \$6, children under 14 free if accompanied by adult. On Friday only, seniors \$5.

**Location:** Ball's Falls Centre for Conservation, 3292 Sixth Ave., Jordan, ON

**Free parking.**

◀ Drums, brass horns and pipes produce the music of 123 instruments in the 1911 military band organ lovingly cared for by John and Pauline Leonard.



▲ Ron Baer at the display of wonderful antique small engines.

◀ What would a harvest festival be without weird sisters? These flamboyantly costumed witches have added strange colour to the festival for years.