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Ione harvests the heavyweights Saturday

By Scott Thomas Anderson Amador in Action Oct 10, 2017



This house at the corner of Highway 104 and East Main Street in Ione already showcases the kind of Halloween spirit that will be on display at the Harvest Festival Saturday.

Photo by Scott Thomas Anderson

Rick Kreth's family has performed tractor work in Ione since 1946, but only recently has he used heavy equipment to move 1,100-pound pumpkins. That's because lately, the town with Amador's richest farming history has taken its harvest-time hoedown to the next level.

The Ione Business and Community Association's Harvest Fair on Saturday includes sidewalk chalk art, scarecrow-building and a scarecrow contest, a showdown for the best-carved jack-o'-lantern, a rollicking dog costume challenge and a slew of October-themed food and craft items. But the main event for the day is the Giant Pumpkin Contest at noon.

The challenge of growing Sasquatch-sized squash has appealed to locals beyond Ione. Last year, bumpy, bulbous pumpkins rolled in from as far afield as Volcano and Mokelumne Hill. In 2016, the orange Frankenstein that took the award weighed in at a whopping 1,100 pounds.

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More and more people are growing abominable orange spherical experiments in their gardens. It's not hard to understand why: The next winner of the Ione Harvest Festival's Great Pumpkin Contest walks away with \$1,000. That's the purse for the adult category, but even the winner of the kids' contest gets \$500.

Given how big the pumpkins are getting, Ione's event has needed some hydraulic muscle from Kreth's heavy equipment. Kreth is a member of the Ione Rotary Club and the

president of the hosting Ione Business and Community Association. Last year, he volunteered his forklift to move the giant pumpkins around. He'll do it again this year.

Kreth has been involved with the event ever since it started six years ago. It didn't take him long to realize that a handful of the most outrageous contestants in the giant pumpkin gambit were farmers from out of the area – who specialized in growing jaw-droppingly unbelievable gourds.

"It was pretty unbelievable," Kreth remembers with a laugh. "They bring those things to fairs all around the state. They're enormous. Those folks can still participate in our Ione event, but we realized we had to make another category for locals-only, too."

With Kreth's gear on hand, the contest will be ready to go. Check-in for entries is 9 a.m., with winners announced at noon. Separate from that, the faceoff for Best Decorated or Carved Pumpkin starts with entries checked in at 7:30 a.m. The winner will be announced at 2 p.m.

The Lone Harvest Fair keeps the action going throughout the day with its sidewalk chalking run from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Kreth recalled that having kids chalk-up the city's pavement was how the whole fair started in the first place. He and his wife had attended Sacramento's Chalk the Walk event a dozen years ago and they felt inspired to help create a similar experience in Lone. Once chalking became a yearly staple of Lone's Halloween, more and more events were added, until the annual get-together morphed into the Harvest Fair.

For Kreth, the chalk contest is his favorite part of the fun.

"I do think it's the most unique thing," Kreth said. "The kids are so creative and they make their art all up and down Main Street."

Another popular feature of the fair is the dog costume contest. It begins at 11 a.m. at Train Park in downtown Lone, with awards at 1 p.m. Awards for the scarecrow contest are given at noon.

All the preparation for the fair seems to have set Lone aglow with Halloween spirit. Decorations are going up around the city. The charming Victorian house at the corner of Highway 104 and East Main Street has completely transformed itself, summoning up a full cemetery on the lawn and an eerie, web-laced gallery for the grim reaper to stare out from. It'll be fun to see how their decorating neighbors try to keep up.

For travelers, Lone has always been a big destination for All Hollow's Eve. Taking ghost tours through the dank catacomb-like basement and hospital ward of Preston Castle has only gotten more popular among thrill-seekers. Paranormal fans who really know their stuff often grab rooms for the night at the century-old Lone Hotel, allegedly haunted by a mischievous former resident of the city called Gregarious George. Between events at Preston, the ambiance of the Lone Hotel and Saturday's Harvest Fair, Lone may very well be Amador's top one-stop spot for Halloween fun.

The tormented futurist Phillip K. Dick once wrote that “To live is to be haunted.” That may be true enough, but dwelling on what’s haunted also reminds us that we’re alive. This October, spend some time in Ione soaking in its fun events and chilling elements, and see if you don’t feel just a little more alive yourself.

Send word on your Amador County events to mtaylor@sierralodestar.com.

Ione Harvest Fair

WHEN: 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Main Street, Ione

COST: Free to attend

MORE INFO: myione.com or 274-2777