

Halloween, lit with 5,000 candle power

This pumpkin display started out small, 15 years ago; now it spills across three acres at a Providence, R.I., zoo.



IT'S DUSK ON opening night of the Jack-O'-Lantern Spectacular at Roger Williams Park Zoo in Providence, R.I. With only 10 minutes until showtime – when all jack-o'-lanterns needed to be in place and lit – John Reckner bumps a wheelbarrow piled with pumpkins down a dirt path. His

crew crisscrosses the three-acre site, bending to light tea candles inside each jack-o'-lantern, then running to the next. A volunteer leans into a 100-pounder with a barbecue lighter and jabs at the wicks of the candles inside. Someone kicks on a fog machine. The sky glows orange for a few more brief moments, then darkness hits.

The audience piles through the gate, giddy at the sight: Giant pumpkins carved in the likeness of Mae West and Humphrey Bogart flicker softly in a copse of tall pines. Around another bend, there's Anne Frank, Shirley Temple, and the Beatles. A glowing orange Andy Warhol squats among dozens of other larger-than-life icons of the 1960s as the sound system pumps out "Nights in White Satin" by the Moody Blues. Off in the distance, carved pumpkins stretch out across a pond. Five hundred jack-o'-lanterns hang along the limbs of a tree that looms several stories into the sky. Nine hundred dot a hillside.

This is pumpkin carving at its best, due largely to Mr. Reckner, an Oxford, Mass., letter carrier who saves up vacation days so he can create a new show each fall.

"I spend all day walking around thinking up ideas," he says. "And I love the outdoors, so what I like most is being able to



PHOTOS BY JOHN NORDELL – STAFF

A FRIGHT OF JACK-O'-LANTERNS: Fog machines and surround sound set the mood for this display at the Roger Williams Park Zoo.

blend the pumpkins into a landscape and highlight its beauty."

Reckner's been in love with jack-o'-lanterns since he took his family up to northern Vermont one October more than 15 years ago. He was heading to Northfield Falls, where he'd heard everyone carved a giant pumpkin at Halloween. As the late-afternoon light grew dim and the air turned cold, Reckner nosed his Ford along a two-lane highway until at last, to the family's amazement, they saw hundreds of

jack-o'-lanterns blazing away on a hillside. "Pumpkins!"

It was a sight they'd never forget.

"We started out in 1988 with a couple hundred pumpkins," Reckner says, "and put them up behind a local school in Oxford. About 300 people came."

By 1999, 20,000 folks were touring the display over an eight-day period and Reckner, along with 30 friends and family, were carving upwards of 4,000 gourds.

"This is probably the last year," he'd say every September. "I don't know if I'm going to keep doing this."

In 2001, Reckner moved the show to Providence's Roger Williams Park Zoo, where 80,000 people saw the show and the zoo had to turn thousands more away.

"It was a perfect marriage," says zoo staff member Lisa Bousquet. "We took care of the ticket booths and bathrooms so that John could concentrate on what he does best – carving."

IT'S A FAMILY enterprise. All year long, Reckner and his wife and two grown children – all of whom went to art school – collect design ideas and patterns. Then at harvest time, they buy pumpkins and do the sketching. Once the carving begins, there's no letup till it's done.

The giant pumpkins are turned over to "gutting marines" who clean out the pulp and soak the pumpkins in diluted bleach, which acts as a fungicide. Then, for a week straight, they carve. Or rather, engrave. A team of about 20 art-school graduates uses flexible paring knives to skin off a

thin layer of rind, making carvings that are extraordinarily fine and detailed. Another team handles the "fillers," simple jack-o'-lanterns that they can carve as quickly as one every three minutes. (They use drywall saws, which have narrow blades serrated on both sides.)

Running the show is also nonstop work: "Every day we take away the rotted ones, light the show, run the show, come home, redo the big ones, get up at 8 a.m. and start all over. It has to be that way," Reckner says.

The pumpkin crew has its own kind of language, says Ms. Bousquet. "Dorothy's down," they'll say, "but the Scarecrow's OK. Bogart is rotten. Edith will last another day but Archie's gonna be mush after tonight."

To John Reckner and crew, these are not fruits, they're performers. Divas even. Take, for example, the 800-pound beauty carved with the image of firefighters hoisting the American flag for the 2001 show. It took 10 men standing shoulder to shoulder in the cold, digging the toes of their boots in the mud to shove a blanket under it, then gently drag the giant to the loading lift of their truck for the trip to Providence.

Reckner's worst nightmare?

"Periodically I have a dream. We don't even have the pumpkins yet and it's showtime."

Worst real-life nightmare?

"One of the Norman Rockwells took us five hours to carve, and it got dropped.

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FAMILY PROJECT: Travis (far right) and Kim Reckner (second from right), children of the jack-o'-lantern spectacular's creator, were among the pumpkin 'gutting marines.'

Some carving tips from the pros

PHOTOS BY JOHN NORDELL - STAFF

1. **Scoop deeply.** The more 'guts' you remove, the longer your jack-o'-lantern will last. Try to scrape out all but about one inch of the rind. (The pros use ice-cream scoops to gut the pumpkins.)
2. **Watch the temperature.** Cold is good; hot is bad. If the weather gets warm, store pumpkins in a cool cellar.
3. **Moisturize.** Rub petroleum jelly along cut edges to prevent the pumpkin from drying out too fast.
4. **Vent.** Cut a small hole in the top to release heat from the candle.
5. **Angle the top.** Cut the pumpkin's lid in a five- or six-sided shape. Cut the lid at an angle, too, so it won't fall inside.
6. **Use the scraps.** Reshape and reattach cut-out pieces with toothpicks to add horns, noses, or ears.
7. **Use the right tool.** The key to making fancy shapes is a narrow, thin, serrated blade - wielded by an adult.



BOO! Twenty art-school graduates design the pumpkins. This tiger has incised designs embellished with black marker.

L.B.

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Then once there was Humpty Dumpty. We had a big old dead tree and we cut it in half. We were trying to get a 100-pound Humpty pumpkin up the tree using two ladders and, well ... it fell."

This year's show has been percolating in Reckner's imagination ever since he turned the 2002 show into compost for his Japanese garden. "This past year we installed surround sound, and it really made

a difference. This year we're upgrading the lighting." He imagines the pumpkins in "skits": a Mother Goose skit, a skit with a tropical theme for a path through the wetland exhibit (carvings of parrots, crocodiles, palm trees, complete with a working volcano in the pond), a fun-house skit.

"I love to combine music with the carving," he says. "The challenge is trying to keep it a unique experience."

No one can argue that Reckner, or his pumpkins, are not unique.

Last season, as the sun went down, John walked the pumpkin trail at the zoo for the final time that year. He rounded up a dozen rotted gourds, pulled them into his truck, and set a dozen, freshly carved, in their places. The pond's surface was still. Voices drifted from the trail - last-minute instructions to the volunteers, vendors setting up a cider-and-pretzel stand. Then, darkness.

A mom, dad, and two kids had driven down from Massachusetts to see this, and as the crowd cascaded through the front gate and rounded the bend toward the first displays, the family stopped dead in their tracks.

"Pumpkins!"

Lesley Bannatyne

■ *The 2003 Jack-O'-Lantern Spectacular is showing now through Nov. 2. For more information, call: 401-785-3510, or log on to www.rogerwilliamsparkzoo.org*



FOUNDER: John Reckner spends most of the year as a letter carrier. His first jack-o'-lantern display was in 1988.