

## Ohio Covered Bridge Week 2<sup>nd</sup> Week in October

Covered Bridges are iconic landmarks throughout Ohio. In Ashtabula County, we are fortunate to have the greatest concentration with 19 bridges in a short driving distance from one another. They are very unique with different colors and truss styles.

Smolen-Gulf is the longest covered bridge in the United States

Liberty Street is the shortest covered bridge in the United States

People come from all over the country to experience these living pieces of history that are easily accessible. Tourism continues to grow in Ohio and our small towns are feeling the positive economic impact of this traffic. We have seen a trend of increased sales, jobs and tax revenues linked directly to tourism in our towns. So, we asked ourselves, "What are people doing?"

In 2017 our Visitors Bureau commissioned a study through NorthStar to understand WHY people visit Ohio's northeast corner. We wanted to know HOW people spend their time when they come to Ashtabula County and WHAT they experience. The answer was very clear. The study revealed the same answers again & again: The trifecta of Lake Erie, our wineries and our covered bridges.

Interestingly, it skewed across age and interest brackets. People of all ages are coming to enjoy covered bridges and they are coming for all different reasons. This is consistent with what we see. Picnics, tours, weddings, afternoon drives, photo ops – all kinds of reasons to visit a unique icon. Charming and beautiful.

These are catalysts for conversation and stimulate learning opportunities. Why are these bridges covered? What is the history behind this bridge? What are the architectural elements used in this construction?

In the visitor center, our driving guide is the most popular resource tool because it includes a self-guided driving tour map for all the covered bridges. Last year we distributed 90,000 guides. This year we have increased the print run to 100,000. People can find the lake. Wineries are advertised. But finding covered bridges is like going on a scavenger hunt. All but two of them are still in use, so the tour is very hand-on. Visitors come back again and again to experience this tour.

New businesses have spawned from our gems: guests can eat in a real covered bridge at Covered Bridge Pizza. The Harpersfield Bridge spanning the river at one of our Metroparks sustains a Covered Bridge Shop. Local chefs are preparing unique dining experiences in covered bridges. The list is endless!

For the last 35 years, Ashtabula County has been celebrating covered bridges during the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of October. With a backdrop of changing leaves and a hint of cooler weather in the air, there is no better time to explore the majesty of Ohio's backroads. Hence, The Annual Covered Bridge Festival!

This festival receives media attention from several states. The mission of the Covered Bridge Festival is to promote Ashtabula County and help in the preservation & maintenance of its

bridges by planning an annual family-oriented festival in a rural community atmosphere and by providing education to the public about its historic covered bridges.

Visitors travel from bridge to bridge where they will experience small celebrations along the way, including live music, wagon rides, food/drink, games and more. There is a central hub in our county seat of Jefferson, but for the most part, thousands of visitors enjoy a go-at-your-own-pace weekend filled with leisurely travel.

And we love travel! The average day-tripper typically spends @ \$110 throughout the day. However, the traveler that chooses to stay the night typically spends \$342 during their stay. The traffic generated by our covered bridges is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to the local economy.

Designating the second week in October as Ohio's Covered Bridge week will allow the entire state to engage and help draw attention to attractions that cannot easily be found while passing through on an interstate. The designation will leverage these historical landmarks and magnify the message of Ohio's authentic and accessible treasures.

To us, there is no better time to celebrate and connect with other pockets throughout the state. This gives the tourism industry another opportunity to work together to strengthen our messaging, positioning Ohio as a tourist destination.

Ohio tourism generates \$413 billion in sales. We look forward to seeing that number grow with your support of initiatives like this.

Thank you

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