

Businesses look to scare up Halloween tourism dollars

BY CAROLYN STEEVES

CHARLOTTE — With Halloween almost a season unto itself, Charlotte area so-called 'haunted attractions' can turn a tidy profit, giving tourists a good scare.

One such attraction, The Nightmare on Independence, is a haunted house in Charlotte now in its fourth year. Co-owner Charles Blackwood said the house gets roughly 7,000 to 8,500 customers a year. Blackwood declined to give an exact figure for revenue, but said it's "just six figures."

Like many haunted attraction entrepreneurs, Blackwood got his start young. He said he had a Halloween party as a kid that people still talk about.

"It's something that's kind of in your blood," he said. "You liked pulling tricks and scaring people as a kid and it eventually goes to a higher level with a budget."

Blackwood, who started in the haunted house business in 1989, said the haunted house business though isn't for everybody.

"It's not something to jump into to make a quick buck," he said. "A lot of people do and they don't last three years in the business."

The Nightmare on Independence employs roughly 40 people during the Halloween season. Blackwood said there are some haunted houses in the country that run year-round and attract tens of thousands of customers. With Charlotte being a smaller market, he said they only operate during the season.

The Haunted House Association estimates that there are over 1,200 haunted attractions in the U.S. charging admission fees. The group estimates a typical haunted attraction will see 8,000 paid guests and charge an average of \$15 per ticket.

The Haunted House Association estimates the industry generates between \$300 and \$500 million a year in ticket sales. This figure, however, does not include the impact haunted houses have on vendors who supply props and costumes, building supplies, insurance, advertisement and other

costs. The industry does estimate that haunted attractions spend roughly \$85 million a year in advertising.

The association estimates there are also more than 300 amusement sites offering Halloween events like the one at Carowinds — an amusement park outside of Charlotte. Its "SCarowinds," now in its ninth year, is a Halloween event that runs every weekend from late September to early November.

Carowinds does not release attendance numbers, but Danielle Swords, a spokesperson for Carowinds, said it is one of their more popular events.

"We have a really big population that comes out for SCarowinds," she said. During the event the rides are open and there are Halloween-related shows, mazes, "scare zones" and people in costume to scare guests.

Swords said amusement parks see a drop in attendance around Halloween and that it is a "creative marketing tool to generate attendance numbers in the off season." She added that it attracts many teenagers and college-aged patrons.

While many people don't like to be outside in the cold, Swords finds, "people are going to come when it feels seasonal to them...when it's related to a seasonal event such as Halloween."

For people who aren't into the haunted house scene, ghost walks and ghost tours capitalize on the Halloween season.

Downtown Statesville started doing ghost walks this year. The idea came from the promotions committee for the Downtown Statesville revitalization group.

"There had been conversation about having some sort of ghost tour instead of just a historic tour, so we've been working on it for about a year," Statesville spokeswoman Nancy Davis said. "I have been working on it for many years, because I think it was ripe to happen, I just finally found a place that would listen"

She said Statesville is filled with ghost stories and legends and is hoping to turn the tour into something that could even be done year-round by

appointment.

Statesville had its first ghost walk last weekend. After losing one day on account of rain an estimated 80 people showed up on Saturday, leading to four or five walks. Davis said this weekend's walks are nearly sold out and the town is planning to add more.

"Legends and ghost stories are safe scary things," Davis said. "They're different from the (horror) movies. A ghost story is an old legend that happened a long time ago and it's a restless spirit not out to harm you...out to make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up."

She added that people "don't like to be horrified, they like to just be scared and jump and then laugh at themselves."

Some organizations use the holiday as a fun way to teach history. The Charlotte Museum of History hosts a "Haunted Homesite" event. Attendance was off last Friday from 2007, which was attributed to the weather.

The museum leads lantern tours around the property while guides tell ghost stories and actors re-enact them. There are people in the woods making noises and other effects to make guests uneasy. However, what the museum does is take historical stories and turn them into ghost stories.

"At the end of the tour we stop and explain historic fact and then we discuss how haunted stories, myths and legends are created — by taking a kernel of truth and expanding on it," Jan McCormick, director of education for the museum, said. She noted that they do not want people to think that the ghost story they heard was the true story.

Why are people so fascinated by the supernatural, particularly around Halloween?

"I think it's the same reason people love monster movies and horror movies," McCormick said. "There's nothing people like better to be scared, then to realize that it's all make believe and everything's going to be okay."