

Bridge walkers celebrate Labor Day

BY MELANIE BOLTHOUSE
Autumn Guide editor

When the Mackinac Bridge was dedicated in 1958 with a bridge walk, a northern Michigan tradition was born.

Today, those looking to celebrate Labor Day and mark the end of summer with a stroll have a variety of towns to choose from.

The oldest and largest of the region's bridge walks is held where it all began — the Mackinac Bridge.

The first Mackinac Bridge walk was in June 1958. The next year it was moved to Labor Day to honor the men who worked on the bridge and also so it could be held on a day when most people do not have to work and are free to participate, said Dawn Edwards, executive director of the Mackinaw Area Chamber of Commerce.

The walk, which draws an average of 60,000 people, begins in St. Ignace at 7 a.m. and spans the five miles of bridge to Mackinaw City. Participants can park on the north side of the bridge and be bused back after the walk, or they can park on the south side and board a bus to St. Ignace at Conkling Heritage Park on Huron Avenue.

The proceedings begin with words from Gov. Jennifer Granholm. This year, the walkers will be led by 300 pre-registered joggers as part of the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness.

The annual event is a huge effort by the city, Edwards said.

"There is an amazing amount of people that help with bus tickets," she said. "A whole lot of people are involved in the town — actual resi-

dents, not just chamber members or business owners."

For those looking to avoid large crowds and socialize in small-town settings, several other towns hold bridge walks on Labor Day as well.

Cheboygan's State Street Labor Day Bridge Walk began in the 1970s by a group who wanted to "thumb their noses at the big bridge walk," said Rich Adams, editor of the Cheboygan News.

The walk stopped in the 1980s because of a lack of interest, but was revived four years ago for the same reason it began.

"A lot of people don't want to go to Mackinaw City for the bridge walk, so we thought, 'Why not start up one in Cheboygan?'" said Bev King, Cheboygan Chamber member.

The walk begins at 11:50 a.m. on the east side of State Street Bridge. Participants walk across and then continue on to Washington Park for a picnic and live music.

Near Traverse City, the Sixth Annual Leland Labor Day Bridge Walk is held to commemorate the completion of the town's bridge.

"In 1999, MDOT replaced the M-22 bridge over the Leland River in Leland. People in the community thought we should celebrate that," said Lee Bowen, vice chairman of the County Road Commission.

Bowen and some colleagues came up with the idea. Since then, he said, it has taken on a life of its own.

"It's just a nice social occasion where everyone comes out to see their friends," he said. "It's a small-town, fun event."

The walk begins at the DNR parking lot east of the Blue Bird



Record-Eagle file photo

Nearly 300 people come out on Labor Day to celebrate the end of summer with a bridge walk across the Glen Lake Narrows.

Restaurant. A cannon shot from the yacht club marks the start, with the grand marshal, king and queen of Leland's Fourth of July parade leading the participants. Everyone receives a certificate at the end, along with lemonade and cookies on the lawn of the Old Art Building.

A few miles south of Leland, Glen Arbor holds a bridge walk across the narrows of Glen Lake. Bill Thompson, president of the chamber, came up with the idea for a bridge walk in 1995 when he owned the Dairy Bar along Little Glen Lake.

"We call ours the 'other bridge walk,'" he said. "The Mackinac Bridge walk is 'the bridge walk.'"

Around 100 people showed up the first year of the walk. Today, nearly 300 participate, Thompson said.

"It's the last day of the season; people are trying to get out of town," he said. "They wait now for the bridge walk and then they go."

Thompson said walkers carry flags and sing songs. Upon completion, everyone receives a certificate.

"We have fun with it," he said. "It really is a kick."

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