

Ready, Aim, Chuck a Pumpkin! at the Kemble Harvest Blowout

Words & photos by Kelly Babcock

The cool air of autumn, wet earth and decomposing leaves make your sweater a friend and the occasional whiff of wild apples reminds you of baked desserts after harvest dinners. I'm tramping across open fields through slanting rain, recalling autumns of years gone by, when the tranquility is shattered by the sound of a pneumatic cannon firing a pumpkin through the sky. Applause follows the shot and ATVs

follow the flying gourd to measure its distance. There are better ways to make pie filling, but this is fun. The official Canadian national Pumpkin Chuckin' competition at the Kemble Harvest Blowout has begun.

Kemble, a picturesque hamlet firmly planted on the Niagara Escarpment between Owen Sound and Warton, used to be the home of fall fairs. We miss the baking, livestock and handwork competitions that were part of these events but most Harvest Blowout attendees agree that there is a great deal

Trebuchets have fired pumpkins farther than 790 feet at the Harvest Blowout Pumpkin Chuckin' competition in Kemble, Ontario. Think of a biblical sling on the end of a long wooden pole and you have a trebuchet.

Trebuchet: a military machine used in siege warfare for throwing stones etc.



Mike Sutherland stands in front of his air cannon, "Silver Streak Chucker." Mike's crew, his kids, pose with him but everyone stands clear when this monster cannon fires. Mike is a Canadian record holder and his air cannons are famous in Kemble.



Team McGregor cocking a trebuchet. The McGregors come to compete and three generations of them are in attendance each year.



Kent Cruickshank and his cannon, "Rusty Brown." At Kent's feet is the yellow trigger valve and the hatch in the barrel where the pumpkin is loaded.



The trigger is about to be pulled on one of the many trebuchets.

of fun to be had with spare parts, your imagination and a pile of pumpkins. 2009 was the fifth year for this new tradition; 2010 will be just as good, a way of celebrating the season with a literal bang.

Times change. So has this community but its tenacity keeps it alive. The Harvest Blowout is a result of Kemble's spirit. Last year, a silent auction raised more than \$4,000 for a 20-year resident, Billy Nicol, suffering from Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Billy says "It's nice to have that kind of support.

Everybody seems to be one big family in Kemble."

Proceeds from the gate went to community projects and ongoing arena expenses. Non-profit organizations ran booths to fund their activities. The Kemble and District Lions Club sold hot dogs, sausages and beverages and the Kemble United Church teamed up with the Kemble Arena Committee to sell chili, rolls, pie, hot beverages and cookies. They work hard every year and they always sell out.

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Mike Sutherland's "Silver Streak Chucker" firing the winning shot of 2,510 feet. It almost looks easy.

The Big Guns

The air cannons are the most spectacular of the pumpkin launching categories. It takes time and technology to build one of these guns. The result is a machine that will shoot a pumpkin as far as possible without shattering it in the air. The pumpkin must be intact when it hits the ground. Records are broken regularly.

Practising at home, Kent Cruikshank achieved 1,500 feet with his air cannon, Rusty Brown. I asked about other distances he had measured. "We were shooting at night so we

don't know," he said. They were unable to find many of the spent projectiles the next day.

Happy to talk about the winter project they had built and pulled by trailer for 100 km, Adam Shefter and Ace Strong of Gorrie, Ont., came to Kemble hoping to win. Adam's welding shop and Ace's pumpkin field inspired them to build the air cannon they called the Double A Flying Circus. They called on friends to acquire enough parts for their shot at the nationals.

Adjusting the angle of their launcher's massive barrel, Adam told me, "We were shooting 32 degrees." Ace added, "We haven't had much time to play with it." I left them calculating air pressure.

Who won in 2009? At 1,461 feet, Ace Strong and Adam Shefter took fourth place, third place went to Shawn Bridge with a shot of 1,548 feet, Kent Cruikshank took second with a shot of 1,690 feet and local hero, Mike Sutherland, the '08 Canadian champion, decisively took first place with 2,510 feet. Who will win this year? There's the question.

The medieval categories, trebuchets and catapults, came next. Design modifications change these ancient war machines into veggy

launchers. Still a war of sorts, the competition is friendlier in nature. After all, they're not shooting at each other. This category is appealing to people with technical curiosity or historical interest. Again records have been established and smashed but misfires can be as spectacular as the good shots. One trebuchet launched a pumpkin roughly 30 yards – backwards.

Pumpkin Chuckin machines amaze and impress spectators. Larry Bluhm of Georgian Bluffs



Adam Schefter and Ace Strong stand next to the "Double 'A' Flying Circus.

said "I think the cannons were a big success." His wife Sue added with a smile, "It really is a show of male testosterone, isn't it?"

Over the years, competitive challenges have been added that test strength and skill. Turnip tossing for distance and accuracy, hay bale throwing and potato peeling events go on throughout the day.

Hairspray Power

New in 2008 was the potato cannon competition. Spud guns, built from ABS plumbing pipe, use compressed air or hairspray to launch a potato. These guns are judged on accuracy rather than distance. Considered dangerous by some, they are still crowd pleasers. I can vouch for the thrill involved. I had the opportunity to fire a gun being developed for the 2008 competition. One shot was all it took. In 2009 I brought my own, a light duty unit known to refuse to fire. I stepped up to take my turn and can happily report that after competing in a field of nine I was tied for second place. That sounds impressive, but in truth, only one team man-

aged any points, the rest of us having been skunked. I left vowing to return with a more accurate model.

The team of Brian Ferguson and Dr. Murray McQuigg won with one hit. I asked Brian if he came to play or to win. "Both!" he replied. Competitors in '08 with a hairspray-powered gun, they stepped up their game in '09 with a pneumatic unit, handing over last year's model to their spouses.

The Escarpment is a beautiful backdrop for a day of fun for neighbours from around the corner, around the Bruce Peninsula and farther

afield. New friends and old gather to challenge and watch and then reminisce at the annual costume dance at the arena. It is a rare soul indeed who leaves without at least the start of a plan percolating in his mind for some form of machine to fire some type of vegetable at the next Harvest Blowout in Kemble. **EV**

Kelly Babcock's family has lived more than seven generations on or near the Grey and Bruce sections of the Niagara Escarpment where he now lives as a fixture in his wife's antique shop. Kelly's website is at www.writeofway.ca.

Next Kemble Harvest Blowout: Oct. 23, 2010

More information: kemblepumpkinchuckin.com