

An A-*MAZE*-ingly Good Time!

By Clayton Spangler

Lots of fun, and even a few life lessons await walkers in the Cooper Family Farms corn maze. © Clayton Spangler

Nothing says fall fun like a corn maze, especially one that is so huge, it's patrolled by a team of "Corn Cops" who help you find your way! That's the kind of fun found at Cooper Family Farms in Milton. Located just behind Old Milton Middle School, the Cooper Corn Maze offers an agri-tourism adventure the whole family will enjoy. Let me tempt you a bit with my experience from last year.

On a bright, sunny day in late October, I joined a small crowd that had gathered in the Cooper Farms parking lot. We didn't have to wait long for the tractor-pulled wagon that would take us to the eight-acre corn maze. As we loaded up, excited riders—young and old alike—imagined what we might see amidst the rows of corn. Someone said he'd heard of a person who had gotten lost and was never seen again. I smiled at the Halloween spirit already bubbling over into wild stories.

As we lumbered along the narrow dirt road, I couldn't help but get caught up in the excitement. The Cooper corn maze is known for its beautiful, elaborate designs, including shapes of the State of West Virginia (the first season's design), Uncle Sam, and a firefighter. Last year's maze honored the Mountain State's 150th anniversary with an intricate design that incorporated the letters WV, the iconic gristmill at Babcock State Park, and the words "150 years." In the illustration of the maze on the Cooper Farms website, it looked a bit daunting to navigate. I couldn't wait to see what it would be like on ground level.

We soon arrived at a small, park-like area with a fire pit, shelters, and wooden benches. A snack and ticket stand was already bustling with excited visitors. I knew I was in for a good time.

Listen to the Corn Cops

When I approached the maze entrance, a Corn Cop dressed in a bright yellow vest stopped me and explained the rules of conduct in the maze: Stay on the paths, or get nabbed by a Corn Cop. No littering, or you'll be carted off with the trash. The speed limit is 2 mph. In other words, no running. And no bad language. The corn has "tender ears." Finally, and this rule was my favorite, Go get lost! And have fun!

Before I entered the maze, I met with Kim Cooper, who owns and operates Cooper Family Farms with his wife, Joyce. As we talked about what I was about to experience, he gave me some history about the farm and the maze. The farm dates back to the 1840s, when it belonged to Kim's grandmother's family, the Jenkinses. Originally just 100 acres, Cooper Family Farms currently spans more than 900 acres in Cabell and Mason counties. Kim and Joyce raise cattle and grain, and

they also sell hay, but it's the corn maze that has brought their farm into the public eye.

The Coopers created their first maze in 2001 after partnering with The MAiZE, the largest corn maze consulting and design company in the world. The Coopers had talked with youth in their church and concluded that "good, clean fun" was hard to find in the area. They wanted their maze to be big, exciting, and, well, a-maze-ing! Although lots of people thought they were crazy, 14 successful seasons and tens of thousands of satisfied visitors have proven otherwise.

"People just shook their heads," Kim said, laughing. "Even my dad thought I was crazy. He said, 'Nobody's going to pay to walk through a cornfield!' I told him, 'It's not a regular cornfield, Dad.'"

It sure isn't. The first year, the corn maze brought in around 2,500 people. Now, depending on the weather, numbers can reach close to 20,000 visitors a season.

Life Lessons in the Maze

I entered the massive maze and was immediately lost in the odd wonder of the densely packed stalks. Walls of 13-foot-tall corn rose high above my head, obscuring any view but the path before me. This isn't a corn maze you'd find in a kiddie carnival; it's a true labyrinth.

Kim and Joyce Cooper developed their corn maze 14 years ago to provide good, clean fun in the Milton area. © Clayton Spangler





(Next page) **Visitors arrive at the** corn maze via a tractor-pulled wagon. © Clayton Spangler

◀ **After strolling through the** maze, visitors to Cooper Farms can squirm through the corn crawl crib in their stocking feet. © Jack Chapman/Cooper Family Farms

▼ **Kids and parents alike** enjoy sifting through a trough of shelled corn. © Clayton Spangler



Initially, the paths were alive with sounds of nearby laughter. But the deeper I delved into the field, the quieter it became. There was a sense of peace that came with that silence, although, I confess, the thought of being there at night seemed a little eerie.

I walked around a blind corner into a clearing, where the path split to the left and right. As I considered which direction to take, I remembered the conversation that Kim and I had had just a few moments before. Although most people come for the fun, he said, the experience inside the maze offers some life lessons.

“We look at the maze as a person’s life in a lot of ways,” he told me. “There are right choices that will take you right where you want to go, and there are wrong choices that will lead you down a dead-end path. A lot of people take those wrong choices in the maze, as in life.”

Besides operating the farm with Joyce, Kim is the principal of Milton Elementary School. Being a person who touches so many young lives, it’s not surprising that the maze’s metaphorical significance is important to him.

Luckily, on the journey through the maze, the Corn Cops are there to offer guidance. However, they don’t automatically show people the way out.

“Just like in life,” Kim said, “if you’re lost, sometimes you

have to ask for help.” If you ask, the Corn Cops will tell you where you need to go.

I chose the narrow path on the right. A few twists and turns and a couple of dead ends later, I found myself on the path that led me toward the exit. After the tight rows of corn I’d been navigating, the exit looked positively expansive!

I met back up with Kim and posed the questions that had occurred to me during my adventure: What happens if you get so lost that you can’t locate a Corn Cop? Has anyone ever been trapped in the maze?

Kim smiled and shook his head. “Not going to happen,” he said. “We go through the corn maze at night just to be sure we didn’t miss anybody!”

Beyond the Maze

I had a wonderful time exploring the maze on my own and at my own pace, but some people prefer to experience it in a more intense, unconventional way. Weekend “Zombie Shoots” allow visitors to blast “real” zombies inside the maze with paintball guns.

And while the maze is the main draw, Cooper Family Farms offers many other activities. New this year is a 1,400-foot zipline that gives riders a birds-eye view of the maze’s impressive design. Energetic visitors should check out the

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corn crawl crib, a building with 27 compartments (and only one entrance and exit) that requires entrants to contort their bodies and navigate up, down, and around to go through it. There's also a pick-your-own pumpkin patch; new, shaded picnic areas; and a nightly campfire with s'mores. The toddler crowd will enjoy catching a ride on the cow train and breaking in the recently installed playground equipment.

Planning For Success

To make all this fun come together, the main attraction must be planned well in advance. Kim says that development of

the corn maze begins at a New Year's Eve party that he and Joyce host, where friends and family toss around ideas. Then, in March or April, the Coopers narrow down possible themes for the design. The design theme for 2014? American Gothic, pitchfork and all.

After the theme has been determined, the creation and execution of the maze takes a lot of hard work. The whole process takes hundreds of hours over many months.

"Pretty much we're working on it from April through November," Kim said. Although the exact techniques used are a trade secret, maze creators generally use a grid system



to lay out their design, planting corn in several directions, to make the growth nice and thick. Once the corn starts growing, the design is applied grid by grid. The shoots of corn are hoed up into the pattern, and the pathways desired for the design take shape.

Of course, Kim reminded me, any time you deal with agriculture, you're dependant on Mother Nature. The Coopers have battled flooding caused by persistent rain and beavers building dams. Other attractions at the farm are on wheels so they can be moved to higher ground easily. Last year, however, the Coopers had to shut down the final five days of the season because a storm destroyed the middle of the maze. Then there are the deer, raccoons, turkeys, and squirrels that enjoy eating the seeds and shoots of corn.

Luckily, the Coopers aren't alone in operating their giant

project or responding to these challenges. "We have friends who have helped us for all 14 years," Kim said. "That makes it work."

Although the maze is literally made from rows of corn, it's the creativity and passion that everyone brings to this field that makes it feel like you're a part of something special. Whether you're a first timer or someone who comes back year after year, the corn maze is always new and inviting. The adventure it offers brings out the kid in all of us.

So when you go, be sure to listen to the Corn Cop: Go get lost, and have fun! 🌽

Clayton Spangler is photography editor of Wonderful West Virginia.

In 2013, the Cooper Family Farms corn maze design celebrated the 150th anniversary of West Virginia's statehood. Courtesy of Cooper Family Farms





The Cooper Family Farms Corn Maze runs from Saturday, September 6, to Sunday, November 2, 2014. General admission for ages 4 and above is \$8, which includes the maze, crib crawl, play area, and cow train. Kids 3 and under are free. Zip line rides are \$12 or 2 for \$15. Group rates are available. Zombie Shoot admission is \$15 regardless of age. This activity will run each weekend beginning at dark. Groups of 20 or more may reserve a Zombie Shoot during the week. The Field of Screams, a haunted stroll through the corn maze, costs \$10 per person and will be held Oct. 17, 18, 24, 25, 31, and Nov. 1.

To find the farm, take I-64 to the Milton exit, then Rt. 60 West to Old Milton Middle School. Parking is behind the school. For more information, check out the farm's website, cooperfamilyfarms.net or call 304.634.MAZE. You can also find the farm on Facebook at Corn Maze at Cooper Family Farms of Milton, WV.