The Houston Pumpkin Festival has grown into a Southwestern Pennsylvania tradition.

Story by Karen Mansfield
Firefighters with the Houston Volunteer Fire Department in Houston pose for a photo at the American Legion grounds where they hold the Pumpkin Festival in October. Proceeds raised go for new equipment for the fire department. From left are: Dave Luongo; Kevin Gasmire, lieutenant; Carl Bruno; Al Nagy; Louie Oliverio; Jason Marth, first lieutenant; Jim Denny, chief; Chad Roberts; Jonathan Taylor; Josh Young, chief engineer; Robb Meddings, assistant chief; T.J. Dunn, captain.

In “It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown,” Linus, hoping that the Great Pumpkin visits his pumpkin patch on Halloween, says, “He’s gotta pick this one. I don’t see how a pumpkin patch can be more sincere than this one. You can look around here and there’s not a sign of hypocrisy. Nothing but sincerity as far as the eye can see.”

The Houston Pumpkin Festival is a lot like Linus and his pumpkin patch: wholesome and sincere. The family-friendly, three-day community event has become an autumn tradition and one of Southwestern Pennsylvania’s most popular festivals.

“We like to say we’re a nice, family-oriented festival,” said Jonathan Taylor, a volunteer firefighter with the Houston Fire Department and one of the festival’s planners. “We’re proud of the festival we put on. We provide a little something for just about everyone who comes, whether they’re there for entertainment, crafts, food or games. It’s a great place to bring the family.”

The festival, now in its 29th year, draws about 100,000 visitors annually to the one-stoplight town with a population of about 1,400 people. It is slated for Oct. 12-14.

The sixth-graders at Allison Park Elementary School re-created Linus’ pumpkin patch for a float in the annual Houston Pumpkin Festival Parade in 2011.

Continued on next page
During the gala (it has earned the title Hometown Favorites Best Local Fair and Festival), the grounds of the Houston American Legion are covered with more than 175 craft and food booths, and children’s games, events and entertainment are provided all weekend long.

Originally, the Pumpkin Festival was organized by the borough, a small, autumn affair to draw visitors to the stores along Pike Street and to provide a little entertainment for kids. But it really took off in 1996, when the fire department took over and turned it into its most profitable – and only – fundraiser.

According to Taylor, 80 percent of the fire department’s budget is generated from the festival. The department recently purchased a utility truck to replace its aging truck, thanks to proceeds from the festival.

Contestants shovel in pumpkin pie slices during the 2011 pumpkin pie-eating contest sponsored by Bob Evans Restaurant. The contest is one of the festival’s most popular events.

The crowd fills the grounds of the Houston American Legion for the Pumpkin Festival. A giant bounce castle and slide are some of the many activities available for children who attend the festival, an autumn tradition.
“We pretty much live and die by it,” said firefighter and parade planner Charles Meddings. “The festival keeps the doors open and lets us operate.”

One of the highlights of the festival is the annual Pumpkin Festival Parade. Thousands of spectators line the half-mile route to watch the floats, costumed characters, marching bands and dance troupes march past.

“It’s hard to believe it’s Houston when you come over the hill past the Pie Place and you see all those people here for the parade,” said Taylor. “It’s a bit overwhelming. It really draws a big crowd.”

The festival planners start organizing the event every March and work hard to bring in top-notch entertainment. This year, American Idol semifinalist Adam Brock will perform with The Soul Band, and the Blue Collar Band and Easy Street Band also will play. Back by popular demand is the pumpkin pie-eating contest, in which each contestant eats an eight-inch pumpkin pie as quickly as possible. Last year’s winner devoured the pie in about 1 1/2 minutes.
And participants in the second annual pumpkin seed-spitting contest will have an opportunity to break the current world record of 34 feet. Last year's best effort was a 28-foot spit.

For teens, the festival hosts an In-It-to-Win-It competition: High school students compete in one-minute challenge games, like separating M&Ms into paper cups according to color and stacking dice on a tongue depressor held in their mouths.

Children's activities have grown to include an inflatable slide, a 30-foot rock-climbing wall, Euro bungee, horse rides, a petting zoo, pumpkin decorating and train rides.

It's hard to resist the variety of tasty treats available at the festival, including funnel cakes, cotton candy, hot dogs and other refreshments.

“We're happy about the festival and how it's become an important community event,” said Taylor. “The longevity is amazing. I don't think when it began that anybody thought it would last this long. It keeps getting bigger. And better.”
Houston Pumpkin Festival Schedule

Friday, Oct. 12
- Noon: Opening ceremony, featuring crowning of festival prince and princess and Chartiers-Houston High School Marching Band
- 1:30 p.m.: In-It-to-Win-It for youth and teens

Saturday, Oct. 13
- 8:45 a.m.: Registration for costume contest
- 9:15 a.m.: Costume judging and awarding of prizes

Sunday, Oct. 14
- 9:45 a.m.: Open-air church service on stage
- 1-5 p.m.: Easy Street Band
- 2:30 p.m.: Pumpkin seed-spitting contest