

## **Hell's Bells**

*A wacky wedding chapel, spooky ice cream shop, and wise-cracking Mayor make a visit to Hell, MI a damn good time*

Rain pounds on the bright, red roof of the small chapel and a percussion of noise beats throughout this space that houses only a half dozen chairs. I can't walk more than a few steps in any direction without hitting a wall or chair, and settle for standing at the front of the room, in the space where the bride and groom take their vows. Beside me, John Colone, 64, the owner of the chapel, ignores his now-damp denim work shirt as well as the noise that threatens to drown out his words. He tells me that the chapel holds around 100 weddings each year. The majority of those weddings, however, are second or third marriages for the happy couple.

"A marriage that starts in Hell can only go up," Colone says. His round, weathered face splits into a wide grin that reaches his eyes behind their wire-rimmed glasses.

Colone acts as the unofficial mayor of Hell (yes, Hell), a tiny community in southeastern Michigan where 72 full-time Hellions reside. Rural houses with sprawling lawns and rusted farming equipment-slash-garden ornaments surround the single block of unpaved road that makes up Hell's main drag. The buffalo farm and overabundance of wagon wheels and ancient plow blades may distract from the sudden appearance of uptown/midtown/downtown Hell, but you can't miss it. Garish paintings of devils, skeletons, and what appears to be a sasquatch splash the sides of the three buildings that line the street.

A man named George Reeves settled the town that became Hell in 1838, taking the time to build a mill and general store, but not to actually *name* the town. No definitive guide to Hell, Michigan exists, but two stories continually pop up as explanations for the name. One suggests that a pair of visiting German travelers were overhead describing the town as “So schön und hell!” (beautiful and bright), and the name stuck. The other, more apt version, says that Reeves got so fed up with the people complaining about the lack of name that he said “You can call it Hell, for all I care.” Either way, the town officially became Hell on October 13, 1841.

Colone is also the owner of two of the three major buildings in town (*Scream’s Ice Cream* and the *Hell Country Store & Spirits*), and he takes his role as mayor and promoter of all-things-Hell very seriously. Or, as seriously as someone who answers his phone “Hell!” (Me: *Hell-o?*) can. Colone spent the past eight years marketing (forgive me) the hell out of his town’s name, and his efforts paid off big time with appearances on the *Today Show*, a feature on a *Travel Channel* special, and thousands of visitors each year—myself included. This trip marks my second journey to Hell; the first coincided with June 6, 2006 (6/6/06) and featured hundreds of bikers, the kind of Halloween costumes banned in public schools, and grandmothers and mohawked kids faux-celebrating Satan, side-by-side. Cars and motorcycles crammed to the side of the dirt road all the way to the buffalo farm, and kids ran around with glow sticks and t-shirts that read “I’ve been to Hell and back!” That day I officially converted to a “Wannabe” (someone who wants to be a Hellion, or at least a Hell-billy).

With the tour of his chapel finished, Colone leads me back out into the rain, pausing to point out the large, metal question mark that perches atop the slanted roof.

Apparently, no religious group wants to be affiliated with a chapel in Hell. My sneakers squish in the mud and still-brown, soggy grass as we make our way back to the ice cream shop, passing a plywood mural of a skeleton bride and groom with the heads cut out that couples can pose in. My bright blue Honda sits beside the ice cream shop, one of only a couple cars in the parking lot. The pouring rain and thick fog have scared off even the hardest of Hellions, and only a handful of Wannabes have passed through since I pulled up. Not exactly DevilFest09.

Inside of *Scream* 's, Colone wipes the rain from his glasses and ushers me toward the stainless steel coffin in the middle of the floor.

“You ever tried bat poop?” he asks, as he scoops some chocolate chips from a bowl inside the coffin. I stare at him, and he raises his eyebrows, expectantly.

“Uh, no,” I say, and he drops a couple into my hand. Not sure what else to do, I eat them. Tasty. I sample vampire blood (red-tinged chocolate syrup), but draw the line at ghost poop. Marshmallows, and the excrement of non-corporeal beings, aren't my thing. Colone hurries around a corner of the shop and comes back with an empty, plastic water bottle. Again, he hands it to me, and proclaims it “dehydrated water from Hell.” The yellow label proclaims it the “best water in this world or beyond!”

“It's one of our biggest sellers,” he says, that giddy grin on his face again. He explains that he takes empty water bottles, washes them, places the new label on the bottle, and glues the cap back on. When the process is finished, ta-da! Hell water, only ninety-nine cents. I get caught up in his excitement, and refrain from telling him that I think this is a rip-off.

Colone's home town isn't the only hellish part of his history. A former soldier in Vietnam, he was seriously wounded in a battle and officially declared dead by army medics. They toe-tagged him and placed him in a body bag for transport back to the home base. Aboard the helicopter, Colone woke up inside the body bag. He spent almost a year recovering in a United States hospital.

Colone later owned a Chrysler dealership just a few miles from Hell, but became more and more involved with his hometown after he retired and bought the two stores in 2001. He transformed the buildings into the *Hell Country Store* and *Scream's* and began working to transform the town's image. He remembers when *Scream's* housed the *Hell's Playground* arcade back when he was a kid. He also remembers when the motorcyclists who visited the town weren't bike enthusiasts, but gang members who took over the space behind the bar next door.

"It wasn't a place you'd want to be," Colone says. Then, he brightens and talks about how the town sees about 40 tour buses a year now and the bikers who roll through town for the annual "Blessing of the Bikes" aren't the Hell's Angels-type they used to be.

Since he bought the stores, Colone has been honored with the title of Mayor three times: once for a week, one term that lasted three years, and this latest term, which began on February 7, 2009. Blame Colone's political inconsistencies on that which Michiganders blame all inconsistencies: the weather. See, when you're a town of only 72, there's really no *need* for a mayor, and therefore no need for a legitimate election process. Electing a mayor begins when Hell (Creek) freezes over. The day this happens, the townspeople gather in the bar to vote for a new mayor. It's an informal process that prefers raised hands to hanging chads, and once the count is tallied, the Hellions have

their mayor until the next time Hell freezes over. Considering how crazy Michigan's weather is, Colone's had a pretty good run, and he uses his (theoretical) mayoral clout and his businesses to try to breathe a little life (ouch) into this dying (I'm sorry) town.

"John's really made some changes," says Gary Bates, an elementary school principal visiting the shop with his family. Bates grew up just down the street in the town of Dexter, and for his birthday this year, his daughters took advantage of Colone's latest idea: Mayor of Hell for a day. At 6 a.m. on Principal Bates's birthday, his phone rang and a voice on the line said, "Mr. Mayor?" The calls continued all day with emergency dilemmas for the 'mayor' to address, and by sundown, Bates was cordially impeached. His parting gift included a certificate that proclaimed him temporary mayor, a Hell hat and tee shirt, and a bottle of soil—"a little piece of Hell."

Colone finishes saying goodbye to the Bates family and then steers the conversation toward the upcoming Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, less than a week away. *Scream's* goes all out for this day, setting up ladders to walk under and signs about lesser-known bad luck omens around the store. He walks to behind the cash register and pulls out some of the small signs, sheathed in plastic stands like the specials menu at a local diner. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back*. Then, he places a box of small, rectangular mirrors on the desk; scraps he got from a local glass manufacturer. In addition to walking under ladders, customers can smash mirrors and create their own seven years' bad luck.

"Do you actually believe in this stuff?" I ask.

He looks up at me, almost indignant. "The hell do you think?" he says.