

**INSIDE**  
This week in Carlton County's only independent, locally owned newspaper.



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## Car buyers struggle with former dealership

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Although the Cloquet Ford Chrysler Center is no longer, a lot of people have unfinished business with the former car dealership. Cloquet police chief Derek Randall confirmed Tuesday that his office has received 14 complaints since June from people who bought vehicles from Cloquet Ford. "They're all somewhat similar," Randall said, reading through a list of issues. "People trading in vehicles and the business didn't pay off the loans. Paid for a vehicle, didn't receive the registration or the title. ... This person put money down for a vehicle they weren't able to provide for them and they refunded the downpayment with a check that

bounced. This person sold a vehicle to Cloquet Ford and they wrote him a \$46,000 check that bounced." The list goes on, including at least one person who is now making loan payments on a new vehicle and the one they traded in, even though they don't have it anymore. As the number of complaints mounted, Randall decided it was time to alert the public, and sent out a police advisory Tuesday morning. Randall said it's uncommon for his department to get involved with financial issues, so they are investigating and working with the state. They're still in the investigation phase, he stressed, adding that he doesn't know if it's a criminal investigation yet.

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Everything looked great on Facebook after Heidi Gustavson purchased a car from Cloquet Ford Chrysler. But months later, she's still waiting on paperwork regarding her purchases. And the dealership has changed hands, becoming Wood City Motors.

## Homeowners are itching for a fright



Bill Nicholson is no newcomer to the art of the scare. As a middle school student, he built himself a coffin out of plywood, dressed up as Dracula — or his interpretation of the blood-sucking vampire — and laid out on the front porch of his house, ready to scare the bejesus out of anyone who dared to trick-or-treat there. He's upped his game since then. Now he creates an entire Halloween world in the front yard and porch of their home at 330 Fourth St. in Cloquet. Each year the house is suddenly surrounded by a faux iron fence and tombstones fill the lawn. A bat hangs over the front walk while a hunched-over butler holds a lamp over the grave of Lucy Lastic, who "bungied badly."

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Bill Nicholson works in the front yard of his home at 330 Fourth St. in Cloquet Tuesday morning, placing a quartet of fanciful pumpkins just so and wrapping up construction of a new mausoleum that will house a fog machine on Halloween night. Nicholson is preparing for the big show on Sunday, which should start at his house after 4:30 p.m.

Photos, text by **Jana Peterson** Pine Knot News

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## Houses ...

Continued from Page 1

A skeleton swings nearby and Eleanor the ghost is rattling in the front window, black lit to show up after dark.

Come Halloween night, lightning will flash and the sounds of thunder will rumble through the air as a fog slowly creeps across the ghoulish scene.

Sure, ring the doorbell if you dare. Take a picture in the photo “booooth” if you’re bold enough.

Nicholson — and numerous other residents around the area — are in their element every October as they prepare for their favorite holiday of the year: Halloween.

A drive around Cloquet reveals a dazzling display at 111 13th St., where lights outline the ghouls and dead things crawling across the lawn. At the corner of Carlton Avenue and Ninth Street, the Schlenvogt family have traded in their July Fourth decorations for caskets and cobwebs and darkly humorous tombstones: “Ben Dismembered, May He Rest in Pieces,” says one. “Here Lies the Pillsbury Dough Boy. He Will Rise Again,” says

another.

### Obsession

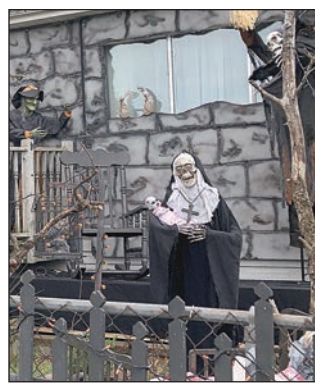
For two months every year, Cassie Nicholson says she becomes a Halloween widow. She loses Bil to his Halloween masterpiece.

“It’s like the deer hunting widow — only they’re a week and she’s a month or two,” Bil said. He’s been at it since early September, he admits.

The Nicholsons have been decorating their home for close to 15 years and adding new pieces or sounds almost every year, drawing children and their parents or grandparents from across the city for candy and fun. The most trick-or-treaters they’ve ever had is about 460, although the average is closer to 300.

Bil said the Halloween bug is spreading down the street and within his family. He got valuable help this year from Brandon Seguin, a friend of the family, and corn stalks from an uncle.

“The neighbors are getting into it, they’ve got some inflatables down there,” he said. Then he gestured at a house across the street that’s decorated. “These guys have a couple kids and they just love it. Occasionally they’ll come over and help me. It’s turn-



This home on 13th Street in Coquet has an elaborate array of spooky stuff. *Jana Peterson / Pine Knot News*

ing into a neighborhood deal and it’s kind of fun.”

The show at the Nicholson house will kick off after 4:30 p.m., so plan accordingly. And they are accepting canned or boxed goods for the Salvation Army food shelf or cash donations for County Seat Theater.

And rest easy about trick-or-treating: it’s recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. After all, it’s outdoors. Just don’t gather in large groups and scream ... which means those haunted house visits need to be in small groups only.

Got a different favorite Halloween stop in Carlton County? Comment on this story on our Facebook page to share with others.

cars while listening to recorded ghost stories told by actors on a car radio frequency. Once parked, audience members can partake in a number of events in the back lot, including concessions, goodie bags for kids, free hot chocolate, a silent movie and various Halloween activities.

The evening will conclude with a 25-minute Halloween variety show on the outdoor stage beginning at 7:30 p.m. Tickets: suggested donation of \$5 per person or \$20 per car. Call the box office at 218-878-0071 to reserve your spot.

### Downtown treats

Carlton’s downtown businesses welcome trick-or-treaters 1-3 p.m. on Halloween. Look for scarecrows throughout the district as well.

### Chilloween

Children in sixth grade and younger are invited to Chilloween at the Cromwell Park Pavilion 6-8 p.m. Friday, Oct. 29, and must come with an adult. Festivities for those in seventh grade and above will run 8-10 p.m. The evening will include snacks, music, dancing, games, costume contests and face painting. Bring already-carved pumpkins to enter a contest.

### Barnum party

Barnum Community Education will host a free Halloween party for children at the Barnum Fire Hall 5-7 p.m. Sunday.

### Trunk or treat

Grace Church Trunk-or-Treat 4-6 p.m. Sunday, 601 14th St., Cloquet. Open to children and teens in the community and their parents/guardians.

Trunk-or-treat 5-6 p.m. Sunday at the Jim Erickson Football Field courtesy of Carlton High School students. Please park in the school parking lot and walk to the football field.

## Car dealer ...

Continued from Page 1

They would like to talk to anyone who’s had issues, so they can collect as much information as possible. He stressed that they’ve had no complaints about Wood City Motors, just the former business operating at the same 701 Washington Avenue address in Cloquet.

It’s a complicated mess, for several reasons:

1. The buyers who dealt with Cloquet Ford Chrysler have no physical place to take their issues, because the business sold its Ford and Chrysler franchise, lease and furnishings to the Duluth-based car dealership group Evergreen, which owns dealerships in the Twin Ports and across the region, on Aug. 30. Evergreen reopened the business as Wood City Motors. The new owners stress that they have no ownership ties to the previous dealership and did not “assume any of its previous business obligations.”

2. Two of the three former owners of Cloquet Ford Chrysler Center, Al and Renee Birman, filed for bankruptcy after moving to Texas last year and selling their home at 1 Park Place in Cloquet for \$527,000 in November 2020. A state bankruptcy filing in July of this year shows the Birmans, who took over Cloquet Motors in 2008 with partner Mike Larson, filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy on July 9. Their assets are listed at \$47,455 with liabilities of more than \$3.7 million.

3. Larson had moved out of his silent-partner role and taken over running the business in the spring of 2020, telling a Pine Knot News reporter that July that he was “trying to get things to a more stable structure.” Larson did not respond to a PKN voicemail message on Wednesday.

### Shock at the DMV

Moose Lake’s Heidi Gustavson was thrilled with her purchase of a 2014 Ford Escape on July 9 of this year. It was her first time going to a larger dealer, and her salesman Elias Lund was very nice and she got a nice deal on her car, which had been traded in three days before with fewer than 50,000 miles and only one owner. She specifically wanted an Escape, and it was a bargain compared to buying new. After waiting for the SUV to be cleaned and serviced, she drove it home and had no problems.

Until August rolled around and she realized her tabs were due. She went to the DMV in Moose Lake with her vehicle identification number (VIN) to purchase new ones.

“That’s when they told me the vehicle was not in my name,” she said. “And they couldn’t give me tabs for a vehicle I didn’t own.”

Gustavson called what was now Wood City Motors. Same site, new business. The first time she reached out, a woman

told her they were working their way through a stack of titles on the desk. When she called back a week later, the man who answered said they’d turned all the titles over to the former owner and were not handling those, assuring her they would honor her extended warranty, however.

Gustavson reached out to Members Cooperative Credit Union, which had given her the vehicle loan, and her loan officer went to the DMV with her. It didn’t matter.

“I was in a state, there were tears,” she told the Pine Knot News. “What do you mean, I’ve made payments, I have full insurance coverage, but you still can’t give me tabs?”

Next, Gustavson contacted the Minnesota attorney general’s office, where they told her to file a complaint, which she did online Sept. 13. She found out the former owners had filed for bankruptcy there. They also gave her the number for the Minnesota Dealer Unit in the Minnesota Department of Public Safety. Ultimately, someone from the attorney general’s office helped Gustavson get her tabs, by walking both her and the DMV rep through the correct process over the phone.

In the meantime, Gustavson had left numerous messages for Mike Larson, the owner when she bought her Ford Escape.

“He called me and said he had received all the titles and he was going to the DMV to get those taken care of,” Gustavson said, “That was a month ago and I haven’t heard back since then.”

### Report problems

Anyone who has experienced title, registration or other financial issues with the former Cloquet Ford Chrysler Center is encouraged to email all documents related to the acquisition of the vehicle to the state of Minnesota vehicle crimes unit at patrol.vcu@state.mn.us. Include photos of both sides and the front and back of the vehicle, along with the VIN plate in the dash by the windshield. Find out more at [www.ag.state.mn.us/consumer/Auto/Default.asp](http://www.ag.state.mn.us/consumer/Auto/Default.asp).

Want to talk to a person? Call the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, Driver and Vehicle Services Division, Dealer Unit at 651-201-7800.

According to information in Better Business Bureau files, consumers with concerns or unfinished business with the former dealership (aka Cloquet Motors) may contact the attorneys for the business at Ledin, Olson & Cockerham, S.C., Attn: Steve Olson, Attorney at Law, 1109 Tower Ave., Superior WI 54880, or call 715-394-4471.

A Wood City Motors rep provided a letter they are giving to people with complaints about Cloquet Ford Chrysler Center, which encourages people to contact former general manager Scott Kranz at 515-302-1073, or owner Mike Larson at 218-390-1210 or [harley4lars@yahoo.com](mailto:harley4lars@yahoo.com).

## Local haunts

### Haunted Hawthorne

This 10-minute walk-through maze at 827 Hawthorne St. in Cloquet returns for another year.

There’s candy at the end and you can buy a \$5 raffle ticket to win a T-shirt. It’s free, and donations are accepted. Do the haunt 7-10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through the end of the month.

### Carlton mazes

The Haunted Shack and Haunted Ridge are open their final three nights Oct. 28-30. Hours are 7-9 p.m. Thursday, and 7-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Tickets: \$15 per person, cash or check only. Save \$2 off the admission price with a nonperishable food item donation. Save \$5 with the donation of a coat for the coat drive.

The Ru-Ridge Corn Maze, at 1781 County Road 1 in Carlton, is open Thursday-Sunday. It offers an 8-acre corn maze, straw bale maze, a petting zoo, games, hayrides, horse rides, corn pits and more. Tickets are \$8 to get in; hayrides are \$3 and horse rides are \$5. Admission with a family pack, for groups of four or more, is \$10 per person and includes everything except horse rides.

Dress for the weather.

Go to [hauntedshack.com](http://hauntedshack.com) for details and visit [hauntedshack.com/hauntedRidge](http://hauntedshack.com/hauntedRidge) for other activities or visit the Facebook pages for Haunted Shack, Ru-Ridge Corn Maze and Haunted Ridge.

### Halloween Spooktacular

The County Seat’s Halloween Spooktacular will take place Friday and Saturday in the back parking lot of the Cloquet theater. It’s a two-part offering: The night begins with a drive-thru haunt down Spooktacular Alley beginning at 6:30 p.m.

Spectators will view entertaining and spooky scenes from the safety of their



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