

# **Orillia's Got Talent: Attracting Tourists with Nonstop Entertainment**

**William R. Horne**  
Lakehead University  
Orillia, Ontario, Canada  
[rhorne@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:rhorne@lakeheadu.ca)

## **Abstract**

The cottage country in the Province of Ontario is a major tourist destination. Bringing tourists into a specific part of cottage country requires a unique attraction. When one thinks of Orillia, Ontario, for example, one thinks of author Stephen Leacock's fictional town, Mariposa. When one thinks of Mariposa, one thinks of the Mariposa Folk Festival. While this is the key event in Orillia's tourist program, it by no means stands alone. The Jazz Festival, the Blues Festival, the Beatles Celebration, and other musical events have been linked with art, drama, comedy, literary, and other cultural events to create an extended summer of tourist attractions. This paper discusses the development of this cultural tourism program and examines its success at drawing tourists to Orillia, contributing to the redevelopment of the downtown, and providing employment alternatives to a bygone industrial community.

Keywords: urban tourism, cultural economy, economic development, downtown redevelopment

---

## **1.0 Introduction**

Stretching across Central Ontario from Georgian Bay through Muskoka, Lake Simcoe, and the Kawartha Lakes to the Frontenac Axis is a large area collectively called cottage country. The Canadian Shield offers a topography and vegetation different from that of the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence Lowlands to the south, while an abundance of lakes provides this predominantly rural environment with a host of both land- and water-based recreational possibilities. Since the late 19th century this has been the destination of tourists from the heavily populated cities of southern Ontario and neighbouring states of the USA (Richmond, 1996). The popularity of the area was further promoted by the visits and artistic representations of the Group of Seven, a group of landscape painters active in the 1920s (Sowiak, 2001).

This area has marginal agricultural potential and was quickly stripped of its useful forest resource. Some of the urban centres had industrial development, but this has for the most part fallen into decline if not departed completely. As a result, the importance of tourism as a local economic engine has increased across the area. The key problem for communities in cottage country becomes one of attracting tourists to a specific location within this larger area when the natural attractions are for the most part similar and access is relatively equal. The city of Orillia is located on Lakes Simcoe and Couchiching, on the southern edge of cottage country and just over one hour's drive north of Toronto. This paper examines the city's attempt to develop a cultural tourism industry.

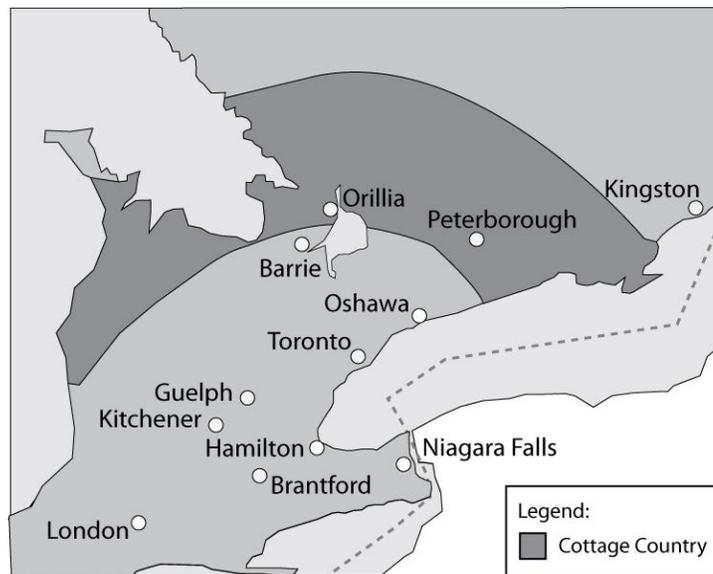


Figure 1. The cottage country of Ontario.

## 2.0 Literature Review

The existing literature on the development of culture-based economies tends to deal with large cities such as Baltimore, Maryland, USA (Ponzini & Rossi, 2010), large areas such as the North Rivers region in New South Wales, Australia (Gibson, 2002), or large attractions such as the Art Gallery of Ontario (Carmichael, 2002). This paper is a case study of a small-scale effort in all of these respects. It examines a smaller community that is intentionally trying to separate itself from the larger tourist region within which it is situated and examines a collection of smaller events to demonstrate that large is not always necessary.

The importance of size and the uniqueness of small cities, as opposed to both large cities and sparsely populated rural areas, as a distinctive area of study are argued by Garrett-Petts (2005) and by Lewis and Donald (2010). Both of these works examine issues of the new cultural economy, such as downtown redevelopment, the growth of the arts community, and general economic development, but neither links these themes to the development of tourism. The aim of this paper is to contribute toward filling this gap.

Hall and Page (2006) point out that while smaller communities, lacking an economically viable large resident population, cannot hope to have major hallmark attractions such as professional sports facilities, convention centres, and theatre districts, a collection of small events may be assembled to add to the physical attractions of rural areas. Horne (2000) describes the success of Brandon, Manitoba, at attracting an ongoing collection of regional and national amateur sporting events. The intent was to bring people in for one event and have them return for others. Horne (2001) expands on this discussion with special reference to downtown redevelopment. This paper will discuss how Orillia has taken a similar approach but with cultural events instead.

### 3.0 Background

Orillia has undergone significant change over the past century. In 1910 with just over 6,000 people it was slightly larger than its closest neighbour, Barrie, and one in six residents worked in industry. By 2010 Orillia had grown to 30,000 but was now only one fifth the size of Barrie and nearly all of the industry was gone. Orillia has become a service community, with the largest employers being the provincial headquarters of the Ontario Provincial Police, the regional hospital, and a collection of educational institutions, including three high schools, a community college, and a new university satellite campus. Despite these youthful attractions, Orillia is very much a retirement centre. It has more than 1,000 residents older than 80 years and the second-oldest mean population among municipalities in Simcoe County. Orillia's mean income levels are in the bottom quartile of the county, although all of the above-mentioned institutions have a few individuals earning more than \$100,000, according to the province's annual listing (Horne & Stubbs, 2008).

As with many urban places, the traditional downtown fell into decay with the construction of a shopping mall and later a big-box shopping centre on the edge of the community. Revitalization of the downtown, a six-block stretch of Mississauga Street extending from Lake Couchiching on the east to the opera house and public library on the west, along with adjacent cross streets, is a goal of both the Downtown Business Management Board (DBMB) and the city. A heritage theme for storefronts and signs was developed, and grants were made available to businesses prepared to appropriately update their façades. The city invested in streetscaping the area.

Tourism has always been important to Orillia, but recently the city has recognized the need to develop this revenue stream. Orillia has used the motto "The City on Two Lakes," but being a city on two lakes is not unique in this region of Canada. The town's most famous summer resident was early 20th-century author Stephen Leacock, and Orillia claims to be his fictional town of Mariposa, described in his 1912 book *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. The other oft-used city motto, "Sunshine City," makes reference to this book, but many visitors probably relate the phrase to a climatic attribute common to all of the towns in cottage country. A more unique motto may still be needed (Bammel & Burrus-Bammel, 1996).

The only large hallmark attraction in the area is Casino Rama, about 15 km distant. The casino relies heavily on charter-coach traffic from the south and has limited spinoff value to Orillia beyond the employment created by the hotel, restaurant, and entertainment facility.

Many smaller communities host annual festivals that attract tourists for a specific weekend. Such events are insufficient to fully support the economy and create numerous boom-and-bust problems, such as traffic congestion and a lack of sufficient facilities for tourists. Unquestionably, the most well-known event in Orillia is the Mariposa Festival. It was first organized in 1961 as a one-off tourist event and ended up attracting 4,000 people. The following year it attracted twice as many people, but the town could not handle the attendant drunkenness and vandalism and told the organizers they were no longer welcome. The festival was held in a number of Toronto locations over the ensuing 20 years. Attendance grew to over 20,000, but cold, wet weather led to financial losses in 1982. Between 1984 and 1990 Mariposa was held at Molson Park in Barrie, where attendance again

grew from 2,000 to 25,000 before it too fell on hard financial times due to bad weather. A smaller-scale festival was held in Toronto during the 1990s.

#### **4.0 Methods**

The development of cultural tourism in the downtown can be evaluated via a content analysis of coverage given to such events by the local daily newspaper, the *Packet & Times*, which tends to devote several pages to what it calls *Life* on a regular basis. Content analysis has been used for a wide variety of studies (Horne, 1980). For this study, the newspaper editions published during the period June 2009 to October 2009 are particularly revealing and cover the main tourist season. The city's weekly paper, *Orillia Today*, was also reviewed. Both newspapers are small enough that the entire content could be examined. A search was made for websites and published brochures associated with specific events. They were also consulted to confirm the nature of each event, its location, and 2009 estimated attendance. If information was still missing, an attempt was made to contact key stakeholders for specific events and to discuss the events in an informal manner with them. While one might expect local newspapers to be biased toward local boosterism, critical comments were made by some commentators and in letters to the editor.

#### **5.0 Results and Discussion**

After Orillia decided to reclaim *its* festival in 2000, the Mariposa Festival has been held at Tudhope Park on the edge of Orillia for the past decade (Mariposa Folk Foundation, 2009). The 3-day event held in July 2009 boasted 139 performers on nine stages, including well-known acts such as Buffy Sainte-Marie, Valdy, and Stephen Page. The festival relied on a total of 550 people working 10 to 12 hours each over the weekend. It attracted an estimated audience of 23,000 (Ross, 2009, July 6). This was despite cold and damp conditions outdoors. On its own, the Mariposa Festival would only be a successful single attraction common to many communities and not the basis for significant economic growth. Its location on the edge of the city does not specifically contribute to the goal of downtown revitalization.

In 2006 the Orillia City Council decided to direct its tourist interests toward cultural tourism. This was to be achieved by developing an ongoing collection of cultural events to attract tourists already visiting the general area into the city, to attract new tourists specifically to the city, and to encourage local residents to spend their recreational dollars in their home community. To do this the Department of Culture and Heritage was created with the goals of building cultural tourism, creating a culturally vibrant downtown, and helping artists make a living in the community (McKim, 2009). The department has only a handful of employees and therefore acts primarily as a steering committee for both preexisting and new events. It relies on volunteer committees to be responsible for specific events and to do most of the actual legwork to get events off the ground. Some of these committees existed before the creation of the department, while others have been put together by the department through invitations to appropriate stakeholders.

McKim writes that Orillia borrowed the idea of developing cultural tourism from the nearby city of Peterborough, which had used Trent University as a base for its developments. Orillia's decision was encouraged by the announcement that Lakehead University would be establishing a campus in

Orillia. As an added bonus, the Lakehead campus shares a restored factory building with city hall just one block south of the opera house. In 5 short years, the Lakehead campus grew from just over 100 students to nearly 1,000. Its presence is significant. Students enter teams in events such as the dragon boat races, held in September, and volunteer at many activities. Faculty have added new faces to the public speaking circuit, joined the boards of various community organizations and event organization committees, and created their own events, including MariposaU, a series of arts and crafts workshops held on the 2 days before the Mariposa Festival. The author's participation in such activities inspired the development of this research project.

Orillia's first attempt at linking tourism and culture predates the Department of Culture and Heritage by almost half a century. It can be traced back to the construction of a concert stage on the shore of Lake Couchiching. For 51 years this has been the site of Sunday evening performances in July and August. This is an opportunity for locals to wind down, although it also attracts cottagers who arrive by boat. The concerts have attracted bands from across southern Ontario. All the available nights are usually filled within a week of the invitation going out in January (Feddes, 2009, cited in Swartz, 2009). The audience usually numbers about 200. Although the location is an easy walk from downtown, most establishments are closed on Sunday nights, so the economic value of these events can only be measured in terms of the goodwill generated.

Given the Leacock connection, literature provides a key arts dimension to Orillia, with activities based at the Stephen Leacock Museum, the Orillia Opera House, and the public library. Two of the three venues are downtown. The eighth annual Orillia Leacock Summer Festival in July featured 25 authors from the worlds of short story, poetry, and nonfiction writing. Literary Lapses in August drew writers from across the province. The International Festival of Authors was held at the Opera House in November and featured Barry Callaghan, Don Gilmor, Martin MacIntyre, and Leon Rooke. Author Arthur Black read at the Leacock Museum 2 days later. Lakehead faculty have joined organizing committees and acted as judges for these events.

The Orillia Opera House, in the centre of downtown, was built in 1895 by the municipality. The main theatre seats more than 700, while a smaller theatre seats 200. It was in use on 270 days in 2008 (McKim, 2009). The opera house hosts a wide variety of entertainment. A rare performance by hometown musician Gordon Lightfoot sold out almost immediately (Ross, 2009, September 15). The opera house features a comedy week in April; this year Cathy Jones was the headliner. An episode of the radio show *Stuart McLean's Vinyl Cafe* is a regular fall attraction. The Orillia Concert association, with close to 700 members, brought four major performances to the opera house, including the Slovak National Orchestra, in 2010. Live theatre is also a regular opera house event (Orillia Opera House, 2009). Lakehead uses the opera house for its student orientation days. In addition to the opera house, a number of downtown church halls act as venues for live theatre and public speakers.

The downtown is also home to the Orillia Museum of Art and History (OMAH), which has become another important venue. It acts as an anchor for a collection of private art galleries, photography shops, and printers that constitute an artists' district, even if it is only one block long. The museum held a 10th anniversary show of local works in July 2010. The All Ontario Juried Art Show also took place

in July, and “Starry Night: A Magical Evening of Art” takes place in August. For this event the street in front of the museum is closed to vehicular traffic so people can move freely among the galleries that line the street. A number of other establishments also display works. In 2009 80 different artists were represented at the event. In spite of a rainy evening, more than 800 visitors were drawn to the event (Swartz, 2009, August 22). The Three Museum Book Sale (OMAH, Leacock Museum, and Ontario Provincial Police Museum) is held in front of OMAH and is a major fundraiser as part of one of several downtown sidewalk sales. While the main street is closed off several times during the year, the local merchants are opposed to its conversion into a permanent pedestrian mall. Off-street parking does exist but is generally seen as inadequate and too far from the stores, being off the two streets that run parallel to Mississauga Street. However, some stores have rear entrances directly to these lots.

The Orillia and District Arts Council promotes visual arts, theatre, fine crafts, readings, drumming, dance, and music with events throughout the year and in 2009 introduced prizes for best artist, best arts educator, and best service to the arts (Ross, 2009, September 14). The fine arts community is quite large, given the size of the town. In September the Village of the Arts Day stretches from the opera house to city hall, with another street closure and parking lot performance area featuring music, drama, dance, crafts (silversmith, sculptors, woodworkers, spinners, rug hookers, quilters, and photography), painters, and book readings (Swartz, 2009, September 12).

In addition to the Mariposa Festival, music is a key part of Orillia’s cultural tourism efforts, and most of the events take place in or near the downtown. The summer season begins in June with the Orillia Spring Blues Festival. The festival is hosted in 10 downtown restaurants. A downtown parking lot is converted to an open-air stage and the opera house hosts the opening event (Orillia Spring Blues Festival, 2009). Events in hotel restaurants tend to limit the involvement of participants with the community as a whole, thus the on-street events generate much of the added income for the community but require public funding. In 2010 the weekend was almost cancelled due to a lack of public funding until a local merchant decided to offer the needed support (Ross, 2010).

The Classic Car/Classic Rock Festival takes place in mid-August. On Friday and Saturday the downtown streets become a giant parking lot for more than 400 classic cars, and a parking lot is again used as an outdoor stage. Attendance at the 11th staging of this annual event was estimated at 25,000 (Matys, 2009, August 13). One participant noted, “[the] show is one of the most attractive for car owners and spectators because it is held downtown” (Swartz, 2009, August 15). This event not only attracts more people than the Mariposa Festival but also highlights the downtown area and opportunities to shop. Possibly one reason it does not extend to Sunday is the fact that most merchants are closed on that day. The downtown is occupied almost entirely by small, independent businesses that do not have sufficient staff to operate 7 days a week.

The third annual Beatles Celebration took place in September 2009. Modeled on Collingwood’s successful Elvis festival, the main street is again turned into a sidewalk sale, this time of Beatles memorabilia. The opera house hosts a number of events, and tribute bands play on open stages at either end of Mississauga Street. Special events occur during the largest community-based Beatles festival in Canada. A rooftop concert and a John and Yoko bed-in were the highlights in

2009. The estimated 11,000 attendees surpassed the previous year (Matys, 2009, September 24). In its first year of operation this event was spread over 3 days and a slightly larger area, including the city hall, but for the second year the Sunday events were condensed into Saturday, as a number of attendees complained about the stores being closed. Events were also confined to the main street. One concern might be that the event has not yet had to deal with bad weather.

The organizing committees for these events consist of concerned citizens who contribute many volunteer hours. The set-up of stages, seats, fences, and traffic barricades relies on two other groups of volunteers: high school students, who must do community service as a requirement of graduation, and people who must do court-appointed community service. Free T-shirts, free food and drink, and free admission to the venues at which they work are additional rewards. There appear to be enough individuals in the volunteer pool to prevent volunteer burnout.

A number of events extend to Sunday, including the Orillia Fall Fair, the Orillia Drumming Festival, and Gospelfest, all held in September, and the Orillia Jazz and Blues Festival in October. Both Gospelfest and the Blues Festival use church venues on Sunday, which overcomes the Sunday problem but does not generate income for local merchants. The 19th Annual Orillia Jazz and Blues Festival was a 4-day event that consisted of 28 shows in 16 venues, mostly local hotels and restaurants. Attendance for 2009 was expected to be 5,000 (Orillia Jazz, 2009). Among the well-known performers at this event was Curley Bridges, formerly of Motley Crew, a successful jump blues band active in the mid-20th century (Munson, 1997). This event obtained considerable attention in the local papers and positive reviews. The key performer at Gospelfest was Diane Lee Clemons (“Gospelfest Feels,” 2009).

Other cultural attractions are based on Orillia’s history and include the annual Scottish Festival, which includes a parade down the main street and activities at Couchiching Park. Doors Open Orillia is a part of the provincial Doors Open program. Based in the 100-year-old city hall/Lakehead University building, it features a walking tour of the downtown, with interior tours of the main historical buildings. In 2010 the city purchased Central Public School but has not yet decided what to do with this historic downtown building.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

The above information allows an evaluation of the three goals of Orillia’s cultural tourism program. The first goal of attracting more tourists to town is evident in the attendance figures for the various events, which bring thousands of visitors to the town during at least 5 months of the year and on some weekends almost equal the resident population of the city. The ability to attract significant performers and the introduction of new events and expansion of established events that have had success for over a decade suggest this is a viable economic program. An uncharacteristically cold and damp summer in 2009 did not seem to cause significant problems.

At the end of October 2009, the Department of Culture and Heritage sponsored a workshop and lunch to provide information to allow groups to learn more about how their festival or event could qualify for part of the \$11 million event funding program established by the provincial Ministry of Tourism for events taking place in 2010. This meeting recognized the importance of festivals and events as major

economic drivers through their generation of increases in both tourist numbers and tourist spending (Stephenson, 2009).

The goal of downtown redevelopment has seen storefront remodeling and an investment in streetscaping, including sidewalk seating in front of a number of establishments. Most of the events described above take place in the downtown area. Thus the local merchants are usually involved in these events as purveyors of goods. Store closures on Sundays cut into the full economic potential of several events but local merchants are not prepared to change their traditional day off.

The events discussed in this paper help to lengthen the summer season into the spring and fall months and have created conditions such that set-up and take-down activities have become very efficient and street closures are not as problematic as they might be if there was only one weekend when it happened. While street closures are accepted on many weekends during the tourist season, the permanent closure of the main street in favour of a pedestrian mall has met with mixed reviews (P. Bowen, personal communication, August 2009). Indeed, even a motion to prevent left turns onto the main street was quickly defeated by the city council.

The DBMB has identified a number of concerns that are as yet unanswered. These include the mix of stores available to shoppers in the downtown and the number of vacancies that still exist. The DBMB has said that these vacancies detract from the appeal of downtown. Improvements to the two or three blocks that link the waterfront marina and park area to the main blocks of the downtown are also desired (P. Bowen, personal communication, August 2009). Suggestions for improvement of these issues have been sought from both professional consultants and students at Lakehead University. Preliminary findings by one student indicated that marina users were not overly concerned by the walk to the downtown or the business mix; however they wanted more seating downtown and, interestingly, more public art work (Marshall, 2009). The students also noted that merchants are not yet attempting to capture the new student market available to them. Too many stores sell goods aimed at an older clientele or at a higher price range than students can afford, they have said. Students could provide a winter balance to the summer tourist shoppers.

The third goal of creating cultural employment has also met with some success. Most musical events include local artists in the lineup, and the arts and crafts events primarily support local artisans, as do the local art and photography galleries. The opera house and museum provide employment downtown, and attracting Lakehead University to the downtown might also be considered an increase in cultural employment. The downtown also has three stores selling musical instruments, a large number for a small shopping district in a small city.

The practice of using an ongoing collection of music, arts and crafts, theatre, and literary events to increase tourism, enliven the downtown, and create employment opportunities for local artists has thus far met with considerable success. The information collected for this paper suggests “Orillia’s Got Talent” would be a good play on the name of a popular television show that could be used as a new motto for the city.

## 7.0 References

- Bammel, G., & Burrus-Bammel, L. (1996). *Leisure and human behavior* (3rd ed.). Dubuque, IA, USA: Brown & Benchmark.
- Carmichael, B. (2002). Global competitiveness and special events in cultural tourism: The example of the Barnes Exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Canadian Geographer*, 46(4), 310–324.
- Garrett-Petts, W. F. (2005). *The small cities book on the cultural future of small cities*. Vancouver, BC, Canada: New Star Books.
- Gibson, C. (2002). Rural transformation and cultural industries: Popular music on the New South Wales Far North Coast. *Australian Geographical Studies*, 40(3), 337–356.
- Gospelfest feels spirit. (2009, September 5). *Packet & Times*, p. A4.
- Hall, C. M., & Page, S. J. (2006). *The geography of tourism and recreation* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Horne, W. R. (1980). *The newspaper: Communications channel for local government*. Unpublished master's thesis. McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada.
- Horne, W. R. (2000). The use of hallmark tourism for local economic development. *Journal of Tourism Studies*, 11 (1), 30–35.
- Horne, W. R. (2001). A multifaceted approach to downtown redevelopment. In M. Burayidi (Ed.), *Downtowns: Revitalizing the centres of small urban communities* (pp. 89–104). New York: Routledge.
- Horne, W. R., & Stubbs, T. (2008). *Life on the edge of the Greater Golden Horseshoe*. Poster session presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Geographers–Ontario Division Conference, St. Catharines, ON, Canada.
- Lewis, N. M., & Donald, B. (2010). A new rubric for creative city potential in Canada's smaller cities. *Urban Studies*, 47(1), 29–54.
- Mariposa Folk Foundation. *A short history of the Mariposa Festival*. Retrieved August 3, 2009, from [www.mariposafolk.com](http://www.mariposafolk.com)
- Marshall, P. (2009). *Linking the waterfront and downtown*. Unpublished manuscript, Lakehead University–Orillia.
- Matys, F. (2009, August 13). Vintage cars and live music at classic show. *Orillia Today*, p. 7.
- Matys, F. (2009, September 24). 11,000 attend festival. *Orillia Today*, A1.
- McKim, C. (2009, July 31). Cultured job swap. *Packet & Times*, A1.
- Munson, B. (1997). *Curley Bridges*. Toronto Blues Society. Retrieved October 7, 2010, from <http://www.torontobluesociety.com/9706curl.htm>
- Orillia Opera House. (2009). [Brochure.]
- Orillia Spring Blues Festival. Retrieved August 10, 2009, from [www.orilliaspringblues.com](http://www.orilliaspringblues.com).

- Ponzini, D., & Rossi, U. (2010). Becoming a creative city: The entrepreneurial mayor, network politics and the promise of an urban renaissance. *Urban Studies*, 47(5), 1037.
- Richmond, R. (1996). *The Orillia Spirit*. Toronto: Dundurn Press.
- Ross, S. (2009, July 6). Folk festival rocks Orillia. *Packet & Times*, A1.
- Ross, S. (2009, September 14). Unique village of the arts event celebrates region's vibrant, varied arts community. *Packet & Times*, p. A3.
- Ross, S. (2009, September 15). Lightfoot tickets hot. *Packet & Times*, p. A3.
- Ross, S. (2010, April 14). Blues festival back on. *Packet & Times*, p. A1.
- Sowiak, C. (2001). Contemporary Canadian art: Locating identity. In D. Taras & B. Rasporich (Eds.), *A Passion for Identity* (4th ed., pp. 251–274). Scarborough: Nelson.
- Stephenson, K. (2009, October 15). Tourism funding workshop at Opera House. *Packet & Times*, p. B7.
- Swartz, J. (2009, August 15). Shiny side up. *Packet & Times*, p. B1.
- Swartz, J. (2009, August 22). It's that time. *Packet & Times*, p. B1.
- Swartz, J. (2009, September 5). Bands vie to perform at the Aqua Theatre as part of the Sunday evening band concert summer series. *Packet & Times*, B1.
- Swartz, J. (2009, September 12). It takes a village to celebrate the local arts scene in a big way. *Packet & Times*, p. B1.