

Blackberry Farm: Old-fashioned history that's good as new

Getting older is inevitable. The trick is handling the aging process gracefully.

On the west edge of Aurora, there's an iconic landmark where the mythical fountain of youth flows. Blackberry Farm harkens back to pioneer era of the mid-1800s and early American settlers. But time has been kind to Blackberry Farm, which sparkles in 2016 like a shiny new jewel.

It's at the crossroads of history and hip.

Blackberry Farm will display its unique charm again beginning Sunday (May 1), when the barn gates swing open and welcome the public for the 47th year. Since 1969, the historic pioneer village and the throwback farm have delighted and educated generations of visitors.

Recently modernized, Blackberry Farm hosts all the traditional favorites like the steam-engine replica train, carousel, hay wagon rides and pedal tractors, accentuated by new features and amenities that make each visit all the more special and exciting.

"It's a combination of yesteryear and tomorrow, with history and new-age attractions all in one place," said Blackberry Farm manager Sandie Gilmer.

At the top of that list is the revolutionary "Adventure Playground," which has drawn rave reviews all around.

It's an extensive network of climbing decks, slides, ropes and catwalk-style bridges connecting an array of playhouses on multiple levels, bringing a 21st century twist to the historic pioneer village. A 70-foot zip line alongside provides added excitement for youth thrill-seekers.

"More than a playground, it's a unique combination of interactive features; a hands-on farm museum where children go from deck-to-deck answering questions and learning about the history of pioneer life," said Gilmer. "Most children have never experienced a playground like this."

Other highlights include a spacious picnic shelter that doubles as a performance stage for live entertainment, where the "Live and Uncorked" series of outdoor concerts will feature five shows in June and July. Guests bring their own beer, wine and food, creating a Ravinia-like setting.

Nearby, on the shore of Lake Gregory, a nautically themed boathouse shelter/pavilion and dock are home to an expanded fleet of eight paddle boats available to visitors. To accommodate the additional boats, a dock extension is being built in May.

Even the historic museums and interpreters (blacksmith, potter, and seamstress) have a few new wrinkles with a series of interactive exhibits available this year to help truly experience the "real" pioneer life.

Group picnic shelters have been expanded throughout the park – ideal for larger gatherings, whether it's for business or a group of family and friends hanging out.

Blackberry Farm makes for an enchanting venue for special events – weddings, reunions, fund-raisers, corporate outings and the like. And, birthday parties at Blackberry are all the rage – just ask the kids.

Every day is a shin-dig at Blackberry Farm; the resident chickens, donkeys, ponies and pigs realize they're living the good farm life. They're farm animal celebrities who love to be seen and entertain adoring fans.

Blackberry Farm and neighboring Splash Country Water Park (across the street) also make for a great double-dandy day – one in the morning, the other in the afternoon – you won't even have to move the car! And, as always, parking is free.

Open every day from May 1 through Labor Day, Blackberry offers three-day weekends in September and Pumpkin Weekends throughout October. Folks will be "gettin' down on the farm" Oct. 1 when the first-ever Barn Dance is held with a live band, pig roast and adult beverages.

Blackberry Farm traditionally ends each year in style with the Holiday Express during December weekends.

With so much to see and do, a visit to Blackberry Farm will make us all feel a bit younger – and wiser, at that.

Jeff Long (jlong@fvpd.net) is the public affairs and communications manager at the Fox Valley Park District. Visit www.foxvalleyparkdistrict.org for more information and be sure to 'Like' Blackberry Farm on Facebook.

PHOTO CAPTION: Train Tours and Hay wagon rides are just two of the many attractions that bring families to visit historic Blackberry Farm, which opens for the season on May 1.

Fox Valley Park District Upcoming Events

Friday, May 6: Afternoon Tea at the FVPD Greenhouse (free), 259 S. Russell Ave., 1 to 3 p.m.

Saturday, May 7: Family Kite Day, McCullough Park/Prisco Center, 10 a.m.

