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FAMILY

Middle Ages Enjoy a Renaissance

Society for Creative Anachronism's medieval festival offers diversions for history buffs and their children.

By BRENDA REES

Special To The Times

If you're looking for--or to be--a knight in shining armor, you've come to the right place.

This Saturday, knights, squires, assorted royalty and peasantry will be feasting, fighting and making merry as part of the Festival of the Rose, held rain or shine at Wardlow Park in Long Beach.

The public is invited to witness medieval festivities that include artisan displays, dance recitals, musical performances, poetry reading and a battlefield swarming with costumed fighters wielding swords, shields and rapiers. Children also will be competing in youth boffer fighting, a "softer" version in which combatants use foam rubber weapons.

Calling all Errol Flynn and Braveheart wannabes.

"It's a big picnic in the park where we bring our families, put on our play clothes and see our friends," says Sara DeLeeuw, a "chatelaine," or official greeter for newcomers, for the Society for Creative Anachronism, which hosts the weekly events.

Dedicated to recapturing the ambience of the time period from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, the society is filled with history buffs and people who seriously embrace the spirit of nobility with a hearty dose of fun.

Unlike local Renaissance fairs--which are for-profit events catering to onlookers in jeans and sneakers--the Society for Creative Anachronism "tourneys" are meant to be faithful re-creations of medieval events where skilled fighters battle for honor under the watchful eye of the king and queen and their court. Just like Civil War and Revolutionary War buffs who reenact historical battles, society members bring to life a chivalrous era, full of color and pageantry.

The society is an international group that's been around since 1966, with more than 24,000 paying members and an estimated 1 million other active participants.

Followers become involved for many reasons: It's a place to study and practice the crafts, sciences, sports and traditions of a period when the world was perhaps a bit more romantic. But don't think this is a highbrow or ethereal group of people. Beneath the knight's armor and the court lady's lace are police officers, lawyers, teachers and mechanics. The current queen is an air traffic controller.

"There are a lot of Monty Python-esque jokes that get flung around here, especially on the battlefield," says DeLeeuw. She notes that the group tends to focus on the "fun parts of the era like the feasts and costumes, but (we) leave out the plagues, lice and beheadings."

The Festival of the Rose celebrates the Queen of Caid, the society-designated "kingdom" that includes Southern California, Southern Nevada, Hawaii and New Zealand. Highlighting crafts, this annual festival is where many society participants showcase their artwork, such as woodworking, needlepoint and jewelry.

Children also play a big part. They will be creating craft projects and writing poems with the rose motif to present to the queen at the various ceremonies. "We make sure our children are seen and heard," says Valerie Plaisance, who organizes children's activities for the kingdom.

"Children do everything the adults do in the group, and they work very long and hard on their projects," says Plaisance. There are workshops for children on such topics as heraldry, weaving and costume making.

And there is the popular youth boffer fighting that attracts boys and girls. "It's a lot of fun," says 9-year-old Christopher Stoner. "I get to hit people and don't get in trouble for it."

But Christopher's father, William, says the sport is not about aggression--it's about humility, honor and duty. William coordinates the youth boffer fighting for the kingdom and stresses that safety is vital during competitions. "They've got helmets, elbow pads, neck protection, groin protection," he says. "We constantly check the weapons to see if they are safe. We have a lot of rules and requirements for kids who participate. We want them to have fun but not get hurt."

Organized only a few years ago, the youth boffer tournaments are a reflection of the increased number of families that are society members. "Our first event had only five or six kids," says William. "Our last big war had probably 125 kids competing."

The Festival of the Rose takes place Saturday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. at Wardlow Park, 3457 Standbridge Ave., Long Beach. There is a site fee of \$3 per person. For more information, write the local office at Society for Creative Anachronism, P.O. Box 360789, Milpitas, CA 95036-0789, call (800) 789-7486 or click on www.sca.org.

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