

Rennies are the Best

A Former Insider's take on the Ohio Renaissance Festival

By Michael Makuch

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Sitting here now (August 9), I am reminded of one of the reasons why I loved the Ohio Renaissance Festival (hereafter referred to as Ren Fest) so much: Beautiful weather in a bucolic setting that tranquilizes the soul. A gentle breeze is heard and felt, accompanied by the subtle din of bugs, birds, squirrels... and the occasional screech of handsaws slashing mercilessly through unsuspecting wood.

Yes, my friends, that is the Ren Fest to me! Not the crowded experience, not without its own charms, of when the fest is actually open to the public, but the time in between. That time was spent in relative serenity which was only interrupted by the sounds of random construction, partying revelers and good conversation with new people who already felt like friends.

The Ren Fest started in 1990 in between Waynesville and Wilmington, Ohio near a little village called Harveysburg and it is now in its 19<sup>th</sup> year of presenting light-hearted, medieval/Renaissance era themed entertainment. I remember going to the very first Ren Fest when it was a handful of buildings and a lot of tents. The best events then, as they still are now, was the Mud Show and the Joust. The Mud Show are three actors humorously portraying classic literature on their Theatre in the Ground: A stage with a large pit of mud. Anyone sitting in the first 10 or so rows can expect to find themselves with more than a little bit of mud on them. You've been warned. The Joust is the real deal. These guys actually don armor and charge full throttle at each other with long poles with the express purpose of knocking the other guy off their horse! There's no stagecraft slight of hand here: There's no way to fake falling off a tall horse wearing 50 pounds of armor after a jousting pole has just shattered after making contact with a soon-to-be, briefly, airborne knight. Back then the Ren Fest was only four weeks long, but over the years the Ren Fest grew in length and breadth and is now an annual tradition for many who devotedly attend the fair every year.

That being said, I am not one of these people. Unfortunately, my perception of the Ren Fest was spoiled early on. After skipping a year, I attended the Ren Fest in 1992 and had a pretty good time. The Ren Fest had improved much in the intervening year, as all the tents were replaced by many new and interesting buildings and, over all, there were many more performers and vendors, as well. The Ren Fest had grown quite a bit and my future (now former) wife thought it would be a great idea to get in on the ground floor of a festival that was on the fast track to growth and success. And so it followed in early Spring of 1993 we were choosing a spot of ground in which we would sell our wares. We picked an excellent location that now houses a Starbucks (How is that Renaissancian?) that was near the entrance and on a main thoroughfare and was set along a creek and a line of trees. We started construction in early June and that's when the real fun started. I won't bore you with the details of the extreme financial, physical and mental hardship this brought us: Suffice it to say, it was all made worthwhile due to the lovely setting, sense of adventure and the wonderful people we encountered there. These people, most of them "Rennies" (folk who travel from Ren Fest to Ren Fest as a way to survive) were the friendliest, most helpful people I have ever encountered in my life. These kind,

happy people would wander by and give you a hand, a buzz, sage construction advice or just good conversation. We were newbies in so many ways but these people thought nothing of nursing us through the whole process. This was insane: These people liked helping others who, in theory, should be their market-driven enemies. And so it went as we spent the rest of the summer constructing our building in the company of these good people.

Once the festival began it was a bit jarring to have our bucolic setting transformed into a thronging mass of people and activity, which is not to say that it wasn't fun in its own special way. However, in the space of a half an hour at the end of the day, as the bristling crowd filters out, the park goes from a thronging crowd of thousands down to a skeleton crew consisting only of vendors and performers who stay overnight in their buildings. Again the park was transformed back into its quiet, out of the way, little village quality, at least until the next morning or the next week when the fairgoers returned.

I experienced this joyful camaraderie for only two seasons as fiscal reality reared its ugly head and forced us back into the real world. It wasn't until two years past that I returned, as a patron, and realized what I'd lost. There was no zest now that I was an outsider, time would need to pass, and it was 11 more years before I would return.

In 11 years a lot can change and so it was when I visited the Ren Fest again, now with a different woman and our one year old daughter. Frankly, I had an excellent time! It was fun to see that so many of the people I knew were still there, that the Ren Fest had continued to grow and that I could see the Ren Fest through fresh eyes. What's also important was the realization that I still carried the balance and serenity I'd learned when I was a part of the festival.

I don't care what anyone says, the Ren Fest is a good time. Friends and family can get together and go back in time and have a lot of fun in the process. Don't believe me? I'll meet you at the Beer Garden to discuss this further with you. The Ohio Renaissance takes place this year August 30 - October 19, 2008 - Saturdays & Sundays PLUS Labor Day September 1 - Open 10:30 a.m. – 6 p.m., Rain or Shine. Visit [www.renfestival.com](http://www.renfestival.com) for more information.