

The Medieval Fair

A Sooner Springtime Staple



Celebration of life in the Middle Ages is often a family affair for those on the fair circuit, as with this father and son dressed for medieval combat.

photos by Betsy Baker

Continued



hen knights and their fair ladies, jugglers, minstrels, peasants and beggars suddenly appear on the Norman scene, the locals know it must be the second weekend in April, time for OU's Medieval Fair.

For the past 18 years, the fair has built on the public's fascination with the Middle Ages to become the University's most successful spring event. The 1994 Medieval Fair drew approximately 600 participants and an estimated 70,000 spectators to Brandt Park, sending the feathered residents of the Duck Pond paddling for cover.

The fair was begun modestly enough in 1976 by a group of English professors who created a medieval atmosphere for a day primarily devoted to student readers and a readers' theater. Surprised at the public interest they found, the professors suddenly had a wealth of volunteer participants. A Norman chapter of the national Society for Creative Anachronism formed from the first fair to demonstrate medieval arts, crafts, music and armed combat. Refreshments and craft booths were added, and by the fourth year the fair was moved to larger quarters at the Duck Pond (now Brandt Park) for a two-day run.

By 1984, the fair, under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Sciences, was attracting 100 artists, crafts people and performers and some 30,000 visitors. The current coordinator, Linda Linn, was hired to develop a stable funding base for the event that had been operating with the charitable support of a number of University departments. For the last seven years the Medieval Fair has been entirely self-supporting through booth fees from artists, crafts people and vendors, soft drink and souvenir sales and grants from the Norman Arts and Humanities Council and the Arts Council of Oklahoma.

Although Linn's job is part-time, she is the fair's only year-round staff. After closing the books and evaluating each fair, she begins planning and budgeting for the next. From a 1994 master list of 2,000, she enlisted 250 artists and crafts people, 28 vendors and four performance groups with a total membership of 300—the Society for Creative Anachronism; the Arthurian Order of Avalon, from the Oklahoma City metro area; the Lionheart, from the Norman area; and Aprocrypha from Tulsa. In addition to hiring several individual and small group performers, Linn also employs the Retired Senior Volunteers to man the soft drink booths and the OU Air Force ROTC to provide trash pickup and parking control.

As the only medieval fair in Oklahoma, the OU event draws visitors from throughout the state, many arriving in school buses. At the suggestion of teachers and parents, the Medieval Fair in 1993 added a Friday to its traditional weekend operation to accommodate school groups wishing to attend as an official school trip.

What was once a strictly local event, the OU festival is now part of a nationwide network of Renaissance and medieval fairs, with more than 50 percent of the artists from out-of-state. Coming in early April (a time selected originally to honor Shakespeare's birthday and only incidentally coinciding with OU Mom's Day), the Norman event follows fairs in Florida and Arizona on the circuit, which then goes to Waxahachie, Texas. Only two or three on the national circuit

are sponsored by universities. Linn feels that the national tie-in brings the OU fair a heightened sense of authenticity—complete with olde English dialect and credible costuming.

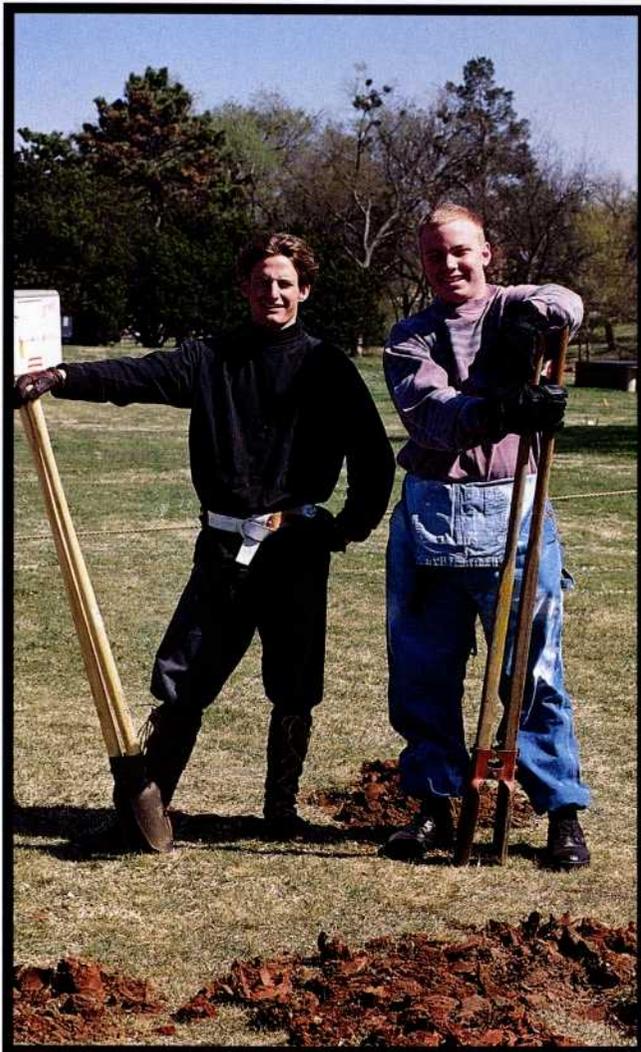
While Linn coordinates the Medieval Fair, she insists that it is not *her* fair. "I know it sounds corny," she says, "but this fair actually has a life of its own. There are people who live and breathe for the fair—and they just can't wait for the next one to happen.

—Carol J. Burr





Coordinator Linda Linn directs the placement of the booths and other attractions as the 1994 Medieval Fair gets ready for another banner year. Looking on in the photo at left is steering committee member Sena Brothers.



At left, members of the Arthurian Order of Avalon dig postholes for the fencing that will surround the Jousting Field at the Medieval Fair. The AOA, which also conducts the Human Chess Game, began as part of the fair's hired performers but wanted to continue its activities year-round. "They just love to perform," says OU's fair coordinator Linda Linn of the non-profit AOA, to whom she refers many outside requests from civic and youth groups for musical entertainment and costume, weapon and combat demonstrations.



One of the out-of-state artists traveling the circuit of Renaissance and medieval fairs is Ranaga Farber, above, whose windchime booth won the 1994 "over-all award" for costuming, salesmanship techniques and decoration.



One young fair-goer complained to officials, “That man was rude!”—as well he might be. At right, “Rufus the Rude” mugs with a medieval artist.



The Norman chapter of the Society for Creative Anachronism grew from the enthusiasm of participants in the first OU Medieval Fair 18 years ago. The group is best known for its combat demonstrations. Educational in purpose, SCA meets each weekend year-round, providing arts, crafts and musical demonstrations from the Middle Ages.



Visitors and fair participants pause for refreshment at the soft drink wagons manned by 100 members of the Retired Senior Volunteers, who hire on for the fair to finance their organization’s recognition banquet. Similarly, members of the University’s AFROTC provide trash pickup and parking control to pay for their Air Force Ball. @