

# **THE RENAISSANCE PLEASURE FAIRE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF AN EVENT**

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Renaissance Faires (popularly known as “Ren Faires”) are a fixture of Summer and Fall throughout the United States. I attended and observed the 40<sup>th</sup> Renaissance Pleasure Faire Southern California and contemplated who attends the faire, why they attend and what purpose it serves. The answers were determined in the main by the level of participation of attendees, itself influenced by demographics.

For the last forty years, the Renaissance Pleasure Faire Southern California has been resident in the Glen Helen Park, north of San Bernadino. Over seven weeks of Summer 2002, an estimated 200,000 people<sup>1</sup> will attend the event, which is billed as “America’s first and California’s biggest”<sup>2</sup> and one of 31 such fairs in California alone<sup>3</sup>. The event has several components. Most visible are the booths – some 250 this year – where traders sell clothing, jewelry, glasswork and pottery, leatherwork, metalwork and perfumes to the attendees. Some of the booths are turned over to food and drink, a vital part of faire, and other booths to “entertainments” such as axe-throwing. Another important part of faire are the “guilds”, groups of enthusiasts who set up shop and perform vignettes, shows or demonstrate some craft to the attendees. The most popular events over the day are undoubtedly the jousting, where volunteers dressed as Knights recreate medieval tourneys. As well as the “official” events, there are also faire workers, dressed in full costume who go throughout the faire, interacting with the attendees.

The demographics of the faire are interesting to note. There are four distinct groups of people to consider: those who work at faire, those who run booths at faire, paying attendees who aim to participate and paying attendees who come to be entertained. The last distinction

is an important one, and one that sets the faire apart from other types of group events, such as a County Fair, where all attendees go as an audience rather than to interact.

Although it is professionally managed, and presumably aims to make a profit, most of the vast number of people who work at the faire are enthusiasts with regular jobs who set aside the seven weekends in May and June to work long hours in the heat for low pay. From observation, it is clear to see a demographic pattern in these staff, and this was confirmed by limited interview. The vast majority are between the ages of 20 and 40, white, middle-class and in at least comfortable, often well-paid careers. Work attested to included computer software design, teaching and engineering/scientific work. Most had at least completed high school and those old enough had completed college. Many of those who were younger were in college. Some workers fell outside the above age range – specifically were older than the norm, but they were unusual, and often had been attending fair since they were within the normal range. It was interesting to note that a number of younger workers were introduced to faire by parents. Two and sometimes three generations of a family were working at faire. Many of the workers were from the Los Angeles area (including Long Beach and Orange County) so had committed to travel over an hour each way for the 15 days of fair. The level of commitment is one that most employers can only envy.

The second group of attendees are the stall holders. The booths split into two categories: professional or semi-professional stalls selling things (including food) and the entertainment booths. Like the staff, they were predominantly white and middle-class, and the entertainment stallholders tended to be of a similar age range, but unlike the staff, the professional or semi-

professional stall-holders tended to be older. This is not so surprising, as many make a living or a partial living from the faires and must have had a certain amount of capital to begin. The stall-holders came from much farther afield than the staff. Many were from out-of-state, and attend not on the Renaissance Pleasure Faire but many other faires over the course of the year.

It is with the paying attendees that I saw the biggest division. Attendees are encouraged to get into the “spirit” of the faire by dressing in 16<sup>th</sup> century clothing, using archaic language and while at faire, interacting with the staff as if all concerned were really attending an Elizabethan faire, albeit one with less mud and disease and better privies. And a reasonable number of people do make at least a passing attempt to do so (including myself). I estimated that between a quarter and a third of all paying attendees were in costume (known as “garb”) and that these attendees were more likely to interact with the staff in a “period” fashion. These attendees appeared more likely to take part in the activity at the entertainment stalls, and to eat period-appropriate food than the non-costumed attendees. The demographics were similar to that of the staff: predominantly young, white and middle-class, although there were larger numbers of older attendees than in the staff group and some of these attendees had young families. Again like the staff, “active” attendees included college students and computer and science professionals.

The second group of paying attendees, however, did not wear garb. It was noticeable that this group was far less likely to interact with the staff, in some cases even shying away from an over-enthusiastic staff member or stall holder. They seemed happier taking a more passive role in the event: shopping at the stalls, watching the shows, and observing the action around them. Their demographic was significantly different from the other groups. Finally, we had a wider range of the Los Angeles populace. All cultural groups seemed to be represented: from the young African-Americans wearing their Lakers shirts to the young Asian and Latino families with the kids often in “Sunday best” (although I wonder whether the parents regretted this particular choice of clothing given the

dustiness of the site). Many were first time attendees and came from a wider range of socio-economic positions. Surprisingly, many had come from as wide a geographic range as the staff: from all parts of Los Angeles, Orange County and even from near San Diego.

The reasons people attend or work at faire – and the meaning faire has for them – differ broadly according to these four categories. Easiest to understand are the stall-holders, who we might assume attend in a professional capacity. However, this assumption ignores the fact that some do not make all or even the majority of their income from their stalls at faires; that many started their businesses *because* of the faires; that many see the faires as more than a mere money-making opportunity. Of the stall holders, the caterers seemed to have the least personally invested in the faire itself, while jewelers and makers of garb were often originally faire attendees or workers who branched into their craft because of faire and who now try to make a business of it. To these latter groups, the income they may make from faire is important, but equally important is the participation in the faire experience.

To participate in the faire experience is what drives the majority of the faire workers. Clearly, they were not motivated by any financial gain – some commented that the amount they were paid only just covered their expenses – but by the need to participate and to be part of a group. But why did they choose this event to participate in? Some cited the sense of community and this certainly seems to be an important factor. The proportion of workers who return year after year is large, and meeting old friends from previous years is a strong incentive to returning. Others spoke of loving the opportunity to dress up, to affect a different dialect, to take on the role of a completely different person, albeit for a few days in the year. This “escape from the real world” was attested to by more than one worker, and seemed especially prevalent among the older, professional career people for whom job stress and real work anxieties are facts of daily life. For the rest of the year, many took part in similar hobbies like the Society for Creative Anachronism, roleplaying games or amateur dramatics, all hobbies with similar means of expression,

the similar opportunities for imagining oneself as a different person within a friendly environment. Some faire workers also expressed a dissatisfaction with “normal” means of expression, the passivity of entertainment such as movies or TV. At faire, they could interact, use their imaginations and express themselves more fully. A few even commented that faire allowed an outlet for their more “bawdy” sides: that current mainstream American society was too puritan and prudish. Certainly, observing events during faire, many were significantly more robust than one might expect to see in mainstream culture.

The paying attendees, split as they were into the active and the passive, also had different reasons for going to faire. The active attendees, those wearing garb and interacting, usually expressed reasons for attendance similar to those of the workers. Some had worked previous years but were unable to give a commitment this year but did not wish to miss the faire completely. Many had attended or intended to attend multiple times during the faire’s seven weekend length and many attended each year. Many also attended one or more other faires in California or even farther afield. The sense of community, the escape, the opportunity to dress up and take on another role, the bawdy humor, were all factors as was a general sense that “faire is just fun.” Secondary, though not unimportant, to this group was the desire to visit the stalls and to see the shows.

The second group of paying attendees, those who did not wear garb and interacted less, had different reasons for coming to faire. A large number, especially those who had attended before, came for the stalls, especially the ceramics, glass work and jewelry, and considered the faire no differently from other “normal” fairs such as the County Fair. Some were amused by the dressing up, while some found the attempts at interaction “difficult to deal with.” Many families were looking for something different to entertain the children for the day. The children, on the whole, seemed to enjoy the experience, but the parents

often seemed bemused by the whole thing. At least one group commented that they couldn’t understand why I, a visitor, would wear clothes “like *that*” (not an unreasonable comment given the heat and the dust did make a t-shirt appear rather more appealing than three levels of skirts and a laced up bodice). My response – that I wanted to participate – elicited smiles and the comment “You’re nuts.” I don’t think they were alone in that opinion. Many of the non-participating attendees walked around with permanent expressions of “You’re nuts” on their faces. When asked why they were attending the faire, amid the shrugs and the “it seemed a good idea” comments, the most common reason was “to be entertained.” They wanted to watch the shows, watch the strangeness going on. To many, it was little different than going to the movies or any other day trip. They did not feel the same sense of community or friendliness felt by the workers or active participants and they were less likely to be returnees or to return than the other groups. Of those that did express the desire to return, many admitted that next time they would “try the dressing up thing.”

The Renaissance Faires have, for four decades, been an outlet for a more active, participatory means of expression than the American cultural norm. Workers and attendees who actively contribute tend to be from a particular section of American life that especially appreciates the opportunity to escape from life’s realities in a safe and limited way, to express their imaginations and their individuality in an environment that accepts and encourages them. For seven weekends a year, they are embraced by a community of like-minded people. Food, crafts, events and bawdy humor fill their days at faire. To everyone else, the faire is a little confusing, a little strange, an opportunity to shop and to gawk at wierdos and usually a fun but dusty day out. They do not need nor want the community, and are happy in their roles. They eat and drink and shop and little realise the greater significance for the active participants.

### Works Cited

- 1 Vinopal, J. et al. "Renaissance Pleasure Faire of Southern California" *The Renaissance Faire*. 27 May 2002.  
<[http://www.renfaire.com/Sites/formatsite.cgi?RENAISSANCE\\_PLEASURE\\_FAIRE\\_OF\\_SOUTHERN\\_CALIFORNIA](http://www.renfaire.com/Sites/formatsite.cgi?RENAISSANCE_PLEASURE_FAIRE_OF_SOUTHERN_CALIFORNIA)>
- 2 *Renaissance Pleasure Faires*. 27 May 2002. <<http://www.renfaire.com/socal/index.php>>
- 3 Vinopal, J. et al. "Faire Locations by State". *The Renaissance Faire*. 27 May 2002.  
<<http://www.renfaire.com/Sites/state.htm>>