

GOOD KNIGHT

It's fun to live in the Middle Ages, even if it's just for a day

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Louise Smithson is not a historical re-enactor. Not exactly.

True, she occasionally wears a crown and calls herself a baroness. And yes, she has become quite the expert on 16th-century Italian cooking. But her version of the distant past is a sanitized one, and as a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism, a group dedicated to recreating pre-17th century life without all the "icky bits," that's the way she likes it.

"Everybody's chivalrous, everybody's considered nobility, and you're really trying to recreate the best of it, the best of the arts and the fighting and the chivalry and the way of life without anything like the plague and peasants and, you know, the bad things," said the woman from South Toledo.

In real life, Ms. Smithson, 39, is a vaccine researcher at the University of Toledo Health Science Campus. Last weekend, though, she was Helewyse de Birkestad, baroness of Red Spears and a figure of great honor at Baron Wars XI, an annual gathering that drew 1,000 to Fort Meigs in Perrysburg.

For the event, modern folks from all walks of life donned suits of armor and personas from the past. It was a chance to be someone else for a while, someone who knows calligraphy, leatherworking, or best of all, fighting.

That's how the Society for Creative Anachronism — 30,000 members strong — got started in the first place. In 1966, a group of friends in Berkeley, Calif., hosted a party summoning knights to come defend the honor of their ladies.

Since then the group has gone international. Members dedicate themselves to researching the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and then putting what they learn into practice. Those who investigate brewing techniques actually make beer. Others teach themselves to make period garb or cook food Old-World style.

VIDEO

[See battles and more from Baron Wars XI](#)

While some accommodations are made to modern life, such as the portable toilets that were sprinkled around Fort Meigs and the absence of spoiled meat, members strive for a historical feel that goes beyond some similar groups, according to Diane Clancy. She lives north of Detroit and is assistant vice president for media for the local

region that includes Ohio and Michigan, called the Middle Kingdom.

"The SCA is more education-oriented, and you're not going to see somebody running around in fairy wings," she said.

The organization's main attraction is the fighting, and the case was no different last weekend in Perrysburg. As the sun settled over a grassy field on Saturday afternoon, a mass of 200 people with metal helmets and painted shields chose sides for a giant melee between two baronies, including Red Spears, which covers northwest Ohio.

Among the first to do battle was the local champion, Lewis Smith, also known as Gaius Albius Lupos, a 2nd-century Roman.

"Imagine the most exciting thing you've ever done in your entire life, the best adrenaline rush you could ever imagine. That's sort of getting a taste of what it might feel like," he said.



Society for Creative Anachronism members in a battle at Fort Meigs. (BLADE PHOTOS/ANDY MORRISON)

Mr. Smith, 24, knows a thing or two about warfare. He is a logistics management specialist for the Ohio Air National Guard's 180th Fighter Wing, where he holds the rank of staff sergeant. Before that, he was on the fencing club at Bowling Green State University.

So he was ready when he took the field for a one-on-one match with the opposing side's champion. Unfortunately, it ended with a rattan sword — they don't use real ones, one of many safety precautions — bashing him in the head.

"He got a lucky shot on me," Mr. Smith said afterward.

What followed was a blur of armor as the two sides rushed toward each other en masse, then clanged together as metal crushed against metal. Bodies fell to the ground everywhere. The unscripted skirmish was intense but short-lived, and it wasn't long before participants were ready for another go at each other.

Randy Shrader, 24, of Millbury, Ohio, said this kind of battle takes him back to when he was a kid play-fighting with sticks.

"It's pretty close, except we get armor now," he said.

And chain mail, which Mr. Shrader made himself from 40 pounds of steel. He guesses it consists of 20,000 to 30,000 small rings that took him six months to make.

Another warrior, Greg Collins, of Millbury, who goes by the name Greggor the Obese even though he weighs only 140 pounds, said events like this are a way for him to say fit, meet nice people, and have some fun.

"It keeps me active," he said. "Crushing skulls isn't exactly the worst thing in the world."

As for history, Mr. Collins is not going to obsess over it.

"I'm not a period Nazi or anything," he said. "I'm wearing fatigues under my armor."

Watching from the sidelines, Susan Puruleski, of Monroe, said being part of the society has been an educational experience for her entire family of six.

"I never knew how to sew, but I've sewn all our outfits," she said.

Everyone has their own favorite part. Her 9-year-old son Donald's?

That's easy, he said: "Probably whacking people."

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Jamie Pience of Akron offers Gatorade to combatants.