

Variety

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TODAY'S QUOTE

► "Siblings: Children of the same parents, each of whom is perfectly normal until they get together." —
—Sam Levinson

SECTION
E1

StarTribune

Imperfect past



The Renaissance Festival offers a '90s take on the 1500s.



Gail Frazer, center, and Mary Kuhfeld assess the Renaissance Festival's historical accuracy.

A pilgrimage to the Minnesota Renaissance Festival with local characters who know what's historically accurate and what's not.

By Karin Winagar
Star Tribune Staff Writer

"It's the zippers that get me," said Margaret of Shaftesbury, abbess of Deer Abbey, fiddling her hands into the broad black sleeves of her habit.

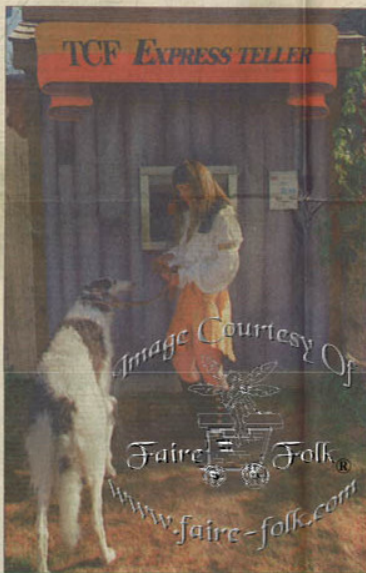
"Tingie, covered wagon — definitely not period," sniffed Lady Allis Fitzare, whose snowy wimple bore only the faintest trace of jaco sauce. Sister Margaret and Lady Allis, a.k.a. Minneapolis authors Mary Kuhfeld and Gail Frazer, know their way around the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The two converse the Shenandoah medieval history series (Berkley Publishing Group) under the pseudonym Margaret Frazer. They meet at the local chapter of the Society for Creative Anachronism while replaying the Battle of Bosworth Field (1485) so Richard III would win.

They recently donned period garb and strolled around the Renaissance Festival, a medieval-mindedly populated by hoards of anachronisms, from expander tellers to switches in Spanish garments and swains in Harley Davidson leather fringe. But some vendors, actors and customers get it right, the experts said.

"(For reference, the European Middle Ages date from 476 A.D. to 1450 A.D., the Renaissance from about 1500 A.D. in England and 1300 A.D. in Italy to the end of the 1500s.)

"Well, the buildings are looking more ramshackle — that's more anachronistic," said Sister Margaret, approvingly.

Please turn to E1B on E2 for more of this story including: —Jousting? Definitely not correct.



Star Tribune photo by Rita Heist
Lee Griffith of Minnetonka, accompanied by her dog Milo, makes a stop at Ye Old Cash Machine on the grounds of the Renaissance Festival.

5 flaming anachronisms

According to historians Mary Kuhfeld, a.k.a. Sister Margaret, abbess of Shaftesbury, and Gail Frazer, a.k.a. Lady Allis of Fitzare, there are historic contradictions at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival. (None of which should impede anyone's enjoyment of it, they add.)

► Chocolate covered strawberries. "Strawberries are period, but chocolate is from the Americas — an Aztec food," said Margaret. "Chocolate didn't become popular in Europe until the 1700s with one-liner beans." Trust us and sugar were added, it was nasty stuff.

► Roast turkey drumsticks. "You can't have turkey if the continent they live on hasn't been discovered yet," said Margaret. "In the Renaissance, the Americas had just been discovered, but I doubt they were importing turkey legs."

► Numerous healthy children. "It was common for the majority of children to die before puberty. That was true up to the Victorian era," said Margaret. "All those lovely little diseases we no longer suffer from, they did."

► Brightly colored clothing. "Those are colors that just have to be aniline dyes, when what they really should have is vegetable dyes, which are not as bright," said Margaret. "And satin — no, if you could afford that you wouldn't wear it here."

► Hard-soled shoes and boots. "Period shoes wouldn't have hard soles," said Allis. "You could have put on wooden clogs if it was muddy, but all shoes had soft soles. And that changes the way you walk; you walked essentially barefoot, sinking into the castle-hallway in heeled boots and clicking across the pavement as it got right. You would more fairly slideny."

Jousting, bubbles, paper money and what's right and what isn't

"But bubbles aren't period," said Lady Allis, spotting a vendor whooping out melon-sized soap bubbles. "They did make soap bubbles, but not as great as these."

"Paper money, what an notion. Hard cash was what we had," said Lady Allis, peering at a candy vendor making chocolate.

"Fairs are incredibly period," said Margaret. "They had a horse fair, sheep fair, spice fair, cattle fair. A village or a runnery had the right to hold the fair and get a profit from it, so this is very period, to own the land and take rents from the booths."

"Entertainers would show up at fairs like this, and people came ready to be entertained because you had to amuse yourself — there was no TV or radio, no vaudeville touring shows," added Lady Allis, passing a stage where jugglers tossed plates. "It was whoever came through your village. Look, the players are coming! We haven't had anybody here whose face we didn't recognize for six months."

'Like a boxing match at a picnic'

The women strolled past the jewelry vendors to the jousting stands.

"Jousting would not be done at a fair..." Margaret said. "That would be like having a boxing match at a picnic," interrupted Lady Allis.

"It was a sporting event done by the aristocracy, and it was stupid — when you lost, you lost your horse and armor and everything," Margaret said.

"The idea we had that armor was so heavy you couldn't get up or get on your horse dates to the late medieval or early Renaissance," Lady Allis continued. "By that time jousting had become limited, and you didn't want to take any chance of getting hurt, so you wore this fantastically heavy armor. Some of it was actually riveted so you couldn't move your joints, you could just gallop to the end of the field, whack somebody, then sit there until somebody turned you around and headed you back."

They paused at a kiosk selling Renaissance Festival T-shirts.

"Badges are right, they showed whose service you were in," said Lady Allis. "The idea of wearing something that proclaimed where your loyalties are is period."

Into the Renaissance

The Middle Ages didn't really end, they segued into the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, and they are the great-great grandparent of current culture, Margaret said.

"You find remnants everywhere," she said. "The university system was invented in the medieval period, the custom of dividing farmland in 40 acre units, the waka (you couldn't always tell if somebody was dead, so you sat up with the body)."

They noted a pickle vendor doing a rap chant, were snarled at by the Rat Catcher ("Tigs! You're all pigs!") and dodged

Minnesota Renaissance

Festival

When the Renaissance Festival opens in Minneapolis on Sept. 24, it will be the largest of its kind in the Midwest.

- > When: Wednesdays 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. through Sept. 24.
- > Where: Hwy 168, Shakopee.
- > Tickets: \$12.95 for a full day, \$6.95 for children under age 12.

Minneapolis Renaissance Festival

singing vendors enticing buyers toward their booths.

'The church might execute her'

In the passing mob, a young woman paraded in tights and tulle.

"The church might execute her for wearing men's clothing," said Lady Allis.

At the north end of the grounds, they halted in the shade to watch a Maypole dance.

"Maidens with bare heads is fine, but there are a lot of older women with heads uncovered here — very improper," said Lady Allis, who had earlier scolded Margaret for showing her ankles during an elephant ride.

"But in the Middle Ages, everyone lived together in a great hall and saw everyone carrying on in producing the next generation, so it was kind of a selective modesty," said Margaret.

Then it was round the corner to where a medallion-maker was stamping out commemorative coins.

"That guy making coins will have his head cut off!" exclaimed Margaret. "The right of making coins was the king's, and he would sell the right to make his official coins. He made money off making money. If you started making coins on your own, that was treason, and you were liable to execution."

'Pearls were THE jewels to have'

A costume shop selling pearl-studded gowns won a nod of approval from the ladies.

"Diamonds couldn't be cut in that period, so pearls were the jewels to have," said Lady Allis.

The sheer populosity of this would-be English village is also not in keeping with history, they agreed.

"There are more people here in a day than the entire population of London in the Middle Ages," said Lady Allis.

"And the people are incredibly healthy," said Margaret. "There's good teeth, and there are no amputees. In those days if you got an infection, all you could do was whack the limb off."

Eyeglasses, however, are not anachronisms, they agreed. By the 1300s, Europeans were wearing spectacles with wooden frames with loops of ribbon around the ears.

But in the past made present, nobody's perfect — even historians.

"Don't look, I've got a watch," said Margaret, skinning back her sleeve to check the time.