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Sept. 11, 1971: Ye Olde Renaissance Festival

By Yesterday's News

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Minnesota's first Renaissance Festival, which opened 40 years ago this week in Chaska, was promoted as a "Celebration of Nature, Art and Life." It as much a celebration of tie-dyed costumes and black-velvet paintings as it was of life in 16th-century Europe. Lute players, minstrels, clergymen and at least one soothsayer wandered the grounds, and merchants in burlap tents sold candles, beads and belts. A "vassal" munching a hot dog told a Tribune reporter: "It's the Renaissance without the lepers, open sewers and plague. They even have 20 portable toilets. The Renaissance was never like this."

Admission was just $1.50 in 1971. Reigning over the first festival as king and queen were George Coulam, one of the event's founders, and actress Tovah Feldshuh. Feldshuh, 18, was in town playing a bit part in "Cyrano de Bergerac" at the Guthrie. After leading the "grand march" with Coulam on opening day, she mingled with the crowd and asked, "Will someone lend the queen a dollar?" Someone did, and rumor had it that she treated a lady-in-waiting and the town crier to beers at the Grain Belt tent.

Here are two photos from the festival's early years:

Sept. 11, 1971: Actress Tovah Feldshuh and George Coulam, one of the festival's founders, greeted visitors on the festival's first day. (Minneapolis Tribune photo by Mike Zerby)

Sept. 18, 1977: Viktor Korchnoi, a contender for the world chess title at the time, played 50 games simultaneously at the Renaissance Festival in Shakopee. Opponents paid $15 each to take on the grandmaster, who played a series of simuls across the United States that year. Here one of the youngest challengers, 12-year-old Andre Wakefield, awaited Korchnoi's next move. The kid eventually lost, as did 42 other challengers. Three challengers fought to a draw, and four – Alan Kemp and Ken Kaufman of Minneapolis, James Hirsch of St. Paul and Ron Elmquist of Mounds View – managed to beat the world's second-ranked player. (Minneapolis Star Photo by Jim McTaggart)