

# A Quest into the World of Rennies

By Taylor Mankin



*Musicians perform for festival attendees, October 1978.*  
Photo courtesy of Texas.713 on Flickr.com. (See Endnote no.15 for license.)

The Texas Renaissance Festival has been a popular form of entertainment for Houstonians since the early 1970s, with thousands making the trek each fall into a world that is part history and part fantasy. Upon entering the fairgrounds, tourists and visitors encounter performers, merchants, and artisans donning medieval-style garb and speaking in a language that most have only heard in Shakespearean plays. Contrary to what some may assume, many of these Renaissance players are not your run-of-the-mill citizens, only working the fair every October and November, but a people who belong to a subculture consisting of

actors and artisans that share a common love for the arts and a way of life that allows them to explore their passions year-round. Working fair after fair throughout the state of Texas and the United States, these people endearingly refer to themselves as Rennies.

The first Renaissance festival was held on the weekend of May 10, 1963, in Southern California. As the years passed, the festival's popularity grew and its duration was extended to six weekends, eventually developing into the current California Pleasure Faire, which is divided into a northern and southern festival. This became the prototype for Renaissance festivals found in the United States today. The event's remote site captivated visitors who were absorbed into the fair's historic realm; however, the concept of an interactive audience had not yet come into play. Rather, the fair aimed to compel audience members to imagine what it must have been like to live during the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

The shift from one-sided participation to a more collaborative style—between the performers, vendors, and audience—originated in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when California Pleasure Faire glass-blower George Coulam decided to open his own Renaissance festival in Utah. After two years, authorities with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints told Coulam that he could not lease the property a second time, a reflection of their distaste for what they saw as uncouth behavior. In his second venture, the Minnesota Renaissance Festival, Coulam leased a larger piece of land. Inspired by a book on Walt Disney and his theme parks, he began using scenarios to establish the fair's

*Frank Della Penna appears as the mystical "spirit of the bells" who breathes life into a rare, four-ton medieval instrument called the carillon in a Texas Renaissance Festival performance of *Cast in Bronze*, 2007. The instrument is made up of thirty-five bells, and is played from a keyboard with the fists and feet.*

Photo courtesy of Eric V. Blanchard. (See Endnote no.15 for license.)





A sign for a Rennie's leather gallery in Todd Mission, Texas. Many Rennies spend their spare time pursuing their respective arts and crafts.

Photo courtesy of author.

overall setting, creating a cohesive narrative for all of the participants. This technique, known as the "Minnesota Model," is still utilized by most U.S. festivals.<sup>2</sup>

Worried that he might once more face problems with leasing land, and again inspired by Disney's ideas on development and construction, Coulam decided to purchase rather than rent the land for his next festival. He found his answer in the defunct town of Todd Mission, Texas, located just outside of Houston, between Magnolia and Plantersville. It is here that Coulam built the Texas Renaissance Festival (TRF), incorporating Todd Mission and avoiding the earlier problem of losing his location. Today, the town more or less *is* the festival and Coulam even serves as its mayor, often referring to himself as "The King."<sup>3</sup>

From its small beginning in 1974, TRF has grown into one of the largest and most popular Renaissance festivals in the United States, with attendance increasing annually from 210,000 visitors in the early 1990s to a record 606,694 in 2012. The festival takes place over seven weekends in October and November. In the late 1990s, it saw up to 37,000 visitors per day, and this figure has grown exponentially in the last fifteen years. The number of performers has also increased rapidly in that time, swelling from just over 500 workers to thousands today.<sup>4</sup>

In an effort to meet the needs of the growing population of tourists and fair-workers, the Fields of New Market Campgrounds have expanded from around 70 to 170 acres. Each year, the festival invites its visitors to spend the day in a sixteenth century world, and this engagement does not end when the sun sets. Those who choose to camp at TRF continue their journey into the night, enjoying an assortment of events, including a bonfire and performances.<sup>5</sup>

In his study of Disneyland's development, Coulam perceived Disney's biggest mistake to be his failure to predict the growth of the nearby towns and cities, which inevitably surrounded the theme park and stifled the possibility for expansion. In an attempt to avoid the same fate, Coulam purchased the contiguous land around the fairgrounds. The expanse of land totaled an estimated 1,200 acres in 1999, and it has continued to provide room for the multitude of visitors and performers who attend each year.<sup>6</sup>

The acquisition of festival property ushered in a new way of life for the Rennies who spend the majority of their time working at the various fairs around the United States. Before, nearly all fair workers lived a nomadic lifestyle, traveling from fair to fair in campers or cars, and pitching tents to live on site for the duration of their stay. For the first time, TRF provided a more permanent and stable place for the Rennies to call home. For many of them, this home is the only one that they have and their fellow fair-workers



Multiple generations of Rennies, such as this mother and daughter, live in the community. Many raise their families on the campgrounds, passing on crafting and performance skills.

Photo courtesy of author.

are their family. After a long weekend working at other Texas festivals, many Rennies come home to the section of TRF property, affectionately called Toon Town, where they maintain established campsites and housing.

According to Lisa High, an artisan, dancer, and Rennie who lives at the Texas Renaissance Festival, only a few areas exist around the United States where large groups of Rennies can be found: the town of Lloyd, Virginia, a commune in Austin, Texas, and the Texas Renaissance Festival. It is within these groups that generations of Rennies can be found. For example, some of Lisa's friends are third generation Rennies.<sup>7</sup>

You may be wondering, what is a Rennie? The term "Rennie" can be both positive and negative. Those who live the lifestyle prefer to refer to each other as Rennies, but they feel that outsiders often use the term incorrectly, or even pejoratively. The term is further complicated because many super-fans of Renaissance festivals often refer to themselves as Rennies—though, it should be noted that the Rennies do not call them that. According to Lisa, a Rennie is "a person who makes their living [working at] Renaissance festivals." They are members of a close-knit community where everybody helps each other. Some Rennies join the festivals looking to create ties to a new family because they have none; however, many are artists and musicians trying to support themselves. Lisa explains, "It is the easiest way to sell our stuff [artwork] in a way that it is presented properly . . . We're doing everything by hand, whether it's playing music, or being one of the players or making leather goods by hand, or pottery . . . Because we only work on the weekends, it gives us the opportunity to pursue our art."<sup>8</sup>

Lisa grew up in Houston and studied theatre in college. She initially joined the festival as a bartender because she always liked the fair as a kid. During her first season, she made friends with other Rennies and through these connections obtained other jobs. The next year, she worked for a soap company selling all-natural soap. She now sells her artwork and often dances with a gypsy dance theatre at the TRF.

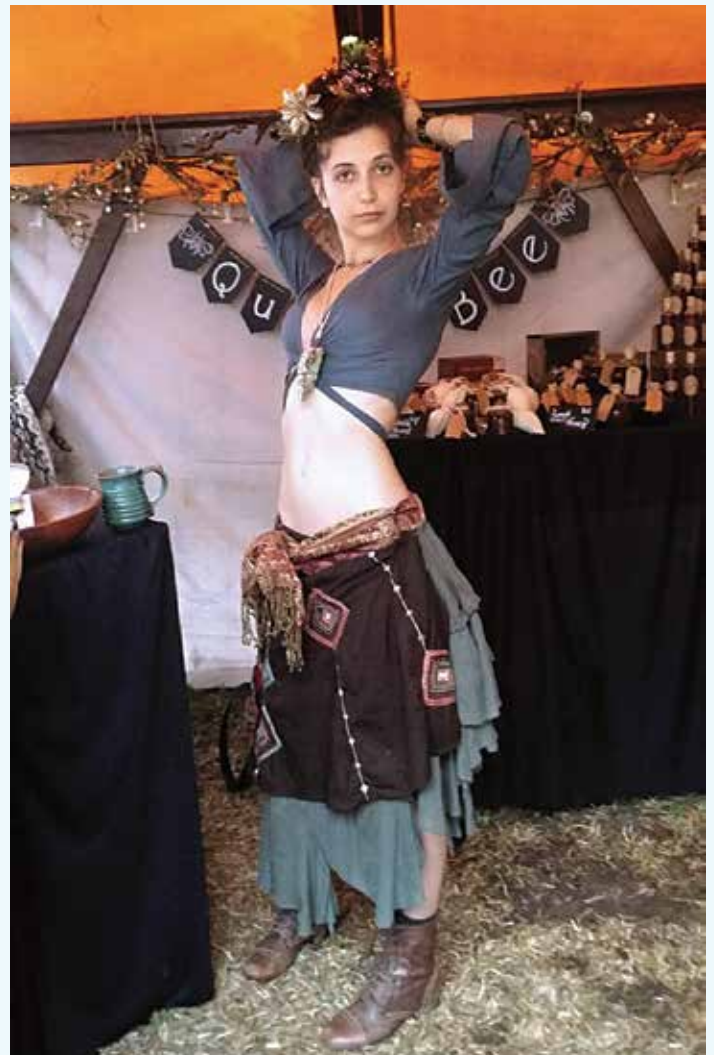
The Rennie lifestyle could best be described as alternative. Certainly the culture has a "hippy" and "gypsy" feel to it, however, that does not apply to every Rennie. As Lisa explains, "[Rennies are] true renaissance people, like when you describe a true renaissance man," adding, "It's people who just do everything. Most of my friends have lived really interesting, crazy lives and do a billion different things or have gone through many different versions of themselves. . . . They are very worldly and cultured."<sup>9</sup>

Rennies work the festivals on the weekend and use the rest of the week to pursue their hobbies and crafts. Those who have higher paying jobs, such as the artisans and performers, can take more time off to explore their passions. Lisa works at the Scarborough Renaissance Festival in Dallas, Sherwood Forest Faire in Austin, the Michigan festival in the summer, and of course, TRF in the fall. Because her jobs pay well, she is able to take off two months in the summer and two in the winter. When she is not in full character at the festival, she plays music, works with other types of art such as painting and mixed-media, gardens, and teaches dance. As Lisa puts it, she "pursue[s] [her]self and

[her] hobbies."<sup>10</sup> Many Rennies love the interactions they have with tourists and visitors. Lisa believes this gives people the opportunity to celebrate life and nature. "We change people's lives. They work in offices and don't [often] go outside. . . . They can't believe I only work two days a week and can make a living. It shows them another perspective. . . . This lifestyle is so far from the norm; it gives them a little inspiration to change their lives even a little bit."<sup>11</sup>

The Rennies at the Texas Renaissance Festival live in a community that, like other communities, has a form of hierarchy. Elders, the Rennies who have been there longest, tend to take the positions of leadership, helping other Rennies to be their best selves. "It depends on who's around and when," says Lisa, explaining, "The community is like a high school or a microcosm of a large city. There are a lot of mini-groups that organize and help other Rennies out." Every Rennie has his or her own social circle within the larger group, often based on their jobs at the festival and how much they earn. Nevertheless, the community has an overall sense of family, and they will always come to the aid of a fellow Rennie.<sup>12</sup>

Rennies have several support systems to help them in



*Rennies often enjoy the freedom festival life offers them to pursue and sell their art. During festival season, they hold positions as entertainers, salespeople, and artisans.*

Photo courtesy oauthor.



*The front door of a Rennie house located in Todd Mission, Texas.*

Photo courtesy of author.

times of need and assist them in staying well-connected. Rennie RESCU is an organization that helps with medical bills by raising money throughout the community.<sup>13</sup> Often, super-fans of Renaissance festivals also donate money. Aside from RESCU, Rennies fundraise to help each other by playing music and performing follies and vaudevillian

shows, as well as holding auctions and collecting donations. Rennies post bulletins at each fair with announcements about other fairs and important information. Lisa points out that staying connected is much easier today with the technology of computers and cell phones. A literary magazine, *Uproots*, also helps to keep Rennies in touch.

With the Rennie subculture becoming more well-known, many members are torn between proudly celebrating their lifestyle with the world and wanting to stay somewhat secluded and undisturbed. They are certainly protective of the community and hope that as the world learns more about them, their culture will be recognized for what it is. Lisa explains, “The majority of us are all artists and are just trying to make a living being an artist. It’s very difficult being a working musician or artist [outside of the festivals].”<sup>14</sup>

Over the years TRF has become an important part of Houston culture. Every fall Houstonians get their friends and families together and escape into a fantasy world, far away from the hustle and bustle of the big city. It is the Rennies who make this fantastical experience possible, inviting Houston into their unique world and bringing joy to thousands through their artistry.

**Taylor Mankin** is a Ph.D. student at the University of Houston. She studies Medieval history and, like many of her fellow Houstonians, enjoys partaking in the beloved bohemian experience that the Texas Renaissance Festival offers.



*A daring tightrope performer maintains his balance while showing off his acrobatic multi-tasking skills at the festival in 1978.*

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