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Pirates Storm Castle

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MUSKOGEE – By weekday, Craig Lutke is a mild-mannered computer programmer. By weekend, he’s Maroon the Shantyman, a pirate

Every weekend through May 22nd, Lutke, who lives in Texas in the real world, is pirating the fantasy pathways of the Oklahoma Renaissance Faire. He’s the frontman for the Bilge Pumps, a gaggle of Dallas-area musicians who sing occasionally risqué pirate songs and tell more-often risqué pirate jokes.

He’s also one of nearly 600 costumed performers and merchants who populate the medieval “village” of Castleton, says the fair’s artist coordinator, Karen Cunningham.

“We try to be as historically correct as possible with our performers,” she says. “It’s the most fun you’ll ever have being educated.”

Back in his home port, Lutke, says strangers don’t always believe what he does in his spare time.

“You betcha, an honest-to-God pirate,” he reiterates. “We were a step ahead of Disney.”

Judging by the number of audience members who know every word of songs like “Old Dun Cow”, “The Night Pat Murphy Died”, and “The Derelict”, the Bilge Pumps have a dedicated fan base among Renaissance Faire junkies.

“Most of our screaming groupies are aware we’re just a bunch of idiots,” the soft-spoken Lutke jokes, sounding more like the mouthier Maroon. “Not very many people have the wherewithal or lack of self-respect to do what we do.”

The Bilge Pumps didn’t set sail seeking pirate booty. Lutke and his friends started out wandering the lanes of the Hawkwood Medieval Fantasy Faire in the Dallas area, singing just for fun. Before they knew it, they had a musical troupe – and their first gig, in February of 2000, at Mardi Gras in Galveston.

“It was two hours, in front of a festival that pulls in 200,000 people,” Lutke recalls. “We kind of jumped in with both feet.”

“We went with pirate music because we already knew pirate songs,” he adds. “We were around before Disney made (“The Pirates of the Carribean”) movie.”

Lutke says most of their performance is designed for fun, not art.



The Bilge Pumps – a troupe of pirate musicians from the Dallas area, will sail the fantasy seas of the Oklahoma Renaissance Faire weekend through May 22.

“People who come to our shows don’t want to sit there and watch us sing. It’s more comedy oriented – especially when we’re doing shows in 110 degree weather.”

On the other hand, Lutke admits, “The Dark Lady”, the story of a pirate captain and his one true love, is the group’s most requested song. “We do a handful of pretty stuff.”

Whatever they sing, the membership of the Bilge Pumps changes nearly every time they come ashore.

“We’re pretty stable right now,” Lutke says, “but we have more ex-members than members.” That ship’s list includes Squeegy the Cabin Boy, who went on to play Barney in the national touring production of the popular children’s show, and Kailyn the Gunner, who is now talent coordinator for the Louisiana Renaissance Festival in Hammond.

It’s one of the charms of the Renaissance festival circuit: Fairgoers never know who will show up where, doing what. A stage show at the Oklahoma Renaissance Faire features harpist Karen Troeh, better known to Kansas City Renaissance Festivalgoers as Her Majesty Queen Eleanor.

“When people come from Kansas City in character, they play as if I am the queen and they’ve caught me,” Troeh says with a chuckle. “The queen is actually of gypsy origin, you know! She would do that.”

Troeh, a middle-school music teacher during the week, says she enjoys just playing and singing, “but I would rather be the queen. It’s like being Mickey Mouse at Disneyland! You’re the one everyone wants to see.”

“It’s also a lot more restrictive and a lot more exhausting,” she admits. “Being a minstrel, I can run around by myself. I don’t have to be accompanied – and the costume is a lot less restrictive. I love the contrast!”

Fairgoers who have long enjoyed the Kansas City Renaissance Festival might also enjoy its smaller cousin. Troeh says she is often told that the Oklahoma Renaissance Faire “feels like Kansas City sis 15 years ago.” It seems smaller and more intimate, but it features many of the same acts and shows, along with the same dedication to patron interaction.

“This is my fourth year at Muskogee,” says Troeh, who has been the Queen of the Kansas City festival for three years. “It’s a little difficult for me to compare, because at Muskogee I’m a stage act, not just a character, this is a very different experience.

“As far as going to the fair, it seems to have a different ambiance because people in the community come there all year ‘round.”

The Castle of Muskogee, home to Oklahoma Renaissance Faire, is a permanent structure that is also used for weddings, receptions, proms, fireworks for the 4th of July, and a Halloween event, says Cunningham, who is also its general manager. The Renaissance Faire started 10 years ago with 13 vendors and has now grown to 100, she says.

“Last year, we had people visit from 47 states, plus we had calls from England to make arrangements to visit,” she says. “It’s international now.”

Lutke says Muskogee fair is the perfect place for his pirates to ply their trade. It’s close enough to Dallas for them to play the festival and still keep their jobs as aircraft mechanic, high school history teacher, stagehand, and professional student. They built their own ship-shaped stage last year, which suits the group perfectly. And, most importantly, it’s fun.

“All of us have 9-to-5 jobs, so we only want to do this when it’s fun,” Lutke says. “I can make more money at my day job. This is just an expensive hobby.”

For information on The Bilge Pumps, see www.thebilgepumps.com.