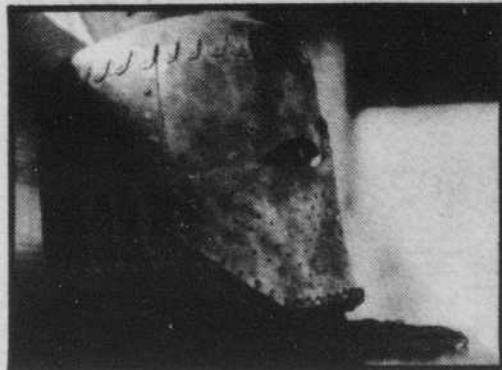




a new day for knights

I haven't seen Frank since the summer of 1974, the summer Nixon resigned. I met Frank through his daughter, an only child and a cripple. She lived with him and her mother in a crumbling house situated over an earthquake fault in Berkeley. There were a lot of cracks in the walls.

Frank, an electrical engineer, didn't have cash for repairs — he was out of work. His wife had recently found part-time work as a clerk. It was the first time she'd worked in years. She was nervous and downed valiums every so often.

For money I was picking fruit in the San Joaquin. When there was no work, I drove into Berkeley and crashed with Frank. He was a friendly guy — he had young men over for drinks and dinner all the time. Men like burnt-out, unemployed Yalies who were building concrete-hulled sailboats in which they intended to sail around the world. Men with strong fantasy lives.

Frank and I shared a love for Errol Flynn. Usually a reticent man, Frank enjoyed talking about Flynn. He was a real "man," said Frank, he would dive seventy feet from the top of his yacht's mast.

"He lived his life to the hilt," Frank told me. "When he died at the age of 51 and they did the autopsy, the doctors said he had the internal organs of a ninety-year-old man."

Once Frank and I went together to a San Francisco showing of the Thirties version of Robin Hood, starring Errol Flynn. We escaped, Frank and I, into a world of fair maidens, arrows true to the mark, and exquisite sword play, a world where the down-trodden triumph over the well-to-do forces of evil. When, in the climactic sword fight, Flynn runs Basil Rathbone through, Frank and I felt triumphant.

"The Sherwood Forest scenes were shot in a small park in California," Frank later told me.

Years later I am standing in a small park in Oregon — Willamette Park outside of Corvallis — watching Tom Binker don his armor beside his Volkswagen Beetle.

In the real world Tom, 28, is a carpet cleaner. In his spare time he crafts helmets, leg armor and protective padding for members of the Society for Creative Anachronism.

The Society is dedicated to perpetuating what was good about the Middle Ages —

inquisitions and plagues are not encouraged. The Society was founded 13 years ago in the Bay Area and now has about 15,000 registered members nationwide.

All members adopt at least one "persona." A persona is an invented role complete with name, occupation, and personal history. Appropriate costumes are worn to Society functions.

Occupations range from scholar to craftsman to wizard, but there seems to be a preponderance of nobility.

Persona or society names — for example, Ulfhedinn inn Vegfarandi, Anastasia Terrapinovana, Morgana de Toledo, Janet of Arden, Michael of Dragonswood — as well as personal histories are unique, since it is forbidden to base personae upon actual historical figures.

Tom Binker's Society name is Gerrick the Silent. Other Society men might be tarrying with fair maidens — delighted squeals issue intermittently from the woods — but Tom quietly concentrates on binding protective pads around his waist.

I talked to Tom over the phone a few days before. He says he's a science fiction nut, as many Society members are, and the Society is an outlet for his fantasies.

"My persona is a second or third son of a land baron from the 10th century and he's of Norman extraction," he says. "But I'm not heavily into my persona. Some people never stop being their persona."

The foam rubber lining inside his helmet is thick and chafing, so Tom twists his helm slowly down over his head and adjusts his strap. Then he takes his sword from a rack and picks his shield up from the ground.

The male nobles (and one of the females) are fond of fighting. There is going to be a War.

Tom's sword is a wood frame padded with thin foam rubber and wrapped in silver fabric tape. Flat, round, and one inch in diameter, the sword tip can't penetrate a visor screen. Tom's shield is made of plywood and is bordered with a slit bicycle tire.

Down from the field where Society members camped the night before, the battlefield is a section of a dirt road which runs through a sparsely-wooded meadow. A field marshal designates the road as a river and lays two ropes across it to denote a ford or bridge; it is never decided exactly which.

A fat friar divides the army of heavily armored knights into two sides, the Vikings

and the Saxons. The Saxons slip on blue and yellow tabards bearing a mercenary insignia — an S-shaped, back-biting snake winding through two parallel arrows which face in opposite directions, and form a dollar sign.

There are eight on a side. One of the Saxons is a woman. In the real world a book-binder, her society name is Miyamoto Tsukikage. She's a samurai, although now she's in full medieval armor. Earlier she exhibited her samurai sword to me. It's not a particularly good one, she says, the hilt is snakeskin. Her two fine swords are at home. They have more prestigious manta ray skin hilts.

Children and the other women, including a crowned princess, ensconce themselves on stool-size concrete road markers to one side of the "bridge." The friar positions three maidens in a grove of trees on the Vikings' side of the road and informs the Saxons it is their duty to rescue these maidens, who have been kidnapped.

"Women join the society for the most part because it gives them a chance to act like ladies for a change," Binker had said.

The friar sets the ground rules for the battle — if one is "killed" one falls off the bridge and is washed downstream, but a knight may return to the battlefield by leaving the stream past a pick-up truck and walking a prescribed route. He says the battle will begin in five minutes.

The friar fails to remind the combatants of the regular rules — a clean hit constitutes a kill, hits should be controlled and not below the knee, there is no hurling of projectiles allowed.

Suddenly, there's confusion. The Vikings have been sitting with their helmets off discussing strategy when the Saxons charge across the bridge and flail into the Viking ranks. Startled Vikings rise up and are beaten to the ground. Soon the Saxons have slayed every Norseman and run off to save the maidens. Pained Vikings vent mild curses.

"Damn it, we weren't ready. You said five minutes."

Arguments ensue about who was responsible for what, but eventually both sides regroup on opposite sides of the bridge. More attentive now, the friar, in the center of the road, blows a whistle and the Saxons and Vikings trundle across the bridge toward one another.

Shields overlap in front ranks, a Saxon pole axe pokes out at the Vikings. It's a strange and timeless moment the second before contact. The breath is sucked in, the eyes grow wide, the mouth feels dry, and the heartbeat quickens. The spirit soars with the

anticipation of triumph.

Thwack thwack thwack. Foam rubber padded swords pound armor. One expects to hear clanks or banks, not thwacks.

Knights thrash and thrash, are hit but don't volunteer to die.

A "javelin" arcs over the bridge. A Viking prince roars his displeasure, "What was that?!"

A halt to combat, an argument over rules. Then another clash is set up, begins.

The Saxons beat the Vikings back, the momentum of their charge hurls Vikings to the ground or against concrete markers. Metal crunches against gravel and rock as the Vikings are defeated.

Another clash. Some knights fall and float downriver, but others fail to recognize clean hits and the spectre of Death.

The Viking Prince yells, "Stop!" It's too hard to tell in the close quarters of the bridge if a hit is good, too exciting for some knights to even feel less than a rattling blow. One knight has already had the wind knocked out of him — the Prince has sensed that danger lies ahead if the bridge battles are continued.

h says the action is no good and after debate over who was to blame for the poor quality of the sport all knights repair to the campground where some engage in more spread out and civilized battles — melees.

The samurai, too upset at some of the Vikings to talk, broods upon a picnic table.

The Viking prince, his helm in his arms, complains to two knights that the sides had been badly drawn, too many of the over-enthusiastic members were placed on one side.

On the open field warriors hack at each other under the scrutiny of the friar. Gowned noble women sit on field chairs and laugh and applaud at the action. Harlequin heraldic banners hang from the trees, fires smolder by mountaineering and member-sewn pavilion tents. Children dart between compact cars and "boff" each other with padded weapons.

Leaving my automobile, I recall Errol Flynn's words, "If I've been anything, I hope I've been at least a dash of color in this prosaic world." And I cast one last, quick glance over my shoulder at the field and its dashes of color.

By William Kogut
Photos by Erich Boekelheide



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