

Back to the... Past?

Early Saturday morning I put the finishing touches on the packing, double check that my husband and I haven't forgotten anything, grab the map, and hop into our "time machine" for a week of relaxation away from the computers, phones and stresses of modern life. We're going back in time, or at least it feels that way. Our destination? The Middle Ages and Pennsic War, near the western edge of the fair Kingdom of Aethelmearc.

Pennsic War is a two-week camping event held every year in August by the Society for Creative Anachronism, the SCA. The SCA is a group of people who enjoy studying and recreating history prior to 1600, concentrating on Medieval Europe. Not only do we research and study medieval history, crafts, and sciences, but we also experience it directly through actually practicing what we learn. The SCA is comprised of a hierarchy of smaller, local groups spread across the United States and elsewhere in the World. All of these local groups have events and meetings that are not necessarily re-enactments of specific dates or locations. We try to recreate the atmosphere and feel of the Middle Ages through the arts, sciences, and social structures of the time period. Although almost all of these events have a fee to attend, you do not need to be a member of the SCA to participate and meetings are free as well as fun to attend.

The SCA and Pennsic War are a chance to learn new things, meet new people, and of course, go shopping. What started as a small weekend activity thirty years ago is not the SCA's largest event. Held in Pennsylvania, more than 12,000 people attended this year's event. It is nominally a series of battles between two kingdoms, but there are hundreds of classes offered on many different topics. Along with shopping, there are many opportunities for socializing, volunteering, dancing and other unique activities. Many of the attendees come from the surrounding states but some come from much farther away. This year I met people living in New Zealand and Australia. It's easy to find new friends who share your interests; for me that means spinning, embroidery, and gardening, to name a few.

After checking in at Pennsic, the first challenge was to find the friends that we were camping with since by the time I got there over 9,000 other people had already arrived and set up their camps. Having a general idea of where my friends were supposed to be as well as a map of the site, it did not take very long to find them and unload the car. I greeted old friends and started to set up our tent as my husband went to park the "time machine". I, like all other SCA participants, shed my modern persona in favor of someone who could have lived in the Middle Ages. Members of the SCA, unlike some other re-enactment organizations, do not re-enact a specific person who really did exist in history. Rather, we are encouraged to make up a person who could very well have existed in the Middle Ages. So when I entered Pennsic, I left Autumn behind and became Diane de Arden, a fourteenth century English woman living near Arden Forest in Warwickshire, England. Others around me became tenth century Vikings, Byzantine noblewomen, and Elizabethan era merchants. Often you don't know someone's real

name, their profession, or sometimes even where they live, but with a shared interest in studying and experiencing history there is still plenty to talk about.

During the week, I went to classes like "Documenting Your Spinning", "15th Century German Counted Thread Embroidery", "Period Comfort Items", and "Medieval Garden Design." Every day I had the opportunity to go to more classes, presentations, and workshops that I had hours in the day. A wide variety of classes were offered in topics ranging from basic sewing skills to medieval zoology and pottery. There was something of interest for everyone, and many of the skills learned at these SCA events can be taken back into the modern life.

My whole time was not spent just going to workshops and classes. Did I mention that shopping was also a popular activity? With over two hundred merchants selling their wares, there were plenty of things to look at and buy. On my numerous trips to the merchants I bought camel hair and silk for spinning yarn and embroidery thread, books on spinning, weaving, and board games, a portrait as a gift for a friend, and a wax tablet to write notes on. A person could come to Pennsic with nothing except their wallet and sufficient money and could buy everything they would need - clothes, tent, and cooking utensils – to become a resident of this medieval town.

Camp was not without its amenities. Each morning I would purchase the morning newspaper from the children paid to run through the camps, and I would plan, or at least try to plan, my day. One or two classes in the morning, one in the afternoon, shopping, time to visit friends that I had not seen for years, and more shopping. In the evening after dinner I would go walking through the site as the sun dipped lower in the sky. After dark all of the merchants' tents were lit by candlelight and the roads by torches. The modern style tents would fade into the background and Pennsic became a medieval city. I never knew what I would find around the next corner on these walks; a friend I hadn't seen in years, a solitary musician playing the harp on a moonlit bench, a group of revelers looking for the dance.

When the end of the week came it was odd to be dressing in modern clothing with a watch and the other electronics that has so recently been a part of the distant future. We packed up the medieval clothing, the shopping purchases, and all of our other camping supplies. I said goodbye to all of the new friends I made and the old friends I had reconnected with, making sure that we had ways to stay in touch until next year. In the meantime there are plenty of other medieval events, meetings, and workshops to enjoy throughout the year.