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COMMUNITY Page

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Renaissance Fest boosts marketing to bolster crowds

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
 Special to The Champion

Milton's newest tourist attraction, and its host, will enjoy seconds this summer. King Henry VIII has grown tired of first love Catharine, and has begun courting his soon-to-be second wife Lady Anne Boleyn.

His royal highness' domain — 16th century England or the Ontario Renaissance Festival, depending on how you look at it — meanwhile will be enjoying its second full season amid the local tourist community.

Operators of the Eighth Line site, the first full-scale park of its kind in Canada, are hoping for a much better turnout than that of their inaugural year.

If increased lead time and pre-season optimism are any indication of what's to come, they'll certainly get their wish when festivities begin next month.

"Last spring was one of the worst ever in terms of weather, and getting the festival constructed by our deadline was a nightmare," said director of operations Marc Vaillancourt, who runs the Ontario Renaissance Festival with general manager Adam Smith. "The weather has cooperated this spring and we've been out waking up the site almost every day. Things are 100 per cent better than they were this time last year."

The festival catered to roughly 25,000 patrons last summer, only half of projected attendance levels. This was due in large part, Mr. Vaillancourt explained, to a late start.

Having been given the green-light in late January, festival operators were unable to prepare an effective advertising campaign, which would have included exposure in numerous seasonal and tourist magazines.

Increased public information

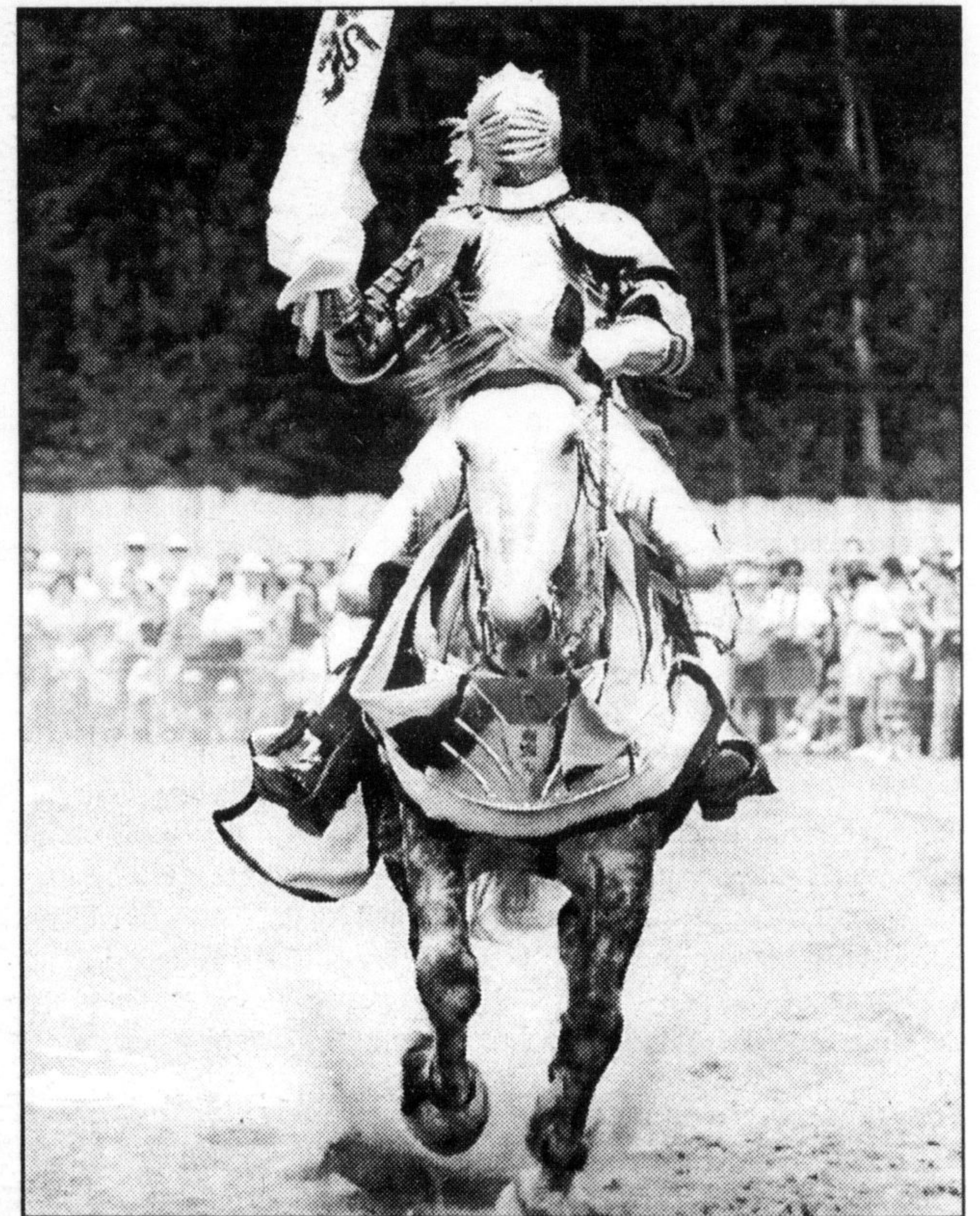
Mr. Vaillancourt and Mr. Smith have had more than enough time to do just that this past winter, as well as secure air and screen time with radio and television commercials. "One of our biggest sources of exposure will still be through Metroland community newspapers. A strong GTA (Greater Toronto Area) visitor base is very important to us," Mr. Vaillancourt said. "We'd love to get the 50,000 visitors we initially projected last spring, but we're shooting for 35,000."

He said the festival will proceed along the same time-line as King Henry VIII's life, more specifically surrounding the lives of his handful of wives. This, he added, will give visitors something new each year.

"Fortunately, he took enough wives to give us new material for quite a while. When we hit number five, we'll start all over again."

Plans are also underway to provide patrons with more shows this summer. Construction is nearly complete on a full-scale Shakespearean-style global theatre which will house at least three shows a day. In-house productions of Romeo and Juliet and Cyrano de Bergerac will also be presented.

In addition, the festival will feature a new sword fighting performance — to complement afternoon jousting competition — as



File photos by GRAHAM PAINE

Good, old fashioned fun for the whole family dominates at the Ontario Renaissance Festival in Milton. Jugglers, artists, and various delectables vie for the visitors attention. The highlight is a joust between armored knights.

well as more food and craft vendors, including a glass-blowing artist.

"We'll still have many of last year's talented performers and all of our tasty treats like the smoked turkey leg and the steak on a stake," said Mr. Vaillancourt, who is currently interviewing students for summer employment. "The word is really getting around about the festival. The other day I talked to a lady from Nova Scotia who's coming west this summer and is interested in

visiting us.

"We're very excited about the way things are shaping up."

The Ontario Renaissance Festival's six-weekend season starts July 12. The site will operate Saturdays and Sundays (plus the Civic Holiday Monday) from 10:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Admission will be \$14.95 for adults, \$13.50 for seniors and \$7.95 for children.

Advance tickets — with significant savings — are available by calling 1(800) 734-3779.

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