

Arts & Entertainment



Renaissance Festival's season opens tomorrow

Milton-based theme park now in its eighth season

By **STEPHANIE THIESSEN**
The Champion

It was like a page straight out of a fairy tale. The fully-armoured knight got down on one knee and proposed to his girlfriend before an audience of assorted medieval characters.

He was, in every sense of the word, her knight in shining armour.

This brave knight — who proposed last year — is just one of thousands of yearly visitors who travel to Milton's Ontario Renaissance Festival, hoping to catch a bit of its magic.

"There's an element of kid in all of us," said Tom Plott, entertainment director at the Ontario Renaissance Festival. "Everybody wants to make believe."

It's safe to say that at the Ontario Renaissance Festival, which begins its eighth season tomorrow, you never know what you're going to get, Mr. Plott said. If it's not a wedding proposal, it might be the village mayor seeking your opinion, or a coy pirate attempting to lure you into his evil scheme.

Each year, the Ontario Renaissance Festival delights the young and young-at-heart as they step into the 16th century village of Trillingham and are greeted by Tudor architecture, Renaissance music and smells of period food wafting through the trees.

The festival has gotten bigger each year, Mr. Plott said, with 58,000 visitors last summer.

For each of the past three years, the festival's attendance jumped by 20 per cent, he said. He added that it was the only renaissance festival in North America to show an increase in attendance last year.

"We're not re-living history, we're celebrating it," Mr. Plott said, adding with a chuckle, "We don't give up modern conveniences like personal hygiene."

Each day begins with the opening gate ceremony, which introduces this year's pirate theme and sees villagers welcome Queen Elizabeth I to their village.

Throughout the day, the seven stages feature entertainment of all kinds. As visitors walk through the village, they see colourful characters and performances by magicians, jugglers, musicians and singers. For kids, there are games, crafts, a children's play area and free pony rides.

The Ontario Renaissance Festival features North America's largest outdoor jousting arena, showcasing full-armoured combat jousting.

"Our knights are in 100-pound suits of steel armour, and they're really jousting (not acting). If they get knocked off, they're really knocked off," Mr. Plott said. "Our difference is that we're not choreographed."

The festival also features more than 100 crafters displaying their



File photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Jousting knights on horse back is always one of the highlights of the Ontario Renaissance Festival, which opens for another season tomorrow.

renaissance-style wares.

Of course, nobody can last long at the festival without having a watering mouth, Mr. Plott said.

"Don't come looking for hamburgers and hotdogs — you won't find them," he said, listing menu items such as turkey legs, steak and fish and chips.

The festival has three taverns featuring ales, ciders, and other drinks suitable for a hot summer day.

Mr. Plott said that at the festival, everyone becomes a kid at heart. Adults who have always dreamed of being pirates or knights can fulfill their desires for a day.

Since the festival is entirely outdoors, Mr. Plott urged visitors to dress appropriately for the weather.

Chris Howard, who grew up in Milton and graduated from E.C. Drury High School, has been involved with the Ontario Renaissance Festival since its inception — in charge of games for the first year, and then a cast member. This year, Mr. Howard has

been cast as a privateer as well as Iago, the village wild man.

"This is the most enjoyable performance work I've ever done," said Mr. Howard, who now resides in Burlington. "Every morning I get into character and I live that character all day long."

Mr. Howard's sister, 18-year-old Kimberley Howard, who graduated this year from E.C. Drury, has also joined the cast this year, following in her big brother's footsteps.

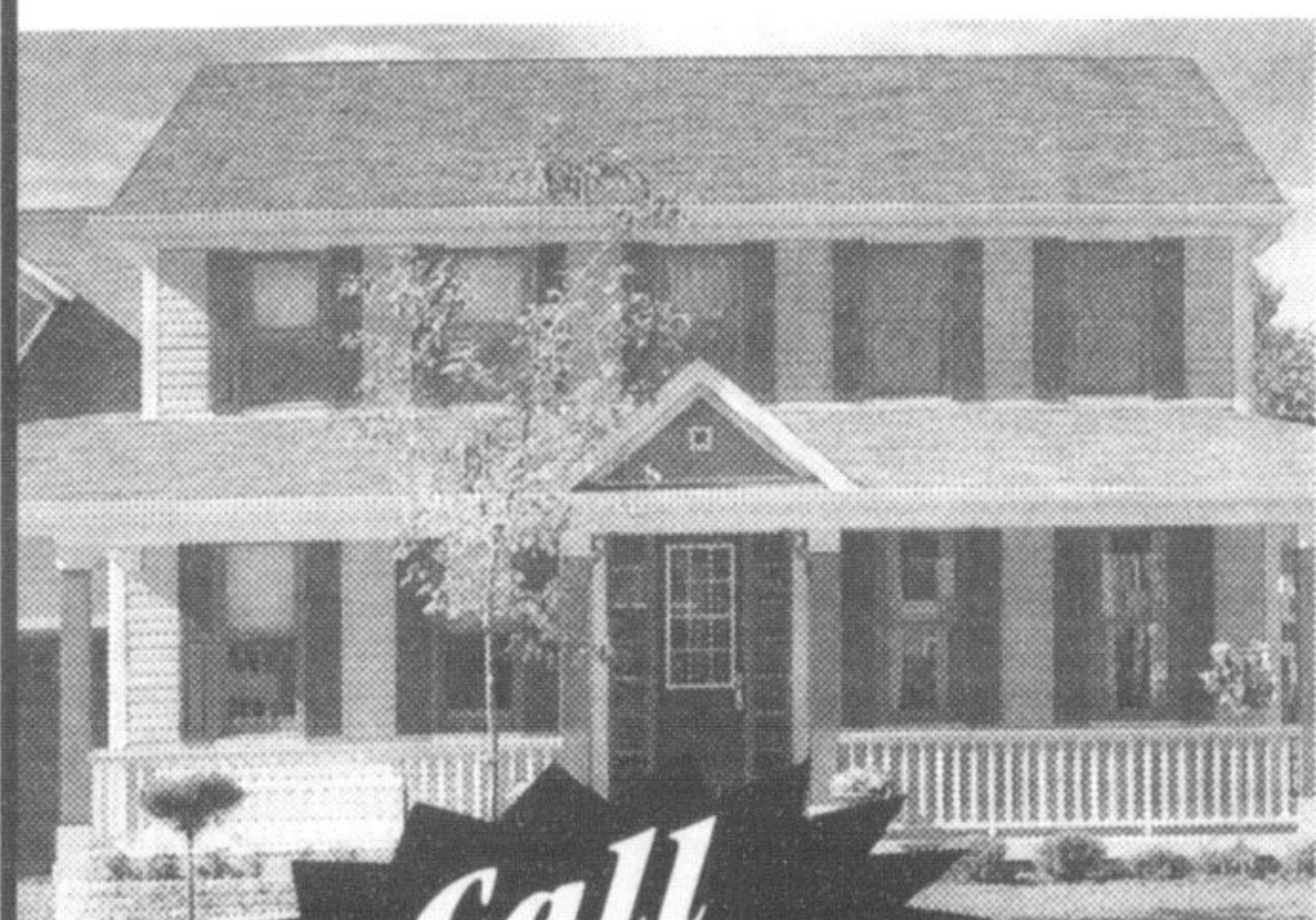
The Ontario Renaissance Festival is open every weekend from 10:30 a.m. until 7 p.m. rain or shine until September 1. Admission costs \$16.95 for adults and \$8.95 for children aged 7 to 15 years. Seniors admission costs \$15.50. This weekend, children under 11 will be admitted free. The festival is located east of Trafalgar Road, on Eighth Line between Derry and Britannia roads in Milton. For more information, call 1-800-734-3779 or visit www.rennfest.com.

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