

November 16, 2006

Happily ever after: For some couples, fall season means a Renaissance wedding

Annual festival offers various medieval themes to mark marriage event

By LAURA ISENSEE

Dressed in a black tunic with silver embroidery, M.J. Jones greeted his wedding guests.

In one hand, he held a huge mug of beer. At his hip, a sword.

Then, heralded by a bagpiper, his bride, Tracey Leyendecker of Magnolia, approached in a horse-drawn carriage.

"Three cheers for the bride: Hip, Hip, Huzzah," her attendants shouted.

Her bridesmaids — or ladies-in-waiting — had donned silver princess gowns and purple floral wreaths in their hair. Her flower girls flitted in purple fairy costumes.

Another herald of trumpets sounded as Tracey passed under an eight-sword arch into the Romanesque temple at the Renaissance Festival.

It was just the beginning of Tracey and M.J.'s themed wedding at the 24th annual Texas Renaissance Festival.

"We're big Renaissance Festival geeks. We come here every weekend and we go to fairs all over the county. There was no other option. Her dream wedding was a Renaissance wedding and so was mine," Jones said.

They are not alone. Every year, dozens of couples arrange themed weddings at the festival, choosing from package deals costing up to \$5,000, which includes a horse-drawn carriage, sword arch, cake and reception for 50 people.

By the time the interactive theme park and fair wraps up Nov. 18-19, Tracey and M.J. will be one of more than 40 couples who tied the knot at the festival.

'Fairy-tale wedding'

Started by George Coulam in 1975, the festival re-creates a 16th century village, full of princes, peasants, poppers and pickpockets, in Plantersville near Magnolia.

About 18 years ago, the festival began to hold weddings, too, after a couple that met at the festival decided to get married in the same place, said Kim

Allen-Dickey, vendor coordinator and wedding coordinator for the festival.

"It blossomed from there," she said.

Over the years, the festival has seen its number of weddings increase consistently, about 10 percent a year, and draws couples from Texas and as far as Utah and Canada.

The festival has built venues for the weddings. The most popular are the King's Chapel, a wooden-frame and open-air chapel covered with fresh ivy every year, and the Roman Basilica, a temple with urns and columns. Given the open-air venues, the weddings often meld with the rest of the festival. Sounds of vendors and bagpipes mix with the vows

BOOMING INDUSTRY

The \$100 billion wedding industry is still growing, according to a recent market report by **The Mercanti Group**, a financial advisory firm. Here are some of its findings:

- Average wedding cost has almost doubled since 1990, from \$15,000 to more than \$27,000.
- More than 44,000 weddings take place each weekend in the United States, or 2.3 million each year.
- The average bride is 27 years old and her fiancé is 29. Their average household income is \$74,000.
- The typical engagement lasts 17 months, compared to 11 months in 1990.
- Nationwide, couples spend an additional \$80 billion during their first year of marriage on automotive, financial services and home-related purchases.

Source: **The Mercanti Group**

and festivalgoers stop to watch, too, especially when the bride travels by carriage through the market on the way to the ceremony.

"It's an absolute fairy-tale wedding," Allen-Dickey said.

Wedding ceremony details, like 15th and 16th century minstrel music, and even reception menu (think turkey legs) reflect the Renaissance and medieval theme of the entire festival.

"No 'Here Comes the Bride,'" Allen-Dickey said.

Spirit of festival

The festival even has its own minister, John Jones, who has performed about 450 weddings since he started about 10 years ago.

Ordained by the Universal Life Church, Jones dons his Archbishop of Canterbury miter and robes to perform either a nondenominational or traditional ceremony.

Although a longtime festival character, Jones said he tries not to act when performing a ceremony.

"I don't try to do any silly accent. I do try to be in the language, with the thee's and thou's," Jones said.

Even though the wedding packages are very streamlined, there are some variations to the ceremony couples can add in, such as a shared chalice drink or the groom kneeling with a sword to say his vows.

"We do everything we can to make it like happily ever after," Jones said.

Growing business

Allen-Dickey said themed weddings are popular because the streamlined package deals make the wedding easy for the bride, who only has to worry about costumes and the marriage license.

"We make it easy. Most brides nowadays work a 40-hour-week schedule. They don't have time to taste cakes with five different bakers or see flowers at five different floral shops," she said. "With this they get a package deal.

Nationwide, weddings make up a \$100 billion dollar industry and the average cost of a wedding has almost doubled since 1990, from \$15,000 to more than \$27,000, according to a recent market study by **The Mercanti Group.**

"Weddings are big business for us," Allen-Dickey said. She said while revenue from the festival itself is generated only in the fall, bookings for weddings bring in revenue all year long.

Couples considering a themed wedding should discuss how much they want to incorporate the theme, whether it will be reflected just in the decor, or throughout the whole wedding, said Michelle Rogers, former owner of Champelles Event Planning and cur-

rently the senior director of special events with B&A Hospitality Group in The Woodlands.

"It's really as much information and resources as the bride and groom can do to complete their own vision," Rogers said.

Neutral site

For Conroe couple Charles Kivlehen and Jessica Smith Kivlehen, it was important to find a place different, meaningful and also neutral as their families have different religious backgrounds.

Both Renaissance festival aficionados, the couple chose to marry in a flower and statue garden on the festival grounds, a decision first met by hesitation from the bride's family.

"He and I are both somewhat dramatic people. We like doing stuff that involves acting, and we like the Renaissance Festival a lot," Jessica said.

Also, the wedding was a way to honor her Irish and Scottish heritage, Jessica said.

Like many couples, Jessica and Charles chose to wear period costumes. So, on their wedding day this November, he dressed in Renaissance boots and a doublet with Chinese dragon print and she wore a corset and cloud-colored princess gown decorated with roses and the same Chinese dragon print. The costumes cost about \$600 each.

Sometimes couples match their wedding outfits with a particular theme of the festival, Allen-Dickey said. On a Scottish weekend, many grooms don kilts; on the pirate-themed weekend, groomsmen have worn pirate outfits, she said.

Happily ever after

At the Renaissance Festival, many guests enjoyed attending a nontraditional ceremony.

"I thought it was really neat and different. Weddings have become all the same. You've been to one wedding, you've been to all. So it was kind of fun for a change," said Cheryl Townsley, who came dressed as a gypsy to a recent wedding at the festival.

A themed wedding is exciting and becoming more accepted, said Danita Gross, who attended her great-niece Mary Marrs' wedding at the festival. Marrs decided to marry at the festival in part because her parents had their honeymoon there.

"I think it's becoming more and more a fun thing to do," Gross said.

Still, there should be a balance between enjoying the celebration and respecting the commitment in a marriage, said Ken Gross, Danita's husband.

"I think you have to be careful about being too flip," Ken said.