

The Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks

Abbot's Report

Winter Solstice, 2009

Philosophical Facebook Fantasies

Facebook is the world's largest Internet social networking site. More than 300 million people world wide are registered on Facebook and a half a million more sign up every single day. Facebook has the potential to bring about *Peace On Earth*. It is far more difficult to make war against people we know than it is to make war against people we know nothing about. Increased communication throughout the world is demonstrating that most people are good people. Once everyone realizes that most people prefer peace to war, it will be far easier to identify the members of the small militaristic minority who cause wars to happen. The military industrial complex has taken control of mainstream newspapers and broadcasting outlets but there's a good chance that they didn't see the Internet coming. If you don't have a Facebook account yet, please try to get one. Unfortunately, more than half of our Order remains disconnected from the World Wide Web. Much of the news included in this *Abbot's Report* is stolen directly from Facebook. Although printed *Abbot's Reports* may seem redundant, they are not yet entirely superfluous.

Brother DaVine Appears at the White House!!!

We seldom hear from the somewhat demure and illusive Brother DaVine (Priscilla Stephan.) However, when she hobnobs with the President of the United States, its difficult for her to remain hidden, although she does so far better than



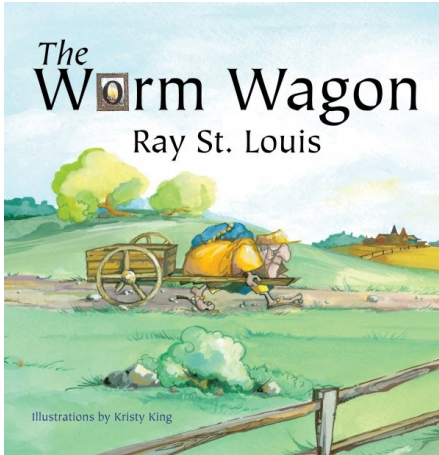
most. Last October, Priscilla visited the White House in Washington, D.C. to attend a Halloween event. We don't know for sure what she may have said to the President but we can tell by the curious expression on his face that he definitely took notice of her.

Brother Can-You-Spare-a-Dime Almost Dies!!!

Brother Can-You-Spare-a-Dime (Ray St. Louis) has been having a rough year. Earlier this Spring, he lost part of a thumb when he was viciously attacked by an errant power tool. Not to be dissuaded, earlier this week, he was busy organizing belt sander races in his barn. This, in spite of the fact that two weeks earlier, he had been hours away from having a serious heart attack! After suffering chest pains for three days at the beginning of December, Ray finally decided that he needed to call a doctor. The doctor told him to proceed immediately to the Emergency Room. He was admitted to the cardiac unit where they found that his right cardiac artery was 99% blocked. Ray stayed awake while the doctors installed a stent in his heart, and eliminated the blockage. Two days later, he was back at the Blue Moon Monastery watching the Florida Gators play football on TV. Vince Carr, the new General Manager of the New York Renaissance Faire in Tuxedo, had a similar procedure performed this Summer.

Four Guys From Minnesota Can Write!!!

Brother Can-You-Spare-a-Dime has one of those over achieving Type A personalities. When he's not busy building thrilling rides and giant slides or hauling them across the country or having emergency heart surgery, he stays busy writing newspaper columns and books. His most recent book tells a story called *The Worm Wagon*. It is beautifully



illustrated by Brother Sister Frances (Kristy King) and it is soon to be published. His first book, *The Road Dog Diaries*, was a semi fictional account of the adventures of an intrepid stilt dancer who performed at various renaissance festivals throughout the United States. Another Minnesotan author, Mark Sieve, has also published a book detailing his life on the Renaissance Festival circuit. Mark was and is one half of a comedy sword fighting duo who call themselves Puke and Snot. After the recent death of his partner Joe Kudla, Mark wrote a book telling of their lives together. The book is entitled *Call Me Puke: A Life on the Dirt Circuit* and is available at Amazon.com. Brother Clevenstein (Clevenger Peters) is also from Minnesota and he is also writing a memoir about his thirty five year career in renaissance festivals which started at The Minnesota Renaissance Festival in 1973. That was the same year that Smee and Blogg, the Singing Executioners, made their debut at the same show. Brother Mutha (Al Olson,) also

known as Smee, has been working on the definitive history of Renaissance Festivals in America for several years now. He recently asked our Abbot to write a history of The Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks, perhaps to be included or excerpted in his book. Our Abbot made an attempt to comply and the result is presented here:

The History of The Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks

For better or for worse, the history of the Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks, in its early years, is the history of its Abbot. That's me. Donald C. Heller, better known as Brother Donald. Whether my history has been determined by choice or by destiny is a question as old as history itself. For the most part, I feel like my life has been like that of a fallen leaf. I have gone where the wind has blown me. Dropped into a mud puddle, the puddle grew into a pond and flowed into a stream and I have been obliged to go with the flow, down the path of least resistance.

There have been some recognizable landmarks along the way. As I passed them, I never perceived them as turning points. They never seemed like moments of import. Our history only becomes visible from a distance. From this distance, I can look back and see some of those turning points now. I was a student going to college on the GI Bill in Oneonta, New York. I had a paperback book. I don't remember its title or its author or much of its content. I only remember the picture on its final page. It was a photograph of a monk, walking through the woods. I thought to myself, yes, that was the way to live.

A few years later, in 1978, my friend, Tom Helsher, offered me an opportunity to sell candles at my first renaissance faire in Sterling, New York. My choice of costume and character was obvious. It was a foregone conclusion. There was no thought or decision making involved. I became a monk. The next year, in 1979, I returned to the Sterling Renaissance Faire as an associate of the Wylde Gaming Corporation, operating a game of Nynne Pins. When Sterling's season ended, I traveled to the Texas Renaissance Festival where I began my career as a story teller. I told stories at five renaissance faires in 1980. In 1981, Brother Pompadour (Dennis Cooper) and I had our first monastic Weenie Roast during the inaugural season of Scarborough Faire. At the end of that first difficult year in Waxahachie, Texas, Dennis acquired the Wylde Gaming Corporation from its owner, Norman Wylde. He renamed the corporation and we packed the knives, axes and arrows into his Volkswagen Beetle and we hauled them to Colorado where Squires Pendragon Games made its debut. One day, we were walking along a path in the woods to our campsite at the Colorado Renaissance Festival where we had pitched our tents. I can remember the exact spot and the exact moment when the name came to me, more like a memory than like an idea. Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks. Soon after, Dennis and I went to the public library in Castle Rock where we found a dictionary entry that informed us that yes, indeed, "scurrilious" was an archaic form of the word "scurrilous." We looked up a few Bible verses having to do with forgiveness and we wrote an indulgence, a document which forgave the bearer for every sin he had ever committed. Marilyn Marzella did the calligraphy for us and Brother Pompadour pawned my high school ring to have the indulgences printed. That was the first time the name of The Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks appeared in print. Brother J. Sparrow painted a sign that we posted to direct people down that path to our tents. The sign said, "Scurrilious Monks" and it now hangs in the Junque Shoppe at Scarborough Faire. Little landmarks along the way.

From the beginning, there had always been contemplation and speculation concerning monks and monasticism and monasteries even if I was the only one doing the speculating. I wondered why we had all been drawn into a business that was focused upon re creating life in

sixteenth century England. It occurred to me that the marriage of King Henry VIII and his second wife, Ann Boleyn, marked the beginning of the decline of monasticism as a powerful institution. Up until that time, the Catholic Church and its monks and monasteries had dominated European life since the beginning of the Dark Ages. Monasteries were the primary centers of learning and culture for all people apart from the nobility. Priests and Abbots and Monks had provided the moral compass which had guided society for centuries. King Henry VIII put an end to that by taking over the Catholic church and all of its monasteries. Monks were killed and monasteries were destroyed or sold or given away to wealthy Dukes and Nobles all over England. Four or five centuries later, much closer to our own life times, something similar had happened in Asia. The Communists in China, under Mao Tse-Tung, had destroyed the Buddhist monasteries which had dominated life in China and Tibet for hundreds of years. Thousands of monks had been killed. All of those Buddhist monks had very strong beliefs concerning reincarnation. I wondered if they were gathering together in the great beyond along with all of the monks who had been murdered in the sixteenth century and throughout history to make a comeback of gigantic proportions. It was conceivable that monasticism was an integral part of human society that would always re emerge and come back and become more powerful than it had been before. Perhaps we had been drawn back to redo the sixteenth century because that was the time when Western Civilization had gone wrong. It is interesting to note that at the time of his death in 2009, Brother Pompadour, the co founder of the Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks, had spent most of the last eleven years of his life in the Far East, deeply immersed in the Buddhist religion.

The year we printed the indulgences in Colorado, 1981, was a pivotal year for the Order, for its Abbot and for renaissance faires in general. I told stories at seven different renaissance faires that year. I had traveled with different people in different vehicles and I had lived in a tent everywhere I went. Near the end of that year, I was hitch hiking down Texas State highway 105, carrying a flat tire that I was trying to find a replacement for. I got a ride from Capt'n Joe Babcock who took me to an auto salvage yard where I found a used tire and a 1965 Chevrolet school bus as well. That bus with its distinctive back porch, was to become my mobile home and monastery for the next fifteen years. I had met the soon to be Brother Capt'n Joe earlier that year at the first annual Scarborough Faire and I ended up spending my first of several winters in Plantersville on property he owned less than ten miles from the Texas Renaissance Festival. By the time I bought the bus, I had a pretty good view of the big picture. I had seen all of the biggest shows east of the Rocky Mountains. At the time, they were in Texas, Minnesota, Maryland, Colorado, Kansas and Wisconsin. At the same time, smaller shows were growing quickly in Michigan, New York, Florida, Massachusetts, and Texas.

Every one of those shows had its own core group of local artists, craftspeople, food vendors, administrators and grounds people. They all worked and played together for six or eight weeks every year. Everyone was sorry when their festival season ended and looked forward to the time when it would come around again the next year. All renaissance festivals depended heavily upon volunteer labor. Promoters always took advantage of the camaraderie generated by the participants to keep those who made little or no money coming back year after year. Invariably, they said that the people who worked at their faire were just like a big happy family. It was true then and it remains true to this day.

I was more interested in the people who traveled from one Renaissance Faire to another. These were people who did not mourn the ending of a festival. They simply packed up their wares and their belongings and traveled to another renaissance faire in another state. They were hardy individuals who were content to live in tents or trailers or buses or shops and they were not afraid to hit the open road several times a year. Unlike circus or carnival workers who traveled together as a group, renaissance festival professionals were more likely to travel independently or with their families and their paths usually diverged at the end of each festival. There was a different kind of camaraderie that existed in this unaffiliated group. Upon parting, we never knew when or if we might meet again. We learned to avoid long emotional good byes when we discovered that we would often run into the same people we had just parted with a week later, at another festival a thousand miles away. Friends would gather together in the Spring in Florida and might not see each other again until they met in the fall in Texas. Or people would meet in Minnesota and they might not see each other again until years later when they met again in Colorado. Unexpected reunions in diverse places became one of the primary fringe benefits of the renaissance festival lifestyle.

Most of these friendships were casual but some were precious. The fragility of these valuable bonds became the impetus for the growth of The Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks. I began bestowing monk hoods upon renaissance festival professionals who I didn't want to lose touch with. For the most part, they were artists who created beautiful products or entertainers who had unusual skills or chefs who prepared delicious foods or people who simply had fascinating or charismatic personalities.

I set about collecting the people I would want to have around me at an ideal festival and people I wouldn't mind growing old with. At a relatively young age, I was imagining what our future might be like. It seemed unlikely that I would ever be rich. Amassing money never seemed like a worthwhile goal. Whenever I managed to collect a bit, it seemed to cause me problems. Collecting friends seemed more sensible than amassing wealth. But poverty can be inconvenient in one's old age. Instead of spending my golden years in a Veteran's Administration hospital, surrounded by old soldiers telling war stories, I thought that it would be more pleasant to live out my final days in the company of other people who had shared my unusual renaissance festival lifestyle. Those outside of that group could never conceive of what we had experienced. Even today, when we tell people that we work at renaissance faires, many look at us as if we are somehow insane or at best, feeble minded. Scurrilious Monks might not do well thrown in with the general population in retirement homes. It would be better if we could gather together in monasteries. That way, when we ramble on about the old days, we will be conversing with people who might

have some vague notion of what we are talking about.

In 1988, The Benevolent Order was transformed into a much larger organization. After having performed as a storyteller during the first seven years of Scarborough Faire in Waxahachie, Texas, I opted, instead, to spend the merry month of May at the much newer Georgia Renaissance Faire south of Atlanta, Georgia. The Order had sponsored Weenie Roasts during all of those early years at Scarborough Faire and May 18, 1988 was the first day that we held concurrent Weenie Roasts in different states at the same time. I appointed more than twenty new monks that day. To mark the occasion, I wrote my first *Abbot's Report* which appeared in the final issue of a renaissance festival publication called *The Don Juan and Miguel News*. *The Don Juan and Miguel News* went on to become *Uproots* and the *Abbot's Report* went on to become an independent publication which soon began appearing in Scurrilious Monks' mailboxes twice a year near the time of the winter and summer solstices. The Benevolent Order has continued to sponsor Weenie Roasts at renaissance faires at various locations across the United States every year since 1981.

Although personal wealth seemed unlikely for me, corporate wealth seemed like a more viable possibility. I knew early on that I would need to insulate myself from the the money that we would need to build larger monasteries by incorporating the Benevolent Order. That was more easily said than done. I needed a permanent address and for an entertainer who makes a marginal living traveling about from one renaissance festival to another, a permanent address is not always an easy thing to come by. In The Summer Solstice *Abbot's Report* from 1998, I reported that I was staying in a campground in Southwestern Missouri, looking for a piece of land to buy. I ended up buying three acres near Urbana, Missouri. The same *Abbot's Report* announced the death of my father. I inherited some clothes and some tools and a bit of intelligence from my father but no money. I cannot, however, be certain that the two events were unrelated.

Early in 1991, Brother Can-You-Spare-a-Dime (Ray St. Louis,) Brother Oh, Brother (David Ballard) and Ras Brother Poppa (Jerry Lee) banded together and bought several acres of land near Alachua, Florida. I have always maintained that anywhere I am living is a monastery but The Blue Moon Monastery and Primate Research Center is widely acknowledged to be the Benevolent Order's first permanent monastery.

The Summer Solstice *Abbot's Report* from the year 2000 announced that The Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks had been incorporated as a non profit corporation in the State of Missouri on March 22, 2000. The *Abbot's Report* seemed to come to life along with the corporation when color pictures first appeared in that issue. It also featured a report from Brother Merlin (Bill Palmer) announcing his last season as a magician and wizard at the Texas Renaissance Festival. In his report, Brother Merlin related some of his personal experiences with Father Sam who had also been a mainstay at the Texas Renaissance Festival. The previous *Abbot's Report*, from the winter of 1999, had quoted an article called "Felonious Monk" from the Magazine *Texas Monthly*. The article had told how Father Sam, the Abbot of The Christ of the Hills Monastery in Blanco, Texas had been convicted of crimes and fined ten million dollars and sentenced to serve ten years in prison. I had been reminded that being the Abbot of a religious order associated with renaissance faires could be a very risky business. On December 3, 2002, the Internal Revenue Service granted The Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks tax exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

Since that time, my dreams of building monasteries adjacent to renaissance festivals have proceeded steadily even though they sometimes seem to be progressing at a snail's pace. Because of the far flung nature of our membership, it seemed to me that our monasteries would have to be designed in cyber space before we could start cementing stones together. Brother Geek (Joni Massengale) designed and built our website, BOOSM.org, sometime in 2002. BOOSM is, of course, an anagram for Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks. Although it has a bulletin board where monks can post messages, the web site has not yet become the forum we need to discuss our monastery building projects. In 2008, Brother Costello (David Roe) created a BOOSM Facebook group which works better for discussions but we have still not formulated concrete building proposals.

Back in 2004, I asked Brother Francis (David Doyle,) who has experience in city planning, to find out who owned a vacant piece of property adjoining the Texas Renaissance Festival. He found out that the 78 acre parcel was owned by Thomas Tucker. Upon further investigation, I found that Thomas Tucker, a former machinist and jazz musician, had died only a couple of months earlier in California at the age of 82. The coincidence seemed like destiny. The Benevolent Order's Board of Trustees agreed to try to acquire the property and to start formulating building plans. All of our inquiries to the heirs of Thomas Tucker went unanswered and at about the same time, I found myself no longer able to secure employment at any renaissance festival in Texas. With George W. Bush in the White House, the political atmosphere in Texas seemed toxic. Those plans faltered and are currently sitting on a back burner.

In 2006, soon to become Brother Felonious Monk (Di Taylor) and her husband, Charles, formed a non profit organization, Historic Arts Presentations, in the State of Missouri. They bought 100 acres of land south of Marshfield, Missouri and they created the White Hart Renaissance Faire. After its first year, Charles Taylor died of cancer and his wife was left to carry on alone. I was employed at the White Hart Renaissance Faire as a storyteller during the first four years of its operation. Relatively speaking, its a tiny little faire. It was able to attract 700 people on its best day and that was during its first year. In comparison, The Texas Renaissance Festival recently drew more than 37,800 people on the Friday after Thanksgiving of 2009. NASA has a motto for designing the vessels they use for space exploration. Its K.I.S.S.—Keep it simple, stupid. It occurs to me that the same motto might apply well to the construction of a monastery. As I write, in 2009, The Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks is in negotiations with Historic Arts Presentations. We have been offered a ninety nine year lease on a parcel of land adjacent to The White Hart Renaissance Faire at a very attractive price.

The history of The Benevolent Order of Scurrilious Monks has been a colorful and exciting one, filled with more ups and downs than can possibly be related in an article of this size. There is no reason to believe that its future will be any different.