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# The knights of the around here table

**ETOBICOKE** -- Just beyond the parents cheering on their young hurdlers and sprinters, and the buzz of someone's remote-control car in Centennial Park on Saturday, May 7, the thunk of wood meeting metal cuts through the bright afternoon air. The grass is strewn with armour and weaponry -- full-face helmets, wooden swords, shields, metallic kneecaps, body sheathing.

Whatever isn't on the ground adorns warrior Vikings and Celts, knights and squires whose allotted patch of grass is barricaded by bright yellow crime-scene tape. Swords out, shields up, faces masked, they approach each other in thrusts and parries. Braids poke out of the helmet of one combatant as she faces an opponent wielding an axe.

At nearby picnic tables, peasants and gentry sporting medieval tunics and Renaissance bodiced dresses, oblivious to their mismatched time periods and social classes, converse while keeping an eye on their children. A "stupid young herald" makes occasional announcements.

It's Lord Mayor's Market Day in the Kingdom of Ealdormere and about 150 people, residents of the Royal City of Eoforwic and surrounding cantons and shires, have gathered in the Etobicoke park. In modern English, it's a meeting of the Toronto chapter of the Society for Creative Anachronism. Founded in a Berkeley backyard in 1966 as a sci-fi/fantasy club, the group is now dedicated to studying and recreating pre-17th-century Europe and has attracted more than 30,000 members to its 18 kingdoms (the seven continents in modern parlance).

They're here for a tavern feast, arts-and-sciences lore (Norse gods, anyone?), and to hold court with the baron and baroness. And for combat. Many are long-time close friends; apparently, hitting one another repeatedly with clubs and swords "is the best kind of friendship." Especially when the strength of a hit, and subsequent victory, is determined by the honour system -- would that blow have led to death in centuries past? "Honesty has a higher value here," explains Her Excellency, the Baroness. So no hitting below the knees; the fundamental of knighthood is "don't be a jerk," and low blows would certainly be a jerk thing to do.

On Monday morning, these medieval characters, whose personas span the years 600 to 1600, will outfit themselves in the garb of 21st-century lawyers, teachers, customs brokers and computer geeks. But by night they devote themselves to "recreational scholarship," meticulously recreating worlds long dead to the rest of us. They're self-taught experts in the minutiae of day-to-day medieval life, tracking down recipes, studying forgotten languages, practising metalwork or sewing.

It's what Magistra Nicolaa de Bracton of 13th-century England (she's Susan Carroll-Clark in the regular world, a PhD in medieval history) calls "a permanent outlet for doing creative stuff." Her weeks are busy with meetings and practice sessions, pewter-making and calligraphy. Once a year she and about 12,000 others meet in Pennsylvania for the Pennsic Wars. Think charging hordes *à la Braveheart*; broken bones and other such mishaps are not unheard of.

Says a ninth-century Celt, a 20-year veteran of the society who's wearing green plaid that matches his son's, "This is a place where hopeless romantics can walk the talk." **LEA ZELTSERMAN**

