

News from Canada: Living the Regency Life at Port Alberni's Jane Austen Festival

by Jane Schmidt, with contributions from Martha Burd



Every dancer was in full Regency dress for the Festival's Grand Ball called by Rosemary Lach (centre on stage) (Photo by Jane Schmidt)

If you are a lover of Jane Austen and all things Regency, Port Alberni on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, was the place to be July 6th to 8th this year. Port Alberni is a small town of 20,000 on the west coast of Canada, half way across the world from the beloved Hampshire where Jane Austen lived and wrote 250 years ago. Incongruous as it may seem, the good people of Port Alberni have been holding a Jane Austen Festival annually for the past three years.

The festival was created by a local costume group called the Centennial Belles. The group's focus was on costumes, so naturally the festival set the goal of breaking the world record of the 'highest number of people dressed in Regency clothes gathered together in one place' to earn a place in the Guinness Book of World Records.

But once you have a group in Regency dress, what do you do? Of course, you have a grande ball. When the festival began three years ago, there were very few English country dancers in Port Alberni. There was lots of interest but little experience. So Rosemary Lach became involved, coming up from Victoria to give a series of dance workshops,

and to call the ball. Now, three years later, there is a good core group of confident local dancers taking part in the festival.

Breaking this world record is no mean feat for a small community far removed from large urban centres that would have a lot more enthusiasts to draw from. I had the privilege of growing up in Alton, Hampshire where Jane Austen lived in Chawton House for her final 8 years, and I think it would be unlikely that even the residents there could have managed it.

When I was growing up, the Jane Austen museum was simply another boring old building filled with artifacts that didn't interest me in the least. I drove past it every morning on my way to school not even giving it a second thought.

How strange that in 2018 at the age of 67 I would spend three days sweating over a sewing machine to produce a dress that fit the requirements of the occasion, decorated a bonnet and trekked all over town to find long white gloves, and then travel 4 hours plus a ferry ride from

Vancouver, BC. But I am an enthusiastic English country dancer. At the last Vancouver contra dance of the season I came across a small poster advertising the Jane Austen Festival. I enjoy any opportunity to dance and dress up so when I saw the festival offered both, I knew I had to attend.

There were many familiar faces at the festival including Rosemary Lach, her husband Robin, and other Victoria folks I knew from dancing. The festival opened with a musical production of *Persuasion* held in the local theatre which is part of the high school complex in Port Alberni, a most impressive building. The musical was written and performed by the Chicago Chamber Operatic Tour Company. They have toured the world over the last 5 years, including performances at the renowned Jane Austen Festival in Bath England. We were treated to a wonderful and humorous operatic delight with great singing, excellent stage management and even some Irish dancing.

Saturday morning saw everyone gather at the theatre in all of our Regency splendor for THE COUNT. There was a sea of beautiful dresses, bonnets with lovely embellishments and men in tail coats, top hats and riding boots. The existing world record was made in Bath England with 409 people suitably attired. Although the Port Alberni attempt fell short with only 349, it didn't dampen the enthusiasm of the crowd who after being counted departed to Harbour Quay to promenade and show off their costumes to the town.

Then everyone headed off to high tea at the Echo Community Centre, still in our costumes, of course. A string quartet from the *Persuasion* orchestra serenaded us while we enjoyed trays of delicate sandwiches, scones with strawberry jam and whipped cream, and endless cups of tea served by The Sunshine Boys, a local men's club. It was all terribly proper and gave us all another opportunity to admire each others outfits.

Then came the grande masquerade ball in the evening, called by Rosemary Lach to music played by The Regency Players, a group of local musicians. The hall was beautifully decorated with chandeliers and candlelight (both real candles and flameless), and in an adjoining room finger food and beverages were served throughout the evening. The ball commenced with the grand promenade around the room—lines of couples now dressed in elegant ballgowns or tail coats, and wearing elaborate masks. Rosemary then led us into a series of



Showing off their Spencer jackets and bonnets, L to R Jane Schmidt, Arlene Tumbler, Margret Goodmason, Robin Lowry, Rosemary Lach and Martha Burd

traditional English country dances, both ones familiar to those who had come to her workshops and simpler ones for the less experienced. Rosemary included her version of "The Triumph," to create an opportunity for every lady to show off her ball gown. In this dance the gentlemen meet at the bottom of the set, join hands to form an arch over one of the women, and lead her triumphantly (and elegantly) back to place. If anyone lacked in skill, they made up for it with enthusiasm and a delightful evening was had by all. Watching everyone in their finery made it easy to imagine the days of the Regency era when ladies and gentlemen dressed to impress, and dancing provided the only physical contact that a young lady might have with a gentleman prior to marriage. We left the ball tired and with sore feet but happy.

There was one more event to complete the weekend. On Sunday everyone donned their Regency outfits once again for a picnic and a dance on the grass in Roger's Creek Park. Some of the families walking in the park joined in the dancing, attracted by the lively music provided by Port Alberni's Old Time Fiddlers, and the novel spectacle of costumed dancers.

Overall, I would say the weekend was a great success. Let's hope that next year THE COUNT will attract 61 more people, and we can say that the little town of Port Alberni smashed that world record!

Jane Schmidt, a former Morris dancer, now dances English in Vancouver, BC. Martha Burd dances English in Victoria, BC, and loves dressing dancers in period costumes.

EXTRA: Read more and see a video that features some of the costumes in this story in the [Alberni Valley News](#).