

USI English Majors Attend the Fourth Annual Jane Austen Festival (Louisville, KY)
By Amy L. Montz

On July 9th, 2011, six English majors, two chaperones, and several fancy tea hats made an early morning trek to Louisville, KY for the Fourth Annual Jane Austen Festival. Chelsea Barber, Lauren Ruggier, Amber Seibert, Allison Skillman, Alissa Tsaparikos, and Melissa Wagner arrived at Historic Locust Grove to find it transformed into Meryton, the fictional hometown of *Pride and Prejudice*'s Bennet family. Shops hawking fabrics and horseshoes, parasols and blended teas, bonnets and buttons of the military persuasion appealed to Austen enthusiasts and historical reenactors alike. Chelsea purchased a spyglass, while Amber found a parasol more to her liking. When asked how she felt about open air shopping, Amber noted that while the weather made it slightly uncomfortable, "it was a lot of fun. A lot of the stuff is really authentic, with the ladies with their fans and parasols." Amber noted that "it was really cool that they had not just stuff for ladies; they had fabric and toys and army supplies" as well. A multi-purpose, one-stop shopping of the Regency era!

Throughout the day, students attended several exhibits, performances, and workshops at the Festival in order to fully immerse themselves in the Regency period. Two students, Melissa Wagner and Lauren Ruggier, participated in a pincushion workshop in which they spent two hours learning embroidery and needlepoint authentic to the era. As a group, the students saw a performance of a biographical story about Jane Austen's life, "Cheer from Chawton: A Jane Austen Family Theatrical," written and performed by Karen Eterovich. Students also attended a workshop entitled "Dressing Mr. Darcy," led by reenactor Brian Cushing, which detailed the intricacies of nineteenth-century gentlemen's clothing. Taking the time to stop in at the gentleman's Hellfire Club, students witnessed what happened in male-exclusive company in the Regency era, an opportunity no polite Regency lady would have had. Fully noting the separation of the sexes, students returned to the hotel to prepare for one of the few experiences in which the sexes could mingle comfortably: large-scale social events.

On the night of July 9th, students arrived at the Spalding University Center, which had been transformed into a Regency Ball led by the Louisville English Country Dancers and hosted by the Greater Louisville chapter of the Jane Austen Society of North America. While period dress was not required, it was highly encouraged, and USI students attended in their best. Alissa Tsaparikos took the opportunity to try out some of the Regency dances; while she admits they were "a lot of fun and scary" at the same time, she loves Austen and the Regency era now more than ever. When asked how attending the ball affected her understanding of herself as an English major, Melissa Wagner argued that "Just learning the experience of what these people went through in everyday life and how early they started with everything," including learning embroidery, and the intricate details of the dances, "actually learning to connect with the characters she's read about [has been] amazing." At the end of the night, Allison Skillman declared the ball "the novel of manners brought to life," particularly in the styling of the dress and the dances.

On Sunday, students returned to Locust Grove for a four-course afternoon Irish tea, which Lauren Ruggier found to be "really neat. It was what the ladies did as a social event, and it was really cool that we got to be a part of it." The ladies who hosted and served "didn't just serve

you tea; they were kind of like your friends, too, explaining everything you were being served.” Enjoying tea sandwiches, scones, and fresh-baked desserts as well as Austen-themed tea blends, students, like their Regency counterparts, spent time in nearly female-exclusive company, displaying their afternoon tea finery in a lovely setting. Taking some time to do some more light shopping, including picking up a few books they would need for upcoming fall semester classes, students then leaned about nineteenth-century medical and dentistry treatments from a living history exhibit, nineteenth-century domesticity in the living history exhibits inside of the historical Locust Grove residence, and Regency hairstyling from Heather Fleming, professional theatrical wig designer.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end, and students retreated to the cars to put on comfortable shoes and settle in for the drive back to Evansville. But while the Festival came to an end, the experience would not. Chelsea Barber feels she’s gained a greater appreciation for how “literature affects the world and the world affects literature, and how literature becomes a mirror for the world.” Chaperone Mary Keck called watching USI English majors experience the Jane Austen Festival “exhilarating! They’re getting an experience with the period they wouldn’t have otherwise. They’re getting to dance the steps, be in the atmosphere where everyone is dressed in the outfits of the period.” Such an immersion only furthers students’ involvement with literature and the historical era in which it is written. Such an immersion in the company of fellow students and USI faculty only furthers students’ involvement with their university and regional community. The Society for Arts and Humanities, who generously funded the students’ attendance at the Festival, truly helped these six USI students—as well as their two faculty chaperones!—more fully understand Austen, her world, her literatures, and why her legacy lives on, two hundred years later.