

A NEW CLAN TENT CONVENER'S SURVIVAL KIT (One Convener's Ten Commandments)

By Larry Kascht, CMSNA, Wisconsin Convener

For years before joining Clan MacLaren, I had attended the Highland Games in our area; I had done so with enjoyment and fascination. The skirl of the pipes, the pageantry, the athletic competitions and dancing, the great vendors and unfamiliar food, the massed bands—all of it was simply magnetic. But I found that I kept gravitating to the Clan Tent Area—it appeared to be the Games' center of cultural activity, friendly conversation, spontaneous music, tartan finery, fascinating maps, travel discussion, good-natured imbibing of fine spirits, and cool collections of everything from medieval weaponry to antique books to Victorian snuff-boxes. It seemed like everyone knew everyone else, like a reunion of old friends. It was simply magnetic.

When I was accepted into our Clan, I went to the next scheduled Games with the expectation of hanging out with my fellow clansmen, at the MacLaren tent. I was shocked to find that our Games didn't have a MacLaren tent.

Subsequent communication with CMSNA leaders resulted in my rather apprehensively agreeing to host a tent, which felt at first like I was taking a big chance. My awareness of the magnetism of the whole thing was replaced by something new—the apprehension of the new guy, and the awareness of my inexperience. How was I going to become a meaningful part of this event? But as I thought more about the prospect of hosting the tent, I started to feel an honest sense of pride in the decision to do it—in a humble way, I would be trying to do something good and helpful for the Clan. This has stayed with me, and it got me through the beginning jitters. And I do now feel, after a few years at it, that I've become part of that magnetic Games experience, part of that reunion of old friends. It's a really good feeling.

I'm a teacher—and that means I know that when I undertake something new, I need a plan. I know that a teacher's (and anyone's) comfort level depends on being well-prepared, and deciding in advance what you're going to do (and if what you wind up doing then turns out different than your plan, as things develop, that's OK—but you need your plan at least at the start, and for security and peace-of-mind). I knew that a clan tent (as part of the Games' cultural offerings) was supposed to be—

- 1—a place for clan members to meet,*
- 2—a place for the clan to recruit new members, and*
- 3—a place for people with a Scottish interest or connection to pursue that interest or connection, in a fun atmosphere.*

These would be my goals, and the tent needed to try to meet them.

So my plan, in order to meet my goals, has been as follows—

1—To take advantage of the excellent Games Kits provided by CMSNA, and the helpful advice and mentoring the Clan provides. These services were helpful and good when I started—they are great now.

2—To assemble an affordable assortment of gear that could be managed solo. This has been important for me, since my tents have been done mostly solo (at least at first). I bought a modest-sized, lightweight canopy tent that I could set-up alone and stake down securely. I put my supplies and display items in modest-sized rubber-maid containers. As my supplies have increased, the number of containers has increased, but not the size—I still have to carry them!

3—To try to look as authentic and Scottish as possible (both me, and the tent)—this has obviously been a work-in-progress, but the look is OK now (and it keeps getting better each year—an ongoing and fun project!).

4—To learn the story of the MacLarens (the Clan has excellent historical resources available, and I've gotten hold of some additional ones), and then tell the story to people who visit. Since I am not shy about talking to people, I usually just jump in with "Do you know about the MacLarens?", and then follow this with however many items their interest will allow me to tell them. The sight of a guy in a kilt talking enthusiastically to people sort of breaks the ice for others who wander up, and they often join in, and the thing sort of snow-balls. The activity of on-going animated discussion erases the intimidation factor of talking to a stranger.

5—To have available Scottish things I'm interested in—in my case, fascinating books (literature, history, travel, folklore), cool topographic maps, pretty tartan charts, the various MacLaren brochures and illustrations, and (of course) whisky—as occasions of enthusiasm and discussion. This has been a work in progress too, but I keep adding to my collection of fun and interesting stuff (an end in itself, after all).

6—Once the ice is broken, it's important to be willing to discuss what's of interest to the visitors, not just to me. Once they are comfortable, they enjoy continuing the discussion.

7—To know who at the Games is an authority, to answer people's questions (since they'll often start their question with "I'm not sure who to ask this, but...").

The people I direct them to are—

--the tent of the clan they're asking about, if that clan is at the Games;

--the Council of Scottish Clans and Associations, who seem to know pretty much everything, and who always have a tent at our Games;

--the St. Andrew's Society or the Robert Burns Club--both of whom are always in

attendance;

--if all else fails, I take their name and address, and try to figure out how to get their question answered, and then get back to them.

8—To have something geared toward the kids—very popular are clan badge stamps, as lots of Games now have passports for the kids to get stamped (and then get a prize). Parents will go where their kids drag them, and kids help keep things relaxed.

9—To make some congenial alliances with trustworthy clan tent neighbors—mutual help at putting up and taking down the tent, watching each other's tent during breaks, etc. This creates an atmosphere of community that is contagious, and results in new friendships!

10—Eventually, to share the tent with other CMSNA members (who probably first showed up as guests, expressing their thanks that a MacLaren tent is at the Games!), who may come forward and offer to help. Let them! I know that, for me, letting go a little bit of something I've put together can be difficult. But sharing the interest and good will that I've helped to generate is wonderful! (It also gives some time to wander, enjoy the rest of the Games, eat and drink, spend money, etc.)

Since there aren't a lot of MacLarens at our Games (I sort of refer to metro-Milwaukee as a northern outpost of the Clan), my tent has tended to be more of a source of information for whoever visits (which suits my presentation-style approach), more than just a hospitality stop for MacLarens in attendance (which is what some of the tents reported in the Standard appear to be). I'm sure both models are good, and probably the ideal tent has aspects of both. But I see some of my clan tent neighbors sitting quietly in their tent, waiting for people to walk in and visit, and it often doesn't seem to happen very much. Shy-ness can be contagious...but so can conversation! Just forcing oneself to jump in and start to talk to people—it breaks the ice and makes good things happen!

Creag an Tuirc!