

**Phyllis Patterson, 82**  
**January 25, 1932 - May 18, 2014**  
**Renaissance Pleasure Faire Founder**  
**Education & Entertainment Innovator**

Beloved Renaissance Pleasure Faire creator Phyllis Ann (Stimbert) Patterson, of Novato, California, died on May 18th, 2014.

She was born on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1932, in Omaha, Nebraska, to Mildred Irene and Elden Carl Stimbert; her father became Superintendent of City Schools in Memphis, Tennessee, where Phyllis attended Messick High School.

While earning her B.A. in English at Memphis State College in the mid-1950s, Phyllis wrote and directed one of the very first broadcast television shows, *Phyll's Playhouse*, and was a DJ on "all-girl" radio station WHER. In 1956 she married artist Ron Patterson, who was stationed in Memphis as an officer in the US Air Force, and the newlyweds moved to Los Angeles, where Phyllis began teaching high school English and history in Culver City.

In 1960, while expecting son Kevin, Phyllis and Ron created "Into the Woods," a backyard drama-and-arts program at the Patterson's Laurel Canyon home in the Hollywood Hills. Phyllis' irrepressible need for teaching was fulfilled by directing improvisational theater inspired by e e cummings, Carl Sandberg, and *Commedia dell'arte*. Her eager nine-and ten-year-old students were encouraged to invent their own creation myths and nonsensical plays. Having taken first place at a children's theatre competition at the Glenn Ford Theatre in Los Angeles, members of her young troupe were so delighted by performing on a commedia wagon built for the occasion, that they besieged Phyllis with requests to "do that again!" In response, the Pattersons rented a local park called "Haskell's Raskells Ranch" and enlisted Pacifica radio station KPFK to sponsor the very first Renaissance Faire in America on May 11th and 12th, 1963.

When Phyllis and Ron were invited to teach art and drama to youngsters at the Idyllwild School of Music and the Arts in the mountains east of Los Angeles, Phyllis famously engaged her young students in writing and performing their own Native American creation myths, with boulders and pine trees as their stage set. Those early students remember her as breathlessly creative and inspirational, and credit her with opening imaginative vistas that resulted in many long-lasting careers in the performing arts.

With the popularity of the second Faire behind them and yearly “Pleasure Faire” momentum building, the lingering echoes of the McCarthy era almost brought an end to the phenomenon. Phyllis found herself frequently dressing as a proper schoolteacher, her abundant hair primly confined in a bun, as she attempted to convince conservative county officials to approve the educational value of the Faire. She testified repeatedly and patiently at public hearings about the whys and benefits of colorful costumes, beards, handcrafts, acoustic music, and artistic freedom in the outdoors, introducing 1950s-style bureaucracies to the creative possibilities then manifesting in the early 1960s.

Somehow, Phyllis always prevailed. Ingenious to the point of rascality, when the Faire was denied permits on some pretense or other, she always found a way around the obstructions – even, in 1966, asking the American Film Institute to produce a documentary of the event so that she could open the gates with a ‘film permit’ (all of the attendees became “extras”). Phyllis was an unstoppable festival trailblazer; along with a team of lawyers and talented staff members, she helped to create laws and ordinances allowing and regulating public gatherings in rural locations, setting precedents throughout California and the west.

Also in 1966, while expecting the birth of son Brian, the Pattersons expanded their event to the San Francisco Bay Area. China Camp (now a State Park) in Marin County was the Faire’s first Northern California location. It was nothing short of magical, with ethnic music groups and true gypsy artists encamped for weeks in the oak-and-bay forest. The event quickly outgrew that idyllic setting, and in 1971 moved to the old Satori Ranch at Black Point in Novato. Amid historic barns, hayfields, and oak-forested valleys, Phyllis and Ron began to host the educational dreamscapes that Phyllis seemed endlessly energized to organize and present.

Workshops and performances flourished in the landmark Red Barn; thousands of school-age kids came to the Faire Village mid-week for “Workshops in the Woods;” and hundreds of thousands of patrons attended the Faires themselves, becoming Phyllis’ unsuspecting students of living history, as they rediscovered seasonal rituals of mummers’ plays, parades, pageants, handcrafts and revelry. In interviews, Phyllis frequently said: “The Faire reminds us of simpler times, more in touch with nature and the earth.”

In 1970, Phyllis and husband Ron instigated The Great Dickens Christmas Fair, using the same techniques of immersive interaction and improvisational playfulness to transport guests into a real-life version of Victorian London at Christmastime. Now in its 36<sup>th</sup> season, the Dickens Fair continues as a beloved feature of San Francisco’s holiday season. Ron and Phyllis’s sons Kevin and Brian, their daughter-in-law Leslie, and grandsons Andrew and Michael now continue this tradition, a creative legacy that involves many of the talented performers,

artists, craftspeople and teachers—and their children and grandchildren—who began working with Phyllis in the 1970s.

Phyllis Patterson did not merely leave her mark on California leisure activity; her work has had a wide and lasting cultural impact across America and abroad. Activities that she introduced at the early Renaissance Pleasure Faires had a defining and still-visible influence on American culture and counterculture. The early Faires were at the time one of very few public venues where artisans and crafters could sell their creations, and as such they were truly instrumental in producing the crafts revival of the 1960s-1970s. Eventually, hundreds of artists were able to quit their “day jobs” and support their families year-round with income generated through Patterson-produced events.

Certain musical hybrids (what might be called “ethnic-psychedelic-folk”) got their start on Phyllis's stages. Dark beer, ale, and mead were tasted at Faires by many for the first time. Tony Award-winning actor Bill Irwin, mime Robert Shields, magicians Penn and Teller, The Flying Karamazov Brothers, and the Reduced Shakespeare Company, among others, all performed there early in their careers. The practice of attending Faires in colorful quasi-historical costume gave birth to a key thread of countercultural expression: the “psychedelic fop” fashions ultimately embodied by such popular musicians as Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, and Jim Morrison.

The current concept of “first person interpretive” living-history programming grew out of the Faire’s full-immersion improvisational theatre, and evolved according to Phyllis’ vision. As her dream of a true Living History Centre became a reality, its value to the larger world was just beginning. California State Parks Director William Penn Mott (soon to be Secretary of the Interior), ahead of his time, consulted with Phyllis to enhance visitors’ experiences with “Living History” at California State Parks. She would go on to become a sought-after living history consultant at Plymouth Plantation, Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, and Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. In the UK, the “Living History” now presented at the Tower of London and other Royal properties is organized by one of Phyllis’ former students.

Thus, over the past 53 years, Phyllis Patterson (in her gleeful role as “Chief Instigator”) profoundly affected the lives of millions of guests who emerged from her events with new possibilities shining in their eyes. Serendipitously, she also became the “mother” of generations of “Fairefolk,” indelibly changing the lives of those who first attended as visitors and stayed to join a magical tribe that held together even after the tents and banners were cleared away. The ripples in this pond are still expanding.

By living her passion for creativity, education, and human connection, Phyllis

Patterson brought the nourishment of her bright vision to our imaginations and our lives. She will be missed—and remembered by all those she loved, influenced, inspired and transformed—with immense gratitude and great affection.

She is survived by her two sons Kevin and Brian Patterson, her daughter-in-law Leslie Patterson and family, and her grandsons Andrew and Michael Patterson, all living in Northern California. Her brother Vaughn Stimbert and niece Cindy Sands and family live in Memphis. Her niece Susan Bullock and family live in Virginia.

For more news of pending memorial plans, visit [fairehistory.org](http://fairehistory.org) and join the email list.

“What’s past is prologue” ~William Shakespeare