

Dickens's Evening on the Strand

Victorian life revisited in Galveston

by Diane Yount

Battalion Staff

It's jugglers, pipers, hot cross buns and gas-lit streets. It's carolers, mimes, Tiny Tim and Scrooge. It's the Budweiser Clydesdales and Queen Victoria. It's Dickens's Evening on the Strand — a reconstruction of life in Victorian England.

Characters from Charles Dickens stories will come to life in the restored Victorian shops and buildings of Galveston in the annual event scheduled for Friday and Saturday.

Tickets are \$4 for adults, \$1 for people over 65 years and for children between the ages of six and 12. The ticket price includes a bus ride to Strand Street and a chance to experience a Victorian Christmas.

Dickens's Evening on the Strand has its roots in the history of Dickens and in the history of the Galveston Historical Society.

And Dickens would have approved.

"Dickens frequented Strand Street in London in the 1800's," Public Relations Director Laura Olafson said.

"The Strand in Galveston is a concentrated commercial district that was built in the Victorian days. Our street was modeled after the one in London. It just seemed like the perfect back-drop for a Dickens party," she said.

Although the event started out as a block party, Dicken's Evening has continued to grow in the past nine years.

"Dickens's Evening started out as a block party," Olafson said. "At first the event was just for the historical society, but last year we had 65,000 paid people. And About 120,000 people really came."

Some of those "extra" people are the volunteers — about 4,000 of them.

"There are over 500 groups who will perform different acts this year," Olafson said. "People from out-of-state would call us to perform. Some of the acts are done in the theatre. Most are impromptu."

Like the time Scrooge and Mr. Pickwick argued the merits of Christmas on a street corner.

"We drew quite a crowd," Steve Long, alias Ebenezer Scrooge, said. "It was pretty much ad lib. It really is such a kick. I think Scrooge is the most fun character to do. I wander around the street and harass

have my own top hat."

Peter Fredrickson, the editor of In Between magazine, also has been a character for two years.

"Last year I got broken-in hawking Christmas cards," Fredrickson says. "This year I'm going to be the town crier. I announce upcoming events. I give people instructions on how to get places. You know, like the privvies. You gotta be loud; the street gets pretty crowded."

Although some of the volunteers are members of the Galveston Historical Society, about half are not.

"About 2,000 of the volunteers are members," Olafson said. "They recruit their friends and then their friends end up joining. Dicken's Evening on the Strand is our biggest fundraiser. The more people help, the more restoration we can do. This is really a big event for Galveston. Everyone gets involved. No one really imagined it would grow to this magnitude. Last year we raised around \$150,000."

Aside from the spontaneous cries of 'Bah, humbug,' and 'Hear Ye, hear Ye,' provided by the volunteers in costume, many scheduled events take place.

"We are having a Victorian Baby Contest for the first time this year," Olafson said. "We aren't accepting any more entries. We already have 35. The prizes will go to the baby in the most authentic dress of the time. Some wonderful prizes have been donated by local merchants."

Other events scheduled for the two-day event are a Parade of Characters, including the Budweiser Clydesdales, a Bell Ringers Festival, a 35-foot Christmas tree, performances by the Great Grimaldi and the



presentation of a hot-air balloon.

"This is the first year that we are really going to fill the balloon up," Olafson said. "Last year the weather wasn't right. Mr. Ivan Koenig usually charges about \$250 to show his balloon, but he brings it here for free. It is really cute."

To provide some entertainment for the children, Grimaldi the Great will be returning for the fifth year. Every year, Paul Lombard dons white make-up and rag-tag, colorful clothing to become the famous British clown.

"After I slip into Grimaldi's costume of knickers, red coat, yellow undershirt and white face, I transform mentally as well," Lombard said.

"I can flirt with the young ladies, dance with the children and put a smile on the saddest of faces," he said.

In addition to the performances of the returning Grimaldi, Alfred Hyslop, the producer of Sesame Street, will be performing "A Christmas Carol," and the Strand Stree Theatre will present "Oliver."

As an added bonus, anyone going to Dickens's Evening in full Victorian dress will be admitted free to the festival.

"This year any extra money raised will go to the restoration of the Samuel May Williams House," Olafson said.

"Williams was one of the co-founders of Galveston. In previous years, the money has gone to projects like Ashton Villa and the Elissa," he said.

The Elissa is a restored ship that can be visited during Dickens's Evening.

Ashton Villa is a mansion that was restored by the Galveston Historical Society seven years ago.

"Ashton Villa is a project of the foundation," Olafson said. "They will be having an English tea there on Saturday. Each serving is about 10 pastries —

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crumpets, tarts — so we recommend that people split a serving."

The continuing list of activities for the two-day event also includes a bear who does tricks, vendors selling their wares, several tradesman giving demonstrations on their work and an international trading market.

Although Scrooge isn't supposed to enjoy festive activities, Steve Long definitely enjoys Dickens's Evening on the Strand.

Long said, "It's about the best event I've ever been to or been involved in. If it's foggy the whole scene is really wonderful. It transforms itself into London at Christmastime."

