

is their first or their 12th, all display a naive excitement.

Stefani Seale, a 14-year-old high school student from Navasota, says her whole family works at the festival and she thought it would be neat to join them. So far, she says, she's having a great time.

"You get to see a lot of different people — weird people," she says.

Seale hawks pretzels and gets paid 25 cents for each one she sells. That's not bad considering she sells about 200 pretzels a day.

Linda Lafitte, a classmate of Seale's, says she likes working at the festival because it's fun making people laugh.

"You get to say different things to people and they get a kick out of it," she says.

Lafitte says trading her blue jeans in for a 16th century frock wasn't that difficult. Obviously, getting used to the language wasn't too hard, either. She easily spans centuries of dialect, switching from a drawl to cockney English every other sentence.

"You get used to it your first weekend and then you start to love it," she says.

Lafitte says employees either make their own costumes or have them made. The festival gave employees a cassette tape to help them perfect the accent and a book of 16th century fashion guidelines, she says.

Although many people working at the festival are locals, quite a few are seasoned veterans of the festival circuit.

Celia Stuart has made her living working the festival scene for the past year. She says she took a break from school to travel and have fun, but she hopes to continue her education in theater arts at the University of Texas.

Stuart says almost every state has some type of Renaissance festival and she can usually cover the entire country working straight from February to December. And she claims she's not alone.

"There is a community of people who do this for a living," Stuart says, adding that she sees a lot of the same people all the time.

Although this is her first year as a professional, she says she has years of festival experience and especially enjoys the one in Plantersville.

"I like this festival because it's huge," she says. "It's the biggest one I've ever seen."

"It's also the most commercial festival I've been to," she adds. "It's a crafts fair that's gotten out of hand."

Stuart says unlike some of the festivals she has worked at,

goods and pays a flat-boothe fee to the festival.

Coulam says about 80 percent of the artists return each year.

Over 3,000 people were hired to entertain and delight the expected 200,000 visitors for six weekends in the forest near Plantersville during this year's festival, he says. The entertainment budget for the festival is \$275,000.

The entertainers — juggl-



Minstrels, a fair maiden and an oversized prince take part in the noon Grand March, a parade of 300 Renaissance characters who add to the magical spirit of the festival.

some of the items sold at this one are not handmade.

Still, those crafts that are handmade are a delight to browse through. Visitors can watch a craftsman demonstrate the ancient art of glassblowing, and then purchase samples of his wares. More daring festival-goers can buy anything from leather lingerie to chain mail swimsuits.

David Coulam, vice president of the festival, says the artists and craftspersons who hawk their wares at the festival number about 250. Each artist builds his own Renaissance-style building to house his

ers, actors, musicians, singers, puppeteers, rope walkers and belly dancers — must pass an audition before they are hired and are constantly being evaluated during the festival, Coulam says.

A formal audition for prospective entertainers is held in April, but he says people can usually audition all year long.

The food booths, great in number and variety, are contracted businesses that pay a percentage of their earnings to the festival. The 49 food booths offer famished festival-goers everything from dragon fajitas to egg rolls for a pretty pound.

Food prices range from \$1 for a buttered ear of corn to \$3.50 for a beefsteak on a stick. Soft drinks, iced tea and lemonade are \$1, beer is \$1.50 and wine coolers are \$2. The most popular food item, the turkey leg, is \$2.75.

In addition to the concession workers, about 16 full-time employees work year-round preparing for the festival.

The commoners at the Renaissance Festival far outnumber the royalty, but no kingdom would be complete without a king. An actor plays the part of King George, but the real king is festival president George Coulam (David's brother).

George, who is also mayor of Todd Mission, the tiny town that is home to the festival, started the festival with David in 1975.

George Coulam worked at a similar festival while he was a student at San Fernando State College. After receiving a master's degree in environmental design, he and David started a festival in Utah but moved it to Minnesota in 1970.

Five years later, they sold that festival and bought 237 acres of strip-mined land near Houston. The present site consists of over 300 acres, and includes the 50-acre festival site, the parking lot, campgrounds, maintenance facilities, office complex and orchards.

David confirms that this festival is one of the largest in the country. But what really separates it from the others is the "privies". This is the only one that has flush toilets, he says.

David says he and his brother decided to start the festival to try to make a living.

"We decided one day just to put a festival together, and here we are," he says.

It is a rather unique way to make a living — one that probably wouldn't occur to the average entrepreneur — but David says that's what makes it fun.

"It's an escape like any other form of entertainment," he says. "You go to the movies to escape day-to-day life. It's the same here."