



Pigpen - 1991-2004

by Ellen Heck

Pigpen may have been of the species known as the common snapping turtle, but she was anything but common. An outstandingly patient and forgiving animal, she is the sole inspiration of the activity known at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival as tortoise walking, which has proved so profitable and fun for us over the years.

Pigpen was housed in the alligator pond. For most of the time she would burrow down into the mud, then take a quick dip to clean and cool off. Such occupation in part led to her name, since this would yield a clean turtle and a dirty pond. Every so often however (ok, several times a day) wanderlust would hit and she would start to climb the fence in search of greener (or muddier) pastures. The problem was that she would often fall back onto the rocks, stranding herself on her back and earning many cuts and bruises. Even if she managed to reach the top, it is a 4-6' drop, either to the ground or more rocks.

Rather than fight all day with this, she would be sent out with a handler to walk. I was often given this task and invented the character of a hapless shepherdess, whose sheep had been frightened off by the many



Scotsmen about and so had been demoted to herding turtles. We allowed no petting, but still managed to impress many people with the sight of a docile snapping turtle wandering about and the

fact that, although the cabriolet drivers yielded for no man, they would swerve to avoid the "medieval speed-bump".

Pigpen had a unique walking style. Since snapping turtles have relatively little shell underneath, she kept a goodly ground clearance, lurching along like Frankenstein's monster after a night on the town. She would also walk perhaps 10-20 paces at a time, then slowly collapse for a bit of a breather before lurching off again. Another thing about Pigger was that she

was a one-way walker. After awhile, when she would tire, she would have to be picked up and carried back to the Cottage. We always created a stir as people stopped to gape, then laugh at the sight of a snapping turtle, legs dangling limply, being carried along.



She never tried to snap or bite at the handling, even when it included a rather gaudily decorated donation basket, nor did she ever display any aggression towards the many patrons who stopped to look, even when they made unflattering comments about soup. I even had one gentleman grab her by her tail and drag her backwards about a foot before I could push him away (he said "that's how you play with them" but left when I threatened to do the same to him). Pigpen took it in stride, merely looking puzzled at the fact that, although she was walking forwards, she was moving backwards.



No one who worked the pond will forget this remarkable animal. I think my favorite memory of her was the last weekend of the run 2 years ago. It was a somewhat cold cloudy day, around 45-50 deg with occasional spurts of rain. I was sitting on the back fence with my feet resting on the edge of the pond, talking to the patrons who walked by. After awhile I looked down and saw that Pigpen had crawled most of the way under my skirt, since it was, after all, a few critical degrees warmer under there. When I pulled the skirt up she looked up at me as if saying "Oy! Close the door; it's cold out there!"

editors note: The cause of death of is unknown as she was not necropsied. She will indeed be missed out at Festival as well as in my home, where she resided for a dozen years. I want to thank Ellen for writing this remembrance, she truly captured the essence of the turtle we affectionately referred to as "Pigpen".