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Everything Old Is New Again

Santa Rosa's Handcar Regatta celebrates a future that never happened

By Gretchen Giles

Dr. Erasmus P. Kitty, so the story goes, founded the Handcar Regatta in downtown Santa Rosa in 1872. Born in India to parents who mixed in the British Empire's brisk spice trade, Dr. Kitty, a dentist of wide renown, lost his father to a Near East monsoon when the poor man was stranded on a log with only a tiger as a companion. His mother, the dear girl, suffered terribly from the loss of an arm in the same storm, and so young Erasmus, just age 10, dutifully built a mechanical one for her.

Victorian ingenuity, the mastery of steam power, the relentless scientific curiosity of the era, the bogus medical boasts—based mostly on the restorative miracles of grain alcohol—and the handmade brass and iron craft of the time all informed Dr. Kitty's robust life. He had a wife (Kitty Kitty) and a sage Chinese confidante (Liu "Louie" Shaoqui) and was naturally affectionate toward his grossly wealthy uncle (Lord Ambrose Hightinkle, OBE), despite the man's wee taste for bondage. And, of course, not a whit of this is true.

But the fantasy certainly entertains. And this made-up tale straight from the most florid pages of the turn of the last century's fiction is the backbone for an unusual new festival set to debut in Santa Rosa's Railroad Square on Sept. 28.

Called the Handcar Regatta, this first annual fest seems to spring from Dr. Kitty's own fevered head. A celebration of art, kinesis, science and DIY craftsmanship, this daylong fandango has a very specific look and feel—it's called steampunk.

"The aesthetic was easy to come up with, because most of the people I know already have one foot in the door with that culture," says Regatta cofounder Spring Maxfield. "This aesthetic is in popular culture everywhere, but it's not mainstream yet, it's still underground. It's a little bit like that festival in the desert," she laughs, alluding to Burning Man, "but it's a lot cleaner."

Popularized in fantasy fiction of the 1980s and '90s, notably William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's 1990 novel *The Difference Engine*, and seen on the big screen in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and even Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, steampunk celebrates the late 19th-century, when technology was just heating up and most of it was blowing hot air.

"It's this idea of the future that never happened," Maxfield explains, seated on a couch in the Santa Rosa design studio Ray Modern. "It's this Jules Vernian vision based on the technologies that they had at the time, which were primarily steam-powered, and this idea



TODAY'S VICTORIANA: Regatta cofounder Spring Maxfield (far left) with event volunteers Meredith Hamilton and Cairenn Voigt.

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that we'd go into the space age with steam-powered vehicles and that we'd be floating around with steam-powered jet packs like in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. Then, of course, history and technology took a different turn to fossil fuels and gasoline and diesel, and steam power got left behind, so that idea of the future that never happened is what we're going after, that antiquated idea of the space race."

With recent coverage in the *New York Times*, a magazine just launched to serve enthusiasts and an "Anachrotechnofestishism" art exhibit currently on in Seattle celebrating the movement, steampunk is, well, gathering steam.

Maxfield and Handcar Regatta cofounder Ty Jones, owner of Ray Modern, like the elasticity of steampunk's look and ethos. It's family-friendly (think adorable ragamuffins in newsboy hats), it's creative (hand-hammered copper laptop covers), it's silly (modern-day snake-oil salesmen replete with jugglers) and it's trendy (girls in corsets). Inventing Dr. Kitty's overblown tale as a backdrop to their very unusual festival was just among the pleasures.

While most of us can conjure a handcar—wasn't that what George Clooney spent so much time pumping down the railroad tracks in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—the word "regatta" may throw visitors for a loop. That's the intention.

"You're supposed to be slightly uncomfortable, slightly off-kilter," Jones smiles, joining Maxfield on his couch. "Regatta" in this instance has nothing to do with boats and everything to do with the train tracks that have sat essentially unused in downtown Santa Rosa for decades. "Having a lot of people out in the streets in Railroad Square, using the SMART site where everyone has been waiting on pins and needles for years for something to happen—why do we have to wait for the developers?" Maxfield asks rhetorically. "All the people who are going to make it lively and wonderful are already here, so let's use that space instead of just letting it become a garbage dump."

Hence the regatta, which is really a time-trials race between hand-built cars that ride exclusively on rails. Maxfield and Jones have determined that a damsel in distress will be tied to the tracks; not running her over is a crucial element of the competition. Awards will be given, not necessarily for speed, but for ingenuity and mechanical speculation.

Some 16 handcars have already entered the competition, and at least five more are expected to wheel in on the day of the Regatta. Meanwhile, four huge sculptures will be hauled to Railroad Square, where belly dancers, a marching band, jugglers and other so-called freaks of a gentler era will hold sway. There is also a Maker Faire-style crafts market, food and drinks will flow, and seven area bands will play.

"We're bringing attention to the railroad tracks and public transportation, performance art and music and kinetic art and sculpture, and we have all of these artists who do massive sculpture, who are bringing their work down just to set up on the SMART site, and now the city's Art in Public Places committee is thoroughly excited and they really want to see these works, and they're talking about possibly purchasing some of it to be placed on a permanent basis in the city," Maxfield enthuses in a rush. "In that respect, we're acting as a bridge for two sides that don't always have the best communication with each other."

Jones and Maxfield have been playing with the idea of hosting an arts festival for years but couldn't find a concept that held them. "It's a lot about what it's not," Jones says of the Regatta. "Originally, we had talked and kicked around the idea of doing another Sausalito [art festival], but that really seemed kind of boring, so the idea just fell apart." This one stuck. With \$4,000 in seed money from the Arts District, the two each invested their own funds to make the project happen. They see it as a long-term annual fest that will eventually be on par with Ferndale's huge Kinetic Sculpture Race, which brings thousands of people and millions of their dollars to Humboldt County each year.

"I'm tired of having to go to San Francisco or L.A. to see great art," Maxfield says. "O'Reilly Media is right here, and yet they do the Maker Faire in San Mateo. I'm not driving two hours and fighting parking to do that. I've got kids here and I have an investment in my house, and I want to see Santa Rosa be the city that it can be with the population that it has and the resources it has. Why are we not more arts-oriented? Every study across the board for the last 10 years says that art is what makes community, yet we're still struggling with that. I know that everybody out there loves the arts—why can't we make it work? I think that a lot of it just gets caught up in bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo. Everyone's forming committees on how to bring the arts downtown."

"Committees," Jones laughs shortly, "don't work."

"Let's do this feasibility study!" Maxfield mimics. "Well, you can do that for 10 years, but that doesn't put the sculpture in the street. How can we actually support the arts in Sonoma County while supporting the artists themselves, which I don't think go hand-in-hand. We can sit there and try to make deals with founders and funders, or we can just ask the artists to bring it, and that's what I did."

Maxfield plans to spend Regatta day dressed as an aviator; Jones is still undecided. Participants are encouraged to don their best

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steampunk regalia. The whole thing is free. What, after all, does the community have to lose? "You can take risks," Maxfield stresses of the nascent festival. "You can have it be a little funky and a little bit gritty, and it's still going to appeal to people. You don't just have to have easels on grass."

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The first annual Handcar Regatta takes over downtown Santa Rosa's Railroad Square on Sunday, Sept. 28, from 10am to 6pm. The handcar races are slated for 1pm; live music and performance from 11am. Between Fourth Street's Depot Park and Sixth Street. Free. 707.526.5315. www.handcar-regatta.com.

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