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Tuesday, Jan 07, 2003

Local

Posted on Wed, Oct. 09, 2002

The Philadelphia Inquirer

New children's book captures one girl's wish for a Viking ship

Exploring the world - from the backyard.

By Lini S. Kadaba
Inquirer Staff Writer

Emma Schachner is no longer a bushy-tailed fox nor a sword-wielding Viking, though she still lusts for a good adventure.

Now, she is something more mundane - a junior at Bucknell University studying political science and eyeing veterinary school.

But a decade ago, when she was 9, something magical happened in her neighborhood of Swarthmore. She wanted, desperately, a real Viking ship. And she got one.

Her mother, Judith Byron Schachner, tells the story best, having spun the fantastic family events of 1992 into a new picture book titled *Yo, Vikings!*, out in time for Leif Ericson Day.

That would be Leif the Lucky, believed to have landed in North America first, before "that other guy" (as any self-respecting Viking refers to Christopher Columbus). The Leif Ericson Society International and the Leif Ericson Viking Ship Inc., both based in the Philadelphia area, will celebrate Viking history with a noon ceremony today at the Viking statue on Kelly Drive.

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The goal is to show another side of a civilization with a reputation for plundering and pillaging, says Gene H. Martenson, a director of the Viking Ship group.

"No doubt, the Vikings were crude," he says. "But we feel the Vikings were amazing nautical engineers, seamen, merchants, settlers."

Emma had a spirit for adventure herself.

Like in the storybook, the real-life girl who loved to dress as a fox wrote a school report on explorer Erik the Red, father of Leif Ericson.

Soon she was doodling Viking ships instead of foxes.

"She lived by her wit and her sword," her mother, 51, says.

In the story, Emma wants a Viking ship for her birthday. Lo and behold, one's for sale. She and brother Ollie (in real life, that would be Emma's younger sister, Sarah) pool their piggy-bank resources (\$128) and make an offer. It looks grim at first, but Emma gets her ship.

Several reviewers have praised Schachner's story and whimsical watercolor illustrations. But in the School Library Journal, Grace Oliff, a librarian in Hillsdale, N.J., took exception with Erik the Red's upbeat image and certain inaccuracies, such as Emma's Viking hat with horns, a popular misconception.

Oliff also found Emma's success at landing a backyard Viking ship "totally implausible."

And so it would seem, but a visit to the Schachner home proved otherwise. In the garden, a piece of wood coiled into a dragon's tail rises triumphantly from the earth. And near the porch is a red-and-turquoise dragon's head, battered now but

If You Go

Leif Ericson Day will be celebrated at noon today at the Viking statue along Kelly Drive's Boat House Row in Philadelphia. For more information, call 610-328-9307 or go to www.vikingship.org.

The *Ravnen*, 29 feet long with oars and a sail with a painted raven, succumbed a few years ago to carpenter ants and rot. But its memory certainly lives.

Schachner remembers well the times the girls slayed dragons with cardboard swords in the heart of this Quaker town. Emma even used her precious fox tail to trim a Viking hat and became a fan of the 1958 movie *The Vikings*, starring Kirk Douglas.

It was the movie that inspired Emma to first ask for a Viking ship, pushing her beyond mere doodles and fantasy. She asked and asked, as only a child could. "You think first of a Lego kit or model of a ship," Schachner says. "No. No. No."

Then, Emma's father, Bob Schachner, saw a newspaper item about the *Ravnen*. It had a hole in it from an encounter with a Buick, and it was for sale. \$7,500. If the Viking men couldn't find a taker, they planned to burn it in true Viking tradition.

Emma and Sarah, certain the hand of a Viking god had intervened, wrote a letter on ruled paper, offered \$128 from their savings and a drawing of a ship.

Ivar Christensen, then-president of the Ericson Society, was touched, striking a deal with the girls' parents for \$700 more, money the Schachner's had set aside for a swing set.

"We were desperate to raise money for the new boat," Martenson, of the Viking Ship group, says. "They were the only ones who had any interest."

Besides, he says, the society hoped the ship would reveal the nicer side of Vikings.

The long boat arrived on a trailer, hauled by "manly men" dressed as Vikings, to the cheers of Emma, Sarah and a gaggle of friends. "Everybody played until the stars came out," Schachner says.

"We'd land the boat and discover new territories," recalls Emma, talking by phone from Bucknell. "It was so cool. It was

the biggest dream-come-true."

For years, children from a nearby elementary school made field trips. Strangers often stopped, curious about the dragon looming over the hedges.

Schachner, just beginning a career as a children's book illustrator and author in 1992, knew she had a story to tell, one about Vikings and dreams.

"Think of the most amazing thing you ever wanted as a child," she says, "and then you get it."

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