

# In Memoriam: Maestro John D. Bailey 1928-2010

by David S. Hoornstra  
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*I'll never forget the day my mother called me urgently to the TV. A fencing instructor had come to town, and she knew well how important that would be to me. I had waited all my young life.*

John Bailey was the grandfather of the Ann Arbor Sword Club – on both sides of the family. The club was formed after Robert Lynn Asprin asked me to take over his Ann Arbor Rec Department fencing class so he could write science fiction full time. It turned out John had been instructor and mentor to both of us.

This document is intended to reveal the wisdom and philosophy that not only led me to take up teaching but colored and shaped the unique mix that is the Ann Arbor Sword Club.

I write this because I owe him more thanks than I could manage to express to him while he yet lived. All narrative has a point of view: this one is from that poor kid who received so much. When he appointed me assistant instructor at age sixteen, he started the change in my self-image from poverty child to something infinitely more rich. In recent years I have kept returning to the things he taught me. Others taught me the love of classical music and literature, but he alone inspired my desire to see – and be a citizen of – the wider world.

I have tried to include bits and pieces from Barbara Bailey, whom John married some years after he left Michigan and modern fencing. Others have their stories to tell; I hope you write to us. My contribution is having witnessed his progress from instructor to master, arguably his happiest and most productive years as a modern-fencing coach: 1962 through 1982.

Having started fencing too late to make competition headlines, he applied himself heart and soul to teaching. What set him apart from other masters I have known is the open-minded, open-handed, wide-ranging creativity that illuminated his teaching and infected his students; a quality that came largely from hard-won experience of the world.

Born in Denver as Dirk Reiss (he told me as if “Bailey” were an alias), he was orphaned at an early age and adopted by Joseph and Maureen Bailey of Chicago. In his obituary, his second wife, Barbara (née Johannessen), says he served in the Navy for two years in WWII. After the war, he joined the Marines and then the Air Force, finding (he told me) neither of them tough enough. But the US Immigration Service provided the challenge and discipline he craved.

I was neither the first nor the last nor the brightest of his “star” pupils. As far as I know, no Bailey student ever made it to the Olympics. His students became teachers. My older fellow students at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan included Barry Newcomb, who – when Bailey transferred to Detroit – took over as coach and built a varsity program at Lake Superior State. Another fellow student, Dick Kirkbride, founded the fencing club at Michigan Tech. Today, a student from the Trenton years, Dennis Murphy, has a terrific club up the road near Brighton, Liberty Lakes Fencing Club.



Portrait of John D. Bailey

by David S. Hoornstra, Oil on canvas 1966  
from a photo from taken in the late 1950s.  
In the collection of Barbara Bailey.

## Chapter One: Sault Ste. Marie

With a population of 19,000 and shrinking and its thousands of elms dying, my home town was a depressed area both emotionally and economically. A significant portion of the local men were unemployed after the closing of its three major industries in a 12-year span. For the attention of the local womenfolk, they had to compete with 7,000 military men within 20 miles, plus 2,000 engineering students at the local branch of Michigan Tech (later Lake Superior State College).

If this were not enough, it was the only Canadian border point between Duluth and Detroit: more than a few strange people came through town. But when I met him at the local chess club, Mr. Bailey was the oddest I had ever met in my young life.

Not much over 5'8", round of face, of body not slim, 33 years old, with straight brown hair, Bailey was not of prepossessing appearance, but quickly made himself unforgettable. His speaking style, in a flat tenor, was very deliberate, nearly a drawl. He chain-smoked cigarettes which, to me, a lifelong non-smoker, seemed unusually acrid. His manner made his law-enforcement occupation manifest: between his voice, gestures and body language you pictured him facing down a tough hombre on the Mexican border. Or maybe a crowd of them.

The photo above shows the Bailey I knew. My 1966 painting (page 1) was based on a studio photo taken in the 1950s.

It was many years later that I first saw an Edward G. Robinson movie. But, in the detective in "Double Indemnity," in his "Sea Wolf," and in the subtle, tough, sophisticated older gambler in "The Cincinnati Kid," John Bailey's speech, look and manner came alive again. I have not seen Robinson's "Genghis Khan," but *that* is a John Bailey look I well remember.

But Bailey was much more than such comparisons might suggest. He carried himself with the authority of a Marine weapons instructor and the confidence of a martial arts expert because he was both. He had a brown belt in Karate long before there was a dojo on every street corner, with a specialty in Sai (quillon dagger). His steady gaze and command voice could easily dominate a crowd. His Expert-class pistol trophies filled a six-by-six-foot case in his living room. But his "hard" style was softened for his friends by his love of wit and of learning.

In the summer of 1962, he and his wife Mary had just settled into "the Sault" from El Centro, California. They also transferred "Salle JoMa" ("the School of John and Mary;" they pronounced the "J" softly, as if it might be Spanish or French), and offered classes in the National Guard Armoury gym. Bailey's expert PR work gathered a wonderful group of over 35 people of all ages, the sort of people fencing attracts with its international, sophisticated aura; people I would not have dreamed existed in the Sault.

I am pretty sure one of the several certificates on the wall in their Sault home showed he finished high school in the military. The Navy, Marines and Air Force had shown him the world, and he had traveled it like a sponge. My degree is in English; I am a published scholar; my command of English is well above the norm – but his was *at least* as good. He also spoke fluent Spanish and dropped Latin quotations like "De gustibus non disputandum" which he translated as "there's no accounting for taste."



John Bailey c. 1970 in master's jacket



Actor Edward G. Robinson as Genghis Khan

Inevitably, his travels took him to Heidelberg, where it took him 75 bouts to get the two scars he showed us, one under his chin and one on his upper lip.

John probably married Mary in the fifties. They seemed entirely devoted the entire 20 years I knew her. I don't recall her maiden name but remember her as a slender, cultivated, redhaired lady from Chicago. Although she was taller, he addressed her fondly as "little one." A bespectacled stay-at-home housewife, she smoked even more than John.

Early on, she helped teach us new fencers. Once Bailey had trained a few assistants, she stayed home. Hers was a lonely life with irregular hours due to John's working all sorts of shifts, not only at the International Bridge but on other assignments. He often arrived at the club armed, in full uniform.

In his group classes, the drill-sergeant was in his element. He duck-walked us around the gym and gave us the French Foreign Legion sword drill (hold sword fully extended until some poor student lets his/her arm sag) and had us lunge until our legs cramped and cried for mercy. He taught classical Italian

and French foil schools; my first foil was a cross-hilt, false-ricasso Italian. We used wrist straps and old French terminology. We did our sabre counting edges only, never flats, as we still do at the Ann Arbor Sword Club. At the annual club tournament, he awarded a Form Trophy for the most correct technique.

That first summer, he invited me and two of my friends over to his house on weekends for 6 a.m. lessons followed by chess or Kriegspiel with refreshments. (*Kriegspiel?* Ask me sometime.) He loaned me the best basic fencing book I have ever read, *The Theory and Practice of Fencing* (1933) by Julio Martinez Castello. No one has ever improved on the crisp, clear illustrations.

He spoke his truths in a slightly high, flat but clear voice: "Foil is the basic weapon; sabre is the Fun weapon, but Epee is the Man's weapon." To teach subtlety and patience: "Gently, gently, catchee mon-kee." To teach the grip he told us, like most instructors, to "hold it as you would a bird."

Verbally, he pulled no punches no matter how young or pretty the student might be. He would say something that sounded gutter-coarse until you realized it was precisely accurate: "That's not a lunge. That's an abortion." If two fencers were merely tapping each other's blades, failing to really attack, he would say "What you are doing is not real fencing. It is only masturbation." A true practitioner of military instruction techniques, he knew how to make you remember the concept.

On the other hand, he never resorted to vulgar four-letter profanity. Au contraire. If peeved, his epithet



Photo:  
David S.  
Hoorstra

Mary Bailey with dog Sean, 1966-7



Photo: David S. Hoorstra

John Bailey (r) coaching at Salle Joma in the National Guard Armory, Sault Ste Marie, c. 1964. Note military service stripes.

was “Oh, joy.” Nor would he resort to time-fillers and place-holders like “ummm..” or “uh ... .” He never opened a sentence with “Well, ...” or “You know, ... .” He cherished, and taught by example, the old-fashioned art of genuine conversation in which one spoke in one’s turn, without the hurry born of fear of interruption. He asked thoughtful questions, and listened with full attention to what you said. He took time before replying. A favorite saying of his was “Do not engage mouth until brain is in gear.”

To women he was unfailingly courteous; for many, including my mother, he epitomized the term “courtly.” He used to say “I’m queer for women.” He cherished the arts of courtship and seduction, freely discussing technique, but made it clear that, to him, love was no superficial thing. In spite of such talk, I do not suspect infidelity was actually contemplated. He was my first example of chivalry; to me he said “Patience is a virtue: be a virgin.” He never belittled women’s intelligence. Instead he encouraged it, actively recruiting them as close friends and followers in both fencing and in his SCA household.

I had been brought up entirely by my mother; Bailey filled the “manly” gaps, taking me under his wing. At the club I was soon leading drills with students twice my size and age, and giving lessons to beginners. Bailey took me along on two-man demo expeditions to Rotary lunches at the Ojibway, the Air Force base and every other showcase he could arrange. I even started a fencing club at Sault High.

At the local police range, he taught me every kind of pistol he used; .22 target, .357 Magnum, .38 snub-nose, and .45 automatic, at considerable expense in ammunition.

Bailey was well respected in his law enforcement career; sought after for his classes in night-stick. He told stories and shared techniques which made it clear that a Border patrolman was no mere guard or sentinel but a detective. He would read classified ads for coded messages about drug drops or rendezvous. He expressed his faith in intuition when evaluating the potential threat from anyone, particularly coming through the border – no woman’s foible but a serious life-or-death sense.

The photo at right shows not one but *two* valued friends. Doug Benoit, one of the kindest men I ever knew, worked alongside Bailey. No two men could be more different. John was always “Mr. Bailey”

or “Svea” until the 1990s, but “M’sieur Ben-wa,” in my college French class, was just “Doug” when we worked together as yearbook photographers, spending hours in the darkroom expanding our technical knowledge and skills (he taught me, mostly, without my knowing it). Earlier, I had given fencing lessons to his daughter Tyrene. Later, we dated... only twice but unforgettably. The Benoit’s started the local Montessori School, and I heard later they were involved in Montessori nationally.

In 1963, a Navy destroyer came to the Sault, bringing an old friend of Bailey’s who taught a karate class on board. We gave them a fencing demo. Bailey and the instructor demonstrated Sai (quillon dagger), recently re-introduced at the Sword Club by Amy, whose “sai” moves brought Bailey’s back to life.

In 1964 Bailey took me downstate to a tournament at the old Detroit Fencers’ Club on Woodward Avenue. I’ll never forget the bright red street door with the gold shield, and upstairs the gym-size fencing



Sault Evening News clipping, Dec. 30, '65: “Douglas Benoit (left) was honored by the Border Patrol along with John Bailey (right) for their outstanding performance on a 60-day assignment in Chicago.”



Photo: Hoornstra collection

room with shields and portraits between the large windows. To one side, a small library with fireplace and bar. Dressing rooms and a ping-pong table. Friday night was the Masters' One Touch Epee Tournament; the Novice on Saturday. Frankly I can't recall how I did. Bailey said I acquitted myself well – all that mattered. He pointed out many people I would later know well.

In those days neither there were no certificates for mere instructors. The National Fencing Coaches' Association of America (NFCAA) is the certifying body for

masters. John was going for it and I was part of the process. In 1964, John's old teacher, Maestro Meyer of Chicago, came to the Sault and spent half a day putting me through my paces in foil. Later, we visited Maestro "Charlie" Schmitter, varsity fencing coach at Michigan State for forty-odd years. I received a demo lesson (photo above) and bouted with varsity fencers. John became a foil master about 1970, and the other two certificates followed in the 1970s.

Bailey was into history from way back. He had books on period fencing and taught us all in the most traditional way he knew how.

I painted John's portrait in 1966. This led to introductions, and one of Bailey's connections hired me to design a rathskellar for the basement of the Ojibway Hotel. I submitted my design as an oil painting. (The rathskellar was never built due to obstructions in the building.)

Thus, on top of everything else, John Bailey spurred my art career.

## Chapter Two: Detroit area: Lion and Sword

In 1967 the Immigration Service transferred Bailey to Detroit, where he served as an Inspector. John and Mary picked Trenton, downriver towards Toledo, to live. Salle JoMa was reborn as the Lion and Sword Fencing Club, housed in a superb recreation building on West Road in Trenton.

1966-7 was my first stint as an impoverished junior at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Unbelievably, there was NO fencing team, not even a club. I had no car, but Bailey somehow got me over to Detroit and took me to Mario's, a celebrated restaurant downtown. That was my introduction to fine dining. I have never recovered: I simply must have red wine with my dinner.

Fencing *did* come to Ann Arbor. A rich business-school professor hired a school gym and got Maestro Istvan Danosi to come out and give lessons weekly on the far side of Ann Arbor. Between the fees and lack of transportation, I could not get there more than once or twice. The rich professor's son went on to win six US Foil Championships and is now Maestro Gregory Massialas in California.

Visiting the Sault in the summer of '67, I got a call from a former saber fencer, Ted Askwith, offering a



John Bailey's personal L&S patch courtesy of Barbara Bailey



Photo: David S. Hoornstra

Barry Newcombe presenting awards, 1972

job designing tourist buildings. Once again, Bailey had made the connection.

When Bailey moved downstate, the Sault Fencing Club moved onto the LSSC campus with Barry Newcomb in charge. When I transferred back there in the fall of '67 it was a big part of my campus life. I helped teach, and Barry led us to Varsity status with a great thumping of "The Big Orange" (U-Kentucky) in my senior year. Barry was a great coach.

When the Vietnam War threatened my future, I asked Bailey's advice. He said in his mythic style "Do not go to the killing ground." I dropped out of ROTC but stayed in college til graduation (1969). That fall I joined the Coast Guard. In boot camp I became Assistant Recruit Company Commander, marching the troops and dishing out pushups to the inept, unwilling... or defiantly resentful.

In our final week, I was tipped off that several of the resentful had decided to give me a midnight "blanket party." Translation: bundle a guy in his own blanket and kick the hell out of him. I had never been in a fight: I had spent my early teens

running from bullies. Bailey had not taught me self-defense *per se*. Due to having dental appointments instead of PT all through boot, I had *no* upper-body strength. Scared but unwilling to *look* like a coward, I took only one precaution: telling the night door sentinel to turn on the lights if he heard a scuffle.

In my row-end upper bunk, I stayed awake for what seemed like hours with no plan. When I suddenly realized I was surrounded, instinct took over. Clutching my blanket, I leaped over the three on the open side, landing on my feet, spinning the blanket as a shield in front of me and retreating into an aisle to narrow my front. In the brief action that ensued, mine were the only 6 punches that connected. When the lights came on I was alone, untouched. For years I had wondered "What good is fencing in a real self-defense situation?" I finally had my answer: none. But footwork, distance control and the ability to remain calm under attack are priceless.

These days, as the AASC pursues Historical European Martial Arts, we welcome many people with the karate, wrestling, judo and aikido training I never took. They are always younger, usually faster and often stronger, but I find that what I have learned from fencing usually prevails.

After boot camp, electrician school. Second in my class, I had my choice of 10 duty stations. I called Bailey for advice. I took it –and the West Pacific– and served two years before the mast of a slow freighter to China... literally. When my ship was decommissioned, I was given my choice of district and transferred to Sault Ste. Marie – pretty soft duty by comparison. Plus, I could get back into fencing at LSSC, where Barry Newcomb had by now gotten the varsity team up and running. He appointed me assistant coach, traveling with the team. In addition, competing in downstate AFLA tournaments, we would often see



The author, EM3 David Hoornstra, landing at Iwo Jima in 1971 from USCG Cutter Kukui WAK-186

Bailey and his Lion & Sword students.

When we hosted our own AFLA tournament, the Laker 4-Weapon, Bailey brought his Lion and Sword team to support the event. His top student and assistant was Jackie Sapulski, who became a competitor, instructor and official in her own right.

Bailey student Bob Asprin brought an Ann Arbor team. Howard Hayden came with his "Over-the-Hill Gang." (When he won the Masters One-Touch Epee tournament at age 65, they renamed it after him.)

In that era, Maestro Danosi and his Wayne State fencing team, including Olympians on scholarship, dominated Michigan competition.

In spite of this, two of us from LSSC – now Barry Newcomb students – managed to qualify to the US Nationals in epee in '73. When Steve Gerrish fenced in the State Finals, the showcase tournament attended by all the fencing "who's whos," Bailey and his wife Mary sat with Barry and his wife Julie (photo at right). Steve won the epee championship.

When the US Military Team ignored my application for the nationals, the Coast Guard stepped in and paid my way to Tucson to fence as an individual. I was eliminated in the first round; Steve made it to the second.

Later in '73, I took an early out for art school at Michigan and returned to Ann Arbor. I continued both teaching and competitive fencing at the U-Michigan Fencing Club. When I could, I took my students down to Trenton to fence with Lion and Sword.

Bailey's new club was vibrant; he was innovating with videotape training. "Why tell them what they're doing when you can SHOW them?" He had by this time acquired a pair of duelling swords with two bloodings and a kill on them. One night in his Trenton basement I received an unforgettable epee lesson with them, they simply being the nearest swords to hand.

At first I didn't meet any other Ann Arbor instructors, but I passed on Bailey's advice to Chuck Lauer, my tall left-handed star sabre guy: "Don't take my word for it. Seek out other instructors and get their point of view." He did. After visiting the Ann Arbor Recreation Department class, he told me I MUST meet instructor Robert Lynn "Bob" Asprin. When we fenced, it was like fencing a slightly younger version of myself: I knew exactly what he would try next. It should have been obvious to me who his coach was: (of course) Bailey. Turns out I *had* fenced him in foil at the Laker 4-Weapon – a different context.



Photo: David S. Hoornstra

Jackie Sapulski, right, in the "Laker 4-Weapon," 1973

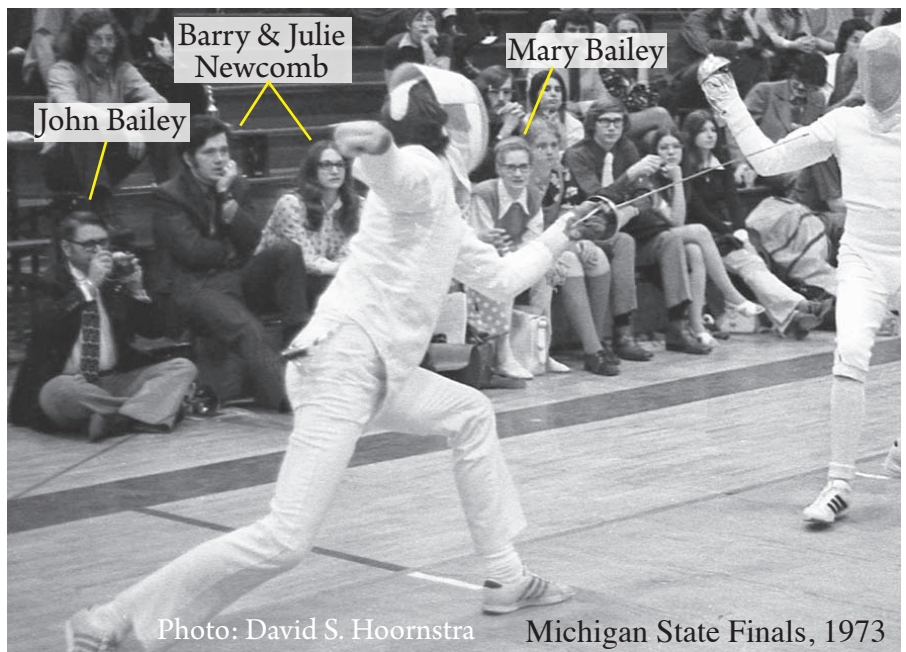


Photo: David S. Hoornstra Michigan State Finals, 1973

LSSC's Steve Gerrish (left) demolishes Danosi student Andy Amort

Bob, an Army veteran and lover of history and things military, introduced me to the Society for Creative Anachronism. Bailey told me later that he and Bob had co-founded the Great Dark Horde. I was surprised: I knew John was, if anything, a Viking. But I was not surprised he had found the SCA before I did. Back in 1963 he had given me a research-and-art assignment: find the Bailey arms and design him a business card with that shield on it. Azure, Nine mullets argent (three, three, two and one white stars on a blue field). When he later formed a household in the SCA he called it “the Castle of Nine Stars” and himself “Svea Wartooth.” Bob, of course, was “Yang the Nauseating, Khan of the Great Dark Horde.”

Bob made it clear: you didn’t have to be a Mongol to join their version of the horde. By the time I joined as a Scot in January 1974, the Dark Horde had boycotted SCA combat activities in a campaign for safety. But in late 1973 my student Chuck Lauer (“Cirion the Left-Handed”) broke ranks with a bang. Using fencing techniques, he authorized at his very first event, defeating a knight in the process.

Chuck and I were both in the A & D School at Michigan, he in Architecture. Together we attended every possible SCA event for the next three years. Our weekend might well include a Saturday SCA event in Chicago and a fencing tournament near Detroit on Sunday. We seldom saw Svea at events.

In 1976, Bob Asprin decided to put all his time into writing Science Fiction for a living. He quit his day job and resigned from the SCA and the Dark Horde. When he asked me to take over his rec department fencing class, I jumped at it. After a season and a half, wanting to do more theatrical and historical swordplay than the department would have liked, we bought out the rec department gear and created the independent Ann Arbor Sword Club, with a similar schedule, renting the same school buildings. We inherited the Lion and Sword/Ann Arbor Fencing Club trophy, contested only three times.

Bailey’s schedule did not allow him much freedom to travel to typical SCA events, but his own “Khanate of the Stobor” – largely Lion and Sword members – had terrific personae, costuming and crafts.

The “Stobor” was a fictional creature in a Robert Heinlein novel (“robots” spelled backwards). John, an avid science fiction fan, met Heinlein through Bob, an absolute fanatic. Bob was a protégé of Gordon R. Dickson, who consulted all three of us on combat techniques for his books.

Bob did not miss the SCA, but the Dark Horde went into a kind of shock. It – we – needed better closure. In 1978, with my khanate, I hosted the Khan’s Birthday Party in Ann Arbor and got Bob to attend. He met with everyone. I believe it helped; who can really say? After a respectable career as a science fiction author and entrepreneur, a close friend of George Takei, Bob died in 2010.

When I authorized in SCA combat in 1979, it was in Svea Wartooth’s scale armor and Freon-tank helm. Although I was never technically a Svea Wartooth fighting student, and never won SCA



Photo: David S. Hoornstra

Robert Lynn Asprin in one of his elements: “filksinging” at a Science Fiction convention.



David Hoornstra (above left) in SCA armored combat, 2014



knighthood nor a crown, I am even now, at 69, often told I am considered a pretty respectable opponent, either “fun to fight” or very formidable due to techniques I derived from fencing – and from John Bailey.

### Chapter 3: Exodus

In 1982 everything changed for John. Mary died of cancer. John, a life-long chain-smoker who would sometimes knock his cigarette into his fencing mask on its way to his lips, went cold turkey. Feeling he could no longer do his job without becoming an undue risk to the public, he retired from the Immigration Service, held a farewell event with his Khanate (which I attended) stored or sold much of his hard-to-move property and hit the road in an old van. His hair turned white; from militarily trim he went long-haired and bearded. He lived nomadically for a few years and then resurfaced at a Dark Horde Kurultai in the Chicago area in 1989. He was elected Khan of the Dark Horde later that year.

There he married Barbara Johannessen. I met her at a Dark Horde Kurultai event in Milwaukee about 1992. I saw him again the next year at Horde Camp at the SCA’s annual Pennsic War, where he served as unofficial patriarch. When leaders of the Horde wanted him to be Khan again, he said “Do not make me your khan, for I will *tell* and not *ask*.”

The last time I saw him was at Pennsic, 1998. To him the old Michigan days were part of another world. Along about 2004 or 2005, John and Barbara Bailey moved to Rock Island, IL. Unable to walk, but equally unable to *not* teach fencing, he had himself strapped to a board so as to give lessons in SCA rapier to several Horde members in the area. It was exceedingly painful to me, later, to hear of him in a wheelchair, and I put off going to see him until too late.

After his passing, Barbara very kindly sent me the Lion and Sword club banner and John’s specially-embroidered Lion and Sword patch. Both display the motto “One light only,” which technically means “Leave no room for doubt about whose touch it is.” In reality it means “keep to your purpose” and much more, reflecting, as do so many things, John’s self-reliant spirit.

Coach Jackie Sapulski also passed away in 2010.

In 2011 I searched the web for “Lion and Sword.” The only result was *this document*. Recently (2016) on Facebook, many old Bailey students, like Lion and Sword/Khanate of the Stobor member Marilyn Tacoma (“Fang,” once at least Khan), have shared their appreciation.

The past two decades have not been easy ones for me, but I have been supported by the realization that, apart from money, I am a rich man indeed. As I continue teaching, I am more frequently reminded that in this respect, I am one of his many grateful heirs. And as the Sword Club makes its mark on the world of historical swordplay, I know he would see that it is his mark also.



John Bailey with Barbara Bailey, 2007. The leather cincher dates from his time in Sault Ste. Marie.

*David Stuart MacLachlan Hoomstra* Facebook artist page: David Stuart Hoomstra  
*in the SCA known as Daibhid MacLachlan, Baron of Court (res. Cynnabar, Midrealm)*