

# Epona Celebration: Beasts, Feasts, and Blessings

This week's column is dedicated to the upcoming Feast of Epona on Mackinac as conceived by the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau. I call it "feasts, beasts, and blessings" for several reasons. I'm happy the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau is giving credence to the horses; it seems to make much more sense than a celebration of baggage carts. This is a nice tribute in the Lilac Festival series of events. In addition to a "Dog and Pony Show Parade," which will be held at Windermere Point Friday, June 17, at 5 p.m., there will actually be a "blessing of the animals" held at the Mission Hill Barn.

Epona does have a horsey connection. She was considered to be a Celtic goddess, also identified as Edain. She was worshipped in the Celtic lands, Rome, and as far as Austrian borders. A retired professor emeritus in the classics, from the University of Michigan, also informs me that Epona was the only Celtic god-

dess honored by Romans with her own temple in Rome. In ancient Gaul (roughly the area of modern France), Epona had a her largest following. Gaulish was the language of Gaul and the extinct language of the ancient Celts.

She is often depicted sitting sidesaddle, or lying on a horse, or standing with many horses around her, usually inclusive of a mule or an ass. She is also portrayed as sitting among them. She was worshipped as the goddess of the lesser equines (mules and asses) as well as oxen, rivers, and springs. Sometimes she is depicted with a cornucopia, which suggests that she has something to with fertility.

In ancient Christo-Pagan times, the Feast of Epona was held in late December and used the symbol of the stable at Christ's birth, where all the animals, especially the horses, the asses, and the oxen, rested. People praised and paid homage to the beasts by decorating the stables with holly, ivy, and



This brooch depicts a rider taking a horse for blessing to the Goddess Edain.

small figures.

Little statues of Epona were often found in stables to worship her and, later, for good luck. Her greatest following was among Roman and Celtic soldiers during the Dark Ages and Christian writings note that the upper classes gradually abandoned Epona, while the lower classes of mule drivers and stable hands did not. The feast developed into one for the working class, and it was they who kept the custom.

Epona's feast day was gradually transferred to spring. Midsummer days (usually those falling from June 14 to

19) have held her celebrations. June 13 and 14 are often celebrated by revelers as Epona's Day.

The brooch photographed in this article comes from a southern Ireland museum and depicts a rider taking a horse to the goddess Edain, probably for a blessing, according to the description that accompanied it.

The Mackinac Island Epona fete will be in the time-honored tradition of having an actual animal blessing by a "member of the holy cloth." Horse blessings have long been a tradition in the British Isles where, on

opening day of fox hunts, a vicar would bless the horses for "fleetness, harmony, safety, and joy." They also bless the riders, too, to not have a bad fall. Traditionally, the Waterloo Hunt still invites a priest or deacon for this very purpose each October, and there is a public turnout of well-wishers.

In London, every third Sunday in September is Horsemen's Sunday. This celebration has taken place annually since 1968. The Hyde Park Riding Club and horsemen of all ages assemble at Hyde Park Crescent for a brief service done by the vicar of nearby St. John's and St. Michael's Church. Often, the vicar does the service mounted on horseback. The crowd then follows the procession to Kensington for a day of horse jumping. There is another holiday held each April in London called London's Harness Horse Parade. This is held in Battersea Park. Like the Feast of Epona, the Harness Horse Parade pays homage to the working horses, with both reverence and revelry.

Actually, another blessing in 1984 precedes the June 17 blessing of the animals on Mackinac. That summer, Michigan's First Lady Paula Blanchard and Father Guy Thoren of Ste. Anne's Church blessed all who attended, human as well as equine, and officially dedicated the original riding ring.

One hopes that all of you who are on Mackinac will join in Mackinac's homage to Epona, from the parade, to the new horse-inspired Seabiscuit and Grog eatery in town, to the barn at Mission Hill where, according to ancient beliefs, Epona really holds her dominion.

*Candice Dunnigan is an active member of the American Equestrian Association, the Waterloo Hunt, and the Mackinac Island Horsemen's Association. Seasonally she resides at Donnybrook and Easterly Cottage.*

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**Mackinac Island**  
**Yacht Club**  
**Bridge Results**



In Mackinac Island Yacht Club Bridge league games for the week ending Wednesday, June 1, Susan Bankard placed first and Nicki Krzykowski placed second.

**Tribal Meeting**  
**Set for June 4 on**  
**Mackinac Island**

The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians will hold a town meeting on Mackinac Island Saturday, June 4, at 2 p.m. to hear what tribal members think about tribal operations and programs. A similar meeting will be held in St. Ignace at Little Bear East Arena Monday, June 20, at 6 p.m.

The gatherings here are among 16 being scheduled around the state in a tribal effort to interact more closely with members.

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