

## Knights in Shining Armor

Around the eighth century, the nobility began to see the need for an army made up of cavalry (horsemen) and wearing armor. These were called *knights*. For these men to afford the equipment and horses they needed, the lord would grant them lands (in other words, make them vassals). Charles Martel used this system to raise a national army with which to fight the Moslems, and local nobles began using the same system.

Becoming a knight was the result of a long process. A boy from a good family offered to serve a baron or warrior, follow him into combat, and carry his shield and spear. It required much exercise, learning to ride, practicing with the weapons of the trade, and coping with the fatigue. It also



**Mounted knights were a formidable fighting force, but once knocked off, knights could not maneuver well on foot.**

involved learning proper manners around ladies: politeness, courtesy, and helpfulness. When he reached manhood, he prepared to receive knighthood. Wearing robes with colors signifying purity and devotion, he prayed and fasted. He was instructed by a priest on the true meaning of knighthood. He then took the vow of chivalry (which included purity, valor, compassion, defense of the church, and loyalty to the king). He knelt before a prince or a warrior who struck him lightly on the shoulder with the flat of his sword and said "In the name of God, St. Michael, and St. George, I make thee a knight; be valiant, bold, and loyal."

The high point for knighthood was the Crusade, and many knights bound themselves together in orders (like religious orders) dedicated to fight the Moslems. French knights formed the Knights Hospitalers. The Knights Templars was an order composed of knights from many nations. The Teutonic Knights were German. A group dedicated to freeing Spain from the Moslems was the Knights of the Santiago de Compostella.

The purpose of the knight was to fight, and much of his life was spent in warfare. In the earlier days of knighthood, a charge by men on horseback was more than enough to scatter men on foot. In time, however, new weapons came along that lessened the shock of a knight's attack. In the 13th century, the crossbow was developed. Firing a metal bolt, a footsoldier could use the crossbow to penetrate a knight's armor. However, it had major limitations. The crossbow was cumbersome, had to be loaded mechanically, and had a short range. The longbow was another useful weapon; it could not pierce armor, but when fired in volleys, it broke up charges on horseback. Anything that caused the horseman to fall off his horse was effective, because with the weight and bulk of his armor, he was defenseless on foot.

In the earlier years of the feudal system, becoming a knight was a way to improve one's position in life, but eventually that door of opportunity shut. People born into the upper class believed it was family, not service, that should fix a person's status. The process of becoming a knight then became more ritualistic with a boy from an upper-class family automatically becoming a page at the age of 7, a squire at about 14 or 15, and then going through the ritual ceremony of becoming a knight. Fewer and fewer boys from poor backgrounds were let into the knighthood.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Class \_\_\_\_\_

## CHALLENGES

1. Who used knights to fight the Moslems?

2. What was the main purpose for having knights?

3. What did a student knight do in his first days of training?

4. What lessons in manners were part of the training?

5. What two saints were important to the image of a knight?

6. What order of knights during the Crusades was made up of Frenchmen?

7. What was the most international order of knights during the Crusades?

8. What was the advantage of a crossbow against a knight on horseback?

9. What was the best strategy in fighting a knight?

10. What happened to the use of knighthood as a way to improve a poor boy's status in life?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Class \_\_\_\_\_

## POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. Why does knighthood seem so exciting and glamorous to the modern person?

---

---

---

---

---

2. What was there about being a knight that might make a man into a better person?

---

---

---

---

---

3. How would you, as a knight, react to a life without wars?

---

---

---

---

---