

LAUREL AND HARDY FANS STAGE FILM FEST JUST FOR LAUGHS

By Phat X. Chiem, Tribune Staff Writer

The motto of Sons of the Desert, the international society of Laurel and Hardy buffs, is a Latin phrase that translates: "Two minds without a single thought."

Mindless, indeed, but it's exactly why the silliness of the famous funny fellows continues to captivate thousands of fans worldwide, even though it has been nearly a half-century since the release of their last film.

Several hundred devotees of "The Boys" are expected to show up Saturday evening for the Laurel and Hardy Film Festival at the Olson Auditorium of Lutheran General Hospital, 1775 W. Dempster St., Park Ridge. The free event is sponsored by the Chicago-area chapter of Sons of the Desert. The local group is dubbed the Bacon Grabbers after the comedy team's 1929 silent short of the same name.

The festival, which begins at 7 p.m., marks the 30th anniversary of the Chicago Bacon Grabbers and features an introduction by Stan Laurel's daughter, Lois Laurel Hawes.

Sons of the Desert was founded in 1965 by John McCabe, who wrote a biography of the comic pair. The name is taken from the 1933 feature film in which Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, as members of a fun-loving lodge, slip away from their wives to attend a rowdy convention in Chicago.

It might seem surprising that some 80 families in the Chicago area still meet regularly to watch and discuss movies featuring the derby-wearing duo, who had their heyday in the 1920s and 1930s. But to many fans, the hijinks of Laurel and Hardy are timeless.

"Their comedy hasn't aged. It's as funny as when I first watched them as a girl," said Park Ridge resident Jenny Wulff, 64, who is the fan club's co-treasurer with her husband, Wayne. "Maybe even more so because they're gone and this is what's left of them. It brings back good memories."

As a child growing up on Chicago's North Side, Mickey Gold, 68, was enchanted by the black-and-white movies of Laurel and Hardy at Saturday afternoon matinees. The films sparked a lifelong love affair with movies for Gold, who spent 50 years managing the Foxfield Theatre in St. Charles and the Oriental Theatre in downtown Chicago.

"It's nostalgia," said Gold, an early member of the Bacon Grabbers who now lives in Naperville. "I saw them before the age of television. I've always liked their clean-cut entertainment."

Entertainment Weekly recently ran a millennium issue that put Laurel and Hardy among the top 100 movie stars.

For Marcia Opal, a public relations officer at Lutheran General and the Bacon Grabbers' secretary, the appeal of Laurel and Hardy is universal, as she discovered when she traveled to Nepal with a Laurel and Hardy pin on her camera strap. She was stopped by two Nepalese teenagers.

"They pointed at the pin and started laughing," she said. "They said they had seen Laurel and Hardy on videos."

The humor of Laurel and Hardy isn't "based on meanness or humiliation. They're just trying to do the best they can. Unfortunately, things don't always work out the way they dream, and everybody can relate to that," Opal said.

For information on the film festival, call 847-658-3421.