

Hey!! Want to Buy Your Family's Coat of Arms ?

By Richard Eastman

(Edited and Condensed by Howard Faulkner)

What can be more personal than one's name? I bet that thousands of people will give presents this year that depict a family coat of arms printed on paper, "*suitable for framing*". Or they may give coats of arms on t-shirts, sweatshirts, golf jerseys, stationery, coffee mugs, or even key chains. There is only one problem: **almost all of them are bogus!**

In shopping malls across America, there are pushcart vendors selling reproductions of coats of arms, claiming to be the "proud history and heritage of your family name" or some such words. A number of Web sites proclaim that they can sell you "authentic" copies of your family's coat of arms. I have one thing to say to these con artists: "Balderdash!"

The study of coats of arms is called heraldry. Those who control the issuance of arms are the heralds. Typically, each country in Western Europe as well as in England, Scotland, and Ireland has an office of the heralds, sometimes called the Kings of Arms. The heralds are empowered to decide who is authorized to display a certain coat of arms. If you do not have authorization from the heralds, you are not authorized to display any coat of arms. The rules are a bit different in the Netherlands and in some eastern European countries.

Most Americans seem ignorant of one very basic fact: in most of Western Europe and in all of the British Isles, there is no such thing as a "family coat of arms." A coat of arms is issued to one person, not to a family. After that person is deceased, his primary heir (normally the oldest son) may apply for the same coat of arms. Again, when he dies, his heir *may apply*. The rules for determining who is eligible to display a coat of arms are very similar to the rules for becoming King or Queen of England. However, even the proper heir cannot display the coat of arms until he or she has received authorization (been confirmed) by the heralds. **At any one time, only one person may rightfully display that authorized coat of arms.**

According to the American College of Heraldry, "While Americans are usually fascinated by the beauty of heraldry, they are rarely familiar with its meaning and traditions and, therefore, often misunderstand and even abuse this rich cultural heritage. They seldom understand that a coat of arms is usually granted, certified, registered or otherwise recognized as belonging to one individual alone, and that only his direct descendants with proven lineage can be recognized as eligible to inherit the arms. Exceptions to this rule are rare."

The American College of Heraldry also says, "It is highly inappropriate for one to locate the arms of another person sharing the same surname, and to simply adopt and use these arms as one's own." My interpretation of this is that, if you are displaying an unauthorized coat of arms, you are impersonating someone else.

The College of Arms in England (the heralds for English, Welsh, Northern Irish, and Commonwealth families) says, "For any person to have a right to a coat of arms, they must

either have had it granted to them or be descended in the legitimate male line from a person to whom arms were granted or confirmed in the past."

Despite these warnings, many vendors are making money by preying on Americans' ignorance of the topic. The pushcarts you see in shopping malls typically are franchise operations. One pushcart owner told me that he paid \$6,000 for a "franchise" to sell this stuff. The so-called franchise did not include a protected territory; another franchisee was free to set up business in the same area. For the \$6,000 investment, the franchisee receives a computer with a database containing thousands of surnames and so-called "family coats of arms," a high-quality printer, a supply of parchment paper, and a supply of coffee cups, key chains and other paraphernalia. These franchisees reportedly receive no training in the study of heraldry. The ones I have talked to didn't recognize the term "College of Arms."

The Web sites aren't much better. The ones I have looked at seem to have carefully-worded claims. Instead of saying, "your family's coat of arms," they will say something like "your historical namesakes." Okay, "namesakes" has a different meaning than "ancestors," but it still can be misleading to many people. When a Web site proclaims, "your historical namesakes," most people will think this means "my family." However, if argued in court, the wording on the Web site would probably be considered correct. In short, their statements are legally correct. I doubt if any of these companies will ever be shut down for misrepresenting their wares.

The next time someone offers a copy of your "family's coat of arms," ask them for the documentation. They won't have any. If a friend of yours is displaying a coat of arms on his stationery or on his fireplace mantel, I suggest you simply walk away smiling. There's no sense in upsetting a good friendship. But don't be as gullible as your friend. And please, please do not display your "family's coat of arms" on your genealogy Web site unless you have been confirmed by the heralds, okay?

To learn more about the serious study of heraldry and any rights you might have to display a coat of arms, visit any of Web sites devoted to the truth. Some of the more reputable ones are:

The College of Arms (the official repository of the coats of arms and pedigrees of English, Welsh, Northern Irish and Commonwealth families and their descendants). This site is operated by the British government: <http://www.college-of-arms.gov.uk/>

The Augustan Society at: <http://www.augustansociety.org>

The American College of Heraldry at: <http://www.americancollegeofheraldry.org>

The Baronage Press at: <http://www.baronage.co.uk/>

None of the above sells printouts on parchment paper, t-shirts, or key chains. However, some of them do sell books and magazines devoted to *the study of heraldry*.

Many Web sites claim they can sell "your family's coat of arms" to you. However, you now know that any site that purports to sell "your family coat of arms" is a rip-off.

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November 18, 2004*