

Many Traditions, One Family

Throughout the year, families all over southeast Wisconsin keep their cultural traditions alive. But for one weekend in November, the largest celebration of nationalities comes alive - during the Holiday Folk Fair International.

The flour and sugar were all over the kitchen, but the four generations of German women didn't care. Conversation and laughter mingled in the air, like the smell of cinnamon and sugar that rose from the "fasching" doughnuts they were making.

As Karen Schmieder of Pewaukee now recalls, her daughter, mother, grandmother, and she weren't just whipping up a traditional old country recipe that day five years ago. They were making memories that would last long after the final sweets had been savored.

Preparations like these are taking place in kitchens all around southeastern Wisconsin this month, as the families who participate in the Holiday Folk Fair International get ready to share their culture with nearly 60,000 visitors.

For one festive weekend, all these people will join under a giant roof of diversity and goodwill. Polish dancers select costumes, young Arab dancers rehearse, Norwegians arrange hand-knit mittens to be sold, women and men cook and bake, and elders from all cultures recall histories that will be told.

All this work is worth it for the thousands of people who represent more than 50 nationalities and cultures at the event, sponsored by the International Institute of Wisconsin. It is, after all, the largest annual indoor ethnic festival in the United States.

In its 57th year, the Holiday Folk Fair represents each nationality's opportunity to shine with pride. And it is one of the most rewarding times of the year for Schmieder. Like the doughnut making she remembers, Holiday Folk Fair means another opportunity to keep cultural traditions alive and reconnect with friends of many nationalities that she's made since her first Folk Fair almost 40 years ago.

Family keeps culture alive

Schmieder still recalls her earliest visits to Folk Fair, strolling with friends through the auditorium, purchasing treasures at the gift booths, eating her way down the line of food stands. Her 10-year-old daughter, Katlin, now follows in her footsteps, as she and her Folk Fair friends pass through the State Fair exhibit halls.

Schmieder likes to see history repeat itself. Her clan is Donauschwaben, of German and Austrian descent. Every branch of her family tree - husband Vern, daughter Katlin, her father, sisters and in-laws - is involved in Folk Fair. They do it all. baking and cooking before Folk Fair, tending the food stand and dancing.

Love of her family's culture pounds in Schmieder's heart like the cheerful drumbeat in a German oompah band - and she feels a responsibility to keep family traditions alive.

Schmieder's mother and grandmother are both gone now, but memories live on - and not just personal ones. As general chairpersons of the Folk Fair, grandmother Catherine Koscak and mother Carol Keidl each helped make it the far-reaching event it is today.

Schmieder says she feels her mother is still with her, guiding her as she strives to follow in her footsteps. In addition to Schmieder's involvement with The Milwaukee Donauschwaben, she is involved with the International Institute's Cultural Awareness Program at Folk Fair, a special learning program for school groups held Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Learning brings respect

Schmieder is determined to preserve traditions - but not keep them under glass. "Our ancestors worked at maintaining our traditions," she says. "They could have dispersed when they came here to America, but they didn't. I work very hard to keep our heritage alive so my daughter can have what I have."

What Schmieder has is a sense of something bigger than one person or a single family.

"It's a sense of your people's history, their struggles, wisdom learned from elders that should live on," she says. "Being aware of these efforts leads to a deeper appreciation of what we now have. It makes for a true celebration."

Like many families involved in Folk Fair, Schmieder has developed a great respect for other cultures. In addition to the Donauschwaben friends she's had since she was a child, Schmieder says friendships have developed with people from other backgrounds, including the Scottish, Slovenians and Serbians.

To understand the celebration that is Folk Fair - why people devote so much time and effort to its continuation and growth - one must first understand the journey to this welcoming place called America.

Hard-Won Freedom, Heartfelt Celebration

People born here, with inherently American privileges and freedoms, may not easily comprehend the struggles of a people like the Donauschwaben, who found it necessary to migrate from country to country simply to stay together.

Originally from the German province of Schwaben Land, the Schwabians moved over the centuries — from their native countries of Germany and Austria to Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania and Russia.

The word Donauschwaben translates into Danube Swabian, the German speaking settlers of various German countries, who came down the river Danube in the early 1700s on makeshift boats starting at the city of Ulm in Swabia to resettle the devastated and unpopulated areas of the Pannonian plateau after the Turks occupation.

"We were forced from our homeland during World War II," says Tony Siladi of Brookfield, who was born in Croatia in 1935.

During the war, Siladi and his mother shared one pair of shoes. Day and night, they hid in ditches from planes and bombing.

"You never knew where your next meal was coming from," says Siladi. "We would ask the farmer if we could find anything left over in the fields after he harvested his potatoes."

Life improved after the war, but not much.

"We lived in barracks and camps because there were so many people," he says. "There was no future there. So, in 1953, I came to America."

Siladi and his wife, Theresa, have been active with The Milwaukee Donauschwaben ever since.

"When you came over, you go where the Donauschwaben are, and it feels like coming home," says Siladi. "You just attach to the them."

For Siladi, the fact that a multicultural event like Folk Fair can even be held is cause for celebration.

"This is heaven," Siladi says. "There is so much goodwill in this country, and any nationality that does some celebration to cherish and preserve their heritage - I give them a big thumbs up. And this government encourages it. That's what keeps America strong."

"There are two places where people line up to get in," says Siladi. "There's America, and there is heaven. I don't blame people who get here and kiss the ground."

"People should not forget what they went through, and children and grandchildren should know."

Dancing Through the Year

The Donauschwaben are used to big events where people work together.

Folk Fair is an annual highlight, and this group is one of the largest represented there; they gather for other occasions throughout the year. The children's "Kinder Karnival," holiday fair, the Rosenball and the Maiball and Jaegerball dances are just as festive.

Everything takes place at The Milwaukee Donauschwaben clubhouse northwest of Milwaukee; one event can attract as many as 400 people. They hold monthly organizational meetings, and four dance groups hold bimonthly practices.

Karen Schmieder attributes the Donauschwabens' vitality to its ability to maintain social and dance groups for all ages - children, youth, adult and couples. She realizes teens and preteens can grow bored with their parents' brand of fun, and the various dance and social groups address that issue.

"If the children grow up in the group, their tendency is to stay with it because that's where their friends are," says Schmieder. "If they've been dancing together for years, they get to be very good friends."

Traditions Lovingly Bestowed

For the Donauschwaben and other ethnic groups, preparing their dance costumes is a careful ritual. They are, after all, the proud, colorful uniform of a rich heritage.

And so, in the next few weeks, women will painstakingly iron pleats until they're crisp.

Young girls will gently wash aprons until they're snow white.

Grandmas will reinforce a rainbow of ribbons, buttons and bows until there's no doubt they'll stay in place for every twirl on the dance floor.

People will gather at the clubhouse for a week before the big event, making goulash, sauerkraut and rollbraten.

Finally, a bevy of bakers will produce tray after tray of linzer, black forest and mocha tortes, snowflake cookies and nut kipfel cookies.

The Schmieders will be there at the clubhouse, too, rehearsing traditional folk dances.

"There are a lot of different ages working together," says Schmieder. "I hope by the time Katlin reaches my age, she'll know as much about our heritage as I've learned."

Though her Oma, great-grandma Catherine and grandma Carol are gone, Schmieder is sure Katlin's paternal grandma, Elizabeth Schmieder, will demonstrate a fine point of torte-making to Katlin. Her opa, grandpa Emmerich Keidl, will teach her a new dance step.

And just as a Donauschwaben seamstress altered Carol Keidl's dance costume to fit her daughter, Karen, perhaps one day Katlin will wear her mother's best.

"The Donauschwaben!" the deep-voiced announcer will bellow, as the spotlight goes up and accordion music swells.

Then with pride, this Donauschwaben daughter will dance on at Milwaukee's Holiday Folk Fair International.