

They Sing, Dance & Remember: Celebrations in Western Iowa

Cynthia Schmidt

The sense of community is durable in Iowa towns where the people are conscious of the importance and beauty of their traditions, some of which have been unbroken for over a hundred years. Festival time brings these traditions to life, transforming and re-creating them in the spirit of western Iowa.

German immigrants in Manning, a small farming community of about 1,500 people, came mainly from the Schleswig-Holstein area. In 1891, sixteen men organized an a cappella singing group called Liederkranz. Today the group's concert of German songs is the highlight of Manning's elaborate German Christmas festival, Weihnachtsfest.

On the opening night of Weihnachtsfest, the first Friday after Thanksgiving, all the lights are turned off on Main Street, and Father Christmas leads a parade of caroling children. A burst of fireworks lights up the town, and with loud cheers and the drama of people depicting holiday scenes in the "living windows" of storefronts, the season comes alive. The making of ice sculptures and gingerbread houses begins, and everyone delights in the aromas in the streets of German foods cooking — *bratwurst*, *pfeffernuesse*, and *fudgeons* (fritters). Hundreds of these pastries (fried doughnuts with currants, rolled in sugar) are made according to the Schmidt family's German recipe in a traditional divided iron pan. Children participate in dance performances and puppet theater (featuring a Martin Luther puppet).

Liederkranz was organized "to cultivate and cherish companionship and sociability," according to a 1931 newspaper article. President Arthur Rix, age eighty-eight, is proud of the fact that his father, a charter member, was also



president, in 1895. Mr. Rix remembers that on hot summer nights, when he was a young boy, the singers would open all the windows during rehearsal, and everyone could hear "the high tenor voices come right down Main Street." In allegiance to their adopted country, the Liederkranz organization disbanded in 1939 at the beginning of World War II, but they continued to furnish music directors to the town. Arthur Rix helped them reorganize in the late 1970s with six members from the original group and second- and third-generation members who worked diligently to learn German. They have retained some of the music from early concerts such as "Wanderlied" but arrange German songs for four-part a cappella singing as well. Like the original group, they sing throughout the Midwest; they also now publish a newsletter, *Die Meistersinger*. Their music has enriched the community of Manning and continues to be a part of the process through which the people are revitalizing German life and culture.

Schleswig, Iowa, also has many second- and

Every Saturday afternoon there is a circle jam session at the Acorn Feed Store in Council Bluffs.

Photo by Gregory Hansen

Iowa Community Style

third-generation inhabitants from Schleswig-Holstein who retain strong ties to the Continent. Over thirty years ago some of the musicians in this farming community formed the Schleswig German Band to play German songs

home to communities of recent Hispanic and Asian immigrants. A population of about 10,000 includes almost 1,500 Hispanics and 1,200 Laotians, many employed by food processing industries. The town has attempted to build a reputation for its positive efforts to interact with recent immigrants through the promotion of food fairs, language classes, and “welcoming” activities.

Storm Lake’s Hispanic community is vital and dynamic, contributing to the society and maintaining links with the Hispanic population nearby in Sioux City. Frank Diaz has been actively involved in organizing dances meant for people to “enjoy themselves and draw the community together.” They celebrate their triumphs, their weddings, baptisms, *quinceañera* celebrations for girls, and holidays. Recently, they had a Mexican Fiesta event, and they donated profits to new immigrants in Storm Lake.

In southwest Iowa, music festivals in various towns bring many people together. Polka Fests, such as in Harlan, the home of the Jolly Homebrewers Polka Band, are popular throughout the state. The Old Time Country Music Contest is held in Avoca each fall; participants camp out, jam all night, and take in such events as barn dances, square- and round-dance workshops, gospel singing, and the junior and adult fiddlers’ contests.

The most typical western Iowa events for music-making and recognizing local talent are the “jam sessions.” At the Acorn Feed Store in Council Bluffs, local musicians gather every Saturday afternoon with their instruments — from banjos to saws — and join together with singers and enthusiasts, sometimes to celebrate wedding anniversaries and special occasions.

As Iowans continue to live their traditions day by day and come together around these contemporary occasions, they provide inspiration to young generations to recognize and proudly claim their heritage.

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Festival-goers enjoy the Weihnachtsfest hayride in Manning at Christmas.

Photo by Cynthia Schmidt

and polkas. Today the band consists of about seventeen people up to seventy years of age who play accordions, trombones, clarinets, and tubas and dress in bright vests and German-style Hamburg hats. They perform for visitors from Germany, for neighboring towns, and for their local Schlesfest and Schleswig Calf Days, when the young people exhibit their calves and local folk tell German jokes and perform “cattle-call” yodeling. Schleswig also hosts the largest fair for local wine-makers in Iowa. The annual October contest now draws entries of homemade wines and beers from around the state and the Midwest.

The region surrounding Elk Horn has the greatest concentration of residents of Danish ancestry in the United States. Their annual two-day festival in May, the Tivoli Fest, celebrates Danish traditions with a parade, the Kimballton folk dancers, Danish pastries (*ableskiver* or apple fritters, and *kringle* or Danish pastries), and demonstrations of crafts such as woodcarving and papercutting.

Storm Lake, in contrast to many western Iowa towns of strong European background, is