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GERMAN-AMERICAN TRADITIONS ON DISPLAY AT 34TH ANNUAL NEW JERSEY FOLK FESTIVAL

The experience of German-American heritage and its cultural traditions will be on display through a variety of musical performances, craft demonstrations, guest speakers, and German food at the 34th annual New Jersey Folk Festival. Admission is free for this all-day family event, which will take place on Saturday, April 26, 2008, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., rain or shine, on the grounds of the Eagleton Institute, George Street and Ryders Lane, on the Douglass campus of Rutgers, the State University, in New Brunswick.

The history of German traditions in America is a long and storied one. The first sign of German settlement in America emerged in Jamestown, Va., the first permanent English settlement in the nation. The first English settlers arrived at Jamestown in 1607; the first Germans only a year later in 1608. Germans were the largest single nationality of people to immigrate to the United States since its founding in 1776, with the largest boom of German migration taking place between the 1680s and 1760s. Causes for the migration included religious persecution, fewer opportunities for farm ownership, and military conscription in Germany, as well as the hope and promise of life in America. Many immigrants situated themselves in Pennsylvania, leaving today’s legacy of Pennsylvania-Germans to bear these traditions.

German music will be showcased at the festival by the Goschenhoppen Strolling Fiddlers, the Bayern Verein Newark Dance Group, and Bernie’s Orchestra. Goschenhoppen is one of the oldest Pennsylvania-German communities in the country, and the group works to preserve these historic folk traditions. Since they began playing at the Goschenhoppen Folk Festival in 1990, the Goschenhoppen Strolling Fiddlers have aimed to provide a glimpse into 18th and 19th century instrumental German music, relying heavily on collections of fiddle tunes that have grown over the years. Instruments as wide-ranging as the fiddle, penny whistle, banjo, guitar, and cello are expertly performed by the group’s current members.

The Bayern Verein Newark Dance Group, of the Bayern Verein club located in Newark, N.J., descends from a small group of Bavarian immigrants who came to the United States in the 1930s, seeking to organize and preserve their Bavarian heritage in a new country. Drawing from several Bavarian and Austrian performances, many of which involve audience participation, the group’s dance repertoire is
comprised primarily of Schuhplatter traditions. The culture of the group is preserved over the years as members of the Bayern Verein children’s group eventually go on to fill executive board positions, and the traditions and dance styles are passed down to subsequent generations. The group also travels to Germany throughout the year to participate in dance festivals and in the annual Oktoberfest celebration.

Bernie’s Orchestra, from nearby Piscataway, was formed in 1967 with three young musicians performing German-American dance music. The band has since evolved into a five-piece ensemble, combining accordion, percussion, guitar, trumpet, trombone, saxophone, clarinet, flute, baritone horn, alpine horn, and vocal talents.

Pastor Edwin Achenbach, the 2008 Honorary Chair, will facilitate a discussion on Post-World War II German Refugees in New Jersey with the help of several sisters who will each share their personal experiences with festival-goers. These sisters, members of the Fellowship Deaconry, trace their spiritual roots back to the late 1800s in Eastern Germany. There, a revival movement attracted young men and women to lives of service as pastors, missionaries, and deaconesses. Early in the 1920s, thousands of Germans immigrated to the United States to escape economic turmoil. While trying to make adjustments to their new homes, many of the German immigrants pleaded with the headquarters of the Fellowship Deaconry back in Germany to send deaconesses to help them as teachers and nurses in their communities. A “Meet the Germans” experience at the festival will allow visitors to speak with the sisters and learn from their stories and talents in the context of a living outdoor museum. As honorary chair, Pastor Achenbach will deliver the festival’s invocation in both English and in German.

German heritage will also be showcased through the knowledge of Professor William Donner’s “Who Are the Pennsylvania Germans,” and Dr. Simon Bronner’s “The Pennsylvania German Story,” both informative lectures which will accompany the German musical performances.

Festival attendees will get the chance to sample both American and ethnic food throughout the day. Of course, authentic German cuisine, including bratwurst and sauerkraut, can be found at the festival. In addition to three stages of music, dance, workshops and a wide array of American and ethnic food vendors, the festival also offers a diverse craft market of approximately 75 booths, craft demonstrators and a folk marketplace where performer CDs and information on area folk concerts are available. For children, there is a designated activities area with games, a clown, a juggler, and free crafts to make and take. The festival is also honored to welcome the Rutgers Army ROTC and the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps.

The New Jersey Folk Festival is the oldest and largest continuously held festival of its kind in the state. Wheelchair accessible, it offers selected programs with ASL interpretation; large-print program books and audio assists are also available. Preferred parking is a nominal $5 charge.

The festival is only five minutes off of exit 9 on the New Jersey Turnpike. For further details including stage schedules and directions visit the web at http://njfolkfest.rutgers.edu or call the festival office at (732)-932-5775 or Rutgers Campus Info Services at (732)-932-INFO.
The 2008 New Jersey Folk Festival is presented by Rutgers University and Douglass Residential College. It is sponsored in part by the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission. Additional sponsorship is provided by The Office of the Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs of Rutgers, Picture-It Awards, Inc., the Middlesex County Improvement Authority, the City of New Brunswick Department of Parks, the Indian Cultural Society of East Brunswick, and CF Martin and Company. The festival is produced by the Department of American Studies at Rutgers, The State University, under the technical direction of Angus K. Gillespie and Erin Clarke.