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Festival of the Oaks



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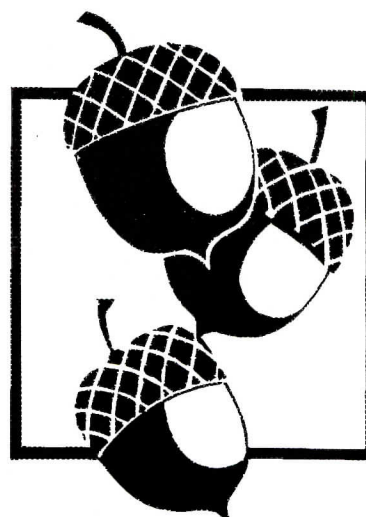
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

President's Message	3
Festival of the Oaks	4
Sweetheart Festival	7
Camellia Festival	10
Council Clips	12
Dance Description:	
Madro (Bulgaria)	13
The Wends and Sorbs	16
Calendar of Events	20

On Our Cover:
Welcome to the
Festival of the Oaks



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THE SORBS/WENDS - GERMANY'S SLAVIC MINORITY

The North American Federation of German Folk Dance Groups was founded in 1994 for the purpose of transmitting the dance repertoire of the present German states as well as the former German territories and of the German minorities in neighboring European countries. In conjunction with this objective the organization also strives to disseminate knowledge of related aspects of folklore in their geographic and historical context, such as costume, custom, craft, music and needle arts. The organization further strives to develop materials in English translation for member groups and publishes a newsletter, "The German Folk Dancer" five times a year.

To implement these goals, an annual weekend folk dance/folklore workshop takes place in various states in the U. S. Instructors are usually master teachers who specialize in the dance and folklore of the region in focus.

The workshop for 2001 will take place February 16, 17 and 18 in Giddings, Texas, and will focus on the dances, costumes and folklore of the Sorbs/Wends, Germany's Slavic minority. The workshop will be hosted by the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum and the Chamber of Commerce of Giddings.

Beginning in the 6th century, West-Slavic tribes, among them the "Lusizi", settled in an area that is bound roughly by the Oder/Neisse and the Spree River, giving the region its name, the "Lausitz" in German and "Lusatia" in English. Collectively known as Sorbs, the residents of Lower Lusatia define themselves as Wends. Their dialect is closely related to Polish, while that of the Upper Lusatian Sorbs is akin to Czech. Although, throughout the centuries, the Sorbs had to struggle against Germanization and assimilation, they have preserved their language, custom, costumes and dances. Street signs and other public notations are bilingual and it is still possible to see women in the smaller towns and villages in their traditional dress.

Being alternatively encouraged to preserve their heritage and being suppressed through the centuries, the 19th century brought a concentrated striving for ethnic identity which produced numerous cultural institutions, such as theater groups, choirs, associations of Sorbish teachers and the sports association, "Sokol." In 1926, all these interest groups collectively came together under the umbrella organization "Domovina." Today, the Domovina is best known as a publishing house of Sorbish letters.

Although the Sorbs are German citizens, their ethnic identity is expressed in the blue, red and white of their flag and the heart-shaped Linden leaf. After the fall of Communism, the language of the Sorbs, as well as that of the Danes, Roma/Sinti and Friesians was recognized by the federal government of Germany as co-equal with German. In many schools Sorbish is taught along with German.

Perhaps the best-known region of Lusatis is the Spree Forest. A favorite tourist destination, it has attracted visitors since before the turn of the last century. Located about an hour's drive southeast of Berlin, it is a densely forested region laced through with narrow waterways, formed by the numerous arms of the Spree River. The farmhouses, of dark wooden planks and straw-thatched roofs, which are framed by crossed boards carved in the shape of crowned snakes, sit on individual little islands. Residents, until very recently, got around by poling themselves in long, shallow boats. The mailman, children on the way to school, women going to market, wedding and funeral processions, all went by boat and in some cases, they still do. It is a haven for storks that build their nests on the straw roofs of the farmhouses, for frogs and for mosquitoes. The major agricultural products are cucumbers, pumpkins and hay. In the heather region, high quality honey is produced. In Upper Lusatia, coal is mined in aboveground mines.

Because of the proximity of larger cities, the towns of Lubbe and Leer are crowded with tourists, resulting in a very deliberate cultivation of regional costume and traditions. From Lubbe visitors can take a tour in one of the long, narrow boats and be poled along the narrow waterways through primeval forests, perhaps to stop at a waterside inn for a traditional meal of "boiled potatoes, cottage cheese and linseed oil," or a snack of smoked eel.

As a small child, on the way by train from Berlin to visit relatives in this region, I remember that when the train stopped in Cottbus, a major railroad interchange, Wendish women would come to the station to sell pickled cucumbers, some getting on the train, dressed in their distinctive clothing, their back baskets filled with produce on their way to market in Gorlitz.

Later, in 1949, when I was in the 6th grade, there was a class trip over the Pentecost holidays to the Spree Forest. We discovered that in one country inn it was possible to buy pickled cucumbers without rationing cards! In the dark and hungry years immediately after the war, this was a sensation and we all ended up with tummy aches.

On Pentecost Sunday we went to church in the city of Burg, having been poled there on one of the long boats. As visitors, we sat in the choir loft while the local community sat downstairs. All the women were in their native dress. Since it was customary to receive communion on this holiday, all were dressed in "Half Mourning." The clothes were black with white bonnets. It was an impressive sight to look down and see the large white bonnets row after row, like swans.

On the following day, the second "holiday" (all major holidays in Germany celebrate the "first and second holiday," the first being the holiday itself, like Pentecost Sunday, and the following Monday being the "second Pentecost holiday,") all the women wore pastel colors.

The costume of the Spree Forest is extraordinarily colorful. It consists of a very full skirt, red for single women, green for married women, that is trimmed with a wide embroidered band which is finished on either side with lace edging. Workday skirts simply are trimmed with one or two rows of black velvet ribbon. Over the skirt goes a very generous white apron, rather sheer, with multiple lace inserts. The apron covers the skirt almost 2/3 around the body. The blouse is a small little shirt with short sleeves edged in eyelet and is worn under a black velvet bodice that is attached to the skirt. The entire upper body is then covered with a satin shoulder scarf in any pastel color of the wearer's choice. It is profusely embroidered with naturalistic flower garlands and edged with very wide lace dripping over the shoulders and down the back. The most spectacular item of the entire ensemble is the bonnet. It consists of two separate kerchiefs folded over newspaper to give the huge bonnet shape. The first kerchief is folded into a triangle and tied in the nape of the neck. Two opposing corners of the second kerchief are folded toward the center of the scarf and then one end is flipped forward to create a straight edge with two pointed ends hanging down on either side. This piece is then attached to the first kerchief in such a way that it stands up and frames the face. The scarves are of satin and also heavily embroidered. The edges are trimmed in wide lace, usually white. The color of the entire structure can be any pastel color except that for mourning and weddings it is white, while on very high holidays, the bonnets are black as are those of very elderly women. (Among the Sorbs, the mourning color has always been white. It was customary for the nearest relatives to wrap themselves into a "mourning sheet" during the burial ceremony.) Because the Spree Forest costume is so distinctive, it became fashionable in the last decades of the 19th century to about the World War I period, for wealthy families in Berlin to engage young women from the Spree Forest as nursemaids making their dress synonymous with a nursemaid's uniform. There are many paintings depicting Berlin life and street scenes in which one can see Spree Forest girls pushing baby carriages or sitting on park benches with their charges.

The Sorbish-Wendish Community is 80 percent Lutheran and 20 percent Catholic. There is a church in Bautzen/Budysyn, which is half Lutheran and half Catholic. Each denomination has its own altar and chancel, the room being divided by a beautiful wrought iron gate. The differences in belief are also reflected in the clothing habits of the various villages. While in one village brides of both confessions wear a black velvet headpiece in the form of a blunted cone; the Catholic bride wears a wreath of dangling gold stars around the upper edge. The Lutheran bride, on the other hand, wears this wreath of stars around the coiled braids in back of her head.

During the 19th Century, the Sorbs, like their German neighbors, also sought a better life by emigrating. In 1854, under the leadership of their pastor, Jan Killian, 531 Sorbs traveled to Hamburg in order to embark for the United States. After many hardships and loss of lives through illness, they arrived in Galveston on December 16. In the following years they founded the settlement "Serbin" named after their own ethnic affiliation. Together with a settlement in Australia, Serbin, near Giddings, Texas, is the only Sorbish community outside Germany. Today, 150 years later, the descendants of those early settlers proudly cultivate their heritage and the memory of those who came before them, concentrating their efforts on the cultural programs, festivals and exhibits of the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum.

KARIN P. GOTTIER



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