

Alongside more diverse backgrounds, increased demands to preserve culture

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State cultural organizations are working to preserve heritages, even as people claim more diverse backgrounds. Organizations such as Sons of Norway, the Germanic-American Institute and Polish American Cultural Institute of Minnesota have steady or growing memberships, despite fewer people claiming just one ancestry or ethnic group.

According to the U.S. Census American Community Survey 2007-11, there were 31,786 St. Cloud residents who reported having one ancestry. More than 12,500 of those residents reported they have German roots.

“There is a real resurgence in people connecting with their heritage,” said Jeana Anderson, executive director of the Germanic-American Institute in St. Paul. “People want to feel anchored. They want to understand who they are and where they came from.”

The organization has 1,600 members across the state claiming connections to Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Its goals are to promote the German language and offer educational opportunities.

It has a German preschool and is a charter-authorizing organization for a German immersion school in the Twin Cities.

“People want their kids to be bilingual,” Anderson said. “There is a lot of German businesses in Minnesota. It’s a good language to have.”

Norwegian

Others want to keep old traditions alive. St. Cloud’s Sons of Norway Lodge has 200 members with interests in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and Finnish cultures.

The club’s Trollhiem Lodge has been in the city for 40 years, said Debbie Backus, president. She is 100 percent Norwegian. Her husband is German but has been a Sons of Norway member for 33 years.

The organization offers activities featuring traditional Scandinavian foods and activities. It also has hosted members of the Norwegian Home Guard, which is part of Norway’s military, when they train at Camp Ripley.

Backus wants to pass down Norwegian traditions, such as making rosettes and lefse.

“I grew up with it,” she said. “Heritage is important.”

Polish

Those with Polish ancestry are extremely proud, said Jane Flanders, president of the Polish American Cultural Institute of Minnesota in Minneapolis. It has a membership of about 500.

Poland’s complex history and its beloved Pope John Paul attract people who want to learn more, Flanders said.

It features a library with 5,000 books, CDs, DVDs and children’s materials.

The organization also hosts 10 events throughout the year that highlights the Polish culture. It will host a formal Polish ball before Lent. It hosts a soup festival in the fall, featuring food, music, dancing and Polish vendors.

“There is something about Poland that draws people,” Flanders said. “It has a really unique story.”

Italian

Other cultural centers focus on exploring the cultural aspects of a country.

The Italian Cultural Center in Minneapolis draws people interested in all things Italian from across the state. It features monthly Italian films and discussions, classes and is working on offering online language courses.

The 2,000 email members are Italians living in Minnesota, have Italian roots or just have a fascination with Italy, said Anna Bonavita, the organization's co-founder and member of its board of directors.

People want to explore the food, literature, art and architecture. Everyone wants to travel to Italy.

"The more you dip into Italian culture, the more fascinated you become," she said. "It's amazing what you can learn in a culture as rich as Italian."

Hmong

The Hmong Culture Center in St. Paul tries to educate people about the Hmong culture and customs. The center offers classes and Web seminars giving people a general look at the community.

It features a library that many people explore, said Mark Pfeifer, grant writer at the center.

The group wants "to promote cross-cultural understanding among the Hmong and the non-Hmong," he said.

At the same time, it wants to keep the Hmong culture alive for the children of those who immigrated here.

"There are some Hmong growing up in the U.S. without knowing much about their culture," Pfeifer said. "I think it is positive to learn about their culture and history."

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