

Nebraska's 'Swedish capital' has smorgasbord of tradition

By Scott Ahlstrand
Daily Nebraskan Senior Reporter

Someone visiting Stromsburg during the Christmas season will be treated to a warm Valkommen and a delicious smorgasbord.

Stromsburg, a town of 1,300 people located northwest of Lincoln, is the self-proclaimed Swedish capital of Nebraska. Geraldine Rystrom, chairman of Stromsburg's Community Improvement Program and Ethnic Committee, said Christmas is a festive time for those of Swedish descent.

"Our Christmas celebration has Swedish traditions and customs that are centuries old that are still observed by our heritage-proud people," Rystrom said.

The Swedish Christmas season officially begins Dec. 13 with St. Lucia Day. In honor of St. Lucia who brought food to her Christian friends hiding in the Roman catacombs, the eldest daughter in the family carries hot coffee and cookies to her parents in bed.

Rystrom said the key to enjoying the Christmas season is early preparation.

"You want to have your tree up and all of your baking done by the 13th," Rystrom said. "Then you can have guests drop in for food and talk, and there's not that rush at the end."

Christmas Eve is a simple, but traditional affair. The meal usually consists of Lutfish (pronounced Lutfisk), boiled potatoes with white sauce, and risgrynskaka (rice pudding).

Tradition has it that an almond is placed in the risgrynskaka. Whoever finds the almond in their bowl then makes up a rhyme. If the rhyme is good enough, the discoverer is destined to be married before the next Christmas.

Rystrom said that the almond tradi-

tion came true in their household, to a visiting classmate of her daughter.

Gifts are exchanged after the meal. A Julbocken (Christmas goat) guards the gifts under the tree. Made of straw with a long beard and braided horns, the Julbocken is placed by the tree.

Later on Christmas morning the family gets together and goes to the church for julotta (Christmas morning mass). The service usually takes place at 5 a.m. or 6 a.m.

The Christmas dinner has ham as its main course. Rystrom said turkey, chicken and other fowl were not common in Sweden, so ham was served.

Potato korv may also be served with the ham. A cooked sausage-potato dish, potato korv is made and eaten all year in Stromsburg.

For dessert on Christmas day Ostkaka is served. A Swedish curd cake, Ostkaka is similar to cheese cake.

Through out the Christmas season songs and music are highlighted.

"The Swedish are very musically oriented," Rystrom said. "Music and song are a very big part of the Swedish Christmas tradition. We're always singing at Christmas time in our house."

Jan. 2 is the traditional time to take down the tree. All the trees are put into a big bonfire while songs are sung. The bonfire signals the close of the Holidays.

Rystrom is a typical Stromsburg citizen. Deeply engrossed in her Swedish heritage, Rystrom has visited Sweden three times, including a visit to Stromsburg's sister city Ockelbo, Sweden.

Rystrom annually leads a Scandinavian tour from Stromsburg.

"We love our heritage, and we live it," she said.

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