Written by By Melinda Russell Sun Correspondent
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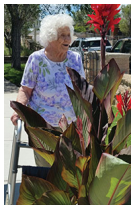

Young or old, Croatian or not, everyone is welcome at the Polka in the Pines picnic Aug. 2. The 38 year old event celebrates the historic culture, music and food of the Croatian people of Gallup.

Thanks to Katie Bolf, the community of immigrants have carried on this tradition since 1978. After Bolf attended a Croatian Convention in Toronto, Canada in 1947 she came home with a mission to keep the traditions of her homeland alive.

Bolf and friend, Shirley Baker hosted a Croatian/Slovenian radio station on Sundays until 1974. They sold advertising to pay for the show and spoke both in their native language and in English.

But most of all, they played music.

A memorial was constructed in 1999 to honor Croatian immigrants who came to Gallup in the late 1800s in hopes of giving their families a better life. The memorial stands in the Babe Ruth Park south of Interstate 40. The Hrvatska Nada, or Croatian Hope, statue has symbols on each of its four sides that represent important parts of the immigrant’s story. There are dancers, tamburas and coal miners and the Virgin Mary.

If you surf YouTube channel for Croatian music, just like in America, there are pop and traditional styles among others. The instruments are different than Americans are accustomed to. One traditionally Croatian instrument is a tambura, a long-neck stringed instrument similar to a guitar. They also use accordions and saxophones.

Many folks were introduced to polka music by John Candy in the movie “Home Alone.” Remember when he referred to his band as a bunch of “polka bums.”

Bolf and other Croatian women published a cookbook in the 1970s so they could pay for a tambura instructor to come from Phoenix every week to giv lessons. Bolf said it was expensive but it was important to teach the children the music of their homeland.

The Croatian mothers formed a bowling team for their children. The youth were at a tournament in Phoenix when the boys decided to throw the mattresses out of the hotel window. Some of those notable young men were Chuck Mataya, Bill Knight and Frankie Chiapetti, said Bolf.

Food is the other tradition that brings people to the gathering. This year, they will serve Silanc´e which is beef, pork and rice wrapped in cabbage leaves. They will also serve sauerkraut, pogatisa and strudel.

Bolf said Frankie Spollar’s kids will roast a pig on a spit.

Misty Tolson said five generations of Croatians will be at the picnic this year. She has attended almost every picnic since they started. They will also serve enchiladas. Tolson says you have to serve enchiladas in Gallup even if it is a Croatian picnic.

Last year the band arrived a day early. They brought Grandma, Lujubica “Luby” Grenko, a bottle of blueberry brandy from Croatia, Tolson said. The band played and sang until late in the night. That experience brought back memories of childhood for Tolson.

Grenko was born in Gallup in 1914. Her mother died in an influenza epidemic in 1918. She was sent to Croatia to stay with family until she was 14. As an adult, Grenko was a homemaker, kept books for the Grenko Coal Mine and worked for Kitchens Opera House during the time her grandfather owned it.

The rest of the time, she baked Pogatisa, Tolson said.

Grenko will be a few days short of 101 at the picnic this year. She is planning to dance the polka like she has almost every one of the past 38 years.

But the picnic is for young and old alike. It is a family event and in recent years, everyone from the community has been welcomed.

Bolf said she does this, “because I love my heritage. I was born and raised over there.”