

Wilson's 53rd Annual After Harvest

# Czech Festival

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# Festival celebrates 25 years of pageants

BY ALAN RUSCH

*Ellsworth County I-1-R*

**W**ILSON — A very special anniversary will be honored during this year's After Harvest Czech Festival in Wilson — the 25th anniversary of the Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queen Pageant.

The pageant will be the grand marshal during the Saturday morning parade, represented by past Miss Kansas Czech Queens.

"I'm thrilled they have been able to maintain momentum over the past 25 years and have had some quality queens to represent Kansas well at the national pageant in Nebraska," said Ellsworth native Sherry Truhlar, the first Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queen.

Sherry was a two-time winner of the crown — in 1989 and 1992. She said the first Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queen pageant was unusual because it didn't have the weight of history behind it the pageants since have had.

"It was forging new ground," she said. Sherry said the pageant is worthwhile because it gives contestants the opportunity to learn more about themselves and their heritage.

Anna Hand of Ellsworth, the reigning 2013 Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queen, described the 25th anniversary of the pageant as "awesome."

"Not many of the pageants can say they have been around this long and that they have been sending girls up to nationals this long," she said.

Anna said she doesn't see any end in sight for the annual pageant.

"I see a lot of girls coming back to run this year for the new pageant," she said. "And I know if they don't win they will be back again, because they just want to represent their Czech heritage as much as possible — as much as us past queens have done."

Paula (Svaty) Gray of Ellsworth, the 1998 Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queen, said the pageant has become a huge part of her life.

"Kansas has a very strong pageant," she said. "I knew this 25-year anniversary would come along."

Theresa (Kasper) Staudinger of Wilson, the 2003 Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queen said it's exciting to see how far the pageant has come and done so much for young women as well as promoting the Czech heritage.

"It's also exciting that all of these women are going to be back together," she said. "It's going to be a fun weekend."

"It's exciting to see there is a focus on the pageant his year for the festival," said Christy Dowling of Hays, another two-time winner of the Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queen pageant (2008 and 2010). She was also the 2011 Miss Czech-Slovak USA. "It's special to have all the queens get together, many of whom I've never met."

Christy said the Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queen Pageant is a big part of the After Harvest Czech Festival.

"It's something very unique to Wilson and to the state of Kansas that there are

all of these girls who are younger and interested in carrying on their heritage," she said. "That keeps all of these festivals alive."

Christy's mother, Lynn Dowling, has a unique perspective on the pageant. Not only were Christy and her sister, Cathy (Dowling) Grosscup, Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queens, Cathy having won the pageant in 2004, but Lynn's father, Robert Malir Jr. of Wilson, served as the pageant's longtime master of ceremonies.

"This is a well-deserved honor as the pageant is a big part of our celebration of Czech heritage," Lynn said. "The pageant is one of the highlights of the Wilson festival, and it is important to promote 'all things Czech.' After all, Wilson is the Czech Capital of Kansas. That is what makes Wilson unique and sets us apart from all the other Kansas celebrations."

# Queens

Continued from Page 8

Lynn said all eight of her great-grandparents came from various regions of Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic, so her family's home was always rich with Czech influence.

"My husband Bill and I both grew up in Wilson, and with grandparents there, it was no surprise that we travelled to the festival every year with our family," she said.

Lynn said both Cathy and Christy were eyeing the queens in the pageant at an early age. They also saw their grandpa Bob's enthusiasm and appreciation for the Czech culture as he emceed the pageant for many years.

"Having been a judge at the national pageant, he was always willing to help and support the girls whether it was teaching them proper Czech diction, or translating a Czech song for their talent presentations," she said. "Learning the family heritage and traditions, and

spending time with grandparents, parents, and other relatives is certainly one of the most important benefits to this pageant program."

Cathy was the first of the Dowling sisters to enter the Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queen pageant while in early high school.

"Lynn Kasper, the pageant director, encouraged her to compete and gain some experience," Lynn said. "Cathy came through this with a much better understanding of what is important, and her time spent studying the culture, traditions, geography and history of the Czech people, along with modeling and pageant skills, ultimately earned her a runner-up finish and her first scholarship toward a college education."

Lynn said although Cathy and Christy were used to speaking and performing in public through school, 4-H, and church activities, the pageant allowed them both to further develop those skills, something that will benefit them in life.

"Cathy next competed in 2004 when she was a student at Kansas State University majoring in music education," Lynn said. "Her early participation proved beneficial, as she was crowned the Kansas Czech Queen."

Lynn said preparing to be a queen starts at a very young age.

"Whether it is reading Czech fairy tales at bedtime, cooking Czech foods in the home, going to polka dances and festivals, or celebrating a traditional Czech Christmas, the culture itself needs to be a part of the fabric of their lives," she said. "The formal preparation that goes into a pageant can begin up to a year before the pageant."

Christy got an even earlier start on stage competition.

"As a fifth grader, she won the Famous Figures contest in Hays with her portrayal of a Czech heroine, Zdena Kapral," Lynn said. She then reprised the same performance at the Kansas Czech Queen Pageant that next sum-

mer. Shortly thereafter, the Princess Pageant was begun, and she was crowned Miss Bohemian Bell. It is nice to see the Czech Princess Pageant be a part of the 2013 Festival once again."

Christy won the Kansas Czech Queen title in 2008.

Lynn said through all of the pageant experience, Lynn Kasper proved to be an encouraging mentor for all the girls that competed, and she followed the same rules as the national pageant.

"This is very important for any Kansas Queen that competes at the national level in Nebraska," she said.

In 2010, Christy once again competed in the Kansas pageant, and was crowned the Kansas Czech Queen. In 2011, she was crowned Miss Czech-Slovak USA at the national pageant in Wilber, Neb.

As part of competing in the annual pageant, Lynn said each of the 25 Miss Kansas Czech-Slovak Queens and all

**Anna Hand, the 2012 Miss Kansas Czech Queen, right, with former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, center, and Danielle Patzel, the 2012 Miss Nebraska Czech Queen.**



Courtesy photo

## Queens

Continued from Page 9

other past contestants of the Kansas pageant have gained a much better understanding of their family traditions.

"Each girl gains self-confidence and a number of lifetime friends, as well as a love of their ethnicity," she said. "Both the state and national pageants have been able to provide a number of wonderful prizes such

as Czech crystal, as well as scholarships to help them continue their studies, and money to help them with the required travel. While not the sole reason girls choose to compete, the awards are an important recognition of their accomplishments. On top of all that, the entire family is blessed by the opportunity to work and learn together, and the fun and family bonds are a priceless memory."