

The Pennsylvania German Language Writing Festival

This year, the Kutztown Pennsylvania German Festival is holding a writing festival in the Pennsylvania German dialect. Participants are asked to write poems and short stories, which will be read on the seminar stage. English translations will be provided.

Although the use of the Pennsylvania German language is waning in many households and it is very rare for any church Pennsylvania German under 55 to have any degree of fluency in the language, it is still known among a wide range of people in this region.

The Berks County Fersommling (a dinner gathering where only Pennsylvania German can be spoken) attracts 1000 participants. There is a long tradition, going back to the middle of the 19th century, of writing in the Pennsylvania German dialect. Throughout the 20th century, newspapers in the Pennsylvania German regions often included a weekly column in the Pennsylvania German language.

The inspiration for holding a Pennsylvania German language festival comes from Germany. In that country, there are many dialects of the German language, which are quite distinct from standard or High German. In the southwestern part of Germany, the homeland of the ancestors of the Pennsylvania Germans, there are dialects that are very similar to Pennsylvania German. Indeed, many Pennsylvania German speakers find that it is far easier to communicate with Germans in these regional dialects than in High German.

In Germany, the use of these dialects is fading as the national language becomes more and more pervasive. But in recent years there have been concerted efforts to preserve these regional dialects. These efforts include festivals in which people write in their regional dialect. Edward Quinter, a German language teacher in the Parkland School District near Allentown, and a fluent speaker of Pennsylvania German, suggested that the Kutztown Pennsylvania German Festival hold a similar festival. Bill Donner, manager of the Seminar Stage, thought it was an excellent idea.

We hope that this also will become a yearly event that will encourage maintenance of the Pennsylvania German language within the region and also expose visitors to an important part of Pennsylvania German culture.

Other Events on the Seminar Stage

The Seminar Stage includes a variety of speakers who are experts about different areas of Pennsylvania German culture. Some speakers have formal academic training with PhDs; others are knowledgeable because they have lived in the culture. The events mix humor, culture and education.

Mike Rhode is a Middle School History teacher and graduate of Kutztown University. He is a practicing Mennonite. He makes a fascinating presentation about the Mennonites and Plain People, more generally. The Mennonites are pacifist, Anabaptists who make up an important part of the Pennsylvania German tradition.

Harry Serio is a United Church of Christ pastor who holds a doctorate in theology. His talk is about the “church” or fancy Pennsylvania Germans, the Lutherans and German Reformed (now United Church of Christ). He discusses the origin of these groups in the Reformation of Europe and how Pennsylvania German religion beliefs developed in America.

Don Breininger is one of the most popular speakers at gatherings where Pennsylvania German is still spoken. His speaking style combines common sense philosophy with down-home humor. He is very well known at Fersommling and Grundsow meetings, these are regional events when only Pennsylvania German can be spoken. He explains the humor and activities at these gatherings.

Lester Breininger (a distant relation of Don) is a graduate of Kutztown University and a retired high school biology teacher. He is also a nationally renowned potter in the Pennsylvania German red ware tradition who has received the Hazlett Award in the arts from the Pennsylvania State Governor. He has published numerous articles about Pennsylvania Germans, especially about their craft traditions. He discusses themes in Pennsylvania German art.

Mary Laub holds a doctorate in education and is a professor in the College of Education at Kutztown University. Raised in the area, she has studied the distinctive practices of the Groffdale Mennonites who maintain their own one-room schools and keep a distinctive dress code. She discusses the operation of present-day one-room schools.

Evan Snyder is a retired professor of physics at Ursinus College. He is a fluent speaker of Pennsylvania German and very active in many organizations that preserve their culture. Dr. Snyder demonstrates the hand-made toys that were made in rural parts of Pennsylvania during his youth in the early part of the 20th Century.

Paul Kunkel is a retired civil engineer who is very active in many Pennsylvania German associations. He is a leader in developing schools for teaching the Pennsylvania German language. He talks about the legends and superstitions of Pennsylvania Germans, including many that he remembers from his youth. He also has some very funny stories to tell which he translates from the Pennsylvania German dialect into English.

Keith and Karlene Brintzenhoff are well-known musicians who sing traditional Pennsylvania German songs. Their presentation includes both an entertaining sample of songs in the Pennsylvania German language and an educational discussion of how these songs were part of the culture.

Leroy Brown and Bill Meck are fluent speakers of the Pennsylvania German language and active participants in organizations that preserve the Pennsylvania German language. Their presentation includes examples of Pennsylvania German humor that are translated into English.

Carol Heppe is a teacher at Kutztown High School. She works in the quilt barn, which houses one of the largest exhibitions of quilts in the entire country. Her presentation describes the history of quilt making. She also explains how to care for and maintain quilts.

Bill Donner is a professor in the anthropology department at Kutztown University. He has a doctorate in anthropology. His research has examined the history of education among the Pennsylvania Germans and the development of organizations that preserve the Pennsylvania German culture and language.