

Cherry Blossom Festival attracts presidents' descendants, history buffs

Written by

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Try to imagine a more unlikely gathering than President George W. Bush's daughter, Dwight Eisenhower's great-grandson, Harry Truman's grandson and nephew, Richard Nixon's great-nephew, along with Bill Clinton's cousin and descendants of Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, John Polk and George Washington. Add to that, Dred Scott's great-granddaughter, the first Timmy from "Lassie," Amelia Earhart's niece, and actors and actresses from "The Andy Griffith Show" and "Gone With the Wind."

They and many others plan to be in Marshfield this weekend.

These people and more are expected to travel from around the United States and beyond its borders to the tiny flyover Ozarks town for the annual Cherry Blossom Festival — a quirky, one-of-a-kind reunion of sorts in its seventh year. That so many come such distance to small town America might seem puzzling to some, but for attendees whose genealogy includes former U.S. presidents, it's a time to enjoy a singular camaraderie and swap stories of shared heritages.

The brainchild of Marshfield's Nicholas Inman, 30-year-old pastor of the Elkland Independent Methodist Church, this year's festival runs Thursday through Saturday and is open to the public. Special this year is the appearance of Jenna (Bush) Hager, daughter of President George W. and Laura Bush who does "Today" show segments on NBC. Hager will be guest speaker at the Robert and Edith Garst History Convocation at the Marshfield High School auditorium Friday morning. Guest speaker at the State Dinner Saturday night will be Clifton Truman Daniel, grandson of President Harry Truman.

The small town event gained national notice this year when the Smithsonian featured presidential descendents in the magazine article, "When the Country's Founding Father is Your Founding Father."

Family reunion

Those not familiar with the event might wonder what brings such a diverse group together — and in Marshfield, of all places.

"The people, hands down," said Devon Nixon, great-nephew of President Richard Nixon (1969-74), via email from his home in China. He is by far the guest traveling the farthest distance.

"Nowhere else in the world has an annual function brought together so many U.S. presidential families and relatives (and) well-known figures," said Nixon. "The stories each person brings with them to the Cherry Blossom Festival are priceless ... pure history of the people who have led and shaped the United States and our global community."

Richard Gatchell Jr. — a fifth great-grandson of President James Monroe (1817-1825) — was among descendents featured by the Smithsonian. He has traveled from Baltimore, Md., to Marshfield for four of six previous festivals and plans to return this year. He usually brings one or both of his daughters, Austin, 13, and

Emory, 11. It's a great time for father-daughter bonding, he says — giving his wife, Cathryn, a weekend to herself.

“This is my three days to kind of hang out (with my daughters). And it's a little embedded history lesson and lets them enjoy their heritage,” he said from his home in Baltimore.

Just as important, he's met people he would not otherwise see and has made many good friends, including Nixon.

He also enjoyed getting to know Chris Truscott and Shannon Lanier, both descendents of the nation's third president, Thomas Jefferson — Lanier through the children of Jefferson and his slave, Sally Hemings.

“They've become great friends,” noted Gatchell. “They do a lot of appearances together. I've enjoyed meeting both those guys who happen to come from the same president.”

Bolivar resident and kindergarten teacher Jill Campbell is a descendent of President James K. Polk (1845-49). The festival is a unique experience, she said.

“Being from a little podunk town in Missouri and getting to meet all these people from the East Coast, Texas, Alaska, France ... Devon came from China ... That's the only way to describe it,” she said.

Her family, which includes father John Polk Campbell and mother Neita Campbell, has attended past festivals and plans to go again this year.

In 2011, the Campbells met local relatives they didn't know about. Dr. Ted Lennard, a Springfield physician at the Neurological and Spine Center, is also related to President Polk.

“Last year was our first,” said Lennard, who is originally from Louisiana. “It was very interesting meeting and hearing other descendants of different presidents. I didn't know that (the Campbells) were in Bolivar, but then Polk County is where they live is named for President Polk or some of his family.”

But seriously: Marshfield?

Tom Washington, a descendant of our country's first president, George Washington (1789-1797), said when Inman first contacted him by phone, he thought the whole thing sounded pretty far-fetched. But Inman, a great salesman, Washington said, talked him into it.

“It was a great experience,” said Washington from his home in Carrollton, Texas. “Marshfield hospitality is superb. I've made lifelong friends ... interesting people from around the country ... and also get to share some of the heritage from my family.”

Gatchell had the same reaction the first year. Now he'd like to see the festival become a signature event with more national exposure, to see every presidential family represented.

“When we got this call from Nicholas Inman seven years ago, we thought, ‘How bizarre.’”

But on a whim, he told his family, “‘Let's just go.’ I went with my dad and my (then) 6-year-old daughter and we had a ball with it.”

Gatchell says coming to the Midwest — Marshfield in particular — is a dose of good old-fashioned Americana. He and his daughters stay with the same host family on their farm, and he loves the small-town charm and sense of patriotism.

“The people are so sweet and open-armed and welcoming,” he said.

“It reinvigorates me,” he said. “I leave there thinking, there's hope. There are people who would do anything for this country. That's what this town represents.”

History lesson

Many descendants sit on panels to answer questions from the audience as well as discuss presidents among themselves.

Inman said he never knows what will come out in a forum: “You get a different perspective each year because we have a different group on the panel each time.”

During the 2011 presidential forum, Curtis Roosevelt, 81 — who lives in France and cannot come this year — spoke about a meeting between his grandfather, Franklin Roosevelt (32nd president, 1933-45), and Harry Truman (33rd president, 1945-53).

Curtis, 11 years old at the time, happened to be present for part of the meeting but was soon dismissed. He had long believed that after he left, FDR told Truman about the bomb.

However, John Truman, Harry Truman’s great-nephew, said he had always believed his uncle wasn’t told.

Ken Hechler of Marshfield — who worked for several administrations during that time frame — thought he had the answer.

“Truman told me himself that FDR never told him about it,” Hechler told the men last year.

Devon Nixon, who will travel to Marshfield from China, has attended all six previous festivals.

He recalled when Inman asked him “to give a 30-minute speech about Uncle Dick and growing up as part of the family,” Nixon said in his email. “I prepared for three months in advance, joining Toast Masters International, reading everything wall-to-wall at the Nixon Library and Birthplace and met with multiple family members and friends for back stories.”

Gatchell likes to get a photo of his daughters with Lyon Gardiner Tyler Jr. of Franklin, Tenn., born in 1924 and grandson of President John Tyler. He finds it fascinating that the 10th president of the United States (1841-1845), born in 1790, can have a living grandson — two, actually, according to the Smithsonian article.

(President John Tyler’s second wife was 30 years younger, and one of their sons, Lyon Gardiner Tyler born in 1853, also married twice and had kids late in life.)

Jill Campbell says since meeting so many others with presidential family ties, she’s become more interested in learning about the presidents, particularly Polk.

“I’ve been to the Lincoln Museum in Springfield, Ill., and I went to James K. Polk’s birthplace this last summer. I try to go to see more of those types of things when I have the opportunity,” Campbell said.