

It started in Scranton . . . *Polka Fest reborn in this centennial year!*

By **Natalie Gelb Solfanelli**

September promises to be a busy month for cultural celebrations in the Lackawanna Heritage Valley.

La Festa, the annual Italian food fest, marks the unofficial end of summer every Labor Day Weekend on Courthouse Square.

This extraordinary celebration of everything Italian attracts more than 100,000 people to downtown Scranton, rain or shine!

It has become an institution, a gathering place for folks of all ages; the Courthouse Square become a mélange of baby carriages, bicycles, skateboards, wheelchairs, skateboards, walkers, wheel chairs, lawn chairs, as the crush of humanity crowds the streets, waiting in line - patiently or not - to enjoy the Italian specialties offered by vendors from near and far. And watch for the political candidates who come to see and be seen and to shake as many hands as possible! It is great fun and it is a centerpiece of our local heritage.

This year, the Italian festival will be followed two weeks later, on Sept. 13 and 14, by the new and enhanced Pennsylvania Polka Fest.

Public television station WVIA has been a sponsor and presenter of the Polka Fest for several years. Past events have been held at the St. Stanislaus Polish National Catholic Youth Center in South Scranton and, on occasion, at the Scranton Cultural Center.

WVIA has televised the dancing live from the chosen venue and the celebration has a devoted following that enjoys the music of renowned polka bands.

This year is special, however, due to the centennials of some very significant local institutions. The Radisson Hotel at Lackawanna Station is marking the 100th anniversary of the magnificent structure that was built as the Delaware, Lackawanna and Wyoming train station.

The Polish National Union was established in Scranton that same year. And the Everhart Museum is also celebrating its one hundredth birthday!

Can you imagine the activity in Scranton in the year 1908?

It was pretty remarkable.

The birthday celebrants, along with WVIA, the Lackawanna County Convention and Visitors Bureau and Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority, and several other partners, have been discussing ways to join together to plan some special events to celebrate the occasion.

In the spirit of community collaboration so typical of this area, the group decided to do something that would pay tribute to these important institutions that have played such

important roles in the history and heritage of our region. Thus, the Pennsylvania Polka Fest has been reborn!

The experience of WVIA as well as the Visitors' Bureau confirmed that there is a huge interest and demand for polka festivals. In their travels to promote our area, the Visitors' Bureau continually receives inquiries about the polka festival.

There are groups from around the country who take bus trips to visits such festivals throughout the country, from Chicago to Buffalo to Pittsburgh to New England! And the television gurus at WVIA have noted similar interest in the demand for programming of polka festivals.

Never known to shirk the challenge of doing something new and exciting, the consensus of the partners was to create a Polka Fest that would take on national significance. A special Polish ethnic mass will be held on Sunday morning at 11 a.m. at St. Stanislaus PNC Cathedral.

Immediate contacts confirmed the availability of the most popular and well known polka bands. And, in recognition that there are various Eastern European groups that enjoy ethnic music, (you don't have to be Polish!), a Klezmer band was booked for Sunday afternoon.

The event will be held at the Radisson, where local churches and other vendors have been invited to offer delicious Eastern European foods, such as pierogies, halushki, kielbasa, potato pancakes "piggies" and other delicacies.

There will be dance lessons on both Saturday and Sunday, and accordion players will stroll through the crowd. Several hotels have created Polka Fest packages for out-of-towners. (Visit www.visitnepa.org for information on package deals.)

Trains will run regularly between the Radisson and Steamtown, where WVIA's documentary, "The Extraordinary Journey," story of the Eastern Europeans in northeastern Pennsylvania, will be showing at the beautiful Steamtown Theatre. The Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum will be open and also featuring exhibits and tours about the Eastern European experience in the region.

Tickets for the Polka Fest are \$6 in advance and \$8 at the door.

Visit www.wvia.org for tickets and further information. Mark your calendars for this fun-filled, enjoyable and enlightening heritage weekend!

Natalie Gelb Solfanelli is executive director of the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority. E-mail her at nsolfanelli@LHVA.org.