



John Marx

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Seven decades of royalty to descend upon UT reunion

It might be a good time to brush up on your curtsy skills because Friday a large gathering of royalty is invading East Moline.

An assortment of kings, queens, princes and princesses --spanning seven decades -- will be on hand for homecoming festivities at United Township High School.

The 81 honorees who have confirmed their return -- from as far back as 1943 -- will take part in a morning assembly, an afternoon parade, and be honored that evening at the Panthers' football game against Alleman.

The idea of the royal reunion -- tossed around by the UTHS Booster Club for several years -- went full speed ahead when former East Moline mayor Bill Ward was approached with the idea.

Ward enlisted East Moline's Carol Karenke as co-chairman, worked some of his morning coffee pals for help, and the plan took off. Now, after several months of research, phone calls, letters and e-mails, Friday's reunion will come to life. It is, Ward believes, the first reunion of its kind locally.

"Things took off when I started mentioning this to people," Ward said of the reunion idea. "I had no idea the response would be as great as it has been. We have people flying in from all over the place to be part of the day. What's really been amazing is those coming back feel honored we have thought of them and believe this to be a wonderful and unique idea."

In addition to speaking volumes about the effort of Karenke,

Ward says the project happened because of the backing by UTHS superintendent Barbara Suelter.

"Talk about someone getting behind an idea and opening her arms to

it," Ward said of Ms. Suelter, in her first year as UTHS superintendent. "Whatever we've needed she has been there. And Carol Karenke, she has been amazing as well. She has been working non-stop on this."

Aside from the footwork needed to make the event happen, the number of royal returnees catches your eye. Seven decades will be represented Friday, including king and queen Reuben Salmonson and Pat (St. John) Freiburg from the 1943 homecoming celebration.

Rich Castleman, the school's 1966 king, will travel the greatest distance to be part of the festivities, returning to East Moline from Sammamish, Wash. In addition to Castleman traveling a great distance, the 1950 queen, Donna (Williams) Demeurisse, will make the trip from Denton, Texas, to be part of the night.

"We'll have 12 states represented," Ward said. "We have reservations for 131 so far (81 of which are honorees) and most of those will be part of all three of the day's events. Can you imagine what this will add to the day?"

Ward said the city of East Moline's centennial celebration played a role in the reuniting of past royalty.

"It's a nice touch and a great way to add something to the centennial of a special place," he said. "It was a lot of work by a lot of people and it should be a great day for everyone. I think the students at UT will get a kick out of it, and I think all the kings, queens, princes and princesses who come back will enjoy the day."

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