



Reading Eagle: Ron Devlin

Robert Webster Reynolds is director of the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center at Kutztown University.

Ron Devlin's Kitchen Table: Director has Pennsylvania German heritage center looking forward, not just back

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- Robert Webster Reynolds, who holds the Freyberger Chair in Pennsylvania German Studies at Kutztown University, is also director of the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center.

Robert Webster Reynolds

Born: Jan. 22, 1963, in Hanover, N.H.

Residence: Hottenstein Mansion, Maxatawny Township.

Position: Freyberger Chair in Pennsylvania German Studies at Kutztown University and director of the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center at the college.

Education: Bachelor's degree, Gettysburg College, 1985. master's in historical preservation, University of Vermont, 1989; doctorate in American Colonial history, Lehigh University, 2003.

Historical preservation experience: Apprentice, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1985; Lyndhurst Mansion (financier Jay Gould's estate) in Terrytown, N.Y., 1986; the Thomas Edison House in East Orange, N.J., 1987; photographed historic homes for the Bucks County Conservancy, 1989-91.

Honors: Recently lectured at the Atlantic Institute in Kaiserslautern, Germany. Scheduled to lecture at the University of Mainz, Germany, in October.

He oversees the 21-acre preserve on the edge of the Kutztown University campus.

On display at the center are a farmhouse, a barn, a one-room schoolhouse and log cabins that date to the 18th century.

Recently, on the 300th anniversary of the migration from Germany's Palatinate region to America, he lectured on Pennsylvania German architecture at the Atlantic Institute in Kaiserslautern, Germany. He is scheduled to deliver a paper at the University of Mainz in October.

Reynolds comes to the Kitchen Table to chat about the center's mission of preserving Pennsylvania German culture.

How did the center get started?

RR: It evolved over time. Ruth Freyberger, a retired teacher who graduated from Kutztown in 1929, donated a one-room schoolhouse in 1992. Then she bequeathed her estate to establish the Freyberger Chair in Pennsylvania German Studies. The holder of the chair also runs the heritage center.

Are you the first center director?

RR: No, David Valuska was first in 1997. I was named director in June 2005.

Where did the center's Pennsylvania German artifacts come from?

RR: The Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Cultural Society ran a museum in Lenhartsville. When it disbanded, thanks largely to Florence Bayer the society donated about 10,000 artifacts and a papers that became the basis of our genealogical and research library.

What is the center's mission?

RR: Since we're a heritage center, we look back on history and tradition. Yet we also look ahead to preserving the culture and history for future generations. We do that by working with young people in ways that enable them to integrate the culture into their lives.

Elaborate on that, would you?

RR: We teach Pennsylvania German architecture in the hope that students will move into Pennsylvania German homes and preserve them. Also, with our annual Christmas on the Farm program we expose young people to traditions that started in Germany, like Santa Claus and the Christmas tree. Keith Brintzenhoff dresses up as the Belsnickel, or German Santa. You can see it in young people reconnecting with their grandparents. We're bringing together the generations and preventing something from slipping away that doesn't have to.

You're working on a master plan for the center's future, right?

RR: Yes, we're developing a preliminary master plan for the next 30 years. We're doing extremely detailed analyses of what it would take to become an international center for Pennsylvania German studies.

Looking ahead, what do you see?

RR: I hope, one day, we'll be the single most important place in the world to learn about Pennsylvania German culture.

We're working with German academics to create opportunities for German and American students to learn from one another. There's a lot of interest in Pennsylvania German culture in Germany. A lot of their culture was bombed out in World War II. They have a saying: you have to go to Pennsylvania to find German culture.

At the Kitchen Table, reporter Ron Devlin chats with Berks Countians whose experiences and accomplishments reflect the region's character and culture. He can be contacted at 610-371-5030 or rdevlin@readingeagle.com.