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Family to celebrate its 100th reunion

About 200 descendants of Jacob and Anna Helmstadter will gather July 4 in White Oak Park

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By Mary Niederberger, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Quite a crowd is expected tomorrow at White Oak Park as the descendants of the late Jacob and Anna Helmstadter gather for their 100th family reunion.

The gathering will include food, desserts and a printout of the family tree that will stretch across two picnic tables. Family members will take turns updating the document.

They'll play bingo and other games; the children will run races, take part in an egg toss and dig for change in a sand pit. Old-fashioned shaved ice, made from large blocks of ice, will be served, and the "kids will eat ice cream all day," said Mary Ann Davis, a Helmstadter descendant from Elizabeth Township.

Certificates will be given to the oldest and youngest members of the family, to those who have been married the longest and the shortest, and to the one who came the farthest distance.

This year, a family cookbook has been produced and will be distributed.

Local family members and picnic planners say they can't even estimate how many descendants there are from the 10 children of Jacob and Anna Helmstadter, who settled in McKeesport after emigrating from Germany in 1881.

They said the original four sons and six daughters of the Helmstadter family produced 32 children.

But it doesn't really matter since everyone knows the picnic is always held on July 4, though the location has changed over the years.

The family reunions started as annual family meetings on July 4, said Edward Helmstadter, 95, of McKeesport, the oldest male member of the Helmstadter family. Then they became full-blown picnics held each year on Independence Day.

The picnic was held at Renzie Park in McKeesport for more than three decades, then moved to other local parks and then to Adamsburg, Westmoreland County. Eventually it moved back to the area at White Oak Park, where it will be held tomorrow.

If the Helmstadter name sounds familiar it's because family members operated a popular department store on Fifth Avenue in McKeesport for 90 years, which closed in December 1995. A smaller satellite store that operated in Clairton closed earlier.

The McKeesport store was started in 1905 by Jacob and Anna's sons, John and Jacob, who opened the store with funding from their sister, Barbara, family members said.

John's sons, Richard and John, ran the stores until they closed. The brothers got too old to keep them going and the area was on the decline economically because of the closing of the mills.

But during its heyday, it was known as the place that "sold just about anything anybody would want," said Mary Ann Davis, of Elizabeth Township, a Helmstadter descendent.

"The old bubbas used to say 'If you can't find it anywhere else, you can find it at Helmstadters,'" she said.

Many family members worked there over the years, some making it their career, while others did it for extra spending money.

The size of the crowd at the annual reunion has varied. Early on, the picnics drew a lot of relatives because most of the family still lived in the area, Edward Helmstadter said.

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Mrs. Wolf also will see her sister, Dorothy Victor, 90, of Austin, Texas, for the first time in five years at this year's reunion.

Mrs. Wolf and Edward Helmstadter have similar memories of attending the picnics when they were children. "You were able to eat as much as you wanted," she said.

That tradition is expected to continue tomorrow.

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