

Kaleva's Favorite Finnish Custom

Kaleva was founded in 1900 by mostly Finnish immigrants from various parts of the US and Finland. They were promised "fertile" land and a place they could speak their language by the Siirtolainen, a newspaper published in what is now the Kaleva Art Gallery. One of the goals that was set after the Centennial was to celebrate the Finnish heritage of the town in various ways.

One custom that started around then is the Lighting of the cemetery on the Winter Solstice. In Finland relatives go to the cemetery on Christmas Eve to honor loved ones who have passed. In effort to put this event into practice in Kaleva, the Historical Society decided to do it on the longest night of the year which is the Winter Solstice.

The goal was modest at first: 300 paper bags with lighted candles were placed on various graves in the cemetery. In a few years it increased to 500 and the past several years there have been 1000 candles placed throughout the cemetery to honor those who have passed. Sometimes relatives place them but more often people just show up to set out the candles. The result is always awesomely breath-taking.

Volunteers gather across from the cemetery at 4:00 to set up the assembly line in a garage the owners kindly lend out. Before this happens candles have to be ordered, the bags which the Kaleva Party Store donates, have to be folded two turns and the sand has to be delivered into the garage. This involves the Kaleva DPW and the Manistee Co. Road Commission. The sand must be kept under cover so it isn't frozen into chunks; the same sand the county uses on slippery roads. A tractor with a front end loader is also volunteered by a local resident.

The rest of the story is who shows up to place the luminaries in the cemetery. This year it was locals; individuals, families, and a few from away. Some years the Brethren Girls or Boys Basketball teams have come to help. This is very welcome since many of our volunteers are aging and the young can work miracles in just the hour that is allotted before dark to put out the candles. Afterwards most enjoy a short service around a blazing fire to celebrate the season and the reason. Then hot soup is served at the Lutheran Church and after that everyone takes at least one drive past the lighted cemetery to enjoy the sight of 1000 glowing candles lighting the longest night.

PS as soon as there is a relatively warm day angels appear and pick up the bags, sprinkle the sand over the ground and put the paper bags in garbage bags. We're never sure who those angels are but they are greatly appreciated.





