

Why are there 3,000 people from North Dakota in that park?

KAILA: Remember life before social distancing? Just a few weeks ago, the simple act of congregation wasn't so foreign to us. People would get together -- in parks and movie theaters. At a friend's house for cocktails. And there's a simple reason why we'd do it: human beings are social creatures.

KAILA: For Valley transplants, the act of gathering can mean something more. It's a chance to reminisce about shared cultures and experiences. To feel at home again.

KAILA: And that's what one of our reporters felt when she attended a picnic with about three thousand other people from North Dakota. That's right, three thousand people from North Dakota, just hanging out in Mesa. (pause) Before coronavirus, of course. (pause)

KAILA: Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com where we answer the questions you ask about metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White. In today's episode, podcast editor Katie O'Connell is teaming up with one of our reporters to tell you the story of the North Dakota picnic.

Katie: The North Dakota picnic is the largest gathering of North Dakotans outside of the state. Or so my colleague thinks. As she said when she wrote about it, there's really no way of knowing.

Rachel: My name is Rachel Leingang and I'm a reporter at the Arizona Republic.

Rachel: I'm from Mandan, North Dakota, which is in central North Dakota, right by Bismarck, the capital.

Katie: Mandan is small. It's the 8th largest city in North Dakota. As of 2017, about 22,000 people lived.

Rachel: I'd say it's like a pretty ...

Rachel: Quiet town. But like, everybody kind of knows everybody and that can be really nice and really terrible at the same time.

Katie: There's one high school in town, Mandan High School. Rachel graduated from there in 2007.

Katie: Rachel's great-great grandfather was German. During homesteading, he immigrated to North Dakota from what was Russia at the time. She grew up immersed in German-Russian culture and food, like Knoephla Soup.

Rachel: And it's just like dumplings and potatoes and it's like beige. So a lot of the foods are just like beige, completely colorless, but it's delicious and it's such a comfort food.

Katie: She learned how to polka dance in school. She said she was a real water bug. She'd spend her summers boating on the Missouri River or tubing at nearby lakes. And camping wasn't just something done on the occasional weekend. It was stitched into her family's culture.

Rachel: People have flags they put on their campers and every Fourth of July it's like a mini-town, full of campers and things like that.

Katie: But then, she left.

Rachel: I've lived here since 2012, so this is my 8th year in Arizona.

Katie: And in the following years, her maternal grandparents began to spend their winters in Gold Canyon, outside of Mesa.

Katie: Are they the ones you found out about this picnic from?

Rachel: Yes. So they've gone to this picnic several times. There's also a monthly breakfast for people who are specifically from Bismarck, Mandan, that they have gone to as well.

Katie: It turns out this picnic has been going on for 53 years. But its origins are a bit unknown.

Christi: I think it probably started pretty organically with just a group of North Dakotans deciding, hey, let's get together and have a potluck. That's what North Dakotans do. And then it kind of grew from there.

Katie: That's Christi Stonecipher. She's with the North Dakota Community Foundation. They're the non-profit group that took over hosting the picnic in 2018. Christi said this event is one of a kind. It's the only North Dakotan picnic the organization sponsors.

Christi: This is the main one where we do right now because there's just such a large gathering of North Dakotans in Arizona. We have so many of our state residents that go there. I don't know if we would ever find the opportunity to do another picnic somewhere else.

Katie: Christi said attendees tend to be a mix of snowbirds and folks who have moved here permanently. Rachel's grandma describes them as the Q-tip crowd: white hair, white tennis shoes.

Christi: And then we do have some people, I think, who maybe plan travel or trips around the picnic if they're going to go down south. They may schedule, you know, their time down there so that they make sure they're here.

Katie: Yes, you heard that correctly. People will intentionally book trips to Arizona based around the picnic. And it's not just because of the booths touting Dot's Pretzels. Those are an addictive pretzel with ties to both North Dakota and Arizona. It's not because of the giveaways, although Rachel said those were popular and competitive.

Rachel: One person instead of writing their name down repeatedly, you just brought their address labels and like put them on the entry forms and was like, that's like this person is playing chess.

Rachel: And we've been playing checkers

Katie: And it's not even because the former mayor of Bismarck, Bill Sorenson, performs magic. Or the live music from an artist aptly named, "Will Dakota." The real draw of the picnic, well ...

Christi: The real draw of the picnic, I think is is being able to find former friends and neighbors and classmates.

Katie: And that's where Rachel comes back in.

Katie: After she found out about the picnic, Rachel started joking around, telling people she could find a relative there.

Rachel: And people were like they thought it was funny and that it would be kind of like a fun thing to do. And I even if I couldn't write about it, it was my intention to do it just because it's weird. And I'd like to do things sometimes just for the story. Right. Like I one time got ordained on the Internet and then like officiated a wedding for someone who I found on Craigslist just because I was like, why not?

Katie: But the idea isn't far-fetched. Not in the slightest. Whenever she wants to head home, Rachel takes the direct flight from the Mesa Airport to Bismarck.

Rachel: On that flight.

Rachel: It is usually like a pretty old crowd, but they always ask, like, who's your grandpa? Do you have any uncles or aunts like that? So the first thing that happens when you sit down beside someone on that plane is they're trying to figure out how they know you.

Katie: And that's assuming there's any mystery involved. Sometimes she'll spot someone from high school on the plane. The last time she flew ...

Rachel: I think I was in the same row as somebody that was like my brother's like one of my brothers close friends in high school. It was so weird.

Katie: Anyway, all of that explains how Rachel found herself in Red Mountain Park in Mesa on Saturday, March 1, searching for a relative.

Rachel: It's windy and beautiful, but I'll tell you what it's not: WINTER.

Rachel: When I first got there, I would say I was overwhelmed because I kind of feel like Finding Nemo type thing just going up and being like, are you my dad? You know, it's a weird thing to, like, put yourself on a mission for.

Katie: Up first: Rachel signed in. The North Dakota Community Foundation sets up a table with clipboards for each county. Attendees can write their names down and scout for other names that look familiar.

Rachel: I just signed up with my home county, which is Morton County, and there were a lot of people there from my hometown of Mandan, but it's been like five minutes and I haven't found like a cousin yet, so for me it's longer than I thought it'd be, but maybe I'm just feeling a little shy this morning. So maybe I just need to start going up to people.

Katie: There's a map of the state too.

Rachel: I just put my star on a big map on Mandan and there were several other stickers there, so I knew I could find people.

Rachel: I just talked to somebody who said, "Yeah, you're a Leingang. That's a huge family. You should be able to find people. So, with that energy, and the strength of this polka music in the background, we're going to go find a relative. How? We don't know. But we'll find out.

Katie: It's worth noting that Rachel wasn't alone in this endeavor. Our photographer Patrick Breen was there shooting photos.

Rachel: So, Morton County is right by Burleigh County and there's a lot of overlap, so maybe the Burleigh list would have more people? Let's see.

Rachel: Yeah, that Burleigh list is crowded. That's where Bismarck is, the capital city.

Breen: There's a line.

Rachel: The line for Burleigh, oh my god!

Breen: Just walk up to people and be like, "Do you know anybody named Leen" ... how do you pronounce your last name? I can't even pronounce it.

Rachel: Line-gang.

Breen: Line-gang?

Rachel: Or Lang-gang. Either or.

Rachel: Yeah, I'll wait 'til they're done signing so I don't interrupt any business.

Rachel: Hey, are any of you guys related to any Leingangs?

(Woman laughs)

Katie: Rachel and Patrick struck out their first few attempts.

Rachel: I'm trying to find some relatives.

Woman: Oh, well we know a George Leingang.

Rachel: What does he do? Does he farm?

Woman: He's retired. He worked for the state highway department.

Rachel: I have an uncle named George Leingang, but he's a farmer and he's not retired.

Woman: Ohhhhhh! (laughs)

Rachel: But I think there's probably a few.

Breen: That was great.

Rachel: That was a close call (laughs).

Breen: That was great though.

Katie: And then, the duo struck gold.

Rachel: I was standing by the sign in sheet and this lady just looked really familiar. And I I I couldn't figure out why. And I was like, you know, Mandan is pretty small, so she's probably from Mandan. So I went up to her and I was like, hey, you know, do you know any Linegangs?

Rachel: Hey, are you guys from Mandan by any chance?

Man: Yes.

Rachel: Hey, I'm from Mandan too. I work now at the newspaper here in town, but I'm trying to find other people that might be related to Leingangs or Smiths.

Man: She's related. Her mom's a Leingang.

Rachel: Oh, your mom? I'm a Leingang as well!

Woman: Ok!

Rachel: And she's like, well, what are your parents names?

Rachel: And I said, My parents' names.

Rachel: My mom's name Laurie.

Woman: From where?

Rachel: From Mandan. She works out of the Bank of North Dakota. And then my dad's name is Arnie and he's a Leingang.

Woman: Oh!

Man: Oh, they go to our church.

Rachel: Yeah they do!

Rachel: And I'm like, that's probably why she looks familiar. Because I've been in my parents church many times and. Yeah.

Rachel: So we figured out that it's a little ... it was a little unclear exactly how we were related. But like, I believe her mom and my grandpa were cousins.

Katie: Carla Tausend. That's the name of the relative Rachel found. It only took her 16 minutes to find Carla. Oh, and Carla was at the North Dakota picnic with another possible relative.

Woman 2: Is Arnie like 58 years old?

Rachel: Oh God, like 55 I wanna say. 56? Somewhere in there?

Loreen: I knew him! I used to hang out with him!

Rachel: Really? What's your name?

Loreen: Loreen Leingang.

Rachel: Loreen Leingang. Ok, gotcha. This did not take as long as I thought it would.

Rachel: And then she was like, but I don't think we're related. But I used to like party with your dad in high school. And I was like, oh, well, that's great. You know, I want to hear some of these stories.

Katie: How did you feel when you finally found her?

Rachel: Well, I felt a bit of relief because I did find it like somewhat nerve wracking to go up to people just randomly.

Rachel: And I know that's crazy for journalists to say. But any journalists would tell you that's usually not their favorite part of the job.

Rachel: Just randomly going up to people in public spaces.

Rachel: You know, there's a sense of camaraderie among North Dakotans, and I think it like the whole picnic experience really captured that, that, you know, there's this little slice of home, no matter where you go, because there are so few of us and even fewer who end up leaving the state that you tend to kind of cling to that familiarity sometimes.

Katie: I was going to say, did you feel homesick at all afterwards?

Rachel: I do. I'm kind of. I don't know how to describe this.

Rachel: I'm sort of low key, homesick a lot, but never forget the place. And always for the people.

Katie: Rachel was supposed to be on a family vacation this week. That vacation was canceled. And like so many of us transplants -- myself included -- Rachel isn't sure when she'll see her family next.

Rachel: I can't even explain how much I miss being around my family, especially now.

Rachel: And it's like, you know, things are crazy in the world.

Rachel: So, yeah, the beginning of March, I went to an event with 3000 people. And I can't foresee a future where I'll be at an event that large. Like, I don't know when we're going to go back to that sort of thing.

Rachel: That's super scary.

Rachel: I also don't know, you know, well, when I'm going to see my family again, you know, my grandparents went home a little bit early because of the how up in the air everything was.

Rachel: They wanted to be back at their, you know, main house back in North Dakota.

Rachel: And I would just love to, like, feel comforted by the people who really know me best.

Rachel: You know, we have face time, we have all these digital tools to keep in touch. So I guess at least we have that. But I think like, you know, for me and everyone right now, there's just this sense of helplessness and like wanting to cling to what you know. But everything, you know, just doesn't make sense right now.

Katie: And it's worth noting that you don't have to be a transplant to feel this way. Many people can't see parents or grandparents right now. I've seen story after story of frontline workers who are distancing from their spouse or their children to keep them safe. Our notion of home has fractured. But with time, we'll get it back. We can choose to be hopeful until then. And we can reminisce. Like Rachel, we can remember camping in the summer or learning polka in school. We can think about what it *feels like* to be in a park ... on a windy March morning ... surrounded by people who sound and feel like home.

(Sound of Will Dakota playing "Country Roads" by John Denver with updated "North Dakota" lyrics comes in.)

Kaila: Hey listeners, it's me Kaila again. Katie, one thing I'm wondering -- you're telling Rachel's story of this picnic and what it's like to be a transplant right now. But you're also a transplant. How are you feeling right now?

Katie: (answer tk)

Katie: Kaila, a few quick notes before we leave today. I want to thank Rachel for sharing what ended up being a really personal story with all of us. She was champ throughout this episode, from interviewing Christi to gathering audio from the event. And thanks to photographer Patrick Breen for his help as well.

Kaila: And thanks to our listeners for joining us. If you haven't had a chance to, please rate and review our show on whatever platform you use to listen. That will help news listeners discover our show and catch up on old episodes.

Kaila: I'm Kaila White, signing off until next week.