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Upcoming royal wedding sparks interest in all things British

SPECIAL TO THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

Leave it to a royal wedding to make everyone feel a bit British.

The upcoming marriage of Prince William to his long-time love Kate Middleton awakens a woman's childhood dream of finding her prince, much like the wedding of Prince William's parents, Charles and Diana, did 30 years ago.

Millions of romantics across the United States will turn on their televisions early on April 29 to view all the pomp only a royal wedding can provide. This version of the "Wedding of the Century" also is likely to turn minds toward all things British.

Locally, there are a couple of ways to get into the spirit of the occasion.

First, start with a trip to Brits at 929 Massachusetts St. in downtown Lawrence. This shop is an anglophile's dream, which makes sense considering owner Sally Helm has made many trips to Great Britain.

"I've always been one of those people who go there, step off the plane and feel at home," she said. "I've always felt comfortable there."

Helm opened Brits in 1995 with Susie Pryor, her friend from junior high school. Pryor has since moved on to other interests, but Helm continues to stock the store with all things British.

Her biggest sellers are food items. Customers can find everything from biscuits (known as cookies in this country), jams, marmalades, chocolates and teas to cereals, spices, baking mixes, beverages, haggis and a sponge pudding called Spotted Dick.

The shop features a large selection of tea pots and tea accessories, DVDs of British television programs and movies (for rent or purchase), pub glasses, scarves representing the country's soccer (known there as football) teams, souvenirs, housewares and toiletries.

Helm said she also will have a number of William-and-Kate wedding souvenirs available, including mugs, postcards, lapel pins, bookmarks, spoons, flags, the official china and “the neatest tea towels I’ve ever seen.”

For those who want to have a party to celebrate the royal nuptials, Helm and employee Patrick Patterson, whose mother is British, suggest having a British tea.

Patterson recommended serving a more refined tea, such as a Darjeeling, and toasting the royal couple with a nonalcoholic sparkling elder flower beverage. Of course, no British menu would be complete without scones, Devon cream and jam.

Patterson also suggested crackers with a selection of cheeses, such as his favorite Caerphilly cheddar from Wales.

If a visit to Brits doesn’t put you in the royal mood, then a new exhibition set to open at Kansas City’s Union Station most certainly will. “Diana, A Celebration,” which runs Friday through June 12, chronicles the life of Diana, princess of Wales, and her wedding gown with its 25-foot train, veil, diamond tiara, shoes and parasol, as well as a bridesmaid’s dress.

The exhibition comes directly from the Althorp Estate in England, Diana’s ancestral home. The exhibition has been on display at the estate since 1998 and has attracted more than 700,000 visitors, despite being open only three months of the year.

Kansas City, the only stop west of the Mississippi River, is the exhibition’s final showing before it returns to England.

“The importance of the exhibition and the international renown make having it very prestigious for both Kansas City and Union Station,” said Tony Cook, who is with the marketing and public relations department at Union Station. “We are proud to be able to host this event.”

Along with the royal wedding gallery, the exhibition also features 28 of Diana’s designer dresses, family heirlooms, personal mementos, paintings and rare home movies and photos. In all, there are nine galleries with 150 objects from the princess’ life.

All profits generated to the Althorp Estate from the exhibition will support charities supported by the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.

Cook expects from 60,000 to 75,000 people to visit the exhibition, and so far ticket sales have gone well.

“For people in the Topeka area, I would recommend you get a ticket in advance to know for certain you have one for the day of your visit,” he said. “That way you won’t make the drive only to discover the exhibition is sold out for the day.”

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