



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



MiniPresentation#46

RUSS

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We call it “spring fever” or “senioritis.” For some reason, graduating seniors are always granted the privilege of responding to the lure of spring—more so than the rest of the population. And for the graduating classes of the Norwegian gymnas, senioritis is not relieved by a mere party or prom. Throughout May, and particularly on Syttende Mai, May 17, Norway’s Constitution Day, soon-to-be-graduates party, flirt, parade and celebrate in a way usually considered unbecoming to the rest of the population.

These students are called **russ** (‘ruhs), a name derived from the Latin phrase cornua depositurus, which means “the one who loses his horns.” This connects to the old European tradition of requiring that new students dress up in horns which older students then ceremoniously rip off to indicate that the freshmen were accepted at the university.

The russ, clad in red or blue, are a sure sign of spring to most Norwegians, but the preparations for the russ celebrations have already been started the previous fall, when students in each school elect a russ council of about 20 members, all with specific duties to perform. A foreman heads the council, which plans most of the organized russ events for the coming spring.

Although celebrations tend to start earlier, Syttende Mai is the day when the russ come out. They are all dressed in red or blue jumpsuits. The blues are graduating after three years of business school while the reds have a background in liberal arts or science. Each student is identified by name on an arm or leg of the suit with the school logo on the back. Another important part of the russ outfit is the red or blue cap. These caps are a mark of prestige for the wearer. A foot-long string hangs from the cap and is knotted to recount the wearer’s “milestones”—staying up all night, kissing the russ president or drinking certain amounts of beer or liquor. Each russ also has a card with name, school, phone number, photo and a joke or pun.

Old, decorated cars have long been a symbol of the russ. During the winter, students prepare for their spring expeditions and parades by purchasing an old car, van or truck—the cheaper and roomier, the better. The cars are painted red or blue and then covered with advertising and slogans in white. Students solicit advertisements from local business people to finance their cars. On Syttende Mai, the russ participate in the children’s parade, but the reds and the blues also have their own parades later in the day. Their cars and trucks are in the parade with russ riding atop them. Other students dress up in costumes or carry signs displaying jokes or slogans. Their parades are tremendously popular—everyone is out to see what jokes and puns the russ have come up with for that year.

Some people disapprove of the russ activities—as a matter of fact, this is also a part of the russ tradition. In order to improve their reputation and be of service to society, the students take on a special charitable project each year. Their fund-raising has proven successful—hundreds of thousands of Norwegian kroner are put to good use every year, thanks to the efforts of the russ. In a few short weeks they will crowd the streets of Norwegian cities and towns in their cheerful red or blue. We hope they will have a **fun celebration!**