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 News  
**Early Alarm Starts Fourth**  
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At Mary Rae Wolf's house, the Fourth of July starts not with a bang and not with a whimper, but with an alarm. Well, maybe a little whimper: By tradition, the alarm clock sounds at 3 a.m.

She and her family rise well before the sun and head out, sticking small American flags into the yards of a couple of old Omaha neighborhoods, Field Club and Holy Cross. The Wolfs go up and down the streets in an area bounded by 32nd, 48th, Pacific and Center Streets, placing nearly 2,000 flags.

"It always rains," she said with a laugh. "It pours down. We look like drowned rats."

The family then meets at a pancake house to celebrate, dry out and compare notes - and rubber bands. The flags come 10 to a bunch, and as the band is removed from each group, it is slipped on to the family member's wrist. The rubber-band count shows who covered the most ground.

The Fourth is full of tradition in America, and each community has its own. The J.E. George Boulevard parade to Memorial Park, for example, features a band, kids on decorated bikes and a grand marshal - always the neighborhood mailman.

Across America, lots of folks shoot off fireworks, legally or otherwise. Then there are the big shows.

The World-Herald's 17th annual Grucci show, the biggest fireworks display west of the Mississippi, draws hundreds of thousands around Rosenblatt Stadium after the Omaha Golden Spikes baseball game.

Big or small, the Fourth is for just about everyone. Big Family

Wolf and her husband, Joe, raised 11 kids to adulthood in a big house on Woolworth Avenue, built in about 1904 a few blocks west of Hanscom Park. A couple of them will arrive from Texas and help with the early morning flag project.

X Mary Rae, a real estate agent, started lining the streets with flags more than a decade ago along with other Home Real Estate agents around town. The company is now CBS Home Real Estate, and agents distribute more than 40,000 flags each year.

Joe Wolf's brother, a World War II veteran, recently moved to Omaha after 45 years in California and already loves the tradition.

Even though family members start their work in the dark, Mary Rae said, it's not too early or too dark to stop and smell the roses. As they insert flags in each yard, they admire the old houses.

"Each one has so much character," she said.

The Field Club Homeowners Association is sponsoring its 19th annual Fourth of July parade along Woolworth at 10:30 a.m. Chairs and people will line the sidewalks.

There's a lot of patriotism evident, but also good humor. Whatever is in the news could give someone an idea for costumes.

When the Council Bluffs casinos started, for example, someone marched with large dice. People dressed as doctors and nurses have pushed people down the avenue on gurneys. Others have dressed as Ken and Barbie dolls. Little Lamb

When Mary Rae's children were young, the family owned a lamb - yes, Mary had a little lamb.

Well, everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go, including the parade. Mary's daughter dressed as Little Bo Peep - a Wolf in Peep's clothing.

The entire neighborhood participates, and judges award prizes for best costume, best motorized display, best house decoration and many other categories. Blocks compete against one another.

"Pine Street, behind us, is pretty good," Mary Rae said. "They're really into this. They usually block off the street and have a party afterward."

Getting up early to line the streets with flags, she said, is a labor of love. It's been said that it takes a village to raise a child - or at least a neighborhood. "This is the neighborhood that raised my kids. I'm just helping decorate it."

As a child herself, she and her family rode streetcars to Fontenelle Park, then the site of hugely attended fireworks shows. Last weekend she went to Memorial Park for the Commercial Federal concert and fireworks.

On Independence Day, she's grateful to the many who have helped keep America free. And she'll help mark the day in a special way - even before the dawn's early light.

"It's exciting," she said, "for people to wake up and see the neighborhood full of flags."

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