Book talk, exhibit brings world of 100-year-old novel ‘My Antonia’ to life

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Antonia Kratochvilova escaped her native Czechoslovakia in 1955 as the Communist Iron Curtain closed in.

So when Antonia’s daughter, English Professor Evelyn Funda, came across a traditional Czech “kroj,” the vest and skirt outfit that was a Czech national symbol, it already seemed like a member of the family. She acquired it in a silent auction from the Czech Genealogical Society International.

The dress, with its glossy vest, elaborate embroidery and wool skirt, dates from the turn of the 19th century, only a decade or so before Czechoslovakia became its own nation.

The dress is now on display in the USU Museum of Anthropology. It’s a “time capsule,” as Funda describes it, representing the world of Funda’s own Czech immigrant ancestors, as well as Willa Cather, who wrote about the immigrants’ struggle on the Great Plains.

It’s also an appropriate visual backdrop for the 100th anniversary of the publication of Cather’s 1918 novel, “My Antonia.” To mark the anniversary, the university’s Cather specialists, Funda and fellow English associate professor Steve Shively, have teamed with Molly Cannon, director of the Museum of Anthropology, and the Logan Library, to present a community book discussion and exhibit.

Shively will lead a discussion on “My Antonia” at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 17, in the Bonneville Room of the library, 255 N. Main, Logan. The discussion is free and open to the public.

Readers can then visit the museum to inspect the dress that symbolized the national pride that Czech immigrants felt in their homeland in the Old Country.

Funda first encountered the novel at the suggestion of a college professor — though she first read it because Antonia was her mother’s name, she says. “My Antonia” is the story of a 12-year-old girl who immigrates with her family to the Great Plains. Antonia learns English with the help of neighbor and tutor Jim Burden, and the plot follows them as their lives intersect through the years.

Shively describes the novel as “thinly disguised history.” Indeed, Jim Burden, the novel’s narrator, is based on Cather herself, he says.

Antonia’s life is steeped in hardship, as a teenager who experiences the suicide of her father, as a bride whose new husband abandons her on their honeymoon, as a husband-less pregnant woman who returns home in shame.

Cather, says Shively, “wanted the focus to be on this girl who becomes a woman and thought the easiest way to portray her was through the eyes of a male.” Plus, he adds, “She also wanted to disguise that it was really her.”

Shively is a member of the Board of Governors for the Willa Cather Foundation, located next door to Cather’s childhood home in Red Cloud, Neb.

Indeed, the Kroj national costume (pronounced kroy), was on display at the international Cather archives over the summer as the foundation held its own celebration of “My Antonia.”
After Funda acquired the traditional Czech costume about a year ago, she brought it to Cannon to assess its museum potential and find best preservation practices.

“I didn’t want her — I look at the dress as a ‘she’ — to live in my house, but to go out on the road,” said Funda. “The idea is she needs to be seen by the public.”

Cannon did the first assessment of the costume, its materials and construction, and dated the dress to 1903. The nearly dozen pieces of clothing that comprise the outfit — petticoats, shawl, vest and tunic, for example — are contemporary to each other, Cannon believes, with the exception of the lace on sewn on the apron’s bottom edge, which is much older. “That’s the tradition of kroj,” said Cannon. “They would often get pieced together with family heirlooms, so you might have older lace that got stitched onto a new apron.”

The exhibit includes three pieces of head wear: two elaborately embroidered bonnets, worn by unmarried women, and a patterned scarf that indicates marriage.

The dress is remarkable preserved for a piece of clothing that’s seen more than a century of living. There are a couple of small stains, but they only serve to remind Funda of the girl, probably much like the fictional Antonia, who once twirled its skirts.

At a hundred years old, “My Antonia” is also fresh and contemporary, says Funda. “It raises issues about immigration, assimilation, class issues, and female power,” she said. “The issues are timeless and relate to our present-day circumstances in very compelling ways that Cather could never have anticipated.”

The novel stands on its own in terms of literary history, she added. Cather’s dirt-poor and hardworking Bohemian immigrants were a fresh injection into a literary era focused on “characters who come right out of the East Coast drawing rooms” created by such authors as Henry James and Edith Wharton.

The traditional dress will remain on exhibit at the Museum of Anthropology through June 2019. Then it will begin another road trip, probably with the Mormon Historical Association, said Cannon.

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- Liberalis article on Steve Shively’s Cather research: CHaSS.usu.edu/Liberalis “Weeds: A Farm Daughter’s Lament” (Bison Books, 2013), Evelyn Fund’s memoir about her Czech upbringing on an Idaho farm, https://amzn.to/2NBxn9l