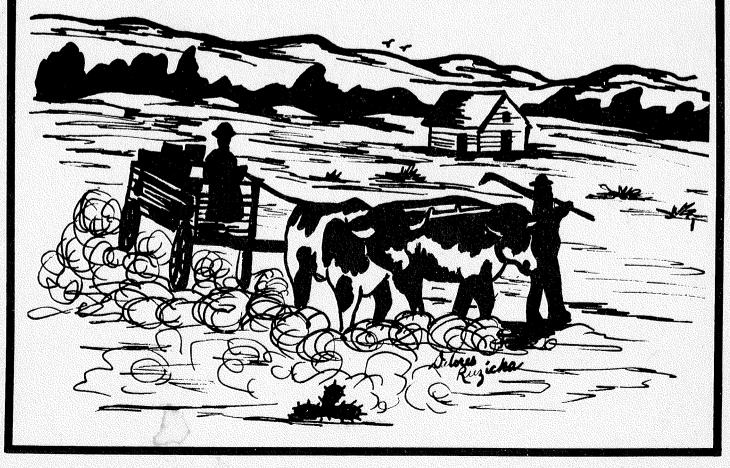
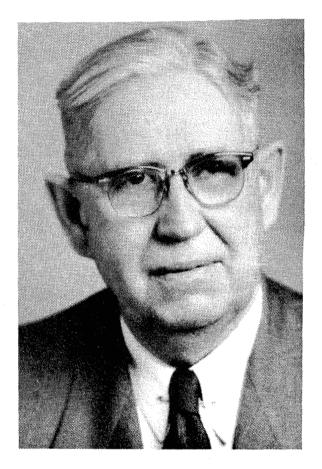
A history of.... The Czechs In Knox County, Nebraska

by

Joseph John Van Hoff



A HISTORY OF THE CZECHS OF KNOX COUNTY, NEBRASKA



by

Joseph John Van Hoff

1893 - 1967

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements For the Degree of Master of Arts Department of History

> Lincoln, Nebraska July 30, 1938

Table of Contents

MAP

Area of Bohemian Settlements in Knox County, Nebraska 1

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND
Purposes of the Thesis 2
Number of Czechs in Knox County 2
Character of Bohemia 2
Early Religious Situations
Bohemian Nationalism 2
Character of the Czech Immigrants 2
Reasons for Coming To America 2-3
First Stopping Places In America
Reasons for Writer's Interest

CHAPTER II

FIRST SETTLEMENT OF THE
BOHEMIANS IN KNOX COUNTY
Movement of Czechs toward Chicago 4
Satisfaction with city life 4
Eagerness to secure land 4
Organization of the Colonizing Society 4
Committee investigates the
Niobrara country 4
First Expedition 5
Second Expedition 5
Trip from Sioux City to
Niobrara 6
Description of Niobrara
Settlers inspect lands 6
First Bohemian files on
a homestead 6
Activities in the spring of 18707
Expedition of 1870 7
Type of settlers who came 7

CHAPTER III

HARDSHIPS AND TRIALS OF
THE FIRST YEARS
Reasons for the severity of
the hardships 7
Prevalance of the Indians
Lack of Preparation for
frontier life 8
Ignorance of farm machinery

First Homes	8
Early cooperative efforts	9
Examples of hardships 9-	10
Grasshopper Spurges	10
Prairie fires	10
Storm of Easter Sunday 1873	10
Winter of 1880-1881	10
Indirect Results of the	
floods of 1881	10
Cattle Drives	11

CHAPTER IV

CONTACTS WITH THE INDIANS	
Types of Indian tribes in the area	12
Reasons for fear of the Indians	
The Brabenec tragedy	12
First hardships of the Brabenecs	
Locating a claim	12
Attacks of the Indians	13
Mrs. Brabenec wounded	13
Finding body of Brabenec boy	13
Brabenecs return to town	
Finding body of Brabenec girl	
The importance of this incident	
Other contacts with the Indians	
Attempts to stop Indian depredations	
The moval of the Poncas	

CHAPTER V

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT Rural

urai	
Economic status of the first settlers 14	
Early ways of obtaining cash 15	
Low prices during the first years 15	
Better crops in the late seventies 15	
Movement for building better homes 16	
Economic status in 1880 16	
Hard times of the early nineties 16	
Thirtieth anniversary celebration 16	
Activities in the early 1900 16	

Urban Development

First stores	17
The beginnings of Verdigre	17
The coming of the railroad	17
The railroad moves on	17
Situation in 1910 and 1911	18
The annual floods	18
Boom year in 1915	. 18
Business situation during the war	18
Situation since 1930	19

CHAPTER VI RELIGIOUS ACT

LIGIOUS ACTIVITIES	
Czech attitude on Religion 19	
Religious situation in Bohemia 19	
Religious problem on the frontier 19	
The drift away from formal religion 19	
Early Catholic Activities	
The work of Missionaries	
Agitation for the building of the church . 20	
The erection of the church	
The first pastor	
Developments since 1893 21	
Religious situation in Pischelville	
Efforts of Protestant groups 21	
Some of the religious customs	
Summary of the religious situation 22	

CHAPTER VII

FRATERNAL ACTI	VITIES A	ND AN	AUSEMENTS
Fraternal Activities	5		

The two classes of Bohemian organizations.	22
First steps toward the formation of lodges.	22
Z. C. B. J. Lodge at Verdigre	23
English speaking branch	24
The Catholic Workman	24
The Sokols	
The Catholic Sokols	
Tel Jed Sokols	24

Amusements

.

Wedding celebrations	25
wedding celebrations	40
Lodge and church celebrations	
Dances	25
Hunting	
Baseball	26
Wrestling	
Drinking	26
Summary	26

CHAPTER VIII EDUCATIONAL AND

EDUCATIONAL AND	
CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT	
Educational Development	
Lack of education among the first settlers 26	
Early establishment of rural schools 26	
First districts 27	
First school at Verdigre	
Verdigre constructs a brick school	
Education development after 1910 28	
Modern school erected 28	
Bohemian schools 29	

Cultural Development	
Two lines of Cultural Development	29
Early musical organization at Pischelville	29
The Pavlik Band	29
Verdigre Military Band	29
Lenger's Niobrara Band	29
Artists Programs	
Dramatic clubs	30

CHAPTER IX

POLITICS AND WAR	
Politics	
Randa, the politician	30
Attitude of the politicians	
toward the Czechs	30
Schemes to land the Bohemian votes	31
The Czechs and the County seat	
and County division	31
Party of affiliation of the Bohemians	31
Bohemians who have held county offices	32
Political attitude of the present generation.	32
War Activities	
Bohemian interests in the World War	32
Added financial burdens	33
Loyalty of the Czechs	33
Support of war activities	33
Home coming Jubilee	

CHAPTER X

RECENT TRENDS

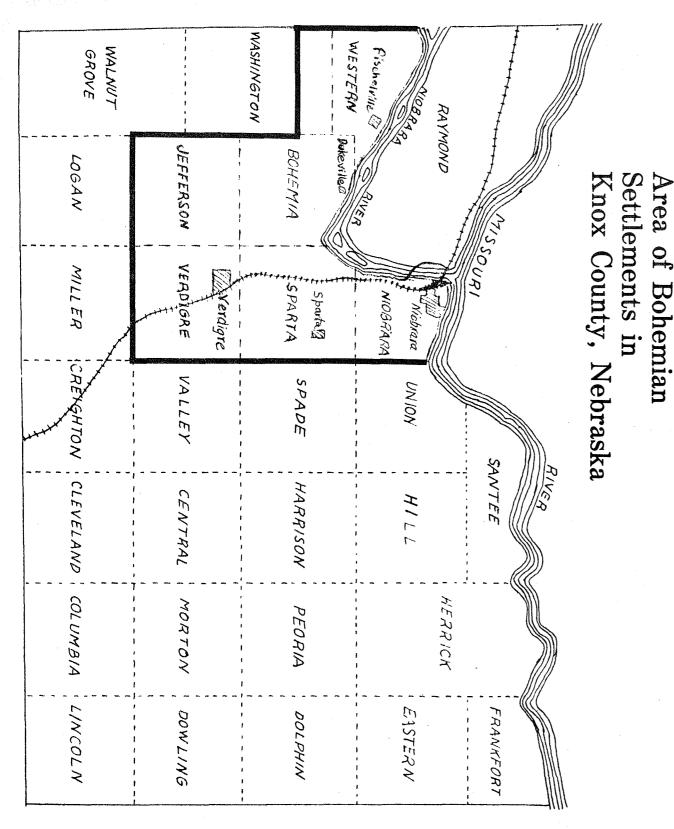
The War as an Americanizing influence	33
The passing of the pioneers	33
Use of the Czech language tends	
to disappear	33
Mixed marriages	33
Young people leave the community	33
Financial difficulties	33
Farming activities	33
Czechs and relief	33
Pischelville and relief 33	-34

BIBLIOGRAPHY 35-	-36
------------------	-----

APPENDIX

Bohemian	Land	Owners	in	Knox	County	
in 1892			•••	• • • • • •		36-37

AREA SHOWN IN BOLD



-1-

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

When the average person thinks of the Czech settlements of Nebraska, he is apt to have in mind the large numbers of this national group who are located in the comparatively centralized area of Douglas, Saunders, Butler, Saline, and Colfax Counties.¹ Few seem to realize that one of the larger of the Czech settlements of the state is to be found in Knox County, a section considerably removed, and having relatively few contacts with the Czechs in the above-mentioned counties.

It is the purpose of this thesis to tell the story of these Knox County Czechs. In it effort will be made to present as clearly and accurately as possible the facts regarding their settlement of Knox County and their early trials and hardships. Along with this, information will be given concerning their economic struggles and accomplishments, and attention will be paid to their religious, fraternal, educational, social, and political activities. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to show that their contribution to the commonwealth lies not in the greatness of a few individuals but in the persistence and toil of the peasant homesteaders, who, while retaining the peculiarly valuable traits of their own nationality, defied drouth, insect plagues, poverty, and a multitude of other handicaps, and eventually achieved economic independence and Americanization.

There are at present approximately four thousand individuals in Knox County who are either Czechs or of Czech descent.² These are concentrated pretty largely in the west half of the county, being found chiefly in Verdigre, Bohemia, Western, Sparta, Jefferson, Washington, and Niobrara Townships. Their chief town is Verdigre, a village of 618 people, ninety percent of whom are Czechs.

To better understand these settlers and the things that they did, and to a certain extent still do, it is necessary to know a little something about their old country background. Bohemia, as their home land is commonly called, is a strange country. The home of a long-abused people, its love of liberty stretches back into shadowy beginnings. Extremely low at times, it on occasions rose to towering heights in the personalities of such individuals as John Huss. Side by side with this love for liberty went the desire for Czech nationalism and these two ideals, cherished through the centuries, came to be factors in marking the Czechs as different from the other groups of central Europe.

Going back into their history we find that the Czechs, influenced by the doctrines of the Reformation and still loyal to their great leader, Huss, were instrumental in bringing on the famous Thirty Years War (1618-1648). This disastrous struggle flared up when the Czechs, feeling that their religious liberties had been violated, revolted against Ferdinand II of Austria. The struggle proved decidedly uneven and in connection with it the Czechs suffered their crowning disaster in the battle of White Mountain on November 8th, 1620.

With this defeat the condition of Bohemia fell to its lowest level. Protestantism received a staggering blow in the form of new orders which drove all of the Protestant clergy from Bohemia, forbade all religious worship, save that of the Roman Catholic Church, and banished all Protestants. The cause of Bohemian kingship was made hereditary in the House of Hapsburgs. As a result of all this 36,000 Protestant families went into exile.³

Despite these extreme reverses, a certain unquenchable spirit remained and the spark of nationalism continued to glow until three centuries later it brought forth from the chaos of the World War, the present Czecho-Slovakian nation. It was such an inheritance as this that the Czech immigrants brought to America and used to carry them through their discouraging days as pioneer homesteaders.

The forebearers of most of the Czechs who came here were agricultural folks and had been attached to the land for centuries.⁴ Living in small towns and villages and having no land in their own right, they tilled the soil for the wealthier land owners. Many of them had a family inheritance that went back into the dim past, but still they belonged to a lower strata of society in their home land and realized it. The philosophy of the majority of them might be expressed by the quotation: "There should be a God in heaven and masters on earth."⁵ Under such a system, prestige and local standing went with the ownership of land, and so it is not surprising that when the land-hungry peasants heard of the ease with which land could be secured in America. they were anxious to come here and share in those benefits which were practically denied them at home.

-2-

¹ Even such a well known Czech authority as Sarka B. Hrbkova in her article on the "Bohemians of Nebraska" in NEBRASKA HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS, Vol XIX, Page 140, mentions these counties as strong in Bohemian population but makes no reference to Knox County in that respect.

² This estimate comes from information furnished by the County Clerk of Knox County. The 1930 United States Census gives the population of Knox County as 19,110. The County Clerk, who also serves as County Assessor, and in that capacity comes in contact with practically everyone in the county, estimates that the Czechs make up about twenty percent of the population. This would place their total number a little under four thousand.

³ Thomas Capek: THE CZECHS IN AMERICA, (New York, 1929), 3 4 Sarka B. Hrbkova: "Bohemians of Nebraska," NEBRASKA HISTORI-CAL SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS, 19, 140

⁵ Emily Balch: Our Slavonic Fellow Citizens (New York, 1910), 42



Verdigre's Main Street, west side, looking north in early 1890's. J. J. Schmidt, Director of the Verdigre Military Band.

Other factors also functioned in the bringing of Bohemian immigrants to our shores. Many were urged on, not only by the meager economic opportunities at home but also by the undesirable social and political system which had oppressed them so long and which showed no signs of improvement as the years of the nineteenth century rolled by. In fact, it seemed to grow worse as the domineering Hapsburgs curtailed their liberties further and in the middle of the eighteen hundreds appeared to be nursing an organized plan to Germanize them.⁶

Another large group, mostly young men, saw in emigration to America escape from distasteful military duty. Democratic and peace-loving America offered them something which they could never enjoy at home.

Previous to 1840 there was little emigration from Bohemia. Thomas Capek explains this on the grounds that Bohemia went through a wave of prosperity following the Napoleonic wars that provided plenty of work for those who desired it.⁷ It would seem, however, that an even greater factor was that the government discouraged it and passports were hard to obtain. However, the Central House Hotel which was destroyed by fire shortly after picture was taken - later rebuilt as Queen Hotel.

drouth of the early forties and the revolutionary disturbances of 1848 breathed life into the movement and resulted in a stream of migration that brought 57,726 immigrants to the United States from Austria between 1850 and 1868. Of this number 43,645 were from Bohemia.⁸

Entering the United States for the most part through the port of New York, a few, chiefly tradesmen and especially cigar makers, remained. but the greater numbers passed on into the interior. Milwaukee, St. Louis, Cleveland, and Chicago were the cities that received them. The factor which decided their destination was generally some relative or friend or some acquaintance from the same village at home who had come earlier and was located in one of the four above cities. From these points they later moved on to the rich agricultural lands of Texas, Kansas, the Dakotas, and Nebraska. Those who formed the nucleus and later the bulk of the Knox County settlers came from Chicago. So much for a brief background of America's Czech immigrants.

7 Capek: CZECHS IN AMERICA, 9 8 IBID, 25

The writer's interest in this subject springs from a residence and close association of twenty-five years with the Czechs of Knox County. During that time he has personally witnessed changes which in themselves have been important. He has been among these Czechs from the period when practically nothing but the Czech language was spoken on the street of Verdigre down to the present when English predominates and the native language is used chiefly by the middle aged and older inhabitants. He has witnessed the passing of the original pioneers and watched with interest the efforts of the younger American-Czechs to meet their economic problems of recent years. He has observed the loosening and breaking down of habits and customs, brought over from abroad, and he has seen them go through the process of amalgamation with the commonly accepted American ones.

Chapter Two

FIRST SETTLEMENT OF THE BOHEMIANS IN KNOX COUNTY

By the early sixties emigration from Bohemia had reached the stage where it was bringing considerable numbers to America each year.¹ Few remained in the east, the majority moving into the rapidly growing cities of the middle west. For many, the goal was Chicago where other Czechs had preceded them, and where a Bohemian colony was established to the point where it was quite strongly concentrated in one section of the city. Most of the newcomers lived for the time being with relatives and friends and without much effort were able to adjust themselves to their new environment. Even lack of knowledge of the English language was not a serious handicap since their native tongue was spoken among their own national group. They also obtained profitable employment with little effort because Chicago was passing through its booming adolescent stage and there was plenty of work for willing hands.

For a while this type of labor and life was to their liking and they gloried in their new-found wealth and independence. Still, many of them

 $1\,$ Tables showing Emigration from Bohemia from 1850-1868. Capek: THE CZECHS IN AMERICA, 29\,

		Year	Number
Year	Number	1859	1842
1850	166	1860	1302
1851	341	1861	1927
1852	427	1862	1246
1853	3419	1863	1124
1854	6128	1864	1950
1855	3021	1865	2417
1856	2088	1866	3089
1857	2167	1867	7430
1858	1341	1868	3220

--4--

--3---

were restless and far from satisfied. They were, after all, an agricultural people and each year as spring and summer approached they felt an age old urge for the soil and a desire to get away from the unsanitary filth of Chicago and out on the rich lands which everyone said were so easily obtained. To feed this feeling came the passage of the Homestead Act, encouraging the immigrants and others to take advantage of the vast stretches of free and fertile lands that lay beyond the Missouri and to the northwest.

To a group who prized the ownership of land so highly and to whom it had been consistently denied, this offered a golden opportunity and they discussed it with unrestrained interest as they gathered evenings for a social hour at the corner saloon and in the homes of their friends. Free land for everyone! It was unbelievable. Such thoughts were voiced as they eagerly sought information that was reliable.

But it was true and out of all of this talk grew a plan for assisting the interested Czechs to establish themselves on suitable free lands. The plan took the form of a colonizing Club, called "Ceska Osada" (Bohemian Colony). One of its most enthusiastic sponsors was Frank Bem, a saloon keeper.² It was organized in 1868, and soon had a membership of about 500. One long-time resident of Knox County says that anyone who could speak Bohemian was eligible for membership and that a small initial fee was charged of all who joined.³

The purpose of the club was not to establish organized mass colonies under its direction and control but rather to find suitable places for settlement and to encourage their countrymen to settle there. The club did urge its members to settle in groups, but it provided no financial assistance, that being a strictly individual matter with each colonist.⁴

Since one of the club's objectives was to find a place for settlement, a committee of two members, Frank Bem and Frank Janousek, were sent out in the spring of 1869 to look over the situation in Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, and the upper Missouri River Valley. Definite information is not available regarding the details of their journey, but we know that they were at Niobrara and that they looked over the lands along the Niobrara River and the Verdigris Creek. They also investigated the locality across the Missouri River from Niobrara in Dakota, and the fertile stretches in

⁶ Robert I. Kutak: THE STORY OF A BOHEMIAN-AMERICAN VIL-LAGE, (Louisville, Ky, 1933), 9

² Rose Rosicky: Translation of Reminiscences of J. V. Holecek of Niobrara, Nebraska, in (FRATERNAL HERALD) February 10, 1934, 81 3 Personal Interview with J. V. Holecek, Niobrara, Nebraska, June 7, 1937

⁴ In discussing this colonizing club with the sons of several of the Czech pioneers it seems that the club was a non-profit organization; that it was interested primarily in the welfare of its national group and hoped in colonizing them in groups to keep alive cherished customs of the Czechs and particularly to perpetuate the use of their native language.

the vicinity of Yankton, then the territorial capital of the Dakotas.

Returning to Chicago, they reported favorably on these two places. Bem was favorably impressed with the Dakota region, probably because of its fertile soil, its nearness to Yankton, and the fact that a few settlers were already there. It is possible that the Niobrara vicinity appeared a little too primitive and wild to him. Janousek, on the other hand, reported favorably on the lands in the neighborhood of the mouth of the Niobrara River. His fancy was caught by the abundance of timber and water in that region and he felt that these natural resources would prove valuable assets to the prospective settlers.⁵

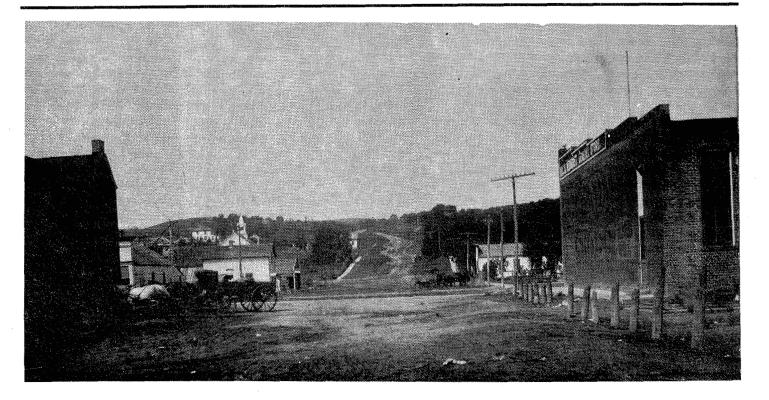
As the result of these reports, the first attempts at settlement were headed in the direction of Niobrara. It seems strange that the first expedition got under way at once and was in Niobrara before mid-summer of 1869. The enthusiasm of this group for the task they were undertaking must have been intense to have gone ahead at a time of the year when crops could no longer be produced. Bem and Janousek headed the expedition. In addition to them, it consisted of Frank Nedved, Joseph Pechan and family, Carl Schindler, Daniel Cap, Thaddeus Pisek and nephew, Alois Chladek, Cyril Jandus, Joseph Hrdlicka, and Frank Fejfar and daughter.⁶

Arriving at Niobrara, this initial group failed to catch Janousek's enthusiasm for the country in

that vicinity, and influenced by Ben, decided to do their settling on the higher Dakota plains, closer to Yankton. Several factors probably influenced them in the making of this decision; the prevalence of Indians (Niobrara is said to have been little more than a collection of Indian tepees at this time) and the encouragement received from the business men of Yankton who were anxious to have bona-fide settlers take up lands on the Dakota side of the Missouri River, contiguous to Yankton in order to insure the growth of their own town. At any rate, only Janousek and Schindler remained in Niobrara. The former continued to scout around and gather knowledge concerning the area's possibilities while Schindler, who was a German-Bohemian, soon took up a claim about nine miles up the Niobrara River from the village, in the vicinity which later became known as Dukeville. From the evidence at hand it would appear that Schindler was the first bona-fide settler of the Czech group to establish a permanent residence on a farm in Knox County. 7

Joseph L. Sedivy led the next group of Czech settlers to the Niobrara country in October of the same year (1869). Sedivy had come to America in 1865 and located in Chicago. He had more wealth

^{1929), 184} 7 Edwin A. Fry: "Bohemians in Yankeedom" in Fry's WONDERLAND MAGAZINE, Vol. 1, No. 6, 7. A copy of this magazine is to be found in Fry's Collection of Historical Material in the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.



Looking west in early 1900's - Verdigre, Nebr.

-5-

than the average Bohemian immigrant, and, according to an account written by his son, 8 he operated a grocery store in that city for about a year. Urged by a desire to farm, he sold the store, joined the Bohemian Colony, and started for Nebraska on October 21, 1869. His departure at this time of the year was probably due to a desire to get located in the new land in sufficient time to be prepared to start farming operations the next spring. His party included his own family, Joseph Krupicka and family, John Holecek and family, Joseph Gregor and wife, Frank Vampul and family, and Joseph Noll and wife.

They came as far as Sioux City, Iowa, by rail. and from there they expected to complete the journey to Niobrara up the Missouri River by steamboat, but transportation by boat had terminated for the season and they were obliged to go the remainder of the way by ox teams. Sedivy had brought a new wagon and plow from Chicago and he purchased for \$190 a yoke of large oxen in Sioux City. Noll and Krupicka pooled their resources and bought a cheaper pair of oxen and an old wagon. The wives and children of the Sedivy and Krupicka families were left temporarily in Sioux City. The remainder of the party proceeded to walk to Niobrara, the wagons being reserved for the necessities that had to be taken along. The slowness of the trip is indicated by the fact that it took from November 2 until November 8 to complete it. Since the total distance is only a little over a hundred miles, they averaged about thirteen miles a day.

J. V. Holecek, one of the members of the party, paints a rather uninviting picture of the village of Niobrara that greeted the arrivals. It consisted of a log cabin store, operated by Westermann and Bruns, and across from this a frame house, occupied by County Judge Tom N. Paxton and also used as a sort of trading post for Indians. In addition, a short distance away was a cabin occupied by Janousek, the colony representative. These constituted the buildings that housed the white population of the town. The rest of the village consisted of about twenty tents of awning and buffalo hides and was occupied by Indians.9 Scattered here and there was an abandoned cabin and it was in one of these that the Holecek family spent the winter.

Having reached Niobrara and unloaded his goods, Sedivy, Krupicka, and Noll left the next day for Sioux City to get the families that were left there. Noll's wife remained at Niobrara with the Holeceks. This time they left Sioux City on November 18th with five wagons, two of which the elder Sedivy rented. They traveled up the east bank of the river, having in mind to break their journey by a stop with one of the Czech settlers who had come out the previous summer and settled on the Dakota side of the river. They reached Yankton on November 21st and went on to the homestead of Mr. Pechan. Upon his advice the Sedivy and Krupicka families moved into an old cabin and were to remain there until the river was sufficiently frozen to render crossing it on ice a safe procedure. They had a considerable wait as the river was not safe for travel until December 18th. Meanwhile, the elder Sedivy had gone on to Niobrara to make preparations for the arrival of his family.

Having unloaded his goods, Sedivy and the others proceeded to inspect the lands along the Niobrara River and the Verdigris Creek. After this, the local trader, Westermann, took them out further into the country into the section where the towns of Creighton and Winnetoon are now located, but noting the absence of trees and a scarcity of running water, they were unfavorably impressed. Returning to Niobrara, they disagreed among themselves in the matter of choosing claims. Vampula and Noll finally decided to settle in Dakota while Sedivy, Holecek, and the rest chose the Niobrara territory as their future home.¹⁰

Sedivy at once took a claim on the Niobrara River about four or five miles from the village and started to build a home, the foundations for which were laid on December 30, 1869. He was the first Czech to make an official entry on a homestead in Knox County, and he was probably also the only one who had sufficient funds to pay the filing fee. The Land Office at this time was at Dakota City, a distance of 110 miles, and he made two journeys there on foot in order to clear his title.¹¹ His claim had been previously taken by someone who had not proved up on it and it was necessary for him to pay \$20.00 for the advertisement, required by law.

It was some time before any of the other Bohemians made legal entries on homesteads. Most of them took advantage of the pre-emption law, under which the settler could claim the land for thirty months by living on it for a specified length of time and cultivating a small acreage. Upon presenting proof of this, he could purchase the land from the government at the minimum price. By taking their land under this law, the settlers hoped that before their legal time elapsed, they would get together enough money to meet the

⁵ Personal Interview with J. V. Holecek, Niobrara, Nebraska, June 7, 1937 6 Rose Rosicky: HISTORY OF THE CZECHS OF NEBRASKA, (Omaha,

⁸ Rose Rosicky: Translation of Reminiscences of Joseph P. Sedivy in FRATERNAL HERALD, September 10, 1931, 364 9 Rose Rosicky's Translation of Holecek's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, March, 1934, 129 10 Rose Residev, Translation of Joseph P. Sedivu's Reminiscences

¹⁰ Rose Rosicky: Translation of Joseph P. Sedivy's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, September, 1931, 365 11 Rose Rosicky: Translation of Autobiography of Joseph Sedivy, FRA-TERNAL HERALD, December 1932, 525

regular filing fee for a homestead and make proper entry.¹² A number probably squatted on their claims and made entry when their financial circumstances permitted.

In the spring of 1870, Holecek with the help of Janousek, chose a claim a few miles from Niobrara and built a 12×24 log cabin. Krupicka established his family on a tract of land near the mouth of the Verdigris Creek. His first home was a 10×12 dugout; but he soon constructed a log cabin.

The Spring of 1870 saw a new group of settlers arrive under the leadership of Vaclav Randa and Frank Partl. This was a larger party than the two earlier ones and included Frank Tichy and family. Frank Vokner and family, John Hajek and family, John Schreier, Thomas Brabenec, John Prasek, Matej Hrbek, and others.¹³ Vokner and Hajek settled near Krupicka in dugouts. Tichy's claim was near Holecek's. Hrbek, Brabenec, Schreier, and Pischel chose rich bottom lands considerable distance up the Niobrara River. Quite a few others, chiefly individuals and small parties, also came in 1870. Among these were Joseph Mlady and John Tikalsky, who became the first settlers in the vicinity now occupied by the village of Verdigre, about twelve miles from Niobrara. The United States Census for 1870, taken on August 3rd and 4th, lists twenty-nine Czechs as residents of Knox County.¹⁴

By 1875 the area of the Czech settlement in the county was quite definitely established and localized and was filling up with settlers. In general, it included all of the Niobrara bottom land west of the village of Niobrara on the south side of the river and extended to the Holt County line on the west. ¹⁵ Another stream of settlement followed the Verdigris Creek, and included the canyons and draws adjoining, and the bordering uplands. A few Bohemians settled to the east and south of the town of Niobrara, but not so many.¹⁶

While we are accustomed to think of the Czechs as mainly an agricultural people, those who came to Knox County as the first settlers were almost as mixed in vocations as an ordinary American group. Largest in number were the peasant class who occupied the hills and valleys of the Verdigris. Among those who were in the 1870 expedition were Frank Partl, a Chicago lawyer, and Vaclav Randa, a superior student and politician.¹⁷

12 Rose Rosicky: Translation of Holecek's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, May 1934, 226 13 Rosicky: Translation of Holecek's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HER-

- Library, Lincoln 15 Settlement on the north bank of the Niobrara was not permitted as it
- was included in the Indian Reservation. 16 Personal Interview with Charles Pavlik, Sr., September 28, 1936
- 17 Rosicky: HISTORY OF THE CZECHS OF NEBRASKA, 186
- 18 Fry: "Bohemians in Yankeedom" Fry's WONDERLAND MAGAZINE, I, 6, 7

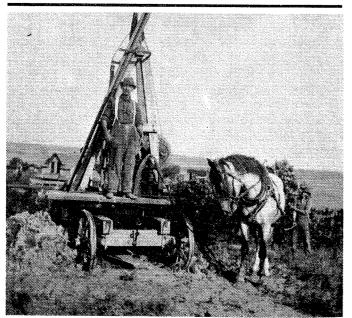
-7---

Some seven or eight miles up the Niobrara River in the vicinity of Dukeville were a group of German-Bohemian farmers. Included in these were Carl Schindler, Wenzel Diez, Joseph Gregor, and Wenzel Kurka. In the Pischelville settlement were settlers with an artisan background. It is surprising to find people of this type in a pioneer country for they were totally ignorant of farming operations and ill prepared to meet the hardships that lie ahead of them. Anton Pischel was a tailor. Another family, the Marshalls, were musicians. Among these settlers, also, were cabinet makers. blacksmiths, a miller, butchers, and laborers. Sprinkled with these were a peasant class who settled further west of Pischelville in the region of Steele Creek.¹⁸

Chapter Three

HARDSHIPS AND TRIALS OF THE FIRST YEARS

No story of a pioneer group is complete that neglects the hardships and trials of the early years for it was in passing through these tests that our forebears accumulated those characteristics which provided an enduring foundation for our commonwealth. Surrounded by modern conveniences and comfortably removed from those trying days when the adverse forces of nature seemed determined to defeat man's attempts to bring the lands of our state into useful cultivation, it is hard for us to adequately visualize the hardships and trials that came to plague and discourage the spirits of the first settlers.



Well drilling apparatus at the turn of the century

While none of the pioneer groups escaped these hardships, there is no question but that they operated with particular severity upon the Bohemian settlers who picked Knox County for their abodes. This was due to several reasons. In the first place, Knox County was still on the edge of civilization at the time when they first entered its boundaries. It also bordered a large Indian Reservation, in which were harbored both peaceful and warlike tribes. Little effort was made to confine them strictly to the limits of the reservation and marauding bands wandered at will beyond its borders, disturbing and frightening the settlers. Criminals, desperados, fugitives from justice, and deserters from army posts were also frequently found among the Indians. These, without doubt, kept them stirred up and even used them as a cloak of protection for their own nefarious deeds.¹ Then there were trappers and traders who circulated freely in the region and helped to give it a "wild and woolly west" atmosphere which was not so evident in the counties to the south and east.²

Another thing which made the general pioneer situation difficult for the Bohemians was the fact that they were not by nature prepared to meet it. They lacked that self-assurance that was found among the native English speaking inhabitants. They were peace loving and disliked turmoil and strife. They were unfamiliar with the handling of firearms and in general without any previous experience that would help them to meet the situations of pioneer life. To offset these traits, they possessed the characteristic of persistence and the willingness to work, two qualities which were to carry them through the difficulties of the first years and enable them eventually to develop prosperous settlements.

The Czechs had other handicaps that were not to be found among the native-born settlers. They were by nature gregarious. Isolated farms, as we know them, did not exist in their home land. There, the peasants lived in villages and tilled the nearby fields. This made for a community feeling as the lives of all in the village were more or less interrelated. Everyone knew everyone else and the individual's life was pretty much an open book with public opinion regulating his behavior. Men obtained pleasure from the frequent gatherings and discussions at the village tavern while the women found enjoyment in visiting in the homes. Sunday saw the majority of them dress up and gather at the church and after services indulge in more gossip.³

While all of this was natural in the home land, it could not be practiced on an isolated Nebraska homestead. Here the nearest trading point was often miles away. There was no church and at first no suitable method of transportation. Even the ownership of land, which the Czech associated with prestige and standing, meant little since it was plentiful and free. On his homestead the Bohemian pioneer looked out upon a new and fascinating world, but it contained a thousand obstacles that planted thorns of discouragement in his path and tended to disillusion him.

Added to all of this, the Czech farmer was forced to learn a new method of cultivation. In Bohemia hand labor functioned admirably since five to ten acres constituted a farm. Here he looked out upon 160 acres of land that was his and which could be adequately handled only by the use of more complicated machinery than he had ever had an opportunity to own or operate. The entire situation was enough to discourage the most optimistic, but the Czech settler shouldered his burden and plodded ahead. His lot had always been a hard one and he was able to endure much.

The trials of the new settler began even before he reached his destination. He began to sense them as soon as he left the railroad terminus at Sioux City and crossed into the wide expanses of Nebraska. Holecek relates in his description of the journey to Niobrara of the scarcity of settlers, of the evidence of destructive prairie fires, and of the sense of loneliness and fear that enveloped the group when they pitched camp for the night on the endless prairie. ⁴

The first homes of many of the settlers were mere dugouts. They were constructed by digging a hole about 10 x 12 in a high, protected bank and covering the opening with branches and brushwood. As soon as possible, through co-operative effort, the settlers constructed permanent cabins from native logs. Many of these early cabins still stand on the Czech farms of Knox County, although no longer used. They were, as a rule, constructed crudely but well. The walls were of logs with the crevices filled with small sticks and plastered with mud. The roof had a slight pitch and was covered with slough grass and a thick coating of sod. The floor was dirt, sometimes covered with hay or straw to lessen its discomfort in wet weather. For all of its crudeness it provided serviceable shelter and seemed to have been preferred to sod houses by the Czechs.⁵

ALD, February 1934, 81 14 U. S. Ag. Census for 1870, MSS. in Nebraska State Historical Society

¹ Rosicky: Translation of Joseph P. Sedivy's Reminiscences, FRATER-NAL HERALD, November 1931, 450 2 Rosicky: HISTORY OF CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 183

³ Robert I. Kutak: STORY OF A BOHEMIAN-AMERICAN VILLAGE,

⁽Louisville, Kentucky, 1933) 9 4 Rosicky: Translation of Holecek's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HER-ALD. March. 1934. 129

⁵ Personal Interview, John A. Schreier, Verdigre, Nebraska, September 28, 1935

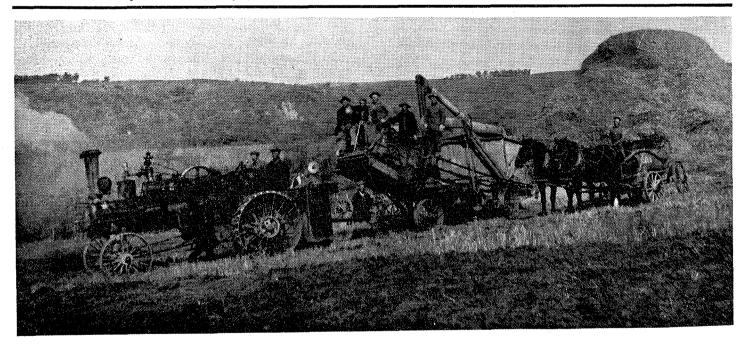
Mention has been made of the co-operative effort among the settlers. This type of activity, common in all pioneer sections, was particularly prevalent among the Bohemians, due to the kinship of nationality and the scarcity of farm equipment. According to the information listed in the United States Agricultural Census for Nebraska for 1870, ⁶ only Joseph Sedivy, Vaclav Randa, and Frank Janousek of the Niobrara Czechs owned oxen. In the Verdigris Valley, John Tikalsky owned a yoke and in the Pischelville settlement, Anton Pischel and John Prasek. They were loaned out to settlers who had none and since no one had money, the settler paid for their use with manual labor. ⁷

There are many examples of hardships endured by individual settlers. Joseph Gregor of Dukeville began production on his homestead by spading the required acres by hand.⁸ John Beran of Verdigre. who came in 1870, never owned a wagon until 1882.⁹ Anton Pischel and many of his neighbors walked and carried produce from Pischelville to Fort Randall, a distance of about twenty-five miles. Mrs. Joseph Kalal, now deceased, tells of walking and carrying a small baby from Niobrara to the home of a cousin near Verdigre, a distance of thirteen miles.¹⁰ Emil Pischel, son of a first pioneer, relates that before regular mail service was established through Pischelville, Joseph Wirth, a local settler, served as private carrier and for the sum of seventy-five cents a trip, walked each Saturday fifteen miles to Niobrara for the settlement mail.¹¹

Children were born under trying circumstances and without the presence of a physician. Joseph Sedivy in his Autobiography, commenting upon the birth of his son John, May 4, 1870, (probably the first Bohemian born in Knox County) says: "We had the roof of our cabin half done when night and rain came on and at midnight our son John was born. I caught rain water and bathed the newcomer. My wife arose the next day."¹² To the pioneers, birth became merely an incident of life.

Only partial crops were planted the first years and these brought scant returns. Money was almost nonexistent and frequently the scarcity of food was so acute that actual starvation threatened. On several occasions the situation might have resulted tragically had not the influence and efforts of the elder Pischel brought assistance to the distressed settlers. Better educated than most of his countrymen, Pischel, a skilled tailor, had frequent employment at Fort Randall. He also spoke English well, and this made it possible for him to get supplies and provisions from the fort at the times when the settlers needed them most.¹³ Joseph Sedivy also acted as spokesman for the settlers and was instrumental in getting material assistance from the commanding officer at Fort Randall.

- 9 Interview with Vac Beran, Verdigre, Nebraska, September 28, 1936
 10 Rose Rosicky: HISTORY OF CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 194
 11 Interview with Emil Pischel, May 20, 1937
- Interview with Emil Pischel, May 20, 1937
 Rosicky, Translation of the Autobiography of Joseph Sedivy, FRA-TERNAL HERALD, December, 1932, 526
- 13 Interview with Emil Pischel, May 20, 1937



Threshing crew in the early 1900's

The year of 1870 is described as a hard one with grasshoppers rayaging the crops and hail completing the destruction.¹⁴ The following year was also a scant one. The year of 1872 started out promising and considerable wheat was sown, but again as June was coming to a close, hordes of grasshoppers dropped from the sky and in a short time completed their work of devastation. Efforts to drive them away by means of smoke smudges proved of no avail and the crops were ruined. ¹⁵ The plague on this occasion covered a wide area and practically blasted the hopes of all the settlers for that year. It was enough to discourage the bravest, but they hung on although some, leaving their families on their claims, went elsewhere, even as far as Chicago, to try to earn a little money.

The next year, 1873 was fair and the settlers harvested a partial crop, but prices were low since markets were distant, and so the net gain to the farmers was small. Another grasshopper plague came in 1874, so destructive and widespread that the legislature made provisions for help in the form of appropriations for the purchasing of provisions and seed for the needy areas. However, a county committee, chosen for the purpose of distributing the assistance fairly, gave little recognition to the plight of the Czechs and they had to worry along unaided.¹⁶

Some of the most dreaded of the scourges that afflicted the settlers were the prairie fires. They might come at any time and were especially terrifying to the homesteader since they threatened destruction to everything that he possessed. The Bohemians, unfamiliar with a menace of this type, soon learned to provide protection by means of fireguards. These consisted of a fairly wide strip of plowed ground, then a strip about a hundred feet wide of sod was left with grass on it, and then came another strip of plowed ground. The strip between was burned off and the whole thing functioned as an effective protective measure against fire, providing there was not too much wind. Sometimes, finding themselves in the path of an approaching fire, they burned off plots of ground and used these burned over spots as havens of safety as the main fire swept by. Most of the fires were caused by careless Indians and passing immigrants who failed to put out the fires that they had used for cooking purposes.

One of the most destructive fires that the Czechs experienced came in the spring of 1879. Besides untold material loss, it brought death to two, a mother and son. The victims were Mrs. Marie Dvorak and son. Her cabin was located a short distance from the Verdigris Creek and was surrounded by tall grass. As the fire approached, she attempted to leave the cabin but was overcome by heat and smoke as she stepped out and collapsed in the dry grass.¹⁷ Her son perished in an attempt to save her.

The winter storms also worked indescribable hardships upon the Bohemian settlers. Accustomed to milder winters in Bohemia, they were illprepared to face the weather extremes that characterized the prairies of Nebraska. Three years stand out above the others in the matter of winter storms, namely, 1873, 1880, and 1888. It requires but slight encouragement to start any pioneer on a lengthy discussion of his experiences in the storms of these years.

While much has been written about the blizzard of 1888, the storm of Easter Sunday, 1873, still holds the higher place among the Czechs who experienced both. Starting with a rain, it later in the day developed into a spring blizzard and raged continuously until Tuesday night. This storm is particularly memorable because of the unusual amount of snow that fell. Cabins were almost lost to sight by the huge drifts, and several pioneers of Verdigre maintain that when the storm came to an end, the snow filled the valley of the Verdigris Creek so completely that it was impossible to locate the channel of the stream.¹⁸ No loss of life is reported in connection with the storm, but it brought death to great numbers of cattle who were caught grazing on the open range, and either froze to death or died from exposure. Losses of this kind fell heavily on the settlers, giving them a decided setback right at the time when they were beginning to get established.

All of the old settlers speak of the winter of 1880-1881 as the most severe in the history of the county. Snow came in October and lay on the ground until late in March. Frequent blizzards piled it up until it covered the open prairies to a depth of three or four feet. Temperatures were unseasonably low and transportation was tied up for weeks. On March 25, 1881, a new menace arose as the weather moderated and the snow began to go off faster than streams could handle it. Ice gorges piled up in the Missouri River. above Niobrara, holding back turbulent waters and setting the stage for the most disastrous flood that ever came to the region. On the night of March 29. the ice gorge broke, releasing the flood waters and completely inundating the village of Niobrara. The flood lasted a week, being finally checked by

⁶ UNITED STATES AGRICULTURAL CENSUS for Nebraska for 1870, to be found at the Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln 7 Rosicky: HISTORY OF CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 189

⁸ Fry's: "Bohemians in Yankeedom," WONDERLAND MAGAZINES I, 6,

¹⁴ Sedivy's Autobiography, FRATERNAL HERALD, December, 1932, 526
15 Rosicky, Translation of Sedivy Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HER-ALD, December 1932, 506
16 Rosicky, Translation of Holecek Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HER-ALD, April, 1934, 178
17 IDEM, 178

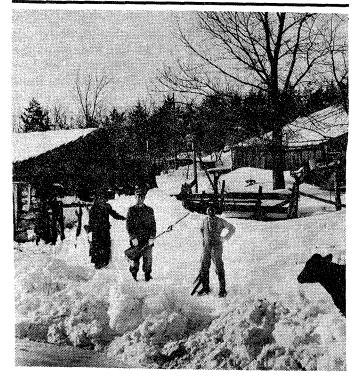
¹⁸ Personal interviews with Chas. Pavlik, Sr., V. J. Beran, Verdigre, and J. V. Holecek, Niobrara

freezing weather that slowed up the thawing of the snow banks. The loss to the Bohemians was mostly in the form of stock that were drowned and buildings and houses that were damaged by water.¹⁹ Janousek of Niobrara lost twenty-nine head of cattle and others suffered correspondingly.

In addition to the widespread general losses to the settlers, there were some indirect results of these floods of 1881 which slowed up the economic development of the entire region. The Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad had built into Running Water, South Dakota, opposite Niobrara, in 1879. They had planned to extend their road south into Nebraska and in the summer of 1880 they had secured the necessary right-of-way, and had even constructed a grade of twelve or thirteen miles between Niobrara and Verdigre. This grade followed the Verdigris Creek and was badly washed out by the floods. As a result, the company ceased their construction and abandoned their plan to enter Nebraska.

The Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Valley Railroad, which by this time was constructed as far as Plainview in Pierce County and seemed about to come into Knox County also held up further construction and thus the region of Czech settlements was denied the valuable privilege of railroad transportation for several years.

Other activities which touched the lives of these first arrivals were the cattle drives which passed through the section. These drives took place annually from 1870-1875.²⁰ The cattle were purchased in Texas by the government to supply the



An early winter scene

military forts and Indian Agencies of the upper Missouri. The wild longhorns, driven by carefree cowboys, were looked upon by the Bohemians with something akin to fear and awe. Attracted by the colorful garb of the cowboys (the Bohemians by nature like bright colors in clothes) they were fearful of their guns and knives and of their rough mannerisms. 21

These cattle herds often ran into the thousands and required the attention of a considerable crew of cowboys. They made a practice of swimming the cattle across the Missouri River at Niobrara in herds of three or four hundred. It was an interesting and dangerous task and they punctuated it with carousals at Janousek's saloon, and in connection with their celebration, they usually shot up the place and terrified the people of the village. They would bring their fun to a close by appropriating what liquor they wanted and then adjourn their celebration to their camp, two miles from town. 22 Since there was no compensation for Janousek, the crafty saloon keeper, in time hit upon the plan of disappearing when the cowboys came to town and leaving his wife in charge of the place. This tended to have a sobering effect and held down the general destruction that tended to go with their visits.

However, the cattle drives were not entirely unmixed evils so far as they concerned the Czechs. Sometime in bad weather the cattle stampeded and wandered into the hills that bordered the streams. Cows that were about to have calves also tended to stray away from the main herds. The cowboys were seldom interested enough to look after these strays and they became the property of any settler who happened to find them. Calves, accumulated in this fashion, formed the nucleus of the herd of many a Bohemian settler.

NAL HERALD, May, 1934, 224
22 Sedivy's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, April, 1932, 154



An early ferry boat at Niobrara on the Missouri River in the early 1920's.

Chapter Four

CONTACTS WITH THE INDIANS

The Bohemians of Knox County were unique in that they were the only members of their national group who had frequent and direct contacts with the Indians.¹ This resulted from the fact that their settlements bordered the Indian country. From their homesteads on the south bank of the Niobrara River, they looked across at the Ponca Indian Reservation which occupied an extensive area on the north bank of the stream.² To their east and scattered along the Missouri River, the government had located a considerable number of the Santee Sioux, following the Minnesota massacres of 1862.³ Still further west and spread out over a vast territory were the Dakota Sioux, a more war-like group, and one inclined to make marauding trips into the lower Niobrara valley, much to the distress of the settlers.

The majority of the native American settlers gave little thought to the Indians, accepting them as a natural part of the frontier setup and in a measure no more dangerous than the other inconveniences of homestead life. But to the Bohemians they were a menace that constantly threatened the safety of their families and the security of their possessions. They had formed their opinions from the stories that they had heard in their native land and from pictures which they had seen in railroad stations. 4 Naturally it was some time before they became convinced that, aside from petty thievery, the majority of the Indians were not to be feared. To the Czechs, all Indians fell in one class and they never seemed to acquire the knack of distinguishing the friendly ones from the unfriendly. 5

The contacts of the Bohemians with the Indians are featured by two things, one a tragedy that occurred in the spring of 1870 and which took the lives of two Bohemian children and wounded their mother. The other was the constant fear of a general Indian attack which was fed and kept alive for almost fifteen years by frequent depredations and theft of livestock by wandering bands of Indians. 6

Unquestionably the Brabenec tragedy of 1870 had a terrifying effect upon every Czech who came as a settler in the early years and it helps to explain the slowness with which the Bohemians became accustomed to having the Indians as their neighbors. For this reason it will bear telling.

The Brabenecs, husband and wife and two children, one a daughter of fourteen, and the other a son of twelve, were in the group of settlers who

came to the Niobrara country in the spring of 1870. They traveled in company with Matej Hrbek, and John Prasek, the three families planning to settle near each other. They had even united in the purchasing of a yoke of oxen and an old wagon. Their party, along with several other Bohemian families left Sioux City on March 25, 1870.

From the beginning their path was beset with misfortunes. Their progress was slow and difficult as they were even unfamiliar with how to drive oxen properly. After a day or so on the trail, they encountered cold, wet weather and disregarding the advice of a German settler, proceeded on in the face of a spring snow storm. Night found them drenched and cold with their wagons mired down on the open prairie. The next morning they were lost, but after some backtracking eventually located the cabin of the friendly German. Difficulties continued to follow them as they struggled on to within five miles of Niobrara. Here, with their food practically exhausted, they were held up for three days by high water. 7

Reaching Niobrara, they rested a few days and then the men set out afoot to examine the land and choose a place for their homes. The three tramped over the country for five days and finally decided to locate on an attractive spot, some eighteen or twenty miles up the Niobrara River from the village of Niobrara. This place later became a favorite one with settlers and was known as the "third bottom." To Brabenec. Hrbek, and Prasek, the valley, though without settlers, was ideal and they discounted any thought of loneliness with the reminder that the three families would be close together. Returning to Niobrara, they were advised not to settle so far from town as the area was too exposed and subject to danger from Indians.⁸ But, they were determined and so went ahead with their plans.

They proceeded to move their claims at once with two local residents, Sedivy and Randa, helping them haul their belongings and families. The first task was to prepare a shelter. Working together they constructed three dugouts, one on each claim, and then started on the job of gathering material for permanent log houses. It

6 Interviews with several individuals who were children in the seventies brings out the fact that groups of Indians frequently visited Bohemian homesteaders. Nearly all of them were harmless and friendly and wanted nothing more than food. Still their appearance never failed to frighten the foreign born mother, alone at home with her children. (Interviews with Charles Pavlik, Sr., and Vac Beran)

7 Sedivy's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, June 1932, 249 8 IBID, 250

¹⁹ Holecek Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, May, 1934, 224 20 Rosicky, Translation Joseph P. Sedivy's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, February, 1932, 153 21 Interview with Vac Beran, also Holecek's Reminiscences, FRATER-

Rosicky: HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 183

Personal Interview with Chas. Pavlik, Sr., November 15, 1936 Holecek's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, February, 1934, 81

⁴ Big lithographs, depicting Indians attacking and burning the homes of settlers, or tearing up railroad tracks, or threatening some helpless woman with a tomahawk were commonly hung up in railroad stations. These had a terrifying effect upon foreign groups about to depart into the Indian country to settle, (Holecek's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, February, 1934, 31)

⁵ Personal interview with Vac Beran, Verdigre, Nebraska, September 28, 1936

was on the afternoon of April 28. Everything was moving smoothly, and the men were working not far from Brabenec's dugout when they heard several shots. A moment later a group of Indians were seen to disappear rapidly over the hills. Immediately, the men had a presentiment of what had happened. Rushing to the dugout they found Mrs. Brabenec, lying on the floor, her skirts soaked with blood. Horrified, they carried her outside and discovered that she had been shot in the thigh.

Calls for the children brought no response but upon making a search they came upon the dead body of the boy in the tall grass about a hundred feet from the dugout. He apparently had been shot in the back while running away. Another thorough search brought no trace of the girl and the men concluded that she had been abducted by the Indians.

Frightened and stricken with grief, they buried the boy and then decided to leave everything and return to Niobrara. So they placed the hysterical and wounded mother in a wagon and started for town. They reached the home of Carl Schindler, the half way point, about midnight and spent the rest of the night there. In the morning Mrs. Brabenec, more composed, gave the story of what had happened. She related that she was baking bread and was just placing the loaves into the oven when she heard shots. A moment later the forms of painted Indians appeared in the opening of the dugout. They greeted her with the usual Indian "How" and one extended his hand. Frightened, she brushed aside his hand and said something in her native language which the visitors apparently considered insulting. Then one of the Indians shot her.⁹

Anxious to get to town and report the outrage, they started for Niobrara. About three miles from Schindler's place they were stopped by a band of Ponca Indians. Fear again came over them but the Indians were friendly and when they learned what had taken place, held council and advised the settlers to return their claims with the assurance that the Poncas would protect them from future attacks from the Sioux. However, the men went on to Niobrara and then returned to Schindlers where they remained for ten days. At that time they made their first visit back to their claims and noticing a dreadful odor coming from a plum thicket, they investigated and came upon the badly decomposed body of Caroline Brabenec. She had been shot in the breast and had staggered into the thicket where she died.

Eventually the three families returned to make their homes on the claims which had been the scene of their great sorrow.¹⁰ The story of the tragedy was retold in every Bohemian cabin and generated a fear of Indians among the women which did not disappear for twenty years. ¹¹ The Brabenec tragedy is memorable in that it constitutes the only known instance in Nebraska of the death of a pioneer Bohemian at the hands of Indians. ¹²

Almost every Bohemian settler at some time or other had contacts with the Indians. It could hardly be otherwise since they lived so close to each other. However, most of these contacts were of a friendly nature.

The Indians wandered about considerably, generally in small groups but occasionally in bands of twenty-five or thirty.¹³ They had the habit of stopping at a settler's cabin and asking for food and other things. Often they would appropriate anything around the place that might strike their fancy and if the opportunity was theirs, they were not adverse to driving off stock. Their most common depredation was to kill grazing stock and divide it among themselves. ¹⁴ The most damaging of these losses occurred when the Poncas and Sioux got into warfare among themselves, and in the course of their travels back and forth raided the homesteads along the Niobrara River. It was not uncommon for them to kill the only oxen and cow that the settler had. Losses of this type were generally reported to Fort Randall, and occasionally the government after a year or so recompensed the settler for his loss. ¹⁵

Naturally this Indian thievery was most common in the first years. In the spring of 1871 it became so bad that a general call was sent out for all of the settlers to meet at the home of Carl Schindler for the purpose of taking steps to end the outrages. Most of the Bohemians attended and a decision was made to build a large cabin as a fort in the third bottom, and to request the commander at Fort Randall to place soldiers there for the protection of the settlers. ¹⁶ As a result, fifteen soldiers were stationed there in the fall of 1871. ¹⁷ This probably had some sobering effect upon the

15 Joseph P. Sedivy's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, November, 1931, 460

Indians but it did not stop their practice of stealing and killing cattle.

In 1874, Edwin A. Fry established The Niobrara Pioneer, a weekly newspaper at Niobrara and its early issues carry rather frequent articles dealing with the relations of the settlers with the Indians. In connection with one meeting of the settlers held in Niobrara in October, 1874, he writes an article and in it he quotes from a speech of one of the leaders of the meeting: "Let us demand that our government keep their vagabond cut-throats and murderers at least in their reservations. Let us demand of the agent of the Santees that he send up the river immediately and call back those who have gone up there to hunt. They destroy large quantities of the finest young trees that can be found at every camping place and frighten the settlers where they pass because very few can tell to what tribe they belong. If we cannot accomplish this in any other way, let us arm ourselves and shoot them down wherever we can find them. [applause]" 18

The settlers not only appealed to Fort Randall for aid against the Indians and made use of their local organizations but also took their problem to the governor of the state. We read the following in the October 27, 1874, issue of the *Pioneer*, the same being part of a report of a local committee to Governor Furnas and dealing with the raids suffered by the Bohemians: "On August 22, 1873, twenty-five Indians visited this section and shot two milks cows belonging to Wenzel Kurka and valued at \$90. On September 8, 1873, the same band made another visit and drove off five head of cattle belonging to Joseph Gregor, valued at \$160, one cow of Joseph Kurka, one cow of Wenzel Diez, and one heifer of John Sedivy. On May 21, 1874, two hundred Indians were skirmishing on the opposite side of the river and about a hundred crossed to this side. They killed two yoke of oxen, two cows, and one heifer belonging to Mr. Hrbek and one yoke of oxen of F. Tuchs, valued at \$150." 19

In July, 1876, the Bohemian settlers were alarmed by the reports of Custer's Massacre. The local Indians also were excited and even the federal government gave added attention to the Indian situation. As a result new treaties were made under which the friendly Poncas were moved from their reservation near Niobrara to a place in Indian Territory.

In connection with this new arrangement the settlers were aroused by rumors that the fierce Sioux were to be located on the former Ponca lands. This brought forth the following denunciation from the pen of Editor Fry of the *Pioneer*: "The Bohemian settlers on the Verdigris and Niobrara are becoming uneasy about the location of the Spotted Tail Sioux across the Niobrara River from them. This is the result of the efforts of some of the citizens of this place to represent to the authorities that it was the desire of the people of this county, now that the Poncas have been taken away, to have the Sioux located where the Poncas were. The prospects of having large band of Sioux near, with fat contracts and jobs connected therewith, should not dazzle any one as to make him forget the exposed and dangerous conditions that many of our homesteaders and farmers would be in if these famous cut throats, many of whom assisted in the butchery of Custer and his men but a year ago, should be located on the north side of the Niobrara. A number of Bohemians have lost their stock by raids of these very Indians and it seems utterly impossible for them to get any compensation for their loss. Certainly no one ought to blame them for wanting to be as far as possible from such savages." 20

With the removal of the Poncas and the confining of the Sioux to a reservation farther west, and the steady influx of more settlers, the Indian problems died a natural death. However, the thievery continued and the Bohemians suffered losses for many years that were attributed to the redskins.

Chapter Five

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economically the Bohemians of Konx County have come a long way since the days when the first bewildered settlers followed the rough trail from Sioux City and staked their future upon the possibility of the undeveloped resources of the county. These first comers were not merely poor, but poverty stricken. Their total wealth consisted of a few meager household articles and a spirit that could not be conquered even by the continuous hardships and failures that for years afflicted them. They witnessed discouraged American settlers come and go while they endured their trials, increased their acreages, and eventually tasted of the joys and comforts of financial independence. 1

The United States Agricultural Census for 1870, for L 'Eau Qui Court County, (the name by which Knox County was first known) gives information which pictures the low economic state of these first Bohemians. The following table presents some data taken from this census.²

1 In the Appendix will be found a list of the Bohemian farmers living in Knox County in 1892 and their land holdings at that time. 2 Taken from the U. S. AGRICULTURAL CENSUS FOR 1870, MSS in Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln, 21

⁹ Holecek, Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, April, 1934, 177

¹⁰ Sedivy's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, July, 1932, 304 11 I have checked the story of the Brabenec tragedy with a number of the older Bohemians and all relate it about as it has been given. Emil Pischel, an old settler of the territory close to the scene of the tragedy, tells of another version of it which he says circulated throughout the countryside. According to this version, the shooting was actually done by white men, masquerading as Indians. They hoped in this way to discourage scitlers from taking claims too far from town. 12 Rosicky, HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 188

¹³ Personal Interview with Vac Beran, Verdigre, Nebraska, September 28, 1936

¹⁴ Autobiography of Joseph Sedivy, FRATERNAL HERALD, December, 1932, 526

¹⁶ Holecek's, Pioneer Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, April, 1934, 177

¹⁷ According to Joseph P. Sedivy this barracks was located at the mouth of Apple Creek, now known as Steele Creek, about three miles up the Niobrara River from Pischelville and in the vicinity of the scene of the Brabenec tragedy. He also says that this post was later moved down the river to what is now the present site of Pischelville.

NIOBRARA PIONEER, I, 7, October 20, 1874
 NIOBRARA PIONEER, I, 8, October 27, 1874
 NIOBRARA PIONEER, III, 42, June 28, 1877

TABLE SHOWING LIVESTOCK OWNED BY BOHEMIAN SETTLERS OF KNOX COUNTY

	AU	GUST, 1	.870		
Wanne Or Gettiet	cwine	Horses	Milk Cows	Other Oxen	Cattle
Frank Janousek	9	3	4	2	10
Anton Pischel		1	1	2	2
Thomas Brabenec			1		1
Mathias Hrbek			1		1
John Prasek				2	$\overline{2}$
Carl Schindler			2	$\overline{2}$	$\overline{2}$
Fran. Schindler	~~				***
Jos. Gregor					
Jos. Husak			2		2
John Hajek			1		1
Joseph Sedivy			2	2	$\hat{2}$
Jos. Krupicka			1	_	-
John Holecek					
Frank Tichy			1		
Jos. Barta			1		
Frank Vokner			1		1
John Tikalsky			1	2	1
Joseph Tikalsky			1	<u> </u>	1
Joseph Mlady			$\frac{1}{2}$		2
Vaclav Jandus			$\frac{2}{2}$		1
Ignatz Marsal			1		1
Jos. Dryak			1		
Jos. Dryak John Srajer			1		1
John Srajer Jos. Mudra			1		1
Frank Vlastnik			1		1
Fred Dogel			1		1
Louise Schindler			1		2
Vaclav Tomek			$\frac{1}{2}$		2
			2 1	2	3
Vaclav Randa			T	4	0

This table shows ownership of seven voke of oxen among the twenty-nine settlers who composed the settlement in August, 1870. It indicates also that in their eyes milk cows were considered most essential and were the first type of livestock acquired. Only one settler is listed as having swine.

In the same census information is given concerning the number of acres of improved land credited to each settler. Joseph Sedivy and John Tikalsky head the list with fifteen acres each. These two settlers had oxen and this probably explains their leadership in the number of acres under cultivation. Most of the others are entered for five or six acres, or about the minimum required for meeting the homestead laws.

During the initial years the opportunities for settlers getting their hands on actual cash were almost negligible. Cultivating a very small acreage and afflicted by crop failures, they produced practically nothing that was marketable. Some supplemented their meager incomes by cutting cord wood in the winter and selling it to H. Westermann, the Niobrara trader, who in turn sold it during the summer to steamboats that operated upon the Missouri River.³ Most of the grain that was produced was hauled to distant mills (at first St. James, some forty miles east of Niobrara) to be ground into flour. 4

While the Bohemians were not adept at handling firearms, as they were not permitted to own them in their homeland, they gradually acquired. through experience, skill in their use and wild game came to constitute a considerable part of their diet. 5

Even after a few years had passed and some production was forth-coming, the Czechs faced discouragement in the form of low prices for farm products. This was no doubt partly due to the fact that the section was handicapped by the lack of an adequate transportation system. About 1875 wheat was quoted at 25c a bushel, hogs at 2 and 21/2c a pound, eggs at 5 cents a dozen, butter at 8 cents a pound, and potatoes at 15c a bushel.⁶

Unquestionably Joseph Sedivy was the wealthiest of the Bohemian settlers and yet his son in his Reminiscences writes that in July, 1876, his father sent him to the Ponca Indian Agency, where his sister was employed, to get her wages as they had no other source of cash income. 7

The later years of the seventies brought better crops and more settlers. This period is also one in which the Czechs began to expand their land holdings, taking advantage of the original Homestead Act and the more recent Timber Claim Act. 8 Some also bought for a low price choice farms of discouraged American settlers, who when they proved up on their homesteads, were anxious to sell out and return to more thickly settled regions. The Bohemians tended to have large families and these purchases of land were frequently made for the purpose of providing a farm for some younger son upon his reaching maturity. Those sons who were old enough to meet the legal requirements. took out homesteads in their own names as long as the free land was available. 9

3 Sedivy's, Pioneer Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, November, 1931, 459

4 Sedivy's, Pioneer Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, February, 1932, 57

Personal Interview, Chas. Pavlik, Sr., November 15, 1936 Personal Interview with John A. Schreier, September 28, 1935

The late seventies were also marked by a movement on the part of some of the Bohemians to provide more comfortable homes for themselves and their families. The editor of the Niobrara *Pioneer*, bears this out in an article in his paper in which he writes: "Our Bohemian settlers on the Verdigris and Niobrara are drawing lumber from Yankton and putting up more comfortable buildings. It is seldom that a Bohemian or German finds fault with this locality. They not only make business for themselves. but make money." 10

The United States Agricultural Census for Nebraska for 1880 is also loaded with information that throws light upon the economic condition of the Czech settlers. It lists a total of 677 farmers in Knox County and of this number 129 are Bohemians. All but nine of these are enumerated as owners of the farms upon which they lived. In contrast with 1870, practically all owned either horses or oxen and most of them are credited with the ownership of farm machinery having a value of \$100 or more. Wheat and corn stand out as the staple crops produced, with quite a few farmers cropping a small acreage of oats and rye. In this connection it is interesting to note that very few of the present day farmers of the Bohemian district of the county go in for wheat production while the acreage of rye is on the increase. Milk cows were to be found on practically every farm, only fifteen farmers being listed as not having them. Their numbers per farm varied from one to twelve with the average being about four.

Every farm had its flock of poultry, indicating that eggs along with butter produced the farmer's steadiest income. The census gives the egg production for 1879 for every farmer and in a number of instances it is listed as 300 dozen. The lowest figure given is forty dozen. From this it can be concluded that the sale of eggs, then as now, took care of a considerable part of the grocery purchases of the farmer.

The same census reveals that by 1880 hogs had already taken their place as one of the important products of the Bohemian farmers. Their numbers per farm were of course rather small and did not compare with those of a later time. John Sedivy of Western Township, who is credited in the census with twenty-five, had the largest herd. Quite a number of the settlers were apparently just getting started in this branch of farming as they list only one or two hogs. 11

Things continued to grow brighter for the Czechs as the eighties went by and, although they suffered occasional reverses in the form of crop failures and partial failures, their persistence and efforts were beginning to bring pleasurable returns as they slowly climbed the ladder of economic

independence. Children, born in this country, were by this time approaching maturity and many a Bohemian farmer glowed with satisfaction as he saw a son or daughter established on an adjoining farm.

But there were still troublesome times ahead in the depressing days of the nineties. These reached their climax in the widespread drouth of 1894. Almost without warning the Bohemians found themselves with large herds of cattle and hogs and with nothing to feed them. Market prices of stock fell to unheard of levels, while the price of feed became prohibitive. Slowly built up herds had to be sold at ruinous prices and prosperous farmers saw their visible wealth melt away like snow. Some, discouraged, left the country and returned to the city, but the majority remained and by adopting a program of reduced expenditures managed to ride out the storm. ¹²

The improved crops of the late nineties along with the more favorable national outlook under the McKinley administration put the Bohemians again on their feet and, when in the summer of 1900, they gathered at Niobrara to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of their settlement of the county we find the editor of the Niobrara Pioneer commenting as follows: "Today no settlements in Knox County can boast any more wealthy people than the Bohemians. They raise large crops, all kinds of livestock, and have the finest horses that come to town." 13

In the years following 1900, many of the first Bohemian settlers, having obtained a sufficient competence, moved to town, leaving some member of the second generation to operate the old homestead. The movement to increase their land holdings continued and their interests found expression in the building of improvements upon their lands. Thrifty as always, these improvements tended to take the form of new barns and better buildings to house their hogs and cattle, rather than the erection of new and modern farm homes. Along with the building movement went a desire for the acquisition of modern up-to-date machinery, fostered and encouraged by the members of the second generation, who by this time were in charge of the farm operation. ¹⁴

⁵ Interview with Vac Beran, September 28, 1936 6 Sedivy's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, March, 1932, 155 7 Sedivy's Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, September, 1932, 394

¹⁰ NIOBRARA PIONEER, 3, 41, June 21, 1877

¹¹ The information given in these paragraphs is based upon the U. S. AGRICULTURAL MANUSCRIPT CENSUS RECORDS for Knox County, Nebraska, for 1880, available in the Library of the Nebratka State Historical Society at Lincoln. They have been used to show the economic progress and status of the Knox County Bohemians in 1880. 12 Interviews with V. J. Beran and J. A. Tikalsky

¹³ NIOBRARA PIONEER, 26, 47, July 20, 1900 14 These conclusions are drawn from conversations and interviews which the writer has had with some of the older retired settlers. It should be noted that the movement to acquire land was not confined to the Bohemians, settlers of other nationalities had the same desire. However, while the objective in the latter case was often speculation, in the case of the Bohemians, the motive was generally to provide a farm for "each of the boys".

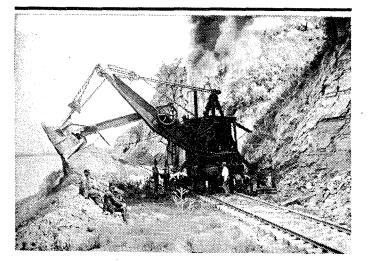
A period of prolonged prosperity followed with some retardation in the twenties as members of the third generation began to appear on the land, and unfortunately, became saturated with the desire for expensive cars and tractor operated machinery. Even with the functioning of these undesirable traits, the Bohemian section of Knox County continued to hold its place as one of the county's most prosperous districts, and entered the recent depression in a healthy economic condition.

Urban Development

While the Bohemian farmers were marching ahead economically, there naturally sprang up in their midst an urban development. At first it seemed as though several small villages might be established in the area, but as time went on the town life of the Czechs came to center chiefly around the village of Verdigre with some of their interests still tied to Niobrara.¹⁵

The first store to be established in the Bohemian settlement was probably that of Anton Pischel's at Pischelville. A little later as the settlement grew, another store was started by Tom Belsky at a rural point called Armstrong.¹⁶ These trading points flourished particularly before the railroad entered the county and in both instances the owners combined farming operations with merchandising. Each of these trading points was benefited by the fact that it was early designated as a post office. Belsky eventually sold his store to a man named Jelen. Shortly after this, the location of the store was moved a short distance, and the name of the post office was changed from Armstrong to Jelen. In time this post office was discontinued and the territory was served by a rural route. Much later a rural route also took the place of the Pischelville post office and the store at that point was also closed.

The first sign that foreshadowed the existence of the present village of Verdigre was the establish-



Building the railroad near Niobrara

ment of a post office in the home of Frank Pavelka, about a mile north of the present site of the town. This post office was known as Verdigris Valley. The earlier mercantile activity appears in 1880 when Fred Opecensky opened a store. There was also at this time considerable agitation among some of the settlers for the erection of a Catholic church and when this was built in 1884, the combination, church and store, along with the local district school, formed the nucleus for the development of the village of Verdigre. 17

For several years no particular development took place and it was merely another spot that supported a country store. In 1886, the village was laid out and there was talk of incorporation. However, the town's first real forward impulse came in 1888 when the Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Valley Railroad built in from Creighton and made Verdigre its terminus. It was now the railroad point for a considerable territory, a transportation gateway of more than ordinary local importance.

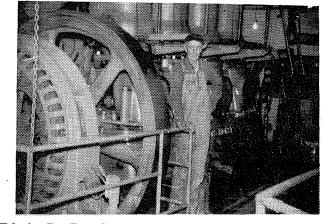
With the advent of the railroad the number of business places increased materially and the following year, 1889, the village was incorporated.¹⁸ It was credited in the U. S. Census for 1890, with a population of 207 and contained at the time most of the common business and professional occupations, including a newspaper and flouring mill. Both Czechs and non-Czechs were found in these first days among the business men with the former predominating.¹⁹

The early nineties saw the town share with the surrounding farmers the hardships and financial difficulties of the drought year, but it still reaped certain extra gains from its position as the end of the railroad. Business was in a state of improvement as the end of the decade approached.

A temporary setback was experienced in 1902, when the railroad was built on to Niobrara and the west.²⁰ However, its long period as the terminus of the railroad had given it permanent roots. It prospered with the surrounding country

18 Based upon the Minutes of the Proceedings of the Knox County Board of Supervisors for the meeting of April 25, 1889, obtainable in the office of the County Clerk of Knox County, Nebraska, Center, Nebraska. 19 J. M. Wolfe, NEBRASKA STATE GAZETEER AND BUSINESS DIRECTORY Omaha for 1890-1891, 533

20 NIOBRARA PIONEER, 28, 15, December 6, 1901



Edwin D. Pavlik was in charge of the light plant at the Verdigre Creamery Company.

in the years following the turn of the century and its population increased as pioneer Bohemians began to retire and establish their residence in the village. By 1910 its population had moved up to 403 and the town reflected an air of prosperity that harmonized with that of the Bohemian farmers who composed its trade territory. Things were looking up and it was with pride that the editor of the local paper in the issue of March 10, 1910, wrote: "There is not an empty house in town." 21

Optimism characterized the village as it moved into the second decade of the twentieth century. The year of 1911 saw the establishment of a creamery and a second bank.²² In the same year came the first R. F. D. mail route service being established on September 1, 1911.²³ Next came the construction of a city water system, contracts for which were let in September, 1911.²⁴ Early the following year the Volunteer Fire Department was organized with a membership of twentyfive.²⁵ The summer of 1912 brought forth agitation for street lights with the result that the village board purchased and installed three Coleman gas lamps on Main street. ²⁶

The spring of 1913 saw the town's first major disaster, a flood on May 15, that followed a cloudburst on the upper stretches of the Verdigre Creek.²⁷ The entire main street was under water and the business places were flooded. It was the first experience of this type that the town had faced. The property damage was high and the village merchants suffered heavy losses on their stocks from water damage. About a year later. May 1914, another flood came and again the storekeepers along Main Street assumed severe losses. 28 As though this were not enough a third flood swept through the village on May 26 of the next year. The people were now getting flood conscious and many merchants increased the height of their foundations and adopted other

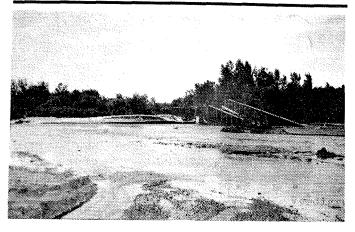
-17-

protective measures against future floods. ²⁹ However, the flood cycle seemed to be ended for it was not until twenty years later, May 1935, that the waters of the stream again left their banks and flowed through the streets of the town.

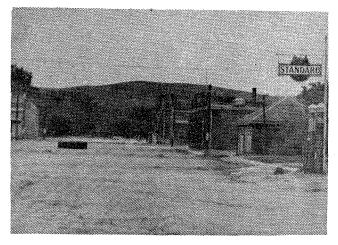
The year of 1915 was in some ways outstanding, being marked by considerable building operations and important civic improvements. In addition to several stores and residences, two churches were constructed. The civic improvements centered around the building of a creamery and light plant.³⁰ This year is often referred to as the town's greatest boom year.

The opening of the War had a brief depressing effect upon the business activities of the village, but they soon expanded to unheard of limits as good crops and high prices put cash in the pockets

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29	VERDIGRE VERDIGRE VERDIGRE VERDIGRE VERDIGRE VERDIGRE VERDIGRE	CITIZEN, CITIZEN, CITIZEN, CITIZEN, CITIZEN, CITIZEN, CITIZEN, CITIZEN,	XVI, 30, May 27, 1915	May 11, 1911
30			16, 45, September 9, 1915	i litera in



C&NW Railroad bridge at Verdigre destroyed by flood waters - June 1, 1935.

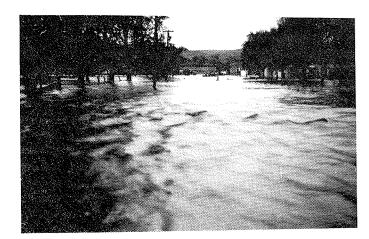


Verdigre flood waters - June 1, 1935

¹⁵ In many ways it seems strange that Niobrara did not become the center of the Czech settlement since most of the first settlers entered through its doorway. Probably no one can provide the exact explanation but without doubt, the tendency of the Indians to hang around its streets and the lack of interest of the part of the early Niobrara businessmen in the welfare of the Bohemians were contributing factors in causing the Czechs to lose interest in the town.

¹⁶ The information regarding these rural trading points comes from a translation of an article from a yearly Bohemian publication, AMERICAN ALMANACH (Chicago) for 1891. The writer is indebted to Miss Rose Rosicky of Omaha for this translation.

¹⁷ Information on the early history of Verdigre was obtained from V. J. Beran who was born on a homestead adjoining the village and grew to manhood during the days when it was being established. The facts have been substantiated by other early settlers, particularly, T. A. Tikalsky, a long time Verdigre business man and Chas. Pavlik, Sr., a farmer who has lived near Verdigre since the early seventies. 18 Based upon the Minutes of the Proceedings of the Knox County



Terrible flood waters for $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours through the streets of Verdigre - June 1, 1935.

of the farmers. The nineteen twenties were also prosperous years for the town and its general economic outlook continued bright until the national crash of 1929 and the failure of two local banks in 1930 and 1931.

During the last few years the village has suffered the fate of most small towns. The people who live in the trade territory no longer have money to spend freely and business moves along in a prolonged slump. Although it might be described as being at an economic standstill its merchants are still optimistic. Enough money from governmental aid sources circulates in the community to provide some business and the merchants feel that a good crop or two will put the community back on the sound economic basis that characterized it for years.

The 1930 census gives the town a population of 618. At least ninety percent of the total is either Bohemian or of Bohemian extraction. Of the thirtyfive business concerns that serve the village twenty-nine are owned and operated by Bohemians, indicating that the Czechs are solidly in control of the community.

Chapter Six

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

Of all the activities that characterize the lives of the Bohemians, those which center around religion are the most puzzling and the most difficult to understand. Visitors in Czech districts are impressed by the thrift, industry, honesty, and general dependability of the inhabitants and at the same time they are struck by the comparatively small number who affiliate definitely with any church and by the large numbers who are either indifferent to any type of religious activity or in some cases actually hostile to it. In this respect the Bohemians differ from the other national groups who came to America. While the Irish, German, and Scandanavian immigrants maintained a high degree of loyalty to the religions practiced in their home lands, the majority of the Czechs, upon establishing their homes here, dropped formal religion and faced their problems on the frontier unaided by the consolation that might come from this source.

The explanation of the Bohemian's attitude on religion is not an easy one. Undoubtedly many factors contributed to his lack of interest and indifference. His home land had been the scene of many long and bitter religious struggles, culminating finally in the Edicts of 1621, which brought death to many noted leaders, caused thousands of Protestants to go into exile, and set up Catholicism as the religion of the land. So completely was religious freedom stifled that it was not until 1781 that a Toleration Patent was issued by Emperor Joseph II, which permitted the Protestants to worship openly, and even this did not allow freedom of worship in the sense that we enjoy it. ²

Since Catholicism was the publicly supported religion in Bohemia, the majority of the people were at least outwardly affiliated with it. Each village had its parish church and in the rural area it was practically the only type of religion available to the people. Such Protestantism as existed was practiced chiefly in the cities and had little effect upon the peasant groups.

When the Bohemians migrated to America they encountered a religious situation which was not within the scope of their experience. Here there was no connection between church and state and no compulsory support of any religion. They were free to do as they chose. They could continue to practice the religion of their native land or they could abandon it. In fact, on all sides they encountered fellow countrymen who had already cut lose from the church and were enjoying the new freedom that existed.

Leaving the city and coming out to the frontier homesteads of Knox County, they discovered that, even if they so desired, they could not conveniently practice their religion since their new homes were in a remote country and there were neither churches nor priests. It was simply physically impossible for them to attend church services and as time went on they lost the habit of regular attendance at church. Incidentally, they were getting along well without formal religion and so why revive it. Assisting in this natural drift away from religion were the Rational and Liberal Czech newspapers which circulated quite widely among the settlers. The editors of these papers, exercising all of the freedom of expression that was permitted in America, criticized the old religious beliefs of their countrymen, and encouraged the Bohemians to break away from the old order and adopt the liberal views which they expressed. All of this had considerable effect and, along with the isolated life of the settlers, was a factor in changing the religious views of many of them.

But there was another side to the matter. Almost as soon as the Bohemians began to settle the region the Catholic authorities instituted plans to administer to their spiritual needs through the medium of an occasional missionary priest. So as time went by, the Bohemian pioneers came to be divided religiously into three fairly distinct groups, namely: those who continued to practice Catholicism; those who thought of themselves as Rationalists or Liberals and were to a greater or less degree antagonistic to the Catholics; and finally those who were indifferent to the whole matter and simply lived along without giving much thought to the religious phase. Incidentally this last group led numerically. 3

Regardless of what the reasons may be, it is evident that the Czechs, as a whole, were not strong for formal religion. Even at the present time with a Bohemian population in the county that approaches four thousand, there is only one Catholic church that serves their religious needs and very few are found who have become formal members of any of the Protestant denominations.

The history of the Catholic activities among these Bohemians goes back almost to the beginning of the settlement. This is not to be wondered at since almost all the settlers had a Catholic background even though they early showed signs of drifting away.

The records of St. Wenceslaus Church at Verdigre contain entries for a period as early as the fall of 1873. These precede by ten years the actual building of a church and have to do with the activities of a visiting missionary. The initial record sets forth that on September 2, 1873, John Tikalsky, the son of John Tikalsky and Marie Masat, was baptized by Rev. J. Dexacher of St. Helana, Cedar County.⁴ He was the first Bohemian child to be baptized in the county. That a considerable number of Bohemians at that early date still felt a close attachment for the church is indicated by further entries in the same record. It lists a total of nine baptisms on September 2, 1873, and four on September 3. All are certified to by Father Dexacher.

This baptismal record shows no entries during the next three years, indicating that the settlement was probably not visited by a missionary priest during that interval. Then on October 5 and 6, 1876, Father Sulak was on hand and performed fourteen baptisms.⁵ This visit was accompanied by a revived interest on the part of many Czechs, influenced without doubt by the fact that the visiting missionary was one of their own nationality. From then on visits of missionaries became more frequent and regular. The record reveals that on June 9, 1877, Father Dexacher again visited the settlement and spent three days ministering to the religious needs of the Czechs and performing a total of seventeen baptisms. In the fall of the same year Father Sulak was back and spent a week in the area, laboring in the cause of the church.

From time to time, generally about six month intervals, the record shows that a priest visited the community. On such occasions religious services were held in the home of a settler and sometimes in the district school house. These services were well attended whenever it was possible to let the people know in advance that the missionary was to be present. 6

By 1880 the district contained enough interested Catholics to start agitation for the building of a church. A meeting was called at which the project was thoroughly discussed and funds to the amount of \$200 were raised, 7 disagreements arose as to the proper location of the proposed church, and the whole matter was temporarily dropped. In the years immediately following 1880, Father Krizek of Tabor, South Dakota, visited the settlement and kept alive religious interest.

In the meantime the movement for the building of a church continued, encouraged by Rev. Jos. Hessoun of St. Louis, Missouri, who was keenly interested in furthering missionary work among his countrymen who had taken up homesteads. He even made personal contributions to the church building fund and donated vestments and religious articles.

In January, 1884, another meeting was held at which definite plans were made for the building of a new church. Joseph Mlady donated two acres for the church grounds, a carpenter was hired, and

6 Interview with V. J. Beran, Verdigre, Nebraska, June 22, 1938 7 Joseph Hessoun, CESKE KAT. OSADY V AMERICE (St. Louis), 362. The article in this book was written in Bohemian. It was translated for the writer by Rev. Chas. J. Oborny, Pastor of St. Wenceslaus Church, Verdigre, Nebraska.

¹ Rosicky, HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 283 2 Ibid., 284

³ Written information on this phase of Czech life is not available to any extent. The writer has discussed the matter with many Czechs from each of the three groups. He has also used his personal observations based upon a long residence among the Bohemians. One Bohemian explains their lack of interest in religion as follows: "We were too busy." Another merely says: "We were not interested." A third expresses his opinion in these words: "Going to church costs too much money." And another says: "We just don't believe any more."

 ⁴ Baptismal Record of St. Wenceslaus Church, Verdigre, Nebraska, 1
 5 Ibid, 4

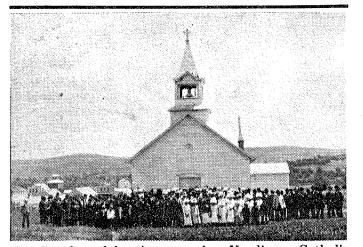
the parishioners agreed to help out with the construction. Again dissension broke out over the location of the church, but this time the work of building went ahead and a frame structure, 26 x 36 was erected.⁸

After the construction of the church, the growth and development of the parish continued to be slow. It was served several times a year by priests from different parishes until 1890, when Rev. John Vranek came to Creighton as pastor, and was also assigned to look after the church at Verdigre. For the first time, services were held with something like regularity, Father Vranek visiting the parish every second Sunday. He showed considerable interest in it and in 1891 enlarged the original structure.

No data is available on the actual number that composed the church membership at this time, but the financial record indicates that the number of regular contributors was small. For example it gives the total amount of the collection for Christmas Day, 1891, as only \$2.76, and it lists the pastor's salary for the two months of November and December, 1891, as amounting to \$15.12.9

In 1893, Father Vranek was transferred to an Omaha parish and Rev. Jos. Macourek took over the Creighton and Verdigre charges, serving both until 1901, when he was appointed first resident pastor at Verdigre.¹⁰ He remained in charge about two years and during his tenure the rectory was built. He was succeeded by Rev. Charles Z. Petlach in November, 1902, who ministered to the parish until 1920. His accomplishments include the building of the present brick church, a \$25,000 edifice that was put up in 1915.11 With the transfer of Rev. Petlach, Father Vaclav Havlicek took over the parish and served it until January 1, 1923, when it was assigned to Rev. Jos. Bata.

In the fall of 1929, the present pastor, Rev. Chas. J. Oborny, was assigned to the parish.



A church celebration at the Verdigre Catholic Church at the turn of the century.

Under his leadership it has shown a steady growth. Needed improvements have been made and regular attendance at services has been stimulated. In general, the parish now is in a flourishing condition. It has no bonded or floating indebtedness and its future looks bright. It has a bonafide membership of slightly over one hundred families. It still includes only about twelve percent of the Bohemian population of the county, indicating that great numbers of the Czechs have drifted away from the religion of their native land.

One of the most prosperous of the Bohemian settlements is to be found along the Niobrara River valley near Pischelville. These people have all the qualities which we have come to associate with desirable citizenship and yet their lives function without any participation in religion. Their marriages are performed by a Justice of Peace, a County Judge, or an orthodox minister at some county seat town. Their funeral services are conducted in their native language and in English by some member of their local lodge at the lodge hall and are marked by the absence of religious ceremonies. Emil L. Pischel, a long time leader of this group, sums up the situation in these words:

"I do not think that you will find a settlement of 200 people in the United States as free of the priest as this one. Once an attempt was made to include this settlement in a Catholic mission, but the leaders discouraged it and we have never been visited since." 12

While these people are not religious, they apparently have no antagonism towards those who follow the orthodox ways. They seem to feel that one of the big objectives of life is to so live as to leave an honorable memory. In their case, they could have introduced religion into their lives. They were free to adopt some form of Protestantism if they preferred it to Catholicism, but they didn't. Clearly, religion carried no appeal to them. They simply didn't believe and they admitted their unbelief.

It is not to be concluded that Protestant groups have made no attempt to spread their doctrines among the Bohemians. The evidence indicates that they have put forth considerable effort, but without gratifying results. There is only one instance of where one of Bohemian nationality served as a minister in one of the Protestant churches that operated in the district. This was a minister by

-21-

"Bohemians in Yankeedom", Fry's WONDERLAND MAGAZINE, 1, 6, 12 13

name of Rev. M. Filipi. He was the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Niobrara during the summer of 1911. He was sponsored by several local Bohemians who were interested in spreading religion among their countrymen, and he did considerable work among them during his brief tenure. even conducting a Bohemian school. 13 He left in the fall and nothing came of his efforts.

In Verdigre, also, attempts have been made by Protestant groups to interest the Bohemians in religious matters. Up until 1915, there was no Protestant church in the community, but services, at least Sunday School, were held each Sunday in the Verdigre Public School.¹⁴ Older inhabitants of the village recall that a few Czech families sent their children to Sunday School, but add that in general there was not much interest in the movement. Without doubt, the lack of a resident minister and the fact that the services were conducted in English rather than the Czech language, worked against the success of the movement. 15

However, the Protestant element had the support of a few non-Czechs, and under the backing of this group, they sponsored a movement for the building of a Methodist Church, and this was finally accomplished in 1915. The Methodist congregation functioned from then on and is still in existence at present, but it is too small and too poor to support a resident minister and has to depend for its support upon a membership that is not Bohemian.

Before leaving the religious phase of the subject. it is interesting to note that some customs brought over from the homeland have gradually been abandoned. No longer do the Catholics of Verdigre hear the Angelus bell at morning, noon, and evening. The practice of using a band in connection with funerals has also passed out of vogue. On the other hand, the bell of the church is still tolled to inform the people of the village of the death of one of the members of the church. Certain feast days are still observed with elaborate celebrations, and the Bohemian language still functions in the religious services, sharing honors along with the English.

In summarizing the religious situation among the Bohemians, it can be said that while the Catholics are well represented, they are in the minority. Also, it is clear that the efforts to extend Protestantism among the Knox County Czechs have not been successful and the majority of the Bohemians of the district live today without any formal religious connection. They have a philosophy of moral principles and honesty which they pass onto their children through home training and which seems to function remarkably well. They are

unique in that they are the only large group of immigrants in the county among whom orthodox religion of some type was not widely practiced.

Chapter Seven

FRATERNAL ACTIVITIES AND AMUSEMENTS FRATERNAL ACTIVITIES

Anyone who has lived among the Czechs cannot help but be impressed by the important place that fraternal organizations occupy in their lives. So strong is the urge "to join" found among them that it is hard to meet up with a Czech who is not a member of some fraternal organization, usually a Bohemian one. Organizations of various kinds are probably more numerous among them than among any of the other national groups.

In general their own organizations fall into two classes, benevolent or fraternal insurance orders, and non-benefit or gymnastic groups, commonly known as Sokols. These groups, in turn, are found as separate organizations among the Catholic and non-Catholic elements. In both instances they serve not only a specific purpose but also as a general social unit. In addition to these peculiarly Czech organizations, the Bohemians are found as members of many of the other common fraternal orders, Farmers' Union Locals, The American Legion, and various clubs of a distinctly local nature. In this discussion, attention will be focused upon those organizations which are basically Czech and will be approached from the angle of non-Catholic and Catholic organizations.

No movement towards the formation of fraternal societies is noticeable in the first years of the Bohemian settlement of the county, the attention of the settlers being monopolized by the immediate task of getting located on the land and producing enough to care for their physical needs. However, there is evidence of the cooperative spirit, which marks successful fraternal groups in the tendency of the settlers to help each other in the putting in and harvesting of crops, and in the pooling of neighborhood resources to purchase oxen or other needed farm equipment.²

The first definite steps towards the organization of a fraternal order came from the non-Catholic groups. Without doubt, the idea was in the air for

15 It should be noted that the Catholic parish from the beginning was in charge of a Bohemian priest and, until recently, the prayers and sermons were all in the Czech language.

CHAPTER 7

2 Joseph P. Sedivy, Reminiscences of Pioneer Days, FRATERNAL HERALD, March 1932, 154

⁸ Interview with Vac Beran, June 22, 1938. Mr. Beran's father acted as secretary of the committee in charge of the construction of the church and so the information supplied here should be authentic.

⁹ Financial Record, St. Wenceslaus Church, Verdigre, Nebraska, 92

¹⁰ Rev. Macourek is still alive and at present serves as pastor of the catholic church at Ravenna, Nebraska. He sets forth in a letter to the writer that at the time he became pastor at Verdigre, the parish numbered about twenty-five families.

¹¹ VERDIGRE EAGLE, 7, 2, September 27, 1934

¹³ NIOBRARA TRIBUNE, 22, 12, September 14, 1911

¹⁴ VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 11, 14, February 10, 1910

Rosicky, HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 347

some time but the actual move for organization occurred in June, 1879, when a meeting was held at the Joseph Krupicka farm near the mouth of the Verdigris Creek. Vaclav Randa, Jan Lenger, and Frank Klima of Niobrara seem to have been the sponsors of the movement. At this meeting a local lodge of the Bohemian Slavonian, Benevolent Society (C. S. P. S.) was brought into existence.³ It had a charter membership of fourteen, consisting of the following Czech pioneers: Vaclav Randa, Jan Lenger, and Frank Klima of Niobrara; Joseph Pavlik, Jan Tikalsky, John Vakoc, Albert Stoural, and Joseph Krupicka of the Verdigre vicinity; and Anton Pischel, Iganc Marshall, Frantisek, Marshall, Jan Ruzicka, and Frantisek Tuch of Pischelville.⁴ The lodge took the name of Bila Hora (White Mountain). It functioned as a unit of the C. S. P. S. until 1897 when it voted to become a charter lodge of a new national Czech organization, the Z.C.B.J. (Western Bohemian Fraternal Association). It still functions as a member of that organization, being designated as Bila Hora Lodge No. 5.

This lodge eventually centered in Verdigre, where it has had a most prosperous career and where it serves a distant community need. In its first years it met in a hall a little north of the village. Somewhat later, it put up a frame hall in the village. In 1903, a few years after it became a unit of the Z.C.B.J. organization, it erected a large brick hall in Verdigre. The construction of this building was not financed by a bond issue but by donations from the lodge membership and by private loans advanced by some of the more prosperous members. A considerable amount of labor was also donated. 5 In 1913 the original hall was enlarged by a spacious addition, making the building one of the finest lodge halls to be found in any of the smaller towns of the state.



Charter members of the Z.C.B.J. Lodge, Verdigre, Nebraska. Bottom row, from left: Tom A.Tikalsky, Frank Liska, Joe Divis; top row: Albert Jecminek, Charles Pavlik (taken in 1937).

The lodge functions both as an insurance and as a social unit. It admits to membership both men and women who are Czechs or of Czech extraction and also members of other nationalities, who can speak the Czech language. Membership in a church does not effect one's eligibility to join the order, although Catholics as a rule do not affiliate with it. Originally the lodge membership was not open to women, but this restriction was removed in 1899 and now women constitute a large and important part of the lodge. 6

The organization encourages the retention of the desirable customs of the pioneers and has been active in keeping alive the use of the Bohemian language among the younger generation. At times they have sponsored and even operated Bohemian summer schools for the children.⁷ They stage general community dances and also put on private social affairs for their own members. They are inclined to observe their anniversary date with some sort of an elaborate celebration. Funerals of members are held in their hall. They also rent it to outsiders, thus making it an important cog in the life of the community. As a result of all of these activities, the organization plays a part in the lives of its members that is more extensive and more important than that which is found in the ordinary fraternal order. The lodge has always enjoyed a good membership and at present has 212 adult and 53 juvenile members.⁸

About the same time that the first Verdigre lodge was in the process of being established, a movement was on foot to start a similar organization at Pischelville. It became a reality as the result of a meeting held at the home of Anton Pischel on January 11, 1880. Its charter membership consisted of eight pioneer settlers of that vicinity, namely: Vaclav Hvizdalek, Jan Barta, V. F. Vonasek, Anton Pischel, M. Mudra, Jan Ruzicka, Jos. Wirth, and Emil Pischel. Subsequent meetings took in other members and on May 16, 1880, it became officially affiliated with the C. S. P. S. national organization as Sladkovsky Lodge No. 61.

In its first years it suffered from dissension among the membership over where the meetings should be held, but this difficulty was in time ironed out and the organization met at the local district school, paying a small fee for its use. The

8 Figures on present membership was furnished by Frank Kves, Recording Secretary of the lodge.

lodge was active from its inception and even maintained a small library of thirty books. By 1884, it had accumulated enough enthusiasm to build a hall at Pischelville, the necessary funds for building being loaned by two members, F. Tuch and Vaclav Dobrichovsky. The lodge at this time held the distinction of being the smallest one in the state (16 members) and the only one to own a hall. 9

When the Western Bohemian Fraternal Association (Z.C.B.J.) was organized, the Pischelville unit withdrew from the old C.S.P.S. and attached themselves to the new group as Sladkovsky Lodge No. 8. The lodge performs functions similar to the one at Verdigre, but is not quite so active. Its membership includes most of the Czech of the immediate vicinity and it is looked upon as a strong and effective organization.

A third lodge of the same organization (Z. C. B. J.) is located at Niobrara. It is known as Vysehrad Lodge No. 53.¹⁰ It was formed somewhat later than the other two. It also has a good membership and owns a fine brick hall. The combined membership of the three units covers quite completely the entire Bohemian district and does a good job of looking after the fraternal and social interests of the Czech group.

After the World War it became evident to the leaders of the Verdigre lodge and to the national leaders of the organization that many of the younger American-born Czechs hesitated to join the organization because of the difficulty that they encountered in speaking the Bohemian language. This led to the formation of English speaking the Bohemian language. This led to the formation of English speaking branches of the parent lodges. One of these, Lodge America, No. 276, was instituted at Verdigre on May 11, 1924, with a charter membership of twenty-one. It provides all of the benefits of the older lodge and permits the conducting of the meetings in English. Operating as a separate unit, it attempts to foster in the younger Czechs an appreciation of their national heritage and strives to keep alive their ability to speak the language. Since its formation, the Verdigre lodge has been active and has enjoyed a healthy growth. At present it is the only unit of the American branch in the county. It has a membership of forty adults and twelve juveniles.¹¹

The oldest and best known fraternal order that operates among the Catholic Bohemians of the area is the Catholic Workman Lodge, No. 4. Its establishment was sponsored by Rev. Jos. Macourek at the time that he was pastor of the Catholic Church at Creighton, Nebraska, and served Verdigre as a mission parish. It was officially organized on October 5, 1897, with fourteen charter members,

namely: Vac J. Beran, Frank Stoural, John Markitan. Joseph Vecera, Thomas Stoural, Anton Kodet. F. J. Skokan, Albert Hornik, Vac Masat, John Peterka, V. A. Pavelka, John Tichy, Joseph Kalal. and Rev. Macourek. This order also provides insurance and social benefits for its members, but has not been so widespread in its activities as the Z.C.B.J. groups. It also has encouraged the continued use of the Czech language and it sponsors certain celebrations that have come to be noteworthy among the Catholics. From the beginning it has been a strong organization and it now has an adult membership of over eighty and a juvenile of about fifteen. ¹²

Among the most interesting and most important of the Czech organizations are the gymnastic societies which are known as the Sokols. Offsprings of a movement that existed in Bohemia, they feature a program of general physical training and have as their motto: "A healthy mind in a healthy body." In the United States two distinct groups of this movement are found, one catering to the Bohemian Catholics and the other to the non-Catholic Czechs. Each maintains a strong and active unit among the Bohemians of Knox County.

The Catholic group, known as the Catholic Sokols, is the older of the two local organizations. It was established at Verdigre in 1909. It has for its specific aims the moral, spiritual, and physical development of its members, and also stresses numerous social activities. Before the War, this organization sponsored many picnics, celebrations, and dances for the benefit of the local church, but in more recent years, it has not been connected to any extent with activities of that type. The unit owns considerable gymnastic equipment and works out regularly under an experienced trainer. Interest in the work is stimulated by participation in district and regional tournaments at which those who excel along various physical lines are awarded certificates of merit and medals. The organization appeals particularly to the youth of the community. At present it is made up of a Junior and Senior Division, the former including boys and girls from 12 to 18 years of age and the latter of those over 18. The total membership of the group is about thirty. 13

The non-Catholic element also have a strong Sokol organization, known as the Tel Jed Sokols.

³ Holecek's, Pioneer Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, May, 1934, 225

⁴ The charter membership roll and general information regarding the lodge and its history was obtained from Frank Kves of Verdigre, Nebraska, the present Recording Secretary of the lodge. 5 Information supplied by Frank Kves, Recording Secretary

This explanation of the eligibility for membership comes from the constitution of the order and was furnished by Mr. Frank Kves, its Recording Secretary. The writer knows of only one instance in which a non-Czech, who could speak Bohemian, became a member of the Verdigre lodge

VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 12, 44, August 24, 1911

⁹ Information obtained from an article by J. F. Lundak in the almanach American for 1886 and translated for the writer by Rose Rosicky of Omaha. 10 Rosicky, HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 358

¹¹ Marie Chocholousek, Financial Secretary of Lodge America No. 276 provided the data from her record.

¹² Information concerning the organizing of the Catholic Workman Lodge was obtained from Rev. Jos. Macourek of Ravenna, Nebraska, and the data concerning its general activities and present membership was furnished by V. J. Beran, Verdigre, Nebraska, one of the charter members of the lodge.

¹³ Personal interview with Rev. Chas. J. Oborny, July 1, 1938, Data relative to the establishment of the Catholic Sokols was taken from the minutes of its first meeting, held September 12, 1909. This record book is in the hands of the pastor of St. Wenceslaus Church, Verdigre, Nebraska.

Its formation was the result of the efforts of the local Czech lodge (Z.C.B.J.) and others who were interested in the movement. It was officially organized on September 25, 1928, with a membership of fifty, about equally divided between boys and girls.14 It is similar to the Catholic unit except that it does not stress spiritual and religious activities. It holds weekly sessions at which the members indulge in gymnastics, calisthentics, and drills of various sorts. Its members also take part in district tournaments. The organization owns a park west of Verdigre which is the scene of many of its outdoor activities. The Tel Jed Sokols meet and train in the Z.C.B.J. Lodge Hall and are encouraged in their activities by this older and stronger organization. They also work to keep alive among the younger Czechs an appreciation of the Bohemian traditions and language.

AMUSEMENTS

The Bohemian people, as a whole, are famous for the color and pleasure that go with their amusement activities. They seem to get a type of joy out of these affairs which exceeds that experienced by other national groups. The Knox County Czechs are no exception to this tendency. Their celebrations are marked by a carefree spirit that is contagious and which attracts many visitors from outside the immediate district.

Almost any of the older Bohemians can spin lengthy yarns of the good times enjoyed by the early settlers. Previous to the formation of fraternal organizations, these social gatherings centered around home visits and neighborhood dances. On certain occasions, such as a marriage in the settlement, they became prolonged celebrations, which might last several days. ¹⁵ Even at the present time a Bohemian wedding as an affair that calls for a free dance and this invariably attracts a hilarious crowd from far and wide.

One of the most memorable of these early celebrations occurred in connection with a double wedding which was performed at Pischelville on October 4, 1875. This was something which called for more than ordinary attention and the settlers gathered from long distances to participate in the fun. The principals were Chas. Marshall and Mary Lundak and Ignatz Marshall and Mary Dryak. The ceremony, an impressive affair, was performed in both English and Bohemian by Anton Pischel, the Justice of Peace, and was concluded by the white-haired father of the two grooms adding his blessing as tears streamed down his cheeks. This was followed by a long drawn out feast and dance that lasted until the next day. ¹⁶

While a settlement wedding was always an occasion for an elaborate celebration, many of the



Recreation on the Verdigre Creek

Czechs obtained the major share of their amusement from neighborhood gatherings that featured house dances with the music by a local fiddler or accordion player. The Bohemians are also lovers of cards and neighbors frequently visited back and forth and indulged in this past time. ¹⁷

With the establishment of the Bohemian lodges at Verdigre. Pischelville, and Niobrara, and the erection of the church at Verdigre, these organizations assumed the task of looking after the larger celebrations. Certain days came to have peculiar significance to them. The Pischelville groups gave special attention to May 16, their anniversary day. The Catholic element observed the 28th of September, a day set aside for honoring the patron saint of their local church, St. Wenceslaus. The Verdigre Czech lodge, Bila Hora, featured big dances on Thanksgiving night and on New Year's Eve. An annual mid-winter masquerade dance was also one of their big activities. In addition to these, they staged social dances that were open only to the membership and they cooperated with individual members in commemorating wedding anniversaries. For a number of years before the war, the Catholic Turners had charge of the Fourth of July celebration. This group had the use of a park in Verdigre where they put on picnics and bowery (open air) dances. Shortly after the war, the park was divided into building lots and sold, and with its sale the Turners became less active.

In the earlier days local bands furnished the music for the dances. Bohemian waltzes, two-steps, and polkas were favorites with the dancers and both the young and old participated. In more recent times modern dance orchestras have been imported and modern dancing is in vogue. As a

17 Personal Interview with Vac Tikalsky, May 30, 1938

result of this innovation, the Czech dances have lost much of the picturesqueness that formerly characterized them.

The Bohemians have always been lovers of sports. In the beginning they satisfied their desire for this type of diversion by hunting.¹⁸ Small game was plentiful and even deer were quite common. Prairie chickens and quail also abounded and the streams were well stocked with fish. Old settlers delight in describing their hunting experiences.¹⁹

In the years following the turn of the century, high interest developed in baseball and the Czechs became enthusiastic followers of the local team. Games were played with teams from all parts of northeast Nebraska and the Rosebud area of South Dakota. The Verdigre squad gained a reputation as one of the strongest teams in that section of the state. ²⁰ Local enthusiasm became unbounded and reached the point where considerable sums were wagered on the outcome of the games. ²¹

In the period about 1910, their sporting interests became centered upon the exploits of a local wrestler named Ben Pavelka. Wrestling matches were frequently held with all sorts of mythical championships at stake. They drew crowds from all over the district. Even the youngsters went wild over the sport and sometimes participated in the preliminary matches.²² Again, in the early twenties, their sporting blood expressed itself in enthusiasm over boxing, aroused largely by their interest in the fortunes of a local Czech heavyweight of considerable merit.²³

Much has been said about drinking among the Czechs. Without question, this phase of their activities has been over-stated. While many of them lean towards the consumption of beer, for the most part, they indulge in moderation and drink in a leisurely fashion as they visit in their homes or play a game of cards in a beer tavern. As a group, they are not particularly fond of hard liquors.

In the pre-prohibition days, Verdigre with a population of a little over 500 supported four saloons. When the sale of liquor became illegal in Nebraska, some bootlegging was done in the Bohemian district, but it did not flourish to the extent that one might expect due to the fact that many of the Czechs went in for the production of "home brew" for their own consumption. Strange to say, a surprisingly large number abandoned the use of liquor entirely. The return of legalized sale of liquors finds the town supporting three beer parlors and one hard liquor entirely. While many complain of the amount of drinking that goes on now, the older Czechs stoutly maintain that less beer and liquor is being consumed at present than in the old days. ²⁴

From what has been said about the amusements of the Czechs, it is clear that aside from their unusual fondness for dancing, they do not differ a great deal from other nationalities. Somewhat clannish with outsiders, they are extremely sociable among themselves. Like all other groups, they are inclined to be spasmodic in their amusement interests. They practice the doctrine of hard work but at the same time they manage to inject into their lives a fair measure of pleasure and amusements.

Chapter Eight

EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The rapidity with which the Bohemians established district schools in their settlements is surprising when one recalls that they came to the frontier with a background that contained no participation in the management of schools in their home land. Their interest in education is especially remarkable when consideration is given to the fact that large numbers of them were unable to either read or write. This condition is indicated by the state census returns for the year ending April 1. 1875, for Western precinct, a district with a large Czech population. ¹ These returns give the population for the Knox County portion of the precinct as 222.² Of this number sixty-eight are listed as unable to read and seventy-five as unable to write. The figures from other Bohemian settlements are comparable and point to the idea that a considerable part of the first Bohemian settlers came to the county with little or no education.

Despite this deficiency in their educational background, the Bohemian pioneers proceeded to establish district schools almost as soon as they located in the county. It has been noted that the first group of any numerical importance came in the spring and summer of 1870. There is evidence to

18 Joseph P. Sedivy in his Reminiscences makes frequent reference to this phase of pioneer life. FRATERNAL HERALD, September, 1931, 365 19 John A. Schreier, who grew up in the settlement during the bioneer days, relates of how the homesteaders during the trying days of the nineties killed prairie chickens and quail in wholesale quantities and sold them on the market. (Interview with John A. Schreier, September 28, 1935)

20 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 9, 43, September 3, 1908

21 Interview with Vac Randa, Verdigre, Nebraska, August 24, 1937 22 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 11, 28, May 18, 1910, also 11, 36, July 14, 1910

23 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 24, 41, August 9, 1923

24 The writer's views on the Bohemians' consumption of liquor come largely from personal observations, extending over the period since 1913, during which time the problem has been particularly acute.

1 MSS Census Returns for Knox County for the year ending April 1, 1876, found in the Nebraska State Historical Library, Lincoln, Nebraska 2 According to the manuscript census for the year ending April 1, 1876, Western Precinct included the area of the present Western Township of Knox County and also an area of settlement in Holt County. The census gives separate figures for the section lying in each county. Of the 146 residing in the Holt County area, only thirteen are listed as unable to read.

¹⁴ VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 29, 40, September 27, 1928

¹⁵ Personal interview with Vac Tikalsky, Verdigre, Nebraska, May 30,

^{16 &}quot;Bohemians in Yankeedom", Fry's WONDERLAND MAGAZINE, 1, 6,

show that by 1873, country schools were being operated in their midst. Three of these early school districts, Numbers 5, 6, and 7 still exist and provide schools, while a fourth, District No. 9 formed the nucleus out of which the village school district of Verdigre and several neighboring rural districts were eventually formed.³

Districts 5, 6, and 7 were located in the settlements along the Niobrara River. Number 5 was the Dukeville school. Number 6 was located near the mouth of the Verdigris Creek and Number 7 was the Pischelville school. All three of these schools were probably initiated about the same time, the fall of 1873. We know definitely that District 6 was functioning in 1874 from an advertisement which appeared in an issue of the Niobrara Pioneer of that year. It reads as follows: "Wanted: A male school teacher for School District No. 6, to teach for three months for \$30.00 per month without board. Inquire of Thomas Sedivy."4

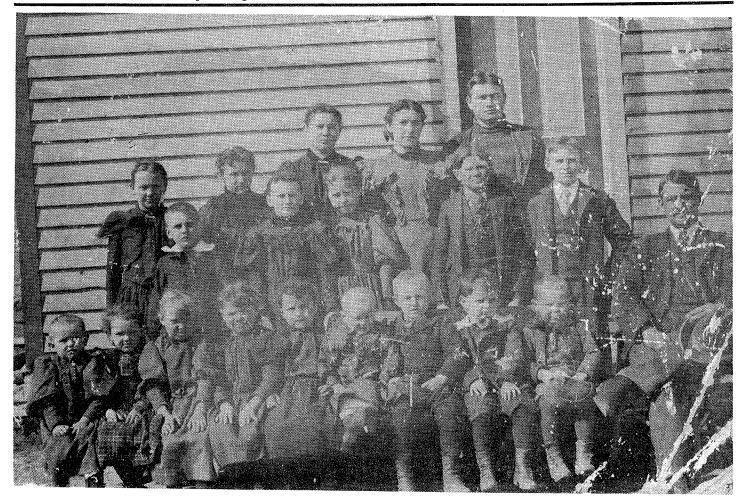
There was also a school operating at Pischelville

in 1873. It was held in a log school house built the previous winter.⁵ Instruction was in English and the school term consisted of three months in the late fall and early winter.⁶ The first teacher was William Crossley, an ex-soldier.⁷ As time went on and the land filled up with settlers, other district schools were established in the area. Three months was the prevailing length of the school term and men were nearly always hired as teachers at low salaries.

The first school in the vicinity of the village of Verdigre was held in a log cabin about a mile

 A NIOBRARA PIONEER, 1, 6, October 13, 1874
 5 A. T. Andreas, HISTORY OF THE STATE OF NEBRASKA, 2, 1033
 6 Personal interview with Louis Marshall, June 25, 1938. Mr. Marshall attended this first school at Pischelville. 7 Personal interview with Raymond Schreier, June 25, 1938.

Mr. Schreier also attended the first school in District No. 7



School house west of Verdigre in 1897. Front row, left to right: Julie Mastalir Broz, Emma Mastalir Broz, Mary Mastalir Nickl, Rose Maly Studeny, Anna Vecera Jedlicka, Edward Mastalir, - Divis, Vac Vecera, Vac Maly; back row: Toni Maly Studeny, Frank Vecera, Stasie Beran Chalupnik, Fanny Vecera Jedlicka, Mary Ondracek Burian, Barbara Maly Kotrous, Tony Beran Stoural, Joe Maly, Frank Ondracek, Joe Vecera, and John Kreycik, Teacher

north of the town's present site and was known as District No. 9. According to its census record for 1874, it contained twenty-one children of school age from eight different families. 8 By 1884, when the village of Verdigre was beginning to take form, the census record shows a total of 76 children of school age in the district.⁹

About this time or a little later, a school district directly west of Verdigre consolidated with a part of District 9 to form the beginning of the present town school district. In 1889 and the early nineties, the educational needs of the village were served by two separate one-room school houses. located not far apart but in different districts. One of these was on the main street of the village and the other was located across the railroad track in what might be designated as the east part of town. 10

Without doubt, the town was in need of a new school building at this time but apparently they endured their inadequate facilities until 1897, when the first brick school was erected. This building is memorable in that it was constructed of soft brick, made locally by the contractor. The building was a four-room structure but at first only two rooms were equipped for use. Emphasis was entirely upon primary education and it was not until 1899 that the first year of high school work was added to the curriculum. ¹¹

During the decade from 1900 to 1910 the village enjoyed a substantial growth in population. This in turn produced an increased school enrollment which eventually led to the building of a three room brick addition to the school in 1909. At this time the main interest of the school still centered on the elementary grades, the total number of pupils in that department being 124 as compared with 19 enrolled in the high school. ¹²

The years following 1910 saw local educational interest move towards the development of a more effective high school. By the fall of 1912, the school was offering three years of high school work and there was agitation for putting in the twelfth grade. The high school enrollment had moved up to thirty while the total in the grades remained stationary.13

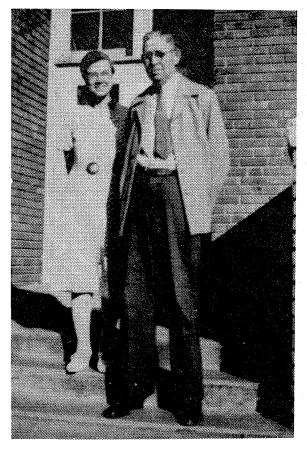
During this period local interest in the school ran high. The annual meeting of the school patrons, held in June, 1913, brought out a crowd of 110 voters. The financial report, given at this meeting, shows that the school district was in a sound financial district. Receipts for 1912-1913 were given as \$6894.95 and expenditures as \$5374.86, leaving a balance in the treasury of \$1520.09. Only \$2500 was voted for 1913-1914. 14 This small amount is explained by the fact that a considerable percent of the running expenses of

the school was met by the annual license fees paid by the four local saloons.

This question of putting the twelfth grade in the high school curriculum remained undecided until the summer of 1916 when the voters at the annual meeting balloted for it by a vote of 58 to 16.¹⁵

With the school finally a twelve grade institution, the next educational improvement centered upon the erection of a new modern school house. This movement was aided by the fact that the soft bricks, used in the construction of the original building, were beginning to disintegrate under the wear and tear of time. After several years of agitation, the movement finally culminated in 1921

8 Census Record for School District No. 9, Knox County, Nebraska for
the year ending the first Monday in April, 1884.
9 IBID, for school year ending the first Monday in April, 1884
10 Interview with V. J. Beran, June 25, 1938
11 Personal Interview with L. J. Bartak, June 25, 1938. Mr. Bartak
attended the Verdigre Public School in the nineties.
12 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 11, 4, December 2, 1909
13 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 13, 45, September 12, 1912
14 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 14, 35, July 3, 1913
15 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 17, 33, June 15, 1916



Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Van Hoff in the late 1940's. "Van" was Superintendent of Schools in Verdigre for 32 years, retiring in 1955. He retired from teaching in 1966 after 46 years in the teaching profession. Joseph John Van Hoff was born on May 7, 1893 at Sadilia, Missouri, and passed away on March 10, 1967. His wife, Florence, and his daughter, Ann, reside in Omaha.

³ Personal interview with V. J. Beran, Verdigre, Nebraska, June 25, 1938. Mr. Beran has in his possession an old census record for District No. 9. The first entries in this record were made in April, 1874. Since this sets forth that it is the census record for the year ending April 1, 1874, one concludes that school was probably held in District 9 in the fall and winter of 1873-1874.

in a successful bond election in which the school patrons voted \$72,000 in bonds to be used for the erection of a new school building. The present building was erected at that time and went into use in the fall of 1922. Since then the school has increased its enrollment and broadened its curriculum until at the present time it has a fairly well balanced offering of essential courses.

Before closing the story of the educational development, a little attention should be directed at the attempts of the Czechs to sponsor Bohemian schools. The purposes of these schools were to teach the American-born Czechs to read the Bohemian language and to inculcate them an appreciation of Bohemian literature and a love for it. They were private in nature and were generally sponsored by some Czech organization or some interested individual. As a rule there was no tuition connected with them, the sponsors raising the necessary expense money in various ways. For example the Verdigre Citizen for March 14, 1912, carries a news item from nearby rural community to the effect that the X.N.Z. Club of Jelen was holding a dance, the proceeds to go towards supporting a free Bohemian school. It concludes with the following statement:

"We want Bohemian schools as close together as possible so as to give our children a chance to attend." 16

Apparently interest in this movement was at its height during the years between 1919 and 1918. Generally these schools operated on Saturdays during the spring and summer months. Such a school was conducted in Verdigre in the summer of 1914 and had an enrollment of 66 with two teachers in charge. ¹⁷ Again in the summer of 1915 one of these Bohemian schools was in operation.¹⁸ The movement received a setback during the war and interest in it continued to lag in the post-war period. In recent years little has been done about reviving it with the result that very few of the present generation of American-born Czechs can read the Bohemian language.

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Frontier and homestead life is not likely to be considered as something conducive to cultural development and yet in the case of the Knox County Czechs, certain activities which come distinctly under that heading were practiced rather extensively. These activities followed two lines, one the encouragement of participation in music, and the other the fostering of Bohemian Dramatic Clubs and the production of plays in the Czech language.

For some reason interest in music seems to be inherent in most Bohemians and almost every Czech home is the possessor of a violin, an

accordion, or some band instrument. Definite musical organizations existed among the Knox County Bohemians from the very beginning. The pioneers of these music activities were the Marshall family of Pischelville. Several members of this family were professional musicians and their string band was a favorite for years not only in the Pischelville vicinity, but also throughout the entire Bohemian area. Later we find other strong musical organizations in the Pischelville territory, especially the Kreycik Brass Band and the Minarik Orchestra. Occasionally several of these groups united to play for some local celebration. They also provided music for the local community dances.¹⁹

In the Verdigre settlement music interest found an outlet in a band organization. The first and best known of these early bands was the Pavlik Band. Like the Marshall group, this band contained a number of the members of one family, there being five of the Pavlik brothers in the original organization. It was formed in 1878 by John Pavlik. It has had a long and successful career, being famous not only locally but also throughout the northeast section of the state. It is still in existence with its membership composed largely of the children and other relatives of the earlier members.20

Before the Pavlik organization had the field pretty much to itself, but along about 1910 a new organization, known as the Verdigre Military Band, was formed under the leadership of J. J. Schmidt, a local musician and an unusually capable director. This band made rapid progress and was in great demand at celebrations and public gatherings in the years between 1910 and the war, even appearing on programs in Omaha and Sioux City. It appeared regularly in the Aksarben Festival at Omaha and its general reputation for excellence was widely recognized. 21

Another early musical organization whose praises are sung by the Czechs was Lenger's Niobrara Band. It was directed by a picturesque Bohemian. John Lenger. He established his band in the late seventies and it functioned for about forty years. It also appeared at many celebrations and important gatherings in north Nebraska and South Dakota. He was a typical showman and, when his band was scheduled to participate in some big festival, would borrow the more talented musicians from the Pischelville and Verdigre bands in order to make the showing of his own organization more impressive. He even at times used Indians in his

band, obtaining in this way valuable publicity. In his later years, he also directed various town bands in north Nebraska. Although still living, he is no longer able to participate actively in band circles, due to poor health and advancing age, 22

The Bohemians were not only interested in their own musical organizations but also obtained pleasure from attending musical programs of artists who were occasionally brought into the settlement. These artists were nearly always of Czech nationality and in some instances had national reputations. The following taken from the Niobrara Tribune deals with this phase of Bohemian cultural life:

"It is perhaps not appreciated by many that Niobrara was honored by a guest of world wide distinction who made the Niobrara date Tuesday evening by making the long stretch from Seattle to Omaha and Niobrara without a stop. -- when Jaroslav Kocian, one of the world's greatest violinists, held his audience spellbound by his skill and genius. Kocian's reception was very cordial and the neighboring towns were represented by their music lovers." 23

Incidentally, the Bohemian music lovers paid \$1.50 for tickets to this concert. 24

Further evidence of this quality of appreciation of good music by the Bohemians is indicated in this article from the Verdigre Citizen:

"The greatest treat of the season was given by Mr. F. J. Koboba, violinist, and Miss Marie Mikova, pianist, of Omaha last Friday evening. The hall was crowded and the people expressed their appreciation of each selection rendered by their great applause. 25

The cultural interests of the Bohemians along music lines are not so hard to understand as they were natural music lovers, but their inclination for Dramatic Clubs and the staging of Bohemian plays is a matter that is not so easily explained. These clubs existed from the seventies, the first one being organized at Niobrara in 1878 with Joseph P. Sedivy its leading promoter. This particular club was known as the "Bohemian Lion" and existed for three years when the marriage of several of its members caused it to disband. 26

Clubs of this nature were also found in the Verdigre settlement and even in the country districts. In the case of Verdigre, much credit for the success of these clubs is due to Joseph P. Sedivy. As manager of one of these organizations. he fostered interest in dramatics and staged Bohemian plays for a period of twenty-five years preceding the World War. 27

These Bohemian plays were generally given during the winter months and were always followed by a big dance. They drew large crowds

and at times were repeated. 28 As a rule the clubs confined their efforts to farces and light comedies but occasionally they attempted more serious plays and even rented special costumes in order to make the performance more effective. 29 The Catholic group also had a dramatic club and put on many plays. In recent years, fewer plays are put on in the Bohemian language, but even now scarcely a year goes by when at least one Bohemian play is not given in the village.

Chapter Nine

POLITICS AND WAR

Strange as it may appear, the political history of Knox County is well sprinkled with Bohemian names. From the days when the population of the county was a mere handful of settlers down to the present, its roll of officials has almost continually included at least one Czech. Probably no other local national group can equal this record. It stands as testimonial of honor to the Bohemians, who without previous political experience, were able to successfully compete against native masters in the art of politics.

When it comes to matters of long time political power, prestige, and influence, it is probable that a Bohemian, Vaclav Randa, towers above anyone else who has been prominent in Knox County politics since 1870. Randa was in truth a remarkable character. Born in Bohemia, he was highly educated, and as a penman had few equals.1 Coming to America in the sixties, he first lived in Chicago where he acted as secretary of the Colonization Club, "Ceska Osada" (Bohemian Colony) and also studied law. 2

In the spring of 1870, he led a considerable group of Czech settlers to the Niobrara country, established his residence in a rough cabin, and became at once a factor in the political situation. His training soon brought him an appointment as County Treasurer and as Justice of Peace.³ In the first election, held in the fall of 1871, he became County Clerk. This position he held continuously

22	Personal interview with Louis Marshall, June 25, 1938	
23	NIOBRARA TRIBUNE, 21, 32, February 2, 1911	
24	NIOBRARA TRIBUNE, 21, 31, January 26, 1911	
	VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 10, 33, June 24, 1909 Holecek's "Pioneer Reminiscences", FRATERNAL HERALD.	M
934,	225	may,
27	VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 19, 12, January 17, 1918	
28	VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 16, 22, April 1, 1915	÷

29 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 16, 14, February 4, 1915

1 Many Czechs have told the writer that Randa was educated for the priesthood. He may or may not have been. Certainly in Knox County settlement he stood as one of the prominent Rationalists and Liberals. Holecek describes him as a political lugitive from his native land. 2 Andreas, HISTORY OF THE STATE OF NEBRASKA, Part 2, 1031

3 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 26, 1, October 20, 1924. Taken from an article on the early history of the region by John Beran, Sr

¹⁶ VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 13, 19, March 14, 1912

¹⁷ IBID, 15, 41, August 13, 1914 IBID, 16, 34, June 24, 1915

Personal interview with Louis Marshall, June 25, 1938 VERDIGRE EAGLE, 39, 25, March 3, 1938

²⁰ 21 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 11, 4, October 13, 1910, also 12, 34, June 29. 1911

until 1884, with the exception of one term (1876-1878) when a combination of his enemies succeeded in defeating him. A Republican, he was not adverse to making deals with men of the opposite party if by doing so he might enhance his own interests. His control over the Bohemian voters placed in his hands the political "Balance of Power" in the county and he used it most effectively.4

In the initial days of the county's existence, it had no Court House and Randa had his office as County Clerk in his home. 5 Out of this grew an interesting squabble which is written up in an early issue of the Niobrara Pioneer as follows: "The County Commissioners broke up their meeting yesterday in a row, the County Clerk having submitted a bill for three years office rent, which none of the Commissioners saw fit to allow. Mr. County Clerk Randa told his friend Mr. County Commissioner Burns that he could go to that place where brimstone is dealt up." 6

Soon after coming to Niobrara. Randa was admitted to the bar and following his long tenure as County Clerk acted as legal advisor to the Bohemians, delved into real estate, sold insurance, and in later years was associated with his brother in the implement business. His hold upon the Bohemian voters continued for a long time and invested him with prestige in political circles that made him an important factor in every county political campaign. The last years of his life were marked by domestic and other troubles. He died in 1900.7

Unquestionably the early politicans of the county looked upon the Bohemian settlers merely as a large block of votes, to be obtained solidly by the candidate fortunate to secure their good will. Since the Czechs spoke the Bohemian language almost exclusively, candidates were hampered in their efforts to win their votes and had to depend upon the assistance of English speaking Czechs like Randa, Janousek, and Pischel to plead their case among them.

The evidence indicates that all manner of schemes were used to gain the political support of the Czechs. One of these is mentioned in the October 7, 1876, issue of the Niobrara Pioneer. It reads:

"One of the stories on the candidate for County Treasurer on the Democratic ticket, I. B. Miller, is that he offered Frank Janousek, a saloon keeper in Niobrara. \$25 if he would use his influence among the Bohemians next Tuesday. But Mr. Janousek is known as an honest man and Mr. Miller's \$25 was refused." 8

Again in the March 29, 1877, issue of the *Pioneer* we meet up with some what different tactics. This article says:

"J. B. Ulrich of Frankfort is getting out a German and Bohemian circular against the railroad bonds. We warn our German and Bohemian friends against such imputation. A man with a personality of \$127 and no real estate yet taxable cannot do a very big business in giving away foreign circulars unless aided by Yankton money or some one more interested in the county than he is." 9

A third method used to line up the Czech votes was to hold meetings in the Bohemian district, frequently at Pischelville, and provide treats for those attending. These meetings were well attended but probably were not particularly effective as a means of securing the Bohemian vote. 10

The County was the scene of numerous struggles for the removal of the county seat from Niobrara and also for the division of the county into two county governmental units. In the county seat fights, the Bohemians supported the cause of Niobrara, as a rule, although in the contest of 1887 when Verdigre was striving to win the prize, many votes were cast in favor of that village. 11 The Czechs consistently opposed county division because they felt that there was not enough wealth in the half of the county, which included their area, to adequately support a separate county government.

The party affiliations of the Bohemians of this section are puzzling. Originally, most of them were Republicans, but along in the nineties they switched over to the Democratic Party and since then have remained loyal to it. 12 Emil Pischel, an early pioneer and one time County Treasurer, attributes this early Republicanism to the influence of Vac Randa. He says that Randa would bring out a keg of beer and give suggestions as to voting which were followed absolutely. 13

Although normally democrats, the Bohemians do not adhere strictly to party lines and are inclined to vote for one of their own nationality, regardless

6 NIOBRARA PIONEER, April 22, 1875

This information was furnished the writer in a letter from Ed A. Fry, dated July 9, 1936. Mr. Fry, the founder of the first newspaper in Knox County, the NIOBRARA PIONEER, knew Randa for years and opposed him politically. Nevertheless, he describes him as a man of unusual ability and one who performed his official duties as County Clerk in a capable manner. 8 NIOBRARA PIONEER, 2, 4, October 7, 1876

10 IBID, 1, 3, September 22, 1874

-31-

11 "The Story of Creighton", Fry's WONDERLAND MAGAZINE, 1, 3, 8. This is found in Fry's Collection of Historical matter in the Nebraska State Historical Library at Lincoln.

12 Fred Marshall, an early County Supt. of Schools, explains the change to the Democratic Party as follows: He says that Emil Pischel sought the support of the Republicans in his race for County Treasurer and they refused it. So Mr. Pischel went over to the Democratic ranks and took the Bohemian vote with him. (Interview Fred Marshall, Lincoln, Nebraska, July 8, 1938)

13 Interview with Emil Pischel, May 20, 1937

of his political connections. It is possible that some Bohemian office seekers have taken advantage of this tendency. They affiliated with the Republican Party as that party normally has the greater strength in the county, and also counted upon the support of the Democratic Czechs to swell their vote.

Among the Bohemians who have held county offices are: Vaclav Randa, County Clerk, 1872-1884 except for one term (1876-1878); Charles Kadish. County Treasurer, 1882-1884; E. L. Pischel, County Supervisor, 1891-1892; Jos. V. Holecek, County Supervisor, 1891; E. L. Pischel, County Treasurer, 1896-1898; Fred Marshall, County Superintendent. 1904-1908: F. H. Lenger, County Supervisor, 1909-1920: Vaclav Vlasnik, County Sheriff, 1910-1916: F. A. Barta, Clerk of the District Court, 1912-1920; F. H. Kucera, County Coroner, 1912-1914; John A. Schreier, County Supervisor, 1916-1920; John Stoural, County Supervisor, 1920-1924; Miss Anna Chladek, County Superintendent, 1922-1926; E. J. Lenger, County Clerk, 1922 to the present. 14

The Czechs of the present generation are not much different from ordinary American groups in their political activities. They enjoy indulgence in political discussions but are not so prone to vote solidly for candidates of their own nationality as did the earlier Bohemians. Most of the men go to the polls on election day and cast their ballot, but many of the women show little interest in political matters and do not exercise the privilege of voting.

WAR ACTIVITIES

The Bohemians had an interest in the World War which extended beyond that of the average American. To them it was not only a struggle which called for the enlistment of their boys and demonstrations of their patriotism, but also one which offered an opportunity for their kinsmen across the sea to free themselves of the obnoxious influence of the Germans and to achieve the goal of Bohemian Nationalism which they had sought for centuries.

The plight of their countrymen, forced to fight under the German banner, brought to the surface their deepest sympathies and they enthusiastically went forth to raise funds for the National Bohemian Alliance, an organization that was seeking to further the movement for Bohemian independence. 15

This interest in the cause of the European Czechs placed an added financial burden upon the local Bohemians which did not fall upon the other residents of the county. To meet it they put on celebrations, programs, and even circulated subscription lists. ¹⁶ On one occasion, September 28, 1918, over \$4000 was raised and sent abroad to be

used by the Czechoslovakian Army that was operating in Russia.¹⁷ In the course of the War, over \$5300 were donated by the local Bohemians for the cause of Bohemian Nationalism. 18

Throughout the war the Bohemians displayed a brand of loyalty that was not surpassed in the county. Many of their sons volunteered for service and others entered the army through the selective draft. The folks at home dug into their resources and supported the local war drives with oversubscriptions that were the envy of the other sections of the county. 19

They also gave their united support to all of local war activities such as the Red Cross, the Home Guards, and the food and fuel conservation movements. The Verdigre Red Cross Chapter was one of the most active in the county.²⁰ The Home Guard unit was active until after the Armistice and was one of the last in the county to disband.

With the close of the War and the return of the soldiers to civilian life, the Bohemians planned a home coming celebration that would surpass anything of a similar nature that might be held in the county. This Home Coming Jubilee was staged at Verdigre on August 30 and 31, 1919. With everything including meals, entertainment, tobacco, and drinks free to the ex-servicemen, it attracted most of the county's former soldiers who had returned home. Over two hundred of the ex-soldiers registered for the occasion and the affair still stands as the greatest celebration ever put on in the Bohemian district.21

Chapter Ten

RECENT TRENDS

Since the war, changes have taken place in Knox County's Bohemian district. In the first place, it acted as an Americanizing influence. Young Czechs, who in some instances had never been away from the immediate vicinity, went into army training camps and at the close of the struggle came back with their interests centered in the future of America and its ideals rather than in their Bohemian heritage.

Furthermore most of the original Czech pioneers have passed on. Only a handful remain and these

- These few were obtained by the writer from local sources. 15 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 18, 25, April 19, 1917
- 16 VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 18, 36, July 15, 1917
- 17 IBID, 19, 49, Oct. 3, 1918

19 IBID, 18, 35, June 27, 1917, also 19, 22, March 28, 1918 20 The women of the Verdigre Red Cross Chapter met and worked regularly three afternoons a week. (VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 19, 17, February 21, 1918)

-32-

^{4 &}quot;Bohemians in Yankeedom", Fry's WONDERLAND MAGAZINE, 1, 6,

^{...} 5 Holecek's Pioneer Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, March, 1934, 131

⁹ IBID, 3, 30, March, 29, 1877

¹⁴ Rosicky, HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 452 The tenure of all of these, except a few, are listed in Miss Rosicky's book

¹⁸ IBID, 19, 52, October 24, 1918

²¹ VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 20, 45, September 4, 1919

can hardly be classified as original settlers as they were small children at the time when their parents came to Knox County. With the death of the pioneers went the strongest link that connected the American-born Czechs with the land of their forefathers.

To the older Bohemians it was natural to speak the Czech language and its use was an important part of their daily life, but the present generation, educated in the public schools, find that they can express themselves more clearly in English and so have tended to drop the use of the Bohemian language. Where formerly Bohemian was spoken almost exclusively in the homes and on the streets, now English predominates and even the older Bohemians admit that it is only a matter of time until very few of the native born will be able to speak the language of their fathers.

From the beginning of the settlement there was a decided tendency for Bohemians to marry Bohemians. Previous to 1920, it was difficult to find an instance of a marriage that involved a Bohemian and a party of a different nationality. But of late years, attendance at distant dances and other social functions has brought about contacts that have resulted in marriages of Bohemians with members of other national groups.¹ These mixed marriages have not only introduced new blood into the district, but have also functioned in the drift away from the use of the Bohemian language, since children of such marriages are invariably taught to speak English rather than Bohemian.

Again, the recent years have seen an increasing number of the younger Czechs leave the district to make their livelihood in the city and other places, or to enter one of the professions. In some ways, this movement has taken away some of the district's most promising young people, leaving behind a less ambitious group. This manifests itself in the caliber of the youth left in the towns rather than in those who have remained on the farms.

The bank failures, drouths, and crop failures of the last few years have resulted in an unhealthy financial situation which has shouldered a heavy debt upon many of the farming group and even causing numbers of them to lose land holdings that have been in their particular families for years. Since this condition still operates, it is impossible to predict just how it will eventually effect the district. As insurance and real estate concerns come into the ownership of these lands through foreclosures, it may mean the placing of non-Czech on these farms and thus a general change in the makeup of the population of the area. So far there is no particular evidence pointing to such a change. The Bohemians as farmers have always showed progressive tendencies. They especially go in strong for modern farm machinery and most of their farms are well equipped in this respect. The present generation is also in sympathy with movements that deal with scientific farming and the introduction of new crops. During the recent dry years when the ordinary grain crops failed to produce, many Czechs planted drouth-resisting sorghums and hybrid corn. The present year, 1938, has shown a marked increase in the acreage of these crops.

Crop failures and the extension of government activities into the field of farming has caused many of the Bohemian farmers to reduce their herds of cattle and hogs, and also their acreages of grain. However, since they are natural lovers of livestock, it is more than likely that the production of a good crop will see a movement to bring back to their farms the raising of hogs and cattle. This in turn will necessitate the increased production of corn and other feeds.

In connection with the New Deal farm program, it is interesting to note that the Czech farmers were slower than their neighbors in the matter of participating in it. A larger percentage of farmers from the non-Czech districts were represented in the original Corn-Hog Program than from the Bohemian area of the county.² However, a succession of dry years has resulted in many of them lining up with the various New Deal farm programs.

When the New Deal brought its relief activities into the county, there was no grand rush on the part of the Bohemians to share in the benefits. In fact, few Bohemian names were found on the relief rolls during the first years of the relief activities. The crop failures of 1934, 1936, and 1937 resulted in quite a number of Czech farmers applying for and receiving farm grants. Also, quite a few Bohemians in the village of Verdigre are at present employed on W. P. A. projects. Among the older group who went through the hard times of the nineties, this practice is not looked upon with favor.

As a final word, it is interesting to note that while parts of the Czech district are surrendering their long time sense of independence to the benefits of relief, one district, the area around Pischelville, still functions without this type of government assistance and glories in it. The attitude of this particular community reflects something of the spirit that carried the pioneer Bohemians through the trials and hardships of homestead life. It is clearly set forth in the following letter, written by one old settler of the community to the editor of the Verdigre Eagle. It reads:

Your publication of February 11, under the caption of Court House News, carried the following: "A bedraggled man, living in the Pischelville community, was found ill and removed by the county officials to Niobrara for medical attention...".

In so far as this man was sick and taken by his brothers and Dr. Green to Niobrara, that is correct, but the scurrilious assertion that the man was tattered and taken to Niobrara by county officials is false and a reflection upon the inhabitants of this community, as so far during its 67 years, there has never been occasion for county



The Z.C.B.J. Lodge of Pischelville, No. 8, Sladkovsky, was first organized in 1879. The Pischelville Hall was built in 1882. Some of the Charter Members were: Anton Pischel, Ignac[®]Marshall, Jan Ruzicka and Frank Tuch. The Lodge is still active aid in any matter. For these libelous statements, reflecting upon the human side of the people of this community, you owe them a public apology." For the Pischelville Community E. L. Pischel³

In closing, it might be said that the Bohemian section of Knox County faces the future somewhat disturbed by the hard times, crop failures, and other misfortunes of the last few years. However, the above letter indicates that some of the present group still have a sense of pride and independence which should go a long ways towards helping them meet their present difficult problems. Without question, Knox County has in its Bohemian inhabitants a group of citizens whose future, like their past, will be characterized by thrift and industry.

3 VERDIGRE EAGLE, 38, 23, February 18, 1937

and has a growing membership. The Pischelville bridge was built some years later. The crowd of people on this picture were at the hall to celebrate the dedication of the new bridge.

¹ An interview with Rev. Chas. J. Oborny, the Catholic priest at Verdigre, on this subject reveals that the older Bohemian parents object strenuously to the marriage of their children with non-Czechs. However, he adds that the strong feeling against such marriages is slowly disappearing as an increasing number of them occur.

² VERDIGRE EAGLE, 36, 25, March 8, 1934. An article in this issue of the Eagle gives the number of Knox County farmers signing up for the Corn-Hog Program. The percentage of signers runs considerably lower in the Bohemian district than in the other areas of the county.

Bibliography

BOOKS

Andreas, A. T. - HISTORY OF THE STATE OF NEBRASKA, 2 VOLUMES, Western Historical Publishing Co., Chicago, 1882

Balch, Emily — OUR SLAVIC FELLOW CITI-ZENS, Charities Publication Committee, New York, 1910

Capek, Thomas — THE CZECHS IN AMERICA, Houghton Mifflin Co., New York, 1920

Hessoun, Joseph — CESKE KATOLICK OSADY V. AMERICE, St. Louis, (Bohemian Catholic Churches of America)

Kutak, Robert I. — THE STORY OF A BOHE-MIAN AMERICAN VILLAGE, Standard Printing Company, Louisville, Ky., 1933

Rosicky, Rose — A HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, National Printing Company, Omaha, Nebraska, 1929

Wolfe, J. M. – NEBRASKA GAZETEER AND BUSINESS DIRECTORY FOR 1890, J. M. Wolfe and Co., Omaha, Nebraska, 1890

ARTICLES

Fry, Edwin A. — "Bohemians in Yankeedom", in Fry's WONDERLAND MAGAZINE, Vol. 1, 6, Found in Fry's Miscellaneous Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Library, Lincoln, Nebraska

Fry, Edwin A. — "The Story of Creighton" in Fry's WONDERLAND MAGAZINE, Vol. 1, 3, Found in Fry's Miscellaneous Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln, Nebraska

Hrbkova, Sarka "Bohemians in Nebraska" in the NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1919, Vol. 19

Holecek, J. V. — "Reminiscences of J. V. Holecek" in the FRATERNAL HERALD, Omaha, Nebraska, for February, March, April, and May, 1934 (Translated by Rose Rosicky, Omaha, Nebraska)

-35-

Sedivy, Joseph — "Autobiography of Joseph Sedivy", in the FRATERNAL HERALD, Omaha, Nebraska, for December, 1932 (Translated by Rose Rosicky, Omaha, Nebraska)

Sedivy, Joseph P. — "Reminiscences of Joseph P. Sedivy" in the FRATERNAL HERALD, Omaha, Nebraska, for September and November, 1931; also for January, February, March, April, June, July, and August, 1932. (Translated by Rose Rosicky, Omaha, Nebraska)

MANUSCRIPTS

PUBLIC DOCUMENTS Census Records for School District No. 9, Knox County, Nebraska, for the years 1874-1884, in the possession of V. J. Beran, Verdigre, Nebraska

Baptismal Record of St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church, Verdigre, Nebraska

Financial Record of St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church, Verdigre, Nebraska

Minutes of the Meetings of the Knox County Board of Supervisors for 1889, in the office of the County Clerk of Knox County, Nebraska, Center, Nebraska

State Manuscript Census for Knox County for 1876, in the Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln, Nebraska

U. S. Agricultural Census for Knox County for 1870, in the Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln, Nebraska

U. S. Agricultural Census for Knox County for 1880, in the Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln, Nebraska

PERSONAL LETTERS

Marie Chocholousek, Financial Secretary of Lodge America, No. 276, Verdigre, Nebraska, giving information in regard to the formation of the lodge and its work

Edwin A. Fry, Herrick, South Dakota, dealing with the political activities of Vaclav Randa

Frank Kves, Recording Secretary, Z. C. B. J. Lodge, No. 5, Verdigre, Nebraska, setting forth data in regard to the history of the organization.

Rev. Joseph Macourek, Ravenna, Nebraska, concerning the early history of St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church, Verdigre, Nebraska

Rose Rosicky, Omaha, Nebraska, dealing with the translation and interpretation of articles from several early Bohemian publications.

NEWSPAPERS

The Niobrara Pioneer, (Niobrara, Nebraska) September 22, 1874, to December 28, 1880; February, 1896, to March, 1898; October, 1899, to March 1902

The Niobrara Tribune (Niobrara, Nebraska) January, 1895, to January, 1919

The Verdigre Citizen (Verdigre, Nebraska) January, 1908, to February, 1931

The Verdigre Eagle (Verdigre, Nebraska) February, 1931, to 1938

Found in the Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln, Nebraska

INTERVIEWS

L. J. Bartak, Verdigre, Nebraska, June, 1938

V. J. Beran, Verdigre, Nebraska, September, 1936, and June, 1938

V. J. Holecek, Niobrara, Nebraska, June, 1937

Fred Marshall, Lincoln, Nebraska, July, 1938

Louis Marshall, Verdigre, Nebraska, June, 1938

Rev. Chas. J. Oborny, Verdigre, Nebraska, August, 1937, and July, 1938

Emil Pischel, Verdel, Nebraska, May, 1937

Chas. Pavlik, Sr., Verdigre, Nebraska, November, 1936

Vac Randa, Verdigre, Nebraska, August, 1937

John A. Schreier, Verdigre, Nebraska, September, 1935

Raymond Schreier, Verdigre, Nebraska, June, 1938

Vac Tikalsky, Verdigre, Nebraska, May, 1938

Appendix BOHEMIAN LAND OWNERS IN KNOX COUNTY IN 1892 WESTERN TOWNSHIP

Name

No. of Acres

Jos. Dryak	. 147
Mat. Hrbek	. 363
Frank Tuch	. 339
Vac Hreik	.328
Karel Kovanda	.120
Fr. Simanek	240
Jan. Kounovsky	642
Jos. Brtek	160
Ignatz Marshall	160
Emil Marshall	120
Alois Marshall	
Jan. Sedivy	
Emil Pischel	
Jos. Wirth	560
Jan. Barta	360
Fr. Vesely	200
Vac Minarek	160
Vac F. Minarek	160
Cenek Elis	
Fr. Tusha	200
John Schreier	160
Emil Schreier	160
Fr. Kukral	280
John Schreier	160
Emil Schreier	160
Fr. Kukral	280
Vojt Slechta	160
Martin Mudra	
Vac Dobrichovsky	
Mat Kreycik	
Jan Mlady	
Frank Vonasek	
Jos. Blazek	
Blaz Haineraich	
Vaclav Vesely	

SPARTA TOWNSHIP

Name

No. of Acres

Anton Placek
Fr. Drobny
Raymond Schreier 160
Jos. Jiskra
Fr. Czech
Vojt Pavelka
F. Pavelka
Jan. Vakoc
Fr. Holan

Vac Tomek
Jan. Houzvicka
Jan. Havlicek
Mat. Pavlik
Jos. Kalal
Fr. Pavelka
Jos. Vakoc
Jos. Martinek
Vojt Masat
Marie Zahora
Anton Kriz
Anton Donat
Anton Tichy
Vac Uhlir
Vac Liska
Vojt Tichy
Jan. Holecek
Jan. Benda
Jos. Krupicka
Josefa Tichy
Jos. Kalas
Fr. Vokner
Vac Slechta
Fr. Drobny
Jos. Krupicka
J. V. Holecek
Aug. Slechta

Taken from a list published in a Bohemian farm paper, Hospodar, Omaha, Nebraska, for March and April, 1892

BOHEMIA TOWNSHIP

No. of Acres

Joseph Vavak
Alois Juracek
Vincent Moticka
Fr. Smetana
Vac Jelen
Tom Belsky
Jos. Janak
Anton Janak
Jan Nikl
Jos. Nikl
Fr. Marcan
Mat Kripner
Vac Prokop
Bar. Novotny

JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP

Name	No. of Acres
Fr. Peterka	
Vac Mrzena	
Jos. Divis	

Jan Peterka
Anton Kodet
Vaclav Nedorost
Vac Pavlik
Vojt Novacek
Adolph Svoboda160
Fr. Jirak
Jan. Skalicky
Anna Nedorost
Jos. Prokop
Fr. Slama
Jos. Somer
Mat Jiracek

VERDIGRE TOWNSHIP

Name

No. of Acres

Jan. Kalal
V. Stoural
Jan. Tikalsky
Vac Dusek
Jan. Ondracek
Vojt Hornik
Vac Mastalir
Fr. Maly
John Markitan
Fr. Souhrada
Fr. Kalal
Fr. Mlady
Vac Jedlicka
Tom Stoural
L. Bicek
Tom Tikalsky
M. Kocina

The above was taken from a list published in the Bohemian farm paper, Hospodar, Omaha, Nebraska, for April, 1892

MAY, 1980

This book is published with the hope that the information herein will create a desire to help preserve and perpetuate in our people the Czech culture entrusted to us by our ancestors.

Thanks to Mrs. Florence Van Hoff and daughter, Ann, for granting permission to print this vast accumulation of research by Mr. Van Hoff.