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
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1. Even such a well-known Czech authority as Sarka B. Hrbkova in her "Bohemians of Nebraska," NEBRASKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS, Vol. XIX, Page 140, mentions these counties as strong in the 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 1910 United States Census gives the population of Knox County as 18,922. The Census returns are based on estimates of the population of each township and, in that respect, are probably more reliable than other sources. The estimate of 4,000 is conservative and represents not more than twenty percent of the population. This would place their total number a little under four thousand.

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 central area of Douglas, Saunders, Butler, Saline, and Colfax Counties. 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 home-steaders, 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. These are concentrated pretty largely in the west half of the county, being found chiefly in Verdigre, Bohemia, West ern, Spartá, Jefferson, Washington, and Niobrara Townships. Their chief town is Verdigre, a village of 418 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 history is one of struggle flared up when the Czechs, feeling that their religious liberties had been violated, revolted against Ferdinand II of Austria. The struggle proved decisively 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 the 36,000 Protestant families went into exile.

Despite these extreme reverses, a certain unquenchable spirit remained and the spark of nationalism continued to glow until three centuries later it was 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 home-steaders.

The forebears of most of the Czechs who came here were agricultural folks and had been attached to the land for centuries. 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." 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.

The writer's interest in this subject springs from a personal 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 which on 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. Few remained in the young Czechs 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 glorified their new-found wealth and independence. Still, many of them 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 this was 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 "Cesna Osada" (Bohemian Colony). One of its most enthusiastic sponsors was Frank Ben, a saloon keeper. 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.

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 to the group, but as a strictly individual matter with each colonist.

Since one of the club's objectives was to find a place for settlement, a committee of two members, Frank Ben 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

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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 liberal 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 liberal opportunities at home.

The Verdigre Military Band. Queen Hotel. Verdigre's Main Street, west side, looking north Central House Hotel which was destroyed by fire some years ago.

Central House Hotel which was destroyed by fire shortly after picture was taken - later rebuilt as Queen Hotel.

Table showing Emigration from Bohemia from 1850 to 1868. Column shows the number of immigrants who came to the United States during the years shown.

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Another large group, mostly young men, saw in emigration to America escape from distasteful military duty. Democratic and peace-loving Americans 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. It would seem, and a greater factor was that the government discouraged it and passports were hard to obtain. However, the
the vicinity of Yankton, then the territorial capital of the Dakotas.

Returning to Chicago, they reported favorably on these two places. Ben 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 natural resources would prove valuable assets to

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 midsummer. The enthusiasm for the country in this time of the year was probably due to a desire to get located in the new land in sufficient time to prepare to start farming operations the next spring. His party included his own family, Joseph Pechan and family, Carl Schindler, Daniel Jandus, Joseph Hrdlicka, and Frank Fejfar and daughter.

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.

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 than the average Bohemian immigrant, and, according to an account written by his son, he spent the Dakota part of his life for about a year at that time. 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 prepare to start farming operations the next spring. His party included his own family, Sedivy and Krupicka families, John Holecek and family, Joseph Gregor and wife, Frank Vampul and family, and Joseph Noll and wife.

They reached 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 insisted that an ox team was the only way to get to 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 1 to 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. Pavon 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. The two buildings were the landmarks 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. 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 behind. Noll was joined 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 eastern 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 wintered there. Sedivy’s wagon was sufficiently frozen to render crossing it on ice a safe procedure. They had a considerable wait as the ice was not sufficiently thick. The party then traveled to Yankton. 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. The area was unoccupied, but not being 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. 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. It 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. 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

Looking west in early 1900's - Verdigris, Nebr.
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 today 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 abode. One of my colleagues, who was 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 manage was frequently in a very lawless state. This and other factors combined to make the region dangerous for settlers. The evidence of destructive prairie fires, and the sense of loneliness and fear that enveloped the groups which pitched camp for the night on the endless prairie.

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 terminals at Sioux City and crossed into the wide expanses of Nebraska, where so many of them deserted from army posts were also frequently present. 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 might have equipped 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 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 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 could not be practiced on an isolated Nebraska farm. The walls were of logs with the crevices filled with small sticks and mud. They were constructed crudely but well. The walls were thrown up 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, sound and they had a roof. The walls were covered with straw or 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 they provided serviceable shelter and seemed to have been preferred to sod houses by the Czechs.
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.10 Joseph Sedivy also acted as spokesman for the settlers and was instrumental in getting material assistance from the commanding officer at Fort Randall.

The year of 1870 is described as a hard one with grasshoppers ravaging the crops and hail completely destroying the production.11 The following year was also a scant one. The year of 1872 started out promising and considerable wheat was sown, but again as June approached, 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.12 The plague on this occasion covered a wide area and practically blasted the hopes of all the settlers for a good crop. It was through the purchase of seed, as it was too late to encourage 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 there was competition due to the fact that the net gain in the farmlands 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 purchase of provisions and seed for the needy areas. However, a county committee, chosen for the purpose of going to Washington, was not given assistance fairly, so little recognition to the plight of the Czechs and they had to worry along unaided.14 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 grass, and horses were used to burn 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 a son. The victims were 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.15 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 ill-prepared 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 Verdigris 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.16 No loss of life is reported excepting what is commonly attributed to the storm, but it brought death to great numbers of cattle who were caught grazing on the open range, and either frozen 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 1889-1881 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 causing tremendous destruction in the Verdigris valley and the village of Niobrara. The flood lasted a week, being finally checked by 14 Sedivy's Autobiography, FRATERNAL HERALD, December, 1902. 15 Beran. Translation of Sedivy Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, December, 1932, 506. 16 Beran, Translation of Helene Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, December, 1932, 499. 17 Beran, Translation of Helen Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, December, 1932, 499. 18 Ibid., 192. 19 Interview with Chas. Pavlik, Br., V. J. Beran, Verdigris, and J. V. Holcik, Niobrara.
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. This resulted from the fact that their settlements bordered the Indian country. From their homes on the north bank of the Niobrara River, they looked across at the Ponca Reservation, which occupied an extensive area on the south bank of the river. This reservation was directly confronted by the Bohemians, who had managed to establish scattered settlements across the stream. The government had located a considerable number of the Santee Sioux, following the Minnesota massacres of 1862. 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 low 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. Naturally it was some time before they became convinced that, aside from personal inroads, a large percentage 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.

The contacts of the Bohemians with the Indians were featured in 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 by almost fifteen years by frequent depredations and theft of livestock by wandering bands of Indians.

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 the builder of any homestead town was wary of his neighbors.

The Brabenec, 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, who also had families planning to settle near each other. They had even agreed in the purchasing of a yoke of oxen and an old wagon. Their party, along with several other Bohemian families, traveled together as far as Verdigre, Nebraska, September 25, 1879. They proceeded to move their claims at once 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 by almost fifteen years by frequent depredations and theft of livestock by wandering bands of Indians.

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19 The contacts of the Bohemians with the Indians were featured in 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 by almost fifteen years by frequent depredations and theft of livestock by wandering bands of Indians.

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 the builder of any homestead town was wary of his neighbors.

The Brabenec, 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, who also had families planning to settle near each other. They had even agreed in the purchasing of a yoke of oxen and an old wagon. Their party, along with several other Bohemian families, traveled together as far as Verdigre, Nebraska, September 25, 1879. They proceeded to move their claims at once 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 by almost fifteen years by frequent depredations and theft of livestock by wandering bands of Indians.
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 group of Indians was seen to disappear rapidly over the hills. Immediately, the men had a presentiment of what had happened. Rushing to the dugout they found Brabenec, their friend, lying on the ground in the thicket where she died. Horrified, they carried her outside and discovered that she had been shot in the back.

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 had had at least one 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. However, the men went on to Niobrara and then returned to Schindler's place they were stopped by a band of Indians who were friendly and when they learned what had happened they asked the settlers to take the body to 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 the women, 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 "Hoe!" 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.

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 Indians who took the body of her son. She had been shot in the breast and had staggered into the thicket where she died.

Eventually the family returned to make their homes on the claims which had been the scene of their great sorrow. 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. The Brabenec tragedy is memorable in that it constituted the only known instance in Nebraska of the death of a pioneer Bohemian at the hands of Indians.

A few Bohemian settlers at some time or other had been visited by the Indians. It could hardly be otherwise since they lived not far from the dugout where she died. In any event, two or three of the leaders of the meeting: "Let us demand that our government keep their vagueboat cut-throats and murderers at least in their reservations. Let us demand that the Indians be removed from their secret places and that joint connected therewith, should not dazzle any one as to make him forget the exposed and dangerous condition that awaits the homesteaders and as farmers would be in 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 one ought to blame them for wanting to be as far as possible from such savages."

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

Chapter Five

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economically the Bohemians of Knox 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 possibilities of the undeveloped resources of the county. These first comers were not merely poor, but poverty stricken. Their total wealth consisted of a ox and a cow or at the most a couple 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, and a few that remained increased their acreage and eventually produced good crops. A few realized the joys and comforts of financial independence. In 1870, the United States Agricultural Census for 1870, for L. Eau Qui Court Township, Knox County (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.
TABLE SHOWING LIVESTOCK OWNED BY
BOHEMIAN SETTLERS IN KNOX COUNTY
AUGUST, 1870

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Hogs</th>
<th>Cows</th>
<th>Sheep</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows ownership of seven yoke 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 more essential and were the first of livestock required. 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. They 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. 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. While the Bohemians were not adept at handling firearms, as they were not permitted to own them in their homeland, they gradually acquired them, through experience, skill in their use and wild game came to constitute a considerable part of their diet.

Even after a few years had passed and some production was forthcoming, the Czechs faced discouragement in the form of low prices for farm products. This was 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 25¢ a bushel, hogs at 2 and 2½¢ a pound, butter at 5 cents a pound, and potatoes at 15¢ a bushel.

Unquestionably Joseph Sedivy was the wealthiest of the Bohemian settlers. 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 other source of cash income.

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.

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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 a healthy economic condition.

For several years no particular development took place and it was not until 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. It was credited in the U. S. Census for 1890, with a population of 507 and contained at the time most of the county's most prosperous districts, and entered the local district school, formed the nucleus for the transport of the common business and professional occupation, including a newspaper and flouring mill. Both Czechs and non-Czechs were found in these first among the business men with the former predominating.

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 at the end of the decade approached.

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

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. In the same year came the first R. F. D. mail route service being established on September 1, 1911. Next came the construction of a city water system, contracts for which were let in September, 1911. Early the following year the Volunteer Fire Department was organized with a membership of twenty-five. 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.

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. 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. 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 protective measures against future floods.

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.

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 of the farmers.

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

Verdigre flood waters - June 1, 1935.

Building the railroad near Niobrara

—17—

—18—

C&NW Railroad bridge at Verdigre destroyed by flood waters - June 1, 1935.
of the farmers. The nineteen twenties were also prosperous years for the town and its general community back on the sound economic basis that merchants are still optimistic. Enough money from governmental aid sources circles in the community to provide some business and the merchants feel that a good crop or two will put the village had its parish church and in the rural area 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 were 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 being regular attendence at church. Incidentally, they were getting along well without formal religion and so why revive it.

In this respect the Bohemians differ from the other national groups who came to America. While the Irish, German, and Scandinavian 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 background, the horizon 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. 1

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 building available to the people. Such Protestantism as existed was practiced chiefly in the cities and had little effect upon the peasant groups.

When the Bohemian came 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.

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Terrible flood waters for 7½ hours through the streets of Verdigre - June 1, 1935.

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Assisting in this natural drift away from religion were the Rational and Liberal Czech newspapers which circulated quite widely among the settlers. They were all expressing all of the freedom of expression that was permitted in America, criticized the old religious beliefs of their brethren, 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 instilled 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; and a third group led numerically.

Regardless of what the reasons may be, it is evident that the Czechs, as a whole, were not strongly influenced and at the present time with a Bohemian population in the county that approaches four thousand, there is only one Catholic church that serves its 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 the Bohemians is almost to the history 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. A meeting was called at which the project was 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 Crook, 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 Mladny donated two acres for the church grounds, a carpenter was hired, and

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 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 number who are indifferent to any type of religious activity or in some cases actually hostile to it.

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, 1870, Father Sulik was on hand and performed fourteen baptisms. 4 This visit was accompanied by a revived interest in 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 Drexcher again visited the settlement and spent three days ministering to the religious needs of the Czechs and performed a total of seventeen baptisms. In the fall of the same year Father Sulik 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. The services were well attended whenever it was possible to let the people know in advance that advances in church attendance.

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 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.

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1 Rocky, HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 286
2 Ibid., 184
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 something 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 Christ-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. Maconre 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. It 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. 12

In the fall of 1929, the present pastor, Rev. Chas. J. Oboray, 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 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 immigrants in the county was the Rev. John Vranek. He was the pastor of the Catholic Church at Ravenna, Nebraska. He sets forth in a letter to the Omaha Catholic Herald that he desired, if possible, to establish a parish in the Verdigre area. It was a county seat town. The first definite steps towards the organization of a Catholic Church in this area was the visit of Rev. Vranek in the summer of 1906. He visited several times a year, and in 1909 he was transferred to the parish of Lewiston. 13

The evidence indicates 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 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 finally accomplished in 1915. The Methodist group was founded on the initiative of a few Czechs, and the leaders discouraged it and we have never been vindicated. 16

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 this 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 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 co-ethnics, and he did considerable work among them during his brief tenure, even conducting a Bohemian school. 11 He left in the fall and nothing came of his efforts.

In Verdigre, attempts have also been made by Protestant groups to interest the Bohemians in religious matters. Until 1915, there was no Protestant church in the county, but later, 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 services were conducted in English rather than the Czech language, worked against the success of the move- 15

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 hand in connection with funerals has also passed out of vogue. On the other hand, the bell of the church is still sounded 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 almost equally with English.

A Chapter Seven

FRATERNAL ACTIVITIES AND AMUSEMENTS

Any one who has lived among the Czechs cannot help but be impressed by the important place that fraternal organizations hold 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 contrast to those 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, there are many, 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 labor and resources to purchase oxen or other needed farm equipment.

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

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8 Interview with Var Bonas, June 23, 1939; Mr. Boyer's father acted as secretary of the committee in charge of the construction of the church and co-operation with Bishop Hnatiuk.
9 Financial Record, St. Wenceslaus Church, Verdigre, Nebraska, 92
10 Rev. Macourek, as he appears in the bishop's annual report, indicates that he was still in charge of the church at Verdigre when he wrote that at the time he became pastor at Verdigre, the parish numbered about twenty-five families.
11 VERDIGRE EAGLE, 2, September 27, 1904,
12 "Bohemians in Nebraska," Fry's WINTERGARDEN MAGAZINE, 1, 6
13 NOIBRARA TRIBUNE, 28, 12, September 14, 1911
14 VERDIGRE HERALD, 1, 11, February 28, 1910
15 It should be noted that the Catholic parish from the beginning was in charge of the Catholic Church Movement, and, until recently, the prayers and services were all in the Czech language.

CHAPTER 7
Boeny, HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 247
2 J. Bohemian Immigrants, Persistence Years, FRATERNAL HERALD, March 1930, 184
occurred in June, 1879, when a meeting was held by the sponsors of the movement. At this meeting a local lodge of the Bohemian Slovene Benevolent Society (C. S. P. S.) was brought into existence. It had a charter membership of fourteen, consisting of the following Czech pioneers: Vaclav Randa, Jan Lenger, Jan Lenarsky, Frantisek Pavlik, Jan Tkalisky, John Vakoc, Albert Stoural, John Vakoc, Jan Tikalsky, John Vakoc, Albert Stoural, Pavlik, F. Vonasek, Anton Pischel, M. Mudra, Jan Kolecek, Pioneer Reminiscences, FRATERNAL HERALD, Map, 1934, Information supplied by Frank Kves, 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.

The lodge functions both as an insurance and as a social unit. It admits to membership both men and women who can speak the 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.

The organization encourages the retention of the desirable customs of the pioneers and has been active in keeping alive the language of the ancestors in the young generation. At times they have sponsored and even operated Bohemian summer schools for the children. They stage general social affairs 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. Some of the 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 life of its members, which is more extensive and more important than that which is found in the ordinary fraternal order. So far as the writer is aware, it has always enjoyed a good reputation and at present has 212 adult and 53 juvenile members.

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, who had come to Nebraska in 1870. The charter membership of this lodge consisted of eight pioneer settlers of that vicinity, namely: Vaclav Hvizdalek, Jan Barta, F. F. Vonasch, Anton Pischel, M. Mudra, Jan Rusieka, Jes, Wirth, and Emil Pichol.

Subsequent meetings took in other members and on May 16, 1880, it became officially affiliated with the C. S. P. S. national organization as Slaskovsky Lodge No. 61.

In its first years it suffered from dissension among the members, but with the passing of the years, the meetings should be held, but this difficulty was put to an end. A record book was made. The lodge was active from its inception and even managed to purchase a number of thirty books. By 1884, it had accumulated enough enthusiasm to build a hall at Pischelville, the necessary funds for building being raised by two members, F. Tuch and Joseph Dobrichovsky. At the time that the building was completed the lodge held the distinction of being the smallest lodge in the state (16 members) and the only one to own a hall.

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 itself to the new group as Slaskovsky Lodge No. 130. Its charter membership was not one at Verdigre, but is quite as 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. 115. It is hailed somewhat greater 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.

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 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 America has been 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.

The most interesting and most important of these activities of that type. The unit owns considerable gymnasium equipment and works out regularly under an experienced trainer. Interest in the unit is widespread in the district and regional tournaments at which those who excel along various physical lines are awarded certificates of merit and medals. The organization appears particularly to the youth of the community.

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

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

AMUSEMENT

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 community.

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. Even at the present time a Bohemian wedding as an affair that calls for a free dance and this invariably attracts a hilarity crowd from far and wide.

One of the most memorable of these early celebrations occurred in connection with a double wedding in 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 festivities. The principal event was to be the marriage of Mary and Lundaik and Ignats Marshall and Mary Dryak. The ceremony, an impressive affair, was performed in both English and Bohemian by Anton Pischel, the local fiddler, and Pavelka, the local accordion player. The wedding was followed by a long drawn out feast and dance that lasted until the morning.
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. ¹

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 Verdigra 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." ²

There was also a school operating at Pischelville in 1873. It was held in a log school house built the previous winter. ³ Instruction was in English and the school term consisted of three months in the late fall and early winter. ⁴ The first teacher was William Crossley, an ex-soldier. ⁵ 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 north of the town during the winter of 1873-1874. The first entries in this record were made in April, 1874. Since this sets forth that it is the record kept 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. ⁶

1. Personal interview with V. J. Beran, Verdigre, Nebraska, June 25, 1938. 2. Personal interview with L. J. Bartak, Verdigre, Nebraska, June 25, 1938. 3. Personal interview with Mr. Marshall, June 25, 1938. 4. Personal interview with Raymond Schreier, June 25, 1938. 5. Personal interview with Mr. Schreier.

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, Stanis Beran Chalupnik, Fanny Vecera Jedlicka, Mary Ondracek Burian, Barbara Maly Kotrous, Tony Beran Stoural, Joe Maly, Frank Ondracek, Joe Vecera, and John Kreycik, Teacher

The first school in the vicinity of the village of Verdigre was held in a log cabin about a mile 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 different families. ⁷ By 1884, when the village of Verdigre was beginning to take form, the census record shows a total of 70 children of school age in the district. ⁸

As time went on, 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 nineteen 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 what is known as the Street of the village and the other was located across the railroad track in what might be designated as the east part of town. ⁹

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. ¹⁰

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 1899. 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. ¹¹

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. ¹²

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 $6594.95 and expenditures as $5800.77 leaving a balance in the treasury of $793.09. Only $500 was voted for 1913-1914. ¹³ 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 1918 when the voters at the annual meeting balledot for it by a vote of 58 to 16. ¹⁴

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 with the building of a new modern brick school.

From the piece of history and local school district information presented here, it can be seen that the history of the school district of Verdigre is one of constant and steady growth. It is a story of adaptability and pragmatism. It is a story of dedication and devotion to the cause of education. It is a story of the hard work and sacrifices of the people of Verdigre who have made it possible to have a high quality education for their children. It is a story of the future of education in Verdigre and the importance of maintaining a strong and resilient education system for the benefit of future generations.
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.

Dealing with 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 funds 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." 18

Apparent interest in this movement was at its height during the post-war period of 1898 to 1914. 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. 19 Again in the summer of 1915 one of these Bohemian schools was in operation. 20 The movement received the natural favor 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 children of American-born Czechs can read the Bohemian language.

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Frontier and homestead life is not likely to be considered 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 to 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 Piscerville. Several of this family were professional musicians and their string band was a favorite for years not only in the Piscerville vicinity, but also throughout the entire Bohemian district. Before long the string bands spread out to the settlement area and in the Piscerville territory, especially the Kreycky Brass Band and the Minarik Orchestra. Occasionally the members of these groups united together for some local celebration. They also provided music for the local community dances. 21

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, the Pavliks, augmented by other professional musicians to form an important organization. It was formed in 1878 by John Pavlik. It has had a long and successful career, being famous not only locally but throughout the northern section of the state. It is still in existence with its membership composed largely of the children and other relatives of the early Piscelvillians. 22

Before the Pavlik band had the field pretty much to itself, but along about 1910 a new organization, known as the Verdigre May 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 because of its great reputation for excellence was widely recognized. 23

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, whatever attraction the musicians from the Piscerville and Verdigre bands in order to become a factor in the political situation.

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 comprised a few European 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 field 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. He was a native of Bohemia and a registered Bohemian for politics since 1870. Randa was in truth a remarkable character. Born in Bohemia, he was highly educated, and as a penman had few equals. 24 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 served as editor of the "Ceske Zpravy." 25

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 the first Bohemian to hold public office in Knox County. His training soon brought him an appointment as County Treasurer and as Justice of Peace. In the fall of 1871, he became County Clerk and held continuously...

Chapter Nine

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Follows:

"J. B. Ulrich of Frankfurt is getting out a German and Bohemian circular against the railroad bonds. We agree with the Bohemian that the bonds are a mistake which brings about a loss and taking in defeat him. A Republican, he was not effectively.

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. 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."

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 publisher 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 part of the local political campaign. The last years of his life were marked by domestic and other troubles. He died in 1900.

Unquestionably the early politicians of the county looked upon the Bohemian settlers merely as a large block of votes, to be obtained solidly by the candidate fortunate in their favor. 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 a 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 part of the local political campaign. The last years of his life were marked by domestic and other troubles. He died in 1900.

The evidence indicates that all manner of schemes were used to gain the political support of the Bohemians. The politician of the time was the October 7, 1876, issue of the Niobrara Pioneer. It reads:

"One of the stories on the candidate for Township 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 of the county to get them to vote against the proposition of switching over to the Democratic Party. Randa, who was the early politician and one time County Treasurer, refused. So Mr. Pischel went over to the Democratic ranks and took the vote.

"The story grows to a longer one in that letter from Ed. A. Fry, dated July 9, 1889. Mr. Fry, the founder of the first newspaper in Knox County, the Niobrara Pioneer, is one of those who opposed the Bohemian district. Nevertheless, he describes him as a man of unusual ability and one who is sincerely interested in his office. His efforts are the more commendable as he is capable of so much better use of his ability in the political arena."

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Again in the March 29, 1877, issue of the Pioneer we meet up with some what different tactics. Among the Bohemian voters how is the Bohemian vote gained.

"It is a number that might be held in the county. It is a number that might be held in the county."

The Czechs of the present generation are not 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. They were not as essentially American as 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 kinmen 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 the Bohemian interest in the World War. With every conceivable means they enthusiastically went forth to raise funds for the National Bohemian Alliance, an organization that was seeking to further the movement for Bohemian independence. 18

This interest in the cause of the European Czechs placed an added financial burden upon the local Bohemians who did not fall upon the other residents of the county to meet it. They made annual donations on Bohemian Nationalism day, organized home celebrations, programs, and even circulated subscription lists. 19 On one occasion, September 28, 1895, over $4000 was raised and sent abroad to be used by the Czechoslovakian Army that was operating in Russia. 20 In the course of the War, over $5000 were donated by the local Bohemians for the Czechoslovak National. 21

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 other entered the army through the selective draft. The folks at home dug into their resources and supported the local war drives with over-subscriptions that were the envy of the other sections of the county. 22

They also gave their united support to all of the home war coming celebration that would surpass any thing 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. Home coming was an ex-soldiers' affair under the veteran's council of war activities for the occasion and the affair still stands as the greatest celebration ever put on in the Bohemian district. 23

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 had passed on. Only a handful of them remain.
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. 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.

As a final word, it is interesting to note that the Czech farmers were slower than their neighbors in the matter of lining up with the various New Deal farm programs. 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 at the original Corn-Hog Program than from the Bohemian area of the county. However, a success of dry years has resulted in many of them turning to 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 glorys in it. The Lodge is still active 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 of Verdigre, on this subject reveals that the older Bohemian parents object strenuously to the marriage of their children with non-Czechs. However, he stated that the percentages of marriages are slowly disappearing as an increasing number of them marry non-Czechs.

2 VERDIGRE EAGLE, 18, 20, February 16, 1937.
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Frank Kves, Recording Secretary, Z. C. B. J. Lodge, No. 5, Verdigre, Nebraska, setting forth data in regard to the history of the organization.

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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
Vacek, Verdigre, Nebraska, August, 1937
Vacek, Verdigre, Nebraska, September, 1935
John A. Schreier, Verdigre, Nebraska, September, 1935
Raymond Schreier, Verdigre, Nebraska, June, 1938
Vacek Tkalisky, Verdigre, Nebraska, May, 1938

Appendix

BOHEMIAN LAND OWNERS IN KNOX COUNTY IN 1892 WESTERN TOWNSHIP

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

### BOHEMIA TOWNSHIP

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### MAY, 1890

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.

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