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A History of the Czechs in Knox County, Nebraska

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

by
Joseph John Van Hoff
A HISTORY OF THE CZECHS
OF KNOX COUNTY, NEBRASKA

by

Joseph John Van Hoff

1893 — 1967

A THESIS
Presented to the Faculty of
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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 centralised 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 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 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, Sparta, Jefferson, Washington, and Niobrara Townships. Their chief town is Verdigre, a village of 618 people, ninety percent of whom are Czechs.

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

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

1. Emily Balch: Our Slavonic Fellow Citizens (New York, 1910), 42.
3. "Bohemian Settlements in Nebraska," NEBRASKA HISTORICAL COLLEGE SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS, 8 (1901), 140.
The writer's interest in this subject springs from a desire to learn something about the Bohemians in Knox County. During that time he has personally witnessed changes which have been taking place in Bohemia. He has been among these people during the period when practically nothing but the Czech language was spoken in the streets and public places. He has been able to observe the passing of the original pioneers and to see the change in the character of the younger Czechs as they have grown up.

The prosperity following the Napoleonic wars that followed the Austrian defeat was due in part to the desire of the government to encourage emigration to America.

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

The second major factor in the migration to America was the desire to escape from the oppressiveness of the society and the political system of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The upheaval of the Napoleonic Wars and the subsequent revolutions created a wave of emigration from Bohemia. Thomas Capek explains this on the grounds that Bohemia went through a wave of emigration to America escape from distasteful and unpleasant living conditions further

The Czechs were restless and far from satisfied. They were looking for a change, for a better life. They wanted to escape the oppressive and restrictive conditions of their homeland. They were attracted to America by the promise of free land and opportunities for economic advancement. The drouth of the early forties and the revolutionary disturbances of 1848 breathed life into the movement and resulted in a stream of migration that passed through its booming adolescent stage and had reached the stage where it was bringing prosperity to the community.

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. The group was 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 Bem and Frank Janousek, was sent out in the spring of 1869 to look over the situation in the new districts. They had the goal of bringing the Czech settlers to the United States where they could establish themselves on suitable free lands. The club did urge its members to settle in groups, but it provided no financial assistance. The group was a strictly individual matter with each colonist.

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 east, the majority moving into the rapidly growing cities of the middle west. For many, the goal was Chicago where other Czechs had preceded them, and where a Bohemian colony was established to the point where it was quite strongly concentrated in one section of the city.

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

Returning to Chicago, they reported favorably on these two places. Benson 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 country and he felt that these natural resources could prove valuable assets to the prospective settlers. 5

As the result of these reports, the first attempts at settlement were headed in the direction of Niobrara. It seems strange that the first expedition got under way at once and was in Niobrara before mid summer of 1868. The enthusiasm of this group for the task they were undertaking must have been intense to have gone ahead at a time of the year when crops could no longer be produced. Benson and Janousek headed the expedition. In addition to them, it consisted of Frank Nedved, Cap, Thaddeus Pisek and nephew, Alois Chladek, and daughter.

Arriving at Niobrara, this initial group failed to find 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 group to establish a permanent residence on a farm in Knox County. 6

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, 7 he spent the early days of the city for about a year. Urged by a desire to farm, he sold the store, joined the Bohemian Colony, and started for Nebraska on October 21, 1869. His departure at this time of the year was probably due to a desire to get to located in the new land in sufficient time to be prepared to start farming operations the next spring. His party included his own family, Joseph, Krupicka and family, John Holecek and family, Joseph Gregor and wife, Frank Vampuli and family, and Joseph Noll and wife. They arrived at Yankton, 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 hired a team of large oxen in Sioux City. Noll and Krupicka pooled their resources and bought a cheaper pair of oxen and an old wagon. The wires and children of the Sedivy and Krupicka families were left temporarily in Sioux City. The remainder of the party proceeded to walk to Niobrara, the wagons being reserved for the oxen. 8 The trip taken alone is one to be envied. The slowness of the trip is indicated by the fact that it took from November 2 until November 8 to complete it, since the total distance is only a little over a hundred miles, they averaged about thirteen miles a day.

J. V. Holecek, one of the members of the party, paints a rather uninviting picture of the village of Niobrara when it was first settled. It consisted of a log cabin store, operated by Westermann and Burns, and across from this a frame house, occupied by County Judge Tom N. Peacon and also used as a sort of trading post for Indians. In addition, a short distance away was a cabin occupied by Janousek, the colony representative. These constituted the buildings that housed the white population of the town. The rest of the village consisted of about twenty tents of awning and tent houses, 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. Noll was again left at Niobrara with Holecek. This time they left Sioux City on November 18th with five wagons, two of which the elder Sedivy rented. They traveled up the east bank of the river, having in mind to break their journey by a stop with one of the Czech settlers who had come out the previous summer and settled on the Dakota side of the river. They reached Yankton on November 21st and went on to the homestead of Mr. Pechan. Upon his advice the Sedivy and Krupicka families moved into the old cabin and waited for the spring. By this time the weather was sufficiently frozen to render crossing it on ice a safe procedure. They had a considerable wait as the ice did not crack safely until December 8th. 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 further into the country toward the section where the towns of Creighton and Winnetoon are now located. It was here that they inspected the land, but noting the absence of trees and a scarcity of running water, they were unfavorably impressed. Returning to Niobrara, they disappeared among themselves in the matter of choosing claims. Vampuli and Noll finally decided to settle in Dakota while Sedivy, Holecek, and the rest chose the Niobrara territory as their future home. 9

Sedivy at once took a claim on the Niobrara River about four or five miles from the village and started to build a home, the foundations for which were laid on December 30, 1869. He was the first Czech to make an official entry on a homestead in Knox County, and he was probably also the only one who had sufficient funds to pay the filing fee. The Land Office at this time was at Dakota City, a distance of 110 miles, and he made two journeys there on foot in order to clear his title. 10 His claim had been previously taken by someone who had not proved up on it and it was necessary for him to pay $200.00 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

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5. Personal Interview with J. V. Holecek, Niobrara, Nebraska, June 7, 1927.
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 common-wealth. Surrounded by modern conveniences and comfortably removed from those trying days when the adverse forces of nature seemed determined to defeat man’s attempts to bring the lands of our state into useful cultivation, it is hard for us to adequately visualize the hardships and trials that came to plague and discourage the spirits of the first settlers.

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

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. This was due to several reasons. In the first place, Knox County was still on the edge of civilization at the time when they first entered its boundaries. It also bordered a large Indian Reserva-tion which granted both peace and warlike tribes. Little effort was made to confine them strictly to the limits of the reservation and many of them wandered far and wide, beyond the borders, disturbing and frightening the settlers. Criminals, desperados, fugitives from justice, and deserters from army posts were also frequently found among the Indians. These, without doubt, kept them stirred up and even used them as a cloak of protection for their own nefarious deeds. 1

Then there were traders and traders who circulated freely in the region and helped to give it a "wild and woolly west" atmosphere which was not so evident in the counties to the south and east. 2

Another thing which made the general pioneer-situation difficult for the Bohemians was the fact that they were not by nature prepared to meet it. They lacked that self-assurance that was found among the English speaking farmers among the native English speaking inhabitants. They were peace loving and disliked turmoil and strife. They were unfamiliar with the handling of firearms and in general without any previous experience that would prepare 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 persistence of their handicaps that were not to be found among the native-born settlers. They were by nature gregarious. Isolated farms, as we know them, did not exist in their home land. There, the peasants lived in villages and the nearby fields. This made for a community feeling that the lives of all in the village were more or less interrelated. Everyone knew everyone else and the individual’s life was pretty much an open book with public opinion regulating his behavior. Men obtained pleasure from the frequent gatherings and conversations at the village taverns where the women found enjoyment in visiting in the homes. Sunday saw the majority of them dress up and gather at the church and after services indulge in more gossip.

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

Added to all of this, the Czech farmer was forced to learn a new method of cultivation. In Bohemia the peasant enjoyed as his advantage that men pitched camp for the night on the endless prairie. 3

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. The excitement of his journey to Niobrara of the scarcity of settlers, of the evidence of destructive prairie fires, and of the sense of loneliness and fear that enveloped the group as they pitched camp for the night on the endless prairie. 4

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

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

There are many examples of hardships endured by individual settlers. Joseph Gregor of Dukewille began production on his homestead by spreading the required acres by hand. 6 John Beran of Verdigris, who came in 1870, never owned a wagon until 1882. 6 Anton Pischel and many of his neighbors walked and carried produce from Pischelville to Fort Randall, a distance of about twenty-five miles. Mrs. Joseph Kalal, now deceased, tells of Fort Randall, a distance of about twenty-five miles. Mrs. Joseph Kalal, now deceased, tells of the sum of seventy-five cents a trip, walked each Saturday fifteen miles to Niobrara for the settlement mail. 11

Children were born under trying circumstances and without the presence of a physician. Joseph Sedivy in his Autobiography, commenting upon the birth of his son John, May 4, 1879, (probably the first Bohemian born in Knox County) says: "We had the roof of our cabin half done when night and rain came on and at midnight our son John was born. I caught rain water and bathed the newcomer. My wife arose the next day." 12 To the pioneers, birth became merely an incident of life.

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

The year of 1870 is described as a hard one with grasshoppers ravaging the crops and hail completing the destruction. 14 The following year was also a scant one. The year of 1872 started out promising and considerable wheat was sown, but again as June approached, pockets 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 proved of no avail and the crops were ruined. 15 The plague on this occasion covered a wide area and practically blasted the hopes of all the settlers for a good crop. It was through the perseverance of 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 sufficiently to keep settlers barely alive, so the net gain to the farmers was small. Another grasshopper plague came in 1874, so destructive and widespread that the legislature made provisions for help in the form of appropriations for the purchasing of provisions and seed for the needy areas. However, a county committee, chosen for the purpose of distributing the assistance fairly, gave little recognition to the plight of the Czechs and they had to worry along unaided. 16 Some of the most dreaded of the scourges that affected the settlers were the prairie fires. These 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 kind, 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. 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 pouring them into the Niobrara. The flood lasted a week, being finally checked by

The year of 1879 is described as a hard one with the settlers working to build and complete their new homes. With the hard winter of 1878-1879, the settlers were forced to seek shelter in the nearest towns. The winter of 1878-1879 was one of the severest in the history of the county. Wintery winds howled through the night, driving snowdrifts into the homes. The settlers were forced to abandon their homes and seek shelter in the nearest towns.

The winter storms also resulted in the loss of many animals. The year of 1879 was one of the severest in the history of the county. Wintery winds howled through the night, driving snowdrifts into the homes. The settlers were forced to abandon their homes and seek shelter in the nearest towns.

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freezing weather that slowed up the thawing of the snow banks. The loss to the Bohemians was mostly in the form of stock that were drowned and buildings and houses that were damaged by water.24 Janousek of Niobrara lost twenty-nine head of cattle and others suffered correspondingly. In addition to the widespread general losses to the settlers, there were some indirect results of these floods of 1883 which slowed up the economic development of the entire region. The Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad had built into Running Water, South Dakota, opposite Niobrara in 1879. They had planned to extend their road south into Nebraska and in the summer of 1880 they had secured the necessary right-of-way, and had even constructed a grade of twelve or thirteen miles between Niobrara and Verdigris. This grade followed the Verdigris Creek and was badly washed out by the floods. As a result, the road was never opened as far as Plainview in Pierce County and seemed about to come into Knox County also held up further construction and thus the region of Czeck settlements was denied the valuable privilege of railroad transportation for several years. Other activities which touched the lives of these first arrivals were the cattle drives which passed through the section. These drives took place annually from 1870-1875. The cattle were purchased in Texas by the government to supply the military forts and Indian Agencies of the upper Missouri. The wild longhorns, driven by carefree cowboys, were looked upon by the Bohemians with something akin to fear and awe. Attracted by the colorful garb of the cowboys (the Bohemians by nature like bright colors in clothes) they were fearful of their guns and knives and of their rough manners.25 These cattle herds often ran into the thousands and required the attention of a considerable crew of cowboys. They made a practice of swimming the cattle across the Missouri River at Niobrara in herds of three or four hundred. It was an interesting and dangerous task and they punctuated it with carousals at Janousek's saloon, and in connection with their celebration, they usually shot up the place and terrified the people of the village. They would bring their fun to a close by appropriating what liquor they wanted and then adjourn their celebration to their camp, two miles from town. Since there was no compensation for Janousek, the crafty saloon keeper, in time hit upon the plan of disappearing 'when the cowboys came to town and leaving his wife in charge of the place. This tended to have a sobering effect and held down the general destruction that tended to go with their visits.26

However, the cattle drives were not entirely unmixcd evils so far as they concerned the Czechs. Sometimes in bad weather the cattle stampeded and wandered into the hills that bordered the streams. Cows that were about to have calves also tended to stray away from the main herds. The cowboys were seldom interested enough to look after these strays and they became the property of any settler who happened to find them. Calves, accumulated in this fashion, formed the nucleus of another class and they never seemed to acquire the ideal and they discounted any thought of loneliness as the "third bottom." To Brabenec, Hrbek, and Sedivy, 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 was of their national group who had frequent and direct contacts with the Indians.27 This resulted from the fact that their settlements bordered the Indian country. From the hamlet of the west bank of the Niobrara River, they looked across at the Ponca Reservation which occupied an extensive area on the west bank of the river and east bank of the Missouri. It was scattered along the Missouri River, the government had located a considerable number of the Santee Sioux, following the Minnesota massacres of 1862.28 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 Americans 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 fear, the Indians of the area 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.29

The contacts of the Bohemians with the Indians are featured in two things, one a tragedy that occurred in the spring of 1870. 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.30

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 Bohemians were always wary and suspicious. 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 heard of the tragic event and were in the habit of travelling out into the country. They knew the location of the Indian village, though without settlers, was something akin to fear and awe. Attracted by the wild longhorns, driven by carefree cowboys, they were fearful of their guns and knives and of their rough manners. In addition to the widespread general losses to the settlers, there were some indirect results of these floods of 1883 which slowed up the economic development of the entire region. The Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad had built into Running Water, South Dakota, opposite Niobrara in 1879. They had planned to extend their road south into Nebraska and in the summer of 1880 they had secured the necessary right-of-way, and had even constructed a grade of twelve or thirteen miles between Niobrara and Verdigris. This grade followed the Verdigris Creek and was badly washed out by the floods. As a result, the road was never opened as far as Plainview in Pierce County and seemed about to come into Knox County also held up further construction and thus the region of Czeck settlements was denied the valuable privilege of railroad transportation for several years. Other activities which touched the lives of these first arrivals were the cattle drives which passed through the section. These drives took place annually from 1870-1875. The cattle were purchased in Texas by the government to supply the military forts and Indian Agencies of the upper Missouri. The wild longhorns, driven by carefree cowboys, were looked upon by the Bohemians with something akin to fear and awe. Attracted by the colorful garb of the cowboys (the Bohemians by nature like bright colors in clothes) they were fearful of their guns and knives and of their rough manners. These cattle herds often ran into the thousands and required the attention of a considerable crew of cowboys. They made a practice of swimming the cattle across the Missouri River at Niobrara in herds of three or four hundred. It was an interesting and dangerous task and they punctuated it with carousals at Janousek's saloon, and in connection with their celebration, they usually shot up the place and terrified the people of the village. They would bring their fun to a close by appropriating what liquor they wanted and then adjourn their celebration to their camp, two miles from town. Since there was no compensation for Janousek, the crafty saloon keeper, in time hit upon the plan of disappearing 'when the cowboys came to town and leaving his wife in charge of the place. This tended to have a sobering effect and held down the general destruction that tended to go with their visits.

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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 Mrs. Brabenec, fallen in the floor, her skirts soaked with blood. Horrified, they carried her outside and discovered that she had been shot in the thigh.

Calls for the children brought no response but upon making a search they came upon the dead body of the boy in the tall grass about a hundred feet from the dugout. He had been shot in the back while running away. Another thorough search brought no trace of the girl and the men concluded that she had been abducted by the Indians. Frightened and stricken with grief, they buried the boy and then decided to leave everything and return to Niobrara. They started for Niobrara. About three miles from there they were stopped by a band of Indians. The Indians were friendly and when they learned what had happened, they suggested that the settlers to meet at the home of Carl Schindler, apparently considered insulting. Then one of the Indians produced a smoking pipe and said some-{word}-he had had the fun of stopping at a settler's cabin and asking for food and other things. Often they would appropriate anything around the place that might strike their fancy and if the opportunity was theirs, they were not adverse to driving off stock. Their most common depredation was to kill grazing stock and divide the hides among themselves. The most damaging of these losses occurred when the Poncas and Sioux got into warfare among themselves, and in the course of their travels back and forth RAIDED the homesteads along the Niobrara River. This was not uncommon for them to kill the only oxen and cow that the settler had. Losses of this type were generally reported to Fort Randall, and occasional-ly the government after a year or two compensated the settler for his loss.

Naturally this Indian thievery was most common in the first years. In the spring of 1871 it became so bad that a general meeting was called at the home of Pioneers. At this meeting, almost all of the settlers attended and a decision was made to build a wire fence around each homestead and to build a fort in the third line, and to request the commander at Fort Randall to place soldiers there for the protection of the settlers. As a result, fifteen soldiers were stationed there in the fall of 1871. Naturally there had been some sobering effect upon the Indians but it did not stop their practice of stealing and killing cattle.

In 1874, Edwin A. Fry established the Niobrara Pioneer, a weekly newspaper at Niobrara and its earliest issue carried a long article dealing with the relations of the settlers with the Indians. In connection with one meeting of the settlers held in Niobrara in October, 1874, he writes an article and from it quotes a speech of one of the leaders of the meeting: "Let us demand that our government keep their vague-band cut-throats and murderers at least in their reservations. Let us demand justice, let us demand punishment that he send up the river immediately and call back those who have gone up there to hunt. They destroy large quantities of the finest young trees that can be found at every camping place and frighten the settlers where they pass because very few can tell to what tribe they belong. If we cannot accomplish this, let us arm ourselves and shoot them down wherever we can find them. [applause]"13

The settlers not only appealed to Fort Randall for aid against the Indians and made use of their local organizations but also took their problem to the governor of the state. We read in the following the October 20th issue of the Pioneer that a section of the Sioux had committed an outrages. Most of the Bohemians attended and a general meeting was called at the home of Carl Schindler, apparently considered insulting. Then one of the Indians produced a smoking pipe and said some-{word}-he had had the fun of stopping at a settler's cabin and asking for food and other things. Often they would appropriate anything around the place that might strike their fancy and if the opportunity was theirs, they were not adverse to driving off stock. Their most common depredation was to kill grazing stock and divide the hides among themselves. The most damaging of these losses occurred when the Poncas and Sioux got into warfare among themselves, and in the course of their travels back and forth RAIDED the homesteads along the Niobrara River. This was not uncommon for them to kill the only oxen and cow that the settler had. Losses of this type were generally reported to Fort Randall, and occasional-ly the government after a year or two compensated the settler for his loss.

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 promise of a rich and prosperous future for themselves and their children. These first comers were not merely poor, but poverty stricken. Their total wealth consisted of a few articles of clothing and a few articles of furniture that could not be conquered even by the continuous hardships and failures that for years afflicted them. They witnessed discouraged American settlers come and go while they endured their trials, built up their homes and farms, and increased their acreage, and eventually tasted of the joys and comforts of financial independence.

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 promise of a rich and prosperous future for themselves and their children. These first comers were not merely poor, but poverty stricken. Their total wealth consisted of a few articles of clothing and a few articles of furniture that could not be conquered even by the continuous hardships and failures that for years afflicted them. They witnessed discouraged American settlers come and go while they endured their trials, built up their homes and farms, and increased their acreage, and eventually tasted of the joys and comforts of financial independence. However, the Indian situation. As a result naw treaties were made and one yoke of oxen of $150. On September 8, 1873, the same band made another visit and drove off five head of cattle belonging to Joseph Gregory, valued at $100, one cow of Joseph Kurka, one cow of Wenzel Diez, and one heifer of John Sedivy. On May 21, 1874, two hundred Indians were seen to destroy large quantities of the finest young trees that can be found at every camping place and frighten the settlers where they pass because very few can tell to what tribe they belong. If we cannot accomplish this, let us arm ourselves and shoot them down wherever we can find them. [applause]"13

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

In connection with this new arrangement the settlement of the Sioux were given a notice that the Bier Sioux were to be located on the former Ponca lands. This brought forth the following denunciation from the pen of Editor Fry of the Pioneer: "The Bohemian settlers on the Verdigris and Niobrara are becoming uneasy about the location of the Spotted Tail Sioux across the Niobrara River from them. This is the result of the efforts of some of the citizens of this place to represent to the agent of the United States that the Poncas have been given the land which the Bier Sioux must accept. The prospects of having large bands of hostile Indians and stocklooters and of settlement and progress are such that farmers would be in if these famous cut throats, many of whom assisted in the butchery of Custer and his men but a year ago, should be located on the north side of the Niobrara. A number of Bohemians have lost their stock by raids of these very Indians and it seems utterly impossible for them to get any compensation for their loss. Certainly no one ought to blame them for wanting to be as far as possible from such savages."14

With the removal of the Poncas and the confining of the Sioux to a reservation further west, the steady influx of more settlers, the Indian problems died a natural death. However, the thievish continued and the Bohemians suffered losses for many years that were attributed to the redskins.
TABLE SHOWING LIVESTOCK OWNED BY BOHEMIAN SETTLERS IN KNOX COUNTY
AUGUST, 1870

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Settler</th>
<th>Oxen</th>
<th>Cows</th>
<th>Hogs</th>
<th>Sheep</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jos. Janousek</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anton Pischel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Brabenec</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathias Hriek</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Prasek</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Schindler</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franz Schindler</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jos. Gregor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jos. Husak</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Hajek</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Sedivy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jos. Krupicka</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Holecek</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Tichy</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jos. Barta</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Frank Vokner</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Tikalsky</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Tikalsky</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Muddy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaclav Jandus</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignatz Marsal</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jos. Dryuk</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Srejaje</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jos. Mudra</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Vlastnik</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred Doger</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise Schindler</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaclav Tomek</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaclav Randa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</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 most essential and were the first type of livestock acquired. Only one settler is listed as having swine.

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 trader, who turned it solid 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 averse to handling firearms, as they were not permitted to own them in their homeland, they gradually acquired, through experience, skill in their use and wild game came to constitute a considerable part of their diet.

Even after a few years had passed and some production was forth-coming, the Czechs faced discouragement in the form of low prices for farm products. This was no doubt partly due to the fact that the section was handicapped by the lack of an adequate transportation system. About 1875 wheat was quoted at $2.50 a bushel, hogs at 2 and 2/10e a pound, and milk at 75 cents a barrel, or 8 cents a pound, and potatoes at 15c a bushel. Unquestionably Joseph Sedivy was the wealthi-est of the Bohemian settlers in this area. In his Reminiscences writes that in July, 1876, his father sent him to the Ponca Indian Agency, where his sister was employed, to get her wages as they had no other source of cash income.

The later years of the seventies brought better crops and more settlers. This period is also one in which the Czechs began to extend their land holdings, taking advantage of the original Homestead Act and the more recent Timber Claim Act. This was no doubt partly due to the fact that throws light upon the economic condition of the Czech settlers. It lists a total of 677 farmers in Knox County and of this number 129 are Bohemians. All but nine of these are enumerated as owners of the farms upon which they lived. In contrast with 1870, practically all owned either oxen or sheep and most of them are credited with the ownership of farm machinery having a value of $100 or more. Wheat and corn stand out as the staple crops produced, with quite a few farmers cropping a small acreage of oats and rye. In this connection it is interesting to note that very few of the present day farmers of the Bohemian district of the county go in for wheat production while the increase in the number of acres is on the increase.

The same census reveals that by 1880 hogs had already taken their place as one of the important products of the Bohemian farmers. Their numbers per farm varied from one to twelve with the average being about four. Every farm had its flock of poultry, indicating that eggs along with butter produced the farmer's steadier income. The census gives the egg pro-duction for 1879 for every farmer and in a number of instances it is listed as 300 dozen. The lowest figure given is forty dozen. From this it can be concluded that the sale of eggs, then as now, took care of a considerable part of the grocery pur-chases of the farmer.

The late seventies were also marked by a movement on the part of some of the Bohemians to sell out and return to more thickly settled regions. Some also bought for a low price choice farms of the type that throws light upon the economic condition of the Czech settlers. It lists a total of 677 farmers in Knox County and of this number 129 are Bohemians. All but nine of these are enumerated as owners of the farms upon which they lived. In contrast with 1870, practically all owned either oxen or sheep and most of them are credited with the ownership of farm machinery having a value of $100 or more. Wheat and corn stand out as the staple crops produced, with quite a few farmers cropping a small acreage of oats and rye. In this connection it is interesting to note that very few of the present day farmers of the Bohemian district of the county go in for wheat production while the increase in the number of acres is on the increase.

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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 tracts, 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 sprung up in their midst an urban development. At first it seemed as though several small villages might be established in the area, but as time went on the town life of the Czechs came to center chiefly around the village of Verdigre with some of their interests still tied to Niobrara. The first store to be established in the Bohemian settlement was probably that of Anton Pischel's at Pischelville. A little later as the settlement grew, another store was started by Tom Belsky at a rural point called Armstrong. These trading points flourished particularly before the railroad entered the county and in both instances the owners combined farming operations with merchandising. Each of these trading points was benefitted by the fact that it was early designated as a post office, Belsky eventually sold his store to a man named Jelen. Shortly after this, the location of the store was moved a short distance, and the name of the post office was changed from Armstrong to Jelen. In time this post office was discontinued and the territory was served by a rural route. Much later a rural route also took the place of the Pischelville post office and the store continued as the end of the decade approached.

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

For several years no particular development took place and it was 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 continued at this time the beginning of the commercial business and professional occupations, including a newspaper and flouring mill. Both Czechs and non-Czechs were found in these first stores among the business men with the former predominating.18

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."19

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, 1911.20 Next came the construction of a city water system, contracts for which were let in September, 1911.21 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.22

The spring of 1913 saw the town's first major disaster, a flood on May 15, that followed a cloudburst on the upper reaches 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.23 As though this was not enough a third flood swept through the village on May 26 of the next year. The people were now getting flooding 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.24 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 town merchants.25

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 economic outlook continued bright until the national crash of 1929 and the failure of two local banks in a prolonged slump. Although it might be community back on the sound economic basis that governmental aid sources circulates in the merchants are still optimistic. Enough money from community to provide some business and the merchants feel that a good crop or two will put the Bohemian or of Bohemian extraction. Of the twenty-nine are owned and operated by Bohemian control of the community.

During the last few years the village has suffered the fate of most small towns. The people who live in the trade territory no longer have money to spend freely and business moves along in a prolonged slump. Although it might be described as backing at an economic standpoint its merchants are still optimistic. Enough money from governmental aid sources circulates in the merchants, and in the rural area it is practically the only type of money available to the people. Such Protestantism as existed was practicedchiefly in the cities and had little effect upon the peasant groups.

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

Leaving the city and coming out to the frontier homesteads of Knox County, they discovered that, even if they so desired, they could not conveniently practice their religion since their new homes were in a remote country and there were neither churches nor priests. It was simply physically impossible for them to attend church services and as time went on they lost the habit of regular attendance at church. Incidentally, they were getting along well without formal religion and so why revit it.

In this respect the Bohemians differ from the other national groups who went to America. While the Irish, German, and Scandinavian immigrants maintained a high degree of loyalty to the religious 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 attitude on religion is not an easy one. Undoubtedly many factors contributed to his lack of interest and indifference. His home background was the home 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 Tolerating Patent was issued by Emperor Joseph II, which permitted the Protessants to worship openly, and even this did not allow freedom of worship in the sense that we enjoy it.

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

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Assisting in this natural drift away from religion were the Rational and Legal 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 countrymen, and encouraged the Bohemians to break away from the old order and adopt the liberal views which they expressed. All of this had considerable effect and, along with the isolated life of the settlers, was a factor in changing the religious views of many of the Bohemians.

But there was another side to the matter. Almost as soon as the Bohemians began to settle the region the Catholic authorities instituted plans to administer to their spiritual needs through the medium of an occasional missionary priest. 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, who had a great degree antagonistic to the Catholics; and finally those who were indifferent to the whole matter and simply lived along without giving much thought to the religious phase. Incidentally this last group led numerically.

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

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

The records of St. Wenceslaus Church at Verdigris contain entries for a period as early as the fall of 1873. These precede by ten years the actual building of a church and have to do with the activities of a visiting missionary. The initial record sets forth that on September 2, 1873, John Tikalsky, the son of John Tikalsky and Marie Masat, was baptized by Rev. J. Dexacher of St. John, Cedar County.

The first record also contains mention of a priest by the name of Joseph Sulik who attended the church occasionally 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.

This baptismal record shows no entries during the next three years, indicating that the settlement was probably not visited by a missionary priest during that interval. Then on October 5 and 6, 1876, Father Sulik was on hand and performed fourteen baptisms. This visit was accompanied by a revived interest on the part of many Czechs, influenced not so much by the fact of the bishop's visiting missionary was one of their own national. From then on visits of missionaries became more frequent and regular. The record reveals that on June 9, 1877, Father Dexacher again visited the settlement and spent three days ministering to the religious needs of the Czechs and 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 the priest was coming. 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 taken up and funds were raised to the amount of $200 were raised, 7 disagreements arose as to the proper location of the proposed church, and the whole matter was temporarily dropped. In the years immediately following 1880, Father Krizek of Tabor, South Dakota, visited the settlement and kept alive religious interest.

In January, 1884, another meeting was held at which definite plans were made for the building of a new church. Joseph Midy made 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 their thrift, 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 either indifferent to any type of religious activity or in some cases actually hostile to it.

1 Rocky, HISTORY OF THE CZECHS IN NEBRASKA, 3th.
2 Ibid., 104
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 considerable interest in it and in 1891 enlarged Verdigre. For the first time, services were held with something like regularity, Father Vranek visiting the parish every second Sunday. He showed considerable interest in it and in 1891 enlarged the original structure.

No data is available on the actual number that composed the church membership at this time, but the financial record indicates that the number of regular contributors was small. For example it gives the total amount of the collection for Christmas Day, 1891, as only $2.78, and it lists the pastor's salary for the two months of November and December, 1891, as amounting to $15.12. In 1893, Father Vranek was transferred to an Omaha parish and Rev. Jos. Macourek took over the Creighton and Verdigre charges, serving both until 1901, when he was appointed first resident pastor at Verdigre. 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 $35,000 edifice that was put up in 1915. With the Transfer of Rev. Petlach, Father Vaclav Havlicek took over the parish and served it until January 1, 1929, when it was succeeded by Rev. Jos. Bata.

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

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

Under his leadership it has shown a steady growth. Needed improvements have been made and regular attendance at services has been stimulated. In general, the parish now is in a flourishing condition. It has no bonded or floating indebtedness and its future looks bright. It has a bonafide membership of slightly over one hundred families. It still includes only about twelve percent of the Bohemian population, and under the leadership of this group, sums up the situation in these words: "I do not think that you will find a settlement of 200 people in the United States as free from protestantism as Verdigre. The people here have professed to include this settlement in a Catholic mission, but the leaders discouraged it and we have never been visited." 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 so to live as to leave an honorable memory. In their case, they could have introduced religion into their lives. They were free to adopt some form of protestantism if they preferred it to Catholicism, but they didn't. Clearly, religion carried no appeal to them. They simply didn't believe and they admitted their unbelief. It is not to be concluded that Protestant groups have made no attempt to spread their doctrines among the Bohemians. The evidence indicates that they have put forth considerable effort, but without gratifying results. There is only one instance of where one of Bohemian nationality served as a permanent Catholic priest, and, until recently, the prayers and sermons were said in a foreign language.

In summarizing the religious situation among the Bohemians, it can be said that while the Catholics are well represented, they are in the minority. Also it is clear that the efforts to extend Protestantism among the Knox County Czechs have not been successful and the majority of the Bohemians have gradually abandoned. No longer do the Catholics of Verdigre hear the Angelus bell at morning, noon, and evening. The practice of using a band in connection with funerals has also passed out of vogue. On the other hand, the bell of the church is still tolled to inform the people of the village of the death of one of the members of the church. Certain feast days are still observed with elaborate celebrations, and the Bohemian language still functions in the religious services, sharing honors along with the English.

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

Chapter Seven

FRATERNAL ACTIVITIES AND AMUSEMENTS

FRATERNAL ACTIVITIES

Anyone who has lived among the Czechs cannot help but be impressed by the important role that fraternal organizations play in their culture. There is strong 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 central or urban settlements, 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 a general social unit. In addition to these peculiarly Czech organizations, there are also the national organizations, 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 available farm 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 this purpose among the local Bohemian community until recently, the prayers and sermons were said in a foreign language.

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occurred in June, 1879, when a meeting was held in Hailstone, Nebraska. It had a charter membership of fourteen, consisting of the following Czech pioneers: Vaclav Randa, Jan Lenger, Frank Stoural, Charles Pavlik, Jan Tikalsky, John Vakoc, Albert Stoural, and Frank Klima of Niobrara; Joseph Vac, and Vaclav Dobrichovsky. The lodge took the name of Bila Hora (White Mountain). It functioned as a unit of the C. S. P. S. until 1897 when it voted to become a charter lodge of a new national Czech organization, the Z.C.B.J. (Western Bohemian Fraternal Association). It still functions as a member of that organization, being designated as Bila Hora Lodge No. 5.

This lodge eventually centered in Verdigre, where it has had a most prosperous career and where it serves a distant community need. In its first years it met in a hall a little north of the village. Somewhat later, it put up a frame hall in the village. In 1913 the original hall was enlarged by a spacious addition, making the building one of the finest lodge halls to be found in any of the smaller towns of the state.

The lodge functions both as an insurance and as a social unit. It admits to membership both men and women who are of Czech descent and also members of other nationalities, who can speak the Czech language. Membership in a church does not effect one's eligibility to join the order, although Catholics as a rule do not affiliate with it. Originally the lodge membership was not open to women, but this restriction was removed in 1898 and now it constitutes 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 traditions and culture of the Bohemian language among the younger generation. At times they have sponsored and even operated Bohemian summer schools for the children.

In the lodge general social activities also play an important role. They stage the annual socials for their own members. They are inclined to observe their anniversary date with some sort of a gathering and somewhere in the lives of the members that is more extensive and more important than that which is found in the ordinary fraternal order. Since the lodge was founded and at present has 215 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 movement was ironed out and the organization met at the local school district meeting, held the distinction of being the smallest one 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 themselves to the new group as Slaskovsky Lodge No. 8. The lodge performs functions similar to the Z.C.B.J. organization and has 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.

As the World War it became evident to the leaders of the Verdigre lodge and to the national leaders of the organization that many of the younger American-born Czechs hesitated to join the organization because of the difficulty that they encountered in speaking the Bohemian language. This led to the formation of English speaking the Bohemian language. This led to the formation of English speaking branches of the parent lodges. One of these, Lodge America, No. 276, was instituted at Verdigre on May 11, 1924, with a charter membership of twenty-one. It provides all of the benefits of the older lodge and permits the conducting of the meetings in English. Operating as a separate unit, it attempts to foster in the younger Czechs an appreciation of their national heritage and strives to keep alive their ability to speak the language. Since its formation, the Verdi- gre lodge has had a most prosperous career and owns a fine brick hall. 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 American branch of the order and was furnished by Mr. Frank Kves, its present Recording Secretary. It becomes a reality as the movement was ironed out and the organization met at the local school district meeting, held the distinction of being the smallest one in the state (16 members) and the only one to own a hall.

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interested in the movement. It was officially and ship 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, calisthenics, and drills of various sorts. Its members also take part in district tournaments. The organization is centered around social gatherings that featured house dances with the music by a local fiddler or accordion player. The Bohemians are also lovers of cards and neighbors frequently visited back and forth and indulged in this past time. 17

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

One of the most memorable of these early celebrations occurred in connection with a double wedding held at Piscchelville 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 event. The wedding of Frank Frikh and Mary Lukac and Ignatz Marshall and Mary Dryak. The ceremony, an impressive one, was performed by Anton Pischel, the Justice of Peace, and was concluded by the reading of a lengthy yarn of the good times enjoyed by the two grooms adding his white-haired father of the two grooms. The marriage was performed in the Z.C.B.J. Lodge Hall, and the newcomers were encouraged in their activities by this older settler.

In the pre-prohibition days, Verdigre with a population of a little over 500 supported four homes or play a game of cards in a beer tavern. As a group, they are not particularly fond of hard liquors. In the pre-prohibition days, Verdigre with a population of a little over 500 supported four homes or play a game of cards in a beer tavern. As a group, they are not particularly fond of hard liquors. From what has been said of the amusements of the Czechs, it is clear that aside from their unusual fondness for dancing, they do not differ a great deal from other nationalities. Somewhat

Chapter Eight

EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Bohemian people, as a whole, are famous for the color and pleasure that go with their amusements. They seem to get a type of joy out of these affairs which exceeds that experienced by other nationalities. These social gatherings centered around home visits and neighborhood dances. On certain occasions, such as a marriage in the settlement, they became prolonged celebrations, which might last several days. 15 Even at the present time a Bohemian wedding as an affair that calls for a free dance and this invariably attracts a hilarious crowd from far and wide.

One of the most memorable of these early celebrations occurred in connection with a double wedding held at Piscchelville 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 event. The wedding of Frank Frikh and Mary Lukac and Ignatz Marshall and Mary Dryak. The ceremony, an impressive one, was performed by Anton Pischel, the Justice of Peace, and was concluded by the reading of a lengthy yarn of the good times enjoyed by the two grooms adding his white-haired father of the two grooms. The marriage was performed in the Z.C.B.J. Lodge Hall, and the newcomers were encouraged in their activities by this older settler.

In the pre-prohibition days, Verdigre with a population of a little over 500 supported four homes or play a game of cards in a beer tavern. As a group, they are not particularly fond of hard liquors. In the pre-prohibition days, Verdigre with a population of a little over 500 supported four homes or play a game of cards in a beer tavern. As a group, they are not particularly fond of hard liquors.
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 Dukewell 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 $50.00 per month without board. Inquire of Thomas Sedivy."

There was also a school operating at Pischelville in 1873. It was held in a log school house built the previous winter. 2 Instruction was in English and the school term consisted of three months in the late fall and early winter. 3 The first teacher was William Crossley, an ex-soldier. 4 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's present site and was known as the school was met by the annual license fees paid 5 Instruction was in English and District No. 9. According to its census record for the year ending the first Monday in April, 1874, it contained twenty-one children of school age from eight different families.

This question of putting the twelfth grade in the high school curriculum remained undecided until the summer of 1916 when the voters at the annual meeting balloted for it by a vote of 58 to 16. 8 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 old buildings, used in the construction of the old building, were beginning to disintegrate under the wear and tear of time. After several years of agitation, the movement finally culminated in 1921.

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

The first entries in this record were made in April, 1874. Hence this sets forth that it is the census record for the year ending April 1, 1874, one concludes that school was probably held in District 9 in the fall and winter of 1873-1874.

3. Personal interview with Raymond Schroeter, June 25, 1938. Mr. Schroeter also attended the first school in District No. 7.

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. 9 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 $6984.95 and expenditures as $5620.56 leaving a balance in the treasury of $1360.09. Only $500 was voted for 1913-1914. 14 This small amount is explained by the fact that a considerable percent of the running expenses of the school was met by the annual license fees paid by the four local saloons.

This question of putting the twelfth grade in the high school curriculum remained undecided until the summer of 1916 when the voters at the annual meeting balloted for it by a vote of 58 to 16.

During this time or a little later, a school district directly west of Verdigre consolidated with a part of District No. 9 to form the beginning of the present town school district. In 1889 and the early nineties, the educational needs of the village were served by two separate one-room school houses, located not far apart but in different districts. One of these was on the north side of the village and the other was located across the railroad track in what might be designated as the east part of town. 10

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

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

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8. Census Record for School District No. 6, Knox County, Nebraska for the years ending the first Monday in April, 1884, 1894, 1904 for school year ending the first Monday in April, 1894
10. Personal interview with L. J. Bartak, June 25, 1938. Mr. Bartak attended the Verdigre Public School in the nineties.
11. VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 11, 4, December 3, 1909
12. VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 13, 4, September 11, 1912
13. VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 17, 20, June 16, 1914
14. VERDIGRE CITIZEN, 17, 20, June 16, 1914

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

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. The following two lines, one the encouragement of participation in music, and the other the fostering of Bohemian Dramatic Clubs and the production of plays in the Czech language.

For some reason interest in music seems to be inherent in most Bohemians and almost every Czech home is the possessor of a violin, an accordion, or some band instrument. Definite musical organizations existed among the Knox County Bohemians from the very beginning. The pioneers of these music activities were the Marshall family of Pischelville. Several of this family were professional musicians and their string band was a favorite for years not only in the Pischelville vicinity, but also throughout the entire Bohemian district. Before long this group brought into the settlement many Bohemian musical organizations in the Pischelville territory, especially the Krycikk Brass Band and the Minirak Orchestra. Occasionally members of these groups united to form a local celebration. They also provided music for the local community dances.

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. This organization was one of the more important original organizations. It was formed in 1878 by John Pavlik. It has had a long and successful career, being famous not only locally but throughout the northeastern section of the state. It is still in existence with its membership composed largely of the children and other relatives of the early Pischelville pioneers.

Before the Pavlik organization 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 in 1919. For many years its reputation for excellence was widely recognized.

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 local national group could supply the money and personnel was given the privilege of sharing in the performance more effective.

The cultural interests of the Bohemians along music lines are not so hard to understand as they would appear to the people of other nationalities. Most of the Bohemian Dramatic Clubs and the staging of Bohemian plays is a matter that is not so easily explained. These clubs existed from the seventies, the first one being formed in 1878 with Joseph P. Sedivy its leading promoter. This particular club was known as the "Bohemian Lion" and existed for three years when the marriage of several of its members caused it to disband.

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

These Bohemian plays were generally given during the spring and summer months. Such a school height during the years between 1919 and 1918. Apparently interest in this movement was at its height during the years between 1919 and 1918.

Chapter Nine

POLITICS AND WAR

Strange as it may appear, the political history of Knox County is well sprinkled with Bohemian names. From the days when the population of the county was largely composed of Czech 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 in the history of Knox County politics since 1870. Randa was in truth a remarkable character. Born in Bohemia, he was highly educated, and as a penman had few equals. 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 as a Bohemian journalist.

In the spring of 1870, he led a considerable group of Czech settlers to the Niobrara country, established his residence in a rough cabin, and became at once a factor in the political situation. His training soon brought him an appointment as County Treasurer and as Justice of Peace. In the following election, held in the fall of 1871, he became County Clerk. This position he held continuously...
until 1884, with the exception of one term (1876-1878) when a combination of his enemies succeeded in defeating him, he was not adverse to making deals with men of the opposite party if by doing so he might enhance his own interests. His control over the Bohemian voters placed in his hands the political "Balance of Power" in the county and he used it most effectively. In the initial days of the county's existence, it had no Court House and Randa had his office as a place to deal with business, his court and other matters. His control over the Bohemian voters was so effective that the Bohemians supported him as a candidate for County Clerk, frequently at Pischelville, and provide treats for those attending. These meetings were well attended but probably were not particularly effective as a means of securing the Bohemian vote.

The Country 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, delving into real estate, sold insurance, and in later years was associated with his brother in the implement business. His hold upon the Bohemian voters continued for a long time and invested him with prestige in political circles that made him an important Bohemian political leader. 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 candidates fortunate enough to secure their support. Since the Czechs spoke the Bohemian language almost exclusively, candidates hampered in their efforts to win the votes and had to depend upon brochures speaking in Czech like Randa, Janousek, and Pischel to plead their case among them.

The evidence indicates that all manner of schemes were used to gain the political support of the Bohemian settlers. The first meeting of the Bohemian settlers, held in the October 7, 1876, issue of the Niobrara Pioneer. It reads:

"One of the stories on the candidate for County Treasurer on the Democratic ticket, J. B. Miller, is that he offered Frank Janousek, a saloon keeper in Niobrara, $25 if he would use his influence among the Bohemians to make them vote Democrat. In the October 7, 1876, issue of the Niobrara Pioneer. It reads:

Again in the March 29, 1877, issue of the Pioneer we meet up with some what different tactics. We have: "J. B. Ulrich of Frankfort is getting out a German and Bohemian circular against the railroad bonds. We are interested. His control over the Bohemian voters placed in his hands the political "Balance of Power" in the county and he used it most effectively." In the initial days of the county's existence, it had no Court House and Randa had his office as a place to deal with business, his court and other matters. His control over the Bohemian voters was so effective that the Bohemians supported him as a candidate for County Clerk, frequently at Pischelville, and provide treats for those attending. These meetings were well attended but probably were not particularly effective as a means of securing the Bohemian vote.

The County was the scene of numerous struggles for the removal of the county seat from Niobrara and also for the division of the county into two county governmental units. The Bohemians supported the cause of Niobrara, as a rule, although in the contest of 1877 when Vordigre was striving to win the prize, many votes were cast in favor of that village. The Czechs consistently opposed county division because they felt that there was not enough wealth in the half county, which comprised their area, to adequately support a separate county government.

The party affiliations of the Bohemians of this section are puzzling. Originally, most of them were Republicans, but along in the nineties they associated with their 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 Bohemian political leader. The last years of his life were marked by domestic and other troubles. He died in 1900.

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The Bohemians as farmers have always showed progressive tendencies. They especially go in for modern farm machinery and most of their farms are well equipped in this respect. The present generation is also in sympathy with movements that deal with scientific farming and the introduction of new crops. During the recent dry years when the ordinary grain crops failed to produce, many Czechs planted drought-resistant sorghums and hybrid corn. The present year, 1938, has shown a marked increase in the acreage of these crops.

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

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

When the New Deal brought its relief activities into the county, there was no grand rush on the part of the Bohemians to share in the benefits. In fact, few Bohemian names were found on the relief rolls during the first years of the relief activities. The crop failures of 1934, 1936, and 1937 resulted in quite a number of Czech farmers applying for and receiving farm grants. Also, quite a few Bohemians in the village of Verdigre are at present employed on W. P. A. projects. Among the older group who went through the hard times and received farm grants, quite a few Bohemian names were represented in the original Corn-Hog Program than from the Bohemian area of the county.

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 glory in it. The attitude of this particular community reflects something of the spirit that carried the pioneer Bohemians through the trials and hardships of homestead life. It is clearly set forth in the following letter, written by one old settler of the community to the editor of the Verdigre Eagle.

It reads:

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

In so far as this man was sick and taken by his brothers and Dr. Green to Niobrara, that is correct, but the scurrilous assertion that the man was 'tattered and taken to Niobrara by county officials to false and a reflection upon the inhabitants of this community, as so far during its 67 years, has never been occasion for county aid in any matter. For these libelous statements, reflecting upon the human side of the people of this community, you owe them a public apology."

For the Pischelville Community
E. L. Pischel

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

The Z.C.B.J. Lodge of Pischelville, No. 8, Sladkovsky, was first organized in 1879. The Pischelville Hall was built in 1882. Some of the Charter Members were: Anton Pischel, Ignace Marshall, Jan Rusicka and Frank Tuch. 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. Olbrzy, the Catholic priest of Verdigre, as this subject reveals that the older Bohemian parents objected strenuously to the marriage of their children with non-Czechs. However, the question of the number of marriages is now disappearing as an increasing number of non-Czechs. 2 VERDIGRE EAGLE, 38. 23, February 18, 1937. 3 VERDIGRE EAGLE, 38, 20, February 16, 1937.

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

Rev. Joseph Moravcek, Ravenna, Nebraska, concerning the early history of St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church, Verdigris, Nebraska

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

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Raymond Schreier, Verdigris, Nebraska, June, 1938

Vace Tikalsky, Verdigris, Nebraska, May, 1938

Appendix

BOHEMIAN LAND OWNERS IN KNOX COUNTY IN 1892 WESTERN TOWNSHIP

Name

Jos. Dryak

Mat. Hrbeck

Frank Tsch

Vace Herlik

Karel Kovanda

Fr. Simanek

Jan. Kounovsky

Jose. Bretek

Ignatz Marshall

Emil Marshall

Alos Marshall

Jan. Sedivy

Emil Pischel

Jos. Wirth

Jan. Barta

Fr. Vesely

Vace Minarek

Vace. F. Minarek

Cesek Ellis

Fr. Tusa

John Schreier

Emil Schreier

Pr. Kuksal

John Schreier

Emil Schreier

Fr. Kuksal

Voigt Slechta

Martin Mudra

Vace Dobrichovsky

Mat Kryukick

Jan Midy

Frank Vonasek

Jose. Blazek

Blaž Hainerich

Vaclav Vesely

SPARITA TOWNSHIP

Name

Anton Plasek

Fr. Drohhy

Raymond Schreier

Jos. Jiskra

Fr. Czech

Voigt Pavelka

F. Pavelka

Jan. Valoc

Fr. Holan

No. of Acres

147

363

339

328

120

240

642

100

160

120

120

503

580

560

900

280

200

100

100

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<td>M. Kozina</td>
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**BOHEMIA TOWNSHIP**

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<td>Alois Jurnacek</td>
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<td>Vincent Moticka</td>
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<td>Jos. Janak</td>
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<td>Anton Janak</td>
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<td>Jos. Nikl</td>
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<td>Fr. Mracan</td>
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<td>Mat Kripner</td>
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<td>Vae Prokop</td>
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<td>Bar. Novotny</td>
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**JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP**

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<td>Vae Mrzena</td>
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<td>Jos. Divis</td>
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taken from a list published in a Bohemian farm paper, Hospodar, Omaha, Nebraska, for March and April 1892

MAY, 1980

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

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