Ethnic Migration and Cultural Maintenance in Eastern European Ethnic Enclaves in Nebraska: The Poles in Omaha, Germans from Russia in Lincoln, and Czechs in Wilber from 1860-1920

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Ethnic Migration and Cultural Maintenance in Eastern European Ethnic Enclaves in Nebraska: The Poles in Omaha, Germans from Russia in Lincoln, and Czechs in Wilber from 1860-1920

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Abstract

This thesis examines whether three Eastern European ethnic enclaves within Nebraska assisted in cultural maintenance and stalled assimilation, looking specifically at enclaves of the Germans from Russia in Lincoln, the Poles in Omaha, and the Czechs in Wilber. These groups were selected due to differences in their location, with a larger city (Omaha), the capital city (Lincoln), and a small rural town (Wilber). In order to narrow down the time frame, this thesis focuses on the years from 1860-1920 in these enclaves. First, I determined that these clusters of immigrants were indeed ethnic enclaves, by using a primary source base of newspapers, city directories, maps, and oral histories. In order to understand spatial and locational aspects of the enclaves, important areas and places were situated on a map on ArcGIS, with pictures of the map featured in the thesis to allow for better understanding of the area discussed. I next determined whether these ethnic enclaves did assist in the maintenance of the immigrants’ culture and traditions, looking at aspects within the enclaves like religion, language, education, and organizations, to see if active participation in these facets of their lives maintained their culture and traditions in the face of the surrounding mainstream culture. I concluded that these aspects of ethnic enclaves do keep the immigrants from immediately assimilating fully into the main culture, showing that ethnic enclaves assist in cultural maintenance.

Starting with an introduction giving a history of Nebraska immigration and definitions of terms, the next three chapters each focus on a single group. These chapters dive into the history of the immigrant group, looking at why they left Europe, and how they end up in Nebraska. The chapters then detail life within the enclaves, and how their lifestyles did or did not assist in maintaining their culture. Through my research into these three groups, I found that while each ethnic enclave is unique, the enclaves have also similarities, with common themes running throughout.
**Key Words:** Immigration, Czechs, Poles, Germans from Russia, Ethnic Enclaves, Cultural Maintenance
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my own Czech ancestors, who got off the train in Elma, Iowa, instead of Alma, Nebraska.
I. Background and Terminology

Nebraska has a long history of European immigration and settlement beginning even before the 1862 Homestead Act. The Homestead Act of 1862 gave 160 acres of land to settlers who were willing to settle and cultivate the land for at least five years. On January 1, 1863, the first homesteader, Daniel Freedman, filed his claim just after midnight. His claim (near Beatrice, Nebraska) is now the place of the Homestead National Monument. Before this, Fort Lisa was founded in 1812 in what is now North Omaha by Manuel Lisa. Lisa was the first European farmer in Nebraska. Many “first wave immigrants”—Irish, English, Germans—came to Nebraska before and after the Homestead Act, but this thesis will be focusing on the “second wave” of immigration, which included groups such as the Poles, Czechs, Italians, and Germans from Russia. This thesis will be looking at Eastern European ethnic enclaves in the state of Nebraska, and the community maintenance that they performed throughout their years of existence. Specifically, it will look at the Germans from Russia in Lincoln, the Poles in Omaha, and the Czechs in Wilber. These enclaves assisted the immigrants in adjusting to American society, while also reinforcing an ethnic identity that held the immigrants back from immediately fully assimilating.

Maxine Seller defines ethnic communities as: “groups of people tied together by common national origin, common language, common religion, and perhaps common physical characteristics.” These elements are factors that can slow assimilation into the main culture that

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2 Anderson, “Homestead Act,” 120.
3 A.E. Sheldon, Semi-Centennial History of Nebraska (Lincoln, NE: Lemon Publishing Company, 1904), 43.
might surround the ethnic enclave. The Poles, Czechs, and Germans from Russia featured in this thesis are all examples of ethnic communities.

An ethnic enclave is a community within a larger community, usually a community of immigrants within the “mainstream” culture. Kurt Kinbacher describes three purposes for the existence of ethnic enclaves for the immigrant groups: first, to “provide a source of self-identification within the groups,” second, to “provide support networks and institutions that allowed individuals to associate with a single ethnic group from cradle to grave,” and third, to “mold American cultural patterns into new shapes and forms in order to include them into their own cultures.”5 These enclaves allowed for a slower and more negotiated and thoughtful assimilation into American society. These enclaves functioned as “safe havens,” “psychological buffers,” and “transition zones” for the immigrants who did not want to break completely with the Old World.6 More recent scholars have branched out from the idea of exclusively ethnic enclaves, saying that “lifestyle, religion, income, or occupation—or combinations among them—can also be the primary bases of enclaves.”7

Along with the concept of an ethnic enclave, there is also the idea of the “urban village.” Kinbacher defines this as “well-defined ethnic enclaves that offered their residents a variety of important services.”8 So not only are these immigrant groups clustered in a geographic area typically close to their work, but the area also provided enough services that the immigrants rarely had to leave the enclave. This level of service allowed for less contact with the mainstream community which spoke English, and may have been prejudiced or ignorant towards the immigrants.

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8 Kinbacher, Urban Villages, 13.
There were many reasons why immigrants decided to move into ethnic enclaves with familiar people: proximity to work sites, the areas that ethnic enclaves usually inhabited had cheaper rent or property value, comfort, support, in-place institutions, and mainstream culture segregation. People in ethnic enclave communities were usually aware of being a member of the community. Ethnic enclaves eventually began to deteriorate typically during the second generation of immigrants, when the language and other organizations began to decline as well for factors that will be discussed. The marks that these enclaves left can still be seen, whether it be in the name of the place, the physical attributes of the place, or the current celebrations commemorating that group.
II. Germans from Russia In Lincoln

Recognized as once having one of the most homogeneous neighborhoods in Nebraska, the Germans from Russia started to emigrate from Russia in 1874. Some settled in South America and tens of thousands came to the United States between 1874 and 1914. Of these, sixty-five hundred came to Lincoln. In Lincoln, the use of ethnic enclaves assisted in the maintenance of the Germans from Russia’s culture and identity. Other social factors such as religion and family structure also assisted in this cultural maintenance.

Although many Lincolnites referred to them as Russians, this was only partly true. The Germans from Russia (also known as the German-Russians and the Russian-Germans) have a convoluted name and past. These immigrants were originally from Germany but were enticed to move into Russia by poor conditions in Germany—poverty created by devastating wars, lack of strong central government and patriotism—and a Manifesto from Catherine the Great in 1763. Russia offered incentives to the Germans to tempt them to move there. Russia would pay for the trip to Russia, and when the Germans arrived, they would have freedom of religion, and would be free from military service. Approximately 23,184 took advantage of the offer. Not all those leaving Germany went to Russia, however. Others moved to the United States and other European countries.

Most Lincoln Germans from Russia came from the Volga region along the Volga River, where from 1764 to 1768, 104 German colonies were established in Russia. More Germans came, and a century later, over 1.5 million Germans were living in approximately 3,000 colonies in Russia. They functioned as a human buffer zone for the Russians from Eastern threats. In these colonies, they mostly worked as agricultural workers, regardless of their past jobs in

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9 Kinbacher, Urban Villages, 25.
Germany. Their seclusion from the Russian people was so great that linguists describe them as “speech islands.” The Germans were not rich, but they were not as poor as they had been in Germany. They also did not bother to learn Russian while they were in Russia, regarding all things Russian as inferior, laying the groundwork of clustering and keeping to themselves that occurred later in America.

In the late 1860s, Alexander II of Russia began to take away some of the privileges that his ancestor extended to the Germans. For many Germans, the last straw was their inclusion into the Russian military draft after the Universal Military Service Law of 1874 passed. They had been there for about a century, but still felt no real patriotic pride to the land they lived on, refusing to assimilate. In July of 1875, an organized group of Protestant Volga Germans left and settled in Sutton, Nebraska. More groups followed the agents they had sent in advance and settled in Lincoln in the ensuing decades. United States railroads advertised in the area in German to try to attract immigrants. Events in Russia such as a famine in 1892, and a following cholera outbreak contributed to why Germans chose to leave. Some Russian-German children gave the cause as why they left Russia as “to get bread.” Between 1873 and 1914 approximately 115,000 Germans from Russia immigrated to the United States, with the peak in 1912. Most headed to the Great Plains, going to states like Kansas, the Dakotas, Colorado, and Nebraska. Migration into the United States dropped off significantly at the outbreak of World War I. The Germans from Russia who left were only a small portion of the Germans living in

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14 Williams, “History,” 76.
15 Williams, “History,” 80.
Russia.\textsuperscript{17} Following settlement in the United States, virtually no Germans from Russia returned to Russia, but some returned to Germany.\textsuperscript{18}

In 1867, the small town of Lancaster was the chosen site of the new state capital, and was renamed Lincoln, after the recently assassinated president. The town was originally founded in the area due to an abundance of salt. In 1868, the population numbered 800, and by 1870, the town covered “approximately one square mile” and population swelled to 2,400.\textsuperscript{19} The University of Nebraska was founded in 1869, and contributed to the growth, along with four railroad lines intersecting the city. Other state institutions and departments were created, bringing more people to the city. Lincoln became a second-class city, able to support a growing number of citizens.

Germans from Russia settled across Nebraska, including in Sutton, Grand Island, and Beatrice, but the majority of them moved to Lincoln. Germans from Russia came to Lincoln as a final destination, or as a stopping point in their trip across the nation.\textsuperscript{20} By the time that they arrived in the United States, there was not much worthwhile free land remaining under the Homestead Act.\textsuperscript{21} Lincoln was ideal for landless, hardworking men, as there was work in industry. Both the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad in Lincoln had many jobs available for the incoming immigrants.\textsuperscript{22} Lincoln also became the home base for laborers in the beet industry, because it was located on the railroad which took the workers to Western Nebraska to work in the fields, and was large enough to provide work through the winter for those who

\textsuperscript{17} Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, s.v. “Germans from Russia.”
\textsuperscript{18} Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, s.v. “Germans from Russia.”
\textsuperscript{20} Historic American Buildings Survey, South Bottoms Historic District.
\textsuperscript{21} Koch, The Volga Germans, 215.
\textsuperscript{22} Historic American Buildings Survey, South Bottoms Historic District.
desired it.\textsuperscript{23} By 1900, the Germans from Russia comprised 13\% of the total population of Lancaster County.\textsuperscript{24} This number increased to 38.2\% of the county in 1920.\textsuperscript{25}

The way that the German colonists settled in Russia also affected the way that they settled in the United States. German colonies in Russia had been settled by entire villages from Germany, who were also members of the same religion. These villages then resettled again with others from their Russian colony in the United States.\textsuperscript{26}

The first German from Russia immigrants in Lincoln settled in an area near Salt Creek, attracted by the low cost of housing and the location near the railroad. They first settled near “First and K Streets” in what later became called the South Bottoms.\textsuperscript{27} More German-Russian immigrants moved into the South Bottoms, again, due to low cost, but also because of the familiar language and culture now present there. Eventually, some Germans from Russia moved north into an area closer to the railroad roundhouse. This second area became known as the North Bottoms. Not everybody who lived in the Bottoms, however, were Germans from Russia, there were also African-Americans, as well as other lower-income American families.\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Williams, “History,” 91.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Historic American Buildings Survey, \textit{South Bottoms Historic District}.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Historic American Buildings Survey, \textit{South Bottoms Historic District}.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, s.v. “Germans from Russia.”
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Williams, “History,” 92.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Hattie P. Williams, “A Social Study of the Russian-German,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1916), 22.
\end{itemize}
Figure 1: Area of North and South Bottoms on a modern map. Every pin is an important aspect of the group: a church, school, or shop, as well as the location of the modern Germans from Russia Museum. The smaller square (colored purple) within the South Bottoms shows the approximate area of the “Frank Bottoms,” an example of a grouping of people who came from the same Russian village.

The area was called the Bottoms for good reason. The land was very undesirable, and most of mainstream Lincoln stayed to the east, away from the salt flats that the west end of Lincoln dipped into.29 The majority of the Salt Creek flood plain overlapped with the area of the Bottoms, and about every spring there was the threat of a flood.30 Other conditions in the Bottoms areas were similarly unappealing. For years, the city of Lincoln dumped its garbage into the front yards of those in the South Bottoms. When the South Bottoms residents protested, they

29 Williams, “Social Study,” 18.
diplomatically moved the trash to the North Bottoms.\textsuperscript{31} There was also a stretch of time when a sewer discharged near the area, causing breeding places for bacteria.\textsuperscript{32} Although the larger population of Lincoln called them “Dirty Rooshians,” the Germans from Russia were very cleanly. Supposedly by walking through the Bottoms, visitors could pick out the German from Russian houses by the “looks of the front porch.”\textsuperscript{33} The Germans from Russia kept buildings in the Bottoms neat and often dedicated the entirety of Sundays to cleaning.\textsuperscript{34} By defying the mainstream stereotype of their area, the immigrants kept their group identities.

These ethnic enclaves were separated from the mainstream community in Lincoln in multiple ways. The Bottoms areas were physically separated from the main culture, with the mainstream community not wanting to journey past certain streets that laid out the invisible boundaries of the Bottoms. The area of the North Bottoms was also outlined by the railroad tracks.\textsuperscript{35} The immigrants were also set apart by their cultural traditions and language. The Germans from Russia faced extreme prejudice mostly due to ignorance from the Lincoln community, who often did not even realize the immigrants spoke German. Lincolnites called the area that the German-Russian immigrants lived in “Russiatown, Little Russia, Little St. Petersburg, Little Moscow, and the Rooshen Bottoms.”\textsuperscript{36} Pamphlets were frequently distributed in the Bottoms that were in Russian, which most of the Germans from Russia did not read.\textsuperscript{37} The Germans from Russia dress was also distinct, some women wore black shawls on their heads. Some Lincoln citizens would have “just as soon see the Chinese come here as these people,”

\textsuperscript{31} Williams, “Social Study,” 20.
\textsuperscript{33} Kurt Kinbacher, “Immigration, The American West, and the Twentieth Century: German from Russia, Omaha Indian, and Vietnamese-Urban Villagers in Lincoln, Nebraska” (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2006), 120; Williams, “Social Study,” 30.
\textsuperscript{34} John Schwindt, interview by Molly Collins, transcript, 19 July 1980, folder RG 4831.AU.07 a and b, Neighborhood Oral History Project, NSHS, Lincoln, 29.
\textsuperscript{35} Williams, “Social Study,” 18.
\textsuperscript{36} Williams, “Social Study,” 19.
\textsuperscript{37} Williams, “Social Study,” 7.
showing the perceived social level of the Germans from Russia.\textsuperscript{38} These perceptions from the outside community encouraged a more inward community focus in the Bottoms, not conforming to the mainstream community identity.

Although the Germans from Russia were separate from the main culture, they still had influence within it through voting. In order to vote, they had to have their first of the two papers it took to become naturalized.\textsuperscript{39} The German-Russian vote was prized by the candidates, because they cast eight to ten percent of the total vote, but it cost money to receive the vote.\textsuperscript{40} Because many of the Germans from Russia did not read English, candidates hired people to give instructions on how to mark the ballot.\textsuperscript{41} The German from Russia voters would be given a marked sample of the ballot, and would mark their official ballot accordingly. These votes would not come cheap to the candidates, as some German-Russians asked anywhere from twenty to three dollars per vote, with the average being about five dollars, in order to make up the day they were not able to work because they were voting.\textsuperscript{42} Another way to get the German-Russian vote was through a keg party thrown by a candidate. These parties did not always work out for the candidate, as nothing would guarantee that the attendees would then go to vote. In these ways, the mainstream Lincoln community (particularly the politicians) tried to influence the Germans from Russia community in order to get votes, which did not always work for them, unless they had deep pockets. In this way, the German-Russians had some influence over mainstream Lincoln, but mainstream Lincoln attempted to influence them.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{38} Williams, “History,” 1.
\textsuperscript{39} Apparently, the Germans from Russia showed the least tendency towards citizenship, with only 4.7% obtaining their second papers after going through the process of getting the first. “Russian” voters made up 17.7% the foreign body of voters in Lancaster county from 1867 to 1910. They were also “ignorant” and “indifferent” voters. Hattie P. Williams, “The Road to Citizenship: A Study of Naturalization in Nebraska County,” Nebraska History 68 (1987): 12-13; “The German-Russian Vote.” Nebraska State Journal, August 17, 1914.
\textsuperscript{40} “The German-Russian Vote.”
\textsuperscript{41} “The German-Russian Vote.”
\textsuperscript{42} “The German-Russian Vote.”
\textsuperscript{43} “The German-Russian Vote.”
Even within these enclaves already separate from the main population, there were further separations within them. Though Germans from Russia in the North and South Bottoms came from similar backgrounds and were both outside of the mainstream community, they still had minor disagreements within the Bottoms. These arguments usually did not mean a turf war, they mostly fought over girls.\textsuperscript{44} It was not “very good for a boy from the South to come down and court a girl from the North.”\textsuperscript{45} There were separate areas for each Russian village the immigrants came from within the individual Bottoms. There were whole streets “occupied by former residents of one colony” next to another street with residents from another Russian colony.\textsuperscript{46} University of Nebraska-Lincoln sociologist Hattie Plum Williams conducted a survey of the area counted fourteen different Russian colonies with residents present in Lincoln. The North Bottoms was occupied primarily by people from the villages of Norka, Kukkus, and Huck. In the South Bottoms, the villages of Frank, Balzer, and Beideck were represented the highest.\textsuperscript{47} The Germans from Russia did not interact with the Germans in Lincoln, some of whom had been in Lincoln for twenty years.\textsuperscript{48} These more specific separations assisted in the maintenance of their more distinct cultures and identities, and even dialects of German.

These ethnic enclaves, also called “urban villages” by Kinbacher, had all an immigrant might want for, allowing the immigrant to stay in the neighborhood and not venture out into the main community. This worked because the main community of Lincoln treated the German-Russian immigrants poorly when they did venture out. Not having to have contact with the outside community for goods and services kept the homogeneity of the neighborhood and did not force the population to learn English to get necessary items. The business-owners within the

\textsuperscript{44}John Schwindt interview, 9. \\
\textsuperscript{46}Williams, “Social Study,” 23. \\
\textsuperscript{47}Historic American Buildings Survey, \textit{South Bottoms Historic District}. \\
\textsuperscript{48}Historic American Buildings Survey, \textit{South Bottoms Historic District}. 
community could also better cater to their customers, whose needs may not have been understood by those outside of the community. One grocery store owner advanced groceries to forty-five families who were going to Western Nebraska to work in the beet fields. Services such as carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, tailors, and painters were all available to Bottoms residents.

Work often caused the Germans from Russia to leave the safety of the Bottoms and journey out into the main culture in Lincoln. Although mostly agricultural workers in Russia, in Lincoln the immigrants started to work as laborers in industry, particularly the railroads or for the city. Some women from the Bottoms worked in the city as maids in hotels and for Lincoln women. These jobs often gave the workers a crash course in English, with one of the maids learning English in six months from her coworkers.

The Germans from Russia also continued their agricultural labor in Nebraska, working in the summer in the beet fields in Western Nebraska and Colorado. The Germans from Russia had many desirable traits for beet field work: they were willing to do the hard labor, and they had large families. As a result, agents specifically recruited in the Bottoms. Everybody down to a child of the age of three was of use in the beet fields, and the Germans from Russia were willing to pull their children out of school to do the work. Letters from these children explaining to their friends why they had to leave school can be found in the Nebraska State Historical Society.

50 Historic American Buildings Survey, South Bottoms Historic District.
51 1913 Germans from Russia Census, Hattie Plum Williams Collection, NSHS, RG 1872. AM, Microfilm.
52 These women typically ranged in age from 15 to 23, and were unmarried. They worked at hotels such as the Lincoln Hotel, the Capital Hotel, and the Victoria Hotel. 1913 Germans from Russia Census, Hattie Plum Williams Collection, NSHS.
54 One labor contract found in the NSHS has a family traveling to Grand Island to work on 70 acres of land in the summer of 1920. For bunching and thinning, the family earns $11 per acre. For first hoeing, the family earns $6 per acre, for second hoeing and keeping clean until harvest, the family earns $3 per acre, and for pulling and topping and covering piles with beet tops, the family earns $15 per acre. The definitions and instructions for each step are on the back of the contract. TFA Williams Collection, NSHS, RG 2824, Box 7.
Archives. Some of the Germans from Russia would eventually work their way up to owning the land they once worked on. In 1930, more than half of the beet farms in Nebraska were owned by Germans from Russia. These summers in the fields allowed for family time for the immigrants and brought those who worked out in the fields closer together, especially as the families traveled out west together on the trains.

In Nebraska, the vast majority of the Germans from Russia were Protestant, with Catholic Germans from Russia settling in Kansas. Religion was an important aspect of daily life for these immigrants, a “cornerstone for group identity.” The construction of a church was central in creating a community and maintaining a community’s ethnic traditions. The South Bottoms, which in 1908 housed 1,400 inhabitants, was able to support five churches. The North Bottoms, with 1,300 residents, contained another three. When choosing a church, the specific denomination was less important than which Russian village it was associated with. There was a church that all the Frankers went to, another with Balzerers, and another with Norkaers. Churches were crucial to maintaining the German language and other cultural traditions, kept through the decades of living in Russia. These religious people would also have prayer meetings, held in community member’s homes, where they would sometimes sing in German. Through churches and other forms of religion in their lives, Protestantism and the German language was maintained, sustaining their culture and identities. The German language persisted in churches in the Bottoms until the 1950s, when they started to transition into English services.

56 Koch, The Volga Germans, 215.
57 Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, s.v. “Germans from Russia.”
58 Williams, “History,” 95; Kinbacher “Immigration,” 130.
59 Kinbacher, “Immigration,” 133.
Although German was spoken in churches, it was not in public schools, which most German-Russian children attended. There were a few public schools near the Bottoms areas, and the first-year public school teachers assigned to these schools considered it an exile. But some would learn to appreciate the children and went into their second year of teaching with a better attitude. Most German-Russian children went to Hayward or Longfellow for the lower levels of schooling, and Whittier for high school. In school, children would talk to other German from Russia children in German, but otherwise “pretty much English” was spoken. Parents would insist that the children speak German at home, but at the same time wanted the children to learn English. In order to ensure that children could still learn German, they would go to German school after regular school was done for the day or attend on the weekend. There was also the option of the Immanuel School, which was the German-speaking parochial school in the North Bottoms. Though most children went to the public schools, the school, located on the first floor of a church, sustained a large enrollment. In 1910, its initial year, there were seventy-two pupils. This number increased to over 325 by the 1913-1914 school year and had a constant enrollment for the remainder of the decade.

Family was another way to continue tradition and culture in the Bottoms. The family was the most important social unit for the Germans from Russia. Germans from Russia mostly came over as family units, different than other immigrant groups who might have sent the patriarch of the family and maybe a son to America to earn money to send back home. While the houses in the Bottoms may have seemed crowded to conventional Lincolnites, residents “valued

62 John Schwindt interview, 16.
64 Historic American Buildings Survey, South Bottoms Historic District.
extended family unity more than personal space.”66 In most traditional German-Russian families, sons remained part of the patriarchal family system until the age of twenty-one or until they married, while daughters remained at home until eighteen or marriage. Occasionally, even after the oldest son would marry, he would continue to live in his parents’ house and eventually take ownership of the family business and home from his parents.67 These traditions made for an average of six people per home, and many four-room homes housed a dozen residents.68 Living in these situations allowed for traditions and identity to persist, and allowed for a strong sense of familial communities.

The importance of family maintenance, and as a result cultural maintenance, is shown through the immigrant group’s low divorce rates. Divorces were almost unheard of in the Bottoms. In 1910, the divorce rate for Lancaster County (where Lincoln is located) was an already low 3.7 per 1,000 for the entire population. For the Germans from Russia, the rate was .4 per 1,000, where their marriage rate was also much higher than the population of Lancaster.69 Between 1909 and 1913, the Lancaster County community had 240 divorces annually, during which the Germans from Russia averaged 4.2 a year, while compromising about one-twelfth of the population of the county. If the Germans from Russian secured divorces at the same rate as mainstream population, they would have about twenty divorces a year, instead of 4.2.70 When sociologist Hattie Plum Williams discussed with community members the fact that the community only had thirty-four divorce cases in fifteen years, the general sentiment seemed to be “that’s just 33 too many.”71 The low divorce rate is also a result of patriarchal family values

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69 Williams, “Social Study,” 88.
70 Williams, “Social Study,” 91.
71 Williams, “Social Study,” 91.
and the teaching of women that they must submit to their husbands, but also shows the importance of family values and keeping of a traditional family to the group.\textsuperscript{72}

Most of the Germans from Russia also fell into the “assisted immigrants” category, meaning immigrants who had their tickets bought in the United States and sent to them.\textsuperscript{73} In the United States, 32% of those entering came on pre-paid tickets, and within the Russian-Germans living in Lincoln 65% came on pre-paid tickets and 35% paid for their own passage.\textsuperscript{74} For the German from Russia immigrants, this arrangement usually happened within families, and as a result, the purchase price was usually loaned without interest. This method of passage allowed for the continuation of family connections and structure, which aligned with their cultural traditions and values.

Community celebrations were another way for community maintenance, most of which were in conjunction with religious customs. There were confirmations, which usually had the child attend German school before, and also three-day long wedding celebrations. Marriage outside of the Russian-German community was not common occurrence, but there could be intermarriages between the North and South Bottoms. Therefore, these weddings would be treated not only as a joining of bride and groom, but also of families within the community.\textsuperscript{75} There were the economic traditions of the groom buying the bride’s dress, and the bride buying the groom’s shirt, as well as the families splitting the large cost for the three-day celebration.\textsuperscript{76} The first day of the celebration included a small church ceremony and reception for immediate family. The next day was set aside for the older generation so if “they wanted to make fools of

\textsuperscript{72} Williams, “Social Study,” 87.
\textsuperscript{73} This is also true of the other immigrants discussed in the next two sections. Williams, “Social Study,” 15.
\textsuperscript{74} Williams, “Social Study,” 15.
\textsuperscript{75} Kinbacher, “Immigration,” 164.
\textsuperscript{76} Anna Schwindt Giebelhaus, interview by Gertrude Schwindt, transcript, 16 July 1980, folder RG 4831.AU.06, Neighborhood Oral History Project, NSHS, Lincoln, 7.
themselves they could do it without the younger people seeing them.” 77 Similarly, the third day was for the younger generation to play “without the watchful eyes of their elders.” 78 By the mid-1920s however, the weddings had become Americanized and cut down to one day. These weddings, which included German traditions such as pinning money on the bride’s dress as one danced with her, assisted in the maintenance of the community and its traditions. 79

Physical buildings and other features also assisted in community maintenance in the Bottoms. As Hattie Plum Williams noted: “Order, system, neatness and thrift are the prevailing traits in the Russian German settlements, particularly as regards the buildings.” 80 The “summer kitchen” is a distinctive feature of the Bottoms brought to the United States by the German-Russians. A summer kitchen was a separate building, usually with one or two rooms, a few feet away from the kitchen door in the main house. In the German colonies in Russia, the summer kitchen existed as a fire protection, as the buildings had thatched roofs. This meant the cooking had to be done as far away as possible from the other buildings, as to not start fires. Summer kitchens were usually composed of brick or stone. The custom for the kitchen transferred to America, even without the real need for it. In America, the summer kitchens were used in the summer to cook so the main building would stay cooler. In the winter, the summer kitchens were rented out to beet workers returning from the fields, or new immigrants from Russia. 81 The ability to tell a Russian-German house because of the tradition of building a summer kitchen being brought to America portrays another way of community maintenance.

Public works could also be a way of community action and togetherness. In Lincoln, sidewalk construction was the responsibility of the property owners, and in the Bottoms there

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77 Kinbacher, “Immigration,” 164.
78 Kinbacher, “Immigration,” 164.
81 Today the ones that still stand are used for sheds and garages. Williams, “Social Study,” 24.
were long, straight stretches of concrete walks showing the German-Russians were good neighbors and conscientious citizens.\textsuperscript{82} When others in the Bottoms were working on projects, such as painting a home or building a shed, neighbors would come out to help.\textsuperscript{83} This shows the community dedication to their new home and their pride in their living areas, even if the mainstream community believed differently.

Eventually a large number of the Germans from Russia scattered throughout the city of Lincoln, moving closer to their work or moving out of their parents’ neighborhood. This move was also a show of higher social status, as the Bottoms were still in the undesirable part of the city, with bad soil and drainage. Second generation Germans from Russia children were embarrassed by their German-ness and therefore began to drift away from one of the most visible manifestations of that heritage: the church. As these social structures started to fail due to lack of members, the assimilation of the Germans from Russia in Lincoln continued.

\textsuperscript{82} Williams, “Social Study,” 22.
\textsuperscript{83} John Schwindt interview, 7.
III. Poles in Omaha

Omaha had a significant Polish community, although they never made up as large of a portion of the population or lived in such homogeneous enclaves as the Germans from Russia did in Lincoln. In the early 1870s, the first Poles came to Omaha to work in a small packing house, which grew and eventually drew more immigrants to the area. More Poles came in the 1880s and 1890s, and by the 1930s, it was estimated that there were 10,000 Polish-Americans in and around Omaha.84 Of the Poles arriving, few spoke English or worked in skilled occupations, but they came with a strong sense of self, country, and Catholicism. The Poles in Omaha experienced many of the same situations as other Polish immigrants entering the United States. Though there has not been as much individual research focused specifically on the Poles in Omaha (as there had been with the Germans from Russia in Lincoln), the experiences of the Poles in Omaha parallel experiences of Poles in the United States.

For Polish immigrants, there was no decisive moment or action that triggered emigration. Polish immigration to the United States typically falls into three waves, the first and largest from 1870 to 1914, the second following World War II, and a third after Poland’s independence in 1989. In the mid-seventeenth century, Poland had not changed much from the previous century, falling behind other countries in Europe, who were industrializing. Its people lived in partitions of Poland under three other governments’ control—Russia, Prussia, and Austria.85 The Polish in Austria, and especially in Galicia, were acknowledged as having some of the most destitute conditions and poverty in Europe, with over one million Poles leaving between 1871 and 1913.86 The Austrian and Russian Poles emigrated temporarily, they wanted to earn money and then

return and buy land in their native land. The German (Prussian) Poles left permanently, and before the Austrian and Russian Poles. With its great need for all kinds of workers, agricultural and industrial, the United States was an obvious destination for all Poles.

The first Poles came to America in 1608, helping develop the English colony’s timber industry, but no steady stream followed. During the first steady wave, from 1870 to approximately 1914, the majority of the Poles went through Ellis Island. After, most of them set out to already established Polish settlements, mostly in developing cities in Midwest states, due to mills, slaughterhouses, refineries and foundries with jobs available. Similar to the experiences of the Germans from Russia, for the Poles most of the fertile agricultural land available through the Homestead Act was already claimed by this time. Some immigrants took jobs in the city in order to save money to eventually purchase land. Chicago in particular was a common destination, and to this day boasts the largest Polish community in a city outside of Warsaw.

When the Polish began to move to the United States, the United States started to be thought of by some as the “fourth partition” of Poland, called Polonia. Polonia was “part cultural formation, part idea, and part the social and cultural community.” The ideology of Polonia became a motive to “build a separate culture and tradition of the Polish nation in America,” and this motive perpetuated throughout the Polish ethnic enclaves.

When the Poles came to Nebraska, some settled on farms and prairie lands in Platte, Nance, Merrick, Howard, Greeley, and Sherman Counties, while others settled in South Omaha,
beginning in 1881. In South Omaha, the Czechs and the Poles were the two most numerous immigrant groups. Omaha annexed South Omaha in 1915, which at the time 31% of the total population of South Omaha were immigrants. South Omaha had the appealing draw of jobs in the meat packing plants and other forms of industrial work. The Poles had to face the reality of industrial America after years of agricultural work, but they sought to create a society similar to the one they left behind. The first step of this process was living together.

The Polish immigrants in Omaha went from occupying about seventeen blocks in 1880 to having two strong and well-established enclaves in 1900: Sheelytown and Little Poland. Their community formation pattern matched those of the Poles in Chicago and Philadelphia: the Catholic parish became the center of the community, and the community “formed first wherever Poles collected for work, with others soon joining.” The Poles originally moved to the area to be close to the Sheely Packing Company. As a result, the area came to be known as Sheelytown, after their workplace. By 1890, there were 200 Polish families in Sheelytown. In 1930, there were 2,500 Poles in Sheelytown. Sheelytown went from approximately between Edward Creighton Boulevard and Vinton, and 24th and 35th Streets.

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92 Ashton, Nebraska is in Sherman county, and has the Polish Heritage Center, and an annual Polish festival. Frederick C. Luebke, “Plains Poles” by Joe Lamb, Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, ACC 1055, Box 4, Item 41; Polish American Congress of Nebraska, “Nebraska’s Observance: The Millennium of Poland as a Christian Nation, 969-1962,” (Omaha, NE: Polish American Congress of Nebraska, 1962), 1.

93 Niel M. Johnson, South Omaha: A Brief History (Omaha: Omaha Teacher Corps Project, 1977), 10.

94 Thompson, "The Polish Home."


99 Susanne Gerge-Bloomfield, Impertinences: Selected Writing of Elia Peattie, a Journalist in the Gilded Age (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 29.

100 T. Earl Sullenger, Studies in Urban Sociology (Omaha: Municipal University of Omaha, 1933), 77.
Little Poland was further south of Sheelytown and extended from 25\textsuperscript{th} to 29\textsuperscript{th} Streets and from F to L Streets. It was about 50\% Polish.\textsuperscript{101} Many of the immigrants who lived in this neighborhood did so due to their jobs in the Union Stockyard, which was directly south of Little Poland, or the Quealey Soap Factory.\textsuperscript{102} Depending on different sources, as Little Poland expanded west to 45\textsuperscript{th} Street, it became another majority Polish area nicknamed the Golden Hill. This population was often grouped into the numbers of Little Poland. Throughout Omaha, the definite number of Poles is difficult to calculate, as Poland did not exist as a political entity until 1918, and so the Poles were counted in other ethnic populations such as the Germans or Austrians.\textsuperscript{103} The new communities were formed around traditional values, which assisted in the maintenance of their culture, but also reflected the new urban reality of Omaha.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101} Fimple, “An Analysis,” 197.
\textsuperscript{102} Fimple, “An Analysis,” 197.
\textsuperscript{103} This is true of all groups discussed within this thesis: the Germans from Russia were counted under the Russians, and the Czechs as Austrian or German.
\textsuperscript{104} Pacyga, “Polish Immigration to the United States,” 37.
Figure 2: Area of Sheelytown, Little Poland, and the Golden Hill on a modern map. The different areas outlined show the discrepancies between sources in giving a definite area of these enclaves. Every pin is an important aspect of the group: a church, school, house, park or workplace.

From looking at Omaha City Directories, the areas that the Poles lived in can be confirmed, with a few exceptions. Even with the modern expressways running down the middle of the area today, directories indicate that the approximate areas indicated above were correct. The directories also showed other areas that were not normally considered inside ethnic enclaves (such as the gap between Sheelytown and Little Poland), but had Polish families living in the area. The area around Walnut Street is another of these zones, and there were more Poles expanding further south in the 1918 City Directory.105

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105 Using samples of Omaha City Directories from 1884, 1889, 1895, 1901, 1910, 1915, 1917, and 1918.
The Poles stayed within their own people, and often within their own Polish communities, as those from Little Poland and Sheelytown did not always get along.\textsuperscript{106} When writer for the \textit{Omaha Bee}, Elia Peattie, came to Sheelytown for a story, she described it as a “foreign country.”\textsuperscript{107} It looked “distinctly un-American,” and had “Germans, English, Irish, Italians, and Poles” living there, with the Poles making up about half of the population and wielding most of the influence.\textsuperscript{108} The Irish, who had originally lived in the area of Sheelytown, were slowly driven out by the Poles, who were “resolute in making it their own turf.”\textsuperscript{109} Blood was shed in fights between the two, sometimes over girls from the groups. It was “unthinkable” that anyone not of Polish descent should date a Sheelytown girl.\textsuperscript{110} It is said that no “non-resident of Sheelytown, Irish, Pole or otherwise, was allowed to cross into the district through its invisible boundaries without a Sheelytown escort, unless they wanted to risk a loss of blood.”\textsuperscript{111} In 1910, only 2.8\% of Polish marriages were mixed.\textsuperscript{112} Tensions between the mainstream community, other ethnic groups in Sheelytown, and the Poles existed, and this may have continued to encourage the Poles to continue to cluster together, forming their community and preserving their traditions.

The Poles did sometimes fraternize with other Catholic communities. For the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in 1912, the Poles cooperated with the Czechs in Omaha to march down 24\textsuperscript{th} and 25\textsuperscript{th}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{107} Elia Peattie, “How They Live at Sheely: Pen Picture of a Strange Settlement and Its Queer Set of Inhabitants” \textit{The Omaha Bee}, March 31, 1895.
\bibitem{108} Peattie, “Live at Sheely.”
\bibitem{109} Otis and Erickson, \textit{E Pluribus}, 250.
\bibitem{110} Otis and Erickson, \textit{E Pluribus}, 253.
\bibitem{111} A story from Anthony Nykiel also proves this point of the barriers of Sheelytown. When Anthony’s sister, Sophie, was being courted by a Pole from Little Poland in Omaha (and therefore a foreigner to Sheelytown), either Anthony’s father or brothers would have to meet him at the outskirts of the district and escort him to their home. They ended up getting married. Otis and Erickson, \textit{E Pluribus}, 250; Henry W. Casper, \textit{Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration}, 1870-1900 (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), 183.
\bibitem{112} Federal Writers’ Project: Racial Element in State, Poles. 1936.
\end{thebibliography}
Sheelytown Poles also attended a German Catholic Church until they could build their own.

Stereotypes of the Poles existed in the mainstream community in Omaha and across the United States, allowing for perceived identities of the Poles to be seen. Mainstream Omaha citizens recognized the Poles for their nationalism, Catholicism, and clannishness. The stereotype of disorganization within the Polish community can be seen in Omaha, with *The Omaha Bee* writer Elia Peattie writing about “up the irregular and ungraded streets small cottages, perched precariously on the edges of bluffs, or on the slope of a hill.” Poles were often written about in the “Affairs at South Omaha” section of *The Omaha Bee*. In one column, the author mentioned that in the dance halls in Sheelytown, the sound of music could be heard almost every Sunday night. This perpetuated the stereotype of the Poles having immoral and promiscuous behavior, which was undesirable to the Omaha community. Stereotypes of Poles were disseminated and perpetuated to the mainstream Omaha community through the newspaper, similar to the stereotypes Poles faced throughout the country.

Physical aspects of Sheelytown also allowed for separation from the Omaha community. Sheelytown was not the cleanest of places, unlike the Bottoms lived in by the Germans from Russia. *The Omaha Bee* writer Elia Peattie wrote of “small cottages.” Cottages were common buildings for Polish-Americans, with Chicago, Buffalo, Detroit, and Milwaukee Poles also known for their story-and-a-half-cottages. In some of the yards there was debris that “indicates

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114 Sullenger, *Studies*, 77.
116 Peattie, “Live at Sheely.”
117 Obidiński, “Social Standing,” 82.
118 Peattie, “Live at Sheely.”
slovenly living.”

But among the untidy houses, there were “many clean, attractive cottages, with pleasant windows, and an aspect of cleanliness and frugality.”

Cottages were cheap and easy to build, both important to Polish families. There were also “unwholesome scents” that “distress the nostril,” probably due to the proximity of the packing plants and other industries. The nearby railroads and stockyards also “marred the physical appearance of the community.” The conditions in Sheelytown were livable, and better than the ones they had left in Poland, so perhaps the Poles did not mind the prevailing perception of an untidy neighborhood.

Outside of traveling to work, which was right next to the enclaves, the Poles had no need to leave their district. It was “a little village by itself.” In Sheelytown, there was a five-block business district on what is now 27th Street. Saloons, drugstores, grocery stores, cobblers, cleaners, and even dance halls made for no reason to leave the neighborhood. Having Polish goods and services available to the immigrants allowed for them to stay within their communities for almost every aspect of their consumer needs, and perpetuated the feeling of community, buying from and supporting shopkeepers with similar experiences as community members.

Sheelytown was so separate from the mainstream Omaha community that it even had its own unofficial mayor, Nicodemus (Nick) Dargaczewski. Dargaczewski came to Omaha in 1884 and worked as a blacksmith. He was a prominent figure, garnering multiple mentions in The Omaha Bee, even when he went to Poland to visit his brothers. Dargaczewski also spoke for his community during a hearing about election fraud, but the hearing committee waved him

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120 Peattie, “Live at Sheely.”
121 Peattie, “Live at Sheely.”
123 Peattie, “Live at Sheely.”
125 Peattie, “Live at Sheely.”
126 Otis and Erickson, E Pluribus, 249.
127 Otis and Erickson, E Pluribus, 249; “Mayor of Sheelytown” Goes to Poland to See Brothers,” Omaha Bee, July 18, 1920, 2.
128 “‘Mayor of Sheelytown,’” 2.
Nick was also good friends with the actual Omaha mayor, Jim Dahlman. In this way, the power of the Polish community can be seen, having an unofficial leader acknowledged by the main community but maybe not being taken seriously.

In Omaha, the Poles worked in the packing plants, stockyards, and railroads. Four-fifths of the Poles in Omaha in 1907 were unskilled laborers, mostly working in the lowest-paying positions, often making only 1.25 to 1.50 per day. Packing plants drew the Poles to Omaha, such as Sheely and the Anglo-American Packing Plant. In 1886, the Anglo-American plant employed 1,800 workers. Union Stockyards employed those in Little Poland. As the packing plants built and expanded, it drew more people to the South Omaha area, and in time the town acquired second class city status, electing a mayor and six councilmen, but eventually being annexed into Omaha. At the plants, there were organized unions, which worked to improve wages and working conditions. There were strikes in 1894, following walk-offs in plants in Chicago. This strike led to some militia being sent to Omaha. There was also a riot occurring in 1904, following a strike. Working these difficult, thankless, and low-paying jobs created a sense of community for those who did. What happened after work could also create a sense of community within the enclave. Dahlman Avenue was only a dirt trail leading from Sheelytown to the stockyards where the men worked. This route eventually became dotted with bars. Men would save their streetcar fare by walking to work, and then use this money for an

extra beer or two. These after work activities strengthened the bonds of those who lived and worked together, and their connection to the enclave.

The Poles in Omaha were known for their strong family ties, and also for their large number of children, with the average being seven children at one point. In the United States, the Polish family became an important unit, both socially and economically. Families were the source of survival and the way to secure and keep employment, with even the children working. Not only the males of the family worked, but also the females, doing jobs such as working as a starcher at Leavenworth Laundry. Polish immigrant women, like many other first-generation immigrant women, found their identities and most of “life’s satisfactions” in their families. The long hours that fathers worked meant that mothers had more social control, but the fathers still kept up the image of a patriarch. Divorces were also uncommon, due to the strong influence of Catholicism and the “resilience of the Polish family.” Families kept the Polish traditions, language, and values alive in the face of a culture that wanted them to assimilate quickly.

Social and religious life revolved around Catholic church, as the Poles brought their devout Catholicism to the new world. By the time Poles came to America, their homeland had been Christian for 900 years. Only 6% of the total Polish population in Nebraska were not Catholic. Poles were quick to establish parish churches in their new homes, and the Catholic

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138 Otis and Erickson, *E Pluribus*, 252.
139 As Thaddeus C. Radzilowski notes, there has been little writing on the history of the Polish family, especially as compared to Italian families. More scholarship has been done on parishes, neighborhoods, and institutions. Federal Writers’ Project: Racial Element in State, Poles; Radzilowskif, “Family,” 58.
140 Radzilowskif, “Family,” 61; 1918 Omaha City Directory.
142 Radzilowski, “Family,” 62-64.
143 Radzilowski, “Family,” 65.
145 Federal Writers’ Project: Racial Element in State, Poles.
parish became the center of the community. The church was usually named for a favorite saint—Stanislaus, Adalbert, Hedwig, or Casimir. In South Omaha alone, there was twenty-three Catholic churches, which to outsiders may have seemed inefficient, but each served a specific ethnic group. Sheelytown residents worshipped for a time at St. Joseph, built by German immigrants until Sheelytown residents built their own church, St. Paul, in 1891, where they could hear sermons in Polish.

Omaha’s Catholic Poles made a name for themselves within the larger community after the burning of St. Paul. St. Paul was built in 1891 and the first priest in charge was Father Jakimowicz. Misunderstandings over the church property occurred and priests were changed in rapid succession. Next, more nationalistic members brought Stephen Kaminski to Omaha, who they “paraded as a priest,” but who was actually “an organist and lay teacher.” This was during the time that nationalistic forces in the United States were advocating for an independent, national Polish Church. Those who brought Kaminski in took control of the title of the property, since it did not technically belong to the diocese yet. The bishop ordered the parish to remove Kaminski, who used firearms to keep control of the church. When two Poles were injured, the case went to the Omaha District Court, where the ruling was to give the church back to the control of the bishop. Rather than to vacate the property, Kaminski and his supporters supposedly set fire to the church structure, destroying the building. Those who participated went to court and were convicted for arson.

Following this incident, the Poles went back to St. Joseph’s Church, where they again started to raise money for a new church. Eventually they raised enough money to build the

147 The Italians had St. Francis Cabrini, the Czechs had St. Wenceslaus, and the Lithuanians St. Anthony’s. Herzog, “Our Sacred Lithuanian Word,” 134.
148 Casper, Catholic Chapters, 186.
149 “Keeping the Fire Tossed,” Omaha Bee, March 29, 1895, 8.
150 Casper, Catholic Chapters, 187.
Immaculate Conception Church, which had classrooms as well, enough for 250 students.\textsuperscript{151} By 1913, the parish had to build a larger school due to the demand. One immigrant, Anthony Nykiel, recalled that he grew up only one block from St. Adalbert Church, but for school or for church, he and his siblings would walk the five blocks to Immaculate Conception, because St. Adalbert’s was for Czechs, and Immaculate Conception was for Poles.\textsuperscript{152} The Little Poland Poles built St. Francis of Assisi church in 1899, which also had a school built in 1903. By the end of 1905, 150 children attended the school.\textsuperscript{153} When the Polish population grew, St. Stanislaus Church was built in 1919 to accommodate them.\textsuperscript{154} Organizing churches and raising money for churches brought the Poles together, solidifying their identities while continuing to define them as Catholic immigrants.

Polish-American churches differed from the Catholic churches in Poland. In Poland, churches were formed by lay societies, raising money to build a church and obtain a priest.\textsuperscript{155} As a result, the parishioners held some sway over the church. This was not the case in American Catholic Churches, where parishioners were supposed to bow to the bishop and diocese’s wishes. This clashing of wills can be seen in the example of St. Paul’s in Omaha. In America, if a parish-community met the “social, cultural, and spiritual needs of Polish immigrants,” it did so due to having Polish clergy, the presence of which were important to the Poles.\textsuperscript{156} These parish priests allowed for the adaptation for the new “American reality while avoiding de-nationalization,” and allowed for the Poles to uphold their identities while still conforming to American Catholicism.\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{151} Casper, \textit{Catholic Chapters}, 188.
\textsuperscript{152} Otis and Erickson, \textit{E Pluribus}, 253.
\textsuperscript{154} Otis and Erickson, \textit{E Pluribus}, 253.
\textsuperscript{156} This is true of all the ethnic groups discussed in this thesis and others. Immigrant groups preferred to have priests or pastors who spoke their language and shared their culture and experiences. Radzilowski, “Social History,” 30.
\textsuperscript{157} Radzilowski, “Social History,” 30.
The Poles often bore an ethno-religious identity—Polish and Catholic. By the end of the nineteenth century, the values of patriotism and Catholicism melded in the Polish national consciousness, with Poland being imagined as a martyr nation by Polish revolutionaries. Catholicism and nationalism became increasingly associated after the partitioning of Poland was done by Protestant Prussians and Orthodox Russians. Within most Polish-American communities at the turn of the century, there were two groups of elites: the Roman Catholic clergy, and nationalist activists who founded groups such as the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America (PRCUA) and the Polish National Alliance (PNA), rivals of each other. Priests stressed the connections between the Polish nation and Catholicism, while the activists placed emphasis on the struggle for national liberty and independence. Both groups used similar constructions of historical events, ideologies, and heroes in order to assist in their objectives. The slogans of these groups’ efforts in reconstructing history became “Poland’s contribution to human civilization” and “Polish contributions to America.” Reconstructing this history required community action and memory and assisted in defining the cultural identity of the Polish-American.

Omaha Poles adopted the Polish-American construction of a Polish-American image that goes back to the past to establish the group’s long history in the United States. Omaha Poles sought recognition for their fellow countryman, Count Pulaski, who was one of the Poles who came to fight in the American Revolution with the colonists. The Poles persuaded the Omaha Parks and Recreation system to name a park after him. The two-acre park still bears his name at 40th and G Streets. Pulaski’s death in the Battle of Savannah proved to the Poles that their

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160 Rokicki, “National Symbols Restructured,” 89.
161 Rokicki, “National Symbols Restructured,” 89.
countrymen had been fighting for their adopted country long before other immigrants, showing that the Poles “through sacrifice and heroism acquired full rights as citizens on this soil.” The Poles also advertised that they had become good upstanding American citizens, paying their taxes on time, and playing a prominent part in the business and political life in their new country. The Polish-Americans desired to inform the mainstream American culture that their people had been in the country the whole time, that they were not some of the newer, more undesired immigrants.

The Poles had a very strong sense of national identity, focusing on events from Poland’s past and honoring them with celebrations. Poles concentrated on events such as the legendary beginnings of Poland, the Polish Constitution of May 3, 1791, and the acceptance of Christianity and the creation of the Polish state. These celebrations for selected dates can be found in Omaha. In 1891, the Omaha chapter of the Defenders of Polish Constitution celebrated the centennial of the Polish Constitution. To celebrate, they had a mass, an assembly where Polish-American citizens would “discuss the Polish situation,” a picnic for the Polish school children, and a parade. This celebration became an annual celebration. In 1910, the celebration was also combined with the anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald in 1410. These celebrations were not only patriotic, but also religious, showing again how tightly connected Catholicism and patriotism were for the Poles. These community celebrations of Polish events, often annual, allowed for the immigrants to stay in touch with their past, which, in return, shaped their current realities.

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165 Rokicki, “National Symbols Restructured,” 90.
166 “A Polish Centennial,” Omaha Bee, May 3, 1891, 12.
The Poles in America were also known for their dense array of cooperative and self-help societies. These groups aided immigrants while they adjusted to a new society and provided the community with a focus for its ethnic identity. The purpose of these societies varied considerably. Some were designed to ensure economic security; others to work for nationalist goals; still others to build a Catholic parish; others to partner with an existing Catholic parish; a few to cultivate music and arts. These societies also assisted with social status within the enclave. With so many organizations available to join, there were numerous opportunities to serve as an officer or organizer within a group. Whatever their other objectives, almost all were working-class associations that provided social insurance and income protection. Lots of immigrant groups had these organizations, but the Polish regional and national associations were particularly strong, and assisted greatly in the maintenance of Polish culture and identity within their enclaves.

In Omaha, there were national societies and local societies. The Polish Roman Catholic Union in America (PRCUA), the Polish National Alliance (PNA), the Pulaski Club, the Polish Welfare Club, and the Polish Citizen’s Club, are all examples of these organizations in Omaha. New lodges were organized constantly, to fill perceived gaps in the enclave. The Polish Catholic Knights were organized in 1906, in order to assist with church functions. These clubs often worked together to put on events for days with significance for the Polish

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170 The PNA and PRCUA were known as rival organizations. The PRCUA was under control of the Polish clergy, and its aim was to provide mutual aid to its member. The PRCUA sought to preserve the ethnic identities of the Polish American communities by maintaining the influence of the church over the immigrants. The PNA on the other hand was more concerned with the interests in Poland and therefore sought to encourage at least some assimilation as to gain influence in the US in order to help Poland. Januszewski, “Organizational Evolution,” 49.
populations, with processions, community discussions, picnics, and bands. These societies helped strengthen Polonia and the connections inside the communities, while fulfilling needs for the immigrants.

Multiple sources mention home-ownership as important for the Poles in Omaha. 90% to 95% of the Poles owned their own homes. In Poland, the idea of status and property ownership were closely linked, explaining the high number of home-ownership in Polish-American communities. There is also the motive to “stake out a place for the family in the physical and moral universe,” and the reasonable calculation of home ownership as a safeguard against economic trouble. In order to own their own home, the Poles developed a strategy that combined family wages in order to accumulate the amount of money necessary. To keep the home costs low, the house might be built by the family with assistance from friends and relatives. In this way, America offered the opportunity for those who were not able to own land in Poland. The need to own was a strong identity trait for the Poles, with roots going back to their time in Europe.

Polish children often received basic education up to confirmation, typically eighth grade. The number of children who stayed in school increased in 1916 after a short-lived child labor law passed. Sometimes, a child was expected to work even before finishing grammar school. Children could also have parochial system instruction, discussed previously with both Immaculate Conception and St. Francis having schooling for those who desired it. Like the Germans from Russia, language was taught in church schools, trying to ensure the continuation

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172 There are still groups that support Polish identity in Omaha, with a group giving scholarships to Polish descendants to go to a Catholic high school. “St. Patrick’s Day,” 5; “A Polish Centennial,” 12; “Poles Celebrate,” Omaha Bee, May 30, 1917, 5.
173 Sullenger, “Problems,” 409; Casper, Catholic Chapters, 184.
174 Federal Writers’ Project: Racial Element in State, Poles.
175 Pula, “Case Study,” 11.
176 Radzilowskif, “Family,” 60.
177 Radzilowskif, “Family,” 60.
of the tradition of the Polish language. Polish was also spoken at home, and children were taught to have pride in their heritage, but parents also encouraged children to learn English, in order to increase their future earning potentials. Learning English and Polish allowed immigrant children to operate in two different spaces, affecting and changing their identities within the community.

The Poles were known in Omaha for their music, dancing, and other celebrations. Organizations such as the Polish Drama Club and the Pulaski Club of America assisted in handing down dances and music from generation to generation. A prime event was the wedding dance, open to the public. In the days before the wedding, the men in the neighborhood would build a large dance floor in the bride’s backyard, and the women would begin the food preparation. The traditional ceremony would last up to three days. After the wedding the couple would be greeted with symbolic salt and bread, and the guests would go to the house for food and drink. During the evenings, spent dancing, the bride “must dance with every man who successfully breaks a plate.” Neighborhood children would show up and tease the bride or groom until given a bribe. Their music was “romantic and spirited.” The Poles played some national songs on special occasions. Through these celebrations, their ethnic identities and traditions were maintained.

As time passed, the Poles in Omaha continued to spread out past the invisible boundaries of their ethnic enclaves. The modern expressways which now intersect Sheelytown and Little Poland cut the neighborhoods into pieces, starting in the late 1950s. As demographics shifted, the

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178 Federal Writers’ Project: Racial Element in State, Poles.
179 Karnash, “History.”
181 Otis and Erickson, _E Pluribus_, 253.
182 Federal Writers’ Project: Racial Element in State, Poles.
183 Federal Writers’ Project: Racial Element in State, Poles; Otis and Erickson, _E Pluribus_, 253.
184 Federal Writers’ Project: Racial Element in State, Poles.
185 Federal Writers’ Project: Racial Element in State, Poles.
Polish-American population moved west to new suburbs.\textsuperscript{186} Family unit stability weakened through assimilation to American culture and values.\textsuperscript{187} The Polish organizations and fraternals started to lose membership numbers as the children of current members had no interest in joining. More intermarriage outside of their enclaves started to occur, and less Polish began to be spoken at home and in churches. South Omaha became home to a new group of immigrants from Central and South America, especially after the 1990s, who also began to work in the meatpacking plants, as well as in construction and food service.\textsuperscript{188}

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\textsuperscript{186} Thompson. "The Polish Home."
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IV. Czechs in Wilber

Nebraska has long been considered a popular place for the Czechs to settle, with the most Czechs settling in Nebraska than any other Great Plains state. In 1910, there were nearly 51,000 Czechs in Nebraska, equaling about 5% of the state’s total population.189 Within Nebraska, the Czechs in Wilber have certainly made a name for themselves. Wilber is known as the “Czech Capital of the U.S.A.,” due to the large number of Czechs who settled there. There were 1,300 Czech families in Saline County in 1904.190 The Czechs in Wilber worked mostly agricultural jobs and bonded through religion, societies, and language.

Ethnic Czechs come from the Eastern European Czech (or Bohemian) lands of Bohemia, Moravia, and Austria Silesia.191 In 1526, Bohemia came under Hapsburg rule, and as a result suffered cultural and religious suppression. At first, the Hapsburgs respected the Protestant beliefs held by most of the nation, but by the 17th century, the Hapsburg rulers began to close down churches and otherwise weaken the Protestant faith. In 1618, the Czech nobles deposed of the king, which sparked the Thirty Years’ War. Two years later Hapsburg forces tragically defeated the Protestant Czechs at White Mountain, and the Czech leaders were executed. Some 38,000 families left rather than convert to Catholicism. The Hapsburgs reduced the Bohemian kingdom to subordinate status, and forcibly Catholicized and Germanized the Czechs who remained.192

Prior to 1840, no one in Bohemia thought of emigrating, due to the wave of prosperity after the Napoleonic Wars.193 Everything was cheap and there was work available. After

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190 Rose Rosicky, A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929), 25.
Droughts and crop failures starting in 1840, the Czechs started to look elsewhere, but the barriers to immigration were insurmountable. When revolution swept through the Hapsburg lands in 1848, the Czechs failed to achieve self-rule in a federated empire, but they did help force emancipation of the peasants, who became free to move and emigrate. Young men also left to avoid military service. In 1850, there were no more than 500 Czechs who had arrived in the United States, but by 1890, some 170,000 Czechs arrived.194

The Czechs started to arrive in Nebraska in noticeable numbers starting in 1863, after the passage of the Homestead Act.195 The cheap land available through the Act allowed them to improve their economic status and support their families.196 A severe depression beginning in 1873 was largely responsible for the next wave of Czech immigrants, and economic reasons continued to play a primary role of immigration in the 1880s and 1890s. Czechs settled in towns, and on farms. Most Czech men worked in agricultural and skilled manufacturing and mechanical jobs. After the cheap land was taken, Czechs started to settle in cities more and more, like the Poles and Germans from Russia who came later than the Czechs.

The early Czechs settled in the land near Wilber in Saline County in Nebraska, most of whom had come from Wisconsin. One-third of all Czech immigrants had settled in Wisconsin by 1860, but some said they were discontented with the climate, others with the soil, so they decided to move on.197 The earliest known Czech settlers in Saline County came in 1865, brothers Frank and Joseph Jelinek and another relative, Vaclav Sestak.198 More Czechs settled in the subsequent years, coming straight from their homeland to Nebraska after receiving encouragements from companies and relatives.

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195 Capek, Czechs in America, 47.
197 Capek, Czechs in America, 47.
198 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, Saline County, 98.
Czechs experienced encouragement from many fronts to immigrate to the United States. Companies like the Burlington & Missouri Railroad Company actively advertised in Czech to encourage Czechs to immigrate to the United States.\textsuperscript{199} The Burlington & Missouri railroad was the only one to offer financial incentives to urge immigrants to move to Nebraska. These incentives included reimbursement for transportation expenses, and even providing discounts on land payments for those who cultivated their land and remained on it for a number of years.\textsuperscript{200} Letters to their homeland from America also attracted past neighbors and acquaintances to Saline County and Wilber.

By 1875, Czech settlement was evident across Saline County, but concentrated near Wilber. Many settled on homesteads and worked as farmers, but others moved to Wilber and held occupations. In 1880, Wilber numbered 710 people, with 220 of them of Czech Descent.\textsuperscript{201} In 1900, the population of Wilber was 1,250, with Czechs comprising about 90% of the inhabitants.

Unlike the other groups discussed, the Czechs did not experience the kind of separation and prejudice from the mainstream community, because they found themselves to be the mainstream community in Wilber. The Czech language became for all Czechs the strongest symbol of their national identity, due to the forced Germanization in their homeland.\textsuperscript{202} As a result, Czech was spoken throughout Wilber, and Czech celebrations took place in the middle and anywhere in the town, there was not a specific area they were enclosed in.\textsuperscript{203} In Wilber, there were many stores that were specifically for Czechs or run by Czechs, including a Czech brewery and a Czech pharmacy.\textsuperscript{204}

\textsuperscript{199} Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, \textit{Saline County}, 99.
\textsuperscript{200} Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, \textit{Saline County}, 99.
\textsuperscript{203} Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, \textit{Saline County}, 98.
\textsuperscript{204} Jan Habenicht, \textit{History of Czechs in America} (Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International, 1996), 158.
Unlike the Germans from Russia and the Poles, the majority of whom retained their religion when they immigrated, some Czechs abandoned the Catholic faith. Approximately one-half of Czech immigrants left the Catholic Church when settling in America. The reason for this abandonment rests in their experience with the Catholic church in Bohemia, where it was used to keep the Czechs in “political subjugation and economic dependence.” In Nebraska, the Czechs were split about evenly between freethinkers and Catholics, with relatively few Protestants. Saline and Fillmore Counties were considered more secularist, with other counties being more Catholic. Not all freethinkers or liberals had the same beliefs, with a handful being militantly atheistic and the majority embracing religious tolerance and agnosticism. Freethinkers were not only an urban phenomenon, half of freethinkers lived on farms. Each religious group, in their own way, pursued the goal of retaining the traditional Czech culture and passing it down to the next generation.

The first Czech Catholic Church in Wilber was built in 1878, and burnt down soon after its completion. A new home was found for the parish in 1882, named St. Wenceslaus after the Czech prince and martyr. Over the next decade, the church was improved. Rural Czechs were more likely to be Catholic than their counterparts, but there was still a portion of freethinkers in Wilber. Some of the second and third generation of freethinkers came back to the church, decades after their parents or grandparents left. Catholic Czechs, like the religious Poles and Germans from Russia, organized and socialized around their church.

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208 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, Saline County, 106.
The Czechs came to America from small towns and villages with an active community life, and the desire for this to continue came over with them. Organizing into groups allowed for Czechs to pursue common interests among those who spoke the same language and came from a similar background. Like the Poles, the groups were also good for social status with so many opportunities through many groups to serve in a leadership position. Scholar Bruce M. Garver categorizes these Czech organizations into five types: “educational and cultural societies, the Sokol organization, fraternal and benevolent orders, cemetery associations, and finally, the Free Congregations.”211 All of these were secular in nature and linked to the freethought movement rather than organized religion. Freethinkers were normally more active in the fraternal lodges and Sokol organizations.212

Wilber had educational and cultural societies and Saline County’s first organization was a Reading Society in 1867, just founded two years after the Czechs had settled there.213 Wilber also had dramatic clubs and singing associations, whose actions and performances will be discussed later on.214

Sokol organizations were specifically Czech organizations; they were throughout the United States and had ties to their homeland. Sokol was founded in 1862 in Prague to celebrate the awakening from two hundred years of repression of the language and national identity and to encourage a healthy mind in a healthy body.215 Along with gymnastics classes, Sokol groups also held theatrical performances and dances. The dances helped fund the theatrical performances.216 Wilber’s Sokol group was founded in 1880 and used the Wilber Opera House

211 There is no evidence of Free Congregations that were uncovered in Saline County. Garver, “Freethinkers,” 155; Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, Saline County, 114.
213 Rosicky, History of Czechs in Nebraska, 347.
215 Rosicky, History of Czechs in Nebraska, 352.
216 Klasek interview.
for their events until they were able to build their own hall in 1891. Like other Czech organizations, membership ebbed and flowed in cycles. The Sokol club in Wilber decreased in numbers dramatically after physical education started to be addressed in schools. In 1910, the Sokol lodge in Wilber had 26 members.

In 1868, some members of the Czech Reading Society were unhappy after discovering the Blue Valley Cemetery would not be limited to just Czech burials. They eventually established the Bohemian National Cemetery, making it the first exclusively Czech cemetery in Nebraska. The Bohemian National Cemetery is halfway between Crete and Wilber, and the tombstones are in both Czech and English. In 1874, Czech settlers held a meeting in Wilber in order to organize another Czech cemetery. They founded the Bohemian-Slavonian Cemetery, a mile west of Wilber. At the same time, the Bohemian Slavonian Cemetery Association formed to oversee the maintenance. The cemetery remained nondenominational. Over 5,000 people are buried at this cemetery, and the gravestones also have Czech or English engravings. The overall arrangement of both cemeteries made an “almost a perfect replica of the cemeteries in the old country.” So in this way, the Czech settlers wanted to maintain their heritage by only burying Czechs next to other Czechs, and by organizing the cemeteries in a familiar way.

Freethinking fraternal and benevolent societies provided the same things promoted by churches: fellowship, community, and civic service, along with death and sick benefits, and Wilber had these in folds. Where membership numbers were strong, the lodges built halls for concerts, dances, and plays. One national organization present in Wilber was called Česko-

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217 Klasek interview.
219 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, *Saline County*, 111.
220 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, *Saline County*, 112.
221 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, *Saline County*, 112.
Slovenská Podporující Společnost or ČSPS (Czech-Slavonic Benevolent Society). It was founded in St. Louis in 1854, and the Wilber Lodge, Lodge Svojan, was founded in 1878. The popularity of this lodge began to diminish in the 1890s because they charged all members the same premium regardless of age, they only allowed women to join if their husbands were already members, and then gave these women less benefits than men, and they were also anticlerical. In 1910, the lodge still had 65 members.

In 1897, another Czech organization was formed in Omaha, the Západni Česko-Bratrská Jednota or ZČBJ (Western Bohemian Fraternal Organization). The ZČBJ attracted members put off by the policies of the ČSPS. They adjusted life insurance premiums according to age, allowed women and men to join on equal terms, and held no stance on religion. As a result of their stances, the popularity grew, and about a third of the members were women. By 1910, the Praha Lodge in Wilber, which was founded in 1898, had 170 members.

Women’s only organizations were founded around the country, and also took hold in Wilber. The Union of Bohemian Women, Jednota Ceskych Dam (JCD), was established in Chicago in 1870 and the first Nebraska lodge came into being in Wilber in 1885. A smaller women’s organization, the Sesterska Podporující Jednota (SPJ) or the Sisterhood Benevolent Union was founded in 1890 in Cleveland, and had a lodge established in Wilber in 1897.

Education ranked high on the agenda for Czech settlers across the United States, both for self-improvement and for their children to prepare for success in their new country by learning English. Most Czechs in Nebraska did not send their children to high school, due to the

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224 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, Saline County, 119.
225 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, Saline County, 120.
226 Habenicht, History of Czechs in America, 159.
227 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, Saline County, 120; ZČBJ: Lodge Praha Minutes, Czech Heritage Collection (MS 085). Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries.
228 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, Saline County, 120; Habenicht, History of Czechs in America, 159.
229 Šašová-Pierce, “Czech-Language Maintenance,” 211.
necessity of the children’s work at home at that age. Like other immigrant groups, the language was spoken at home, and English was spoken at school. Children who lived in the country went to country schools. One country school, north of Wilber, was only attended by Czech children and taught by a Czech girl, but English was still the only language spoken at school. One country school taught Czech on Saturday afternoons to upper-level pupils, and then they performed a Czech skit for an end of year program.

The Czechs, unlike the Poles and Germans from Russia, continued working in agriculture after arriving in the United States. Of the one in three Czechs who settled west of the Mississippi, approximately half of them became farmers. Others become skilled laborers, businessmen, or entered a profession.

Similar to the Germans from Russia and Poles, intermarriage between Czechs was high. Since most of the people in the Wilber area were Czech, it was extremely easy to marry another Czech, perhaps meeting at a dance or in school. There were, however, exceptions. A daughter of Frank Sadilek, Irma, fell in love with Laurence Wild, who was not Czech. Her parents felt “that she had no business marrying him,” but the couple still married. In this way, the Czech traditions, culture, and values were passed down through this intermarriage system.

Wilber had an especially vibrant art culture, with both dances and theatrical performances. Either could be sponsored by fraternal organizations, the Dramatic Club of Sokol Wilber, or St. Wenceslaus Parish. There could be local actors or visiting theatrical groups from Omaha or other towns. The first theater performance held in Czech was in 1877, in the opera house built in 1876.

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233 Garver, “Freethinkers,” 147.
234 Frank J. Sadilek, Frank’s Wilber: The Early Days of the Czech Capital of Nebraska (Wilber: The Nebraska Czechs of Wilber, 1999), 131. This was originally written by Frank Sadilek in Czech in the 1910s, but was then translated into English in 1999.
In 1893, a dramatic club named Tyl was established and started producing plays, though performances had already been given for years. The performers would put advertisements in the Wilber newspaper. One, from September 30th, 1877, was for the Bohemian Theatre at Hokuf’s Hall in Wilber, with “The Popular Drama in Five Acts, entitled Incendiary’s Daughter.” Admission was twenty-five cents, and fifteen cents for those under twelve. A follow-up piece of gossip said that it was well-attended, with there being about 500 present, and other Czechs recalled there being sometimes 300 to 400 people present at other performances.

The plays would be in Czech and would celebrate their heritage. One play performed was a remembrance of the burning of John Hus, the great Bohemian reformer. Due to the plays being in Czech, it allowed for the knowledge of the language to persist, especially for the children who would act in these plays, some of whom learned Czech by acting in the plays. The plays could also be put on to celebrate achievements and milestones, with plays to celebrate 2,000 members of ZCBJ Lodge Libuse No. 70 in 1916, and in 1917, a play to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the JCD Lodge in Wilber. The Czech band established in Nebraska was in 1867, by Jan M. Svobada in Saline County. There was a number of bands, with some for children and girls, and others for adults. These musical and theatrical performances were a way to connect with their Czech culture, language, and community.

Czech immigrants were highly literate, and as a result they highly valued school and print materials. It was estimated that in 1900 about 150,000 Czech-Americans subscribed to one

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236 Kucera, *Dramas*, 142.
237 Lad Skopec interview.
238 Kucera, *Dramas*, 145.
239 Mrs. Lad Skopec interview by Joseph Svoboda, October 21, 1975. Czech Heritage Collection (MS 085). Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries; Klasek interview. Both said that either they or a parent learned Czech in this way.
240 Kucera, *Dramas*, 149.
242 Vladimir Kucera, *Czech Music in Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1979), 58.
The first Czech paper in Wilber, Beseda (Friendly Meeting), was published in 1878. A collection of other Czech papers came and went throughout the years. Noviny (News) was a weekly paper from Wilber that was shut down within the first year in 1892. The Wilberské Listy (Wilber Paper) was also a weekly paper from Wilber founded in 1892 but merged with the Delnické Listy of Omaha in 1894. The Czech language and culture of literacy was continued in Wilber through these numerous newspapers published in Wilber, and those who subscribed to bigger Czech newspapers from across the country.

Politically, the Czechs held a number of offices in Saline County, especially as compared to the other groups examined. Due to the large majority of Czechs in the area, they could vote for and elect those who they felt would represent their interests, unlike the Germans from Russia and Poles, who were minorities in their areas. Frantisek Sadilek held the county treasurer’s office and was even chosen as an electorate for the 1896 presidential election. Czechs also served as county treasurers, county clerks, and county recorders. Also due to the high-level of Czechs in Saline County, they were able to elect multiple Czechs to the House branch of the State Legislature, starting in 1881.

The Czechs used similar building ideals in Saline County as they did in their homeland. There, houses were built of logs, timber, or mass wall construction. The material choice depended on geography, but also the wealth of whoever was building. Similar to their homeland, the Czechs in Wilber used whatever was close, with the first settlers making a dugout shelter with sod and wood. As soon as settlers were able, they began to build fully wood houses. Masonry construction was also used in Saline County by the Czechs, but also depended on the

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244 Habenicht, History of Czechs in America, 160.
245 Habenicht, History of Czechs in America, 158.
246 Rosicky, History of Czechs in Nebraska, 151.
247 Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, Saline County, 100.
economic resources of the immigrant. As a result, the longer the Czechs started to be in Saline County, the more the houses developed.

Czech life in Nebraska, which had been strong for several decades, by the 1920s showed signs of weakening, in part due to prejudicial pressures of Americanization. Organizations started to change their record keeping from Czech to English to attract and accommodate the new generation.248 By the time the second generation of Czechs outnumbered the first, the Czech language started to disappear. Similar to other groups, WW1 and the subsequent ideal of Americanization started to decrease the cultural and tradition maintenance by the communities, especially when intermarriage began to occur. Some Czechs stayed in the area, some spread out, but the weakening and lessening of the Czech culture in Wilber continued.249 In 1962 however, there was a revival of Czech heritage, and the annual Czech festival in Wilber began. In the inaugural year, it attracted 20,000 people.250 Eventually, Wilber was deemed the “Czech Capital of the U.S.A.” by President Reagan in 1987.

248 ZČBJ: Lodge Praha Minutes.
249 Mrs. Lad Skocpol interview
V. Conclusion

After looking at these immigrant groups, many similarities and differences can be seen. What is clear though, is that these groups settled in ethnic enclaves, and used various institutions to hold tight to their traditions. Scholars have pointed out that all three of these groups faced alienation from the mainstream in their old countries, and as a result, had experience in keeping to themselves and maintaining their traditions within their communities.251

Institutions like churches, fraternal organizations both within and outside of churches, and traditional family structures (including intermarriage and chain migration) assisted in maintaining these immigrants’ culture and language.252 Institutions like public schools assisted in Americanizing immigrant children, with the children learning English, usually at the urging of their parents who understood the importance of the language in finding a job and fitting in. Parochial or ethnic schools assisted in the continuation of the heritage and language, but eventually had to shut down due to decreasing enrollment.

All of these groups still have some legacy in their respective areas. The descendants of the Germans from Russia established the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, and founded a museum near the South Bottoms in Lincoln. They have a quarterly journal and host an annual conference.253 The North Bottoms is still referred to as such, though now it symbolizes college housing and parties. The Poles in Omaha have their Polish Home building, Belvedere Hall, in downtown Papillion, as well as the Polish Heritage Society of Nebraska, with 540 members in November 2018.254 They hold various events promoting Polish culture in the Omaha

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252 “The ethnic church’s mission was not simply to bring God to the people. It also dominated immigrants’ activities and time, thus helping maintain ethnic identity and slow assimilation.” Screws, “Tools,” 50.
area. Where the original Polish settlements were, a mural stands honoring their contributions to the area. As mentioned previously, the Czechs in Wilber have their annual Czech days, and also host the annual Miss Czech/Slovak U.S. Pageant. In this way, the cultures are remembered as something to celebrate, remember, and support.

In 1910, the foreign-born population in the state was 176,662 accounting for 14.8% of the total population. Immigrants in Nebraska often faced (and still do) prejudice and discrimination and as a result, settled amongst themselves to slow assimilation into the main culture. Today, Nebraska is a melting pot of different backgrounds and cultures due to the number of immigrants who settled here. Nebraska is still a common destination for refugees and immigrants alike. Between October 2015 and September 2016, Nebraska led the nation in resettling the most refugees per capita, with 76 per 100,000 Nebraskans, or 1,441 refugees. Immigrants also make their homes here, now coming from Mexico, India, China, Guatemala, and El Salvador. These settlers come to Nebraska for some of the same reasons the Polish, Czech, and German from Russian immigrants: economic reasons and knowledge of an existing community in place for them to join.

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