

"They Chose This Place" or did "This Place Choose Them"?

As the 'family genealogist' I was asked to give a talk on the history of our Bednar family, at our annual Oak Leaf Park family reunion celebration a few years ago. I opened my presentation by informing my relatives that there were both good and bad aspects to being the family genealogist. For example, one bad thing was that the job was indeed an unpaid position and involved many hours of thankless work. However, the good news was my family had agreed to give me a 10% pay raise, to become effective next year!

And then I showed them the following picture and asked the question if anybody knew the name of the place or what its significance was?



My relatives shrugged their shoulders and no one could recognize this unfamiliar but naturally-beautiful and peaceful looking place. A few people wondered if it might be the ancestral village of the Bednar family and if so, when could we arrange our trip to go there?

The answer: the home village of Martin McLeod otherwise known as Glencoe, Scotland—the namesake of the settlement that he founded in May of 1855, which was Glencoe, Minnesota.

The first wave of white settlers to McLeod County primarily consisted of English speaking people from England, Ireland, and Scotland. Many of these settlers were descendants of families who already lived

for generations in America, transplants from East Coast who came to lay claim to the land and to seek their fortunes in the 'Big Woods' of Minnesota, by buying low and selling high.

The Big Woods (a direct translation of 'Grand Bois', the name given to the region by French explorers) was at the western edge of the great deciduous forest that swept over the middle United States from the Atlantic coast to the Great Plains. In Minnesota the deciduous belt ran from the northwest to the southeast, thickening in the middle to form the Big Woods. There, elm, basswood, sugar maple, and red oak covered more than 3,000 square miles, rising high in the air to form a vast canopy that nearly obliterated the sun during the leafy summer months. (<http://www.waymarking.com>).

It is a romantic American notion that our immigrant ancestors, i.e. the 'huddled masses', came to the 'New World' and kept on traveling until they found a locale that reminded them of their home country. Then they unpacked and plunked down their roots to start a new life, to enjoy their religious freedom.

That would make a great story, however, I have to believe in many cases, our immigrant ancestors simply settled in the place where their wagon broke down or perhaps where they ran out of money.

But what about the foreign-language speaking Czech immigrants who decided to settle in and around the area now known as Silver Lake, McLeod County, Minnesota? Why this place? Who were the first Czechs to arrive in McLeod County and why did hundreds upon hundreds of more Czechs follow their example?

For answers to some of these questions, we can turn to Silver Lake native, teacher, historian, and librarian at the Minnesota Historical Society, Ms. Esther Jerabek (1897-1979), who in 1934, wrote about the early Czech community of Silver Lake:

"Many of the Czechs selected the towns of Racine or Caledonia on Lake Michigan as their first destination upon their arrival in the United States. For several years they led a hand-to-mouth existence. The report of free land farther west lured them on. On April 1, 1858, a little more than a month before Minnesota became a state, Václav Kašpar, Josef Malý, and Antonín Navrátil left Racine with their families for McLeod County, Minnesota. (Source: "Ze zkušeností starších osadníků českých v Americe " in *Amerikán : národní kalendář, 1891*, 188. This Czech-American almanac was published at Chicago.)

On the journey ox teams were used to convey the children and the most necessary household goods. The few roads were so poor that the caravan preferred to use the prairie beside them. Not until July 6 did the settlers reach their destination, and then only after experiencing many dangers and hardships.

The homesteads that the Czech immigrants chose were in a thickly wooded area situated about five miles east of Hutchinson and ten miles north of Glencoe. (Source: Records of the claims made by the earliest Czech settlers in McLeod County are to be found in the " Register of Declaratory Statements filed in the Land Office at Minneapolis," 1855-1860, nos. 7705, 7706, 7707, 8153, 8154, 8218, and 8219. This volume is among the archives of the Minneapolis Land Office in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society.)

Their first task was to clear enough land for gardens in order to raise their food supply. The rest of the land was cleared gradually. Jan Kašpar, a fourteen-year-old boy at the time that his father's family

arrived in McLeod County, tells of their bitter poverty during the first years. Several times the elder Kašpar walked the fifty-five miles to Minneapolis to seek employment and earn enough money to supply the most urgent needs of his family. Meanwhile the others toiled early and late, clearing the land and planting and harvesting what crops there were.

Glencoe and Hutchinson had been settled in 1855, but as trading places they were unimportant. Trips had to be made, usually by ox team, through forty miles of almost pathless forests to Carver, for there the nearest flour mill was located, and there the Czech settlers took their grain to be ground. They followed the beds of streams with wagons wherever possible, but they often found it necessary to unload and carry their produce through the woods and over swampy places. Because of danger from the Indians the settlers went heavily armed and sought protection in numbers.” (Source “THE TRANSITION OF A NEW-WORLD BOHEMIA”, Esther Jerabek, 1934)

And so to recap: the first three Czech families arrived in McLeod County in the spring of 1858, just before Minnesota became a state, as the settlements of Glencoe and Hutchinson were just turning three years old. Specifically, they settled on the Northern part of Rich Valley Township, in the area where the Bohemian National Cemetery would be located.

Of these first families: the Kašpar family from Choceň (near Vysoké Mýto) in the Pardubice region of Bohemia and the Navrátil family from Borová (near Polička)--a town about 30 miles South, just over the borderline of Pardubice into the Moravian region known as Vysočina, the Czech word for ‘highlands’. These families met in the rural Czech settlement of Caledonia, Racine County, Wisconsin before deciding to head West to McLeod County to acquire land for little or no money, but the pioneer challenges they faced were immense. The immediate areas surrounding the Czech towns of Vysoké Mýto and Polička would factor largely into the future of McLeod County, as they were the primary source of immigrants that would build and shape the character of the Czech community that would become Silver Lake.

NEXT COLUMN: the Story of Caledonia, Racine County, Wisconsin—the place where rural Czechs gathered before coming to McLeod County.

In Memoriam : Stanley M. Drahoš (1933-2012)

This column would like to pay its respects to the family of Stanley Drahos, a Silver Lake native, who recently passed away on Sunday March 11th. Former postmaster of Silver Lake, he was an active supporter of the local community and his church. Stanley was genuinely loved and respected by all who had the privilege to know him. Blessed be his memory!

©2012 Anthony J. Kadlec. If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: tkadlec@gmail.com or call me: (651) 271-0422 or send your letters to my attention: 1408 Fairmount Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. See this article online at: www.kadlecovi.com
Děkuji! Tony Kadlec