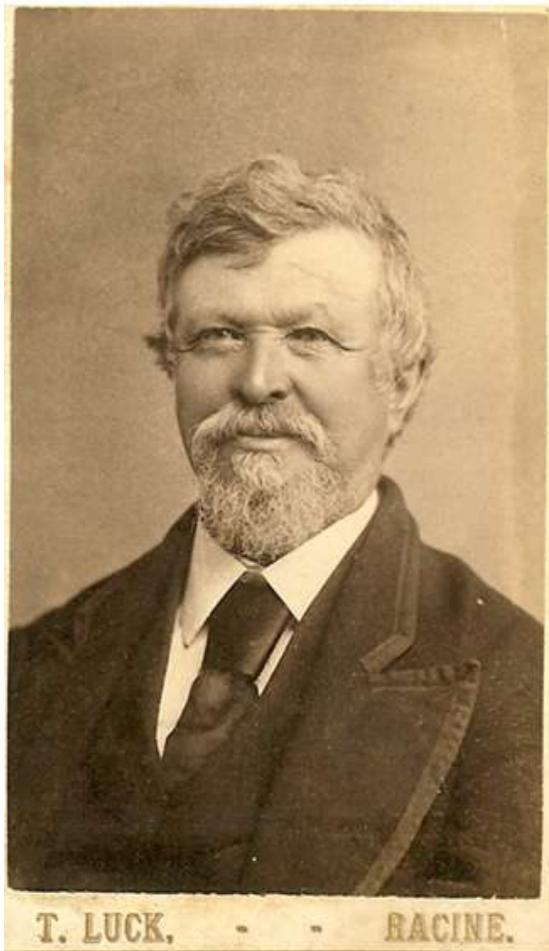


Reconnecting with Caledonia, Racine County, Wisconsin

So how do you proceed to write the biography of your ancestors whose lives were not noted in history books, but who happened to live in a historically notable time and place? You take any clues you can find and look for any sort of association to those who were documented as notable individuals, infer as much as possible and hope for a lucky break in your research.

After spending years pouring over dozens of unlabeled mid 19th century photos retained by my Kadlec family from their earliest days in America (specifically Caledonia, Racine County Wisconsin), a lucky break did occur.

I was reading through a book called History of Czechs in America, which was written by Jan Habenicht, a Czech immigrant and a doctor who traveled around the United States and documented the Czech communities he encountered. A very familiar face appeared on page 296 in the section on Racine County, Wisconsin—I knew this guy! I had seen him in multiple photos from my family’s album and had assumed that he must have been a relative. His name was Anton Kroupa (Kraupa), a well-respected man, reputed to be the very first Czech settler in the City of Racine.



Wrote Habenicht about Anton Kroupa:

“The first Czech to arrive in “Czech Bethlehem”, as Racine was called by the first Czechs, was Antonín Kroupa (Kraupa) in 1848. He was born in Vlašim in 1816.

He arrived in America shortly after the 1848 Prague uprising, and he for a short time ran a draper’s business in Cleveland for twelve dollars a month. After sixteen weeks, poor and desolate, he left Cleveland for Racine. Thanks to his perseverance and honesty, he achieved fair wealth and the respect of his fellow Racine citizens.

After his arrival in Racine, Kroupa worked at many jobs as a day laborer. He then received a job in J. Conroe’s hardware store where he worked for sixteen years, first as a hand, and later, as an assistant.

After Mr. Conroe’s death in 1865 he ran the store himself. He died in Racine on October 30, 1900.”

Photo of Czech settler Anton Kraupa from the personal collection of my great great grandfather Josef Kadlec, the very same photo published in History of Czechs in America by Jan Habenicht.

Learning of my family's connection to the notable Anton Kroupa got me to thinking that there might be more information about my family that could be uncovered in Racine County. Subsequently I have made multiple trips to this picturesque place where Wisconsin meets Lake Michigan, to the village of Caledonia, which is 20 miles South of Milwaukee. By highways and Interstate freeway a motorist can make the 400 mile trip to Caledonia from Silver Lake in about 7 hours. This is not bad considering that back in the 1850's the journey from Caledonia to McLeod County would have been an arduous, off-road, ox cart adventure that took two months!

Wisconsin was perhaps, the most important destination of the Czech rural immigration to America. In Wisconsin we can find the first Czech farming town Caledonia, which was later called Tabor, named for a Gypsy word meaning "gathering place". Czechs preferred Wisconsin for many reasons. There were many German settlements in the middle of the 19th century, Czechs could speak German and it was easier for them to start somewhere where they could understand the local people. The land was cheap here and the wooded landscape of Wisconsin also reminded them their homeland. They used timber as instant building material and a source of income to buy farming equipment.

The weather was as damp and cool as in the Czech lands; however, the extremes between summer and winter were something Czechs had not experienced in their homeland. Czechs in Wisconsin grew the same crops as back home and the grain production led them to establish several breweries. So Czechs in Wisconsin were not only farmers but also entrepreneurs thanks to the traditional Czech great consumption of beer.

In the 1850s most of the Czech immigrants congregated in Wisconsin; however, after the introduction of the Homestead Act in 1862, not only the newly-arrived Czechs but also the Czechs who had already settled in Wisconsin moved farther west in search for better opportunities and better climate. But the weather in the prairie states was definitely not less extreme, so they did not help themselves too much in this respect. Czechs looked for better land in Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois. They found less severe weather only in western parts of Illinois (Polišenský, 1996; Saxon-Ford, 1998).

In 1910 Habenict wrote this wonderful historical account of the Czech immigrant settlement of Caledonia, Wisconsin:

"Located eight miles north of Racine, on the west shore of Lake Michigan is the rich Czech colony of CALEDONIA. About 300 Bohemian and Moravian families live there.

The strongest wave of immigrants began in 1856 and lasted until 1866. At the turn of the 1860's and into the 1870's, an exodus from Caledonia took place, especially to McLeod County, Minnesota, to Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas. But they did not leave Caledonia because of poverty, on the contrary, they did very well; the reason was that there was no more land to buy for sons and daughters in the town of Caledonia.

Many of the emigrants now have hundreds of acres of land in the other states, while in Caledonia just a few compatriots who managed to carry out purchases lot by lot have over 100 acres. Anyway, many of

our people have 20, 40, 80 and even 100 acres there. (An average cost is now \$125 per acre, but there was even a purchase of an acre of the best land for \$200, i.e. 1,000 crowns!)

The beginnings for the Czech farmers who had settled in Caledonia in the early years were severe. Nobody could begin a journey without an axe, because even the route to Racine had not been cut through the forest. Ditches were bridged with beams, logs and branches so that they could drive wagons over them. This was the method used to cover bogs and marshes. First they laid out long beams, over them logs next to one another and then branches and brushwood. At that time there was nothing but dark virgin forest, full of marshes and bogs, and it was easy to lose one's way. Here and there near the muddy road there was a shabby dwelling. Later when the residents did better, they converted the original dwelling into a cowshed. At first, everyone cut and burned trees—in the cold, in the heat, in the rain. During spring they hoed the soil between the stumps and planted potatoes and sweet corn.

In the early spring, while light frosts still appeared, everybody cooked “molasses” from maples for sweetening “coffee”, made of roasted endive mixed with some roasted corn.

They preserved deer meet in hollow stumps because they had no barrels. Those who were lucky to have a team, from time to time loaded a wagon with wood and carried it to Racine, and when they received a dollar or a half a bag of flour, they happily sat on the wagon and drove home, loudly singing folk songs.

Harmony and sincere love prevailed among the first colonists. They would share the very last piece of bread and nobody had the slightest idea of cheating the others. When they met by a river or lake, they reminisced about the times in the old homeland when their work was not so difficult. They were happy to see and love another like brothers.

It certainly took a very long time to turn the wild forest to green meadows and fertile fields! In locations where only the bells of grazing cattle could be heard and wild birds seen, where no one could cross the marshes in winter, now you can find nice buildings surrounded with barns, cowsheds, stables, granaries, gardens and fields that bring more and more crops every year and amply reward a good farmer's work.

This interesting colony where the history of the Czech country people in America established its roots has never been a purely Czech village or town. It is one of the towns in Racine County where Czechs once made a majority of the population, but today they do not. Many of them died, a large number of the others migrated to other states and so Czechs lost their former majority in the town of Caledonia. Czech farms are no longer even neighbors of one another they are mixed with Americans, Irishmen, Germans, etc. as they are in most other parts of the Country.

There are no more Czech colonies in Racine County [as of 1910] . . . All that once was, is no more. These Czech colonies died out.” ([History of Czechs in America](#), Habenicht, p 303-306)

To a twenty-first century genealogist seeking to imagine and to mentally recreate the nineteenth century circumstances of my Kadlec family's first years in America, specifically in Caledonia, Wisconsin, Habenict's words are very insightful.

Firstly, the farming neighborhoods of Caledonia such as “Tabor” (literally: “gathering place”) were indeed an initial place of gathering for these Czech immigrants to get their first foothold in their newly adopted country, before moving along to the next place where they could perhaps establish themselves more upon the terms of their own choosing.

Secondly, the travails and work that these early immigrants faced was undoubtedly hard and full of existential threat and heartache. Despite these trials and tribulations, these immigrants banded together in the spirit of their culture for survival, to live day by day.

And thirdly, by the turn of the twentieth century, the outward signs of the thriving Czech colony of Caledonia were no longer visible to the writer Habenicht; this observation was certainly confirmed one hundred years later, on my first trip to do historical research in Caledonia. Despite the presence of the Bohemian National Cemetery and old Czech schoolhouse which still exist in Caledonia, there is apparently no remaining critical mass of Czech descendants to sustain the cultural legacy of this once vibrant Czech settlement, which transplanted itself in other parts of the country, namely in and around the village of Silver Lake, McLeod County, Minnesota.

However, my second and third trips back to Racine County were indeed more fruitful, yielding clues to finding where my family had once lived, worked, and developed relationships that resulted in marriages and new family lines that still thrive in McLeod County today, some 150 years later.

History of Czechs in America by Jan Habenicht (English version), is published by Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International. For more information please go to www.cgsi.org.

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