

WEAVING TOGETHER THE STORIES OF YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

Genealogy research is a lot like Neil Diamond music or the pastime of doing crossword puzzles—you are probably really ‘into it’ or you are not.

But if you’ve ever attempted to engage a crossword puzzle to its conclusion, you realize that there is more than one answer that seems to fit for a given clue or question. If you have sloppy skills, you can choose to accept the first answer that comes to your mind and write it down and build upon it and fill in the spaces. But when you’re almost done and think you’ve solved the puzzle, you’ll get to that point where you realize the error of your ways. If you’re a perfectionist, you’ll need to backtrack, rework the questionable areas until you are satisfied. Someone might even look over your shoulder and give you some free advice or correct your work. When you’ve triumphantly completed your puzzle, you’ll let it sit on your nightstand or coffee table for a period of time until you or someone else eventually gets around to throwing it away.

For better or worse, the fate of crossword puzzles also applies to the genealogy research we do and the family stories that we retell or bother to write down.

“A family, like any group, passes through time and change collecting, modifying, discarding, and forgetting stories. In the process of doing this it knits itself into one, recasts itself, comes unraveled and unless written, is finally entirely forgotten.”

(Jacob’s Well, p. 128, by Minnesota-based historian, Joe Amato).

It was this sentiment, which really motivated me to start writing a book on the story of my Kadlec family. One might call it the ‘fear of being forgotten’, but in simple terms, I wanted my three sons to have the opportunity of someday being able to pick this book up to read and know at least some of the stories that helped to define the character of our family over the many generations of its development.

My interest in the roots of my Kadlec family deepened when my family moved to my grandparent’s farm (originally established in 1866), where my father and previous generations of Kadlecs had grown up, just West of Swan Lake and North of the Bohemian Cemetery. Occasionally as a teenager I would meet old timers around the Silver Lake area who were contemporaries of my grandpa Joe and I would ask them what they remembered about him and my other previously departed ancestors, to see if their stories corroborated with what I had heard from others.

Once while in the process of getting a haircut from Phil Pilarski, in the old main street barbershop in Silver Lake, I learned that he had known my great grandfather, Albin. I thought to myself--what an opportunity! Here was my chance to get a firsthand account of Albin from someone who knew him on a personal level, many years ago. And so I asked him what he remembered about Albin. This barber’s primary recollection: “Albin had very hairy ears.” To my disappointment, he had no other information to share with me.

Through the years these family stories and legends were told and retold and gradually absorbed into our collective family memory. Some of these stories seemed unfair to me, such as the story about my great great grandmother Francis (Kutina) Kadlec. She held the dubious distinction of having accidentally overflowed the bathtub on the second floor of the then new Kadlec farmhouse, ruining the plaster ceiling of the first floor below. To this day, I cannot look up at that repaired ceiling in the back hallway without thinking about her.

At some later point in time, the ruined plaster story reminded me of Albin's hairy ears and then a lesson dawned on me: even though the arc of a person's life has ended, it still lives on, reflected in the curious observations and memories of others. It makes you wonder which of your foibles will be told about you and your life by future generations, doesn't it? Perhaps that is another reason you ought to start writing down your version of your family story—having a good offense might be your best defense.

In my case, I started writing down my Kadlec family stories over the course of about a dozen business trips to China, as an insomniac with a bad case of homesickness and a lack of English channels on the television in my hotel room.

The writing process caused me to reflect upon my experience of growing up in the Czech community of Silver Lake. The family stories we shared over the years helped me to understand that I was the product of a long line of proud Moravian people (yes Moravian) of strong character. Case in point: my great-great grandfather, Anton Čačka, who chopped off the trigger finger of his right hand and moved his sons out of the Austrian Empire, so they wouldn't be conscripted to fight against their Czech cousins in the name of the Austrian military.

As I started researching my father's Czech roots, I found wasn't too difficult to get started—my great grandfather Albin Theodore Kadlec (born 1881) and his father Josef (born 1838) and his father František (born 1800) were all interred in the nearby Bohemian National Cemetery, which was co-founded by Josef Kadlec in 1873 just over the hill from the Kadlec farm where I was raised.

While in the midst of sorting out the tangle of descendants of the fifteen children of my great great grandfather Josef and his wife Francis, there remained a series of unanswered, fundamental questions: what was the home village of the Kadlec family? What members of our family made that fateful trip across the Atlantic and what was their motivation for leaving? When did they arrive on the American shores and what was that journey like? How did they come to arrive in the Czech settlement of Silver Lake, Minnesota? And what family members were left behind, if any?

NEXT COLUMN: Finding the clues that helped me to start answering the above questions ...

Mluvíte česky? Do You Speak Czech?

Kdo hledá, najde ('KAH-do HLEH-da NYE-deh') - He who looks, finds.

As a rule, you should always stress the first syllable of a Czech word!

IN MEMORIAM: Vaclav Havel (5 October 1936 – 18 December 2011)



Vaclav Havel was a Czech playwright, essayist, poet, dissident and politician. He was the tenth and last president of Czechoslovakia (1989–92) and the first President of the Czech Republic (1993–2003). He wrote over 20 plays and numerous non-fiction works, translated internationally.

Beginning in the 1960s, his work turned to focus on the politics of Czechoslovakia. After the Prague Spring, he became increasingly active. In 1977, his involvement with the human rights manifesto Charter 77 brought him international fame as the leader of the opposition in Czechoslovakia; it also led to his imprisonment. The 1989 Velvet Revolution launched Havel into the presidency. In this role, he led Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic to multi-party democracy. His thirteen years in office saw radical change in his nation, including its split with Slovakia, which Havel opposed, its accession into NATO and start of the negotiations for membership in the European Union, which was attained in 2004. (Source: Wikipedia.org)

"The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and human responsibility."

-Vaclav Havel

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Děkuji! Tony Kadlec