

Over the next several columns, I would like to present the work of Silver Lake native and historian Esther Jerabek (1897-1979), who in 1934 wrote the following historical account of Czech immigrants who settled into the Silver Lake area.

THE TRANSITION OF A NEW-WORLD BOHEMIA – PART 1

A paper read at the afternoon session of the eighty-fifth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, held in the Historical Building, St. Paul, on January 8, 1934.

In the years immediately following the unsuccessful revolution of 1848, the Czechs were finding life in their native land under Austrian rule more and more unbearable. They were irked by political oppression, the economic status of the majority was deplorable, many chafed under the requirements imposed by military service and under the religious intolerance of the government. After the Hussite wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the defeated remnants of Hus's followers were driven into the mountainous districts of Bohemia and Moravia. (Source: Robert I. Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village, 9* (Louisville, 1933); *Průvodce po českých katolických osádkách v arcidiecesi St. Paulské*, 189 (Chicago, 1910). Unless otherwise indicated, all works cited in this paper may be found in the library of the Minnesota Historical Society.)

They might have been forced to submit to the Austrian rule of church and state if the Reformation under Luther had not again aroused them to a consciousness of their religious status. For more than a hundred years all their political and religious activities took place in secret under unremitting persecution. At the beginning of the fifties of the last century, after the hopes of the Czechs had once more been shattered, the United States immigration agents found fertile soil for propaganda among the members of the dissatisfied sects of Hussites and Moravian Brethren.

Wisconsin was then making strenuous efforts to attract settlers from northern and central Europe. Thousands of Germans were immigrating to the vicinity of Milwaukee, which became known as the German Athens. There they were joined by large groups of Protestant Czechs, who felt a religious sympathy for the German Lutherans and were familiar with the German language.

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 Maly, and Antonín Navratil 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 is 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.

In 1859 the three Czech families already living in McLeod County were joined by those of Josef Vosmek, Josef Zicha, Antonín Nunvař, and Jan Vaňous, all acquaintances from Caledonia, where they had resided for several years after their arrival from Bohemia. Other settlers followed, taking homesteads close by in the present township of Rich Valley. In the first town election in 1859 thirteen votes were cast. (Source: *Amerikán, 1891*, 188. Six Czech families are listed in the manuscript population schedule of the census for Rich Valley Township, McLeod County, 1860, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.)

During the Sioux uprising of 1862 the village of Hutchinson was partly destroyed and several persons met death at the hands of the Indians. The Czech families, now fourteen in number, were compelled to seek safety in an improvised stockade which they had built for themselves. (Source: William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2: 163 (St. Paul, 1924); *Amerikán, 1891*, 189.) Within it they placed their personal property and live stock. All the men and boys were armed and the stockade was carefully guarded. The Indians kept circling it just out of gunshot, but hesitated to attack; and since the settlers were cautious also, they escaped with their lives. Most of their crops that year were left standing. Only the fields nearest the stockade were harvested, and those by men with guns at their sides.



"The siege of New Ulm, Minn", a painting by Henry August Schwabe, 1902. It depicts an attack on New Ulm on August 19, during the Dakota War (Sioux Uprising) of 1862.

Jan Kašpar, among others, was drafted into service as a scout. The scouting parties consisted of groups of five or nine young men, well acquainted with the surrounding country. Their duties consisted of tracking the Indians, watching their movements, and warning the settlers whenever they were in danger. Their days and nights were filled with peril and discomfort, but they soon became as skillful in wood and nature craft as the Indians themselves. After the Indian troubles were over, the settlers were able to devote their time to cultivating the land. They increased rapidly in number, as they were followed by many fellow countrymen from eastern Wisconsin.

Esther Jerabek, 1934, The Transition of a New-World Bohemia, P. 27 , 1934, St. Paul, Minnesota, Minnesota Historical Society Press.

Mluvíte Český? Do You Speak Czech?

Stokrát nic umořilo osla (A hundred times nothing killed the donkey)

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

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. Thanks! Tony Kadlec