

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

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 2

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.

Many of the settlers who arrived in the community between 1870 and 1880 came directly from Bohemia and Moravia. Most of them were from such border towns as Polička, Litomyšl, Choceň, Nové Město, and Telecí. Only a few were from southern Bohemia. (Source: *Průvodce po českých katolických osádkách*, 190.)

As was the case with other foreign settlements, immigrants were generally attracted to localities that already were settled by a number of people of their own nationality. Often they followed relatives or friends. It is difficult to ascertain what part letters written by settlers to friends and kinsmen in the homeland played in inducing others to emigrate. That such letters were influential is indicated by the fact that relatives and acquaintances did join many of the earlier emigrants. Some used methods of their own in deciding where to settle. At least one of the pioneers of the McLeod County community applied to a steamship company in Bremen for information and help in making arrangements. (Source: A group of fourteen letters relating to the arrangements made by Jan Jeřábek for transporting a group of Czech families from Moravia to America is in the Jeřábek Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. See Karesch and Stotský to Jeřábek, May 2, 1873, to April 22, 1874; Anton Borovec to Jeřábek, December 17, 1873; Jan Nunvař to Jeřábek, April 1, 24, 29, 1874.)

Late arrivals in the settlement were unable to obtain claims of government land such as were taken by the first Czech settlers, so they purchased farms from the original Yankee homesteaders, many of whom were ready for other ventures on land farther west. The community was from the beginning, and still is, primarily agricultural.

By 1874 a few houses had been built beside Silver Lake, from which the village later took its name. It was first known as Fremont. Theodore Mimms, originally of Kentucky, built and operated a general store and a sawmill there. In 1881 he sold his property to John Mimms, Jan Jeřábek, and Jan Totušek, who cooperated in laying out a town site. Together they conducted the mercantile business for three years, at the end of which time Mimms sold his share to the other two, who continued in partnership for three years more. After that they divided the stock and Totušek started a store of his own at the east end of the village. (Source: *Silver Lake Leader*, December 30, 1922; Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of McLeod County*, 433 (Chicago, 1917). Silver Lake appears as Fremont in the manuscript population schedule of the McLeod County census for 1860.) Not until 1889 was a petition presented to the county commissioners to incorporate the village. An election was held in November of that year. The village is not listed in the 1890 census. Since then its population has increased slowly — 321 in 1900, 382 in 1910, 475 in 1920, and 477 in 1930.



Looking West down Main Steet, Silver Lake Village, circa mid 1880's

The first churches in the McLeod County community were outgrowths of cemetery associations organized for the separate burial of the dead. In 1867 the Catholic Czechs established a cemetery at Bear Creek, four miles south of the present site of Silver Lake. Seven years later, in 1874, a Catholic church was built, chiefly through the interest of the Vosmek, Zicha, Josef Kučera, and Josef Popelka families.

At first missionary priests served the parish. In 1879, with the help of the Czechs, the Poles, who settled in the community in large numbers after 1870, erected a church in what is today the village of Silver Lake. From 1880 to 1894 Polish priests served the Bear Creek church. (Source: *Průvodce po českých katolických osádkách*, 194.) In 1894 the Reverend František Jiranek, a Bohemian priest in charge of the Polish church, took steps toward organizing a Czech congregation in the village. The county and church records name him and Archbishop Ireland, Louis E. Caillet, Josef Popelka, and František Navratil as founders of the Church of St. Joseph on April 6, 1895. The Reverend Jaroslav Čermák assumed charge of the parish at Christmas, 1895. Under his leadership the congregation built a church in the following year, and later a parsonage. Few of his parishioners lived in the village proper, most of them going to church a distance of two to nine miles or more. Father Čermák served from 1895 to 1906, when he exchanged pastorates with the Reverend František Tichý of New Prague. The latter was elevated to the rank of domestic prelate with title of monsignor in 1913 and he ministered to the parish till his death in 1925. A new parish house was built in 1925 and a parochial school, costing \$35,000, was erected five years later. (Source: Jan Habenicht, *Dějiny českův amerických*, 401 (St. Louis, 1910); *Silver Lake Leader*, June 14, 1930.)

The McLeod County settlement has a larger proportion of Protestants than is usual in Bohemian colonies. Many of these people are descendants of the Moravian Brethren. (Source: Roman Catholicism

was the state religion in Austria and was forced upon the Bohemians from the time of the defeat of the Hussites at White Mountain in 1620 until the World War. Protestantism was nearly stamped out in Bohemia. Hundreds of Hus's adherents went into permanent exile or were forced into the mountain fastnesses, where they became the forebears of the Moravian Brethren. For information about this sect, see *Briève & fidèle exposition de l'origine, de la doctrine, des constitutions, usages et ceremonies ecclesiastiques . . . des Frères de Bohème & de Moravie* ([Amsterdam?], 1758). A resume of the religious situation in Bohemia is given in Will S. Monroe, *Bohemia and the Čechs*, 210-232 (Boston, 1918). Immigrants in the nineteenth century were prone to drop religious affiliations upon arriving in the United States, particularly if they settled in the cities. Those living in rural sections more often adhered to the religious faith into which they had been born, as was the case with the settlers at Silver Lake. For a discussion of these tendencies, see Edward A. Steiner, "The Bohemian in America," in *The Outlook*, 73: 968-972 (April 25, 1903).)

As early as 1871 the Protestants began meeting at various homes for worship. As they were unable to obtain the services of a minister for several years, they had to rely upon volunteers from their own number to read sermons and lead the singing and prayer. The first minister to preach to them was the Reverend Fridrich Emtý, a German, who visited Silver Lake in 1874 and spoke through an Interpreter. (Source: Vilem Šiller, Václav Průcha, and R. M. De Castello, compilers, *Památník českých evangelických církví ve Spojených Státech*, 121 (Chicago, 1900). A copy of this book is in the possession of the writer. See also *Naše Práce*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 5 (December, 1926). This publication is the official organ of the Czech Central West Presbytery and Evangelical Union.)

The people were not satisfied, however; they wanted a pastor who could speak to them in their own language. Eventually their desire was satisfied through the ministrations of the Reverend František Kún, a missionary pastor from Western, Iowa, whose influence upon the Protestant Czechs of the Middle West was outstanding.

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

Mluvíte Česky? Do You Speak Czech?

Host do domu, Bůh do domu (A guest in your home is like a God in your home)

Host do domu, hůl do ruky (If a guest comes to your home, grab a stick)

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