

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 4

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.

Until 1893 the only educational facilities available for children of the community were the rural schools. District number 38, which had its building not far from the village limits, served the town children. It became an independent district in 1893, when a four-room schoolhouse was built on the lake shore within the village. Lawrence Moriarty was the teacher of the upper grades and principal during the opening year. It remained for a woman, Mathilda V. Bailiff, principal from 1911 to 1914, to agitate for and introduce a high-school department. Until 1912 the young people of the community who wished to continue their schooling beyond the elementary grades were compelled to do so in neighboring towns. For many years a large Silver Lake contingent attended the Hutchinson High School.

The first class to graduate from the Silver Lake High School, in June, 1914, consisted of five members, all of whom had done two years' work in other schools. From 1914 to 1925 the number of high-school instructors increased from one to four, and the enrollment grew correspondingly. A large percentage of the graduates of this school and of schools in the surrounding rural sections have pursued their educations further by attending institutions of higher learning or vocational schools. The majority have selected the state university, Macalester College, or state teachers' colleges. In some ways this has been a distinct loss to the community, for few of these students have returned to the town to make their homes. Several native sons of the community deserve special mention for intellectual achievements. Among them are the Zeleny brothers, Anthony, John, and Charles. The first two are physicists on the faculties of the University of Minnesota and Yale University, respectively; the third is a zoologist at the University of Illinois. There is also a young theologian. Father Rudolph G. Bandas of St. Paul Seminary, who has published several books in his field.

While the high-school department of the Silver Lake school has prospered, enrollment in the elementary grades has declined steadily. In 1922 the Polish Catholic Church of St. Adalbert built a new parochial school. This is operated by the Sisters of Notre Dame and has an average enrollment of over a hundred. The erection of a school by the Bohemian Catholic Church of St. Joseph in 1930 caused a further decrease in the public school enrollment.

The first generation of Czech settlers adhered to the language, habits, and customs of their native land, mingling but little with their neighbors of other nationalities. Their solidarity was such that men and women who came to the community fifty and sixty years ago have never been obliged to learn English in order to transact business or have social intercourse. They have had their own churches, libraries, and organizations; have read Czech newspapers; and Czech tradespeople have supplied all their material needs. With the education of the second generation in the public schools, a bilingual group has developed. Although its members have discarded many of the picturesque customs of their forebears and have adopted those of Americans, they have preserved enough Czech traditions to serve as a connecting link between their parents and the third generation, now upon the scene. Until about 1914 the Bohemian language was in general use on the public school playground. A large number of children entered school without knowing English, and the task of the American-born teacher

who was compelled to instruct a roomful of beginners was not easy. Persistent campaigns by the teachers have made the use of English fairly general, and one now rarely hears Czech spoken by the school children. It is used today chiefly by some of the older citizens and in part of the church services. Modes of dress are also changing. The kerchiefs formerly worn by women in place of hats and the large imported shawls once used instead of coats have almost disappeared.

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?

Co se v mládí naučíš, ve stáří jako když najdeš (You will use in the old what you have learned young)

Kolik řečí znáš, tolikrát jsi člověkem (The more languages you know, the better person you are)

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