
Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

Here is the final installment of 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. You can find this paper in its entirety, as well as all Pavučina Corner articles, and other local historical information at my website www.kadlecovi.com.

THE TRANSITION OF A NEW-WORLD BOHEMIA – PART 5 of 5

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 early years the Silver Lake Czechs observed a large number of church holidays. The Catholics had special services on many saints' days and the Protestants kept a few, including St. Stephen's Day — December 26 — and Ascension Day. A curious custom was connected with the observance of Easter Monday. The boys, each with a whip and basket, called on the girls for the purpose of collecting colored Easter eggs. The whip was brought along to be used in case the girls proved reluctant to contribute to the collection.

Other customs have been transplanted. Until recently newly married couples were as a rule dowered with feather beds, which were in common use as bed coverings. In Bohemia the family's wealth had been computed by the number of feather beds it possessed. Many Immigrants preferred to bring these treasures with them rather than other personal belongings. With the passing popularity of feather beds has gone the need for feather-stripping bees, which at one time were important as entertainments, with the singing of Czech folk songs to enliven the hours of the workers.

Like other nationalities, the Czechs have their own peculiar dishes. The best-known is a pastry called *koláče*. There are others, such as *bramborovi knedlíki*, a potato dumpling; apple *štrudl*; *fleky*, similar to noodles; *jitrnice*, a pork sausage; *jelita*, a blood sausage; two fried pastries, *tašky* and *křehutiny*; and *trpalky*. The latter is made of mashed potatoes flavored with melted butter, ground poppy seed, and sugar. The use of poppy seed is common, and one can see large beds of poppies in Silver Lake garden plots and fields every summer.

Amateur theatricals and music play a large part in the recreational life of the community. Several times each year Czech plays are produced by casts made up either of local residents or of amateur actors from the Bohemian communities of Hopkins or St. Paul. The Komensky Klub, a former Czech student organization at the University of Minnesota, frequently offered programs of plays, debates, or music at Silver Lake. For many years the village has had an amateur band that is known throughout southern Minnesota for its concert work. Under the direction of Frank J. Kolar it attained the distinction of winning the American Legion state band tournament in 1922, and for several years it won first place in district band tournaments. The citizens of the village are intensely proud of this organization and contribute liberally in time and money toward its support. They collect voluntary subscriptions, give programs, carnivals, and sales, and assess a tax for the benefit of the band.

Other cultural activities have been carried on by various organizations. The Bohemian Reading and Educational Society, which was founded in 1876, has its own building half way between Silver Lake and Hutchinson. (Source: Habenicht, *Dějiny českův amerických*. 414.) There the members hold meetings, give dances, conduct summer schools for the teaching of Czech to their children, and maintain a library of more than seven hundred volumes in Czech in the fields of history, politics, literature, and philosophy. Sokol gymnastic club meetings were also held there from 1924 to 1928. This club has been suspended

because of lack of Interest among the younger members. (*Silver Lake Leader*, July 14, 1928.)



Bohemian Reading and Educational Society picnic, held at the Bohemian Hall, formerly located on the Northwest corner of the intersection of what is now State Highway 7 and Major Avenue, sometime between 1884 and 1895.

The Presbyterian church has a library of some five hundred volumes, about half of which are in Czech. Several lodges, a commercial club, branches of the Red Cross, American Legion, American Legion Auxiliary, and organizations connected with the various churches play a part in the social life of the community and the promotion of its many civic enterprises. Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, Girl Scouts, and a Parent-Teacher Association have been active at different times. For several seasons the community supported Chautauqua and lyceum courses. Since 1920 it has held an annual community fair.

During the World War the people of the settlement, along with other Bohemian groups in the United States, worked actively for the independence of their native land. As early as July, 1915, when the Protestants celebrated the five-hundredth anniversary of the martyrdom of John Hus, hopes for the freedom of Bohemia were expressed. In 1917 several meetings were held to promote the work of such agitators as Vojta Beneš, who delivered a lecture at Silver Lake in July, and Lieutenant Antonín Holy of the Czechoslovak army. The latter spoke there in August, 1918. In October, 1917, a branch of the Bohemian National Alliance was organized at Silver Lake, a telegram was sent to President Wilson indorsing the break of the United States with Austria-Hungary, and \$2,266 was collected to help to

establish the new republic of Czechoslovakia. Dr. Josef Křenek, a pastor of the Silver Lake Presbyterian church, spoke in many Czech communities of the Middle West on behalf of the movement. For this service the Czechoslovak government, through its consul in St. Paul, awarded Křenek a medal in 1928.

The material progress of the village has kept pace with that of other towns of its size. The *Silver Lake Leader* has been published weekly since 1901 under the editorship of W. O. Merrill. A village hall was built in 1909 at a cost of \$10,800. The same year an electric power plant was installed by the Silver Lake Milling Company. This was taken over by the Northern States Power Company in 1916. Five thousand dollars in bonds was voted for an addition to the public school building and a park site was purchased for \$1,600 in 1912. The same year saw the installment of a telephone exchange.

From 1887 to 1915 Silver Lake received its only railway service from a branch line of the Great Northern Railroad, which had a station nearly two miles from the village. The situation was much improved by the building of the Electric Short Line, now the Minnesota Western, in 1915. In the following year a water works system was completed. A band stand was built in the park in 1921 and \$50,000 in bonds was voted for a new public school building. In 1923 the building of the Short Cut Trail from Minneapolis improved highway communication. The American Legion purchased an addition to the park in 1928 and presented it to the village.

The last two generations have seen many changes in the Bohemian settlement of McLeod County. As in other Immigrant colonies, the ways of the Old World have given place to those of the New in nearly all the ordinary routine of living. Fifteen years ago a homesick young Czech who was studying the methods of the Young Men's Christian Association in Minneapolis could still allude to Silver Lake after a brief visit as "little Prague." But with the gradual disappearance of the pioneer settlers little remains to distinguish it from other small villages and farming districts of southeastern Minnesota.

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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?

Kdo jinému jámu kopá, sám do ní padá (He who digs a hole for someone, will fall in it himself)

Kdo se moc ptá, moc se dozví (He who asks too much will learn too much)

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