

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

THE SEARCH FOR ANDERA GRAVEYARD CROSSES

In the Bear Creek/Church of the Assumption Catholic Cemetery of Rich Valley Township, are buried some of the earliest settlers of McLeod County. A curious observer might note that some of the graves at the Southeast corner of this cemetery are adorned with elaborate grave markers known as “Andera Graveyard Crosses”. Who was Andera and what is the story behind these crosses?



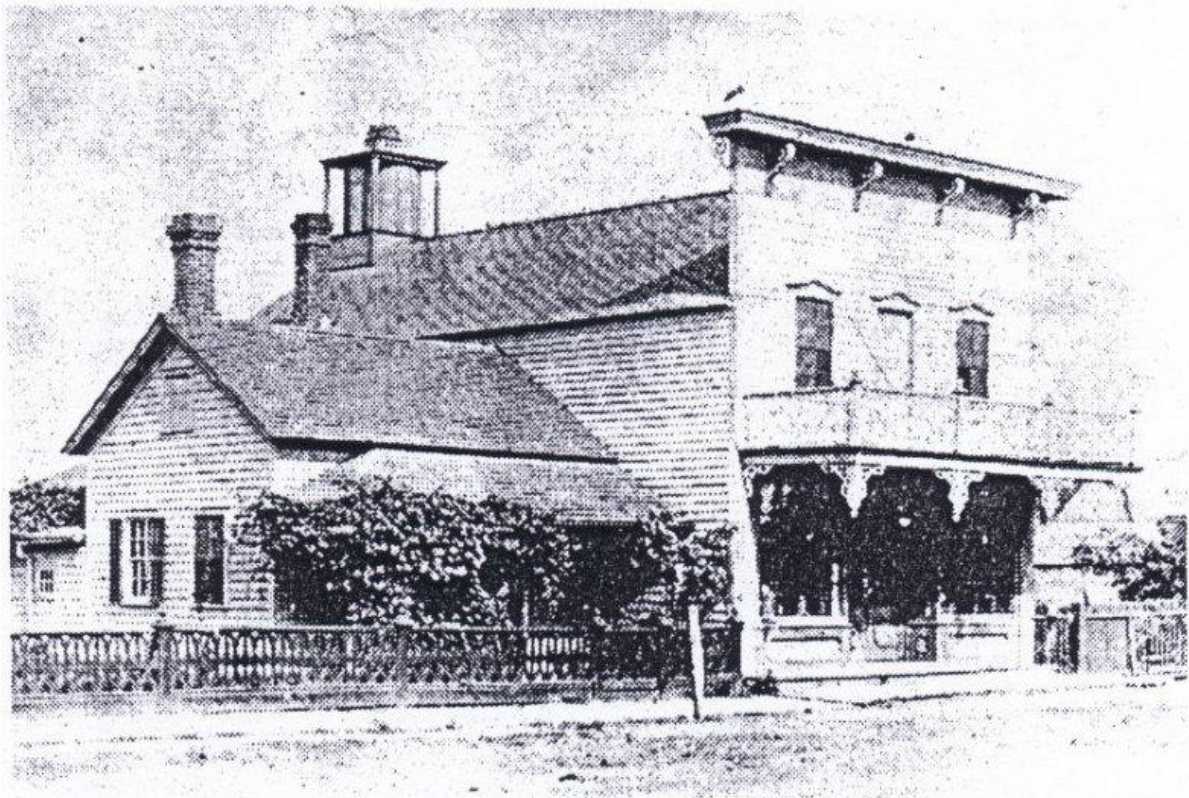
Charles Andera Cross on the grave of Marie Komar, Bear Creek Cemetery, Rich Valley Township, McLeod County, Minnesota.

When in 1929 Charles Andera died, he left behind a unique legacy: the hundreds of ornate, distinctive cast metal crosses which mark the final resting place of Roman Catholic Czech Americans in no less than twelve states. His beautiful grave markers have been found in cemeteries from Prague, Oklahoma to Bohemia, New York; from Pisek, North Dakota to Hallettsville, Texas. Almost exclusively, these monuments are in Czech Catholic graveyards. Loren N. Horton, Chief Historian for the Iowa State Historical Society, now retired, calls Andera's cemetery art a "Czech-American treasure."

In addition to his wonderful work, Andera left us with a number of questions: Where did he learn his many skills, where did he have his intricate crosses cast, how did he market them, and how many more are there that we don't know about? Those questions are all begging answers. An effort is now underway to resolve them and to locate and catalog all of his wonderful grave marker crosses.

Charles Andera came to this country with his parents and several siblings in the early 1860s from house No. 12 in Hrobská Zahrádka (Garden of the Graves), a small village near Tabor, Bohemia. Its name was derived from the ancient burial mounds near which it was located. [Note: Andera was baptized in the parish church at Cetoraz, which is the ancestral village of the Vacek family who settled in McLeod County).

After a short stay in Toronto, Canada, the family settled on a farm near Spillville, in Winneshiek County, Iowa. There in 1875 Charles married Barbara Dostal, the daughter of a wagon maker. Where he lived in the interim is unknown. Was it perhaps with an older half-brother near Charles City, Iowa who had trained in Vienna, Austria as a furniture maker? When the question came up, long after his death, no one had the answer.



Charles Andera home and shop, near Spillville Iowa. The glassed-in cupola provided light for exposing photographic printing paper, c. 1890. Photo by Charles Andera.

Now a skilled carpenter and cabinet maker, Charles Andera opened a furniture store next to his small house in Spillville. His work included the construction of the communion rail and other wooden appointments in Spillville's St. Wenceslaus Church. Bells of the clock he installed in its steeple sounded on the quarter hour and could be heard for miles. Commuting by bicycle, he crafted the altars in the Catholic churches in nearby Fort Atkinson and Protivin, Iowa. He also made burial caskets.

The earliest crosses extant in the Spillville cemetery were made from wagon maker's strap iron and may have been the product of Jan Dostal, Andera's father-in-law. Was this connection perhaps what gave Charles Andera his cross-making start? There would have also been wooden crosses of oak, a common practice which in his native land, went back several centuries.

An early photo (another of his skills) by Andera shows one wooden cross, and two of cast metal. Of the latter, one is relatively plain and may have been his first design in cast metal. The other, which in later photos he identified as #1, is the first model he decorated with a religious symbol. Although none of his wooden crosses are known to exist, they are mentioned in a history of Tremont (Karlín) MO, a railroad flag stop where he lived for a short time just after the turn of the century.

Andera's photos of the crosses he sold show eight different basic designs which, through markings, can be identified as his work. Each cross could be had with a variety of stone or metal bases. The illustrations also show two designs which may not have been his own product: neither has been found with an Andera mark, Horton has identified no less than 22 different Andera marks.

Strangely, there appears to be no pattern in the manner in which Andera marked his crosses. Some simply have his initials, "C.A."; others include his initials or name, the words "Spillville, IA" or "Tremont, Mo." and may include the date of manufacture. Some, on the back of the heart shaped inscription plate, are marked "No. 5" or carry the outline of a cross. Many monuments, otherwise identical to the marked crosses, are unmarked.

Charles Andera sculpted his crosses from wood and Plaster of Paris, and then sent this pattern to a foundry to have it cast. The corpora, of which there were several sizes, as well as the small statues which adorn two of his designs, he carved from wood. The inscription plates he may have cast himself. The foundry was probably in Wisconsin but to date no solid evidence has been found.

Most puzzling is the question: how did this craftsman locate buyers scattered throughout such a wide region? Spillville was a village of less than 400 souls, Tremont less than a quarter that size. The sole Andera ad, which has been found was in a 25th anniversary history of the Catholic Workman, a Czech Catholic fraternal union, the Spillville chapter of which Charles Andera was the founding member. He was also a charter member of the Western Czech Catholic Union which incorporated in Spillville on 1 January 1899.

Branches of both organizations had formally belonged to the Bohemian Catholic First Central Union which had formed in St. Louis, MO in 1877 and which used the newspaper HLAS as its organ. The paper's readership extended throughout the country's Czech Catholic community and was one of its prime means of communication. Was it somehow through this union that Andera learned of potential buyers?

The Andera grave marker crosses are rich in symbolism. His #1 was adorned with a skull and crossbones. (This did not indicate that the deceased had died from poison as one school child surmised, but was an image commonly displayed by Czech Catholics in centuries past as a reminder of man's mortality.) This style was also available with an abstract design. Other symbols and decorations the

cross maker utilized include angels, cherubs, crucifixes, the Lamb of God, statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mother, the crown of thorns, quatrefoils and trefoils.

States in which Andera crosses have been found are Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, New York, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri and Texas” (source: <http://www.klimesh.com/cross/front.html>)

REGIONAL PRESENCE OF ANDERA CROSSES

With regard to the Andera Crosses, Fr. Bob Mraz remarks: “I have seen those crosses in Czech cemeteries in many locations. We do have one in Calvary Cemetery (St. Mary's Church) in Tracy, Minnesota. I know there is at least one in Bechyn Cemetery. Naturally Spillville Iowa has a bunch of them, there may be others in some of our local Czech Cemeteries such as Lucan, Seaforth, and Olivia.”

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. See this article online at: www.kadlecovi.com Děkuji! Tony Kadlec