

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

I am pleased to present this guest column by Ron Pulkrabek, which in the spirit of Memorial Day, calls to mind the sacrifices made by our immigrant ancestors and their service to our country.

THE STORY OF JOHN WESSALE

Guest column by Ron Pulkrabek

John ‘Honza’ Wessale, my great-great grandfather and his wife Catherine came to America in 1854, along with two children. A baby died and was buried at sea. The original Czech name was likely “Vesely” (which means ‘cheerful man’ in Czech), but we think, through a misunderstanding at the immigration office a “V” in Czech sounds like “W”, and was spelled the way it sounded. Who is going to argue with an immigration officer when you can’t speak English and you’ve come so far and are almost in America?

They eventually made their way to a homestead just south of Waconia, Minnesota. They cut down trees, built a shack, grubbed trees for farm land, battled mosquitoes, locusts, grasshoppers, fires, depressed prices and pesky Indians. Indians would peek through the windows or quietly sneak into the shack in the middle of the day, sometimes while Catherine was cooking. She would turn away from the stove, and “surprise”, there would be an Indian standing there. They asked for food. It was recalled that, Catherine, not being a small woman and not afraid to stand her ground, would loudly holler, “PACOTCH!” or “Get out of here!” in Indian.



Example of an early log home in Waconia, Minnesota, settler Andrew Peterson, 1898 (Minnesota Historical Society).

John and Catherine had eight children, two of whom died in infancy. One of their children was Katherine who married my great, grandfather, Joseph Bartosh. They are both buried on the Czech Presbyterian Cemetery. A son named Anton married Anna Smida of Silver Lake.

John and Catherine worked hard like all the pioneers and for ten years improved their farm and kept their children fed. The Minnesota Indian Wars were winding down; the United States Civil War was at its peak in 1864. One day John, age 39, with a wife and six kids, the oldest age 13, Katherine age 9, decided to join the Army and leave his family in the woods. Was it due to patriotism? Was he promised another homestead by the government? Was it for the \$100 sign up bonus? Was it for the \$13 a month pay? We can't imagine how well this went over with Catherine. Probably, "Honza! Honza! Supoc tam jalot?" "Tse a takova loupý Dedecek!" "Prosim, Prosim, Prosim!" "Nerozumin!" "Tebe vsecko zdravi, ze dalekych vlasti slet ptactva zpevem ze vseh koncín svetin!" and finally, "Yanevim!" John, John, what are you doing? (or something to this effect--readers fill in your own words).

January 18, 1864: Honza, age 39, walks to Fort Snelling from Waconia, found physically able, and is sworn in for three years or the duration of the War, we think. From John's enlistment certificate; "I, Captain George Keith, have minutely [notice the word minutely] inspected John Wesele, finding him entirely sober, is of lawful age, and is qualified to perform the duties of an able bodied soldier". The Army changes his name from Wessale to Wesele. I tried to obtain records from the National Army Archives under Wessale. They didn't have that name. A resubmission under Wesele produced the few meager documents. Private John Wesele, Third Minnesota Regiment U.S. Volunteers, Company "F", was shipped from the frozen North to hot and muggy Pine Bluff, Arkansas, near Little Rock. There were still pockets of resistant Southern soldiers, so everyone had to be on guard 24 hours a day.

The Army placed the camp in the worst spot. In a swamp near a bend in the river, right on the river's edge, with mosquitoes, slimy green scum, no breeze, damp conditions and a mysterious mist came floating in each evening, called "Miasma". The poor food, including moldy hard tack, poor drinking water, bad sanitation conditions and malaria attacked the healthy Northern soldiers. There seemed to be no defense against it. Medical supplies are in short supply. Of the 200 men in the camp, 89 died of disease. Dysentery and bloody stools start with gripping stomach pains, followed by vomiting and dehydration. The bowels start to relax accompanied by a high fever and headaches. There are not enough men to pull guard or bury the dead. JOHN WESELE DIES ON JULY 5th, 1864. We don't think he ever fired a shot.

In 2006 my wife and I traveled to Little Rock to see if we could find John's grave site. John had been buried along with other soldiers in little outposts around Pine Bluff with very little markings. Three years after the War in 1868 all the bodies were dug up, transported by carts and river boats some 50 miles to the Little Rock National Cemetery. Local grave diggers were given a payment of \$4.78 for each body they dug up. We had an old Civil War pamphlet stating that John Wesele was buried at little Rock. The local cemetery officials were at a loss as why they didn't have John listed in their records. By 1868 there were 5,000 soldiers buried here: 3,000 known and 2,000 unknown of which 1,482 were shipped in from Pine Bluff. During the moving process, perhaps due to poor help, poor markings on the graves, name tags falling off, lack of paper work or even a pencil, poor weather conditions, and genuine government foul-ups, John does not have a "KNOWN" marker. He is somewhere among the "UNKNOWN" unmarked standing stones--or at least we think he is here.

In 1916 the State Minnesota erected a 12-foot high granite monument in the Minnesota area of this cemetery for the 164 Minnesota soldiers buried here (ours was the only state to have commemorated its soldiers with such a memorial). Fifty percent are buried under “UNKNOWN” stones. John has his name embossed on the Civil War memorial in the City Park in Waconia. Per the archive papers, John had \$69 of advance pay and was still owed \$38 which was sent to Catherine. Catherine also received \$8 per month to feed and raise her family of six children. She carried supplies on her back to her home two miles from Waconia. John had no other personal effects. There are now 20,000 soldiers buried at the 31-acre Little Rock National Cemetery.



1916 Monument dedicated to Minnesota Civil War soldiers, Little Rock National Cemetery, Little Rock, Arkansas.

John and Catherine’s children grew up to be very successful; some owned the Waconia Sorghum Mills, (which later expanded to Cedar Rapids, Iowa), others owned the Waconia Patriot newspaper, some farmed, etc. John’s wife Catherine died in 1916 at the age 91 and is buried at Waconia.

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 Dekuji! Tony Kadlec