

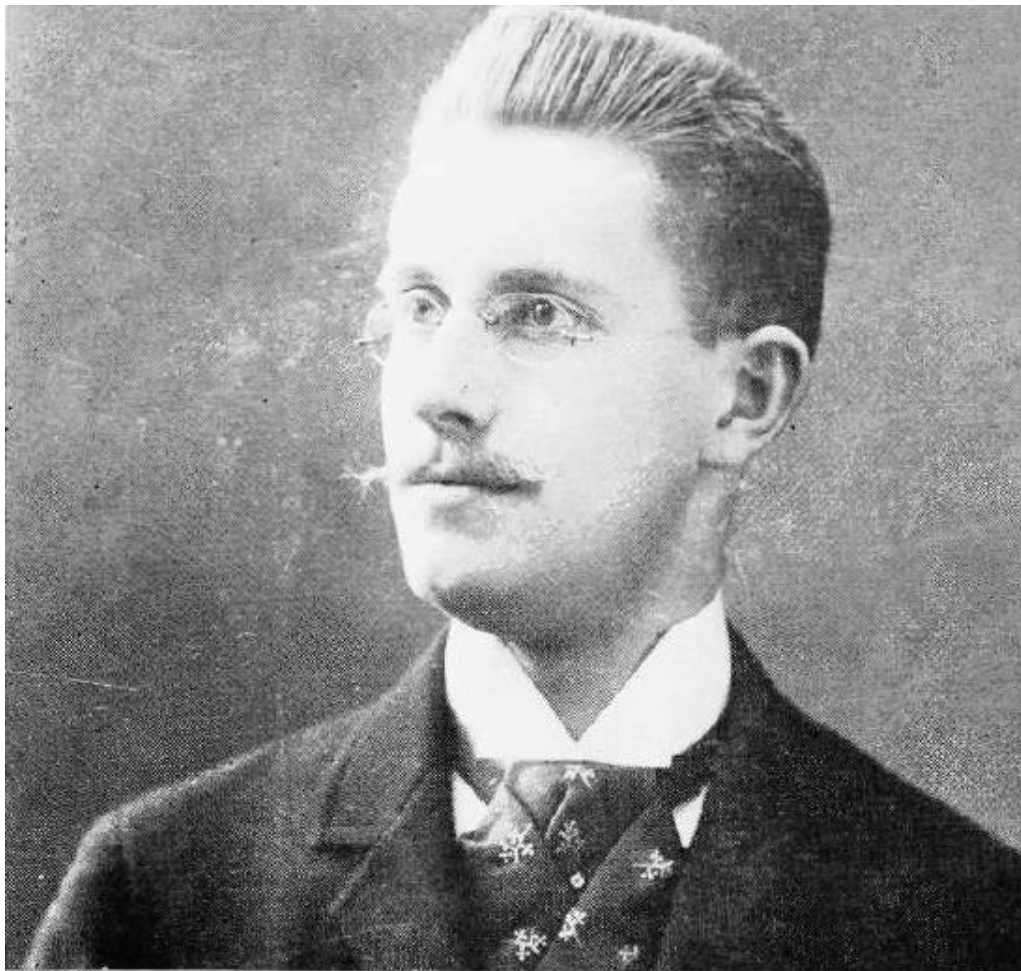
Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

When Minnehaha Falls Inspired Dvorak Part 2 of 4

By Lionel B. Davis and Kenneth Carley

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After he had agreed to go to America, Dvorak made a fortunate acquaintance that helped him greatly in all phases of his visit. Completing his studies at the Prague Conservatory in the spring of 1892 was a young Czech-American musician, Josef J. Kovarik, born and bred in Spillville, a Czech settlement in Winneshiek County, northeastern Iowa. His father, Jan J. Kovarik, had emigrated in 1869 at the age of nineteen from his native Bohemia. An accomplished musician, Jan Kovarik served as organist and choirmaster at Spillville's St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church. He also taught school and tutored a number of students — including his own children — on stringed instruments.



Josef J. Kovarik

Josef was his father's prize pupil. He became so proficient on the violin and viola that Jan sent him to Prague for finishing studies. On Mondays Josef went to a book and music store in Prague to read newspapers smuggled in from America against the edicts of the ruling Austrian government.

One day Dvorak rushed into the shop and asked whether anyone there was acquainted with America. Fingers pointed to young Kovarik whose face was buried behind an American newspaper. "Do you speak English?" Dvorak asked him. Kovarik said he did and then agreed to teach the composer and his family that language in preparation for their stay in the United States. To do this Kovarik lived with the Dvoraks at their home, Vysoka, during the summer of 1892. He also helped them get ready for the trip and on September 17 sailed on the ocean liner "Saale" from Bremen, Germany, with the Dvoraks and their two oldest children (the other four were left at home). They arrived in New York on September 26.

Although he yearned to return to Spillville, Josef Kovarik remained with Dvorak during his first eight months in New York, acting as his interpreter, music copyist, and general factotum and also serving on the conservatory staff. Reports differ about Dvorak's reaction to New York, but for the most part he evidently adjusted well to the big city. Frequently accompanied by his faithful secretary, the composer conquered his dislike for New York traffic enough to pursue some favorite pastimes. These included feeding pigeons in Central Park, watching railroad locomotives and elevated trains, and walking aboard ocean liners at the docks. "He knew to the day and hour what ships were arriving and departing," wrote a biographer, "and prided himself on being able to address his letters to Bohemia, stating exactly on which ship they would be carried."

Dvorak disliked social life — even though he appreciated the desire of fellow Czechs and others to honor him — because it kept him up too late. So did conducting concerts. Born and raised in a small country town, he always preferred to go to bed early and to get up early for walks. He also grew chary of newspaper reporters, who grilled him on practically every subject and wrote some embarrassingly inaccurate stories about how Dvorak had come to America to show budding American composers how to write American music.

The composer apparently did a good job of teaching at the National Conservatory. One of his colleagues there — James T. Hunecker — later wrote about "old Borax" (as he was affectionately called): "He scared me with his fierce Slavonic eyes and yet he was as mild-mannered a musical pirate as ever scuttled a pupil's counterpoint." One of his pupils, Negro musician Harry T. Burleigh, enhanced Dvorak's interest in Negro music by singing spirituals to him. This influence is easy to detect in the famed *largo* and other portions of the *New World Symphony*, which Dvorak composed in New York and substantially completed by May 24, 1893."

Next Week: Dvorak decides to take a summer vacation in the Midwest...

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 A