

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

When Minnehaha Falls Inspired Dvorak Part 4 of 4

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IN THE FIRST WEEK of September Dvorak, his wife, and Kovarik set out on a second trip that took them to Omaha, Nebraska, and the Twin Cities. Their host in Omaha was Edward Rosewater, a newspaper publisher of Bohemian Jewish ancestry who had been a friend of Dvorak's father in Bohemia. After two days spent visiting the plant of Rosewater's *Omaha Bee*, seeing other sights, and being feted by numerous Czechs in the area, the three travelers took a train by night for the journey to St. Paul by way of Sioux City, Iowa, and Mankato.

Father Rynda greeted the Dvorak party when it arrived at the St. Paul station at 7:00 A.M. September 4 (or September 5). He took his guests immediately to the St. Stanislaus rectory. After breakfast, Dvorak asked when he could see Minnehaha Falls, as he was eager to get back to Spillville.



Father Jan Rynda

Father Rynda had other plans, however, and acted as though he did not hear his guest. He diverted Dvorak's attention by telling him a number of gay Moravian stories. "You can be sure he served the composer Bohemian beer, too," Anne M. Kovarik, Josef's sister, said in a recent interview.

Before long, a delegation of St. Paul Czechs arrived to greet their beloved composer and to invite him to a reception in his honor that evening at C.S.P.S. Hall at the corner of West Seventh Street and Western Avenue. Dvorak agreed to attend. In the afternoon the Dvoraks toured the city with Father Rynda and Kovarik. The composer admired the Mississippi River and, as has been told, was impressed enough by Minnehaha Falls to be inspired to melodic expression.



View of Minnehaha Falls at about the time that Dvorak visited it in 1893.

In the evening the C.S.P.S. Hall was crowded with 3,000 people for the informal reception. St. Paul newspapers covered the event in detail in their September 6 [1893] issues. When he entered the hall — to Franz von Suppe's *Light Cavalry Overture* played by Emil Straka's orchestra — Dvorak "was hailed with great applause and cheering.

. . . The audience rose en masse to do him honor, and Antonin Jurka delivered the address of welcome." After Jurka's "glowing tribute," Dvorak "was presented with a beautiful bouquet by Miss Antonia Klecatsky."

Dvorak then replied briefly, thanking St. Paul's Bohemians for their hospitality. E. M. Povolney welcomed Mrs. Dvorak. In addition to leading the orchestra, Emil Straka "gave a violin solo, which was rendered in his usual fine style," and Josef Kovarik contributed "Bohemian melodies."

Straka, who was born in Suez, Egypt, had attended the Prague Conservatory ahead of Kovarik and became a well-known St. Paul musician and teacher. In between musical numbers and speeches, "many of the citizens who were present were introduced to the honored guest of the occasion."

Members of the committee in charge, said the *St. Paul Daily Globe*, "are entitled to much credit for the excellent arrangements made at such short notice." The paper ended its account of the evening thus: "The reception which his St. Paul countrymen gave him last night is but a slight tribute to the esteem in which he is held by all Bohemians.

The occasion was a very informal one, and every one present was very much pleased to have an opportunity to do honor to the man whose name is a household word with his own people."

Although Father Rynda did his best to get Dvorak to extend his visit, the composer would not be persuaded. He left St. Paul by train the next morning at eight. Traveling by way of Austin, he was back in Spillville by 4:00 P.M.

TEN DAYS LATER, their vacation over, the Dvoraks left Spillville for New York. Long after that summer idyll, Spillville honored its distinguished visitor by erecting a memorial in Riverside Park near the Turkey River. And in 1929 the road from Calmar through Spillville and the Czech town of Protivin, Iowa, to Preston, Minnesota, was officially designated the "Dvorak Highway."

Back in New York for another busy season at the National Conservatory, Dvorak remembered his "Minnehaha theme" when he sought to do something noteworthy for his hundredth composition. He decided to compose a modest piece that his youngsters, Otilie and Antonin, could play. The result was the *Sonatina* for violin and piano, opus 100, in which the "on-the-cuff" tune he conceived at Minnehaha graces the slow second movement. Josef Kovarik coached the children for the performance. When they played it for their father in the winter of 1894, "Dvorak was so beside himself with joy that he cried and embraced his children and thanked them for the happiness that they gave him that evening."

After spending the summer of 1894 at his home in Bohemia, Dvorak returned for a third season in New York, but no longer was happy there. He then went back to his homeland for a relatively quiet decade and died in Prague in 1904. Josef Kovarik stayed in New York and served for years as a violinist and principal violist in the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He died in 1951.

Jan Kovarik remained in Spillville for thirty years — until 1899 — when he moved with his family to New Prague [Minnesota], another Czech settlement. The elder Kovarik resided there forty years — until his death in 1939. He taught school and gave music lessons, as at Spillville, and directed community concerts. He also played the organ and directed the choir at New Prague's St. Wenceslaus Church. His daughter Anne, who still lives in New Prague next door to a sister, Mrs. John Bruzek, still serves as a church organist. Miss Kovarik has many mementos of her family and Dvorak. Hanging on her studio wall, for instance, is the framed photograph of himself that Dvorak autographed and sent to her father in gratitude for his hospitality.

As a direct result of his short sojourn in America, Dvorak left a rich legacy of compositions inspired by the "New World" scene. Minnesotans can take pride that that legacy owes a small but significant part to Dvorak's visit to Minnehaha Falls.

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