



## John Barzynski, Land Agent

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company held the title to odd-numbered sections for settlement in Sherman and Howard counties. The railroad's agent, John Barzynski, sold the land to Polish countrymen. He worked to keep the Polish settlers in touch with each other and to keep them faithful to the Roman Catholic Church.

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## JOHN BARZYNSKI, LAND AGENT

BY MEROE J. OWENS

WHEN the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company settled its controversy over taxes on its lands in Nebraska counties, one of the terms of settlement was the company's promise "to use every inducement possible to bring settlers into the county." The company turned to Europe for settlers, advertising in various foreign countries and also in foreign language newspapers in the United States.

Scandinavian, Czech (Bohemian), English, and Polish agents, also those of certain religious congregations, became active in Nebraska. In Sherman and Howard counties, in central Nebraska, the railroad had been granted title to the odd-numbered sections, unless previously chosen by actual settlers. Danish, Czech (Bohemian), and Polish nationals settled in these two counties.<sup>1</sup>

One John Barzynski, editor of a Polish newspaper in Chicago, had answered the advertisement of the B. & M. He became agent for the railroad's lands in Howard, Greeley, Valley, and Sherman counties and made his home in Howard County from 1878 to 1884. The railroad's desire to sell lands coincided with the consuming interest of Barzynski—that of

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<sup>1</sup>Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company, Land Department, 73.6, agreements between agents and colonists (about 1877-1884), Burlington Archives, Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.

*Miss Meroe J. Owens of Loup City has long been interested in the history of the Loup Valley. She is the author of A Brief History of Sherman County, Nebraska (Norfolk, 1952).*

keeping his countrymen in touch with each other and of seeing that they remained faithful to the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup>

John Barzynski had an unusual background. He was born near Sandomierz, Poland, in 1849, the youngest of three sons of Joseph Barzynski and Mary Sroczynski. He was scarcely five years old when his mother died. The father insured the best possible education for his sons. The elder brothers, Vincent and Joseph, studied for the priesthood and were ordained before the Polish Insurrection of 1863. Because of the unsuccessful ending of that movement and to escape brutal Russian reprisals, the young men fled to France, where they became associated with the new congregation of the Resurrection Brothers. In 1866 they came to the Polish settlement of Panna Maria in Karnes County, Texas, below San Antonio. Their zeal was stirred by the rather strong anti-Catholic feeling among many of the Polish immigrants, who held the Catholic Church to blame for the failure of the Polish independence movement. In 1874 Vincent was called to St. Stanislaus Kostka, the first Polish congregation in Chicago.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the youngest son of Joseph Barzynski, Sr. was pursuing his education in Poland. He finished the Szkoła Główna in Warsaw, where he was an outstanding student in mathematics, studied for a time in Rome, then joined his father and brothers in Texas. After serving as superintendent of a parochial school in San Antonio, in 1871 he became associated with the *Orzeł Polski*, a Polish journalistic enterprise. In 1872, with the Reverend Matuszek, a chaplain from Silesia who was pastor at Krakow and Clover Bottom (Union), Missouri, Barzynski founded *Pielgrzym, The Pilgrim*.

*The Pilgrim* was succeeded by the *Gazeta Polska Katolicka*, published by Barzynski alone. The publication was moved from St. Joseph, Michigan, to Chicago, following the organization of the Polish Roman Catholic Union.

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<sup>2</sup>*Dziennik Chicagoski*, July 12, 1947. Information concerning the founders and first officers of the Polish Publishing Company was furnished by the Polish Roman Catholic Union, Chicago, translated by the late Reverend Father Fidelis Skiara, S. J., chaplain of Sacred Heart Hospital, Loup City, Nebraska, January 21, 1954.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

Barzynski and his brother, the Reverend Vincent, promoted Polish parochial schools.<sup>4</sup> John was the author of the first Polish primer series printed in America, a copy of which may be seen in the Archives and Museum of the Polish Roman Catholic Union in Chicago.<sup>5</sup>

Barzynski had written while in Missouri:

We shall build this type of Polish here: the Pole on American soil will never be the same as the European Pole, but we desire that he believe as a Catholic, that he speak Polish: let him know the history and traditions of Poland; as for the rest let him be a Yankee.<sup>6</sup>

When John Barzynski answered the advertisement of the B. & M. Railroad concerning lands which the company offered for sale in central Nebraska, he saw the possibility of establishing a Polish colony there. Already Panna Maria, the first Polish settlement in the United States, had sent out settlers and established churches and schools in San Antonio and Bexar County, Texas, in Missouri, and elsewhere. When the advertisement appeared in the *Gazeta Polska Katolicka*, John Barzynski was named agent.<sup>7</sup>

In the B. & M. papers in the custody of Newberry Library, Chicago, are to be found the letters exchanged between Barzynski and the B. & M. officials from 1877 to 1884.<sup>8</sup> Written in longhand, often after a tiring trip under primitive conditions, they reveal much of the character of the writer.

A letter written September 12, 1877, gives the terms of agreement between the company and the Polish agent. With-

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<sup>4</sup>Rev. Wacław Kruczka, *Historye Polska w. Ameryce* (Milwaukee, 1905), LV, 32. Translated by Edmund G. Orczyk in *The Catholic Press in America* (Milwaukee, 1940), pp. 49-71.

<sup>5</sup>*Dziennik Chicagoski*, July 5, 1947.

<sup>6</sup>Orczyk, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup>*Gazeta Polska Katolicka*, IX, No. 35 (May 6, 1880), 2; XI, No. 18 (January 5, 1882), 4. Chester Paul Mysliwicz, "History of Karnes County, Texas," thesis, University of Texas (Austin, Texas). The story of Panna Maria, first Polish settlement in America, located in Karnes County, Texas, south of San Antonio, is a moving tale of hardship, persecution, and incredible courage. Panna Maria is called "the mother of all Polish settlements in America." Besides the Barzynskis, who lived first at Panna Maria and later in Howard County, Nebraska, there are several Polish settlers in Sherman County who came from the Panna Maria area in Texas.

<sup>8</sup>Burlington Letters, Land Department, Bundle 29, Sherman County.

in two years he was to settle four hundred Polish families in Howard, Greeley, Valley, and Sherman counties. There was to be no change in prices and rates to Polish settlers before July 1, 1878. Barzynski was to receive the  $S\frac{1}{2}$  of Section 29, T14, R 11, in Howard County and a commission of ten cents per acre on all land sold. He proposed to do this "by speeches, and through his paper, the *Polish Catholic Gazette*." His activity in the matter since March 1, 1877 is mentioned. There is a list of sales dated September 18, 1877, "not completed this morning." These settlers had chosen Howard County lands.<sup>9</sup>

In her *Catholic Church on the Nebraska Frontier*, Sister M. Aquinata Martin states that there was a Polish colony and a settlement of Czechs in Howard County, sponsored by the Polish Roman Catholic Union and that the Reverend Anthony Klawiter, John Barzynski, and J. M. Niemzinski were the leaders.<sup>10</sup> Land entries of blocks of the odd-numbered sections (the railroad's), in Sherman County, were made by the Reverend Lawrence Spryzinski of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, also by Dr. John Telafus "late of Tiflis, Russia, temporarily residing in Lincoln," through "John Barzynski, agent." These lands were subsequently transferred to Polish settlers.<sup>11</sup>

A Bohemian colony, Slovakia, in Howard County, is described by Miss Rose Rosicky in her *History of the Czechs in Nebraska*. The Czech colony had already been established and in the spring of 1878 had built a church, 16 x 28, St. Wenceslaus, on the SW $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 3, T 15, R 11.<sup>12</sup> C. V. Svoboda, a pioneer settler of Howard County, stated that it was divided into two rooms, one for use as a church, the other for the priest's residence.<sup>13</sup> A Bohemian missionary priest, the Reverend Francis Szulak, from Chicago, held services there. Sister M. Aquinata Martin says that the B. & M. "emigrant house" was first used as a place of worship. The

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Sister M. Aquinata Martin, *The Catholic Church on the Nebraska Frontier* (Washington, 1937), p. 166.

<sup>11</sup>Deed Records, Sherman County, Nebraska, I, II, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup>Rose M. Rosicky, *History of the Czechs in Nebraska* (Omaha, 1929), pp. 26, 208-211, 231-235.

<sup>13</sup>Nebraska Press Association, *Who's Who in Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1940), p. 582. Mr. Svoboda states that Slovakia was started in 1873-74 but that because there were settlers already there, even though the Czechs brought relinquishments, they were not a compact group.

*Grand Island Independent*, September 6, 1878, announced that the Reverend Klawiter of Pittsburgh had stopped there en route to his homestead in Howard County; that he proposed to bring a large colony of Poles later in the fall; and that he had been in Howard County in the spring.

Miss Rosicky tells how Father Klawiter had brought with him a cook and organist for his new Polish settlement. He asked for and was granted lodging in his new church. Lacking furniture, he stretched pots and pans on wires between two stakes. "When the settlers came to church on Sunday, he taught the housemothers how to cook Polish foods. The organist soon learned to play Czech songs, the priest learned to read in Czech, and everybody was happy."<sup>14</sup>

The railroad had built an emigrant house on 29-14-11 for the temporary lodging of settlers and had donated a quarter section of land for the Polish Catholic church. The settlement, called New Posen (shortened later to Posen), was served by Father Klawiter, who also served St. Wenceslaus. In November 1879, the Reverend Joseph Barzynski, C. R., came to New Posen, but left in January 1880. Lack of funds compelled both Father Klawiter and Father Joseph Barzynski to leave New Posen.<sup>15</sup>

The substance of the agreement, made May 11, 1878, with reference to John Barzynski's starting a new colony of Poles in Sherman County provided:

1. The NE¼ of 13-15-15 (in Sherman county) was to be donated for townsite purposes; one half for the benefit of Poles settling in Sherman county; as soon as 50 families were secured and sales made of not less than 5,000 acres.
2. Reserve for the Poles Townships 13, 15, 16, R.15, until December 28, 1878.
3. Barzynski to print 1200 copies of a new Polish pamphlet for \$65.00.
4. Give three or four "passes" as Polish community transportation from Chicago to Kearney Junction. (The branch of the Omaha and Republican Valley Railroad from Grand Island to St. Paul was completed May 23, 1878.)

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<sup>14</sup>Rosicky, *op. cit.*, pp. 325-326. The *Catholic Register*, Nebraska edition, September 5, 1937, states that it was Father Klawiter who gave the mission its Polish name, Warsaw.

<sup>15</sup>*Catholic Register*, September 5, 1937, article on Farwell.

5. Money for the Polish land sales to be given to Barzynski, sent by him to Lincoln.
6. The Burlington to erect an emigrant house in Sherman county. (Note, this story and a half house, one room above, two below, stood not far from the site of the present B. & M. station in Loup City. It was later moved to become a residence north of the main street of Loup City.)
7. Refunds: 160 A on 6 yrs. credit, full fare one way; amount of the round trip \$20.00. One third of above to purchasers of 80 acres, 6 yrs. credit, or 160 A, ten years' credit.
8. Terms of sales: prices as for North Platte pamphlet of 1878; continued to Poles for 1879.
9. Barzynski's commission to be the same.
10. Barzynski to sell one third on ten years credit; two thirds on six years credit.
11. Discounts: on 10 years credit, 25%; 6 years credit, 15%; 2½ years, 5½.

Signed at Burlington, Iowa, by  
 A. E. Touzalin, General Land Agent  
 John Barzynski, editor *Gazeta*  
*Polska Katolicka*.

Barzynski stated that on October 1, 1878, he had sold 20,465 acres of land in Sherman and Howard counties. Barzynski and others were to receive the lowest freight and passenger rates.

Barzynski's activities are illustrated in a statement dated January 31, 1879:

Hotel bills, Chicago to Lincoln, Kearney to	
Grand Island	\$10.00
Ticket, Kearney to Grand Island	2.10
One week's stay in Sherman county, lodging, feed	
for horses, expenses	20.00
5 days' stay in St. Paul	9.60
Expenses to circulate petition in Howard county	15.00
2 days' stay in Howard (later Boelus)	6.00
Livery stable to Mr. Thompson of Grand Island—	
driving in Sherman county	18.00
Stage—St. Paul to Grand Island	1.00
Layover in Kearney on Sunday	3.00
Lincoln to Chicago	6.00
	<hr/>
	\$90.70

Barzynski had arranged for a surveyor to plat forty acres of the NE¼ of 13-15-15 in Sherman County, and to lay it out in town lots. He proposed to call the new Polish town

Krakow.<sup>16</sup> The site chosen was west of the county seat town of Loup City, begun in 1873. Barzynski's section, 15, is cut by the river; much of the land is sandy, whereas the townsite of Loup City, a mile from the river and rising into the hills which encircle the town on the north and east, was a much more practical location.

There were difficulties in making sales to prospective Polish settlers. The townships reserved to Barzynski in Sherman County contained much hilly land. The natural tendency of settlers was to choose land along the course of a river or creek. Some Poles from Howard County preferred to follow Oak Creek. Already many had caught the spirit of independence in the new country and selected government lands which could be homesteaded or entered under the Timber Culture Act. I. M. Polski of Duluth, Minnesota, attracted by Barzynski's ad, decided en route to Omaha, after learning of government land, to enter a "tree claim."<sup>17</sup>

In 1878 terms of agreement between the railroad and the Polish land agent were extended to 1879. Mr. Barzynski wrote, under the letterhead 631 Noble Street, Colonizacya, Nebraska, that crops were fine in Nebraska and the settlers wanted time to sell their wheat, that Mr. Julius Koslicki had had fifty acres of fine wheat damaged by hail, and therefore patience must be shown. He urged that the deed for the Sherman County Polish landsite be given him, and he would give a deed in trust. While Land Department officials Touzalin and McFarland seem to have agreed to the proposals, the townsite was never developed.<sup>18</sup>

Mr. Barzynski became a permanent resident of Howard County in 1880, and on May 20 he was married to Bronislava Virginia Wilkowzewski, whose parents, Edward and Romualda, lived in Philadelphia when she was born. Her father was said to have had the first art store and picture frame factory in Chicago. The marriage had been witnessed and blessed by the Reverend Vincent Barzynski, C. R., at St. Stanislaus

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<sup>16</sup>Barzynski, memorandum of agreement made in Burlington, Iowa, September 15, 1877; July 15, 1878.

<sup>17</sup>Burlington Papers, letter, January 16, 1879; Letters, I. M. Polski, February 23, May 27, 1939. Mr. Polski later was elected treasurer of Sherman County.

<sup>18</sup>Burlington Papers, letter, July 15, 1881.



Kostka Church in Chicago. The census taker of St. Paul, Nebraska, Thompson McNabb, on June 7, 1880, listed:

John Barzynski, age 30, real estate agent	b. in Poland
Virginia Barzynski, age 24	b. in Penn.
Paulina Jaszynka, age 18, servant	b. in Poland <sup>19</sup>

The B. & M. agent entered into the activities of the new community, and when St. Paul was incorporated as a village in April, 1881, he was one of the five trustees appointed by the Howard County commissioners. He was elected at the first election which followed. The village board sometimes met in his office. He was listed among the grand jurors of Howard County in 1881. He had also identified himself with the Democratic party organization, attending county conventions and making addresses in nearby communities. He and his wife took part in the social life of their countrymen:

Married, in Sherman county, last Sunday, by the Rev. Maly, pastor of New Posen Church, Mr. Frank Duda and Miss Julia Wesierski, all of Sherman County. The Honorable John Barzynski and lady attended the wedding.<sup>20</sup>

A change was made in terms of sale in 1882, apparently without Mr. Barzynski being notified. His reply to this action was an impassioned statement of his devotion to the interests of his countrymen and a request that he be informed in such matters. There was by 1882 much competition in the real estate business, for county clerks, surveyors, or any eager or willing person might receive the right to sell railroad lands, a fact which must have been a handicap to the Polish land agent.<sup>21</sup>

Sadness came to the home of the young couple in March 1883. Mrs. Barzynski's father, Edward Wilkowzewski, succumbed to pneumonia in Leadville, Colorado. The son-in-law arrived a few moments before his father-in-law's death and brought the remains to St. Paul for burial. Because there was no Catholic church in St. Paul (the Barzynski home was used for services in town), a catafalque with elabo-

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<sup>19</sup>Letter, Brig. Gen. J. E. Barzynski, July 19, 1947; Nebraska census, Howard County, 1880.

<sup>20</sup>St. Paul *Phonograph*, March 21, April 16, 1881; September 23, 1880.

<sup>21</sup>Burlington Papers, letter, November 1, 1881. County papers of Hall, Howard, and Sherman counties contain advertisements of various agents.

rate decorations was improvised in a town hall. The services were conducted by the missionary priest, Father Steuer, with an address given in Polish. Music was furnished by Professor Loneragan of Grand Island, assisted by Mrs. Robare, organist, and Mr. and Mrs. Murrell. The Requiem Mass by Schmitt, sung by the quartette, was described by the St. Paul editor, A. A. Kendall, as "something unusual, never before heard in St. Paul. It was music that affected the senses, solemn and deep." Interment was in the Catholic cemetery, but in later years this grave could not be located. A biography of Mr. Wilkowszewski appeared in a later issue of the *Phonograph*, in which it was stated that he had been born in Poland, "under Russian rule, of noble birth."<sup>22</sup>

Three children were born to the young couple, the first two in Nebraska. The elder daughter, Mrs. Marie B. Smietanka, a Polish historian, resides in Chicago with her daughter, Mrs. Virginia Taber. The son, destined to become a brigadier general in the United States Army, was born March 13, 1884, at St. Paul and christened a month later in St. Anthony's church at New Posen. He had a varied career of service, from Mexico in 1916 to liaison officer with the American legation in Poland after World War I. Now retired, he last saw active duty near Chicago. One of his uniforms may be seen in the museum of the Polish Roman Catholic Union in Chicago. The younger daughter, Mrs. H. F. Kelley, lives in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.<sup>23</sup>

Barzynski's advertisements in the Howard County newspaper decreased in size, possibly an indication that business was declining. His fine Howard County farm was noted for its large house. The land was rented to Martin Janschorik in October 1883, with the usual provision for breaking sod. After the death of John, his brother Joseph sold the land to Adam Lorkoski for \$600.<sup>24</sup>

Barzynski denied, in the St. Paul *Phonograph*, February

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<sup>22</sup>St. Paul *Phonograph*, March 30, April 6, 1883.

<sup>23</sup>Interview, Mrs. Marie Smietanka, April 14, 1954. Letter, Rev. Joseph Heinzman, Pastor of St. Anthony's Church, Farwell, Nebraska, August 11, 1954.

<sup>24</sup>Howard County Nebraska, Deed Record, R. 148; Mortgage Records A, 442, 495; B, 517-18; C, 283-285; H, 240, 294; Q, 314; Misc. Rec. 3, 304.

6, 1884, that he had accepted a position in Chicago, but later the editor announced that from Chicago:

John Barzynski, who is interested in local democracy, wants to know what the faithful are doing.

On June 20 this announcement appeared:

To my Friends and Customers: My present address is 307 West Division Street, Chicago, Ills., where I would be pleased to meet you, and to where all communications should be addressed.

Editor Kendall had written, June 16, 1884:

John Barzynski has taken up his abode in Chicago. John was a valuable citizen, public spirited and energetic. Mrs. Barzynski was a lady respected by all who knew her. The family formed a part of our best society here, as they will elsewhere. Good luck go with them.

Final mention of Barzynski's being in St. Paul, Nebraska, was in an item dated December 1, 1884, which stated that he was in the city to close his business.<sup>25</sup>

Of her father's characteristics, his elder daughter writes:

He was of medium stature, he may have weighed 150 pounds. His hair was dark, and his eyes were brown. He was a gentle soul and loved to read. His reading matter was a very high grade, and the books which he left to us are all annotated, which shows that he was a careful reader. He had learned English in Europe and was especially fond of Shakespeare. All his love letters to my mother were written in English.

One of his characteristics was his love of truth. The only time he ever spanked me was for telling a lie when I was about six years old. He accompanied the whipping by a lecture on truth, saying: "No Barzynski ever lied, and you won't lie either."<sup>26</sup>

He lived but five years after his return to Chicago. His brother, the Reverend Vincent Barzynski, had urged him to become editor of *Wiara i Ojczyzna* (*Faith in Country*). Later, he helped organize and establish the *Dziennik Chicagoski*, *The Polish Daily News*. He was an unsuccessful candidate for alderman in 1884, defeated, it was asserted, because of the defection of the Irish Catholics. He became secretary of

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<sup>25</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>26</sup>Letter, Mrs. Marie Smietanka, February 11, 1955.

the north side police court and later established a coal business. His untimely death, at the age of forty, was due to a tumor of the brain, according to his elder daughter. The funeral, held from St. Stanislaus Kostka Church, from which he had been married, was unusually large, a testimony of the esteem in which he was held and a recognition of his devotion to the interests of the Poles of America. He had been made an honorary member of the Societas Princeps a Petro, on direct recommendation of Pope Pius IX<sup>27</sup>

While the Polish town in Sherman County, planned by John Barzynski, did not materialize, the presence of many Poles in central Nebraska is proof of the success of his efforts as a colonizer.

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<sup>27</sup>Interview, Mrs. Marie Smietanka, April 14, 1954. *Dziennik Chicagoski*, July 12, 1947. Mrs. Smietanka furnished copies of the letters written by her brother, dated June 16, 17, 19, 1947.