REMINISCENCES OF THE DAYS WHEN BOHEMIANS FIRST SETTLED IN KNOX COUNTY, NEBR.

(Translated from an article written by Joseph P. Sedivy, Verdigre, Neb. an Bohemian, for the Bohemian weekly Osveta Americká, in 1911).

In the years between 1870 and 1875 it was the rule that large herds of Texas cattle were driven through our new settlement, each year, beginning in June and ending in September. The cattle was bought by the government in Texas for the military posts and Indian agencies along the upper Missouri. This wild cattle, with long horns, was in the care of equally wild cowboys, who often dealt roughly with the settlers, causing them loss and endangering their lives. I remember when a group of cowboys once held a veritable reign of terror in Niobrara and woe to him who refused to do as they bid. For instance, Mr. Frank Janousek had a log house in Niobrara in which he ran a saloon. A crowd of cowboys came with great noise and jumping off their horses, they hastened in. There were about twenty of them. They ordered everything in sight, some paid, some did not. They began to entertain themselves by drinking, playing cards and dice and teasing the proprietor. When they began to feel pretty gay as a result of too much liquor, those that were playing cards got up a quarrel, just for effect. They pulled out their guns, began to shoot up the place and when the proprietor tried to restore order and demanded pay, they turned their weapons on him and the bar tender. Each of the latter was armed but each realized that discretion was the better part of valor. The proprietor lived in the back rooms, and so he and the bar tender made their escape there, barricading the door firmly.

The unwelcome guests sent a few shots after them, then amid general laughter, swearing and singing, they all fell on the stock at hand, and a wild orgy ensued. Revolver shots, an unearthly din, singing, swearing, breaking glass, etc. resounded far and wide. They used everything for targets, even the bolt on the door. Niobrara was the county seat and the sheriff lived there, but he was afraid to come forth, knowing that he was practically helpless. All the houses were fortified in various ways and the occupants trembled with fear. The men were armed and prepared to defend themselves and families. The racket lasted until dark, when a few sober cowboys came from the camp and with great difficulty got the rest to go with them. The camp was situated about two miles from town, but the quiet air during the whole night was rent with din. Mr. Janousek received no damages for his loss. This was but one example of what the cowboys used to do.

It was their custom, when driving a large herd, often numbering ten thousands, to take it across the vast prairies in somewhat the following order: The boss cowboy rode first with one or two cowboys, then came a herd of healthy stock, driven by cowboys who rode on horses, at the sides. Then came a herd of tame horses, generally led by a docile mare with a bell about her neck. Then came more cowboys, then wagons drawn by three pair of oxen each, with Mexican drivers. The wagons contained the provisions and necessities. Then came a herd of sick and lame cattle, driven by two or three cowboys. When the herd reached the Missouri valley at Niobrara, which at that time was unsettled, with the exception of the little town and a few farms, the cowboys made camp. It was necessary now to drive all the animals over the Missouri River, to the other side. It was the custom to divide the herd into groups of three and four hundred head each., Local Indian half-

breeds were hired to assist. They sat in their boats and helped to steer the cattle over. This was most dangerous work, when an enraged beast refused to go on and attacked the man in the boat. But Indian half-breeds were good swimmers and brave, and were eager to do the work for good pay. Later white men used to do this work too. It was interesting to watch a mottled herd of cattle swimming in the river. The weak ones often perished by drowning or stuck in the mud, and such became the prey of Indians loafing on the banks. The red men sat in the tops of trees along the shores like vultures and used every occasion to get the unfortunate animals. When they thus gained a goodly supply of meat, they had a great celebration in the near-by village, from whence could be heard, the whole night long, their racket and din.

It happened also that during storms the cattle stampeded at night and many heads wandered away into the hills southeast of the Niobrara valley. ~~Cows~~ Cows, feeling their hour of pain coming on them, got miles away from the herd. The cowboys did not care much about looking for lost cattle, except when a general stampede occurred. It was the rule that any lost heads became the property of the person who found them, be he white or red, each had an equal right.

I often helped to get such an animal and I could relate many an interesting episode of such occasions. But I will limit myself to one, which happened toward the end of September 1872.

I was but a boy at that time and it was my duty to look after father's cattle, consisting of a pair of oxen, two cows and a heifer. In those days cattle roamed at will, for but a small share of the ground was under cultivation. The cattle usually came home at night by itself, and if it did not, we had to get it. I started out one evening to

get our stock, but could see no signs of it, nor hear the bell. I took myself over the hills to the east until I came to a little creek that flows into Sturgis Creek. The sun was nearly setting and I could not find the cattle. I decided to go down to the creek and if I did not find anything, to return. I was about three miles from home. I started to cross the hill, to get to the creek, but when I reached the top I saw a large Texas steer lying there in the valley. I knew it was dangerous to approach him on foot, so I retraced my steps as quietly as I could. I hurried for help and wanted to get the steer before darkness came on. Mr. John Barta lived on his homestead on Verdigre Creek and as he was a good huntsman, I turned to him. When I got to his dug-out and told him my mission, he was ready in a minute. Before we reached the place where I had seen the steer, twilight came on and it was necessary to go ahead carefully, so he would not see us first. But to our great sorrow he was gone. There were three of us, Mr. Barta with his trusty gun, Mr. J. H., With a knife and hatchet, and I with my weapon. Suddenly we heard a noise in the grass and we saw in the dark a black object. I was greatly excited and fired twice and my shots started up several other black objects. We all sped after them, when Mr. Barta cried: "Be careful!" and there we saw, about thirty feet away, our "boy from Texas." At the same time a dreadful odor spread around us which we knew to come from skunks and so we began to retire hastily, especially since the long horn showed signs of impatience. Mr. Bárta took a shot at him, the animal reared and it seemed was struck. It took several wild jumps, as it seemed in our direction, and we ran as fast as we could, although we were well nigh suffocated by the horrible stench. I felt myself falling, so I grabbed hold of Mr. J.H. and dragged him with me into a pool. Mr. Barta fell over a log, stopped, and not seeing any danger, called for us. We got out, wet to the skin but with the sickening odor still clinging to us. I

had lost my weapon and Mr. J. H. his hatchet. When Mr. Barta saw us, he had a good laugh. We decided to set out in the morning to look for what we had lost and see if we could not find the wounded steer. I got home tired and chilled, called my father out and told him what had happened. He brought me clean clothing which I put on in the barn, then I went up into the attic without any supper other than a cup of hot, black coffee. The next day Mr. Barta and I went forth and found our weapons, but aside from a stench nothing was to be seen of the skunks. We found the tracks of the steer and a good deal of blood, and although we followed the tracks for six miles, we lost them in a deep ravine overgrown with high grass. Being hungry and tired we decided to return home. A few days later I met Mr. J. H., but he was minus his beautiful, blond beard. When I asked him why he parted with it, he replied that he was obliged to on account of the smell. He swore never again to look for lost Texas steers.

Of those Bohemians who first came to our settlement but few had a wagon, team or plow. In some cases three families together owned a pair of oxen, which they used alternately, and did so in entire harmony. There were those who could not even buy a cow, and in such cases the neighbors helped them with their teams. When I realize now what hardships our fathers and mothers had to endure, I admire their ~~bravery~~ bravery and energy. They had no experiences in faming, nor any notion of what it was to settle in a wild, strange country, far from civilization, in which only Indians lived. Besides that we had to suffer all sorts of trouble by drouth, grasshoppers, hail in summer and cruel storms in winter. There was plenty of poverty, for there was but little work to be had in the vicinity and the pay was scanty. We used to cut and haul cord wood, which was bought from us in Niobrara and sold to

steamboats going up the Missouri. Those of our countrymen who had teams used to haul flour from distant mills and railroad stations. But even such work was very hard and poorly paid.

In 1869 we had in our county 80 white settlers, living in two settlements. One was in the valley at the mouth of the Niobrara where it flows into the Missouri River, and the other about twenty-three miles east, also in the Missouri valley. Between these settlements was the Santee Indian reservation. West and southwest of Niobrara was the Ponca Indian reservation. The boundary between this reservation and the white settlement was the Niobrara river. In the Niobrara valley were two storekeepers, who traded entirely with the Indians. One was the store of H. Westermann and F. Bruns in Niobrara, the other was near the mouth of the Niobrara river, about two and a half miles from town. Both of these stores exchanged various trinkets for hides and furs. These trinkets included ammunition, glass beads, paints for the face, mirrors, copper and brass wire, tin bells, arrows, knives, etc. Also flour, salt, sugar, bacon, coffee, matches, tobacco and dry goods of gay colors. These storekeepers secretly sold the Indians whiskey (pe-te-ni), and although it was greatly "baptized", that is diluted, they charged enormous prices for it. Sale of whiskey to Indians was strictly forbidden, but it was carried on anyway. If the drunken Indians were guilty of a crime or trouble of any kind, the matter was hushed. I remember a similar case to that happened at the Ponca agency, to which I was an unwilling witness and which ended in a bloody fight. The agent himself tried to hush the matter up but in vain. The Indian Department in Washington punished all the guilty ones and the agent lost his position. There was peace for a while after that, better order being maintained.

In May 1874 our family suffered a great loss. One of our oxen drowned. My parents, having no money and besides that being in debt to the storekeeper in Niobrara, found themselves in a bad situation. It was cruel that it should have happened in the busiest time of the year, when we needed the team the most. The year before we suffered from a hail storm, so that we had but the slimmest kind of harvest.

William Lamont, an American settler who traded with the Indians and owned a farm in the Niobrara valley, took pity on us. He offered to sell my father an ox on payments and said that he would be willing that I work for him until the sum ~~is~~ was paid. My father was glad of this offer and I set out the next day.

William Lamont was born in Pennsylvania, of French ancestry. At that time he owned about a hundred head of cattle and 600 acres of land in the Niobrara valley. He did all his work himself, for his family did not live with him. His wife and he had parted, she returning to Pennsylvania. During the busy times in harvest and haying he hired Indians, later whites. He lived a solitary life. He was hot tempered but good hearted. He was a good advisor to us Bohemian settlers and sometimes more than that, a real benefactor. He lived in a cabin made of cedar logs, of two rooms, with a sod roof. The front room served as a kitchen and dining room, the other as a store. There were but three windows. The walls were covered with wpider webs and dust and insects were thick everywhere. I took but one look and decided to go home, but when I thought of the position my parents were in and realized that they relied on my help, I thought I had better stay. Lamont promised that I could go home each Saturday and that strengthened me.

But the real test was yet to come! When I arrived with my bundle on my back, Lamont was beginning to cook dinner. A kettle of water was

boiling on an old stove, and behind the stove was a four gallon dirty jar. Lamont put some flour on the dirty table, then added several teaspoons baking soda and made a ~~crouch~~ tough dough, rolled it out and put it right on top of the stove to bake. From under the bed he took a sack of bacon, sliced some and fried it. Then he sliced boiled potatoes, took some lard from the jar, at the same time picking out of it certain black objects. I began to lose my appetite. He set the table with two tin plates and old cups, and after he had fried the potatoes and made coffee in a dirty pot, he invited me to dinner. I felt backward, which he noticed and begged me heartily to go ahead and eat. So I took a few mouthfuls, but alas, I found certain black fragments in the potatoes and on my plate. They were the remains of cockroaches and flies, which insects no doubt found a greasy grave in the lard. The "bread" was of a green color and smelt strongly of soda. That was my first meal away from home, that is while I was in service. In those times of universal hardships and lack of many things we have now, I certainly did not have a cloyed appetite, but this was more than I could stand, for although our fare was simple, my dear mother was very clean.

After dinner my boss hitched ~~4~~ horses to a harrow and showed me how to work it. I had had experience with oxen only. I harrowed a field for corn and all went well. At times I felt like making for home, but when I thought of our need and of Lamont's hot temper, my courage forsook me. I could go home over Sunday and make up what my bill of fare through the week lacked. We had tea, crackers and syrup, soda bread and fried potatoes for supper, and so it went the whole week long. Sometimes Lamont bought game from the Indians, or fish. On Saturdays I

ran home as fast as my feet could carry me, and you would not believe how much supper I ate and how good it tasted. When I returned to Lamont's, I used to take with me a sack containing a loaf of mother's good bread and fresh butter. Lamont liked it too, and so for a few days at least I did not have to "feast" on his soda bread. Thus it went on until about the middle of June. I tried to keep Lamont's home as clean as I could and in every way endeavored to please him. One day I had to leave my work in the field because of rain. I came in the house all wet and saw that my boss was pulling a grain sack from under the covers and buffalo robes of the bed on which we both slept. The sack contained something most thoroughly pressed or baled and one could see that the rats had gnawed it. I realized that this sack with whatever it contained had served as our pillow for a long time. Lamont explained that the sack contained corn meal and that for a change it might be nice to have corn meal mush. I was changing my clothes for dry ones in the meantime, and looked on with a sick feeling at my stomach. Lamont proceeded to sift the meal and at the same time busily picked out certain black objects again, and when I observed the sack closer, I saw that it was covered with bedbugs. I was afraid to call his attention to them for he was easily angered and so I let Lamont make the mush. He added lard and syrup and when we sat down, he ate his portion with relish, but I feigned a headache and drank only my coffee.

After dinner as it continued raining Lamont sent me to fix a fence down by the river, saying that he will follow me as soon as he is through with some Ponca Indians. As I walked out I noticed a large yellow dog that had followed the Indians. An hour later Lamont came and helped me finish, but he complained of not feeling well. As we were returning home, we heard the wild barking of a dog. Hurrying on we

discovered that a dog had been imprisoned in the house, he tried to get out of the barred window. It was the yellow dog I had seen with the Indians. He had come in with them and Lamont, not noticing him, had locked him in on leaving the house. When Lamont spied the dog, he swore terribly, opened the dore and threatened him with a hoe he had in hand. The dog was a vicious Indian dog, not afraid of anything, so that a wild struggle ensued. The room was full of dust. The dog would not go out. Lamont took a gun standing in the corner and aimed at the dog under the bed. I was standing in the door way and as the wounded dog ran out, he nearly knocked me over. The next instant Lamont pushed me aside and followed the dog, but he vanished. We were both very much excited, I with fear and my boss with anger. After a bit he became calmer and laughed as he said: "What's the matter with the smoke, it does not want to go out."

He stepped in the house and kicked over the pan of mush and then we saw that the dog had raised Hades while we were gone. The pan was broken and the contents spread all over the room, even under the bed. The table and dishes were broken, as were two panes of window glass. When my boss saw this, his anger boiled over again, and he threw the pan of mush out of the door, striking an Indian woman just stepping in. She was one of several women who had come to trade. But my boss did not care, he rapidly fired out one object after another and the women fled with loud cries. I noticed that the bed was burning and carried out the bedding. Then I brought water to quench the burning mattress, but ~~pouring it~~ instead of pouring it on the bed I poured it on Lamont in my excitement. We finally put the fire out and Lamont acknowledged that he caused it himself, when he fired at the dog. We slept outside that night and my boss was sick for several days, either from the mush or excitement ~~or excitement~~, probably both.

About a week after he was well he went to Sioux City for merchandise, taking with him a supply of hides and buffalo robes. I helped him get ready in the morning and he gave his orders, leaving with me about fifteen dollars in change. He cautioned me especially not to sell the Indians whiskey under any circumstances, and said further that my neighbor, Antoine La Ravier, a Frenchman, whose wife was a Ponca Indian, would stay with me nights.

La Ravier was a pretty good man, except that he liked his whiskey too well. He was a good comrade of Lamont's and had lived about sixteen years with the Ponca tribe. He was a typical frontiersman. He was always armed, with a gun, knife or revolver. He traded horses and hauled freight to the Ponca agency. When drunk he was wild and very quarrelsome, and the Indians were afraid of him.

I was glad to have company for the night but hoped he would be sober. The first night I spent alone, Antoine did not appear. I was greatly afraid, for the Indians coming from the Niobrara reservation at night used to wake Lamont to buy goods and get food and whiskey. Then they would sit comfortably on the ground and smoke the pipe of peace. Although the Ponca Indians were friendly to us whites and protected us from the Sioux, still we did not feel safe if they were drunk.

The next night I went to bed alone again, at about ten o'clock. Soon I heard several horses in the yard and the voices of people and I knew the Indians had come. Someone knocked on the door and called for Lamont. I lit the lamp, dressed myself quickly and admitted five Indians. Two were chiefs, "Smoke Maker" and "Big Smoke". They wanted Lamont. I did not give them a direct answer, but could see that they well knew that he was away, for they laughed at me. They sat down and

began to smoke a pipe, passing it on from one to the other. They bought two packages of chewing tobacco and face paint. They offered me a blue blanket for whiskey. One of them pulled out a whiskey bottle, drained it and handed it to me, asking me to fill it and offering me some silver money. I told them they could get no whiskey from me and asked them to go home. I had a big revolver under the bed and feeling scared, I reached for it. The Indians divined my purpose, jumped up and raised their weapons. Just then I heard a loud voice and my saviour Antoine La Ravier stood in the doorway, holding in one hand a long knife and in the other a revolver. "Out! Out! Out, you dogs, or I will shoot you! Out!" he cried.

The Indians were petrified. The one nearest to me, with tomahawk upraised, fled and the rest followed him. Antoine, still aiming at them, sent his compliments along the night air.

When the last echo of the horses' hoofs had died, Antoine sat down and related to me that he had been in Niobrara and was returning home on his horse. Seeing a light he realized that I had Indian visitors that had been in Niobrara and were somewhat tipsy. He remembered his promise to Lamont and came just in time. Luckily he was sober. I could not fall asleep until morning, but Antoine fell asleep immediately and snored away as though nothing had happened. He stayed with me each night after that until Lamont returned.

Antoine died that year a terrible death. He tried to entice an Indian's sweetheart from him and in the ensuing struggle was shot. Wounded and unable to defend himself, he was literally chopped to pieces by an Indian woman. The perpetrators of this dreadful crime vanished from the agency and were never found.

Matters later became much better at Lamont's, as regards food and comfort. Lamont hired my friend George Vlasnik, now dead, and together we saw to it that cleanliness prevailed. In October I went home.