

Bohemian Pioneers of Omaha.

(Translated from the Bohemian weekly Osveta Americka, Omaha, issue of September 11, 1912).

Written by V. L. Vodicka, Omaha, now deceased.)

As far as I know, Mr. Edward Rosewater was the first Bohemian to permanently settle in Omaha. There were some Bohemians before him, but they left no trace, except Mr. Schlesinger and Mr. Joseph Horský, both of whom settled in Washington County in 1857 and used to come to Omaha. Mr. Schlesinger hauled freight in the early sixties between Omaha and Denver, Colo. I came to Omaha March 6, 1868. I was born in Těchovice, Bohemia, September 14th., 1844 and I came to America in 1865. I first lived in Baltimore, two years, then I went to Cincinnati and then to Dayton, Ohio, where I worked in the railway shops. Mr. Dolanský worked there too, he died a few years ago in Crete, Nebraska, where he lived for many years. I realized that the west and country life afford better opportunities to everybody, especially the worker in the city, and so in March, 1868 I set out for the west. Mr. Eman Hronek of Dayton, Ohio, came with me.

At that time there were not more than a dozen Bohemians in Omaha, who had come here from Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Among those was Mr. Joseph Novacek, proprietor of a boarding house on Twelfth Street near Dodge, in which building later was the Redfield Printing Company. Some of his Bohemian boarders were Vaclav Sulek (deceased), John Hula and F. Horak, both of whom returned to Cedar Rapids. All three were musicians and made their living thereby. Of those who came before me I remember George Dvorak, who came the year before from St. Louis and whose son Joseph Dvorak later became county clerk of Colfax County. Then there was Eman Schlesinger, son of Mr. Schlesinger mentioned before. He was a contractor and built the building now standing south of the office of the South Omaha Ice & Coal Co. on South Thirteenth Street near the

viaduct. Then there was V. Kucera, also a carpenter, who came from Cleveland. Then Joseph Zima, and Vaclav ^{Kovar} Kovar, who came from Cedar Rapids, was a tinner and later returned to that city. Then there was Vaclav Stepanek, who used to clerk and in 1869 built the first Bohemian hall on Thirteenth and William Streets. As far as I remember, those were the only Bohemians here at that time, although there may have been others. About the time when I arrived the family of Mr. Tucek (father of the druggist on South Thirteenth Street) came also. During 1868 the following came: Reznicek, a cigar maker, who died later in West Point, Nebraska, and whose son has a meat market in Omaha; the Marusaks, who settled in Butler County; Vaclav Basus, who left for the west in 1875 and nothing was ever heard of him thereafter; old man Boukal, whose sons are living here; Matěj Nerad, now living in South Omaha; F. Mares, who later lived in Crete, Nebraska; Joseph Zerzan, who moved many years ago to Schuyler, Nebraska; Savlík, Hajek and Killian, who moved to Saunders County; Charles Jackele, who died in Wisner; Joseph Kastl, who moved to Saunders County and whose sons live there; F. Kriz, F. Klikos, Anton Jansa, Josef Dufek, Josef Bures, Pospisil, and others. In that year came too F. Jilek from Pittsburgh, who settled in Fremont and whose sons took the name of Ellick. With him came Jacob Mares, who died in Linwood.

In the fall of 1868 Uhlik, Majer and I established a Bohemian colony in Dodge County, settling there, among others, F. Kriz, F. Klikos, the Bartoses and others. ^{all} All of those who took advantage of this chance prospered. In 1868 came the following: Pinter of Cleveland, who later went to Republic County, Kansas, where he died; Josef Reznicek, a mason from St. Louis; Frank Koudele, later a banker in Weston; Herold, a butcher, who left for West Point; M. Zirnuth, who

lived for some time in Saline County and then for a quarter of a century in New Mexico; Ferdinand Vondrejs; The parents of Joseph Kavan, who removed to a farm to Saunders County; John Janacek, who died in Schuyler; Joseph Papez, now living in Albion; John Stibal, living in Rogers; Martin and John Svacina, who came from Wisconsin; old man Konvalin, Sojka, Novak, Vaclav Kavka, John Kavka, Thomas Kastner (he died in Nebraska City), Joseph Kavka, Vaclav Fiala, F. Vrba and Joseph Mejstrik; Vaclav Cuda, Sucha, Bednar, brewer Barta who worked in the Bemis Brewery, the Spilinsks, Matej Nemecek, a tailor Nemecek and a blacksmith Nemecek, the Krepelas, Mrany, and others.

Most of these people considered Omaha but a stopping place, and after a shorter or longer stay they went further west, usually to take up claims, and surely none were sorry for it. Messrs. Zerzan and Dvorak had the first Bohemian store here. Both were then single young men. That was in 1869. Mr. Chas. Jankele took over the first Bohemian hall in 1871 from Stepanek, sold it to Kucera and Kucera built a new hall on South Thirteenth Street, between Pierce and William, and sold the old one to George Hoffman. In 1876 he sold the hall on Thirteenth Street to the Catholic bishop, who made it over into a church for the Bohemian Catholics.

In those days Thirteenth Street from Leavenworth Street south was but a wagon road. At Leavenworth a stream crossed it, and the bridge ^{over} it was a miserable affair. About where Pacific Street now is there was a place where two wagons could pass each other, over the rest of the road but one wagon could pass. All that part of the town which is called Kountze's Addition was in ^{litigation} court. George Francis Train had bought it, but had not made the payments properly and was sued therefor, which suit dragged along for years. Our countrymen used to settle there because they did not have to pay rent. They could build a shanty and

lived in it for years, undisturbed. The surrounding hills were covered with brushwood and timber and thus gave fuel, but toward the end of the seventies the taking of this fuel was forbidden by the police department. Along Thirteenth Street flowed a stream, which had its beginning at Thirteenth and Center Streets, and along this stream were most of the Bohemian shanties. When the suit was finally settled and Mr. Herman Kountze became the owner, our countrymen bought lots of him and built better homes.

Although there were not many of us and most of the Bohemian population was of a shifting nature, going further to settle on farms, we lived from the beginning a social and national life. The Bohemians love dancing, singing, music and the drama, so in the first Bohemian hall, owned by Stepanek and later in Kucera's hall we ^{acted plays quite} ~~played the theater~~ often. The stage was primitive, but it had to suffice. The principal actors and actresses were F. Kares, M. Nerad, J. Stibal, Zima, Miss Pinter (she married later Mr. Krejci of Cleveland, O.) Anna Kucera and others..

After establishing the colony in ^{Lodge} Dege County and a stay of several months in West Point, I returned to Omaha and for several years was employed in the Union Pacific shops, at the same time giving attention to the matter of Bohemian colonies or settlements. In 1874 Martin Vacek, V. D'Obes and Anton Francel and I established a Bohemian colony called Slovenia in Howard County. In the following years I helped by word and act many settlers in Saline and Fillmore Counties, I mean of course Bohemian settlers. In the late seventies I established the Bohemian colony in Madison County, near Kalamazoo, and helped many of my countrymen to settle in various parts of the state.

Of the Bohemians now living in Omaha, Mr. Tucek and I are the oldest Settlers.