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## The tragedy of the Brabenec family.

(Translated from the article written in Bohemian for the Bohemian almanach Pioneer, by Joseph P. Sedivy, Vergennes, Neb. r.)  
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Dear reader, in order that I could accurately describe the sad episode of which this article treats, I had to call on Mr. Matěj Hrbek, the only living eye-witness of the tragedy of the Brabenec family. Mr. Hrbek is eighty-four years old, but he is still full of life and very kind. He lives with his daughter near Knoxville, Nebraska, and likes to tell about the hardships and Indian raids suffered by our pioneers. He likes also to relate funny, comical episodes, and is very glad to receive visits from his friends. He greeted <sup>me</sup> most hospitably and I <sup>spent</sup> a pleasant afternoon in conversation with him. He told me everything with great accuracy and I was amazed at his wonderful memory. I myself remember many persons mentioned in this narrative, and all that came to my eye and ear at that time.

Mr. Matěj Hrbek became acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. Brabenec in Chicago, Illinois, in 1869, at the time when a society called "Česká Kolonie" (Bohemian Colony) was founded, having for its purpose the finding of government lands for its members to settle on. Both Mr. Hrbek and Mr. Brabenec wished to farm and so they became members of this society. They left Chicago with the second expedition, composed of several families. Their goal was the country in L'Eau Qui County in Nebraska. That was what our Knox County was called then.

All the participants of the expeditions carried with them <sup>numerous</sup> ~~numer-~~ <sup>plans</sup> ~~of plans~~ for the future, but not much money and no experience whatever in farming according to the American style. They took with them only the most necessary implements, clothes and feather-beds, in order to save on freight, for the railroad only went to Sioux City, Iowa. They intended to proceed from there by boat along the Missouri river, but



in this they were disappointed, for the river was frozen. There was nothing else to do except to make the remaining hundred miles as best as they could. Mr. Matěj Hrbek, Mr. Tomáš Brabenec and Mr. Jan Prasek together bought a pair of oxen and an old wagon for \$240.00. They loaded all their goods and started out early in the morning on March 25th. from Sioux City, filled with a desire to see the "promised land" Nebraska. They traveled together with Joseph and John Tikalsky, who too had bought a pair of oxen and a wagon in Sioux City. When they got to the Missouri River, they found it partly frozen, so that it was dangerous to ford it. But they gathered up their courage and fortunately gained the opposite shore, Nebraska. The valley was filled with water from the Missouri and they encountered their first difficulty.

They did not know how to handle their team in American style, and so the first day they made only thirteen miles. The night they spent with a certain farmer.

They reached Ponca, a small settlement, the next day, with great difficulty. It was dark when they arrived, the teams were very tired in spite of the fact that all the immigrants walked beside the wagons. The loads were a trifle heavy for the rough and in places almost impassable roads. They spent the night in Ponca, in a boarding-house. Realizing that they <sup>could</sup> ~~cannot~~ transport their loads to Niobrara in this manner, they looked around for somebody who would take over a part of their freight. Finally they did find a man who agreed to haul their goods into "the terribly dangerous country by the Niobrara, which is full of bloodthirsty Indians", for the sinful price of \$140.00. They had to take advantage of this offer, there being nothing else to do, and they took along in their own wagons only clothes, feather-beds and food. They laid up a stock of bread and groceries in Sioux City, enough to last them until they got to Niobrara.



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They rested a day in Ponca. The next day they made but twelve miles, for the oxen were lame. That night they spent at a German farm house, the host and his wife being most kind, having themselves experienced bitter times at first. When our pilgrims awoke, they found it was raining and it rained heavily for two days, so that further traveling was impossible. On the third day the sky was still clouded, a mist prevailed and a cold northwestern wind blew. But our people were eager to look upon their Eden, which was to make true all their plans and hopes, and so they set out in spite of the warnings of their hosts. When they had been on the way about three hours, the rain changed to snow and the freezing wind became furious. The farms were scattered far apart, the country was but thinly settled, but our friends forged ahead bravely. The oxen became faint and were made to go with great difficulty. When the front wagon struck a muddy hollow, the team could not move, and even when the other team was harnessed to the first, the wagon did not budge.

What now? Darkness settled over the land, as far as eye could see no habitation appeared. Our people had to spend the night under the sky. They unhitched the oxen and tied them to the wagons, giving them the last of the wet hay. The poor animals, hungry and spent, trembling with the cold, soon made away with their scanty supper and wanted more, but there was no more. The women and children crept between the feather-beds, under the cover, after a supper consisting of frozen bread. The men ran about, trying to keep warm. After midnight the heavens cleared, but it remained very cold. At dawn to their consternation they found that they had lost their way. The oxen bellowed with hunger, the women and children scolded and cried, saying they were ~~so~~<sup>sorry</sup> they ever left Chicago, where no such suffering was dreamed of.



At last the men got the wagon out and they all returned to their German host, who again received them hospitably and gave them shelter and food. The following day he went with them a ways, to show them the right road and gave them other good advice. In the evening they reached a settlement called St. James, in Cedar County, consisting of five buildings. The principal one was a mill, belonging to a German miller, by name Hoesse. The creek was <sup>high</sup> ~~high~~, the entire valley under water, and our travelers risked their very lives to get to the mill, where they found lodging for the night. The miller charged them two dollars for each person and as much for each team, for he was an extremely shrewd man in financial matters, for which reason he was not very popular. Our pilgrims paid the required amount and started out early the next morning.

The day was warm and mud everywhere, except in the ravines, which were filled with snow. They made twelve miles and spent the night under the sky once more. The country west of Saint James was sparsely settled. The settlers, mostly Germans, lived in sod houses, which material afforded buildings for the stock and poultry too. The country there is a high prairie, through which flow numerous creeks into the Missouri river. On this rolling prairie are now found thousands of beautiful, fertile farms. They reached Mr. H. Weingandt's farm in the evening, which was well improved for those times. Mr. Weingandt, a German, gave them lodging and advice regarding the rest of their journey.

The following day they got to Bazile Springs, a small creek. They camped for the night near a log cabin owned by a white man whose wife was an Indian. They made <sup>coffee</sup> ~~coffee~~ and spent the night outside. Weingandt's farm bordered on the reservation, so there were no more settlers. The Indians lived in tents, mainly in the agency on the Missouri river.



The next day they reached the mouth of the Bazile, five miles from Niobrara. The water fell slowly, so they had to camp three days, part of the time being hungry, their stores being used up. The fourth day with great difficulty they forded the creek and reached the other side. In the afternoon they came to several cabins of cottonwood logs and were informed that they had reached the town of Niobrara!

They found shelter in an empty shanty, several families together, the driver unloaded their goods, and they had to get along as well as they could.

The weather became favorable. After a two days' rest the men set out to investigate. They started afoot early in the morning, having in mind to select homesteads one next to the other. They felt that as close neighbors they would not be so lonesome and could help each other in case of need. They struck out to the west to the Niobrara, then up along Verdigre creek. Brabenec, Hrbek and Prasek did not like the land there, so they took themselves in a southeastern direction from Niobrara, but could not find what they wanted. Having spent thus five days, they finally agreed to take up claims on the Niobrara river, in a valley about eighteen or twenty miles from Niobrara, which the Bohemian settlers later used to call "Third Bottom". The Niobrara river has a valley several miles long along the southern and southwestern side, edged with hills that close it in and form in places perpendicular banks. Then follows a stretch of fine valley and then hills again. This romantic country follows the river for many miles.

At the time of which I write the valleys were covered with timber, especially in those <sup>places</sup> ~~places~~ where the prairie fires could not reach and where there was no grass. In such spots were fine cottonwoods, oaks, elms, cedars, basswoods and other trees. In the valley and on the islands in the river was much beautiful timber. Now it has vanished. The forest, our country's ornament, is gone and with it its



picturesqueness.

As I have said, Brabenec, Hrbek and Prasek liked the lands in this beautiful valley, entirely free of settlers. They had the opportunity to take up good fertile land with nice timber, which would give fuel and building material. There was plenty of rich grass, untouched by prairie fires. The lay of the land was level or slightly rolling. Through the upper part flows Apple Creek.

They returned to their families in Niobrara, but when they told their friends what they had decided to do, these warned them not to go so far from other settlers, from Niobrara, from the white man's settlements. They were told that they <sup>would have</sup> had to bear with Indian raids, that their lives and property would be endangered, but all in vain! They said they would take up those claims or return to Chicago - so well did they like the beautiful valley.

The next day they asked Mr. Vaclav Randa, who had moved to Niobrara from Chicago the previous February, to help move them with his team of oxen. My father sent me with a wagon (we lived on a homestead five miles from the town, on the Niobrara river) and I obeyed with alacrity.

So far I have been relating to you what was told me by Mr. Hrbek, now I will tell something of my own reminiscences.

I was glad of the opportunity to see a new piece of country and like all young boys I was anxious to experience adventure. We loaded our wagon to the full, bound the load with ropes, hitched our oxen and Randa's too, and the others being ready, we set out of Niobrara in grand style! Everything went well, although slowly, but inasmuch as our oxen and Randa's were older and experienced, we got to Verdigre Creek without any trouble. But neither Randa nor I had ever made a long trip with oxen over creeks and hills, through woods and mud, and so



we were not the best of drivers. We had to acknowledge several times that our steeds had better acumen than we did.

The ford over Verdigre Creek was about 300 feet from the place where the creek flowed into the Niobrara, and both creek and river were still high. But there was nothing to do except to ford, and we reached the other shore with no other catastrophe than the wetting of the loads. We went along further on a narrow and rough road, under the hills. The ground was very muddy in places, in others we had to ride on a bank 20-35 feet high, where just a slight movement of the wheels would have been sufficient to throw us into the Niobrara river.

The road from Niobrara along the river had just been broken through by settlers who had found homes in the first valley the previous summer, about ten miles from Niobrara. They were: Louis Kestner, a German, and Carl Schindler, a Bohemian-German. We rode about a mile and a half over this dangerous road and felt very frightened. The immigrants and their families walked, only Mrs. Hrbek and two small children rode. The weather was warm and pleasant. Randa entertained us with his humor, for everyone who remembers him, knows he was naturally very jolly. We got to the first valley and stopped at Carl Schindler's. Here we fed the oxen and drank coffee, served us by Mrs. Schindler, who brought milk for the little ones and tried in every way to show us hospitality. At three in the afternoon we started out again. Mr. Schindler told us which way to go, for we had come to a country where for a thousand miles there were no settlers and no wagon road, here and there only an Indian trail.

We rode through the valley until we came to a place where it was enclosed by hills. Here we had to go up a steep hill, to get to the upland stretching from east to west for several miles. It took quite a



while to get to the plain and when we finally got to the top, we saw a drove of antelopes running away. We found that we had come to an Indian trail, used at times from the south, which we were to follow in order to get to the second valley. Mr. Hrbek shot several prairie chickens on the plain, there being many of them and of many kinds in those days.

The sun was setting when we got to the next path on the ridge of the hill rising up from the valley. This path led steeply down to a creek in the valley, later called Soldier Creek. The descent was very sharp and we had to use chain brakes. We got down allright though, and it was a miracle we did not tip over and fall into a hole made by heavy rains. But we could not go any further, for the road was covered with thick underbrush. We looked in vain for a clearing, and had to get out our axes and cut a road. Luckily the largest brushwood was only four inches in diameter, but we got pretty warm before we reached the creek. The sun had set long ago. We unhitched the oxen and while they were drinking in the creek, the moon arose in all its clear beauty and lighted up the heavens.

We were all in a good humor. We made a camp, boiled coffee, fried bacon bought in Niobrara, and after a hard day's work ate a good supper. The oxen got hay given us by Schindler. It was pleasant to sit by the fire and we conversed long into the night. Here and there a night-owl or a screech-owl was heard, which frightened the women, who thought it was the Indians imitating birds, and we could not pacify them.

I slept with Randa under the wagon near the fire, wrapped in a blanket and fully dressed. All the men of our small caravan slept thus, the women slept in the wagon. The Brabeneč children slept near the fire. I fell hard asleep and awoke in the morning only when a



chilly sensation made me get up and replenish the dying fire. The other men were getting up, although it was barely dawn. They fed the oxen and went to see where the creek could best be forded. About thirty feet from where we had camped we levelled the steep banks and after breakfast we set out again. The day was pleasant, the night had been warm, the prairie grass was getting green. All the air was filled with the perfume of awakening spring, meadow larks and robins sang merrily, and prairie chickens were heard on all sides. Above the river, high up in the sky, a pair of eagles circled, looking for prey, from the tops of the majestic oaks came the hoarse voices of crows and mischievous squirrels, of which there were very many. Nature as well as our party was in the best of moods.

We crossed the second valley, about six miles long, later settled by our countrymen Pisl, Marsal, Vlasnik, Jandus, Mlady, Driak, John Sedivy and John Kounovsky. We gained another upland plain, two and a half miles long and from there we saw our goal. A third valley lay before us, where the families of Brabenec, Hrbek and Prasek hoped to find a happy future. The men were most enthusiastic, and one after the other cried out to their wives: "I have picked out that land near the creek", "I have taken that place there, where you see the cottonwood woods by the river." The third said: "And I liked best the land between both claims, so I have taken that." The women were happy to see the final homes they would have.

We reached this valley at three in the afternoon, by Randa's watch. All were hungry, the oxen too, of course. We ~~decided~~<sup>decided</sup> that it would be best to unload all the goods under a bank by a large oak on Brabenec's claim. However, before we finished unloading, Hrbeks decided that they wanted their things taken to their claim, which we did and the



same was done with Prasek's things. Then we unhitched the oxen and were surprised to see how they relished the dry prairie grass, green only in spots. The men made a fire, boiled coffee and baked potatoes in the ashes. Hrbeks had brought the potatoes from Chicago. Oh, what a delicacy were those baked potatoes, even without butter, just salt to give them more flavor! I often think of that. It seems to me that even the coffee boiled in the open had a finer perfume than now, a nicer flavor than coffee boiled on modern gas or electric stoves.

After eating we found that it would be better if Randa and I stay until the next day, for we could not reach Schindlers by daylight any more. The oxen too were very tired. As the sun was setting, we saw seven ~~xxx~~ antelopes. They came out of the brush by the creek about two hundred <sup>feet</sup> ~~miles~~ from us, looked at us a while shyly but with curiosity a suddenly vanished. We sat around the crackling fire and enjoyed ourselves as on the evening before. Brabenees came too and all talked of plans for the future. They did not dream what sorrow, want and trouble lay in store for them before they could gain what they were seeking - contentment.

The pleasant ~~xxxx~~ silence of the night was broken only by the voices of night birds or howling of prairie wolves. The oxen, tied to trees, chewed their cuds contentedly. After midnight our camp grew quiet. I wrapped myself in my blanket and fell asleep, and slept soundly until awakened by Randa. We breakfasted and bade farewell to our friends, who thanked us heartily. The day was unpleasant, a southeastern wind blew cold and did not go down until evening. We stopped at Carl Schindler's, where we had coffee and a bite and fed our team. We got home after dark, Randa had supper at our house and went on home to Niobrara.



I will let Mr. Hrbek resume the story now. "The day after you left us", he said, "we three men got busy right away to prepare temporary dwellings for our families. As you remember, I had a wife and two small children, John, three years old, Anna five months old. Brabenec had a daughter Caroline, fourteen years old, and a son John, twelve years old. Prasek came <sup>with</sup> ~~with~~ his wife, their daughter came to them after a year.

Well, we each put up a shack on our land, that is a dug-out, covered with brushwood and reeds. We set up a stove, put sod around the pipe in the roof and plastered it with mud. We made beds on the floor, and put the flour and provisions in, leaving the rest outside. The weather being dry, it did not matter. The women hoed gardens. We men decided to fell some of the slender cottonwoods growing by the river and build a log house on each claim, the first being on Brabenec's land. On the morning of April 28th. we set out for the river and chopped down only straight trees of a size that three men could load on a wagon. By noon we put the first load on the spot where the cabin was to stand and after dinner returned to the woods. We worked with a will, happy to think that we will have good and stable homes. We were about half a mile from Brabenec's dug-out, which we could not see, however. It was a quiet, clear afternoon. At about three o'clock we heard several shots, which seemed to come from Brabenec's dugout. We were surprised, in fact paralyzed and looked in that direction. In a short time to our horror we saw a group of Indians riding rapidly into the hills, which bordered the valley. A bad presentiment took hold of us and we hurried to the dug-out. When we got there, at first we could see nothing wrong, but when Brabenec entered, he ran out again and lamented that his wife was dead. Prasek and I entered the dug-out and saw Mrs. Brabenec, apparently dead, lying on the floor by the stove, the oven



door of which was open. Having gained courage, we carried the poor woman out and tried to bring her back to life, which we accomplished in a little while. We found her skirts above the knees in the back soaked with blood. I remembered my family and ran to our dug-out. I was extremely excited and worn, my knees trembled and heart beat to suffocation. At first I could not speak, but when to my great happiness I saw my family all there, I began to relate what I had seen at Brabenc's. My wife was amazed, she had not seen ~~nor~~ <sup>heard</sup> the red men, ~~nor~~ the shooting, and she offered to go with me to Brabenc's. I took my son in my arms and my wife the little one and we hurried to our unfortunate countryman. From afar we ~~heard~~ <sup>heard</sup> Prasek and Brabenc calling Caroline and John. When we got to the dug-out, we found Mrs. Prasek there, she was trying to pacify the poor wounded woman, who continually called for her children.

I left the wife and children there and went with the men to look for the children. Finally Brabenc, worn with weeping and fear, returned home. Prasek and I tried to give him hope that perhaps the children had only wandered off and are home by this time. We walked through high, thick grass and about a hundred feet from the dug-out to our horror we found the dead body of Johnny Brabenc, lying on the bloody grass. His face was to the ground, his hands above his head. Sad, very sad was the ~~meeting~~ <sup>meeting</sup> between the father and son! Poor Johnny had been shot in the back, as the wounds showed. One bullet went through his skull, one through his neck and the third through the left shoulder-blade. It was evident that he had been shot while fleeing, but fell after a few steps and died quickly. We could not speak or act. After a while we were able to get our friend to go to his wounded wife. She had fainted. Prasek and I set out to look for Caroline. We walked and looked, called all over the valley, but to no purpose.



We returned to Brabencs and as evening was coming on, we took spades, being careful that Mrs. Brabencs should not see us, and while the sun was setting we prepared the last resting place for little Johnny right on the spot where he fell and where his dust now rests. With tears in our eyes we returned to Brabencs and after a council decided to hitch up and take the wounded woman, our wives and the children to Niobrara, leaving all else the way it lay. Mrs. Brabencs's condition was dreadful, at times she seemed insane. We had lost hope of finding Caroline and thought the Indians had carried her away. We had the good fortune to have moonlight, otherwise we would have lost our way in a country unknown to us. After midnight we reached Carl Schindler's, where we stayed until morning. It is not necessary to say that none of us thought of sleeping.

Mrs. Brabencs fell asleep towards morning, spent with pain and sorrow, and when she awakened, she seemed more collected. She told us the following: "I was baking bread, that is I was just putting the loaf in the oven when it seemed to me that I heard shots outside. The children were playing somewhere, I did not feel worried about them. Presently I knelt down by the stove and opened the oven door, to see how the bread was getting on, when suddenly I <sup>saw</sup> ~~saw~~ the doorway filled with Indians. I felt petrified and could not move. They said: "How!" and the nearest put out his hand. I do not know why, but I pushed his hand away and said in Bohemian: "Go away, you scoundrel!" All I remember after that is that I heard a shot and fell to the ground."

Most probably the Indian was offended at her manner, intended to shoot her through the breast, but the shot entered her upper leg, causing a bad but not fatal wound, for the bullet went through.

The next day in the afternoon we set out for Niobrara, but when we had gone about three miles, we were stopped in the woods by thirty



Ponca Indians, one of whom could talk English. He asked us where we are going and who we are. Although upon our arrival we had been assured that the Poncas were friendly, you can imagine how we felt after our past experience. In those days especially it was hard to know the difference between friendly and ~~unfriendly~~ <sup>unfriendly</sup> Indians, they were all painted alike and wore the same primitive costume. These Poncas were heavily armed and their hands and faces were strongly painted. In broken English as best we could, with the aid of gestures, we told them what had happened. They conversed together a while and then their interpreter told us to go back to our claims, that they, the Poncas, would stand guard over us and would not allow the bad Sioux to persecute us. Inasmuch as they pressed their offer so hard, we returned to Schindlers, where we stayed nine days. The tenth day we decided to go back to our homesteads for the provisions and clothing we left there. And thus it happened that when we were going with the team from Brabenc's dug-out to Prasek's, we noticed an odor coming from the heavy brushwood. We thought it must come from a dead body, and surely enough, we found what was left of poor Caroline Brabenec. The body was decomposed and partly gnawed. Filled with horror we gazed upon the mutilated <sup>d</sup>body of the once pretty girl. We ~~find~~ <sup>found</sup> that she had been shot in the breast with a well-aimed bullet. She must have staggered to the center of the brushwood and fallen, never to rise again. We brought sheets, took out the body and buried it about thirty feet north of Johnny's grave. And so Bohemian blood, the blood of two little children was ~~laid on the~~ <sup>laid on the</sup> altar of the bloody sacrifice which gained for us our western country!

What reason did the cruel red men have to destroy the lives of two small Bohemian children? It will never be known. It is true that the children were mischievous and somewhat bold. Perhaps they made



faces at the Indians and so angered them, but that is a mere supposition and the truth will never be known.

When Mrs. Brabenec's wound had partly healed, we decided, after twenty-one days, to go <sup>back</sup> ~~pak~~ to our claims. Nothing else was really left for us to do. We had no money for the way back to Chicago and we did not want to walk that distance. The commander at Fort Randall helped us that year with provisions and corn, otherwise we would have perished. Our troubles were not over. We had several bad years, as to crops, and the Indians killed our cattle and teams, in many cases the last cow. That is another sad chapter, about which much could be told. Those were hard times!

We settled on our claims with a firm purpose to overcome all difficulties. Mr. and Mrs. Brabenec stayed on theirs until they grew too old to work, when they sold and returned to Chicago. Prasek's sold out too after some years and moved away. Only we, my wife and I, stayed, and by dint of hard work and patience gained independence and prepared good homes for ourselves and our children. I often think of past times and it seems like a dream."

The dear old man bent his head and covered his face with his hands. Two large tears stole down his cheeks as he finished his speech. He was much affected, good old grandfather Hrbek.