

Out of the timber, brush, and stumps

The Bohemians around Cadott created fertile farms and an enduring community

Taken from "History of Chippewa County Drywood Bohemian Settlement," compiled by Jeanne Kysilko Andre, February 10, 1948 — a manuscript in the Glenn Curtis Smoot Library and Archives.

Before 1898, there were only a few Bohemian¹ families scattered throughout Chippewa County. These few, mainly farmers, lived in the vicinity of Chippewa Falls, Bloomer, Cadott, Boyd, and Edson. There was not any real settlement of Bohemians as a group until 1898, when Cypreansen Brothers of Eau Claire, who held a few sections of wild land east of Drywood, opened the land for settlement. Hiring a Bohemian, Vincent Benesh, as their agent, they asked him to sell the land. Mr. Benesh advertised the tract in the Bohemian language newspapers of America, and so it was that many recent Bohemian immigrants who were scattered through the country working in factories and renting farms saw their opportunity to become farm owners, to

¹Bohemians as they are known here are really Czechs, after the name of their native Czechoslovakia.



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build farms and homes of their own and achieve independence.

They came from many states in the Union, and some came directly from their native land², to create prosperous farms from the timber and brush of the drywood country. They were fortunate in buying good farmland on which to build their futures. The first families, or oldest settlers, of the area were Formans, Kosars, Najbrts, Svomas, Kysilkos, Vlasniks, Peterliks, and Josifeks. As time went on these pioneers, thru correspondence with friends and articles in the Bohemian-language newspapers drew many more of their people to this productive land, until the settlement numbered 100 Bohemian families.

Out of the timber, brush, and stumps, the diligent settlers created prosperous farmsteads of which they were very proud. Most of the old pioneers are resting in everlasting sleep in the little Bohemian cemetery of the community, while the second and third generations carry on in their place. The pretty little cemetery beside Highway 27 was a contribution of Cypreansen Brothers Land Company, which also donated a small sum of money for the building of a Community Hall near the center of the settlement.

With that money, a little hall was erected, and a Bohemian fraternal lodge was organized. Here was the recreational outlet

²In later years, after the first settlers had built up their farms, many of them staked friends or relatives in the home country, so that they might be able to come to the new world and make their homes.

for these hardworking people, and many merry parties were held in the hall. Thomas Kysilko was the fiddler at most of these dancing parties, and the popular sequence was square dance, waltz, polka, over and over, all evening long. Young unmarried girls were not plentiful in the community in those early days, and the three or four who were eligible couldn't sit out a single dance. Everyone, young and old, came, and everyone had a good time dancing and visiting. The young babies and toddlers were put to sleep in the Prokupek home across from the hall. The old timers tell the story of one family living about three miles away who came to a party at the Hall, left the baby to sleep, and went across to enjoy a full evening of dancing. The fun and excitement proved too much for them, and they were back at home before they realized that they had forgotten the baby. In those horse-and-buggy days it was no simple task to turn around and go back three miles, but back they did go for their child, and with due apologies to Mrs. Prokupek went home a second time with the youngster. Needless to say, they were the butt of many a joking remark after the episode.

The community soon outgrew the old hall, and plans were drawn up for a new one a short distance away. This project was undertaken by the lodge which had become prominent in the early 1900s, and a large hall was finished in 1907, with a big dedication program on July 4th. The original hall became a shelter for horses until the coming of the auto.

Any history of the Bohemian settlement would be incomplete without [an elaboration on] the ZCJB³, the lodge mentioned in the previous paragraph. This is an insurance type lodge with headquarters in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and chapters in all the Bohemian settlements in the United States. aside from its insurance duties the lodge did much toward promoting social life in the community. In later years a stage was added to the hall and many plays and programs were presented there in Bohemian and English. The lodge still sponsors this type of entertainment as well as many dances⁴. The Bohemian gymnastic organization, the *Sokols*⁵, has also used the hall for the calisthenics and sports programs. This is primarily a youth organization, created for the purpose of building “sound spirit in a sound body” as the motto says.

Here, as in every community, stories are told of the early days. Little incidents are remembered over the span of years and one spends a very interesting afternoon listening to a pioneer tell of the early days. There is the story of the Big Drywood Creek School District Number 8 to which three generations of Bohemian children have come to learn their “3 Rs.” It is a small, white, one-room building built in 1899 by John Harm. Many interesting facts stand out in the building and early history of the school. It was found that the exact center of the district was in a swamp, the one across from Capek’s. It was decided that the

³Zapadni Caska Bratrska Jednota, or Western Bohemian Fraternal Organization.

⁴Especially wedding dances. The writer has danced at many of these, including her own, at the Bohemian Hall.

⁵In Bohemian, the word means Falcon.



At the ZCJB Hall, 2004. Photo by Kathleen Roy.

school should be built on higher land and after some discussion the present site was secured from Frank and Steve Naibert, who at that time owned what is now the Oscar Sobola farm. For the first two or three years of the school’s history the only way of getting to it was by following an old logging road, which wound its way from Drywood through the woods coming out on Kysilko’s hill. The school children found this road so round-about that they often took shortcuts through the woods. One of the first teachers was a young man named Mr. Kaiser, who, when he came out to teach, was driven by Mr. George Miller, the Cadott druggist. It seems that the road was very muddy, so muddy that Mr. Miller’s buggy sank to the hubs — those were the days when even a buggy could barely make it. However, in 1901 Highway S was built and graded, and the logging road was forsaken. Several years later an addition was built to the school, and in recent years the district was divided, making two schools in one district.

The pioneers tell of an unusual accident which occurred near what is now the Henry Scheidler farm on Highway 27. Frank Johnson, who lived on that farm, kept a few swarms of bees close to the road. One September day James Muska drove a team of horses past the farm on the way to Cadott just as a late swarm of bees

came out and settled on the horses and on him. Both of the horses died as a result of the stinging they received, but Mr. Muska’s life was saved by Mr. Johnson, who smeared the victim with honey to draw out the poison of the stings.

In spite of the struggles of the pioneers against nature’s resistance to change, the settlement has today emerged as one of Chippewa County’s fine farm communities. A few of the old families have moved away, but their places have been filled by newcomers and the rising generations, and the community is still intact. The tongue of the mother country is heard frequently in the homes and fields, and the dances and meetings at the Hall are still regularly held. Explore County Trunk S from where it intersects state Highway 27, and for several miles in either direction along both these roads you can see the evidences of the industry and thrift which remains a heritage of these people.

Postscript: In the decades after this essay was written, the ZCJB Hall fell into disrepair, but a 1999 drive brought new Hall members, and non-member volunteers lent helping hands to restore and preserve the Hall. Since 2000, the building has hosted a “Long Live the Squeeze Box” program, a jaternice (sausage) and potato pancake breakfast and kolache classes (kolache is a sweet, yeasty bun), among many other events.