

FROM PRAHA TO PRAGUE: ASSIMILATION AND
ETHNIC IDENTITY IN AN AMERICAN FARM TOWN,
PRAGUE, OKLAHOMA, 1891 - 1930

By

PHILIP D. SMITH

Bachelor of Arts in History
Northeastern State University
Tahlequah, Oklahoma
1981

Master of Arts in History
University of Tulsa
Tulsa, Oklahoma
1992

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Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Ronald A. Petron

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Richard Rohrs

Dr. Joseph F. Byrnes

Dr. David D'Andrea

Dr. Michael Taylor

Dr. A. Gordon Emslie

Dean of the Graduate College

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. CZECH IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES TO 1930.....	32
3. SETTLEMENT OF LINCOLN COUNTY AND THE FORMATION OF PRAGUE, OKLAHOMA: 1891 - 1902.....	72
4. RELIGION AND THE CZECH COMMUNITY	90
5. ECONOMIC LIFE IN A SMALL TOWN	113
6. CZECH FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS IN PRAGUE.....	142
7. FAMILY TIES IN THE LIFE OF PRAGUE'S CZECHS	170
8. EDUCATION AND THE CZECH COMMUNITY.....	202
9. POLITICS AND COMMUNITY LIFE IN PRAGUE	227
10. CONCLUSION.....	245
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	263

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1 Czech Foreign Born by Region (1900).....	42
2.2 Czech Foreign Born by Selected State (1900).....	43
2.3 Czech Foreign Born by Selected Cities (1900).....	44
2.4 Czechs to the United States by Year.....	54
2.5 Czech Immigrants in the U.S.by Selected State (1910).....	55
2.6 Czech Immigrants by Year and Sex.....	58
2.7 Immigrants by Sex and Percent (1899-1910)	59
2.8 Ages of Arriving Immigrants by Percent (1899-1910).....	60
2.9 Occupations of Czech Immigrants by Percent.....	61
2.10 Yearly Earnings of Males at Least 18 Years of Age	62
2.11 Yearly Earnings of Females at Least 18 Years of Age	62
2.12 Foreign-Born Households by Percent.....	63

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1902, the Ft. Smith and Western Railroad Company, seeing an opportunity for larger profits, made plans to build tracks from Ft. Smith, Arkansas across Indian Territory and into Oklahoma Territory to tap the exploding towns of central Oklahoma, especially the Guthrie/Oklahoma City area. The railroad identified the southeastern part of Lincoln County as a perfect spot for a coaling station. Initially, the railroad company wanted Lambdin as the coaling site. But when a local native-born farmer rebuffed their offers as too small, they looked elsewhere, specifically to the farmland of the Czech community.¹ Two Bohemian immigrants, Anton Simek and Vencel Kozak, who had purchased the homesteads of Eva Barta and her son, Frank, agreed to sell part of their holdings and the railroad allowed Josephine Barta, wife of Frank, to name the new town.² Josephine Barta decided on the name Praha because she had grown up in Praha, Bohemia. However, Frank R. (Squire) Vlasak, an influential merchant in the Czech community, convinced her to Americanize the name to Prague.³ The deal done, town lots went on sale

¹ William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948," (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948), 9-10. See also *Lincoln County: Oklahoma History*, 186. Lee Watts was the farmer who turned down the railroad's offer.

² Russell Willford Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma: A Comparative Study of the Stability of a Czech Farm Group in Lincoln County Oklahoma, and the Factors Relating to its Stability," *Bulletin of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College) 39, no. 13 (June 1942): 44. For additional details, see Melva Losch Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A., Prague (Kolache-Ville) Oklahoma* (Norman: Hooper Printing, Inc., 1978), 32.

³Ibid.

May 20, 1902 and the brand-new town of Prague opened with the great benefit of being a railroad town.

Frank Barta, Josephine's husband and one of the original settlers, took immediate advantage of the opportunities offered by the brand-new town. In the summer of 1902, with great difficulty and just as much excitement, Barta hoisted and moved his entire farmhouse into the new town and reopened it as Hotel Barta. The enterprising Barta also opened a general store and restaurant, but it was his family's hotel that proved lasting; the building operated as a hotel on a continuous basis until 1961.⁴

This work hopes to elucidate a little researched phenomenon: the dilemmas of an immigrant group living amongst a larger primarily native-born white population in a small, somewhat isolated farm town. This inquiry also examines the processes whereby this ethnic community maintained its identity and established a presence in the town while simultaneously joining the

larger community economically, socially, and structurally to the point of complete incorporation. The area chosen for research is the Czech immigrant community in the agricultural hamlet of Prague, Oklahoma from the founding of the ethnic colony in 1891 until 1930, when most of the original settlers had died. By understanding this ethnic group's reactions to assimilative pressures and the mechanisms they incorporated in attempting to maintain their ethnic identity may illuminate differences in the urban/rural

Location of Prague, Oklahoma



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum

⁴ *Prague News*, 24 July 1902; 17 December 1915.

matrix as well as provide a comparison with other farming towns that hosted a more homogenous ethnic population

A primary assertion of the work is that the Czechs of Prague, Oklahoma underwent cultural and structural assimilation more rapidly than Czechs in urban environments and rural areas such as Milligan, Nebraska where Czechs predominated to the point of homogeneity. This occurred for several reasons. First, soon after the creation of the town of Prague in 1902, the Czechs found themselves in the minority. This forced each individual to make a choice: either participate in the growing community or retreat and isolate themselves in an ethnic enclave. The new town of Prague was a frontier community located in Oklahoma Territory but close to Indian Territory. This “wild west” origin of Prague offered opportunities for the immigrants and an acceptance by non-Czechs who wished to see the new town succeed. Concomitant with this was the relative isolation of the community, again probably causing some native-born Americans to accept the newcomers for practical reasons. Although impossible to know with any certainty, some of these native-born whites might not have tolerated the strange-talking immigrants in another setting. Finally, the mere fact that Czechs were “white” helped them with the majority population. Blacks also moved into the new town, but were not accorded the opportunities or friendship ceded the Czechs.

Some writers argue that adherence to ethnicity is primarily a reaction to hostility.⁵ These scholars argue that many immigrants clung to their ethnic roots and identity as a defensive measure against an unwelcoming society. In other words, their group identity served as security during a fearful time. Nevertheless, although they settled in Prague at

⁵ Candace Nelson and Marta Tienda, “The Structuring of Hispanic Ethnicity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” in *Ethnicity and Race in the U.S.A.: Toward the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard D. Alba (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 71.

a time of heightened nativist feelings throughout the United States, there is little evidence that this Slavic group suffered rejection or resistance from the larger community. Furthermore, because of their special environment and history in Europe, the Czechs of Prague adjusted quickly to the dominant culture of the United States, which continued to be centered on Anglo-Saxon law and traditions. They chose to interact with the larger community rather than isolate themselves into a separate element within the town and resist any encroachment on their traditional way of life. Yet, they still battled to maintain their heritage and identity albeit with mixed results. Although the results were probably not exactly what the original settlers intended, today many Prague Czechs still attend St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church while others meet regularly in the same Bohemian Hall as their ancestors and continue to cling to their ethnic identity and recognize their heritage, even if it is more symbolic than real.

One of the early myths regarding the experiences of immigrants to the United States was that most ethnic groups underwent similar experiences after their arrival.⁶ Since the 1980s, mounting evidence challenged this assumption. Today, most historians and sociologists agree that ethnic groups' encounters with American society differed sharply.⁷ Time of arrival, occupational skill, education, and race were factors contributing to the diverse experiences.⁸ Nevertheless, regardless of group or circumstance, ethnicity proved important to practically every arriving immigrant.

⁶ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), xvi, 51. Bodnar argues that ethnic groups faced different obstacles once in the United States.

⁷ Nelson and Tienda, "The Structuring of Hispanic Ethnicity," 49. Richard D. Alba, "The Twilight of Ethnicity among Americans of European Ancestry: The Case of Italians," in *Ethnicity and Race in the U.S.A.: Toward the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard D. Alba (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 134. Also, see Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, xvi.

⁸ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 51.

Although the words ethnic and ethnicity were seldom used before the twentieth century, the idea of separate national, racial, or immigrant groups was common in literature, government documents and United States census records.⁹ The concept of ethnicity is an incredibly complicated subject. Tomes such as *The Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups* (1980) list no less than fourteen possible attributes contributing to ethnicity:

1. Common geographic origin.
2. Migratory Status.
3. Race.
4. Language or dialect.
5. Religious faith or faiths.
6. Ties that transcend kinship, neighborhood, and community boundaries.
7. Shared traditions, values, and symbols.
8. Literature, folklore, and music.
9. Food preferences.
10. Settlement and employment patterns.
11. Special interests in regard to politics in the homeland and the United States.
12. Institutions that specifically serve and maintain the group.
13. An internal sense of distinctiveness.
14. An external sense of distinctiveness.¹⁰

Others, like Candace Nelson and Marta Tienda, view ethnicity as a social construct conducive to change rather than simply a collection of ascriptive traits.¹¹ However, Milton Gordon in his 1964 work, *Assimilation in American Life*, best summed up the complex issue by positing that in the final analysis ethnicity referred to group feelings about land, political government, a common culture which included a set of religious beliefs and values, and a common racial background. He called the culmination of these shared values, “peoplehood” and suggested the term “ethnic group” be used for groups

⁹ Harold J. Abramson, “Assimilation and Pluralism,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups*, eds. Stephen Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 151.

¹⁰ Stephen Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, Oscar Handlin, “Introduction” to *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups*, eds. Stephen Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, and Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), vi.

¹¹ Nelson and Tienda, “The Structuring of Hispanic Ethnicity”, 51.

with this sense of distinctive identity.¹² A simple and useful definition of ethnicity is a people who share a common historical origin, cultural and social distinctiveness, and similar language. An ethnic group evinces a sense of belonging that transcends kinship bonds.¹³

That Czechs consider themselves and should be referred to as a distinctive ethnic group appears obvious. They share many attributes of ethnicity including language, shared myths, folklore, and a common history. Furthermore, they claim a definite homeland, the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia in Central Europe. Although many, especially early arrivals, referred to themselves as Bohemian or Moravian rather than Czech, over the years the linguistic term Czech became commonplace when speaking or writing about these Slavs of Central Europe. Interestingly, in the early twentieth century, the non-Czech residents of Prague, Oklahoma usually referred to their Czech-speaking neighbors, whether they originated from Bohemia or Moravia, as “Bohemian.” Thus, the terms “Czech,” and “Bohemian,” in this case are synonymous.

Regardless of where Czechs settled in the United States, they were used to being a minority within a larger culture. Beginning in 1621 with the defeat of the Czechs at the Battle of White Mountain, the Austrian crown controlled the areas of Bohemia and Moravia with the result being a strong Germanizing of Czech territory. The German language became the primary tongue of the government, military, and universities as well as among most of the aristocracy and professional class. As a result, for several centuries the Czech language served as nothing more than a peasant patois. Nevertheless, the historic language of Bohemia and Moravia persisted despite repeated attempts by the

¹² Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 23, 27.

¹³ Abramson, “Assimilation and Pluralism,” 151.

Habsburg rulers to extinguish it.¹⁴ In addition, the Austrian lords inundated their conquered dominions with their Germanic culture which included not only western European ideas of governance and law but even delved into culinary tastes including even beer making. For example, Czechs claim that pilsner beer, considered by most a German brew, originated in the Bohemian town of Plzen, and was a joint creation of the Czech inhabitants and a hired Bavarian brewer.¹⁵

The Habsburg domination resulted in two seemingly contradictory mindsets which helped Czech immigrants in the United States adjust to American culture and resist complete assimilation or “Americanization” at the same time. The centuries-long foreign domination empowered Czechs with the ability to sustain their heritage and identity under harsh conditions, while their intimate contact with German culture caused a partial adoption of German ways as their own.¹⁶ Thus, Czechs became the most western-oriented of all Slavic groups and although considered part of the “new immigration” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Czech immigrants differed significantly from their Slavic neighbors. Many arrived earlier than other Slavic groups and most came as family units with every intention of staying and making the United States their new homeland.¹⁷ This “Germanization” or “westernization” proved valuable to most Czechs once they were in the United States. American culture, although definitely foreign and unfamiliar, does not appear to have daunted Czechs to the extent it did other

¹⁴ See Robert A. Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire, 1526-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 533-534.

¹⁵ There are conflicting stories of the origin of pilsner beer. The most accepted is that the inhabitants of Pilsen in 1838 hired Josef Groll, a Bavarian brewer to instruct them in the German lagering method of brewing. He included Saaz hops in the recipe resulting in the famous pilsner draft.

¹⁶ See Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 533-534. German-speaking lands bordered Bohemia in the North, West, and South.

¹⁷ Czechs speak an Indo-European language that is related to Polish, Slovak, Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and several other southern and eastern European peoples. The family of languages is known as Slavic.

Slavic groups like the Slovaks and Poles. Czech immigrants entered America with a distinct advantage over other Slavic immigrants.

Although most of the original forty-eight Czech settlers of the Prague, Oklahoma area had previously lived in another state, many were but a few years removed from the farming villages of Central Europe.¹⁸ These villages were community-oriented rather than individualistic, which served the Czechs well in their new environment.¹⁹ Czechs stuck together. This enabled them to succeed when many native-born farmers, who were fiercely independent, failed. Nevertheless, the story of the Prague Czechs centers on their ardent desire to maintain their ethnicity while simultaneously diving into the culture of their new homeland. This dual lifestyle in a town dominated by native-born whites resulted in rapid acculturation and incorporation into the mainstream, but also resulted in these small-town Czechs carving a permanent niche in the community as a distinct group. Due to the frontier setting, they reacted pragmatically to the environment into which they found themselves and despite their numerical inferiority, succeeded in establishing a permanent presence. The outcome proved somewhat different from Horace Kallen's famous cultural pluralism model, which promoted ethnic minorities preserving their distinctive culture while simultaneously pledging loyalty to their new nation.²⁰ The Czechs of Prague gradually lost much of their European culture, such as language, religion, and holidays, but conserved their most important attribute – the preservation of

¹⁸ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 89.

¹⁹ Ibid.,

²⁰ For further discussion, see Horace Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States: Studies in the Group Psychology of the American People* (Salem, NH: Ayer Company, 1924). Also, see Kallen, *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea: An Essay in Social Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1956).

their ethnic identity. They stubbornly maintained an internal sense of distinctiveness, a sense of who they were.²¹

Beginning with the immigrant generation, the Czechs of Prague began losing much of their original European ways. By 1930, most ethnic Czechs fit comfortably in their new environment; their children attended public school, played baseball and football with as much fervor as anyone in the community, worked for whoever paid the highest wage regardless of ethnicity, and married outside the group with little or no condemnation from other Czechs. The product of the Prague experience also suggests minor differences from Herbert Gans's idea of "symbolic ethnicity" where ethnicity became more a question of "feeling ethnic" which centered primarily on ethnic foods and ethnic festivals rather than actually being a practicing member of a distinct ethnic group.²² Although Gans's research focused on later generations, the persistent and deep ethnic distinctiveness forged by the early Czechs of Prague laid the groundwork for a lasting and more far-reaching ethnic identity than what should be labeled "symbolic ethnicity." Furthermore, the experience of these small-town ethnics suggests that Richard Alba's contention that the ethnic identities of European-origin groups progressively declines is not all-encompassing.²³ Instead, the Czechs of Prague, Oklahoma, trod a unique path on their journey towards assimilation into American society. They quickly lost much of their European ways, but managed to hang onto their identity as a singular group in the midst of a vast field of "American" neighbors. This

²¹ According to the *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups* this internal sense of distinctiveness is one of the defining characteristics of ethnicity. See Thernstrom, *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups*, vi.

²² Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, no.4 (October 1979): 9.

²³ Richard D. Alba, "The Twilight of Ethnicity," in *Ethnicity and Race in the U.S.A.: Toward the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard D. Alba (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 152.

middle path or birthright ethnicity evolved out of the strong desire by the earliest Czechs to take a practical approach in maintaining their group's identity while embracing their new home.

When writing about assimilation, there is little accord regarding the concept and it remains a controversial subject even today. The theory of complete assimilation or Anglo-conformity and later known as Americanization entails the idea of minority ethnic groups completely and totally joining the all-encompassing culture, which in the United States was based on the nation's English beginnings. Immigrants and their children gradually embrace the omnipresent influence of American traditions and ways leaving behind the language and customs of their country of birth. Over several generations, the descendants marry outside their core group until their very identity as a member of a specific ethnic group becomes blurred to the point of becoming nothing more than a family memory based on their surname or the surname of a long-ago grandparent. Eventually, all long-time residents become "American" in every way homogenizing the culture until ethnic groups all but disappeared. Over time, the offspring lose all sense of ethnic belonging until their concept of being Irish or German or Polish might consist of participating in ethnic rituals like drinking green beer on St. Patrick's Day or attending the local Oktoberfest celebration in their home town or proudly displaying the flag of Poland on the wall of their work cubicle.

One of the most pervasive concepts of assimilation is, of course, the idea of America as a melting pot. This persistent theory holds that newcomers "melt" into the fabric of American culture and identity as quickly as possible after their arrival in the

United States. The resultant mixture forms a new race in which elements of the newcomer culture meld with other immigrant traditions and the pervasive Anglo-Saxon customs to produce a new creation. This is sometimes referred to as ethnogenesis and traces its roots back to the eighteenth century and Jean de Crevecoeur's famous question, "What, then is the American, this new man?"²⁴ The resultant American becomes a composite of the various peoples who have lived in the United States. Today, America as a melting pot remains a popular concept even among many newcomers who wish and expect to submerge themselves and their family into American behavior and quickly emerge as a "real" American.²⁵

A refinement of the melting pot theory holds that some individuals assimilate into another non-dominant ethnic group. These newcomers voluntarily choose to alter or forgo much of their ethnic characteristics and incorporate into another ethnic identity. In, "Single or Triple Melting-Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1940," Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy popularized this idea of a "triple melting pot" in which immigrants, through intermarriage and similar religious backgrounds, join a larger religious group. One of the examples, she gives is Swedish, German, and English Protestants merging and forming a larger inclusive Protestant group. However, a significant factor in this type of assimilation is the similarity of merging ethnic backgrounds.²⁶

In the early twentieth century, Chicago was an important center for assimilation theorists and one of their earliest sociologists to devise a lasting assimilation theory was

²⁴ De Crevecoeur, J. Hector, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), quoted in Abramson, "Assimilation and Pluralism," 152.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 152. The term "melting pot" entered the American lexicon with Israel Zangwill's popular play of the same name written in 1908 and performed across America.

²⁶ Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, "Single or Triple Melting-Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1940," *American Journal of Sociology* 49 (January 1944): 331-339.

Robert Park at the University of Chicago. Park's best-known work, "Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups with Particular Reference to the Negro" (1914) posited that two different meanings of assimilation existed side by side and functioned on both the individual and the ethnic group. The first is "to make like", which could perhaps be better described as acculturation. In this process individuals "acquire one another's language, characteristic attitudes, and modes of behavior." In other words, individuals, either volitionally or as a matter of necessity, learn to speak, dress, and act in the fashion of the dominant culture. Park summed up his second meaning of assimilation with the phrase "to take up and incorporate." Here the individual and ethnic group joins the larger group and for all practical purposes the once separate and self-functioning ethnic group ceases to exist. He viewed the process as involving three stages: contact, accommodation, and assimilation.²⁷

In addition, Park argued that modern societies enabled more heterogeneity among its inhabitants which led to many individuals breaking away from their homogenous ethnic group to participate in and be included in the larger "cosmopolitan groups."²⁸ By expanding their social and business acquaintances members of ethnic groups became more autonomous and thus reached a greater degree of independence. Park perceived assimilation as the interaction between the newcomer and the dominant society's values. He argued that it was reciprocal in nature and resulted in a shared national identity with a shared language and core cultural values at the center. However, he also argued that national identity did not preclude the presence of ethnic distinctiveness and affiliation with an ethnic group. Park did not expect immigrants to reject their own culture; rather,

²⁷ Robert Park, "Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups with Particular Reference to the Negro," *American Journal of Sociology* 19, no. 5 (March 1914): 606.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 607.

he posited that it was a process whereby newcomers cooperated with the dominant culture to succeed.²⁹

In a paper presented to the Augustana Historical Society entitled, “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant” (1938), Marcus Lee Hansen presented a thesis that challenged the concept of a straight-line assimilation whereby ethnic groups slowly but inexorably lost their unique characteristics until they became unidentifiable from the larger society.³⁰ Hansen suggested that most immigrants did not so much adjust to their new environment as reconcile themselves to their surroundings and make peace with the dominant society. He presented the immigrant as a problem society never fully solved. He also claimed that with time the problem disappeared when immigrants, through accommodation, reconciled themselves to their new surroundings.³¹

However, the second generation struggled with their own problems. These sons and daughters of immigrants tussled with contradictory lifestyles. On the one hand, their parents expected them to maintain the customs and traditions of a land most had never seen and chastised them for exhibiting American ways that differed from their own upbringing. Conversely, when the second generation interacted with the native-born in public schools, local theaters, or city parks, the native-born viewed them as too foreign. This dilemma of trying to live simultaneously in two worlds caused psychological problems which many times resulted in the second generation ethnic member despising his foreign roots and desperate to become as American as possible. This appeared to be

²⁹ Ibid., 607-608.

³⁰ Marcus Lee Hansen, “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant,” In *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1996): 202-216.

³¹ Marcus Lee Hansen, “The Study of Man: The Third Generation in America,” *Commentary* XIV, no. 5 (November 1952): 493.

true even when immigrant families evidenced strong affection towards each other or as Hansen put it, “[n]othing was more Yankee than a Yankeeized person of foreign descent.”³²

Not so with the third generation. Hansen puts forward the idea that the grandchildren of immigrants, secure in their American identity, became interested in their past and it was they who formed historical societies to record and glorify their ethnic history; as Hansen put it “what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember.” This third generation no longer felt any inferiority and thus was free to look backwards with not only curiosity, but with pride.³³

Another scholar, Will Herberg, in his book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, examined Hansen’s thesis and suggested that for most immigrant groups the arrival of the third generation usually meant the looming disbanding of the ethnic group. Beginning with the second generation, the individuals of ethnic groups began losing the qualities that made them different from members of the larger society. These qualities included the loss of their parents’ language and culture. Herberg agreed with Hansen that the second generation was full of perplexities and conflicts in that these American-born ethnics were “in part American, but only in part.”³⁴ He did note, however, that the Jewish situation was different. The third generation did not get rid of their “Jewishness” but actually reaffirmed their identity. What Herberg found among succeeding generations of ethnic groups was the increasing likelihood for them to identify themselves not as hyphenated

³² Ibid., 494.

³³ Ibid., 496.

³⁴ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960), 16.

Americans but as Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish Americans.³⁵ Herberg argued that over time descendants of immigrants sloughed off their ethnic languages and cultures, but held fast to their religious roots – their family religion. This enabled their offspring to enter the American mainstream and, at the same time, embrace something of their forefathers – their religion. Thus, religion became the focal point of ethnicity.³⁶

For the Czechs, Herberg's theory is both true and problematic. As will be seen in chapter eight, religion split the Czech community. Despite a strong Catholic presence, many Czechs flocked to the free thought movement, while a small minority migrated to Protestant sects, primarily the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches. This religious division meant, in contrast to Herberg's assertion, that there was no all-encompassing focal point in the Czech population centered on religious beliefs.

One author who focused exclusively on the immigrant generation was Oscar Handlin. In his works, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790-1880: A Study in Acculturation* Handlin looked first at the adjustment process. In his second book, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that made the American People*, Handlin dealt with the concept of alienation when he portrayed the immigrant population as one in constant conflict with the dominant society and experiencing immense suffering while trying to adjust to a foreign and usually hostile environment.³⁷ His synthesis began by looking at the peasant origins of most immigrants and their attachment to the communal village. For the most part, it was these rural peasants who formed the bulk of the migration to the United States and their leaving persuaded others such as village ministers and priests,

³⁵ Ibid., 34, 39-41.

³⁶ Ibid., 31.

³⁷ Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790-1880: A Study in Acculturation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941); Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951).

tavern keepers, smiths, and millers to follow. Handlin saw these immigrants as uprooted, caused to flee their ancestral homes by economic and demographic forces beyond their control. Once in the United States, they existed in a veritable sense of shock; a shock that persisted for many years and affected not only them personally but also their offspring. It is this alienation that Handlin focuses upon. Rather than analyzing how immigration altered the United States, he chose to look at how the migration, loss of old solidarities, and adjustment to a new environment altered the immigrants.³⁸

One of the most important works dealing with assimilation is Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*. Gordon organized his theory of assimilation into seven types or stages: 1). cultural or behavioral assimilation (acculturation); 2). structural assimilation; 3). marital assimilation (amalgamation); 4). identificational assimilation or the development of a sense of peoplehood based exclusively on the host society; 5). attitude receptional assimilation as evidenced by the absence of prejudice by the dominant society; 6). behavioral receptional assimilation, which entails the absence of discrimination; and 7). civic assimilation, where conflicts between the ethnic group and host society gradually disappear and are replaced by a sense of common identity or citizenship.³⁹ An important aspect of Gordon's work is his contention that ethnic groups are not just cultural entities but also "subsocieties" whereby group members can live out their lives completely within an ethnic environment. As Gordon put it:

From the cradle in the sectarian hospital, to the child's play group, to the social clique in high school, the fraternity and religious centers in college, the dating group within which he searches for a

³⁸ Handlin, *The Uprooted*, 4, 6, 8, 31.

³⁹ Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, 71.

spouse, the marriage partner, the neighborhood of residence, the church affiliation and the church clubs, the men's and women's social and service clubs, the adult clique of "marrieds," the vacation resort, and then as the age-cycle nears completion, the rest home for the elderly and, finally, the sectarian cemetery – in all of these activities and relationships which are close to the core of personality and selfhood – the member of the ethnic group may, if he wishes, and will in fact in many cases, follow a path which never takes him across the boundaries of his sub societal network.⁴⁰

Gordon admits that cultural assimilation took place fairly quickly after ethnic groups arrived in the United States. This proved especially true of the native-born, the second and third generations. However, he sees a perseverance of the ethnic group or subsociety. He contends that the subsociety serves three important functions. The first function is as "a source of group self-identification" or the locus of peoplehood. Secondly, it provides a network of relationships within the ethnic group which enables an individual, if he or she wishes, to function throughout his life.⁴¹ Finally, Gordon posits that the subsociety lessens the harshness of the national culture on the ethnic member and allows him or her to acculturate through the prism of a comfortable and recognizable cultural heritage.⁴² Gordon saw acculturation being followed by structural assimilation. Structural assimilation consisted of the ethnic individual changing his primary and institutional relationships or, to put it simply, the acceptance of the new society as his society. This occurred when ethnic members entered public schools, the work force, and other structural organizations. Once structural assimilation occurs, all other types (civic,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁴¹ For the purpose of clarity and easiness of reading the generic forms of he will be used throughout the study rather than he/she. No sexism is intended.

⁴² Ibid., 38.

marital, identificational) will follow. As Gordon writes, “[s]tructural assimilation, then, rather than acculturation, is seen to be the keystone in the arch of assimilation.”⁴³

One of the key facets of this study, then, will be to ascertain the depth, if any, of the assimilation of Prague’s Czechs. This will be done by looking at specific institutional factors in the lives of the Czech immigrants and their descendents. A starting point, after a brief examination of their settlement patterns, will be to analyze their relationship with their historical European religion. In this case, did they stay true to the Catholic Church or did they accept the dominant religion of most native-born Americans, which was overwhelmingly Protestant during this period?

A second area of study, which will be important in determining the degree of assimilation, focuses on the economic activity of the immigrant group in Prague. Did the Czechs isolate themselves economically and primarily do business within their ethnic group or did they evince an attitude of adaptation and integration by participating in the overall economy of the small town?

However, further questions emerge regarding assimilation. For example, did the Bohemians of the small farming community culturally assimilate into the overall society? If so, how quickly and to what degree was their acculturation? Did they attend or participate in holidays or town events such as dances and plays? That the newcomers created a subsociety within the community will become evident. However, did the Czech subsociety set itself aside from the larger community or did they begin blending with the native-born population? An assessment of acculturation within the subsociety will be possible by first examining Czech fraternal associations within the farming community. What influence did these ethnic organizations, such as the Bohemian Hall and Sokol

⁴³ Ibid., 81.

Gymnastic Association, wield over the Czech community? Were they refuges of isolationism or gateways to the larger society? Following this examination, the study will delve into the family life of Prague's Czechs. Questions in this category include their social activities, the degree of interaction with the non-Czech population, and the telling factor of exogamous marriages. Did Czechs marry outside their ethnic group and when did it occur? Did immigrants marry non-Czechs or did exogamous marriages only begin occurring with the second generation?

Education is yet another institutional category needing exploration. Besides instruction of the young, public schools serve as purveyors of culture and socialization. Thus, if the Czech community accepted and sent their children through the public school system is an important indicator of assimilation. In addition, schools employed English as their exclusive language of instruction, which in the long term usually sounded the death knell for ethnic dialects.

A final area of study looks at the ethnic group's behavior in community life. Did the Czechs assimilate civically by participating in political parties and elections? Did the Czechs of Prague contribute to the development of the farm town by joining the police or fire departments? Did they serve on the any town committees? And, if they did, when did they do so? Was it the immigrants themselves that contributed or was it future generations, ethnic Czechs born and raised in the farming community that accepted their roles and duties as citizens? Lastly, did Prague's Czechs develop a sense of peoplehood or national identity based on the host society or did they strictly maintain their ethnic identity? In conjunction with this area of examination, the focus must turn to the native-born population and their attitudes towards their immigrant neighbors. Did the non-

Czechs of Prague accept the immigrants into their community or did they evince prejudice against the newcomers? Was discrimination practiced against Prague's Czechs in any way? Finally, what was the level of prejudice and discrimination of the larger society against the newcomers? By examining these factors a clear picture of the degree of assimilation of the Prague Czechs will become visible.

A book published at practically the same time as Gordon's work was *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963) by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan.⁴⁴ Glazer and Moynihan's study focused on five ethnic groups in New York (Italians, Irish, Jews, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans) and argued for the persistence of ethnicity despite the pressures to assimilate. Other scholars followed *Beyond the Melting Pot* with works celebrating the victory of ethnicity over amalgamation and incorporation. They argued that the United States was not a melting pot or a bastion of Anglo-conformity, but, instead, an ethnically-pluralistic society, a society where ethnicity was actually undergoing resurgence – revival. Although this work covers the modern-day Czech colony only fleetingly, it is still important to realize that beginning in the 1970s scholars again took up the question of whether or not some ethnic groups had indeed assimilated.⁴⁵

Social historians added to the dismissal of grand assimilation premises by writing bottom-up history, focusing on individuals, the problems they faced, and the choices they made. An important work in this genre is John Bodnar's, *The Transplanted* (1985).

⁴⁴ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963).

⁴⁵ Some of the works arguing for ethnic persistence include, Peter Schrag, *The Decline of the WASP* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971); Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1975); and Andrew Greeley, *Why Can't They Be Like Us? America's White Ethnic Groups* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971).

Bodnar's study examined the ethnic community in light of economic pressures and concluded that their reactions were simply a practical reaction to the larger society's dominant institutions and culture. Two of his primary foci were to show that the immigrant experience was not a common one and that not all newcomers behaved in a similar fashion. Bodnar found the instrument of social change to be the urban-industrial economic system and not only for ethnic groups, but also for society as a whole. It is always in this context that Bodnar looks at the ethnic struggle to survive in a foreign land.⁴⁶

Bodnar did not examine a specific ethnic group. Instead, he attempted to relate a wide-ranging narrative centered on ordinary individuals and the choices they made in dealing with a foreign urban society. Bodnar does not view immigrants as victims but rather as "active participants in an historical drama whose outcome is anything but predictable."⁴⁷ Such things as social station, familial status, and ideological orientation conditioned the responses of the immigrants to their new situation. He argues that these variables influenced each individual and helped decide their fate, their mobility in the American industrial society. Furthermore, Bodnar suggests that it was these decisions – made by all immigrants – that enabled some to fare better than others, some to decide to return home, and many to get by in their new environment.⁴⁸

Although Bodnar's work focused on immigrants in an urban setting, much of his findings translate well to the rural environment. Prague's Czechs also faced many choices, especially in the social realm and even though they were not directly involved in factories prevalent in most major cities, they contributed to the growing American

⁴⁶ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, xvi-xviii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

economy through cotton production and later oil and ranching. In the early twentieth century, Lincoln County and the Prague area in particular were major centers for cotton growing in Oklahoma, with several mills located in Prague.

Despite many scholars either dismissing the idea of assimilation or simply ignoring it, there remained both historians and sociologists who remained steadfast in their support of assimilation theory. These included John Higham, Herbert Gans, and Richard Alba. In addition, in the 1990s, younger scholars such as Ewa Morawska called for the resuscitation and further exploration of assimilation theory.⁴⁹ An especially potent work that attacked the idea of ethnic persistence was Stephen Steinberg's *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America*.⁵⁰ Published in 1981, *The Ethnic Myth* rejected the popular 1970s idea of an ethnic revival inundating communities all over the United States. Instead, Steinberg argued that "the ethnic revival was actually a 'dying gasp' on the part of ethnic groups descended from the great waves of immigration of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."⁵¹ Steinberg, along with others such as Herbert Gans, suggested that ethnicity evolved into something little more than symbolism whereby descendants of particular ethnic groups rejoiced in their historical tribal roots through annual festive occasions that centered on parades, dances, and eating ethnic food.⁵² In reality, these descendants were Americans through and through with the only

⁴⁹ Ewa Morawska, "In Defense of the Assimilation Model." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 76-87.

⁵⁰ Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1981).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵² Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity," 1-20.

articles of ethnicity remaining for many being a non-Anglo surname and a pride in their ancestry.⁵³

State of the Question:

When studying the literature of specific ethnic groups, their assimilation experiences, as well as their impact on where they settled, a realization immediately confronts the researcher; it was the ethnic elites writing most of the history of the group and they primarily focused on the elites of their ethnic group. Czech literature is no different. However, writers such as Jan Habenicht, Emily Balch, Rose Rosicky, and Thomas Capek also include valuable quantitative information and lists of early settlers. Nevertheless these authors concentrate on people they believe made a considerable impact on the Czech immigrant population and American society as a whole.⁵⁴ In 1940, Thomas Capek published a list of American Czechs in public office.⁵⁵ In the short work, he included Czech-American congressional representatives from Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Nebraska; state legislators from New York, Nebraska, and Wisconsin; and Anton Cermak, mayor of Chicago in the early 1930s and personal friend of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁵⁶ Nowhere does he mention Frank R. Vlasak and the Bohemian Political Association of Prague, Oklahoma or the fact that the town of Prague

⁵³ What I mean by “Americans through and through” refers to the later generations fully identifying themselves as citizens of the United States and accepting the customs, language and culture of the United States as their own. The country of their ancestors becomes nothing more than the origin of some of their ancestors.

⁵⁴ Jan Habenicht, *A History of the Czechs in America* (St. Louis: Hlas Publishing, 1919); Emily Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910); Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929); and Thomas Capek who contributed many works concerning the Czech experience including, *The Czechs (Bohemians) in America: A Study of their National, Cultural, Political, Social, Economic, and Religious Life* (New York: Arno Press, 1920; repr., 1969).

⁵⁵ Thomas Capek, *American Czechs in Public Office* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1940).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-8.

elected three Czechs to their town council in 1906, a Czech as mayor in 1911, and a Czech immigrant to preside over the school board in 1916.⁵⁷ Granted these men did not have broad political influence, but the impact they wielded in their small part of the world was significant and shows the exclusivity of writers like Capek.

Previously, four writers wrote about the community of Prague, Oklahoma. The starting place for any study of the Czech experience in Oklahoma must begin with Karel Bicha's, *The Czechs in Oklahoma*. Bicha's work details the settlement patterns of the pioneer Czechs and highlights their cultural and social proclivities. Although his work is not specific to Prague, he does cover the formation of the town and its distinctive Czech flavor.⁵⁸

In 1948, William Ray Tower wrote a master's thesis covering the general history of the town. Later, in the 1970s, Melva Losch Brown, a resident of Prague, updated the history with her self-published book, *Czech-Town U.S.A.*⁵⁹ Both are straightforward, informational accounts of Prague and rely almost exclusively on interviews with long-time inhabitants of the town. Neither attempted to tie the local Czech community with any aspect larger than what went on within the confines of the Prague area. In fact, the two works are not ethnic studies. They considered the town of Prague as a whole and did not focus on the Czech population per se, but only as they influenced events. A more important study is Russell Willford Lynch's, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma." Lynch examined the Czech farming community and why it prospered while many native-born

⁵⁷ *Prague News*, 10 May 1906; *Prague Record*, 13 July 1916; Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 103; Melva Losch Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A., Prague (Kolache-Ville) Oklahoma* (Norman: Hooper Printing, Inc., 1978), 137-138.

⁵⁸ Karel Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).

⁵⁹ William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948); Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A.*

farmers in the same geographic area struggled. However, other than a brief summary of the formation of Prague and snippets of how Czech farmers interacted with the townspeople, Lynch's work deals with the farming community and why they were so successful.⁶⁰

A good, fairly recent study on working-class Czech immigrants is Josef Barton's short article, "Land, Labor, and Community in Nueces: Czech Farmers and Mexican Laborers in South Texas," comparing Czech farmers in southern Texas with Mexican laborers in the same location during the years 1880 to 1930.⁶¹ Barton, without going into great detail, traced the migrations of Czechs as they searched for prime farmland on which to settle. He concluded that in 1906 three of every five Czech families were sharecroppers. However, as they migrated south to Nueces and acquired land they began to prosper.⁶² His study shows how many Czechs ardently desired and sought land and once they obtained land they usually thrived. Another important conclusion Barton drew was that "the locus of membership and alliance in the Czech community was the lineal unit of the family. . . Czech immigrants, in short, allied themselves in families of three generations."⁶³ That the family was the basic unit of the Czech community should come as no surprise. Furthermore, their reliance on extended families helped them endure, cope with, and eventually overcome most economic and societal obstacles blocking their path to success.

⁶⁰ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma."

⁶¹ Josef Barton, "Land, Labor, and Community in Nueces: Czech Farmers and Mexican Laborers in South Texas, 1880-1930," in *European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1998): 147-160.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 151.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 152.

John Bodnar suggested that “not all newcomers behaved in a similar fashion . . . and that not everyone faced identical experiences.”⁶⁴ This work examines an ethnic group that appears to fit Bodnar’s statement. To prosper in a small town where they were the minority, the Czech residents had to adapt – and adapt quickly. Because of their rural, isolated environment, they could not simply retreat to an ethnic neighborhood where they constituted, if not the majority, a strong block of Bohemian ethnics. Furthermore, unlike the rural Czech colony of Milligan, Nebraska where the immigrants enjoyed overwhelming numbers, the Czechs of Prague had to interact daily with the native-born whites, German immigrants, and African-American residents of the village. Nevertheless, the Czech newcomers of Prague, Oklahoma established a permanent presence in the small farming town on the edge of the Great Plains. They maintained their identity as Bohemians, not in the multicultural sense whereby they steadfastly held to their native tongue and native ways, nor in a symbolic sense in which the only remaining vestiges are public festivals and kolache cafes, but in a much deeper, existential sense they remained Czech; they preserved and passed on an internal sense of distinctiveness.⁶⁵ They resisted complete assimilation and held fast to their birthright despite societal pressure to conform. How did they do this? What were the ethnic mechanisms whereby Czechs maintained their ethnic identity? How early did interaction between Czechs and non-Czechs take place? What form did these early interactions take? Finally, were the early Czechs accepted on an equal basis in the community by non-Czechs?

⁶⁴ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, xvi.

⁶⁵ Kolache are a traditional Czech pastry.

Chapter two offers a brief history of Czech immigration to the United States until 1930. Topics covered include a short summary of when the Czech exodus from Bohemia began and why Czechs came to the United States. An examination of the general area where they settled once in the United States and a discussion of Bohemia's cultural and political interaction with the German-speaking areas is also included. One of the salient features of chapter two centers on the idea that Czech immigrants differed from other Slavic migrants. Although historians include Czech immigration in the period that came to be known as the "new immigration," many actually arrived in the United States earlier than 1880 (the date commonly associated with the beginning of the "new immigration"). One of the primary reasons for many Czechs arriving before 1880 was that Bohemia and Moravia, the two primary homelands of Czech-speakers, were part of an industrializing Austro-Hungarian Empire. The industrial revolution greatly affected the province of Bohemia in particular and drove many villagers to seek a better way of life elsewhere, especially The United States. In addition, as previously noted, the Czech's close proximity, both culturally and politically, to the German-speaking peoples provided Bohemians with a more western outlook than other Slavic areas.

Chapter three examines Czech settlement in Lincoln County, Oklahoma and the formation of the town of Prague eleven years later. The chapter begins with a description of southeast Lincoln County, which would later include Prague. This is followed by a short summary of the Sac and Fox Land Run and resultant land acquisitions by the earliest Czech settlers, which resulted in a tight ethnic farming community known as Barta Post Office. Almost immediately some of the newcomers formed a benevolent association, while others began a Catholic church. Regardless, the newcomers began

building homes and planting crops and the small Czech farming community flourished. The chapter concludes with the formation of the brand-new town of Prague and explains why the Czechs so quickly became a minority.

Chapter four looks at the importance of religion in the lives of the Prague Czechs. One important division within the Czech community revolved around religion. Despite Catholicism being the state religion of Bohemia, many Czech immigrants rejected the church soon after arriving in the United States. Most joined free thinking societies, which assumed an anticlerical stance if not outright hostility towards religion. These free thinkers with their diverse doctrines, and their importance in the Czech religious community, especially their impact on assimilation, are examined in detail. The Catholic Church and various Protestant sects that attracted Czechs are also scrutinized in regards to retarding or advancing assimilation.

In chapter five, the economic situation of Prague is explored. One of the basic questions scrutinized in this chapter will be who owned what? What type of businesses did ethnic Czechs own in comparison to non-Czechs? Who controlled the banks and newspaper? Furthermore, can economic interaction between Czechs and non-Czechs be determined? If so, what are the specifics? Did the economic picture change from the formation of Prague to 1930? Finally, what do the economic circumstances of Prague tell us about assimilation?

Chapters six and seven look at the social and cultural life of the Czechs of Prague. Chapter six focuses on the Czech's benevolent societies and their importance to the ethnic group. Chapter six also examines the immigrant community's strong desire to see an independent Czech nation in Europe and how they worked to bring this about during

World War I. Chapter seven details the social situation in Prague. Family life, marriage patterns, holidays, and sports and entertainment will provide an idea of the rapidity of acculturation of the Czech community. A glimpse into how Czechs attempted to maintain their ethnic identity in the midst of a cultural onslaught by the native population will also be possible.

Education, especially the public school system, is the topic of chapter eight. Czech involvement in Prague's public schools is analyzed as well as the success of Czech students. A look at Czech schools and the ideas of the free thinkers are also examined. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the impact of all forms of education on the Czech community's progeny.

What was the community organization of Prague, Oklahoma? Were Czechs involved? How were they involved? What civic positions did they hold? Did Czechs continue to accept positions of responsibility in Prague from the inception of the town to 1930? These are several important questions covered in chapter nine. This chapter examines the civic organizations of Prague and looks at positions such as fire chief, the town's band leader, Czechs in the Chamber of Commerce, as well as notable clubs such as the Masonic Lodge and Woodmen of the World. The purpose and effectiveness of Prague's Bohemian Political Association is also examined along with its importance regarding acceptance by the non-Czech population.

Chapter ten reviews the major findings of the study, specifically the idea that their minority status and the unique environment of Prague caused ethnic Czechs to interact immediately with the non-Czech population. The diverse farm-town population proved different than most urban situations and definitely from rural areas almost solely

inhabited by Bohemian newcomers. In addition, Prague's early years as a territorial frontier town on the edge of a "dry" territory actually aided the immigrants by presenting them with opportunities nonexistent in many other areas. Nevertheless, the rapid acculturation by the Czech community did not prevent them from maintaining their ethnic identity, their sense of who they were. Over time, many Czechs became dual citizens, totally American but still proudly clinging to their birthright identity as Czechs. In this, the historical plight of the Czechs while in Europe was critical. Bohemia's long domination by German-speaking peoples incorporated an existential sense of identity among many Czechs. The free thought movement also served the ethnic community in preserving a sense of ethnicity and belonging through the fraternal lodges, especially the Sokols.

This study relied heavily on several sources. Background information and snapshots of Prague came primarily from a book commemorating the centennial of Prague published under the auspices of the Prague Historical Museum as well as the, *History of Lincoln County*, put together by the historical society in Chandler, Oklahoma, the county seat. Other works referenced regarding the early life of the town include Russell Lynch's work on Lincoln County farmers, Ray Tower's thesis on the town of Prague and Melva Losch Brown's 1970s general history of Prague.⁶⁶

Newspapers were essential to the study and Prague, from its inception, had at least one newspaper and for several years, two. The newspapers were weeklies and like many small-town papers carried news about the local population including marriages, vacations, business enterprises (both successful and failed), parties, sporting events,

⁶⁶ Both Russell Lynch's and Ray Tower's work used as primary sources personal interviews with either the original settlers or their children.

entertainment, information on churches, and a plethora of advertisements. A fountain of information for the study derived from Prague's Bohemian Hall. The Western Czech Brotherhood Association kept extensive records (in Czech) including membership rolls, minutes of monthly meetings, and account books as far back as 1896. These dust-covered volumes proved a bonanza and gave the researcher a clear picture of the membership and workings of the fraternal association.

Census manuscripts also provided vital information regarding Prague's Czech community. By studying census records one can discover information such as family size, occupation, home ownership, place of residence, date of immigration, and prior residence. With this information a somewhat detailed portrait of the individuals and families emerges. Added to this image are church records and sectarian cemeteries, which add further illumination to the shady spots of our picture. By combining these sources a good – if imperfect – view of the past is visible; from this view, we should be able to see how the Czechs of Prague, Oklahoma adjusted to their new surroundings while maintaining their ethnic identity.

CHAPTER 2

CZECH IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES TO 1930

The young mother, dressed in a simple peasant skirt and blouse, ushered her children into the small, badly lit room to see their grandmother one last time. The children hugged and kissed the tearful lady who valiantly forced a smile to her lips as she lovingly ran her fingers through their straw-colored locks and told them over and over how much she loved them. When the children finally pulled free from their grandmother's embrace, the suddenly tired woman rose from her wooden rocker and stretched her arms toward her youngest daughter. The younger woman bounded across the plank floor and squeezed her mother as if they had not seen each other for years. Knowing it might be the last time they might ever touch, the two women held fast to each other for well over a minute. Although neither sobbed openly, both felt the warmth of tears seeping down their cheeks. When at last they separated, the young mother promised yet again to write often, then turned towards the door and with children in tow marched towards the waiting wagon that would take her to the steamship where she would journey to America to join her husband.¹

The above vignette, loosely based on Emily Balch's true story of a woman saying goodbye to her mother, depicts the heartache many emigrants felt when leaving the village of their birth. The emotional state expressed by many emigrants included a

¹ Paraphrased and expanded from a story found in Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*, 58-59.

mixture of enthusiasm, apprehension, and sorrow. The sorrow of leaving one's home, one's extended family, and one's life-long friends must have been traumatic. In a study of popular immigrant songs, Victor R. Greene, in "Ethnic Confrontations with State Universities, 1860-1920," concluded that "immigrants generally, though not uniformly, suffered personal discomfort from and disillusionment over their transfer."² This disillusionment did not end once the emigrant set sail. Indeed, soon after their arrival, immigrants faced new obstacles such as an unfamiliar language, a new culture, and an energetic, highly competitive economy, where jobs went to those willing to work long hours in, many times, dirty and dangerous occupations. This early phase of immigration and its sudden and drastic changes caused many to become sufficiently disillusioned to the point of returning to their homeland.³ Although all immigrants faced this dilemma, it proved especially true for single, male immigrants arriving for purely economic reasons. Many emigrated to work, save money, and then return home. These "birds of passage" lived a frugal existence in company dormitories or row houses close to the mill or refinery with their goal of returning home always foremost in their minds.⁴ However, the Czech experience appears different. Immigrants from Bohemia and Moravia primarily

² Victor R. Greene, "Ethnic Confrontations with State Universities, 1860-1920," in *American Education and the European Immigrant: 1840-1940*, ed. Bernard J. Weiss (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 153; Bernard J. Weiss, "Introduction" to *American Education and the Immigrant*, ed. Bernard J. Weiss (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), xviii.

³ Paul H. Elovitz, "Patterns and Costs of Immigration," in *Immigrant Experiences: Personal Narrative and Psychological Analysis*, eds. Paul H. Elovitz and Charlotte Kahn (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 14; Nobuko Yoshizawa Meaders, "The Transcultural Self," in *Immigrant Experiences: Personal Narrative and Psychological Analysis*, eds. Paul H. Elovitz and Charlotte Kahn (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 49.

⁴ An example of this phenomenon is the Slovaks. From 1908 to 1910 of the 71,172 Slovaks who entered the United States 41,726 (59%) returned home. For an indepth discussion, see Josef Stasko, *Slovaks in the United States of America* (n.p.: Dobra Kniha, 1974), 48.

came to the United States in family units with every intention of staying and their rate of return was far less than other Slavic groups.⁵

Why did Czechs leave Bohemia and Moravia? Why did they uproot their entire family – oftentimes including grandparents – and come to a foreign land? What caused them to take such drastic action? Was it the lure of the New World and its promise of prosperity? Or did things become so bad in their own country that many simply lost all hope for a better future? In many early accounts of the immigrant experience, the traditional pull of the American economy and the vast opportunities it offered was held as the prime motive underlying immigration.⁶ The idea of the United States as a beacon of hope and liberty and the opportunity to obtain prosperity attracted millions causing them to leave everything behind and cross oceans to realize their dream.

However, the political and economic situation in their homeland emerges as the primary reasons for Czechs coming to the United States and was the impetus for why they overwhelmingly came in family groups. Both push and pull factors are important and neither should be discounted. Nevertheless, before anyone would even consider leaving their village or town of birth they must come to the conclusion that things simply are not going to get better. Bernard Bailyn was on the mark when he wrote, “[a]gain and again major issues, apparently unresolvable paradoxes in the peopling process, can be resolved by reference to the domestic scene in the land of origin.”⁷ In other words, people normally do not simply up and leave the country of their birth. Their situation has

⁵ U.S. Immigration Commission, *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol.12 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1911), 385.

⁶ For a brief discussion of early writing on immigrants, see John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 2.

⁷ Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America: An Introduction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1986), 29. For a further discussion, see Bodnar *The Transplanted*, 3.

to become desperate, discouraging; there has to be a push. What was the push? Why did hundreds and then thousands of families sell everything, board a ship, and set sail for a new land? Early on it appears that religious reasons caused many Bohemians and Moravians to cross the Atlantic and settle in the United States. However, in the nineteenth century the impetus for emigration shifted to economic factors as the industrialization of Europe spread from West to East.

The first known Czech to settle permanently in America was Augustine Hermen who came to the New World sometime during the 1650s.⁸ Hermen first settled in New Amsterdam, present-day New York, but eventually migrated to Maryland where, after publishing a detailed map of the colony, Lord Baltimore awarded him twenty thousand acres. Hermen established his home on this tract of land and christened it Bohemia Manor. There can be little doubt that Hermen, although living in a British colony, was proud of his heritage. Besides naming his estate Bohemia Manor, he dubbed the two rivers running through his property the “Big Bohemia River” and the “Little Bohemia River.” When the well-to-do farmer died in 1692 the inscription on his tombstone read, “Augustine Hermen, Bohemian.”⁹

Due to the religious conflict, the Thirty Years War then ravaging Bohemia, other Czechs soon followed Hermen. Approximately five hundred fled Bohemia searching for a more tolerant place to live. These small numbers of Czech Protestants settled primarily in Pennsylvania alongside the more numerous German immigrants and quickly lost their

⁸ Thomas Capek, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America: A Study of their National, Cultural, Political, Social, Economic, and Religious Life* (New York: Arno press, 1920; repr., 1969), 9; Also see Jan Habenicht, *A History of the Czechs in America* (St. Louis: Hlas Publishing, 1910), 11. Chroniclers spell the name several different ways: Herman, Herrman, Harman, Heerman, Hermans.

⁹ Habenicht, *History of Czechs in America*, 12-14.

cultural identity and native tongue.¹⁰ These early immigrants from Bohemia seeking religious and political freedom continued to trickle into North America usually settling near German communities until around 1850 when a new type of Czech immigrant began arriving – one leaving the homeland primarily due to economic factors.¹¹ Due to Bohemia and Moravia containing rich natural resources, the Habsburg rulers of Austria-Hungary rapidly industrialized the areas resulting in a deterioration of the way of life in many villages. By 1914, 70 percent of Habsburg industrial capacity was in the Czech lands with Bohemia alone containing about one-third of all the industrial workers in the empire. Agriculture changed from primarily self-sufficiency to an emphasis on the market, which changed forever many European communities.¹² Although unintended by the imperial government, this disruption of village life resulted in a destabilizing of peasant culture and caused a rural to urban migration and ultimately an exodus to other parts of Europe and the world, especially the United States.¹³ Interestingly, the first to leave were usually craftsmen, artisans, and small independent farmers (cottagers) who felt threatened by the new market-based economic order that emphasized large estates and the production of cash crops.¹⁴ The industrializing forces especially hurt the middle level of the Czech peasantry in southern Bohemia and eastern Moravia and it is mainly these areas that supplied most of the mid-nineteenth-century immigrants to the United

¹⁰ Karen Johnson Freeze, “Czechs” in *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, eds. Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov and Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 262.

¹¹ An exception to this would be a small group of Moravian Protestant missionaries who immigrated to Georgia for evangelistic reasons. See Capek, *Czechs in America*, 23.

¹² *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 12, 366; Karel Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 7

¹³ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 10.

¹⁴ A cottager usually owned between five and twenty-five acres and existed primarily as a subsistence farmer. See Russell Willford Lynch, “Czech Farmers in Oklahoma: A Comparative Study of the Stability of a Czech Farm Group in Lincoln County Oklahoma, and the Factors Relating to its Stability,” *Bulleting of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College) 39, no. 13 (June 1942), 89.

States.¹⁵ Thus, despite Bohemia being the chief industrial center of Austria, the future appeared bleak to many Czechs as thousands left their relatives and friends to seek a better life. When asked by United States Immigration Commission agents sent to Bohemia in the early twentieth century as to why so many desired to leave their motherland, “[i]n practically every instance . . . was . . . the answer ‘to earn greater wages in America.’”¹⁶

Another important motive that added to the economic woes emerged in the form of a European population explosion. Between 1800 and 1910 Austria-Hungary more than doubled its population.¹⁷ Increased family size and the new economic order many times led to hunger and want resulting in an almost fanatical effort to find a way to relieve the misery. Robert Kutak, in his study of the Nebraska town of Milligan, questioned 117 Czech immigrants as to why they left Bohemia. Of the 117 questioned, 92 gave “poverty and large families” as the primary reason for emigrating.¹⁸

In addition, in the 1840s, central Europe experienced terrible droughts which decimated harvests and all but destroyed potato crops. As a result, many Czechs began believing that it simply had to be better in the United States. Thus, the loss of hope in the land of their birth catapulted many Czechs across the ocean. As already noted, many of these newer immigrants were of the cottager class from small villages in Bohemia and

¹⁵ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 55-56; Emily Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), 75. Many of the mid-nineteenth Century Bohemian immigrants came from the areas of Plsen, Budweis, Tabor, Pisek, Kutteneberg, and Caslau.

¹⁶ *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 12, 361.

¹⁷ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 34, 37; Richard A. Easterlin, “Immigration: Economic and Social Characteristics,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, eds. Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 484.

¹⁸ Robert Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village: A Study of Social Persistence and Change* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1933, repr. ed., 1970), 11. The other reasons given for coming to America were: political (3); religious (2); to escape military service (5); and to join relatives or friends already in the United States (15).

Moravia. Once in the United States, they sought a similar lifestyle. Therefore when they arrived, rather than migrating to the established German/Czech communities of Pennsylvania, many sought out inexpensive land in the West, thus becoming the only Slavic group to farm extensively.¹⁹ These Czech families established themselves in Wisconsin, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota and, despite battling a harsher climate than they were accustomed to in Bohemia and Moravia, became successful husbandmen growing wheat, rye, oats, and corn.²⁰ According to Russell Lynch, the cooperation and community-mindedness of many of these farming areas closely resembled the European villages the Czechs had just left. It was in these north-central states that many Czechs broke away from the German-American influence and flourished on their own. This proved especially true in the rural states of Nebraska and Iowa.²¹ Although Lynch paints a somewhat rosy picture of the plight of Czech immigrant farmers, his work chiefly dealt with Oklahoma Czechs at the turn of the twentieth century, many of whom had already lived elsewhere in the United States. Most pioneer farmers of the mid-nineteenth century found life in the relatively treeless plains region harsh and often times lonely. Many farmsteads were miles from the nearest village and despite the Czechs's cooperative spirit, they spent many days alone and isolated from their ethnic kinsmen. This is true not only regarding the Czech experience but of most pioneers, regardless of ethnicity, who settled on the Great Plains.²²

¹⁹ Freeze, "Czechs," 261.

²⁰ Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929), 26; Also see Capek, *Czechs in America*, 36-48.

²¹ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 89, 105.

²² For an excellent narrative of the difficulties encountered by settlers on the Great Plains, see Ole Edvart Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927, repr., New York: First Perennial Classics, 1999).

From 1850 to 1890, emigration from Bohemia and Moravia continued and most of these newcomers to the United States bypassed the eastern destinations so dear to other Slavic groups and headed for the Midwestern farming communities. As decades passed and the cheap western land filled up, Czechs were forced to look elsewhere for a new start. Some chose to settle in New York and Cleveland, but many continued west settling in cities like Chicago, Omaha, and Racine.²³ St. Louis, in 1854, was home of the first sizeable urban Czech community. However, Chicago soon stripped St. Louis of this honor and by the turn of the century became the veritable, if unofficial, capital of America's Czechs.

By 1890, over 170,000 foreign-born Czechs lived in the United States.²⁴ However, this does not take into account second and third generation native-born Czechs, many of whom lived in rural Czech colonies or in urban ethnic neighborhoods. The sparsely-populated state of Nebraska alone contained over fifty thousand people claiming Czech ancestry.²⁵ Nevertheless, the farming villages and Midwestern urban centers were not the only places ethnic Czechs chose to live. New York contained over forty-seven thousand residents claiming a Czech background and Texas, the destination for many Moravians, held just over forty-one thousand ethnic Czechs.²⁶ However, Czechs increasingly chose to live in the northern states of Illinois, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and the Dakotas. At the turn of the twentieth century, these areas held

²³ Capek, *Cechs in America*, 36-47.

²⁴ Freeze, "Czechs," 262.

²⁵ Henry W. Casper, *History of the Catholic Church in Nebraska* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), vol.4, *Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration: 1870-1900*, 101. For a further discussion, see Capek, *Cechs in America*, 60.

²⁶ The Moravian immigrants to the Lone Star State embarked from Liverpool and landed in the United States in Galveston rather than New York. See Habenicht, *History of Czechs in America*, 63; Also see Capek, *Cechs in America*, 60. Capek gathered his quantitative information from the Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Mother Tongue of the Foreign White Stock, Table 17, 985-986.

over three hundred thousand Czech ethnics, more than any other geographical section of the country.²⁷

So the Czechs came. In addition, they came with their families to stay.²⁸

Americans considered them part of the “new” immigration – those whose country of birth was in southern or eastern Europe even though Czechs had been coming to North America since the early seventeenth century. Nevertheless, Czechs differed from other “new” immigrants such as the Poles, Slovaks, Croats, and Hungarians in many areas.

To begin with, Czechs had not culturally associated much in the past with their northern Slavic neighbors, the Poles, or their close linguistic relatives, the Slovaks. Historically, the Hungarians dominated the Slovaks resulting in Slovakia becoming a land of uneducated peasants rather than a western-oriented, industrial society. To add to this separation, most Slovaks, upon arrival in the United States, settled almost exclusively in the industrial cities of the Northeast, particularly Pennsylvania, rather than traveling to the Midwest as many Czechs did.²⁹ These men sweated long hours in the mines and mills saving as much of their paychecks as possible with every intention of returning home.³⁰ As previously mentioned, many were known as “birds of passage,” and rarely attempted to assimilate into the larger community. Instead, they were content living in company housing close to the workplace unlike the Czechs, who came to stay.³¹ Nevertheless, those Slovaks who decided to remain in the United States established

²⁷ Capek, *Czechs in America*, 60-61.

²⁸ *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 12, 385.

²⁹ Stasko, *Slovaks in the United States of America*, 35.

³⁰ Of the 71,172 Slovaks who entered the United States from 1908 to 1910 41,726 (59%) returned home. For an excellent discussion, see Stasko, *Slovaks in the United States*, 48. See also M. Mark Stolarik, “Slovaks” in *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, eds. Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov and Oscar Handlin, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 928.

³¹ Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986), 106.

close-knit neighborhoods complete with churches, Slovak-speaking businesses, and community associations much like other immigrant groups.

However, Czechs, due to centuries of interaction with the German-speaking peoples to their north and west, shared more in the areas of customs and mode of life with the non-Slavic Germans than they did with either the Poles or Slovaks. Thomas Capek summed it up well when he wrote, “[Czechs] felt pretty much at home among the Germans.”³² Although Czechs felt somewhat at ease with western culture, they did not sail across the Atlantic Ocean, as the Germans had done, in appreciable numbers until after 1880. Thus, despite having much in common with their German neighbors, most Czechs definitely were part of the new immigration.

The population of America in 1900 stood at 75,568,686.³³ Of this total, there were 10,460,085 residents born outside the United States and of these, 156,991 were Czechs.³⁴ Looking at these large numbers, it is obvious that Czech immigrants did not make up a large portion of the whole. Thus, regarding the overall portrait of American immigration during this time period, Czech influence and visibility pales in comparison with groups such as the Italians, Greeks, and Jews. And if we compare the American Czech influx with the Poles, another Slavic group we see that in the previous decade many more Poles arrived in the United States than their Czech counterparts.³⁵ In the ten years after 1890, the Czech foreign-born population in America increased 32 percent,

³² Capek, *Czechs in America*, 112.

³³ Department of Commerce, United States Bureau of the Census. *Census Reports: 1900*, vol. 1, *Population* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1904), xix.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, clxx.

³⁵ It is impossible to compare the Czechs with the Slovaks during this time period as the Census Bureau did not list the Slovaks as a separate people. They were not listed separately, but included as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

while the Polish community zoomed from 147,440 people in 1890 to 383,510 at the beginning of the twentieth century, a 160 percent rise.³⁶ Consequently, although a viable part of immigration history, the Czechs cannot compare numerically with many of the other European newcomers.

In general, these newly arriving Czechs migrated west to the North Central region of the United States and joined their countrymen. The 1900 census suggests that this was, indeed, the case. Table 2.1 shows that Czechs overwhelmingly chose the North Central Region of the United States to settle where inexpensive farmland was still available.

Table 2.1
Czech Foreign-Born by Region (1900)

North Atlantic	22,176
South Atlantic	3,187
North Central	118,883
South Central	10,819
<u>West</u>	<u>1,826</u>
Total	156,891

Source: *Census Reports: 1900*, vol. 1, *Population*, Table lxxxii, clxxxiii.

A more specific look at where Czechs in the United States lived in 1900 further validates that many traveled to the ethnic communities of their forebears. Table 2.2 illustrates that North Central states like Illinois, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Ohio, Minnesota, and Iowa contained comparatively large numbers of Czech immigrants. New York was the only North Atlantic state with any appreciable numbers of Czechs and because it was the primary port of arrival, it is difficult to ascertain how many immigrants chose the state as their permanent home or were merely passing through. Maryland was the top South

³⁶ *Census Reports: 1900*, vol. 1, *Population*, clxxi.

Atlantic state with 2,813 Czechs. However, its total was lower than most North Atlantic states. The state of Texas, which included the port of Galveston, contained a sizeable Czech population with over nine thousand foreign-born, with Oklahoma Territory the only other South Central area hosting more than a thousand Czech residents. The Oklahoma Czechs came primarily due to the land runs and, in most cases, represented a second migration.³⁷ The Czechs who settled in Oklahoma Territory consisted mainly of farmers from places such as Nebraska, Kansas, and Iowa looking for a new start. Alongside Czech immigrants making their way to Oklahoma Territory were some native-born Czechs who had already spent many years in the United States thus giving the new state a relatively significant number of Czech residents.³⁸ Finally, the far western states contained only few Czech immigrants at the beginning of the century.

Table 2.2
Czech Foreign-Born by Selected State (1900)

<i>North Atlantic</i>	New York	16,347
	Pennsylvania	3,368
<i>South Atlantic</i>	Maryland	2,813
<i>North Central</i>	Illinois	38,570
	Nebraska	16,138
	Ohio	15,131
	Wisconsin	14,145
	Minnesota	11,147
	Iowa	10,809
	<i>South Central</i>	Texas
	Oklahoma	<u>1,168</u>
Total:		138,840

Source: *Census Reports: 1900*, vol.1, *Population*, Table lxxxii, clxxxiii.

Although many Czechs, especially those arriving before 1880, chose to live in small farming communities in the North Central part of the United States, a sizeable

³⁷ Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma*, 15-21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

number also migrated to cities. Table 2.3 shows the major urban destination points for Czech immigrants in 1900. After examining the data it is immediately apparent that a huge number of Czechs settled in Chicago. The largest city in Illinois contained over thirty-six thousand (foreign-born) Czechs out of a state total of less than thirty-nine thousand. A thriving Czech community existed in the windy city at the turn of the century with only a smattering of Czechs elsewhere in the state. Two other cities with sizeable Czech populations in 1900 were New York and Cleveland.³⁹ If nothing else, the lack of significant numbers of Czech immigrants in most cities shows that they were more spread out than many other ethnic groups.

Table 2.3
Czech Foreign-Born by Selected Cities (1900)

Chicago	36,362
New York	15,055
Cleveland	13,599
St. Louis	2,590
Milwaukee	1,719
St. Paul	1,343
<u>Minneapolis</u>	<u>385</u>
Total	71,053

Source: *Census Reports: 1900*, vol.1, *Population*, Table lxxxii, clxxxiii.

The 1900 census included extensive data for persons claiming foreign birth, but contained little information on native-born individuals claiming a specific ancestry – in other words descendants of immigrants who still claimed their parents or grandparents ethnicity. Usually by the third generation, ethnics lose most or all of their foreign distinctiveness except during Old World festivals and holidays, which they readily embrace. However, these events represent symbolic memory rather than a lifestyle. The

³⁹ Again, it is impossible to ascertain how many New York Czechs were permanent residents or transients on their way to other destinations.

descendents of immigrants having been born and raised in the United States were citizens by birth. They attended American schools and, with few exceptions, became immersed in the dominant culture. Additionally, during this period American society made a conscious effort to absorb them.⁴⁰ Thus, most ethnic children, if they had not totally lost the language of their parents and grandparents, regarded it primarily as something to use on holidays and family gatherings when visiting with their extended family. Generally speaking, Czechs appear no different. Their progeny eagerly accepted American culture and, even though they still proudly proclaimed their Czech ancestry, became Americanized through and through.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the numerically-small Czech immigrants carved out space for themselves wherever they settled. And, because many bypassed the populous northeastern cities and headed west to less-populous farming communities they wielded influence well beyond the strength of their overall numbers, especially had they chosen more densely-inhabited urban areas. In several farming villages across the Great Plains, Czechs either numerically dominated or constituted a significant majority. This enabled them to influence their community economically, socially, and politically. An influence their numbers did not command in urban areas.

In a 1983 article advocating immigration restriction, Peter Brimelow argues that opposition to immigrants has been around since the inception of the United States. He wrote: “The first naturalization law in 1790 stipulated that an applicant must be a ‘free, white person.’ In addition, Blacks became full citizens only after the Civil War while restrictions on Asian newcomers gaining citizenship were not dropped until after World

⁴⁰ Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 184.

⁴¹ Capek, *Czechs in America*, 101-104.

War II.”⁴² Brimelow, a British immigrant to the United States, asserts that the United States was historically a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant nation and when Catholic immigrants, Slavs, and Asians began arriving, nativists tried to protect the culture and heritage of their forefathers. Whether or not his summation is accurate is beyond the scope of this work. However, he is correct about the response of many native-born citizens regarding the wave after wave of eastern and southern Europeans arriving on the shores of the United States. As more and more immigrants arrived in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the outcry against them increased in frequency and volume.

The 1880s marked a turning point in American immigration and the attitudes towards it.⁴³ In 1882, 87 percent of arriving immigrants were from western and northern Europe. Twenty-five years later, in 1907, the picture looked vastly different. Of the almost 1.3 million arrivals that year, 80.7 percent emigrated from countries in the southern and eastern part of the European continent.⁴⁴ During the early 1880s, nativists ignored the racial aspects of the rising immigration, preferring to focus their energies on economic competition and religious conflict.⁴⁵ When people discussed immigrants and their “negative” aspects, the newcomers’ “race enjoyed the least support.”⁴⁶

Nativism reappeared in the United States with the labor upheaval beginning roughly around 1886.⁴⁷ With the Haymarket Square bombing and the resultant panic over anarchism and foreign radicals, more and more people began to listen to and be

⁴² Peter Brimelow, “Looking Back at America's History of Immigration: United States's Ethnic Foundation was White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant” in *Opposing Viewpoints in World History: Immigration*, ed. Tamara L. Roleff (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2004), 199.

⁴³ Dennis Wepman, *Immigration: From the Founding of Virginia to the Closing of Ellis Island* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2002), 160.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Also see *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. I, 13.

⁴⁵ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

persuaded by the anti-immigrant message. Nativist literature reminded Americans about the “Molly Maguires” and the violent episodes in the Pennsylvania coal mines. Nativists also railed against the Socialist Party, formed a decade earlier and which many believed contained an enormous immigrant membership. In 1877, a series of violent railroad strikes occurred which further enraged the anti-immigrant faction. This fear of radicals genuinely frightened average Americans and many began to look at the newcomers differently.⁴⁸

Besides the purported radicalism, native-born Americans did not like the popish faith of many new immigrants. Anti-Catholicism was nothing new in the United States.⁴⁹ The Irish, when they arrived prior to the Civil War, suffered myriad slights, disparagements, and out-right hostility over their religion. With the new immigration, nativism resurfaced. In the 1870s, the Republican Party attacked Catholics over the issue of public schools and religion with the result that some newcomers, like the Irish before them, left the public institutions and formed their own private sectarian schools.⁵⁰ The United States, because of its Protestant heritage, had always evinced a mistrust of Catholics and with the new immigration it again bubbled to the surface.

Working Americans also became worried about the possible effect the new arrivals could have on the economy. The working class, always apprehensive when it came to the subject of job security, saw these newcomers as a threat to their positions or, at the least, driving their wages down. Early in the debate, the President of the American

⁴⁸ Robert F. Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics: The Dillingham Commission, 1900-1927* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 104.

⁴⁹ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 28.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, came out against immigration.⁵¹ Although later he and most unions modified their stance, many of the rank and file members remained staunchly opposed to the flow of humanity arriving from Europe. With the advent of World War I and a noticeable lessening of new arrivals, the economic argument against immigration softened. However, after the war these economic concerns returned when the American financial situation took a downturn in 1919.⁵²

Many immigrants crowded into the great cities of the United States where they formed ethnic enclaves and lived in crowded, dirty neighborhoods, always hoping and working for a better life in their adopted homeland.⁵³ Joseph Lee, a Bostonian, viewed the immigrant problem as mainly one of urbanization.⁵⁴ He believed that if immigrants, especially the youth, were not so restricted, they would lead better lives and thus, not be such a problem to authorities. He advocated the building of playgrounds and open areas where the children could play.⁵⁵ Others believed that if the newcomers could spread out across the continent, the situation in the cities would improve. However, for the most part, most new immigrants remained in the cities. They found employment in factories and sweatshops and found comfort living among the expatriates of their homeland. The rapid increase of population overtaxed the infrastructure of most cities. The resultant overcrowding inevitably led to social decay as filthy, congested conditions increased crime and health problems.⁵⁶ In addition, with the passage of the Volstead Act, banning the sale or transportation of alcohol, many immigrants, whose culture and upbringing

⁵¹ Wepman, *Immigration*, 178.

⁵² Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 267.

⁵³ Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics*, 9.

⁵⁴ Barbara Miller Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 137-138.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁶ *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol.7, 34-35.

included alcohol consumption, found themselves on the wrong side of the law.

Immigrants soon became associated with anti-prohibition criminal activities, which further hurt their image throughout America.⁵⁷

Lastly, there was a deep-rooted racism that fostered a fear that these Slavs, Italians, Hungarians, Greeks, and Jews would pollute the blood of the American people.⁵⁸ These race-centered nativists included intellectuals who believed in a form of Social Darwinism. It was their contention that the laws of evolution guaranteed that the “fittest” races would triumph over the inferior groups and they believed that the most evolved race was the Nordic populations of western and northern Europe.⁵⁹ Therefore, the new immigrants were not only socially unacceptable, but also genetically inferior. This pseudo-scientific belief flourished before the war. It faded from the public conscious during the war, returning full-force in the early 1920s, just when Congress began considering restrictive legislation.⁶⁰

Americans became concerned and worried about the effects of the large influx of newcomers on their country. According to newspapers and vocal politicians American civilization teetered on the verge of collapse or, at the least, was about to change completely – and not for the better. The huge numbers of immigrants combined with their racial differences, strange languages, the perceived connection between aliens and radicalism, and the social decay of the cities swayed many Americans into believing that their quality of life was in peril.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Highham, *Strangers in the Land*, 267.

⁵⁸ Wepman, *Immigration*, 182.

⁵⁹ Highham, *Strangers in the Land*, 135, 266.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁶¹ Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics*, 8.

Czechs, as part of this newest immigration, became targets of the restriction lobby. They joined the Italians, Russians, Poles, Bulgarians, Slovaks, and several other groups to be labeled as “unwanted.” When the nativists won the national debate in 1921 and 1924, Czechs felt the full-force of the new legislation.

Before delving into the minutiae of Czech characteristics and comparing them with other immigrant groups, a brief look at their overall numbers will give us an idea of their numerical place in the United States. In 1900 there were 156,991 Czech immigrants residing in the various states.⁶² The number of Czech newcomers rose dramatically in the next decade to 239,357. However, this would be the apex as their population decreased slightly, no doubt because of World War I, to 235,198 in 1920. The Czech foreign-born community then began its inexorable decline in 1930, dipping to 201,138.⁶³ The succeeding years witnessed nothing but a gradual decrease in the numbers of Czech immigrants in the United States.⁶⁴ The immigration laws enacted during the 1920s caused the inevitable decline. There simply were not enough arriving Czechs to replenish the dying first generation.

Besides the Czechs, another Slavic group, the Poles, also began migrating to the North Central region of the United States, albeit mainly choosing to live in urban areas. Polish immigrants especially favored Chicago and the state of Illinois, but settled in the cities of surrounding states as well.⁶⁵

⁶² *Census Reports: 1900*, vol. 1, *Population*, clxxi.

⁶³ Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census. *U.S. Census of Population: 1960*, vol.1, *Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1963), Table 41.

⁶⁴ Philip D. Smith, “The Decline of Czechoslovak America: An Examination of Czechoslovak Immigration and Adjustment to the United States since 1960” (M.A. Thesis, University of Tulsa, 1992), 214-215.

⁶⁵ Department of Commerce, United States Bureau of the Census. *Census Reports: 1920*, vol. 2, *Population* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1924), Table 11, 375. Also see Department of Commerce, United

The city of Chicago served as the hub for American Czechs. As noted earlier, in 1900 there were over thirty-six thousand Czech immigrants in the windy city. Despite World War I, the next twenty years saw the Chicago Czech community rise dramatically to 43,676. The new restrictive immigration laws passed by Congress in 1921 and 1924 apparently affected the Czech population immediately because their numbers plunged to 32,451 in 1930.⁶⁶

A noteworthy city where Czech immigrants congregated was Omaha. In 1920, the city of Omaha, with a population under two hundred thousand contained almost five thousand Czech immigrants and over six thousand second-generation Czechs.⁶⁷ This number dropped to a little under four thousand by 1930, but the Czech impact on this medium-sized city must have been significant.⁶⁸ In fact, Omaha contained more Czechs than any other foreign-born group.⁶⁹

Of course, newcomers born in Bohemia were not the only ingredients comprising Czech communities; ethnic Czechs were also important. Born in the United States, these second- and third-generation Czechs remained a vital component of many enclaves. These sons and daughters and grandchildren of Czech immigrants would have learned much about their parent's birthplace including knowledge of the language, customs, and folklore. In 1910, the census recorded 531,193 Czech ethnics throughout the United States. Their numbers swelled to 622,796 ten years later.⁷⁰ Compared to other ethnic groups like the Poles, Italians, and Germans this number is miniscule. However, when

States Bureau of the Census, *Census Reports: 1930*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1931), vol. 2, *Population*, 758. This Polish immigration centered on the city of Chicago, which had a large ethnic community.

⁶⁶ *Census Reports: 1930*, vol.2, *Population*, 11, 375.

⁶⁷ *Census Reports: 1920*, vol.II, *Population*, 55, 312-313, 1006-1008.

⁶⁸ *Census Reports: 1930*, vol.2, *Population*, 11, 375. The exact numbers for Omaha were 4,717 in 1920 and 3,860 in 1930.

⁶⁹ *Census Reports: 1920*, vol.2, *Population*, 750.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 973.

we look at the numbers closer we see that several of the North Central states contained relatively large numbers of Czechs. For example, the rural state of Nebraska held over fifty-four thousand people claiming Czech heritage in 1920 and neighboring Wisconsin, over forty-six thousand. Illinois counted the most with 140,000 with Ohio placing second with slightly under 60,000.⁷¹ Thus, the Czech community's influence in certain states or regions within a state where they were heavily concentrated was greater than their overall numbers suggest. However, as stated earlier, Austrian domination of the Czech lands caused an osmosis-type seepage of German culture and ways into Bohemia and Moravia resulting in a somewhat different way of life compared to their Polish and Slovak neighbors. Were the Czechs truly more western than other Slavic group?

In 1907, at President Theodore Roosevelt's urging, Congress established a commission on immigration headed by Senator Charles Dillingham to study the immigrant problem and submit recommendations for possible action. The United States Immigration Commission or the Dillingham Commission, as it came to be known, spent the next three years examining the immigrants themselves. The commission looked at how many came, detailed characteristics of the newcomers, their living conditions in the United States; even traveling to Europe to find out why the immigrants left their home country. It was a detailed, exhaustive study and from it we can learn much about the Czechs who came to the United States.

By analyzing the findings of the Dillingham reports, a good picture of the Czech-immigrant population should reveal itself. We will also be able to look at the data the United States Congress had at their disposal when they voted to change the immigration

⁷¹ Ibid., 983. The exact numbers for Nebraska were 54,024; for Wisconsin, 46,425; Illinois, 140,011; Ohio, 59,206.

laws during the 1920s. Lastly, we can direct our attention to specific characteristics of Czech immigrants and compare them to other groups to see if they truly were different.

The three groups we will compare to the Czechs, when possible, will be the Poles, Slovaks, and Germans. Reasons for choosing these three groups include the fact that Czechs lived in close proximity to all three in Europe. Furthermore, Czechs linguistically belong to the Slavic branch of nations, as do their neighbors, the Poles and Slovaks. In addition, the Czechs lived adjacent to the German-speaking people of Western Europe and, as stated earlier, appeared to interact with them every bit as much, or more, than they did their Slavic neighbors. It must be noted that the Dillingham Commission did not survey every single immigrant in the United States when they examined certain characteristics.⁷² They relied on a sampling of the immigrant population, so the results were not totally definitive. However, they do reveal a good snapshot of the characteristics of the immigrant that was in America during this time period.

A total of 100,189 Czechs came to the United States from 1899 to 1910.⁷³ The zenith was 1907 with 13,554, while the year with the least amount was 1899 with 2,526. One question is: Does the data show that the majority of these newly-arriving immigrants migrated to the North Central region as their nineteenth-century predecessors had done or did they elect to live elsewhere?

⁷² The characteristics they sampled comprised things such as living conditions, children in school, immigrants seeking charity, etc. The samplings did not include the number of immigrants, ages, or sex, which were exhaustive.

⁷³ *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 20, Table 10, 45.

Table 2.4
Czechs to the United States by Year

1899	2,526	1905	11,757
1900	3,060	1906	12,958
1901	3,766	1907	13,554
1902	5,590	1908	10,164
1903	9,591	1909	6,850
1904	11,911	1910	8,462
Total: 100,189			

Source: *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 20, Table 10, 45.

The census records (see Table 2.2) show that the North Central region remained the popular choice for Czech immigrants. This cluster of states contained more Czech foreign-born than the rest of the country combined. Illinois continued as the most heavily settled with the North Atlantic state of New York second. A new phenomenon, and one that would continue throughout the twentieth century, is the gradual movement of Czechs further west.⁷⁴ Like their predecessors, most Czechs first touched the shores of the United States in New York.⁷⁵ And like their precursors, they continued searching for land and opportunity. In 1900, there had been almost no Czech immigrants in the western states. By 1910 three states (California, Colorado, and Washington) each contained over one thousand. Although these totals are small, it does show that some Czechs chose to venture into different areas of the United States.

⁷⁴ Smith, "Decline of Czechoslovak America," 216-218.

⁷⁵ Some Czechs disembarked after their long journey by steam ship at Galveston. However, most came through the immigration portal at New York City.

Table 2.5
Czech Immigrants in the U.S. by Selected State (1910)

<i>Northeast</i>	New York	24,493	
	New Jersey	13,668	
	Total:		48,985
<i>North Central</i>	Illinois	56,448	
	Ohio	22,701	
	Nebraska	19,004	
	Wisconsin	16,301	
	Minnesota	11,655	
	Iowa	11,080	
	Total:		141,952
<i>South Atlantic</i>	Maryland	4,149	
	Total:		5,352
<i>South Central</i>	Texas	15,074	
	Oklahoma	2,332	
	Total:		24,817
<i>West</i>	California	1,838	
	Colorado	1,703	
	Washington	1,499	
	Total:		7,852

Source: *U.S. Census Report, 1960*. vol. 1, Table 41.

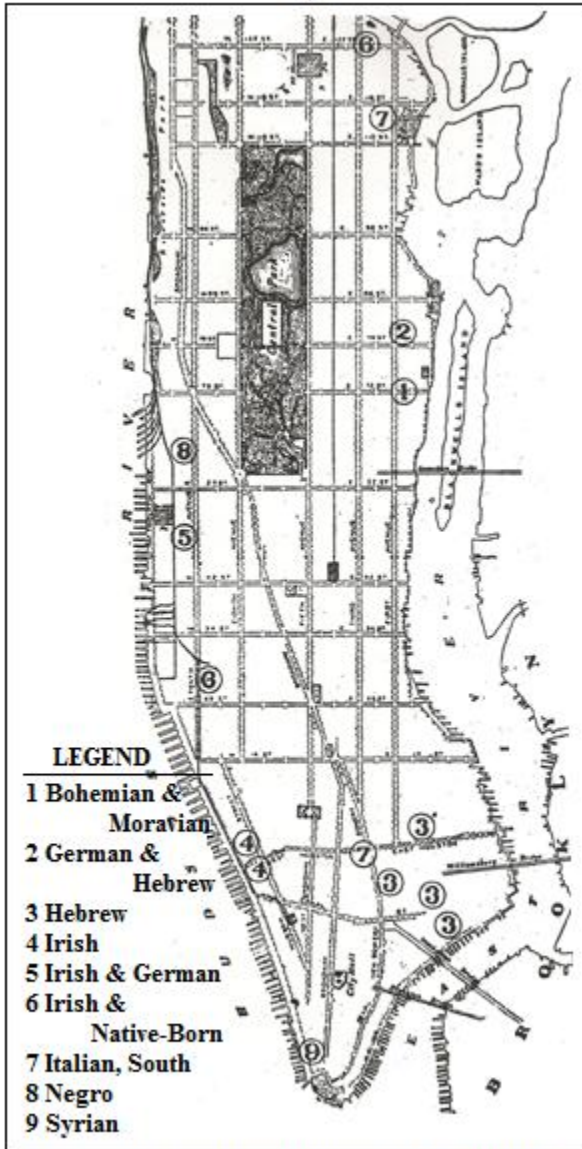
The Dillingham Commission reports also included 1910 city maps showing the approximate location of immigrant communities. These maps showed that Czech city-dwellers did not settle next to their close-kinsmen, the Slovaks, nor did they reside near the Poles. Instead, in every instance, they moved in close proximity to German neighborhoods.⁷⁶ This reinforces Thomas Capek's assertion that Czechs, despite their historic differences with the Germans, were comfortable living near them. Although, for reasons not discernable, the other immigrant group Czechs seemed to have congregated towards were the Jewish neighborhoods.⁷⁷ The reports do not contain any maps or data

⁷⁶ *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 26, pp. 158, 248, 510, 680. The reports studied in detail and provided maps for seven cities: New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Boston, Buffalo, and Philadelphia. However, only the first four mentioned show the settlement patterns of Bohemians and Moravians which are included in this study.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

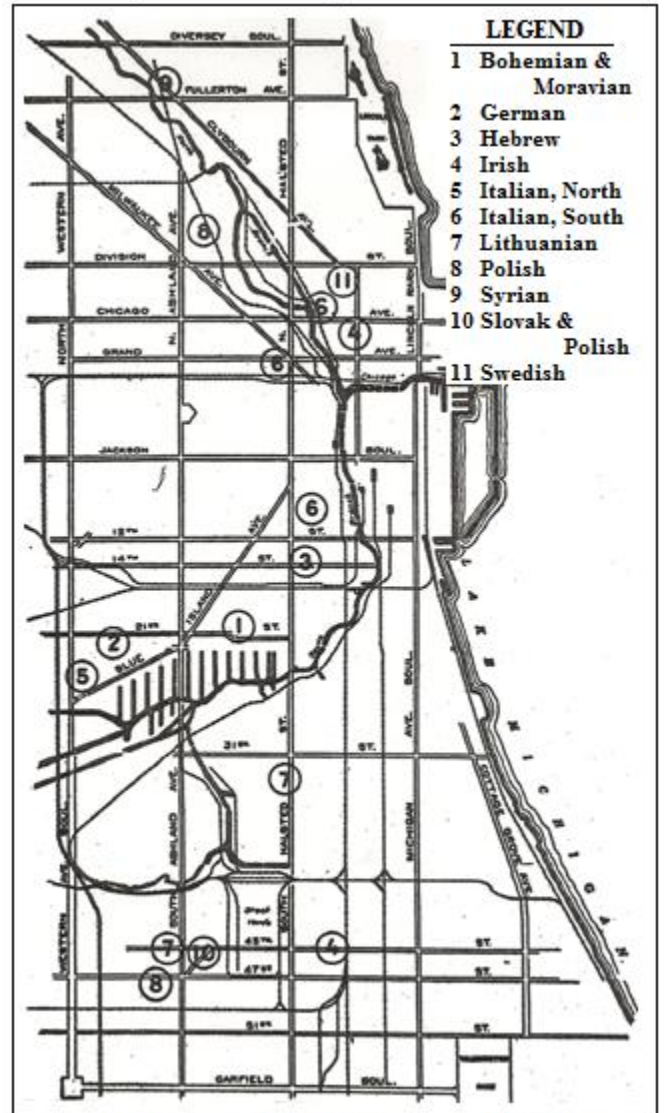
showing exactly where rural Czechs lived. However, if states mirrored Nebraska, it appears safe to assume that most lived in Czech farming communities or in ethnic zones in medium-sized towns like Omaha and Racine.⁷⁸

New York Ethnic Group Settlement Patterns



Source: *Reports of the Immigration Commission* (Washington: GPO, 1911), vol. 26, 158.

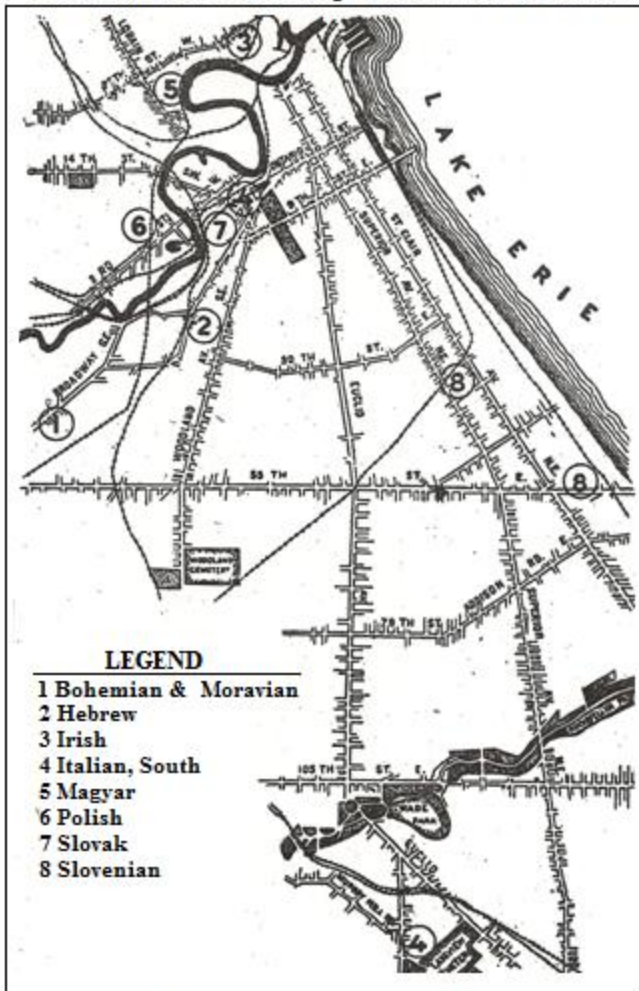
Chicago Ethnic Group Settlement Patterns



Source: *Reports of the Immigration Commission* (Washington: GPO, 1911), vol. 26, 248.

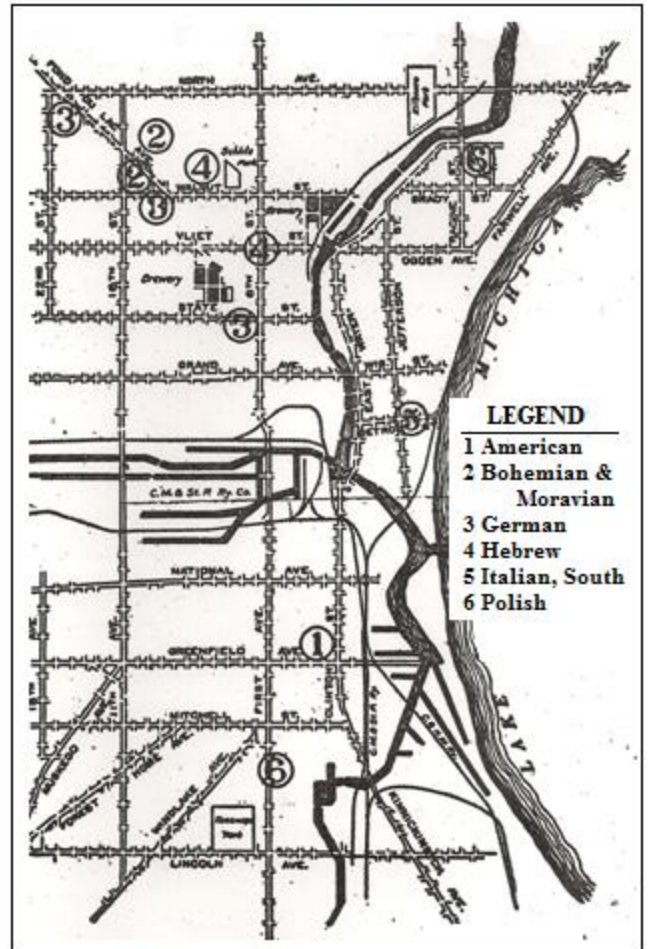
⁷⁸ Rosicky, *A History of Czechs in Nebraska*, 84-85. Also see *Census Reports, 1920*, vol. II, *Population*, 982-984.

Cleveland Ethnic Group Settlement Patterns



Source: Reports of the Immigration Commission (Washington: GPO, 1911), vol. 26, 510.

Milwaukee Ethnic Group Settlement Patterns



Source: Reports of the Immigration Commission (Washington: GPO, 1911), vol. 26, 680.

Table 2.6 shows Czech immigrants by year of arrival and sex. Looking at the totals we find that 57,111 males and 43,078 females came to the United States during this time period, a ratio of 57 percent male to 43 percent female. Although men preponderated over female newcomers by a considerable margin, the data suggests that, in addition to single men, family units heavily infused the Czech immigrant population.

Compared with the target groups, Czechs had a much higher proportion of females to males. The German foreign-born were the closest with 59.4 percent males and 40.6 percent females; Slovaks and Poles were practically the same with 70.5 percent males and 29.5 percent females for the Slovaks and the Poles with a male percentage of 69.5 and the females at 30.5 percent (Table 2.7). These statistics suggest that the Czech flow to the United States included more family units than either the Poles or Slovaks. The percentages equated much closer to the Germans than either of their Slavic European neighbors, whose numbers included a large quantity of single men. How many of these men were “birds of passage,” who had every intention of returning home once they had earned enough money to help their left-behind families cannot be ascertained. However, the simple fact that the Polish and Slovak immigrant community was 70 percent male seems to hint that there were some.⁷⁹

Table 2.6
Czech Immigrants,
by Year and Sex

<u>Year</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Total</u>
1899	1,262	1,264	2,526
1900	1,562	1,498	3,060
1901	1,943	1,823	3,766
1902	3,278	2,312	5,590
1903	5,820	3,771	9,591
1904	6,657	5,254	11,911
1905	6,662	5,095	11,757
1906	7,418	5,540	12,958
1907	8,142	5,412	13,554
1908	5,495	4,669	10,164
1909	3,998	2,852	6,850
1910	4,874	3,588	8,462
Total	57,111	43,078	100,189

Source: *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 20, 49-51.

⁷⁹ For an analysis of these sojourners see Archdeacon, *Becoming American*, 112.

Table 2.7
Immigrants by Sex and Percent
(1899-1910)

	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Total</u>
Czechs	57.0	43.0	100.0
Germans	59.4	40.6	100.0
Poles	69.5	30.5	100.0
Slovaks	70.5	29.5	100.0

Source: Percentages derived by calculating information from *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 20, 47, 49-51.

Another telling statistic, which further reinforces that many Czech families came to the United States together, is found by examining their ages at the time they disembarked (Table 2.8). Over 20 percent of Czech arrivals were under the age of fourteen. Again, the Germans were the closest with 17 percent under fourteen years of age, with the Poles and Slovaks trailing at 9 percent each. Surmising that children under the age of fourteen for the most part did not sail across the Atlantic Ocean unaccompanied (although some did) would strengthen the hypothesis that a large percentage of Czech immigrants during this time came in family units. Further, less than 10 percent of Polish and Slovak arrivals were children, while both of these groups consisted of overwhelming numbers of people aged fourteen to forty four. If we review Tables 2.6 and 2.7 and take into consideration that most Polish and Slovak immigrants were male, we cannot but conclude that many of them were young, single males when they came to the United States.

The Czech and German newcomers included about twice as many middle-aged and elderly immigrants than did the Poles and Slovaks. Why this occurred is uncertain. Why would a man or woman leave their homeland at such an advanced age? Many immigrants probably were accompanying younger relatives on the trans-Atlantic journey.

Others made the arduous trip to join family already in the United States. Both of the preceding scenarios are good and probable explanations. However, with only numbers to look at, it is impossible to give a definitive answer.

Table 2.8
Ages of Arriving Immigrants
by Percent (1899-1910)

	<u>Under 14</u>	<u>14-44</u>	<u>45 & Over</u>
Czechs	20.4	73.8	5.8
Germans	17.0	76.2	6.8
Poles	9.3	88.3	2.4
Slovaks	9.3	87.6	3.1

Source: Calculated from information in *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 20, 89-94.

Once in the United States, Czechs seemed determined for their children to succeed in their new home. The Czech people have always had a love of education and it manifested itself in the United States as over 92 percent of Czech school-aged children attended school. This was only slightly lower than the German population and well ahead of the 82 percent of Polish children and 79 percent of Slovak youth in school.⁸⁰

Czechs also had an advantage in literacy. Inspecting agents at Ellis Island and other American ports listed only 1.7 percent of arriving Czechs as illiterate, compared with 5.2 percent of Germans; 24.0 percent of Slovaks; and 35.4 percent of Poles.⁸¹ In 1909, after Dillingham Commission agents investigated Czech communities they found that 66 percent of the foreign-born could speak English.⁸² Then, when they looked at the

⁸⁰ *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol.10, 66-68. The exact percentages were Czechs, 92.3; Poles, 83.4; and Slovaks, 78.9.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 20, 84. Illiteracy was determined if an immigrant could neither read nor write in *any* language.

⁸² *Ibid.*, vol.10, 177.

second-generation, they discovered that 99.7 percent could speak English.⁸³ Most Czechs promoted or at the least tolerated their children learning the language of their new home.

What kind of employment did the Czech foreign-born population have? (Table 2.9). The single most popular occupation of Czech immigrants was farming. This should come as no surprise as the North Central section of the United States was home to many such immigrants. Czech communities also contained a significant number of skilled workers. It is impossible to state with any certainty, but this could have been a result of Bohemia being the industrial center of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The only other scenario is that these newcomers learned a skill after arriving in the United States. Although certainly possible, it is not as likely. Czech occupation statistics included less than 13 percent laborers, most of which would have been employed by factories. This seems low. However, the total number of farm workers probably included common laborers in addition to farm owners.

Table 2.9
Occupations of Czech Immigrants
by Percent

Professional Occupation	1.3
Skilled Occupation	40.8
Farm Workers	15.9
Laborers	12.6
Other Occupations ⁸⁴	29.4
Total:	100.0

Source: *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol.12, 377.

The American economy apparently liked Czech workers; relatively speaking, they paid them well. (Table 2.10) The yearly earnings of Czech adult men were \$538, well

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸⁴ Other occupations would include jobs such as sales work and clerical, but would not be factory employment.

ahead of the \$384 for Slovaks and the \$365 earned by the Poles. German immigrants topped the Czechs in yearly wages with \$613, but overall, Czechs were prosperous.⁸⁵

Czech women too, enjoyed success, outdoing not only the Polish and Slovak women, but also the Germans. (Table 2.11) Of course, an important caveat to remember is that some women stayed at home with their children rather than work. Thus, the data for the women is probably not as representative as that of the men.

Table 2.10
Yearly Earnings of Males
at Least 18 Years of Age

Czechs	\$538
Germans	\$613
Poles	\$365
Slovaks	\$384

Source: *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol.26, 136-137.

Table 2.11
Yearly Earnings of Females
at Least 18 Years of Age

Czechs	\$300
Germans	\$204
Poles	\$168
Slovaks	\$208

Source: *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol. 26, 138.

An area the Dillingham Commission examined extensively was the living conditions of immigrant communities. Congress wished to determine the congestion of ethnic enclaves, which they believed would answer questions regarding immigrant pauperism, crime, health problems, and the social decay of American cities.

Throughout the United States, Czech immigrant families averaged 4.4 persons per household. This was slightly higher than German families, who averaged 4.3. Polish households contained 5.5 people and Slovaks, 5.2.⁸⁶ Table 2.12 shows that, in general, Czech and German families were similar, while Polish and Slovak families were larger. Thirty-four percent of Polish households consisted of seven or more persons living

⁸⁵ Of all foreign-born males, only the Germans and Swedes (\$692) eclipsed the earnings of Czechs. See *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, vol.26, 136-137.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

together – by far the highest percentage of the four groups. A logical follow-up would be: What percentage of these households were single-family units? How many included extended family such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, or even paying boarders? The Commission’s agents also examined that aspect of immigrant living conditions and found that 83.5 percent of Czech families lived as a single unit in their dwelling. German immigrants registered an even higher percentage at 86.4. Approximately 63.0 percent of Polish families lived alone, while only 55.5 percent of Slovak households did not have either relatives or boarders living with them.⁸⁷ Thus, only 37.0 percent of these large Polish households consisted of people not in their family unit – the Poles had large families.

Table 2.12
Foreign-Born Households
By Percent

	<u>Not more than</u> <u>3 persons</u>	<u>4-6 persons</u>	<u>7 or more</u> <u>persons</u>	<u>Total</u>
Czechs	38.4	47.8	13.8	100.0
Germans	40.7	44.7	14.6	100.0
Poles	22.9	42.9	34.2	100.0
Slovaks	23.7	52.8	23.5	100.0

Source: Calculated from information in *Reports of Immigration Commission*, vol. 26, 37.

Czech immigrant families living in cities averaged 3.65 rooms in their place of residence. This is more space than either the Poles or Slovaks, who averaged 3.58 and 3.21 respectively. German dwellings were the largest at 4.30 rooms.⁸⁸

The commission examined two other indicators of living conditions in immigrant housing: number of persons per bedroom and number of adults per room. In both areas,

⁸⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 31.

Czechs fared better than Poles and Slovaks and slightly below the German immigrant community.⁸⁹ By examining the data regarding rooms per family, it is only possible to ascertain the average number of rooms immigrant families occupied. It is not known how large the rooms were. Were the Slovak and Polish rooms more spacious than those of the Germans or Czechs? In all probability, they were not. Most likely, both German and Czech immigrant families lived more comfortably than their Slovak and Polish counterparts.

German households paid the highest rent for their living quarters with a national average of \$2.38 per person per month. Czech families gave \$2.09 per person per month for their dwellings while Slovaks paid \$1.37 and Poles, \$1.34.⁹⁰ One reason for this rent disparity is the fact that there were fewer people living in Czech and German households than in Polish and Slovak homes. However, many Czechs and Germans lived in the North Central region of the United States, where according to the immigration commission, newcomers paid comparatively lower rents.⁹¹ Furthermore, the Dillingham Commission found that Poles and Slovaks generally paid “relatively low rents per room in all the cities where they [were] studied.”⁹² Thus, it appears that Czechs and Germans may have lived in relatively better housing than their Polish and Slovak counterparts.

A final note on living conditions and one that definitely shows a desire to remain in the United States rather than return to their country of birth is home ownership. It indicates thrift and responsibility and signifies payment of property tax, a coveted sign of

⁸⁹ Ibid., 54, 61. The actual averages for persons per bedroom were: Czechs, 2.31 per sleeping room; Germans, 2.03; Poles, 2.72; Slovaks, 2.63. The average number of adults per room was: Czechs, 1.05; Germans, 0.89; Poles, 1.32; and Slovaks, 1.28.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁹¹ Ibid., 6.

⁹² Ibid.

citizenship in the early twentieth century. Here German immigrants outdistanced the other three groups as almost 26 percent of families owned their home. The Czechs again come in second at almost 18 percent, but close behind them were the Poles at 17 percent. Only 9.9 percent of Slovak families owned their home in America.⁹³ Only 1.4 percent of Czechs living in New York owned their home. This implies that either they had only recently arrived in the United States or they were planning to settle elsewhere. The answer to low Czech home ownership in New York is probably a combination of both.

By all accounts, it appears that Czechs adjusted fairly well to their new way of life in the United States. Many arrived in family units with every intention of staying. In large numbers, they migrated to the North Central area of the United States where they settled in close proximity to German ethnic neighborhoods. Czech newcomers included significant numbers of women and children, more than either the Poles or Slovaks, and their literacy rate was among the highest of any immigrant arrivals. Compared to other Slavic groups, they earned a better than average wage and their overall living conditions exceeded both Poles and Slovaks and compared favorably with the German immigrant community. Czechs, by practically every indicator of success, were doing fine.

Nevertheless, the forces that wanted to keep Italians, Jews, Greeks, Albanians, Turks, Romanians, and the various Slavic groups, including Czechs, out of the United States continued to gain influence and political power during the first two decades of the twentieth century. It is to this battle we now turn our attention.

The crusade to restrict the flow of new immigrants into the United States gained momentum during “The Progressive Age,” a time of great change in both attitudes and

⁹³ Ibid., 103.

laws. Not a unified movement centered on specific goals, progressives coalesced into special interest groups committed to changing a specific sector of society. Some progressives battled for better working and living conditions for the poor, others for political change such as the direct election of senators. One group of New England patricians, who thought of themselves as progressive, led the restriction movement. In 1894, these Ivy-League educated men formed the Immigration Restriction League. During the next thirty years, through pamphlets, newspaper articles, and public discourse the group convinced both poor and wealthy, including many politicians, that the unrestricted flow of humanity must be stopped. Conversely, American presidents since the 1890s had consistently vetoed literacy bills that would have curbed the influx of immigrants. Yet, it was Theodore Roosevelt, a progressive president, who authorized the Dillingham Commission to study the immigrant problem and recommend solutions.

One of the basic tenets of early twentieth-century progressive thinking was the belief that the country's troubles were solvable by identifying each problem, gathering all available facts, and then deciding on remedial action.⁹⁴ Progressives exhibited complete faith in solving problems through investigation by experts. They also placed unwavering trust in government intervention which they saw as the only way to cure society's ills.⁹⁵ However, most progressives simply could not believe that the newcomers might be hurting American society.⁹⁶ Thus, progressivism was torn. The principles of the progressive movement rejected the idea that immigrants harmed the country. Yet within

⁹⁴ Otis L. Graham, *Unguarded Gates: A History of America's Crisis* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 57. Also see Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics*, 21.

⁹⁵ Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics*, 3.

⁹⁶ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 119.

their ranks were nativists.⁹⁷ Consequently, many progressives took a wait-and-see attitude when President Roosevelt called for a commission to study the issue.

The nine-member United States Immigration Commission, better known as the Dillingham Commission, contained all the trappings of a progressive inquiry. The members included former professors, economists, statisticians, as well as senators and congressmen.⁹⁸ However, during their careers, most of the politicians on the commission previously had espoused restriction as the answer to urban poverty and social tribulations. Congressman John Burnett of Alabama (1854-1919) had long been an advocate of stemming the flow of newcomers.⁹⁹ Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (1850-1924) was also an avowed restrictionist who, although not a member, stayed in close contact with members of the Immigration Restriction League. The chair of the commission, Senator William P. Dillingham (1843-1923), the quintessential patrician, entered the study with an ambiguous record on immigration.¹⁰⁰ At most, he was a moderate restrictionist.¹⁰¹ Benjamin Howell of New Jersey (1844-1933) provided the restrictionist cause with still another voice. Although not as strident as Lodge or Burnett, the anti-immigrant camp considered Congressman Howell a loyal friend. The anti-restriction viewpoint found a champion in William S. Bennett (1870-1962), Republican congressman from New York. Bennett represented New York City and, because of his many personal contacts with immigrants who formed a large part of his constituency, believed them good people and

⁹⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁹⁸ For a complete list and analysis of commission members, see Zeidel, 37-50.

⁹⁹ Burnett promoted deporting all “dangerous” aliens. See *New York Times*, 14 May 1919.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 41

¹⁰¹ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 310.

desirable as citizens.¹⁰²

The commission began work on April 22, 1907. They sent hundreds of agents into the field, some traveling to various ports in Europe to search for answers. The commission gathered reams of statistics on every immigrant group residing in the United States. As information reached their desks, commissioners and their staff studied the data for answers in typical progressive fashion almost completely relying on the myriad immigrant responses and statistical analyses. In 1911, the commission published their findings in 42 volumes of detailed statistics, much of it dealing with living conditions and the immigrant experience in the workplace. The Dillingham Commission greatly influenced immigration policy, but not immediately. World War I interrupted everything.

During the Great War, despite no change in federal policy towards Europeans, immigration slowed and the public outcry lessened.¹⁰³ People throughout the country focused on the European slaughter and paid only cursory attention to the swarthy faces and unintelligible speech of factory workers and seamstresses. Nevertheless, the movement to restrict immigration did not entirely go away. In fact, the pseudoscientific theory of eugenics gained momentum among educated patrician elites when in 1916, Madison Grant published his book on race suicide, *The Passing of the Great Race*. Grant, a friend of Theodore Roosevelt and a member of the Immigration Restriction League, claimed that stopping the influx of immigrants was the only way to maintain the “Nordic” race that had made the United States so great. This scientific racism slowly,

¹⁰² The final senator changed periodically due to deaths. Thus, I have discussed only two. The presidential appointees were professor Jeremiah Jenks (1856-1929), economist Charles P. Neill (1865-1942), and William Wheeler, a businessman. Of the three, only Neill, before joining the commission, openly professed a desire to see immigration restricted.

¹⁰³ Congress did pass the Immigration Act of 1917, which excluded Asian Indians from coming to the United States.

inexorably, spread downward from New England's elites to the native-born, white workingman, especially in the South and West and incited the average person against the newcomers.¹⁰⁴

In 1917, Congress instituted a literacy test for all arriving immigrants. Nevertheless, nativists voiced dissatisfaction. They claimed the literacy test was not enough to discourage immigration despite a downward trend in the number of arrivals. Following the end of the war, as soldiers returned from Europe, the old fears returned, this time more energetic and virulent than ever. The highly-motivated nativists, through pen and voice, threatened that the next wave of immigrants might very well dilute the native stock, the real Americans, to the point of mongrelization unless Congress enacted further legislation. Emotions spiraled when A. Mitchell Palmer, Attorney General of the United States, jolted everyone when he authorized police raids to arrest radicals, communists, and fellow travelers with many of his targets being foreign-born or second-generation members of ethnic groups. In the early 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan resurfaced with almost as much hate towards the new immigrants as against the black population. The Klan warned of a fast-approaching time when Jews and blacks and the strange-speaking immigrants would numerically dominate the "rightful owners" of the United States and extolled the theories of Grant and other eugenicists as the solution to the nation's troubles.¹⁰⁵

Soon after the passage of the Volstead Act making the liquor industry illegal crime increased in practically every city. Highly-organized gangs materialized seemingly overnight and cities such as Chicago and New York transformed into urban

¹⁰⁴ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 277.

¹⁰⁵ Wepman, *Immigration*, 225.

shooting galleries as mobsters jostled for control of the now-illegal liquor trade. Newspapers and politicians attacked the foreign born, especially the Italians, as nothing more than criminals determined to foil the great experiment of Prohibition. Then finally, the coup de grace for the immigrant population: in 1920, the economy faltered and Americans despaired. They demanded to know what had gone wrong! World War I was over. They were the victors! The nativists smirked and pointed an accusing finger at the “strangers in the land.”¹⁰⁶

Referring to the work of the Dillingham Commission, in 1921, the Congress of the United States passed the first of two immigrant bills. Called the Emergency Quota Act, the first act set immigration quotas at 3 percent for each country as represented in the 1910 census with a total yearly limit of 357,803.¹⁰⁷ Shouting it was still not enough, nativists pressed for tougher laws.

Three years later nativists got their wish. Congress, with the Johnson-Reed Act, amended the 1921 law and limited immigration to 2 percent of the number of people from each country fixing a maximum of 357,000 yearly arrivals. This quota ceiling continued until 1927 when Congress lowered it to 150,000 per year. The new lower level became law in 1929 and effectively shut out most aspiring immigrants, Czechs included. No longer would the United States judge men and women by their individual qualifications, but instead, by where they were born.

The new restrictive laws affected Czechs as they did all immigrants. Throughout the 1930s and succeeding decades the numbers of Czechs coming to the United States

¹⁰⁶ Title of John Higham’s seminal work on nativism, *Strangers in the Land*.

¹⁰⁷ The Emergency Quota Act was also known as the Emergency Immigration Act of 1921 and the Johnson Quota Act of 1921.

plummeted.¹⁰⁸ The immigrant population aged and slowly died off. Despite the Dillingham Commission data showing that Czechs succeeded in their new home, the United States turned them away. Even though Czechs scored almost on par with German newcomers, Congress counted these most western of Slavs with the southern and eastern European nationalities and forbade them from entering in large numbers. However, immigrants such as the Poles and Slovaks, Italians and Russian Jews also adapted to their new environment, albeit apparently slower than Czechs. As shown earlier, home ownership by Poles compared favorably with Czech levels. Nevertheless, in almost every category studied Czechs performed better than their Slavic cousins. Because of their historical interaction with their German neighbors, Czechs appeared better equipped to adapt to America.

Czech immigrants, along with Italians, Jews, Greeks, Poles, and others from the southern and eastern areas of Europe, suffered as scapegoats of a nervous, frightened country. They were victims of archaic racial ideas, but they were also victims of something even more significant, even more powerful. The United States, in the early decades of the twentieth century, was transforming from a rural, traditional society into a modern, urban, industrial giant.

Nevertheless, during the years of unrestricted immigration Czechs established a presence throughout the United States in urban and rural areas. Many chose farming as their occupation and when good land in the Midwest became harder to acquire, some looked elsewhere. Learning that the American government planned “land runs” on Indian reservations in the Territory of Oklahoma Czechs joined thousands of others in a quest to obtain land of their own.

¹⁰⁸ For a statistical summary, see Smith, “Decline of Czechoslovak America,” 18, 57.

CHAPTER 3

SETTLEMENT OF LINCOLN COUNTY AND THE FORMATION OF PRAGUE OKLAHOMA: 1891 - 1902

Frantisek Vlasak, his wife, and young children after years of struggle and disappointment, years of grinding poverty and want, finally decided to leave the land of their birth – the land of their parents, grandparents, and forebears. The family sold most of what they owned and bought one-way tickets to the United States and the promise of a better life. In 1866, the Vlasaks left the tiny village of Bykosi, Bohemia, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and arrived in New York City several weeks later. Here, they set up a new home in the bustling financial capital of the United States. However, their time in the huge city proved short. They decided to move inland to Ohio and later to Nebraska, joining the many Czechs already living in that state. After several years in Nebraska the family relocated to South Dakota. With cheap land in short supply, Frantisek's two now grown sons, Frantisek Jr. (called Frank) and Vincent, and Frantisek's daughter, Fannie Koutnik, along with her husband, Frank, migrated to Waterloo, Iowa, early in 1891 in search of their own land. Shortly after arriving in Iowa they learned of a land run to be held on the Sac and Fox Indian Reservation in distant Oklahoma Territory.

Jumping at the opportunity for land ownership, the three young families quickly decided they wanted to participate in the run. The Vlasak brothers and their sister's family immediately packed their few belongings and left for the booming town of Oklahoma City. Once in Oklahoma City they discovered that the land run was six months away. Still determined to joust for the valuable land, the three siblings and their families waited for their opportunity. Although conversant in English, their native tongue drew them into contact with other ethnic Bohemians also waiting for the opportunity for cheap land. This group of Czechs resolved to try and claim land close to one another. When the gun sounded for the start of the land run, the Czechs galloped and drove their wagons as fast as possible in hopes of acquiring prime farmland. Unfortunately for Frank Koutnik, brother-in-law to Frank and Vincent Vlasak, his horse died only four miles into the run. A frustrated Koutnik claimed the area under his dead horse which lay slightly south and several miles west of his hoped for destination. Although saddened by the mishap of their brother-in-law, the Vlasak brothers strove forward and found desirable plots in the southeast corner of what later became Lincoln County, Oklahoma. Other Czechs joined the Vlasaks in the area and almost overnight a small community of Bohemian farmers sprang into being.¹

As the above narrative displays, no single person or group arranged in advance the Czech settlement in the southeastern corner of what is now Lincoln County. There was not a planned migration from Bohemia to Oklahoma or from any other state containing a large population of ethnic Czechs. Instead, prior to the 1891 land run, several Czech families and individuals happened upon each other while waiting in

¹ Lincoln County Historical Society, *Lincoln County: Oklahoma History* (Saline, MI: McNaughton & Gunn, 1988), 1362; See also *Prague Record*, 12 September 1929. The 1929 newspaper account was written as part of an article about Frank Vlasak's accidental death.

Oklahoma City for the run. Although most had previously never met, their common tongue drew them together and they agreed to try and settle in the same area of the Sac and Fox Reservation.² These families, with names such as Barta, Hrды, Sestak, Bontty, and Provaznik, successfully staked out homesteads in the southeast corner of Lincoln County in the townships of North Creek and South Creek.³ Most of these particular Czech immigrants came to Oklahoma after first migrating to Midwestern farming communities. Russell Lynch, in his work on Czech farmers in Oklahoma, interviewed the original forty-eight settlers of the two townships or their children. He found that twenty-four claimed Nebraska as their preceding residence while fourteen said they previously lived in Kansas. Three migrating families declared Iowa as their prior home and two claimed Wisconsin. The following states contributed one immigrant family: Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, and Colorado. Only one settler asserted he came directly from Bohemia to Oklahoma.⁴ Nevertheless, many participating in the 1891 land run were but a few years removed from the farming villages of Central Europe.⁵ Furthermore, as the opening anecdote shows, some of the settlers had previously lived in several different states before making their way to Oklahoma.

² Russell Willford Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma: A Comparative Study of the Stability of a Czech Farm Group in Lincoln County Oklahoma, and Factors Relating to its Stability," *Bulletin of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College) 39, no. 13 (June 1942): 14. See also *Lincoln County: Oklahoma History*, 1362.

³ The Davenport, Oklahoma newspaper, *The Monthly New Era*, in 2000 published maps of the first persons to file for homesteads in 1891 in South Creek Township, Lincoln County. There were twenty-one original filings by Czechs and included the following families: Bontty, Bruza, Vlasak, Barta, Eret, Beranek, Provaznik, Sestak, Suva, Muisack, Hruska, Hrды, and Bartosh. For a complete listing of homestead filings see *The Monthly New Era*, (Davenport, OK: April 26 and June 28, 2000), 3, 3. See William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948), 8. Also see Melva Losch Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A., Prague, (Kolache-Ville) Oklahoma* (Norman: Hooper Printing, Inc., 1978), 25.

⁴ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 15, 91.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

While this band of Czechs strove to claim land in Lincoln County, others also raced to the area. A smaller group of German immigrants settled in North Creek Township, directly north of the Czechs whose homesteads lay primarily in South Creek Township. However, despite the efforts of both Czechs and Germans, white native-born Americans comprised the bulk of those involved in the land run. Even with the Czechs' attempt to settle together many times someone quicker to the spot interrupted their claims.⁶ For example, the 1891 land run claims of Czechs Frank Barta, Frantisek Mastena, Frantisek Souva, and Vincent Martinek surrounded the holding of J.W. Harshaw, a non-Czech.⁷ Furthermore, native-born settlers dominated the northeast corner of South Creek Township while most Czech homesteads lay primarily in the southern and western sections of the area.⁸

Most of the original Czech settlers came in small family units with each adult male securing a homestead.⁹ They paid \$1.25 per acre for the former lands of the Sac and Fox tribe and immediately began building and preparing the land for cultivation.¹⁰ Shortly after the land run, the United States government established mail service on the southeast corner of the homestead of Frank Barta and the area soon became known as Barta Post Office.¹¹ However, the Lincoln County Czech farming community was not the only area in Oklahoma Territory containing ethnic Bohemians. Oklahoma City, directly west of Barta Post Office, held over 1,100 ethnic Czechs and a considerable

⁶ The Davenport, Oklahoma newspaper in 2000 reproduced maps from the Federal Tract Books showing the names of the first persons to file for a homestead in North and South Creek Townships. See *The Monthly New Era*, Davenport, OK, April 26 and June 28, 2000, 3.

⁷ *The Monthly New Era*, Davenport, OK, June 28, 2000, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91. See also Tower, "A General History," 5.

¹¹ Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A.*, 28.

Bohemian presence existed in other Oklahoma towns.¹² Yukon, a small town west of Oklahoma City, contained a large number of Czechs and designated itself as the Czech “capital” of Oklahoma.¹³

Within two years after the land run of 1891, there were about fifty Czech homesteads in the Barta Post Office area, bunched closely together.¹⁴ These ethnic farmers prospered and although preferring to form an isolated Czech colony, experienced good relations with the non-Czech population including the ethnic German settlement located to the north of the Czech. There was little or no hostility between the diverse groups in the new land, probably because the Czech farmers associated almost exclusively with their European kinsmen as did the Germans and white native-born population.¹⁵

Soon after the land run, several small settlements sprang up. Two of the larger were Lambdin, located two miles east of the future town of Prague, and Arlington which boasted at its peak two general stores, a post office, a blacksmith shop, a Methodist church, and three doctors.¹⁶ By the turn of the twentieth century other small settlements dotted the rolling hills of Lincoln County including Keokuk Falls, a popular swimming and fishing hole for Czechs, Bellemont, the birthplace of the great Sac and Fox athlete, Jim Thorpe, and tiny Dent, the smallest and closest community to the future town of

¹² William Earl Martin, “The Cultural Assimilation of the Czechoslovak in Oklahoma City: A Study of Culture Contrasts” (M.A. Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1935), 118. Oklahoma towns containing ethnic Czechs and foreign-born included Yukon, Hennessey, Kingfisher, Perry, and Garber. See Paul M. Nemecek, *Historical and Cultural Essays on Czechs in America*, (n.p.: 2005), 98. See also *Census of Population: 1920*, 1034.

¹³ Vera Laska, ed., *The Czechs in America: 1633-1977: A Chronology & Fact Book* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1978), 35.

¹⁴ Lynch, “Czech Farmers of Oklahoma,” 14.

¹⁵ Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A.*, 26. Bohemians harbored a historical animosity towards German-speaking Austria, which dominated them politically. Nevertheless, Czechs frequently lived near German immigrants in America. See Capek, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 19.

¹⁶ Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A.*, 16, 23. The three doctors (Frank Isles, F.N. Norwood, and S.A. Buercklin) moved to Prague soon after it organized.

Prague, Oklahoma.¹⁷ The area quickly filled up. Although the original Czech settlers derived from Midwestern states, after 1900 and especially following the formation of Prague, Czechs from Texas trekked north looking for opportunities in the thriving farm town. These newer residents differed from the first settlers in that some were Moravian rather than Bohemian with more Protestants included in their number.¹⁸

As previously mentioned, the locale of the Czech settlement lay in the southeast corner of Lincoln County.¹⁹ Rolling, timbered hills dominated the landscape with numerous streams lacing the area. Most of the region's brooks were nothing more than narrow, shallow trickles, but a few flowed wide and deep. These, together with the hills, created a terrain that, for the most part, was uneven and rough which caused farming to be difficult at first. Rainfall, which could be heavy in the spring, many times all but disappeared in the hot months of summer. However, only a few miles west of the Czech homesteads a vast expanse of flat prairie grassland emerged, part of the Great Plains region.²⁰

Oklahoma Territory in 1891 was overwhelmingly a rural, agricultural region. After the 1889 land run, economic activity centered on the Guthrie/Oklahoma City area with much of the rest of the territory sparsely settled and still belonging to various tribes. It was the promise of farmland that drew Czech settlers to the new territory. Unlike the poor Bohemian sharecroppers in Texas described by Josef Barton, most Oklahoma Czechs appear to have been more prosperous and, although not "brand-new" to the

¹⁷ Ibid., 17, 19-20, 30-31. Also see Tower, "A General History," 6. Dent lay one mile south and one mile east of Prague.

¹⁸ Karel Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 21.

¹⁹ The county officially received its name after the November 8, 1892 election. The three proposed county names voted on were: Lincoln, Sac and Fox, and Springer.

²⁰ Oklahoma Geological Survey, *Bulletin No. 19: Petroleum and Natural Gas in Oklahoma, Part II: A Discussion of the Oil and Gas Fields, and Undeveloped Areas of the State by Counties* (Norman: Oklahoma Geological Survey, 1917), 297.

United States, were not that far removed from a middling peasant farming background in Bohemia and Moravia.²¹ In central Europe, people referred to these energetic husbandmen as the cottager class and the Czech arrivals to Oklahoma Territory definitely fit this description.²²

In 1920, over two-thirds of Oklahoma's Czech immigrants still lived in a rural setting and the proportion remained at this level in the 1930 census.²³ Cheap land served as a primary cause for most Czechs to leave Nebraska and other Midwestern states. They simply wished to own land and live in a rural setting. For example, although still an agricultural rural state, Nebraska, by 1930 counted 13,839 Czech immigrants among their population. However, over five thousand of them lived in an urban environment.²⁴ Lincoln County eventually attracted so many Czech immigrants that it became one of the most attractive destinations in Oklahoma. Only Oklahoma County, which included Oklahoma City, the largest town in Oklahoma, and Garfield County, contained more Czechs (during the decade of the 1920s).²⁵ At the turn of the twentieth century, Oklahoma Territory contained more Czech immigrants claiming another state as their previous residence than any other United States territory or state.²⁶

Upon arrival, Czech farmers began clearing the land and transforming it into productive agricultural fields. Not surprisingly, they modeled their farms on the central European pattern most had only recently left behind.²⁷ The Czech farming community

²¹ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 89.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Census of Population: 1920*, 371; *Census of Population: 1930*, 306.

²⁴ *Census of Population: 1930*, 371.

²⁵ *Census of Population: 1920*, 827; *Census of Population: 1930*, 573-574. Lincoln County contained more Czech immigrants than Garfield County until the 1930 census.

²⁶ Bruce Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871-1914," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 147-169.

²⁷ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 89, 105.

prospered and quickly, along with the area's German immigrants, became the leading farmers in the area. As part of his study, Russell Lynch toured Czech farms and found that the families lived in large houses, kept them in good condition, and took excellent care of their out buildings and land.²⁸ The hardiness and productivity of the Czechs could have been predicted. When the Immigration Commission examined Czech farmers, they concluded that wherever they settled, "Czechs [were] regarded by their neighbors in the same light as the German and Scandinavian farmers."²⁹ One advantage Czech farmers appeared to enjoy over native-born farmers was their communal attitude. Czechs formed a tight community and helped each other. This group-mindedness many times took the form of simple encouragement liberally sprinkled on a struggling neighbor but also on occasion resulted in the more prosperous individuals helping the straining ones.³⁰ Unlike most native farmers, who tended to be extremely individualistic, the group-mindedness of the Czechs boosted their chances of prosperity in the early days of settlement.³¹ This cultural difference showed up later in their ties with the village of Prague when many Czechs sought opportunities in the new town, some even moving there on a permanent basis.

Nevertheless, it should not be misconstrued that the Czech farming community was merely a transplant from Bohemia. It was not. Peasant villages in Bohemia and Moravia usually consisted of one long street with houses on each side. The men of the village arose early, ate breakfast with their families, then walked to work in the outlying

²⁸ Ibid., 63-65.

²⁹ Ibid., 91.

³⁰ Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 54-58.

³¹ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 93.

fields. The isolated farmhouses of the United States did not exist in the Czech lands.³² Even after the formation of Prague, the majority of Czech farmers spent most of their time on their homesteads traveling to town only to buy, sell, attend church, or participate in social activities. None lived in town and commuted to their fields on a daily basis as was common in the Czech lands of Europe.

Although living on fairly remote farms, the early Czech farmers of southeast Lincoln County established social and religious ties with each other. In 1892, five immigrants living in the Dent area – about one mile south of the future Prague – formed a chapter of the Bohemian Slavonian Benevolent Society headquartered in St. Louis. Before the end of 1892, twelve others joined the organization boosting the membership to seventeen.³³ Five years later they left the St. Louis organization and established a charter lodge of the Western Czech Brotherhood Association headquartered in Omaha.³⁴ These benevolent societies provided Protestant and secular (usually freethinking) immigrant farmers with not only fellowship and relief from difficult, back-breaking work but also provided a sense of community. Once established the societies built a permanent building usually called Bohemian Hall or Czech Hall. The halls afforded Czech newcomers a place where farmers could meet and discuss the tough job of producing a crop from the virgin soil, a place where both men and their wives could socialize with

³² Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village*, 10.

³³ Western Czech Brotherhood Association (Zapadni Ceske Bratraska Jednota), Bohemian Hall, Membership Rolls; *Central Book (Hlavni Kniha)*, Lodge 46, Prague, Oklahoma.

³⁴ Bohemian Hall, Membership Rolls; See also Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A.*, 134-135. According to Brown, the five original members included Frank R. Vlasak, V. Ladra, Jiri Walla, and John Sefcik. Brown included Jan Vobornik as an original member. However, the membership rolls list him as joining the society in 1900. There are thirteen others listed as becoming members in 1897. However, the rolls do not list the month in which they joined thus it is impossible to discern who was the final charter member. The other 1897 members were: Josef Bruza, Vaclav Bruza, Anton Cerny, Josef Cerny, Maximilian Hruska, Jan Kaiser, Josef Leder, Frantisek Sekavec, Antonin Smika, Frank Stasta, Frantisek Terfler, Vaclav Ulrich, and Hynes Vojtech.

others who spoke their language and shared a common past and culture; a place where everyone could just relax and enjoy a few hours of respite. Although the new Lincoln County Czech benevolent organization included no female members the first year of operation, during the next two years twelve women joined the society. Thus, almost from the very beginning, and unlike many native-American organizations, the Czech's fraternal association welcomed both men and women.³⁵

However, not all Czechs in the area joined the society. The 1900 census manuscripts of South Creek Township where the association held regular meetings and comparing it with the Bohemian Hall's membership rolls shows that the society included only nineteen of the eighty-three Czech adult males listed in the census manuscripts.³⁶ In most cases both husband and wife were members of the fraternal lodge. However one Czech, Frank Sestak provides an interesting case. His name does not appear on the membership rolls from 1897 to 1904 but his wife, Terezie, is listed as joining in 1899. Perhaps the exclusion of Frank from the rolls resulted from a simple clerical mistake. In addition, his name does not appear in the Bohemian Hall's membership books through 1913.³⁷ Thus, without more evidence Sestak cannot be considered a member of the benevolent association during this period. Apparently, for whatever reason, the wife joined the organization while the husband did not.

Not all Czech immigrants joined Bohemian Hall. Catholics rejected the secular freethought tenets of the organization and stayed away. Instead, they formed a parish which besides fulfilling the Czech community's spiritual needs, also offered

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Department of Commerce, *Census of the Population, 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma; Bohemian Hall, Membership Rolls; *Central Book: 1897-1904*. By the 1920s the membership of the Bohemian Hall exceeded two hundred.

³⁷ Bohemian Hall, Membership Rolls, *Central Book: 1911-1913*.

opportunities for social interaction. Eleven of the forty-eight original Bohemian settlers became members of the new church, including the Barta and Simek families, who originally owned the land that became the town of Prague.³⁸ Later, the parish church moved to the new town of Prague. Harkening back to their collective history, Prague's Czechs christened the church St. Wenceslas after the famous medieval Czech king. Regardless of whether the Czech immigrant was Catholic, Protestant, or a freethinker, most in the farming community prospered.

South Creek Township included many families of non-Czech origin. The 1900 census counted 341 total families in the area of which, 42 claimed Czech ethnicity.³⁹ Of these 42 Czech families, 37 heads of household listed their birthplace as Bohemia. In other words, the primary wage earner in most Czech families was an immigrant. Furthermore, in 1900, Czech families constituted a little over 12 percent of the total population of South Creek Township. Thus, from the very beginning the non-Czech population in the township dwarfed the Czech immigrant community.

A closer look at the Czech community in the 1900 census two years before the creation of Prague reveals that of the forty-two families living in the township, twenty-eight definitely lived in another state before migrating to Oklahoma Territory. This can be ascertained by means of the census manuscripts for 1900 that lists the birthplace of each child. Although it is impossible to tell exactly when the family arrived or left by

³⁸ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 96; Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 118-119; The Barta and Simek families are buried in the Catholic cemetery. Source: author's personal tour of cemetery grounds.

³⁹ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township. Of the 341 total families, 269 were native-born white, forty-two were Czech, thirteen were African-American, with the remaining seventeen claiming foreign-birth from someplace other than Bohemia or Moravia. One of the Austrian-born immigrants, Joseph Custas, may in fact have been Czech. However, Joseph Custas is listed nowhere in any Czech organization and he fails to appear in the 1910 census. Thus, it is impossible to ascertain whether he was Czech or German.

looking at the state of their child's birth, we can determine that they were living in a specific state at the time of the birth or at the very least the mother lived there during this period. By using this method we can ascertain with some degree of confidence their previous state of residence and, of course, the fact that they did not come directly to Oklahoma Territory from Europe.

Census records prove correct Russell Lynch's assertion that most pioneer Czechs came to Oklahoma Territory from the Midwest. By an overwhelming number most Czech families appear to have come to Lincoln County from Nebraska with Kansas coming in second as the previous place of residence. Other states listed in the 1900 census where Czechs lived before moving to Oklahoma Territory included Texas, Iowa, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.⁴⁰ With the creation of the farm town of Prague, the numbers of Czech residents in the area rose on the 1910 census. Again, as in 1900, most previously lived in Nebraska with the main difference in the ethnic community being an increase in the number of second-generation Czechs.⁴¹ However, an examination of the 1920 census manuscripts reveals that the situation changed. From 1910 to 1920, Prague witnessed an influx of Czechs from other states, especially newcomers from Texas claiming Moravia as either their birthplace or the birthplace of their parents. Still, Prague's Bohemian population more than doubled the numbers of Moravians. Nevertheless, there was a substantial number of Moravian Czechs arriving during the second decade of the twentieth century.⁴² This later migration to Lincoln County is interesting and appears to undermine the claim of Karel Bicha who wrote that

⁴⁰ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁴¹ Department of Commerce, *Census of the Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

⁴² Department of Commerce, *Census of the Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

“Czech settlement in Oklahoma occurred almost entirely in the territorial period” and “by the time of statehood in 1907 the movement was complete, and future increases in the number of Oklahomans of Czech extraction resulted from the excess of births over deaths rather than a continued migration of people.”⁴³ There was, at least in the Prague area, continued migration – albeit from other states, primarily Texas from 1910 to 1920.

Despite the town’s Czech beginning and Czech name, non-Czechs showed no hesitation in buying lots. Quickly, they outnumbered the immigrant population in the new town. Nevertheless, Czechs flocked in large numbers to the bustling village where construction of wood and brick buildings seemed endless. A comparison of South Creek Township in 1900 and 1910 shows the heavy influx of Czechs to the area. The 1910 census recorded 448 families in Prague. One hundred forty-eight (31 percent) of them were Czech including 108 heads of household born in either Bohemia or Moravia.⁴⁴ As noted earlier in the chapter, the Czech component of South Creek Township in 1900 was 12 percent. The 1910 numbers show that the Czech portion of the total population jumped from 12 percent to 31 percent, a hefty increase. The lure of this small farming town named after the beloved Bohemian capital city obviously proved great for many ambitious Czechs.

Besides Czechs and native-born whites, other immigrants migrated to the new settlement to take advantage of the perceived opportunities in the railroad town. In 1910, nine heads of household reported their birthplace in Germany with another eight American-born heads listing either one or both of their parents’ country of birth as

⁴³ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

Germany.⁴⁵ Another four families claimed a Canadian background (one declared themselves French-Canadian, the other three English-Canadian), and two immigrant merchants were Russian Jews. The final five foreign-born heads of household in the town listed their birthplace as Ireland, Scotland, Switzerland, Belgium, and Poland.⁴⁶

Besides an increase in the white population, the 1910 census also showed an increase in the African-American presence in the community. In 1900, thirteen black families lived in the area. This more than doubled to twenty-eight on the 1910 enumeration. An interesting variation from 1900 to 1910 deals with the arrival of African-Americans and the states from where they came. In 1900, six of the thirteen African-American heads of household living in South Creek Township listed their birthplace as Tennessee. Three heads declared Alabama as their state of origin, two listed Arkansas with one each from Mississippi and Georgia.⁴⁷ However, in 1910 almost half of the twenty-eight heads (thirteen) listed their birthplace as Texas. Tennessee remained second with five of the same families recorded in 1900 remaining in the Prague area. An additional black family from Arkansas found their way to southeast Lincoln County while the two African-American families from Mississippi and Georgia were again listed on the 1910 census. A further addition to Prague's African-American community was two families from Kentucky and one from Louisiana.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ The bulk of the German community lived in North Creek Township. According to the 1920 census there were twenty-two families headed by a German immigrant or second-generation ethnic. See Department of Commerce, *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for North Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

⁴⁸ *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

The white, non-immigrant population of South Creek Township in 1900 consisted of 269 families. One in four of the heads of these families declared the neighboring state of Missouri as their birthplace. Arkansas, Tennessee, and Illinois also contributed significant families to the newly-opened farmland.⁴⁹ However, an inspection of the 1900 manuscript census shows extensive and repeated movement of families throughout the United States. The William Harris family is a good example. William, the father, was born in Texas. However, he listed his father's birthplace as Illinois with his mother's being North Carolina. Georgie Harris, William's wife, claimed Mississippi as her place of birth with her parents born in Alabama. It is impossible with only census records to discern where the couple met or married. However, by following the births of their children we can trace, albeit roughly, their migration to Lincoln County, Oklahoma. For example, we know that from 1885 to 1887 the Harrises lived in Texas because their two eldest children were born there. We can also state that sometime before or during 1889 the family moved to Indian Territory and delivered another child. Then, in 1892 they were living in Oklahoma Territory, but returned to Indian Territory where they had a son in 1894. For whatever reason, the Harrises had moved back to Texas by 1896 but their stay proved relatively short because they listed the birth of still another child in Oklahoma Territory in 1898. Finally, the census taker counted the Harris family's residence as Oklahoma Territory on the 1900 census. Thus, just from the birthplaces of their children as listed on the census manuscript records we can trace the movement of the Harris family from the state of Texas to Indian Territory, then to Oklahoma Territory, back to Indian Territory, a short return to Texas and finally back to Oklahoma Territory.

⁴⁹ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

These movements took place within a fifteen year period.⁵⁰ Moreover, the Harris family experience was not an anomaly; they were not unusual. Of the 269 white, non-immigrant families living in the South Creek area in 1900, only 29 appear to have moved directly from their state of birth to Oklahoma Territory.⁵¹

A quick glance at the birthplaces of non-Czech heads of households in 1910 shows that Missouri again led the way with Arkansas registering the second most. However, Kansas replaced Tennessee with the third largest numbers followed by Illinois.⁵² Thus, most people coming to Oklahoma came from neighboring states.

As can be seen from the above demographic portrait, from the inception of the farming community of Prague, the Czech community found themselves at a numerical disadvantage. Unlike some farming towns in the Midwest such as Milligan or Wilbur, Nebraska, or ethnic Czech neighborhoods in Chicago, Cleveland or New York which many times contained a majority of people of Bohemian stock, the Czechs of Prague, constituted a minority group from the very beginning.⁵³ As a result, the experiences of these Oklahoma Czechs differed significantly from urban areas where ethnic groups, despite living amongst a diverse population, many times isolated themselves culturally and also differed from rural settlements such as Milligan, Nebraska where the population was overwhelmingly Czech and one could go days without even hearing the English

⁵⁰ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma. For a good analysis of tracking the movement of families see Richard C. Rohrs, "Settlement and Migration Patterns of Immigrants and their Children: A Research Note," *Immigration History Newsletter*, 19 (November 1987): 6-8.

⁵¹ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

⁵² *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township, Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

⁵³ Urban areas seldom contained many blocks inhabited exclusively by a single ethnic group. Usually only limited sections held a fifty per cent or higher concentration of a single group. See Humbert S. Nelli, *Italians in Chicago: 1800-1930, A Study in Ethnic Mobility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 25, 90. See also Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 11.

language spoken.⁵⁴ In fact, it is this singular environment which sets apart the Prague Czechs from many urban and rural ethnic communities where cultural and social isolation and, in some instances, even economic seclusion proved easy to obtain. Furthermore, it is the diversity of this small Oklahoma farm town and the interactions of the individuals within the Czech community with the larger population that is so interesting and important.

From the creation of the town, their minority status forced these rural Czech settlers to confront and cooperate with the larger and to them foreign society if they were to succeed in their new home. Unlike the Czechs of Chicago who, after a long day's work retreated to a crowded neighborhood filled with the sounds and smells of their beloved Bohemia. Or unlike the residents of Milligan, Nebraska, who successfully, if only temporarily, created a Czech oasis on the Great Plains where English need never be spoken unless a stranger happened to pass through. The town of Prague daily challenged the Czech newcomers with obstacles in language, social interactions, customs, and economic realities that their kinsmen in other parts of the country faced only at irregular intervals or, at the least, could escape. This is not to say the pressure to acculturate, especially in the cities, was not great. However, the second generation, not the immigrants, usually fulfilled the task of acculturation in urban areas. Having been born and reared in the United States, gone to public schools, and speaking English as well as the descendants of Franklin or Lincoln these sons and daughters of immigrants crossed the cultural bridge and mingled freely with the dominant society. In contrast, the diverse population of the Oklahoma farming community forced most Prague Czechs including

⁵⁴ Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village*, 85.

immigrant adults to live a dual lifestyle embracing the new American ways while toiling to maintain, not only their European customs and memories, but their identity as Czechs.

Nevertheless, the Czechs of Prague proved hearty both in numbers and purpose in maintaining a thriving ethnic presence within the larger population of native-born whites and the small but strong German community located a short distance north of Prague. Most settlers quickly accepted the fact that they were a minority and adjusted. They merged a determination to maintain their ethnicity with an equal resolve to participate in every facet of community life resulting in a duality that enabled them to succeed economically and adapt to the larger community quicker and without some of the tensions and conflicts other ethnic groups encountered while living in large cities or in isolated, ethnically homogenous settlements throughout the Plains region. The Prague Czechs plowed a haven of success and held onto their ethnic identity, their internal distinctiveness, within the larger native-born society while fully participating in every social, cultural, economic, and political activity the small southeastern Oklahoma farming town had to offer. However, the religious situation of Czech immigrants differed drastically from other ethnic groups. Rather than a primary ingredient of their culture, religion many times served as a source of disagreement if not downright enmity. It is to this we turn.

CHAPTER 4

RELIGION AND THE CZECH COMMUNITY

On that fateful spring day in 1918, several men and women approached the field of devastation with dreadful anxiety bordering on terror. Splintered white-washed lumber, twisted deformed shingles, and shards of glass sparkling in the late-afternoon brightness littered most of the four acres. Barely visible in the tall spring grass rested shattered planks of various lengths with jagged edges and long sharp nails protruding as if purposely and chaotically placed to injure any inattentive trespasser. Heaps of ruined wood embedded with tiny splinters to dagger-like chunks of glass rested next to serene tombstones of loved ones gone to be with the Lord. Alongside the irregular scenes of destruction lay a few seemingly unharmed boards already painted, complete with shiny spikes ready for the powerful blows of the carpenter to hammer them into place. Juxtaposed with the vast carnage, the intact lumber appeared out of place like a joke played by someone with a sick sense of humor. Thankfully, no one was in the building when the tornado roared from the sky and smashed into the church. As if not content with crushing the roof, it appeared the twister hoisted their precious sanctuary from the ground and slung it back towards the foundation exploding on impact and scattering the debris among the graves of deceased parishioners. The tornado completely destroyed the church; little remained that a competent carpenter might salvage. Where once stood St.

Wenceslaus Church, the center of activity for Prague's Catholics, lay nothing more than four acres of rubble.¹

Over the next few weeks the parishioners carefully removed the ruined vestiges of their church. They raked and swept glass from the burials sites of their departed kinfolks and friends. At special meetings the church members discussed what to do next? Of course, not rebuilding was out of the question. They needed a place to meet and worship. However, the two chief issues centered on where to build and how to fund the new construction. Some wanted to recreate the former church on the same ground near the cemetery. Others wished to see an even bigger church built within the environs of the growing town. After much discussion and locating a piece of available land, Prague's Catholic parish opted to relocate their church closer to the central business district. The next chore, raising funds and actually erecting the edifice, took over a year. Josef Lanik, a devout Catholic from the immigrant Czech community, volunteered to head the drive for donations of money and labor. Lanik and his helpers visited every Catholic household in the area, not begging, but counseling fellow Catholics of their duty to support the parish through financial gifts and contributions of labor. The community responded, especially the prosperous Czech farmers living in the countryside outside of town. Raising over \$2,500 for materials, Prague's Catholics constructed a much larger church on Main Street. The finish carpenters worked long hours to complete the intricate woodwork of the chancel and nave allowing St. Wenceslaus Church to hold its first service in the new building right before the Christmas of 1919.²

¹ Paraphrased from the depiction given in, Melva Losch Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A., Prague (Kolache-Ville) Oklahoma* (Norman: Hooper Printing, Inc., 1978), 119-120.

² Ibid.

On their arrival, most immigrants clung to the religion of their past. Confronted with new laws, foreign customs, and a strange, usually urban, environment the newcomers tenaciously embraced their church and their beliefs. Uprooted from a simpler way of life, these rural cottagers and village artisans arrived in the United States with a sense of excitement and hope, but also an overwhelming apprehension bordering on dread. The psychological trauma experienced by many must have been great as they gathered their belongings, underwent the mandatory physical examination, and experienced their first noisy, crowded street. If a relative or friend met them when they disembarked from the ship, it helped relieve some of the anxiety, but not all. Beginning with their first step, the city bombarded the immigrants with all things new. Young, forceful boys stood on the crowded sidewalks and hawked newspapers written in the perplexing language of the United States. Thick men in peculiar clothing and rounded hats jostled the new arrivals as they hurried past them on the heaving avenues. Wagons, pushcarts, hacks, and carriages squeezed together on narrow streets gestured as their drivers bawled at one another for any perceived illegality or social misconduct. And, the immigrants took it all in. Although most newcomers throughout American history experienced similar sensory shocks, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe arriving after 1880 underwent an enormous transition. Strapped with a vastly different culture, religion, and language than the majority of the native population, is it any wonder so many newcomers inwardly smiled when they beheld the spires of the Church.³

³ For examples of arrival experiences and the obstacles confronting newcomers from southern and eastern Europe, see Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that made the American People* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown Books, 1951), 135-139; See also Alan Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986), 67-73, 109; Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 72-73.

The Catholic Church welcomed the new arrivals. Priests sympathized with and encouraged the immigrants. In eastern cities such as Boston and New York, the earlier arriving Irish dominated clerical positions to the point where many native born equated Catholicism with being Irish.⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century because of their numbers, Italians demanded and received their own priests and parishes and soon competed with the Irish in number of churches. Other groups such as the Poles and Slovaks migrated west and formed ethnic churches in the neighborhoods of St. Louis, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. Wherever they settled, most southern and eastern European immigrants looked to the Catholic Church for reassurance and oftentimes provisional assistance while they struggled to adjust in their new surroundings. Indeed, regardless of their belief system, religion offered the dislocated a system of coping and a means of support, comfort, and reconciliation during difficult periods.⁵

Once an ethnic group gathered enough members, religious leaders within the group appealed to the Catholic hierarchy for their own church with their own clergy. Much of the initial impetus toward church formation focused not only on a shared doctrinal ethos but also on a desire to preserve the old ways: the traditions of home.⁶ Churches were meeting places for various social needs and became refuges for newcomers confused and uncertain of their place in American society. Many times in these churches religion morphed into a form of ethnicity reinforcing specific customs

⁴ Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63.

⁵ Harold J. Abramson, "Religion," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups*, eds. Stephen Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 873.

⁶ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 146.

peculiar to the members' region or nation.⁷ Although the religious zeal was authentic, often the magnificent cathedrals constructed by the early settlers were sometimes troubled places.⁸ The ethnic membership and religious leaders grew incompatible and divisions formed between factions of clergy themselves over the ideals of religious devotion and ethnic identity. Religion and ethnic identity became an issue in the 1890s, especially among Catholics. Leaders in the Catholic Church worried that the Church might develop into a church of the foreign-born rather than an American church.⁹ This placed clergy at odds with their parishioners who enjoyed and took comfort in the cultural distinctiveness of their services and fellowship. Lay leaders spoke out. John Bodnar summed up the problem occurring in some urban churches. "Within the immigrant group itself secular leaders became simultaneously more threatening and more aggressive, as they now agitated for increased ethnic rather than religious awareness in order to foster homeland nationalism."¹⁰ In other words, laypersons within the immigrant community resisted replacing the ethnic focus of their local congregation with a solely religious one. At this period of their life in the United States, many immigrants refused to become only a Catholic American. To them, ethnic identity still held great importance.

Regardless of tensions between laity and clergy, immigrant churches aided individuals' and families' adjustment to their new surroundings. Religious institutions provided psychological relief from the strains of factory work and dismal, crowded living conditions. Catholic Churches supplied material relief through emigrant aid societies that

⁷ Abramson, "Religion," 872, 875.

⁸ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 144.

⁹ Dolan, *American Catholicism*, 92-93.

¹⁰ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 167-168.

focused on helping women and children. These programs provided struggling mothers with staples such as bread, salt, sugar, and, sometimes, meat. Similar to secular agencies like Jane Addams's Hull House, the Church also educated mothers in practical matters and offered a sympathetic ear, many times in the immigrant's native language.

Additionally, ethnic churches created organizations and offered fellowship activities that allowed immigrant families a place to congregate, make friends, and feel accepted.¹¹

Overall, immigrant churches softened the cultural and economic blows of the dominant society. Over time, these churches introduced a more American form of worship, usually less formal, including the usage of English rather than Latin in part or all of the corporate service. As incongruous as it may appear ethnic churches provided immigrants a way of holding to things past, at least psychologically, while innocuously advancing modernism and Americanism.¹²

According to John Bodnar, "No institution in immigrant America exhibited more discord and division than the church."¹³ This is clearly seen in the situation of the Czechs. As briefly discussed in chapter seven, Czechs were the only immigrant group in which a majority abandoned the Church. Many Czechs cut all ties with organized religion and a majority of arrivals became known as liberals, rationalists, freethinkers¹⁴

Freethought (*svobodomysleni*) is the name of a movement that evolved from many different sources. The exact origins of the term are uncertain, however, by the late seventeenth century a few writers including Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) began using

¹¹ Peter D. Salins, *Assimilation, American Style* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 36-37.

¹² Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 317-318.

¹³ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 167.

¹⁴ Bruce Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871-1914," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), xxvi, 148.

the word in its present meaning.¹⁵ In the United States, some scholars consider the period from about 1875 to World War I as the high-water mark of freethought in American society.¹⁶ Freethought is the philosophy that man rules his own destiny, rejecting the ideas of miracles and divine intervention in an individual's or world affairs. Belief centers on the idea that nature and natural law guide mankind and that the use of reason and science are the means by which one should judge everything. Freethinkers argue that truth should derive from the application of observation and experiment without the cumbersome influences of tradition and superstition.¹⁷ This rationalist philosophy asserts that "all beliefs should be subjected to critical examination by exactly the same standards."¹⁸

When examined, the differing ideas concerning the origin of freethought in the Czech community form a muddy pool, but one that highlights the complexities of not only rationalism itself but Czech acceptance. Emily Balch in *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* argues that the writings of radical thinkers such as the iconoclastic agnostic, Robert Ingersol and English philosopher, Herbert Spencer, heavily influenced early Czech freethinkers.¹⁹ Bruce Garver pinpoints the origins of freethought in the European Enlightenment. Garver also credits French Positivism, German Materialism, and Darwinian theories with influencing European freethought ideas.²⁰ Another Czech chronicler, Rose Rosicky, posits that the Czech movement gradually developed out of

¹⁵ Gordon Stein, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), 247.

¹⁶ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 151.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁸ Stein, *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, 531.

¹⁹ Emily Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), 390-391.

²⁰ Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," 149.

Hussitism and the questioning of the Church as the final arbiter of everything.²¹ Czech intellectuals absorbed the ideas of freethought through their close proximity and long association with the German-speaking peoples. Again, the dichotomy of Czech/German history comes into play. On the one hand, Czechs despised German power and their historic ascendancy over the Czech lands. On the other hand, Czechs borrowed heavily from their Germanic neighbors in areas from food to philosophy. Freethought gained a foothold among Czech intellectuals through the writings of Hegel (1770-1831), Feuerbach (1804-1872)), Nietzsche (1844-1900), and others. Rationalists like Johannes Ronge (1813-1887) and Robert Blum (1807-1848) and the ideas of the ill-fated 1848 uprisings gained further traction among Czech thinkers. However, the ideas of freethought gained acceptance with the masses primarily out of rebellion against the authoritarian Habsburg government and the state religion, the Catholic Church. Many Czechs viewed both the political and religious sectors as children of the same mother – tyranny. Among many Czech liberals anti-Catholicism, especially enmity towards clerics, elicited strong emotions. Militant Czech freethinkers carried this anti-clericalism with them when they crossed the Atlantic.²²

Rationalists dominated the Czech-language press in the United States. By the end of 1910, over three hundred Czech-language serial publications stemmed from American presses.²³ With the exception of the major Catholic weekly, *Hlas*, most Czech-language newspapers leaned heavily towards freethought or at least attempted to remain neutral.²⁴

Joseph Chada in *The Czechs in the United States* placed the ratio of progressive to

²¹ Rose Rosicky, *A History of the Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929), 286.

²² Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," 164; Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*, 391.

²³ Karel Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 34.

²⁴ Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 286. *Hlas* translates "The Voice."

conservative periodicals at six to one.²⁵ One of the more strident liberal publications came out of Omaha. Edward Rosewater's *Pokrok Zapadu (Progress of the West)* consistently advocated an anti-clerical and anti-organized religion stance. Rosewater and fellow Czech and Omaha publisher, John Rosicky were the first to publish thought-provoking rationalist articles throughout the Plains region reaching immigrant communities as far south as Texas.²⁶ Nevertheless, Chicago, containing the largest number of Czech immigrants, became the axis of liberal publication and activity. The Windy City, in 1883, contained fifty-two freethought societies but only three Catholic parishes. By 1920, membership in freethought associations across the United States doubled those in Catholic organizations.²⁷ If number of newspapers and periodicals is any indicator, from roughly 1860 to the end of World War I Czech rationalists dominated and controlled Czech-American society and culture.

Even so, not all freethinkers believed alike. Their views ranged from outspoken, atheistic Free Congregations (Svobodne Obce) and benevolent agnostics to those who believed in a supreme being but not in miracles or divine intervention (deists).²⁸ Despite profound differences, a spirit of theological questioning and physical separation from organized religion provided common threads binding all rationalists. Their trust in science and empirical evidence trumped the faith of their fathers and placed them philosophically within the progressive matrix. Freethinkers believed in the progress of man in the here and now. They embraced the principle of the goodness of man and

²⁵ Joseph Chada, *The Czechs in the United States* (Chicago: Czechoslovak Society of Art and Sciences, 1981), 92-93.

²⁶ Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," 148; Chada, *Czechs in the United States*, 17.

²⁷ Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," 150, 156; Clinton Machann, "Religious Attitudes in Early Immigrant Autobiographies Written by Czechs in Texas," *MELUS* 22 (Winter 1997):168-169.

²⁸ Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 279; Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," 155.

confidence in the future of society. These universal ideas echoed middle-class aspirations in the early twentieth century and served to attract converts, especially those not holding extreme views on matters religious.²⁹

Czech freethinkers differed from their fellow European rationalists in one important matter: Czech freethinkers incorporated an anti-German attitude into their beliefs. Czech rationalism expanded beyond simply questioning Church authority and teaching, a fiery finish of nationalism covered the entire movement. In Europe, the nineteenth century witnessed the birth of modern Italy (1861), and Germany (1871), as ideas of nationhood and citizenship gained acceptance and flourished, first among intellectuals then filtering down to the masses. Because of the budding nation-state movement, the medieval martyr, Jan Hus, took on added importance. Hus's defiance of authority and spirit of independence more than his theological arguments appealed to Czech liberals. Freethinkers held Hus in high esteem, although not as a martyred cleric but as an independent thinker and aspiring nationalist.³⁰ Rose Rosicky, in her 1929 work on the Czechs in Nebraska, relates the patented rationalist answer when asked why liberals revere the memory of a defrocked Catholic priest: "If Hus were living today, he would be a liberal."³¹

The early freethought press in the United States promoted Hus, not so much as an enemy of the Church, but as an embodiment of Czech resistance to domination and as someone searching for ultimate truth. Hus, executed at the Council of Constance in

²⁹ Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*, 69; Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," 151; Ernest Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions* (Chicago: Benedictine Abbey Press, 1942), 70.

³⁰ Henry W. Casper, *History of the Catholic Church in Nebraska* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), vol. 4, *Catholic Chapters in Nebraska Immigration: 1870-1900*, 103; Machann, "Religious Attitudes," 164.

³¹ Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 285.

1415, became a symbol of rationalist inquiry and Czech nationalist impulses. In the United States, Saline City, Nebraska held the earliest known commemoration of the burning of Jan Hus on July 6, 1873. The featured speaker at the ceremony was Vaclav Snajdr, then editor of the Omaha-based *Pokrok Zapadu*, one of the leading freethought weeklies of the Great Plains.³² Czech communities throughout the United States read about the festivities honoring Hus and began hosting their own event every sixth of July. These yearly commemorations took on a more defiant tone with the advent of the Great War. The 500th anniversary of Hus's death in 1915 was particularly emotional and used by the anti-Habsburg press to rally support for the nascent independence movement forming in London, New York, and Chicago among Czech émigrés and American Czechs. With reports of Austrian atrocities filling the pages of American and Czech-language newspapers, the commemorative events doubled as fund-raisers for the Bohemian National Alliance. Once the Allies secured victory in Europe and created the new Slavic nation of Czechoslovakia, emphasis on Hus gradually faded in Czech-American communities.³³ It appears that Jan Hus, the martyred Catholic priest, hailed as a proto-freethinker by many in the press, was actually more important to the typical Czech American as a symbol of nationalist desires and independence from Austrian domination than as an icon of epistemology.

Freethinkers controlled the early fraternal associations.³⁴ Fraternal lodges such as the Slavic Benevolent Society and Western Bohemian Fraternal Association, along with the liberal press effectively persuaded many Czechs to leave the Catholic

³² *Ibid.*, 80.

³³ Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," 163.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 158; Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 37; Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 287.

Church.³⁵ Bruce Garver estimated that before 1914 about 55 percent of Czech immigrants in the United States were freethinkers with the rest maintaining loyalty to the Catholic Church or switching to a Protestant sect.³⁶ Some freethought intellectuals, especially journalists, viewed their mission as a sort of crusade against the Catholic Church and all organized religion.³⁷ Without apology, these writers denounced traditional churches and through the printed word spread their message throughout American Czech communities. Reading only their articles and editorials would leave one with the impression that the freethought movement among Czechs in the United States was passionate and uncompromising. However, zealous journalists constituted only a small fraction of Czech Americans and perhaps garnered too much attention when examining the philosophical boundaries of Czech rationalism. That a division existed between liberal and Catholic Czechs is clear. In Prague, practically no Catholics joined the local Bohemian Hall during the first thirty years; their membership at St. Wenceslaus sufficed. Although the 1918 tornado destroyed the member rolls of Prague's Catholic Church, a comparison of Catholic cemetery records with Z.C.B.J. membership rolls to 1930 reveals only a couple of possible dual memberships. Jan and Anna Babek and Anna Wostrcil, members of the Western Bohemian Fraternal Association, are buried in the Catholic cemetery.³⁸ Furthermore, and although not totally conclusive, it appears that in Prague the division between Catholic and secular immigrant was not based on economic status. For example, four early immigrant leaders of the new town were Joseph Lanik

³⁵ Casper, *Catholic Church in Nebraska*, 103.

³⁶ Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," 148.

³⁷ Machann, "Religious Attitudes," 168.

³⁸ Western Czech Brotherhood Association (Zapadni Ceske Bratraska Jednota), Bohemian Hall, Membership Rolls, *Central Book (Hlavni Kniha)*, Lodge 46, Prague, Oklahoma; St. Wenceslaus Catholic Cemetery.

and Frank Barta who remained Catholic, while Frank Vlasak and C.M. Sadlo had left their European religious roots.

Catholic Bible of Frank Vlasak's mother



Source: Author's photo of Bible on display at Prague Historical Museum.

In his study, Russell Lynch also found little duplication in membership between the church and Z.C.B.J. However, through interviews with the original settlers or their children Lynch found that Catholics and Bohemian Hall members enjoyed amiable relations and frequently socialized.³⁹ Garver, in his work on Czech freethinkers, suggested that in the Great Plains region tolerant liberals, not militants, dominated Czech fraternal associations.⁴⁰ This appears to be the case in Prague. These rural Czechs, either through anger or apathy towards the Catholic Church, drifted into a kind of lethargic irreligion. However most liberals, at least in Oklahoma, harbored little animosity towards the Church to the extent of the freethinking journalists but simply felt indifferent

³⁹ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 97, 137.

⁴⁰ Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," 149.

about it.⁴¹ Few were evangelical atheists or even agnostics. They merely quit the church and concentrated on economic and family matters, usually joining the Bohemian Hall for insurance and fellowship opportunities not because they entertained a deep grudge against St. Wenceslaus Church or the Catholic faith. Nevertheless, Prague's Z.C.B.J. members concealed no yearnings to return to the Church. Most remained unchurched and those who began attending chose a Protestant denomination rather than return to the pews of the Catholic parish. There is simply no evidence of hatred against their former faith.

Although claiming no pretense of being a religious organization, Czech freethought associations such as the local Bohemian Hall evolved into a kind of secular church complete with regular meeting times and the site of weddings, receptions, and funerals. Prague's Bohemian Hall held several weddings and funerals during this time, usually with a local judge officiating.⁴² No record of the type of music played at Czech funerals in Prague exists. However, Robert Kutak asserts that funerals held at the Milligan, Nebraska lodge included church songs such as "God Will Take Care of You," "Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown," and "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere."⁴³ Remembering that most of the original settlers came from Nebraska, it would not be surprising if religious hymns rang out at Bohemian Hall memorial services in Prague as well.

Freethought in the United States then, slowly transformed through the lodges

⁴¹ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 28-29.

⁴² For a few examples see *Prague Record*, 12 May 1926; 27 April 1927; 6 March 1929.

⁴³ Robert Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village: A Study of Social Persistence and Change* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1933, repr. ed., 1970), 92.

from a strident denunciation of everything Catholic and religious to a calmer, secular, ethnically-oriented movement. Again, among liberal and Catholic leaders the split was real and, at times, quite hostile. Religious disunity plagued Czech communities in the United States more than any other ethnic group. This became evident during World War I when Czech Catholics refused to merge resources with the secular Bohemian National Alliance until late in the conflict. However, in rural locales like Prague the two camps put aside their antagonisms in the name of their shared ethnicity. When Prague's Bohemian Hall sponsored a dance or play it was a Czech dance or a Czech play rather than a freethought dance or freethought play and as time went on dances included American tunes as well as traditional Bohemian songs and steps. This further weakened hostile feelings between the two groups. In the end, Catholic and non-Catholic Czechs transformed ethnicity into their common "religion." As freethought, especially the radical anti-clerical form lost its appeal and fraternal organizations focused more and more on sustaining and passing down Czech distinctiveness to the young, rationalist ideals withered until by 1980 Catholics comprised a large portion of lodge membership.⁴⁴

Karel Bicha noted in his work, *The Czechs in Oklahoma*, that Czech National Cemeteries were permanent monuments to the freethought movement in Oklahoma.⁴⁵ There is no doubt that in the technical sense this is true. Throughout Oklahoma and other states, the secular, freethought associations created these burial grounds and interred their members. Catholics preferred their parish cemeteries and many Protestants chose the City Cemetery. However, similar to the ideological fate of the actual organization, later generations and non-Czechs viewed Czech cemeteries as monuments to Czechs rather

⁴⁴ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

than freethinkers. Unless the passerby happens to be a student of freethought or Czech immigration, the cemetery symbolizes the historical presence of Bohemians and Moravians in the area. The ethnic identity of the buried trumped their philosophical leanings. Today, Czech National Cemeteries, although started by rationalists, are monuments to all Czech Americans rather than the purveyors of a secular freethinking ideology.

On January 1, 1903, eight months after its founding, Prague contained seven saloons and no churches.⁴⁶ The rough and tumble frontier town attracted many of the coarser elements from the twin territories searching for strong refreshments after a hard day's toil. Drunken fights and revelries abounded in the embryonic town. Despite the raucous turmoil, Prague's spiritual-minded residents coalesced into bands with like-minded beliefs and began building churches. Although not the first sacral structure in the new town, the Catholic parish dated back to 1891 and the land run.⁴⁷ Eleven of the forty-eight original Bohemian settlers claimed membership, including the Barta and Simek families, whose homesteads later became the town of Prague.⁴⁸ Over time, the Czech presence in the church grew until by the late 1940s their numbers topped 75 percent of the membership.⁴⁹ Unlike urban areas where Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics

⁴⁶ Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 115.

⁴⁷ The first church building in Prague was the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948), 42.

⁴⁸ Russell Willford Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma: A Comparative Study of the Stability of A Czech Farm Group in Lincoln County Oklahoma, and the Factors Relating to its Stability," *Bulletin of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College) 39, no. 13 (June 1942), 96; Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 118-119.

⁴⁹ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 94; Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 31; St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church issued a memorial pamphlet in 1949, the golden anniversary of the first permanent structure. The volume listed 186 members, of which 133 sported Czech surnames.

dominated, these small-town Czechs faced an empty field of competition for control of church functions and activities. Recognizing the need for Bohemian priests in these rural Great Plains settlements, the Catholic Church advertised in the newspapers of Bohemia and Moravia for priests to come to the United States.⁵⁰ St. Wenceslaus requested and maintained a Czech-speaking priest for over thirty years.⁵¹ In addition, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church rose to become the largest denomination in the United States. With growing numbers, mainly fueled by immigration, Catholics transformed from a tiny minority religion ridiculed and belittled by some Protestant sects into a proud, confident group.⁵² It was under these circumstances that Prague's Catholics established St. Wenceslaus Church.

Although primarily interested in the salvation of souls, the Church throughout America also aided the poor and needy. In Chicago, the Catholic Benevolent Union helped Czech immigrants adjust to industrial capitalism and living in an overcrowded city.⁵³ Catholic churches in farming regions promoted Catholic holidays and sponsored dances and bazaars, which turned into community affairs attended by Catholic and non-Catholic alike. In an attempt to cultivate Christian fellowship among their congregants, Prague's Catholics established their own fraternal association, the Catholic Workman (Katolicky Delnik).⁵⁴ The organization sponsored social activities such as dances, dinners, and festivals centered on important Catholic holidays. Renegade Catholics of the Bohemian Hall attended St. Wenceslaus celebrations, as did many in the community.

⁵⁰ Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 293.

⁵¹ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 31. The parish, formed in 1891, retained a Bohemian priest until 1927.

⁵² Dolan, *American Catholicism*, 72.

⁵³ Abramson, "Religion," 874.

⁵⁴ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 43.

Similar to Bohemian Hall activities, townspeople viewed the events as community events every bit as much as religious galas.⁵⁵ About sixty miles east in Oklahoma City, William Earl Martin found immense religious friction between Czech Catholics and the smaller congregations of Czech Protestants. Much like Ernest Zizka, Martin emphasized the antagonism between Catholics, Protestants, and freethinkers.⁵⁶ The differing groups in the larger town separated themselves and refused to cooperate. In the small town of Prague things were different. They lived in close proximity to each other and saw the same people on the streets and in the stores anytime they shopped. Constant interactions bred more of a community spirit than seen in most urban centers. The residents, regardless of religious preference or ethnicity, simply had to find a way to get along.

Nationwide, Czech Protestants comprised only a handful when compared to numbers of freethinkers and Catholics. After arrival in the United States if a Czech left the Catholic Church, rarely did he relocate to a Protestant pew. Among immigrants, Presbyterian churches attracted the most ex-Catholics. Czech Presbyterians traced their national and religious heritage to Jan Hus and the Bohemian Brethren, the first Protestants in the Czech lands. In fact, one of the largest Czech Presbyterian churches in New York named its building after the martyr: Jan Hus Bohemian Presbyterian Church.⁵⁷ In the farming communities of the Midwest, Rose Rosicky noted that most Czech Protestants in Nebraska claimed Presbyterianism as their faith.⁵⁸ However, the most aggressive sect was the Methodists. Focusing their conversion efforts primarily on

⁵⁵ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 97; Kutak, *A Czech-American Village*, 44-45.

⁵⁶ William Earl Martin, "The Cultural Assimilation of the Czechoslovak in Oklahoma City: A Study of Culture Contrasts" (M.A. Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1935), 143; Zizka, *Cultural Contributions*, 48.

⁵⁷ C. Merton Babcock, "Czech Songs in Nebraska," *Western Folklore* 8 (October 1949): 321.

⁵⁸ Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 337.

the young, Methodist churches attracted second and later generation Czechs. Over time, more Czechs claimed Methodism as their faith than any other Protestant sect.⁵⁹

Members of the Methodist-Episcopal Church erected the first church building in Prague. The pastor, appointed by the Annual Conference, ministered in Prague every other Sunday because he also served a church in nearby Okemah.⁶⁰ Soon after opening, the Methodists agreed to allow other denominations, specifically the Presbyterians and Baptists, access to their building until they constructed their own place of worship.⁶¹ Much like the Catholic Church, Bohemian Hall, and Sokol Hall, the Methodist Church became a center of community activity hosting concerts and plays in addition to revivals and special Christmas services.⁶² The membership rolls of the church show no Czech names on the register during the first decade of its existence. However, by the 1920s Czech individuals and families began joining the ranks of Methodism with several holding positions of leadership. Church records list William Vlasak, son of the Czech pioneer Frank Vlasak, as a Steward in the church and serving on the Sunday School and Finance committees during the 1920s. In 1928, the members elected Mrs. Billy Urban as the treasurer. During this same period her husband served alongside Vlasak on the Sunday School Committee.⁶³ Other Czech members listed over the years included Cervenys, Svobodas, Jezeks, Novotnys, Klabzubas, Koutniks, Stoklasas, Voborniks,

⁵⁹ Joseph Chada, *The Czechs in the United States* (Chicago: Czechoslovak Society of Art and Sciences, 1981), 120-121.

⁶⁰ William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948), 42. There were twenty-five charter members in the Methodist Church according to the 1903 Membership Rolls of the First United Methodist Church of Prague. None had Czech surnames.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶² *Prague Record*, 1 March 1917; 16 July 1915.

⁶³ First United Methodist Church of Prague, Church Records. The *Prague Record*, 11 January 1928 also listed the election of new Methodist officials.

Opelas, and Bonttys.⁶⁴ Some of these, such as Jan Svoboda and William Vlasak were members of the Z.C.B.J. while others were the wives or sons and daughters of members. For example, Ella Klabzuba, a member of the Methodist church, was the wife of Joseph J. Klabzuba and both are buried in the Czech National Cemetery. Joe Stoklasa, one of Prague's grocers and a believer in the tenets of Wesleyism, was a member of the Sokol Hall and is also interred in the freethinking cemetery.⁶⁵ Finally, when the long-time Bohemian Hall stalwart, Jan Svoboda died, Prague's Methodist Church held his funeral and the Czech National Cemetery, his body.⁶⁶ The above list embraces some of the most active Czech Methodists. Apparently many more attended because in 1927 the Methodists sponsored a special meeting inviting Dr. Karl Sladek, a Czech Methodist from Oklahoma City, to be the guest speaker at special Czech-language services.⁶⁷

Practically no primary source information exists on the town's Presbyterian church. In his "General History of Prague," Ray Tower notes that "the church conducted services in Prague from 1906 to 1920 when it was finally decided to disband because of the small and declining membership."⁶⁸ However, from newspaper accounts we can glean that the C.V. Sojka family were active members holding a dinner for the Presbyterian Social Circle in 1916.⁶⁹ Later in 1928, Mildred Eret, granddaughter of Bohemian Hall member, George Eret, married Charles Butler, a non-Czech, in the Presbyterian Church in Okemah.⁷⁰ It appears the Eret family remained staunch

⁶⁴ First United Methodist Church of Prague, Membership Rolls.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Stoklasa was listed as a member of Sokol Hall in the pamphlet, *Prague, Oklahoma: City of Opportunities*. He is buried in the Czech National Cemetery. See, Prague Chamber of Commerce, *Prague, Oklahoma: City of Opportunities* (n.p: n.p, n.d.), 37-39.

⁶⁶ *Prague Record*, 7 July 1927.

⁶⁷ *Prague Record*, 8 February 1928.

⁶⁸ Tower, "General History," 32.

⁶⁹ *Prague Record*, 23 June 1916.

⁷⁰ *Prague Record*, 8 February 1928.

Presbyterians because despite losing their church in 1920, the family held their daughter's wedding in a neighboring town. Jumping to the conclusion of the newlywed's lives, Charles Butler and his Czech wife, Mildred Eret Butler, chose as their final resting place, the Czech National Cemetery.⁷¹ Joseph and Lillian Eret, the parents of the wife also chose the national cemetery over the City Cemetery, again showing how the once freethinking cemetery transformed into more of an ethnic cemetery rather than the final resting place for nonbelievers.

Few Czechs joined either the local Baptist church or Christian church during the early years of the community.⁷² Similar to the experience of the Catholic Church, Prague Baptist Church lost all records during a storm.⁷³ However, a few snippets of Czech interest in these churches emerge from the pages of the newspapers. For instance, Rose Klabzuba married Harmon Veatch in the parsonage of the Christian Church and James Urban, a Czech, married Eula Nash with the ceremony held at Prague's Christian Church.⁷⁴ Both Czechs were third generation and both married outside the group. Thirdly, neither ceremony took place in either of the two primary venues of Czech ritual expression, the Bohemian Hall or the Catholic Church. Of course the question is: what does all this mean? What is the relevance for the Czech community in Prague; for Czech communities throughout the United States? Only future studies can adequately answer whether or not the religious experiences of these small-town Czechs translates throughout the country. However, it appears that many Czechs, especially the later generations,

⁷¹ Czech National Cemetery.

⁷² Until 1929 and the formation of a Nazarene congregation, the Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and Christian Churches were the primary churches in Prague.

⁷³ Prague Baptist Church changed its name to First Baptist Church in 1957.

⁷⁴ *Prague Record*, 14 September 1927; 10 March 1921.

returned to some sort of faith with most opting for Protestant sects rather than the Catholic Church.

Upon arrival in the United States many Czech immigrants left the Catholic Church. Most of these immigrant apostates never returned to the fold, but imbibed the secular ideas of freethought. A very few joined Protestant congregations, chiefly Presbyterian and Methodist. Freethought intellectuals, particularly journalists, espoused a highly anticlerical form of rationalism. Through their weeklies and journals they contested against their historical faith and developed an us-versus-them attitude. However, the rank and file leaned more towards apathy in religious matters rather than confrontation. This appears true in small towns like Prague. Although the freethinkers established a Bohemian Hall for their members, they openly advertised for anyone – Catholics, Protestants, Czechs and non-Czechs – to attend their social functions. Likewise, the Catholic Church held events such as dances and bazaars which were as much community events as sacred affairs. In Prague, Catholics, freethinkers, Protestants, and those who simply did not go to church mingled socially at whatever venue offered refreshments and a good time.

As time and generations passed, more and more Czechs joined Protestant churches. However, many continued their association with the local chapter of the Z.C.B.J. including burial in the Czech National Cemetery. Slowly, Prague's freethinking Bohemian Hall transformed into more of an ethnic club than a bastion of religious unorthodoxy. The 1920s increasingly saw both Catholics and Protestants join the freethought organization and by 1980 Catholics comprised a majority of the lodge's

membership. Thus, the situation of Prague differed from urban areas which witnessed more bitterness and animosity between freethinkers and Catholics.

Rather than unifying the Czech community, religion caused divisions within the group. In Prague, these divisions did not erupt into outright hostility. The differing sides realized the need to work together. The following chapter analyzes how this sense of community transferred to the economic realm. It examines how Catholic, Protestant, and freethinker were able to set aside their differences and cooperate for the sake of prosperity. Finally, the chapter looks at the economic interactions of Czechs and non-Czechs as they struggled to make the frontier farm town a success.

CHAPTER 5

ECONOMIC LIFE IN PRAGUE

With Bible in one hand, a hatchet in the other, the stout but still energetic matronly woman marched down the middle of the dirt street with a brigade of women in her wake. The bonneted matriarch halted the excited throng close to the front doors of the nearest saloon and immediately launched into her practiced and polished tirade against the evils of alcohol. By the time she had finished her blistering verbal attack, the crowd buzzed with righteous indignation and anticipation with what they knew would happen next. Closing the Bible and brandishing her weapon, Carry Nation turned from the crowd and strode into the emptying saloon. With swinging ax and cries for deliverance to God, the temperance leader splintered several cases of beer before leaving the drinking establishment where she proclaimed victory to the applauding crowd.¹

Despite the determined efforts of Carry Nation, Prague's saloons flourished during the pre-statehood era. In fact, during the period before November 1907, the saloon business boomed for most of the communities in southeast Lincoln County. The reason was quite simple. Lincoln County, as part of Oklahoma Territory, allowed open and legal alcohol consumption. However, adjacent Indian Territory located a little over

¹ *Prague News*, 15 September, 1904. See also Melva Losch Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A., Prague (Kolache-Ville) Oklahoma* (Norman: Hooper Printing, Inc., 1978), 53.

three miles east of Prague was “dry.” Alcohol could not be transported, bought, or sold there. Thus, evenings and weekends saw a veritable parade of Indian Territory residents crossing into Oklahoma Territory to relax and imbibe alcoholic refreshments. The prolific alcohol consumption by some customers on occasion erupted into heated arguments over perceived slights many times ending in bloody fist fights or worse resulting in a wild-west aura enveloping many towns in the area. Prior to the formation of Prague, the most infamous was Keokuk Falls, home of the “Seven Deadly Saloons.” Located only a short ride from Indian Territory, the taverns of Keokuk Falls became a favorite destination for hard-working ranchers and hired hands as well as members of the Sac and Fox tribe. However, the easily available booze also attracted unsavory characters as well. In this small settlement, less than a mile from the future town of Prague, “all sorts of outlaws, horse-thieves, cattle-rustlers, road agents, and murderers hung out during the last decade of the [nineteenth] century.”² Regardless of the violence surrounding these drinking establishments, the saloons earned enormous profits. Thus, to combat the violence, Keokuk Falls hired lawmen equally as tough and violent as the customers to keep the peace.³

Upon the formation of Prague in 1902, as in nearby Keokuk Falls, drinking proved a profitable business enterprise. Only a few weeks after the opening of the new town, the *Prague News* listed seven saloons operating in the environs with three of the establishments serving drinks under nothing but a simple canvas covering.⁴ The success

² Lincoln County Historical Society, *Lincoln County: Oklahoma History* (Saline, MI: McNaughton & Gunn, 1988), 198. Keokuk Falls no longer exists. After weeks of heavy rains in the spring of 1923, a flood covered the entire area with silt and mud destroying the once beautiful natural falls which had been a favorite recreational area for early settlers.

³ *Ibid.*, 198-199.

⁴ *Prague News*, 28 August, 1902.

of these saloons encouraged others to join the business. From 1902 until statehood in the fall of 1907 anywhere from six to thirteen saloons operated within the town's limits.⁵ Prague's Czechs, like many immigrants from eastern or southern Europe, enjoyed drinking alcoholic beverages. Most primarily drank beer and Czechs prided themselves on the Bohemian origins of 'budweiser' and "pilsner" beer.⁶ Owning a saloon or working as a barkeep ranked high in the minds of most Czechs as desirable occupations. Many viewed attending bar every inch as respectable as teaching school, working at a bank, or committing to the priesthood or ministry.⁷ The Bohemian immigrants of Prague apparently were no different. One of the most popular drinking establishments in the early years of the town was the Kentucky Liquor House, owned and operated by Josef Klabzuba, a Czech.⁸ Another Czech, Josef Hrdy owned one of the first saloons in the new town.⁹ Furthermore, saloons were important business enterprises in early Prague as they brought in much revenue for the town. An example of the profitability of the liquor business is found in the *Prague News*' May 1907 article reporting the town's receipts from licenses and fees. According to the town's treasurer, in 1906, Prague took in a total of \$4,193.88. Of this amount, \$2,549.00 (over half of the year's receipts) came from the

⁵ *Prague Record*, 5 October 1916; See also *Prague News*, 28 August 1902; William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948), 13; Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 52.

⁶ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 61.

⁷ Emily Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), 308; Joseph Slabey Roucek, "The Passing of American Czechoslovaks," *The American Journal of Sociology* 39, no. 5 (March 1934): 616.

⁸ *Prague News*, 15 September 1904; See also Tower, "History of Prague," 23-25.

⁹ *Prague News*, 1 December 1904.

issuance of saloon licenses.¹⁰ Drinking was definitely big business in pre-statehood Prague.¹¹

Another activity that emerged during this time was the smuggling of liquor into Indian Territory where even the possession of alcohol was punishable by fine or imprisonment. However, the legal prohibition did not deter some ingenious drovers and ranchers. A common practice was to purchase the forbidden brew in Oklahoma Territory, hide the alcohol (usually whiskey) inside their boots in nearly undetectable flat containers, and then ride back into Indian Territory with the contraband completely out of sight.¹² Even subsequent to statehood and the political decision that the new state of Oklahoma would be totally “dry” the smuggling of liquor continued. The newspapers, before the passage of the federal Volstead Act, occasionally contained colorful stories of arrests of unlucky or inept wrongdoers such as the story in the *Prague Record* recounting the arrest of a young man found with twenty-four quarts of liquor “hidden” on his person. The account does not specify where the lawman discovered the illegal booze. One might suspect the culprit concealed the two-dozen bottles of alcohol under a long heavy coat. The only problem with this seemingly astute deduction is the arrest occurred during an Oklahoma summer.¹³ Another interesting account of the illegal alcohol trade revolves around a young woman who lived near Prague. Apparently, she made a daily habit of walking to a nearby stream carrying her baby in one arm and a bundle of baby’s clothes

¹⁰ *Prague News.*, 9 May 1907.

¹¹ *The Prague News* listed the Ragsdale & Perkins Saloon as Prague’s first saloon; See *Prague News*, 28 September 1905. Other saloons mentioned in the newspapers during the pre-statehood period include the Ramsdal Saloon, Hardy Saloon, First Chance Saloon, Phil’s Place, Dorcey and Roberts Saloon, Watts Saloon, and Hendrix Saloon. See *Prague News*, 5 January 1905; *Prague Patriot*, 25 May 1905; *Prague News*, 29 November 1906; *Prague News*, 1 November 1906; *Prague News*, 19 January 1905; *Prague News*, 31 May 1906; *Prague News*, 4 July 1907.

¹² Lincoln County Historical Society, *Lincoln County*, 198.

¹³ *Prague Record*, 6 June 1916; For another interesting account of the illegal liquor trade after statehood see *Prague Record*, 14 September 1916.

in the other presumably to wash the clothes. The local Methodist minister noticed her daily forays to the creek, became suspicious, and decided to follow her. To his astonishment, when the young mother passed by a group of young men, she pulled several whiskey bottles from under her bundle and handed them to the expectant men.¹⁴

When the two territories combined to form the state of Oklahoma, Prague's saloons were forced out of business – but not without a last hurrah. In a lengthy article about the final Saturday night before the “dry” laws went into effect, the *Prague News* reported that “Prague has had some rough Saturdays but the last one was about the roughest yet. The drunks were a little drunker and the fights a little harder and oftener if possible.” However, in the same edition the paper also reported that “the nine saloon keepers of Prague promptly quit business Saturday night, thereby proving themselves to be law abiding citizens.”¹⁵ A few weeks later the weekly newspaper put an optimistic spin on the loss of a large part of Prague's early economy by opining that “the empty saloon buildings will soon all be full again.”¹⁶

Besides Klabzuba's and Hrdy's saloons, many other Czechs participated in the local economy. From the onset of Prague, Czechs contributed a good proportion of the businesspeople in the new town. During the early years, Prague's Czechs owned or ran more than a fourth of the businesses in town.¹⁷ This involvement in the economic sector continued throughout the second and third decades of the community. In addition, most

¹⁴ James Edward Klein, *Grappling with Demon Rum: The Cultural Struggle over Liquor in Early Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 136; Klein went into greater detail in his PhD dissertation. See Klein, “A Social History of Prohibition in Oklahoma: 1900-1920” (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 2003), 257.

¹⁵ *Prague News*, 21 November 1907.

¹⁶ *Prague News*, 5 December 1907.

¹⁷ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 56; Russell Willford Lynch, “Czech Farmers in Oklahoma: A Comparative Study of the Stability of a Czech Farm Group in Lincoln County Oklahoma, and the Factors Relating to its Stability,” *Bulletin of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College) 39, no. 13 (June 1942): 99.

businesses retained a close relationship with the Czech farming community. Besides working his fields, this relationship might revolve around a farmer also owning a store in town or a member of the farming family working in town while still living at home. Or, a specific business might heavily rely on the trade of Czech farmers to stay in operation.¹⁸

Regardless, the communal peasant environment in which most first-generation Czechs knew so well in Europe helped them adjust to their new surroundings. This statement does not contradict Oscar Handlin's contention that "[t]he peasants found nowhere an equivalent of the village" in the United States but rather expands his thesis.¹⁹ Handlin argued that immigrant groups did not experience communal life as was the norm in Europe. As already stated, the Czechs of Prague, did not live in a central European enclave where most lived in the village and walked every morning to their fields and pastures. Prague's farming Czechs lived on the peripheral areas of the town on their own farm land. After the formation of Prague, some of these Czech farmers moved to town while others remained on their farms with members of their family working at jobs within the village. Still a few, like Frank Vlasak, owned farm land but also ran a business in town. This is not equivalent to the European peasant experience in the strict sense. However, one experience that did transfer from Europe to North America was the communal mindset. This cooperative spirit melded the outlying farmers with the Czech town dwellers as both worked to ensure the success of the other. Meanwhile, organizations such as the fraternal orders and the church solidified these relationships.

Handlin also wrote that the Americanization process proved painful to most immigrants. He asserts that the emptiness of the prairie farm led to loneliness and

¹⁸ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 100; See also Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 53.

¹⁹ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), 95.

market-oriented agriculture promised an agonizing adaptation to American life.²⁰ Generally speaking, this is unassailable as at the least change causes pain. Anyone moving away from their home and extended family undergoes extreme apprehension. This would be compounded further if moving to a faraway place where the language is incomprehensible and your early efforts to learn the foreign tongue turn to frustration at the myriad idioms and colloquialisms. However, unlike some ethnic groups such as the Slovaks, Czechs arrived in the United States with every intention of making a new home. They came with their families, intent on carving a niche in the new land not only for themselves but for their descendents as well. No doubt many suffered anxiety and some depression. Nevertheless, the support system provided by their family, friends, and fellow Czechs helped most get through the tough times. Despite spending most of their time working on their farms, they could look forward to coming into town for church functions or a Saturday-night dance held at the Bohemian Hall or American Legion Hall. Moreover, as Lynch portrays in his work, Czech farmers proved more successful than their American-born counterparts in productivity and persistence on the land. They lived in larger houses with well-kept yards and painted out-buildings.²¹ Some of this success must be attributed to their group-mindedness and cooperative spirit.²²

Other economic questions that need exploration include the impact of Prague's Czechs on the overall economy of the farm town. Did the immigrants keep to themselves; did they isolate themselves into a separate business community doing business only with other members of their group? Were they excluded from the

²⁰ Ibid., 94.

²¹ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 13.

²² Emily Balch also wrote about how Czech farmers helped each other more than their American counterparts. See Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*, 319-320.

economic mainstream by the larger society? Another question is how did the American economic system affect the Prague Czechs? Did their European peasant background hurt them as they tried to navigate a competitive market economy? Did their rural experience mirror John Bodnar's statement concerning urban immigrants that "most would labor in routine, difficult jobs throughout their careers as would the majority of their children?"²³ In other words, was economic opportunity greater for members of an ethnic group in a farm town or in a large city? Finally, did the newcomers have separate classes within their ethnic structure? Was there a successful group of Czech entrepreneurs and business families who withdrew from their ethnic roots? Finally, did these immigrant entrepreneurs serve as catalysts of amalgamation into American society?²⁴

The new territorial town boomed. Within a few weeks, after town lots went on sale, Frank N. Newhouse (not a Czech), formerly of Kansas, moved to Prague and began publishing a weekly newspaper, the *Prague News*. In August, 1902, the front page contained the following:

Prague is but six weeks old, but she already has two banks, two hotels, five or six restaurants, one drug store, two meat markets, one furniture store, two hardware stores, one printing office, two lumber yards, one blacksmith shop, one livery barn, six saloons, one bakery, one tin shop, six stocks of general merchandise, three doctors, one real estate firm, and two barber shops.²⁵

From the beginning, the Czech farming community got involved in the activities of the new village. Some of the first townspeople included Czech families such as the

²³ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 183.

²⁴ Some scholars believe immigrant entrepreneurs served as agents of acculturation. See Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 138.

²⁵ *Prague News*, 28 August 1902. The first issue of the weekly *Prague News* appeared 24 July 1902. The paper was eight pages in length. Frank Newhouse, the publisher, was not Czech. Soon there was a rival newspaper, *the Prague Patriot*.

Voborniks, Cervenys, Kratkys, Zaloudiks, Bendys, and Bartas.²⁶ The very first issue of the *Prague News* ran advertisements for Frank Barta's General Store and Restaurant and the Czech-owned Dobry Lumber Company.²⁷ Frank Vlasak, one of the original land-run settlers, soon caught the business fever and opened up a grocery store also selling dry goods. A few years later, his

son operated a garage repairing the gasoline-powered automobiles becoming ubiquitous on the dirt streets of Prague.²⁸ In fact, one of the first banks to open its doors in the new town was the Lincoln County Bank and the directors, no doubt wanting

Czech business, chose Frank Vlasak as vice-president.²⁹

The Czech community actively participated in the economic realm of the new town and the passage of time did not seem to slow down their excitement. Czechs, whether original settlers or relative newcomers to the area, energetically joined the business community. During the next three decades of the town's existence, Czechs provided many products and services to the residents of Prague. Frank Svoboda opened a blacksmithing operation, C.M Sadlo prospered as the town's tailor, while Mike Mitacek

Barta Hotel



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum.

²⁶ Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 34.

²⁷ *Prague News*, 24 July 1902. As mentioned earlier, Frank Barta also built a hotel in the fall of 1902 (Barta Hotel). The hotel operated until 1961. Regarding the Dobry Lumber Company: The Czech word "dobry" means "good" in English.

²⁸ *Prague News*, 2 July 1915. Frank Vlasak called his business Vlasak's Cash Store.

²⁹ Tower, "A General History," 21-22.

repaired and dyed worn out shoes at Mitacek's Boot and Shoe Repair Shop.³⁰ Frank Lanik, a Czech farmer, opened a cotton gin on the outskirts of town, John Cerveny sold real estate, and Frank Kucera earned a living feeding hungry customers at his Busy Bee Café offering them the "best 25¢ meal in town."³¹ Other Czechs earned money through

**The Busy Bee Café opened in 1912
by Frank and Josephine Kucera.**



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum.

advertising special services in the newspapers. George Sadlo offered violin lessons to the residents of Prague, boasting that he had studied under Gerald Mraz of the Musical Art Institute of Oklahoma City who himself had studied under Ottokar Seveik of the Prague Conservatory of Music in Prague, Bohemia.³² In

addition, during the early 1920s George Sadlo and his wife Emily, taught music for Prague's public schools.³³ Another Czech, George Eret, directed the first town band and latecomer Jake Zabloudil cashiered at Prague's First State Bank during the Great War, dabbled in the oil business, and served a stint in the state legislature.³⁴

³⁰ The author could find no issues of the *Prague News*, *Prague Patriot*, or *Prague Record* that did not include an advertisement by a Czech business from 1902 to 1930.

³¹ *Prague Record*, 1 June 1916.

³² *Prague Record*, 7 September 1916.

³³ Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 73. George Sadlo later moved to Cleveland, Oklahoma accepting the position of high school band director. In 1928, the Cleveland High School band, under Sadlo's direction, won Oklahoma's Class B State Championship. See *Prague Record*, 23 May 1928.

³⁴ *Prague Record*, 29 June 1916, 1; See also Lincoln County Historical Society, *Lincoln County*, 404-405.

The first permanent building constructed in Prague was a bank. Within a few years the town contained three financial institutions and although, as noted earlier, none of the bank presidents were Czech, Frank Vlasak, one of the most respected of the Czech

**Wagon traffic on Broadway,
Prague's main street, ca 1909.**



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum.

many operated by members of the Czech community.

These Czech merchants and artisans were a part of the larger business community that besides numerous native-born white merchants also included people with German, Irish, and Jewish

citizens, served as vice-president of Lincoln County Bank.³⁵

Vlasak, whose father played in the Prague symphony in Bohemia, also built a two-story building in downtown Prague which became home for several economic enterprises. As the first decade passed, the growing town attracted businesses of all kinds,

C.M. Sadlo's Tailor Shop



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum.

³⁵ Tower, "A General History," 21-22; Lincoln County Bank was later renamed Prague National Bank.

backgrounds. A quick perusal of the very first issue of the *Prague News* reveals advertisements for non-Czech businesses operated by people with names like Crow, Fowler, Bond, Ayers, Alexander, Taylor, and Berger.³⁶ By 1915, Prague contained

thirteen mercantile establishments and although the number dropped slightly during the 1920s, the town continued to attract enterprising merchants, many of them not Czech.

The Leader, one of the

largest stores in the

growing town belonged to Morris Blumenthal, a Jewish merchant.³⁷ During the first three decades of Prague, two other Jewish families operated retail stores. Sol White operated a dry goods business until his retirement and Sam Kolodny, a Russian Jew, managed the popular New York Bargain Store until relocating after nineteen years of business in Prague to Wetumka in 1926.³⁸ One of the oldest firms in Prague was Emmet O’Kane’s One Price Store, formed in 1903. O’Kane, of Irish ancestry, proudly

Frank Zajic’s Service Station



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum.

³⁶ *Prague News*, 24 July 1902.

³⁷ *Prague Record*, 7 September 1916.

³⁸ *Prague Record*, 1 June 1916. The listed newspaper edition is an example of White’s and Kolodny’s advertisements. Both ran ads on a weekly basis. All three Jewish merchant claimed to be Russian Jews. In 1920, Sol White was the oldest at 53 with Blumenthal next at 48 years of age and Kolodny being the youngest at 35. See *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township. For Kolodny’s relocation to Wetumka see *Prague Record*, 10 February 1926.

advertised himself in the *Prague News* as “the redheaded feller.”³⁹ A member of the German community, Nola Mertes, operated a millinery parlor and hat shop inside O’Kane’s mercantile.⁴⁰ Another ethnic Irishman, Vern McKim, ran a livery business while two fellow Irishmen managed one of the drug stores in Prague during the second decade of the twentieth century.⁴¹

Neither the first local dentist nor the postmaster was Czech and only one of the doctors during the period investigated claimed Bohemian stock. In 1904, that Bohemian doctor, John Z. Mraz, advertised himself as a physician and surgeon in the *Prague News* with his office located at Biggs Drug Store.⁴² Mraz practiced medicine in Prague until he moved to Chicago in August 1905.⁴³ Another Czech ethnic, John Mastena, opened a chiropractic clinic in the fall of 1920 and later in the decade, Frank Klabzuba returned to Prague after attending Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, and opened a dental office.⁴⁴ Prague even had a town crier in its early days. William Woods, an ex-slave, daily drove along the streets of Prague in a horse-drawn hack, ringing a bell, proclaiming

³⁹ For an example of O’Kane’s advertisements, see *Prague News*, 17 September 1915.

⁴⁰ *Prague Record*, 16 November 1916. Jacob Mertes, owner of Mertes Hardware, died in November, 1916. The newspaper listed his place of birth as Obermehlen, Germany. He is also listed as born in Germany on the census records. See *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census for South Creek Township.

⁴¹ *Prague Record*, 9 June 1916. The proprietors of The Rexall Drug Store were listed in the newspaper as “Brannigan and McDowell.” The 1910 census lists Clayton Brannigan as a druggist. However, he was not listed on the 1920 census. There is no listing for anyone named McDowell on either the 1910 or 1920 census. It is very plausible that McDowell arrived in Prague after the taking of the 1910 census and departed before the 1920 census. Furthermore, there are no advertisements in the newspaper for Rexall Drug Store after 1919. The store apparently went out of business before 1920. See *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁴² *Prague News* 10 November 1904.

⁴³ *Prague News*, 24 August 1905. Dr. Mraz moved his practice to an office in the Prague National Bank building sometime in 1905.

⁴⁴ *Prague Record*, 7 October 1920; For information on Frank Klabzuba’s dental office, see *Prague Record*, 31 August 1927.

the important news and upcoming events to pedestrians. When not employed shouting the news, “uncle” William performed odd jobs for the local inhabitants.⁴⁵

William Woods was not the only black living in Prague. Although the African-American population remained small throughout this period (see chapter three), the blacks who migrated to Prague did not receive the same economic opportunities as other residents, including the Czechs. Examining the decennial censuses from 1910 to 1930 reveals a similar result. While all African-American families listed their occupation as “farmer” on the 1900 census, with the formation of Prague the status of newer arrivals changed. While a few still claimed farming as their livelihood, black Americans in Prague overwhelmingly worked as laborers. The specific jobs for African American men listed on the various census manuscripts ranged from “odd jobs” to “cook” to “cotton picker” with a few blacks claiming employment as “cake punchers” at the cotton oil mill. On the 1920 census, one of Prague’s blacks, Augustus Gray, claimed that he was self-employed as a “scavenger.” Many African-American women also worked. Their job descriptions varied from “cook” to “laundress” to “servant”.⁴⁶

Unlike members of the immigrant Czech population, no blacks served on the board of a bank; no blacks owned a building in downtown Prague; no African-Americans supervised a lumber company or operated a dry goods store. Instead, like most towns and cities in America the white community, which controlled the overall economic apparatus, relegated to the black residents of Prague only the most menial and low-paying

⁴⁵ Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 60. Woods took ill in 1916. The *Prague Record* ran a short article about the beloved “uncle” William: “William Woods, one of our respected colored citizens, who has been quite sick, was able to be out again, Monday.” See *Prague Record*, 22 June 1916.

⁴⁶ See *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township; *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township; *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township; *Census of Population: 1930*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

jobs. Perhaps this is another reason for the acceptance of the Czech community by the native-born white population. Czechs, like the dominant native-born residents, were Caucasian. Czechs were white.

While the Czech immigrants of Prague enjoyed a higher economic status than blacks in the area, such was not the case in most northern cities. When the “new immigration” began around 1880, most northern cities contained only small numbers of African Americans. Thus, when the massive wave of southern and eastern European newcomers crowded into the restricted confines of cities like Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit they placed enormous pressure on the infrastructure and services of the cities. These low-paid factory workers usually sought apartments close to their work and ethnic kinsmen. Entrepreneurs responded by building “dumbbell tenements” which housed thousands of immigrants on a single city block. The areas of high immigrant concentration soon degraded into unsanitary, crime-infested slums with the Italians, Poles, Czechs, and other groups becoming the focus of ridicule and blame by many native-born Americans. Nativists attacked the newcomers for their Popish faith, their strange languages, and unfamiliar customs. Occupying the bottom rung of the social and economic ladder, the immigrants became the whipping boy for any perceived societal problems. Many Americans did not accept immigrants and saw them as a threat to the American way of life. This was not the case in Prague. In the farm town of Prague, Oklahoma, the bottom visage on the collective totem pole did not look Slavic; the face was much darker.

Thus, the presence of an even more despised group in Prague resulted in an early acceptance of the immigrant group. An immigrant group scorned by many in the North,

it appears the native-born white residents of Prague overlooked the Catholicism and freethought tendencies of these central European émigrés, in part, because at least their skin was white. With the given evidence it is impossible to state with complete certainty that the existence of a small black community in Prague displaced ethnic persecution prevalent in northern cities. Nevertheless, having another minority group (the blacks) could only appreciate your value in the village.⁴⁷

Plentiful economic opportunities abounded in the early years of Prague, at least for the white population. The territorial frontier town needed and welcomed anyone willing to work and contribute to the town's success. People from different backgrounds arrived in the small agricultural village for the chance to open their own business or work for one of the successful business enterprises. Non-Czechs from states such as Missouri, Kansas, Tennessee, and Illinois migrated to the farming community in hopes of reaping economic success. Unlike some urban areas, Czechs found little discrimination or harassment about their "strange" ways. Czechs from other states also found their way to Lincoln County. While most of the original settlers came from the Midwestern states of Nebraska, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Kansas, many later arrivals migrated from Texas. These included a number of families proclaiming to be from the Czech province of Moravia rather than Bohemia. Although Moravians and Bohemians spoke the same language and both considered themselves Czech, there were a few differences primarily centered on religion. Most Bohemians held to either the Catholic faith or claimed freethought as their principal belief with a few drifting towards Presbyterianism. However, Protestant sects

⁴⁷ For a provocative examination of why blacks fared worse than white immigrants, see Stanley Lieberson's *A Piece of the Pie: Blacks and White Immigrants Since 1880* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980). In the work, Lieberson agrees that blacks migrating north suffered more discrimination than the previous immigrants from central, eastern and southern Europe. However, he maintains that race was not the ultimate cause of why they economically did worse than white immigrants.

such as Methodism and later the Baptist church attracted many Moravians. According to the 1900 census manuscripts of South Creek Township, only three Czech families listed their last state of residence as Texas.⁴⁸ This actually shrunk to only two families on the 1910 census.⁴⁹ However, perusing the 1920 census shows that thirty-three families of Czech stock recorded their previous residence as Texas with twenty of them claiming to be Moravian. The 1920 census taker, unlike the two previous national counts, differentiated between Moravians and Bohemians. Although Prague's Bohemian families dominated with seventy-six, Moravians showed a strong minority with twenty-eight families.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the name "Bohemian" was already the accepted moniker for Prague's Czechs among the non-Czech population. The non-Czech population of Prague referred to all Czechs, whether from Bohemia or Moravia, as Bohemian. This remains true even today. Nevertheless, regardless of which province Czechs claimed to originate, many did well in their new environment. In fact, by the 1920s many were relatively quite prosperous.⁵¹

In the early days of Prague, Czech merchants, because of their shared language and group identity, attracted many customers from their ethnic kinsmen. The collective mindset of the group suggests that Czechs stuck together for the benefit of the whole. Although impossible to prove, it appears logical to suggest that many Czechs carried on business with other Czechs. Despite the census records claiming that by 1920 most Czechs spoke English, some preferred to communicate in their native tongue. In 1920,

⁴⁸*Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁴⁹*Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census, Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁵⁰*Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁵¹ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 51.

Wes Klabzuba, an auctioneer, advertised in the newspaper that he “cried in either English or the Bohemian tongue.”⁵²

However, Prague’s Czechs did not practice economic exclusivity; they eagerly interacted with non-Czechs in the community. Czech farmers sold crops to Benjamin F. Whitmore and had their cotton ginned at his mill.⁵³ The *Prague Record* reported that Joseph Lanik (Czech) and Cliff Parks (non-Czech) traveled to Shawnee together on a business trip.⁵⁴ Although it is not possible to determine which specific stores individual shoppers, whether Czech or non-Czech, favored a glimpse at their hiring practices suggests there was little or no prejudice. Moreover, the economic interaction began soon after the construction of the town. For example, Frank Griffin tended bar at John Zabloudil’s saloon and John Pierson and M. J. Tarpey worked as barbers at Czech immigrant, Joe Eret’s barber shop in 1905.⁵⁵ The *Prague News*, proud of Eret’s new barber shop bragged about his operation:

As evidence of his faith in the future of Prague, Joe Eret has invested more than two thousand dollars in a barber shop and its equipment and now presides over one of the finest shops to be found in Oklahoma. His shop has been furnished with all the latest designs of furniture, consisting of three chairs, four elegant mirrors, mug cases, wash basin, boot black’s chair, etc. and in addition to this he has added a bath room with two fine porcelain tubs, hot and cold water supplies. A wind mill and tank furnishes the water and a hot water tank keeps on a supply of hot water all the time. . . . The people of Prague should show their appreciation of his enterprise by turning him a liberal patronage.⁵⁶

⁵² *Prague Record*, 7 October 1920.

⁵³ *The Prague Record* wrote that “J.F. Walenta sold a load of corn to B.F. Whitmore at 75 cents a bushel.” The paper also reported that another Czech, Joe Piter, “sold a load of hay to B.F. Whitmore.” See *Prague Record*, 10 August, 1916 and *Prague Record*, 7 September 1916. Whitmore’s birthplace was Missouri. In addition, both his parents were born in the United States. Whitmore’s wife, Elizabeth, was also born in America (Illinois). However, her father was a German immigrant. See *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁵⁴ *Prague Record*, 23 September 1920.

⁵⁵ *Prague News*, 9 February 1905; 13 April 1905.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 24 November 1904.

A Czech and non-Czech, Charles Vobornik and C.E. Kinsey, formed a partnership and together operated the Broadway Meat Market for several years.⁵⁷ Several Czechs erected buildings in Prague and accepted any businesses in the community as tenants regardless of ethnicity.⁵⁸ This inclusive trend continued into the second decade of the town. In 1915, Vern McKim, the Irish liveryman, took a job at William Vlasak's garage. Happy to have the Irishman working for him, Vlasak proudly advertised McKim's presence at his establishment and urged everyone to bring their malfunctioning motor vehicle to Vlasak's shop for McKim to fix.⁵⁹ In addition, another of Vlasak's employees was Carl Fiel, an ethnic German.⁶⁰ Julius Bontty, a Czech farmer, advertised "for help to bale 200 acres of prairie hay."⁶¹ Bontty did not specify in the advertisement that he only wished to hire Czech hands. He probably wanted any strong young men to aid him in the tough, hot job of baling hay.

Wes Klabzuba, shared calling duties with another Czech, A. J. Balaun and two non-Czechs, William Alexander and H.E. Bevers. The four men advertised together on a weekly basis in the newspapers before World War I.⁶² During the 1920s, Wes Klabzuba joined another non-Czech named Ogburn, to form an auctioneering business. Later in the decade Klabzuba again formed an auctioneering partnership with another non-Czech named Barrett. Klabzuba and his partners throughout the 1920s advertised their services

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 November 1907.

⁵⁸ Example of non-Czechs operating businesses on Czech-owned property include: E. E. Long ran a candy store inside the Klabzuba building; Frank Tugwell worked at Hatcher & Co.'s drug store located in the Cerveny building on Broadway Avenue; Henry Cheek operated a restaurant in the Vlasak building on the corner of Main and Broadway. See *Prague News*, 26 December 1907, 2 January 1908, 29 August 1907.

⁵⁹ *Prague News*, 30 July 1915.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 July 1915.

⁶¹ *Prague Record*, 20 July 1916.

⁶² For an example of the auctioneers' advertisement see *Prague Record*, 29 June 1916.

practically every week in the local paper.⁶³ Furthermore, non-Czech business establishments hired Czechs when they needed help or even to oversee their business. The Amsden Lumber Company employed P.J. Bartosh, a Czech, to run its operations and a young Czech woman, Henrietta Sosenko, worked as a saleslady at the New York Bargain Store for the Russian Jew, Sam Kolodny. Kolodny also employed Eva Shumate who was neither Jewish nor Czech.⁶⁴ Frank Vlasak's vice-presidency of Lincoln County Bank shows that many native-born businesspeople in the Prague area concerned themselves more with earnings and permanence than with nativist emotions prevalent throughout much of America during this period.

With the discovery of oil in 1915 in nearby Paden, a minor oil boom came to Prague.⁶⁵ The tiny village of Paden sat nine miles east of Prague with the larger town benefiting through increased economic activity. People visited Prague to purchase luxuries in addition to staples causing a brisk business and an increase in the number of mercantile firms and restaurants. The discovery of oil deposits on farmland in the vicinity of Prague continued into the 1920s. Unfortunately, the explorers never found any oil in the immediate environs of the town. However, oil was discovered on Morris Blumenthal's Leader Ranch directly outside of Prague. Blumenthal, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, also owned the Leader General Store in downtown Prague. The oil booms brought added prosperity to the town and caused people to pay close attention to the price of oil. In August 1915, the *Prague News* rejoiced that "the price of oil stood at sixty

⁶³ For example, see *Prague Record*, 6 January 1926; See also *Prague Record*, 13 January 1926. The advertisements do not mention Barrett's first name. There is a Barrett listed in the census with the first name of David. However, in 1920 his age was listed as 75 and he does not show up in the 1930 census. David Barrett may well have been Wes Klabzuba's auctioneering partner. But it is impossible to state this conclusively because by 1926 David Barrett would have been around 81 years of age.

⁶⁴ *Prague Record*, 27 July 1917.

⁶⁵ Tower, "A General History," 28.

cents a barrel, an increase of twenty cents in only ten days.”⁶⁶ The discovery of oil in the Prague area occurred only a couple of years after Henry Ford’s perfection of the assembly line in automobile production. Car dealerships opened in the bustling town and with the increase in automobile traffic came the call to improve the town’s and county’s roads.⁶⁷ “Wish we had a good dirt road from Prague to Chandler. The shape of the road is in now is a fright,” lamented the *Prague Record*.⁶⁸ The call did not go unheeded. Quickly, the citizens of Prague mobilized, forming the Good Roads Boosters. The next two years witnessed caravans of cars traveling throughout the county “boosting” for everyone to urge their state representatives to build wider and smoother roads.⁶⁹

One such booster trip ended disastrously when in August 1916, a group of Prague boosters set out in five cars to travel the county rallying the people to support their cause of building better roads. The group was ethnically diverse, including at least two Czechs, Van Sojka and Henry Prykrill, who agreed to drive. While crossing a bridge near Davenport, the expanse collapsed plunging Prykrill’s vehicle twenty-five feet into the shallow creek below. Miraculously, all the passengers except the driver received only minor cuts and abrasions. Prykrill, knocked unconscious for several minutes, broke his nose, injured his back, and cut his face.⁷⁰ Luckily, the incident killed no one and only temporarily set back the Good Roads Boosters and their quest for easier travel. If anything the accident strengthened their argument for the county to improve the roads.

⁶⁶ *Prague News*, 13 August 1915.

⁶⁷ For examples of the call for better roads see *Prague News*, 15 July 1915; 6 August 1915.

⁶⁸ *Prague Record*, 27 July 1916.

⁶⁹ *Prague Record*, 31 August 1916.

⁷⁰ *Prague Record*, 31 August 1916.

Both the town and county roads did undergo improvements including the paving of Prague's Main Street in 1926.⁷¹

Prague's merchants answered the call for more automobiles. The Jones brothers began selling Buicks in 1915 followed by F.S. Irvine and his Maxwell cars. Irvine sold his Maxwells for only \$695 attracting many who did not wish to pay the \$950 to \$1485 asked by the Joneses for their Buicks.⁷² Not to be outdone, Preston G. Rawdon opened the Prague Garage in 1916.⁷³ Rawdon sold the even cheaper Fords to cash-strapped farmers and townspeople or anyone looking for inexpensive transportation. One Czech who got into the auto industry was Charles Klabzuba, son of the aforementioned saloon keeper. In 1927 Klabzuba resigned as cashier of the First National Bank and started his own business, the Reliable Chevrolet Company, selling and repairing Henry Ford's primary competition.⁷⁴

Despite the oil boom, cotton and the railroad formed the basis of Prague's economy until the late 1920s. In 1900, Lincoln County grew more cotton than any other county in Oklahoma Territory and by 1910, led the entire state in cotton acreage.⁷⁵ In October 1904, the *Prague News* proudly proclaimed from the front page of the weekly newspaper that "200 bales of cotton sold in Prague on this day [4 October]."⁷⁶ The advent of World War I spurred even more cotton activity. Although a major hail storm damaged many farmers' crops in 1916, the newspaper, only a few months later, wrote of the large war profits made by farmers not only around Prague but throughout the United

⁷¹ Tower, "A General History," 51; See also Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 45.

⁷² *Prague News*, 16 July 1915; See also *Prague News*, 6 August 1915.

⁷³ *Prague Record*, 8 June 1916.

⁷⁴ *Prague Record*, 20 July 1927; See also *Prague Record*, 17 August 1927.

⁷⁵ Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 94; Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 7.

⁷⁶ *Prague News*, 6 October 1904.

States.⁷⁷ Despite the overall success of producing and selling cotton, several farmers sold their farms during these years. Most appeared to be non-Czechs selling their holdings, but the newspapers also included Czechs selling their farms. Frank Vlasak was one of these. Vlasak sold his farm land during the winter of 1916 and thereafter focused on his economic ventures in the town.⁷⁸ However, cotton production took a giant hit in 1928 when boll weevils almost completely destroyed Prague's cotton farming region. Thereafter, farmers looked to other commodities, especially livestock and growing hay for feed.⁷⁹

The first train passed through Prague on July 4, 1903. The townspeople, now numbering over six hundred, celebrated the train's arrival with a parade, barbecue, and baseball game. Benjamin Franklin Whitmore, local mill owner and mayor, gave a grandiose speech about the rosy future of the growing town.⁸⁰ Excitement over the prospects of the town expanded exponentially. Some envisioned a town that could one day rival nearby Chandler or even Shawnee in size and prosperity. Throughout the railroad era of Prague, six trains normally stopped daily, three heading east and three heading west.⁸¹ During the next thirty-six years the Ft. Smith and Western provided transportation for crops and passengers. The railroad proved important to the fledgling

⁷⁷ For information on the hail storm see *Prague Record*, 22 June 1916; War profits article appeared in *Prague Record*, 11 January 1917.

⁷⁸ *Prague Record*, 7 December 1916. Vlasak sold his farm holdings to C.A. Gripe and A.C. Sahn; neither were Czech.

⁷⁹ Tower, "A General History," 18.

⁸⁰ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma, 98; See also Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A.*, 100.

⁸¹ *Prague Record*, 1 June 1916.

community and helped Prague become the hub of economic activity for many farmers in southeastern Lincoln County.⁸²

Of course, not all Czech immigrants and ethnics succeeded economically. In the United States's competitive market economy Czech enterprises, like non-Czech ventures, failed and went out of business on a regular basis. Others closed for more personal reasons such as Vlasak's Cash Store, which closed upon the Prague pioneer's untimely death due to asphyxiation at his home in 1929.⁸³ The introduction of automobiles and tractors ultimately ended Frank Sekera's dream of establishing a harness shop and Jake Zabloudil, despite serving in the state legislature and in 1916, becoming president of the First State Bank, left Prague discouraged and divorced and moved to Texas.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, many Czechs thrived in the bustling small-town economy to the point of being considered by some as excessively materialistic in their outlook.⁸⁵

Many Czechs in Prague quickly succeeded in rising higher than most of their urban counterparts who struggled in routine, difficult jobs year after year.⁸⁶ John Bodnar argued that "most [urban] immigrant businessmen lacked access to large amounts of capital" and thus remained small serving only a neighborhood clientele.⁸⁷ This may very well be true concerning America's urban immigrant population as a whole. As early as the 1880s, observers of the Czech urban population noticed that many succeeded quite

⁸² Due to financial difficulties during the Great Depression, the Ft. Smith and Western Railroad Company abandoned their Prague coaling station on 7 August 1939. See Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 98.

⁸³ *Prague Record*, 12 September 1929.

⁸⁴ *Prague Record*, 1 June 1916; Lincoln County Historical Society, *Lincoln County: Oklahoma History*, 404-405. Although Zabloudil left Prague for Abilene, Texas he continued to keep abreast of his adopted town via the newspapers. In 1926, the *Prague Record* listed their subscribers which included Abilene's Jake Zabloudil. See *Prague Record*, 14 April 1926.

⁸⁵ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 60.

⁸⁶ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 183.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

well. In a long article published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1886, a reporter who spent three days wandering around in the Bohemian district of the windy city wrote: “It is a mistake to think that the Bohemians are only common laborers and wood-shovers. They are blacksmiths, watchmakers, and wood-turners . . . and they are all steady, sober, active men.”⁸⁸ The reporter went on to say that “many of them are excellent cabinet makers and upholsterers” and described the entire group as prosperous.⁸⁹ Although, the reporter’s conclusion was a general statement there were, with little doubt, also failures, slackers, and even criminals among the Czech population of Chicago.

Likewise in rural communities like Milligan and Wilbur, Nebraska, where Czechs numerically dominated to the point of ethnic exclusivity, the group thrived.⁹⁰ Despite arriving comparatively poor and with few skills other than farming, some realized the opportunity for success in the economic realm and became retail store keepers supplying their ethnic kin with the goods they needed.⁹¹ After only a few years, the town of Milligan included a doctor, dentist, hotel owner, and several school teachers of Czech ethnicity.⁹² As in Prague, the immigrant populations of Milligan and Wilbur, Nebraska, enjoyed spirits and recreation prompting some Czechs to operate saloons and dance halls.⁹³

It appears that regardless of where Czechs settled, they generally succeeded in rising above the poverty level with many enjoying the fruits of the American economic

⁸⁸ Paul M. Nemecek, *Historical and Cultural Essays on Czechs in America*, (n.p.: 2005), 41-42. Most Czechs lived in the southwestern part of Chicago.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

⁹⁰ Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929), 84, 119.

⁹¹ Robert Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-Village: A Study of Social Persistence and Change* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1933, reprint edition, 1970), 18; See also Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 54.

⁹² Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-Village*, 18; See Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 121.

⁹³ Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 60, 89.

system. Two reasons emerge as primary explanations for the success of so many Czechs wherever they lived, that being their cooperative mindset and their western outlook. As documented in chapter two, the United States Immigration Commission created in 1907 also noticed the Czechs' peculiar success, especially compared with other Slavic groups such as Slovaks and Poles. The Commission explained it this way: "Czechs were thoroughly imbued with the progressive spirit of the West."⁹⁴ Again, German-speaking lands, such as the Holy Roman Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire both centered in Austria, dominated Bohemia for centuries endowed the Czechs with, if not an appreciation of, at least a familiarity with western European ways and customs. This obviously helped them adjust and prosper in their new homeland.

Nevertheless, there remain differences in the Czech communities. This especially holds true when comparing rural to urban. In Bodnar's immigrant synthesis, he states that "in reality two immigrant Americas existed. One consisted largely of workers with menial jobs. The other, a smaller component, held essentially positions which pursued personal gain and leadership. Immigrants did not enter a common mass called America but adapted to two separate but related worlds which might be termed broadly working class and middle class."⁹⁵ Writing specifically about immigrants from Czechoslovakia, Joseph Roucek argued that, for the most part, the successful newcomers learned the English language and a profession and got "lost within the American inundation and very seldom associate with the rest of the Czechoslovaks of lesser importance. They pride themselves on their 'Americanism' and assiduously avoid social contact with the

⁹⁴ Joseph Chada, *The Czechs in the United States* (Chicago: Czechoslovak Society of Art and Sciences, 1981), 37.

⁹⁵ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 208.

immigrants on the other side of the social fence.”⁹⁶ Generally speaking, this did not hold true in the farm town of Prague, Oklahoma, especially with first-generation Czechs. There were, to be sure, Czechs who left the city for better economic opportunities such as Gerald Mraz. Mraz relocated to the much larger town of Oklahoma City to attract more students for his music school. Nonetheless, he apparently maintained contact with his friends in Prague and loved the small farming community because upon the death of his wife he requested her burial be in Prague and practically the entire town turned out for her funeral. Another successful Prague Czech who left was Jake Zabloudil. After serving in Oklahoma’s House of Representatives, Zabloudil went through a divorce and abruptly left town for Texas.⁹⁷

Perusing the membership rolls of the Western Czech Brotherhood, Prague’s primary Czech fraternal association, shows that their numbers included farmers, tailors, blacksmiths, and businessmen. Some of them such as Frank Vlasak and Joe Hrды, who built one of the early brick buildings in Prague and operated the C.O.D. Meat Market, gained much success and acceptance by the larger community and, relatively speaking, were quite wealthy. While others, such as the farmer Joseph Rubac or Frank Sekera, acquired less wealth but were content with growing cotton or operating a harness shop and raising their children in the usually peaceful farming village.⁹⁸

An important distinction between the urban cities described by Bodnar and the small town of Prague is the wealth ceiling. The opportunities to acquire extraordinary financial gain in a city such as Chicago or New York dwarfed the prospects of a rural

⁹⁶ Roucek, “The Passing of American Czechoslovaks,” 617.

⁹⁷ *Prague Record*, 1 June 1916; Lincoln County Historical Society, *Lincoln County: Oklahoma History*, 404-405.

⁹⁸ Bohemian Hall, Membership Rolls, *Central Book*.

community like Prague. Quite simply, the economic ceiling was not as high in Prague, Oklahoma as in New York, Chicago, or even Omaha. This meant that the economic divide was not as wide among the residents of Prague whether they were Czech or not. With the exception of the Blumenthal family on whose land petroleum explorers found oil, most of the “wealthy” residents of Prague would have been considered middle class at best if they had been living in Chicago, New York, or St. Louis. This resulted in a stronger feeling of community among the residents of the farm town. There was not an exclusive suburb for successful Czechs to escape their fellow countrymen. There were no private country clubs where the wealthy elite gathered to avoid the masses. In fact, there were no country clubs at all. There is simply no evidence that successful Czechs segregated themselves from the others.

Instead, both Czechs and non-Czechs, because of their geographical situation, learned that if their community was to be successful they had to get along. It was the diverse population incorporated into such a small town that forced quick acculturation and amalgamation onto the Czech population. If a Czech blacksmith, barber, tailor, or grocer wished to succeed he simply had to attract at least some non-Czechs to his business. Likewise, with the native-born or non-Czech ethnic business enterprises, they too needed Czech customers to survive economically. This is not to suggest that everything was harmonious or that Prague was an economic utopia. It was not. Businesses failed, people moved, the black population suffered hardship and lacked economic opportunities afforded others, and during World War I ethnic tensions rose between the Czechs and Germans of Prague. Nor is this to suggest that Czechs gave up being Czechs and forsook their European culture. As will be seen in the next chapter,

they did everything they could to maintain their language, customs, and shared history.

They battled to inculcate into their young their ethnic identity, the internal uniqueness of being Czech.

CHAPTER 6

CULTURAL LIFE: CZECH FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

Fifty-seven year old Oswald Blumel did not notice the tiredness that enveloped his body. He paid no attention to his need for sleep, his need for rest after such a long journey. He was much too excited. After almost a year of planning and raising money for the 1920 trip, Prague's Sokol gymnasts at last arrived in Prague – Prague, Bohemia. Their expressed purpose was to take part in a gymnastic exhibition featuring Czech Sokols from all over the United States and Czechoslovakia. However, a bigger reason for the trip was to visit relatives and see and experience the new independent nation of Czechoslovakia.¹

Less than two years had transpired since the end of the massive bloodletting of the Great War. After leaving Chicago, the small group of Czech athletes arrived in France on May 23, 1920 and spent a few days in Paris. From France, Prague's Sokol made their way to Austria and the former capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Vienna. Although most in the party had never seen Vienna, both young and old identified the city as the center of Czech persecution. During the war, newspaper articles and speeches depicted the shameful wickedness of the Habsburg regime in the most unflattering terms

¹ Upon returning to Prague, Blumel wrote a detailed article about the European trip for the *Prague Record*. See *Prague Record*, 16 September 1920.

However, after visiting the capital of the empire even the most virulent Habsburg critic had to admit to the beauty of the city. The Austrians further disarmed the Czech group by showing them nothing but kindness. From Vienna, the small band of Oklahomans traveled through the southeastern part of Germany, through the Bavarian Forest, and crossed the international border into Czechoslovakia. At first, some of the people they met spoke German. But as they continued on towards the capital of the new nation, Czech became the dominant tongue.²

Prague was as beautiful as Blumel remembered. Despite not being in Bohemia for over twenty-five years, memories of his childhood and early adulthood flooded the older man's mind. Nevertheless, Blumel still believed he made the right decision in leaving. He managed his own hardware business in the Oklahoma farm town and lived in a comfortable house which he owned. Although his three children had all been born in the United States, he and his immigrant wife, Emelia, made sure their kids learned the Czech culture through the Sokol and Bohemian Hall and both agreed that the costly trip was important and worthwhile.³

The gymnastic exhibition, although exciting and fun, proved only a small part of the trip. The Oklahoma Czechs, like all traveling American groups, were treated like royalty by their hosts. They ate well and the gymnastic schedule allowed the group ample time to explore the city of their forefathers at their leisure. Blumel took time to visit his childhood home and re-meet friends and relatives he had not seen in decades and likely would never see again. The entire trip was exhilarating to everyone, especially the

² Ibid.

³ For details concerning Blumel's family, occupation, and home ownership see *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township. Blumel was also a member of The Western Czech Brotherhood Association. See Bohemian Hall, Membership Rolls, *Central Book*.

older chaperones like Oswald Blumel. When, at last, the day of leaving dawned it was with bittersweet emotions that the Czech expatriate hugged and shook hands a final time with the memories of his former life.⁴

Oswald Blumel, like many Czechs in Prague, continued to love the country of his past. Despite realizing their families were better off economically in the United States, they never wanted to forget their heritage, their sense of who they were. So, for this reason, Czechs throughout the United States held fast to their European ways and earnestly tried to pass their Bohemian uniqueness to their descendants. Although with time and new generations of children born and bred in the United States, their attempts to safeguard specific traditions, especially the Czech language, quietly fell by the wayside. However, despite failure in the grand attempt to create a Czech enclave in the midst of a foreign society, the Czechs in Prague, Oklahoma succeeded in inculcating for many descendants a permanent Czech identity. Furthermore, the matrix of this lasting group identity emerged during the early decades of settlement and arose from the group's persistent efforts to preserve their distinctiveness in a torrent of change.

In 1915, the *Prague News* published a directory of local lodges. The list included the Masonic Lodge, Knights of Pythius, ODD Fellows, Z.C.B.J. (Zapadni Cesko-Bratsky Jednota or Western Czech Brotherhood Association), Modern Woodmen of America, and Woodmen of the World.⁵ Although every lodge included Czechs, the lodge that attracted the most Czechs was the Western Czech Fraternal Association (Z.C.B.J.).

⁴ *Prague Record*, 16 September 1920.

⁵ *Prague News*, 27 July 1915.

Despite the fact that the Z.C.B.J. lodge stood at the apex of Bohemian social life, the Czech community's original fraternal association was the Bohemian Slavonian Benevolent Society (Cesko-Slovansky Podporujici Spojek) with its headquarters in St. Louis. The Missouri Czechs established the Bohemian Slavonian Benevolent Society in 1854 long before the advent of the "new" immigration. The St. Louis society was America's oldest and largest Czech fraternal association in the United States and provided help, both financially and psychologically, for many Czech families throughout the country.⁶ A year after the 1891 land run, five Czechs living in the Dent area of Lincoln County formed Lodge 214 of the Bohemian Slavonian Benevolent Society to encourage fellowship and cooperation and to provide aid and life insurance for the immigrant farming community. The charter members, Frank Vlasak, Jan Sefcik, Jan Vobornik, Jiri Walla, and Vaclav Ladra, did not erect a permanent meeting place but met in private homes on a regular basis. The lodge meetings and social gatherings provided a refuge for the newcomers from the intense labor and emotional struggle of creating functioning farms and finding their niche in a strange land.⁷

However, in 1896 a schism developed within the national association between the eastern and western lodges. The eastern lodges, containing an older membership, received an inordinate amount of the benefits being paid out due to their aged members.⁸ In addition, the Bohemian Slavonian Benevolent Society did not admit women to their

⁶ Thomas Capek, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America: A Study of their National, Cultural, Political, Social, Economic, and Religious Life* (New York: Arno Press, 1920; repr., 1969), 258.

⁷ Russell Willford Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma: A Comparative Study of the Stability of a Czech Farm Group in Lincoln County Oklahoma, and the Factors Relating to its Stability," *Bulletin of Oklahoma Agricultura and Mechanical College* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College) 39, no. 13 (June 1942): 95; Melva Losch Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A., Prague (Kolache-Ville) Oklahoma* (Norman: Hooper Printing, Inc., 1978), 134-135.

⁸ Rose Rosicky lists the death benefit as \$250. See Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929), 357.

ranks; it was a men's only club.⁹ Chafing at the rising monthly dues charged by the national headquarters in St. Louis and the desire to allow women to join, several western lodges seceded from the parent organization and established their own association in 1897 with headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska.¹⁰ This new group chose the name Western Bohemian Fraternal Association (Zapadni Cesko-Bratska Jednota or Z.C.B.J.). The Czech farmers living in the southeastern corner of Lincoln County, Oklahoma joined this secession establishing a charter lodge in the new organization – Lodge 46. When Prague incorporated five years later, the Z.C.B.J. Lodge moved from the rural community of Dent to the new, larger town. In 1901, while still meeting in Dent, the lodge contained fifty-three members, including sixteen women. By the end of 1902, membership in the lodge grew to seventy-three and the number of women members jumped to twenty-six – over a third of the total.¹¹ Unlike many early twentieth century associations, both ethnic and native, the Z.C.B.J. lodge welcomed female members on an equal basis as men and many Czech women eagerly joined their husbands as members.¹² Prague's Bohemian Hall was a community lodge in which family participation was the norm. Not only could husband and wife join, but their children attended most functions as well. Moreover, as Czechs married non-Czechs the lodge also welcomed their spouses.¹³

Once relocated to Prague, members continued meeting in homes and sometimes at the local schoolhouse. As the lodge grew, members agreed that they needed a permanent structure. John Barta, a Catholic and not affiliated with the Z.C.B.J., offered to give the

⁹ Ibid., 356-357.

¹⁰ Bruce M. Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871-1914," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 160.

¹¹ Western Czech Brotherhood Association (Zapadni Ceske Bratska Jednota), Bohemian Hall, Membership Rolls; *Central Book (Hlavni Kniha)*, Lodge 46, Prague, Oklahoma.

¹² Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 357.

¹³ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 94. See also Bohemian Hall, *Central Book*, Membership List.

lodge an acre of land.¹⁴ In return for his munificence, Barta received free admission to all lodge dances, plays, lectures, or any program held at the Bohemian Hall for the rest of his life. Finally in 1917, after myriad fund raisers and donated labor by many members, a permanent two-story building south of the Catholic Church was completed. In the dedication ceremony, lodge members christened the red-brick structure Bohemian Hall. The Hall became a focal point in the lives of many Prague Czechs sponsoring all sorts of events including dances, plays, coming-out parties, and special lectures.¹⁵ In addition to activities, membership in the lodge included a life insurance policy for husband and wife as well as financial help when a member became ill or injured. The national organization in Omaha published a handbook for all its lodges and in addition to death benefits, the handbook states that lodges are established:

To unite its members fraternally and to furnish them with an opportunity for mutual education and advancement, and to furnish opportunity for relief and aid in event of their sickness, disability or distress.

To arrange educational lectures and debates, to support Czech-American national understandings, especially schools and Sokol organizations, to establish and maintain Czech libraries, and to cultivate the mother tongue and culture in general among its members.¹⁶

The Western Czech Brotherhood Association (Z.C.B.J.) came out of an

¹⁴ John Barta is found nowhere on the membership lists of Lodge 46. In addition Barta is not buried in the Czech National Cemetery. John Barta is buried in the City Cemetery.

¹⁵ *The Prague Patriot*, *Prague News*, and later the *Prague Record* seldom published an issue without a short article or advertisement on the next event to be held at the Z.C.B.J. Lodge (Bohemian Hall). Lynch and Brown both discuss the importance of the Bohemian Hall to the Czech community. See Lynch, 96; Brown, 135-136.

¹⁶ *Z.C.B.J. Handbook*, 1939. Quoted in Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 95.

intellectual movement known as freethought. As discussed in chapter four, many Czech immigrants left the Catholic Church soon after arriving in the United States. These

Bohemian Hall, Prague, Oklahoma



Source: Author's photo of Bohemian Hall, March 2008.

Catholic apostates provided the backbone of the early fraternal movement and used their Bohemian Halls the way most believers used their church. Prague's Catholics rarely joined the Z.C.B.J., preferring to participate in parish activities.¹⁷ Thus, it is interesting that John Barta provided the land for the erection of a permanent

building for the non-religious fraternal association because the origins of the American Czech fraternal movement contained deep roots in freethought, with many freethinkers openly expressing anti-clerical and anti-Catholic beliefs. Apparently this anti-Catholicism did not extend to the farming community of Prague or at least John Barta separated his religious beliefs from helping his ethnic kinsmen.

Another popular organization of Prague's Czechs was the Sokol Gymnastic Society (Telocvicna Jednota Sokol).¹⁸ This gymnastic club, originally the brainchild of

¹⁷ William Earl Martin, "Cultural Assimilation of the Czechoslovak in Oklahoma City: A Study of Culture Contrasts" (M.A. Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1935), 137; see also Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 97.

¹⁸ Sokol means falcon in Czech.

Miroslav Tyrš and based on similar German organizations, was formed in Prague, Bohemia in 1862 as part of a cultural revolt against Austrian domination.¹⁹ The purpose of the initial society was to train Czech young people (both male and female) physically, but also, and just as important, to inculcate them with Czech pride and nationalism. Many Czechs worried that the German language and culture of the Austrian Empire would, over time, extinguish the native language, traditions, and historical pride of the Czech people. The Sokols were a reaction to this fear and the athletic clubs proved a huge success with the population, especially amongst teenagers. Within a few short years practically every village in Bohemia and Moravia of moderate size or larger sported a gymnastic association. Apparently, Sokols succeeded in their mission of instilling nationalistic feelings in Czechs because during World War I, the Austrian government dissolved all Sokols declaring them treasonous to the Empire.²⁰

The Sokol clubs quickly crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The St. Louis Czechs established the first Sokol in the United States in 1865 and the gymnastic order came to Prague in 1906.²¹ Although the various fraternal lodges stressed the maintenance of ethnic identity and culture, Sokols were especially assertive in their quest to instill Czech traditions among the young.²² Like the Western Czech Brotherhood and other fraternal orders, American Sokols soon became freethought in their outlook. Although physical training, language maintenance, and cultural retention were the primary goals, Sokols

¹⁹ Chicago formed the second Sokol in 1866 with New York City forming their own club the following year. Vera Laska, ed. *The Czechs in America, 1633-1977: A Chronology and Fact Book* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1978), 86.

²⁰ The Czech national Alliance in Great Britain, *Austrian Terrorism in Bohemia* (London: The Czech National Alliance in Great Britain, n.d.), 28-29.

²¹ *Prague News*, 5 April 1906; See also Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 96; and Karel Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 44.

²² Joseph Chada, *The Czechs in the United States* (Chicago: Czechoslovak Society of Art and Sciences, 1981), 145.

also attracted many religious and political liberals, some harboring radical beliefs and opinions.²³ Joseph Chada in his discussion of the gymnastic organization asserts that Sokols were the conduits that spread progressive ideas to the rural areas of the United States.²⁴ Some Sokol clubs, evincing a decidedly progressive stance, even wore red as their primary uniform color to signify their socialist viewpoint. Other clubs commonly referred to these groups as “Red Sokols.” However, the more mainstream clubs that strictly focused on athletics and Czech culture wore the traditional white tops and deep blue bottoms.²⁵ Prague’s Sokol fell into the traditional category. When competing, Prague’s gymnasts wore the white and blue of the original organization, not the political red of the radicals.²⁶ This is not to say there were no socialists among the Czech population. Progressive thought and socialism held a strong attraction for many Oklahoma farmers during the early decades of the twentieth century regardless of their ethnicity. Prague would have been quite the anomaly among Oklahoma farm towns if progressive ideas and socialist theory were not political topics discussed while waiting for a haircut at one of the local barbershops or on a family’s front porch where neighbors gathered in the cool of an early evening after a hard day’s work to share a cool drink and visit about the coming weather, swap family and town gossip, and solve the problems of the world. When Frank Vlasak, a charter member of Prague’s Z.C.B.J., died in 1929 of accidental asphyxiation, the *Prague Record* included in the obituary the fact that he

²³ Ernest Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions* (Chicago: Benedictine Abbey Press, 1942), 72.

²⁴ Chada, *Czechs in the United States*, 88-89.

²⁵ Joseph Roucek, “The Passing of American Czechoslovaks,” *The American Journal of Sociology*,” 39, no. 5 (March 1934): 623.

²⁶ The Prague Historical Museum contains photographs of early twentieth-century Sokol uniforms. In addition, Mary Anne Pritchett, daughter of Sokol member Frank Sefcik, still has her father’s navy blue and white uniform.

proclaimed himself a “progressive.”²⁷ Vlasak, whose mother appears to have been a Catholic, was not a member of any church. His family held his funeral at the Bohemian Hall and he is buried in the Czech National Cemetery instead of the City or Catholic cemeteries.²⁸

Prague’s Czechs established a Sokol on the first day of April 1906 amid much fanfare from not only

Sokol Hall, Prague, Oklahoma, ca 1907

the immigrant community but also from the town at large.²⁹ The thirty charter members purchased the Prague Produce Market and began teaching gymnastics on Sunday afternoons and courses



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum

in the Czech language and traditional dance during the week.³⁰ The Sokol proved extremely popular the first twenty years of its existence, traveling to Ft. Worth, Texas for regional competition, Chicago for National Sokol contests, and once even sailing across

²⁷ *Prague Record*, 12 September 1929.

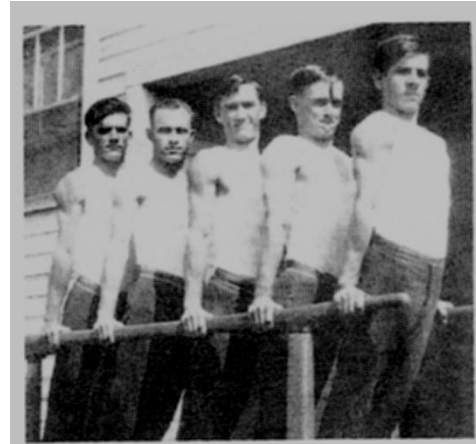
²⁸ The Catholic Bible of Frank Vlasak’s mother is on display at the Prague Historical Museum. See Appendix B.

²⁹ *Prague News*, 5 April 1906.

³⁰ *Ibid.*; *Prague News*, 12 April 1906.

the Atlantic Ocean to show off their gymnastic skills to their European kinsmen.³¹ The Sokol and Z.C.B.J. organizations helped both young and old. They provided athletics and social intercourse for Czechs whether living in town or on a farm. Prague's Sokol concentrated on gymnastic events. However, occasionally the hall held other athletic events such as in 1929 when they held a wrestling match and invited the entire town.³² In addition, the fraternal associations

Members of the Sokol Hall on parallel bars.



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum

buttressed the minority ethnic community psychologically and enabled their members to

Members of the Sokol Hall on parallel bars.



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum

confront and adjust to the larger, dominant society with success. In his study of Oklahoma's Czech farmers, Russell Lynch concluded that "Czech children due to the Z.C.B.J. and Sokol were better rounded [educationally] than those of the native American farm youth."³³

³¹ *Prague Record*, 16 September 1920. The group visited Paris, Vienna, Prague, and several towns in Germany. The Prague Sokol visited Oklahoma City and Ft. Worth, Texas in 1926. See *Prague Record*, 23 June 1926; 1 September 1926.

³² *Prague Record*, 6 March 1929.

³³ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 99.

An interesting aside to the discussion of Prague's Sokol concerns their Sunday gymnastic classes. Many American towns during this period strictly enforced Sabbatarian laws commonly referred to as blue laws. These regulations forbade certain businesses such as saloons from operating and also restricted social practices like athletic events from being played on Sunday. As noted earlier, the baseball team occasionally played on Sundays and here is evidence of the Czech community's Sokol holding regular workouts on the Lord's Day. Whether or not there were protests in Prague against these practices is not known. There may have been entire sermons preached against the practice. However, there is no mention in the Prague newspapers of complaints either against the Sokol or Prague's baseball team. Nor is there evidence of city officials taking any official steps to discourage the events such as occurred in nearby Wellston. The *Prague News* reported that authorities arrested the entire Wellston baseball team in 1907 for playing a baseball game on Sunday. As a result, city officials discontinued all baseball games and the residents of Wellston lost their team in the Frisco League. The franchise moved to Davenport, also in Lincoln County and continued playing with many of the same players.³⁴ Why Prague appears lax on enforcing blue laws is difficult to ascertain. Perhaps the isolation of the farming community separated them from the pressure to conform to other towns. A more likely explanation lies in the fact that early in Prague's history, and during the apex of the strict

Female Sokol Hall members



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum

³⁴ *Prague News*, 4 July 1907.

enforcement of blue laws, the Protestant churches did not hold much power in the community compared to the Catholic Church and Bohemian Hall. Neither of them pushed Sabbatarianism and in the case of the Czech fraternal lodges, cared not a whit about abiding by primitive Christian rules. Thus, the principal actors in the community allowed Sunday activities such as the playing of baseball games and exercising on the pommel horse and parallel bars which other towns dominated by Baptists and Methodists proscribed.

Few Catholics joined the Bohemian Hall preferring to participate in parish activities including their own mini-version of the Bohemian Hall.³⁵ The Catholic Worker (Katolicky Delnik) founded in 1904 by members of Prague's St. Wenceslas Church, included many farmers and townspeople and during the first two decades of the town was one of the most active social organizations in Prague.³⁶ However, besides containing fewer members than the secular Bohemian Hall, this, and most Catholic enterprises, focused on charity work rather than social gatherings and primarily strove to help the poor and needy families in the community through the giving of food baskets, Christmas gifts to young children, and direct relief to those suffering hardship.³⁷ Because it concentrated first and foremost on religious instruction, the Catholic Church did not set aside the financial resources to sponsor as many events as the Bohemian Hall. Thus, their social events paled in number to the almost weekly affairs, especially dances, held just south of their building.

Nevertheless, many in the Catholic congregation mingled socially with members of Bohemian Hall. Catholics, especially the young, were not averse to attending dances

³⁵ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 39-40.

³⁶ Martin, "Cultural Assimilation of the Czechoslovak," 137.

³⁷ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 97.

or plays sponsored by the Z.C.B.J.³⁸ It also appears that the Bohemian Hall did not belittle or disparage the beliefs of their Catholic kinsmen. The Western Bohemian Fraternal Association, unlike the older B.S.B.S. society, propagated a policy of impartiality in the matter of religion.³⁹ The younger generation of freethinkers evinced more moderate thinking than their forebears. They definitely were not as confrontational and anti-clerical in their beliefs.⁴⁰ Czech Catholics of Prague and their counterparts in the Bohemian Hall did not comprise two enemy camps as suggested by other writers.⁴¹ Due to pragmatic reasons, such as the wish of people regardless of their philosophical or religious convictions to enjoy a community dance, band concert, or dramatic play about old Bohemia, the two opposing sides laid aside their differences and got along. In the farm town of Prague, Oklahoma the limited population almost demanded it.

By 1914, some of Prague's Czechs had lived in Oklahoma over twenty years. Many had been in the United States even longer. Nevertheless, when war erupted in Europe the rural Czech community instantly showed concern when the Austro-Hungarian Empire, of which ancestral Bohemia and Moravia were provinces, joined Germany to fight the Allies led by Great Britain, France, and Russia. With anti-German sentiment growing in the United States primarily due to a cultural affinity with the West and the persistent submarine warfare perpetrated by the Kaiser's Germany, bewilderment cascaded upon many Czech Americans. Thus, American Czechs looked to their native land for guidance.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Rosicky, *Czechs in Nebraska*, 357.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 286.

⁴¹ Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions*, 48.

From the onset of war, the Czechs of Bohemia and Moravia despised the conflict. They saw the war and conscription of their young men as further German oppression. The imperial government in Vienna feared a rebellion and tried to forestall problems by issuing an official decree that suspended “many constitutional guarantees, including freedom of speech, public gathering, press, travel, the privacy of one’s home, and the secrecy of the mails.”⁴² Furthermore, a military court rather than a civilian judge and jury tried anyone accused of violating the decree.⁴³ Nevertheless, Bohemians and Moravians ignored the diktat, resulting in thousands arrested.⁴⁴ Anti-Austrian sentiment worsened and a long-suppressed nationalistic clamor rang throughout the Czech provinces.⁴⁵ The Sokols took the lead as the most active Czech organization opposing the war and attempting to awaken a nationalistic consciousness. Prominent and respected individuals such as Thomas Masaryk and Edvard Benes added stimulus to the anti-Habsburg feelings sweeping the Czech lands. When the Austrian government moved to stamp out all dissent, many Czech intellectuals, including Masaryk and Benes, fled the to Switzerland and then to England.⁴⁶

The dissidents formed the Czech National Alliance in Great Britain and began speaking and writing against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, specifically against Austrian oppression. Through pamphlets such as *The Case of Bohemia*, the alliance argued that the Czech struggle against German domination and tyranny went back to the fifteenth

⁴² H. Louis Rees, “The Czechs During World War I (Especially 1917-1918); Economic and Political Developments Leading Toward Independence” (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1990), 20.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁵ Joseph Jahelka, “The Role of Chicago Czechs in the Struggle for Czechoslovak Independence,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 31, no. 4 (December, 1938): 381.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 383.

century and the martyrdom of Jan Hus in 1415.⁴⁷ In this “case” against the Austrians, the Czechs proclaimed their national history to be “one long struggle against the Universal German Monarchy under whatever garb it should appear.”⁴⁸ Lewis B. Namier, author of *The Case of Bohemia*, concluded his argument by appealing to the Allies to create a free Bohemia which would serve, in the future, as “a safeguard against a new German advance and a barometer of German pressure.”⁴⁹ Still another pamphlet originating in London, detailed imprisonments and atrocities committed by the Austrian authorities and military against the Czechs. The short tract, titled *Austrian Terrorism in Bohemia*, alleged that since the beginning of the war, the Austrian government had sentenced almost one thousand Czechs to death and “the total of [Czech] soldiers executed already amount[ed] to several thousands.”⁵⁰

Soon, anti-German fervor spread to the United States. Chicago, with the largest concentration of Czech immigrants, became the center of anti-German activity. The leaders of the Chicago Czechs formed their own group, the Bohemian National Alliance of America, composed of the Sokol Gymnastic Societies and the principal Czech fraternal organizations in the United States. At first, few Catholic organizations joined the movement. This was probably due to the fact that many movement leaders espoused a freethought or liberal religious philosophy which disturbed urban Catholics. However, despite their concern, Czech Catholics eventually grasped the cudgel of Bohemian independence and joined the effort in the latter portion of the war; they formed their own

⁴⁷ Lewis B. Namier, *The Case of Bohemia* (London: The Czech National Alliance, 1917), 5-7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁵⁰ The Czech National Alliance in Great Britain, *Austrian Terrorism in Bohemia* (London: The Czech National Alliance in Great Britain, n.d.), 23.

national alliance in 1917 and then merged with the Bohemian National Alliance and the Slovak League to form the Czechoslovak National Council of America in 1918.⁵¹

The Chicago alliance began speechmaking and printing pamphlets attacking the Central Powers, Austria in particular, and calling for Czech independence. Charles Pergler became one of the alliance's most prolific orators traveling and speaking throughout the United States. In 1916, in an address before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, he explained to American lawmakers why Bohemia should become an independent nation.⁵² Later that year, Pergler gave a stirring speech in Chicago in which he said:

It follows, therefore, that this war is not only one to reduce France to impotence, to destroy the British Empire, to thwart legitimate Russian ambitions, to destroy the Serbian nationality and to absorb Belgium, but it is also a War on the part of Germany and Austria against the Bohemian People, who have been the western sentinel of Slavdom for Centuries.⁵³

Pergler ended his talk by hoping that the Allies emerged victorious and a free and independent Bohemia was a fruit of their victory.⁵⁴ Increasingly, the Bohemian National Alliance included calls for independence in their speeches and printed tracts. Vojta Benes, an exile and member of the alliance, wrote that “[t]he Bohemian nation has

⁵¹ Chada, *Czechs in the United States*, 49.

⁵² Charles Pergler, *Bohemia's Claim to Independence: An Address Delivered by Charles Pergler, LL.B., Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives of the United States on February 25, 1916* (Chicago: Bohemian National Alliance, 1916), 8.

⁵³ Charles Pergler, *The Bohemians (Czechs) in the Present Crisis: An Address Delivered by Charles Pergler LL.B. on the 28th Day of May, 1916, in Chicago, at a Meeting Held to Commemorate the Deeds of Bohemian Volunteers in the Great War* (Chicago: Bohemian National Alliance, 1916), 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

always held the right of self-determination to be the inalienable right of every people.”⁵⁵

When the Alliance reprinted a London speech by Thomas Masaryk, in which he declared it was time for the Bohemian people to strike out for themselves, the alliance capitalized and shouted in bold print his plea to the allies:

WE ASK FOR AN INDEPENDENT BOHEMIAN-SLOVAK STATE⁵⁶

Apparently the Chicago Czechs came under some criticism because in a published position paper the Bohemian National Alliance declared that they felt comfortable speaking on behalf of all Czech Americans because the Alliance was only expressing the general will of the community.⁵⁷ Indeed, Dr. L.J. Fisher, president of the American Alliance, contributed numerous articles to the cause with many printed in both Czech-language and English newspapers across the United States, including Prague, Oklahoma.⁵⁸ In addition, all Czech-language periodicals in America carried a standing entreaty to Czech residents in the United States to become, as quickly as legally possible, naturalized citizens to rid themselves of “the odium which Austro-Hungarian citizenship in their minds carries.”⁵⁹

Chicago was not the only major American city to take up the cause of Bohemian independence. The Czechoslovak Arts Club in New York City joined the Chicago alliance by printing and distributing pamphlets. Like the Bohemian National Alliance,

⁵⁵ Vojta Benes, *Economic Strength of the Bohemian (Czechoslovak) Lands* (Chicago: Bohemian (Czech) National Alliance, 1918), 2.

⁵⁶ Thomas G. Masaryk, *Declaration of the Bohemian (Czech) Foreign Committee: Comments of London Papers* (Chicago: Bohemian National Alliance of America, n.d.), 6.

⁵⁷ The Bohemian National Alliance, *The Position of the Bohemians (Czechs) in the European War* (Chicago: Bohemian National Alliance in America, n.d.), 17.

⁵⁸ *Prague Record*, 3 May 1917; *Prague Record*, 10 May 1917.

⁵⁹ The Bohemian National Alliance, *The Position of the Bohemians*, 17.

they too declared the right of self determination for Bohemia.⁶⁰ However, one of their more interesting tracts contained nothing but quotes, including many attributed to the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. This pamphlet was powerful and surely evoked tremendous hope for Czechs not only in America but across the world. In one example:

Self-determination is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.

Woodrow Wilson⁶¹

There is little doubt that the contribution of American Czechs proved vital in persuading the American people, and thus their government, that a free and independent Czech-Slovak nation would become a valued ally and buffer to German aggression in the future. The Chicago Czechs led the propaganda battle through speeches and printed material. However, any effort of this magnitude takes money, and a lot of it. Joseph Jahelka, after studying the Czech independence movement in the United States, asserts that “the principal support, both financial and moral, came from the workingman in the cities, and the farmers of the Middle West and Southwest.”⁶² The Czech community of Prague supported Bohemian independence, and did so from the outset of the conflict. Furthermore, they assisted the movement through volunteer work and donations and vocally championed the independence movement and Allied war effort even if it resulted

⁶⁰ The Czechoslovak Arts Club, *The Czech Declaration of January 6, 1918* (New York: The Czechoslovak Arts Club, 1918), 2.

⁶¹ The Czecho-Slovak Arts Club, *The Independence of the Czechoslovak Nation: Quotations from Wilson, Viviani, Balfour, Palacky, Masaryk, Seton-Watson, & Others* (New York: The Czecho-Slovak Arts Club, 1918), 6.

⁶² Jahelka, “The Role of Chicago Czechs,” 392-393.

in hard feelings and physical confrontations with the German immigrant community in Prague.

Economically, the war proved a godsend for American farmers. In January 1917, the *Prague Record* published a report by the Department of Commerce showing a doubling in exports of agricultural products from 1913 to 1916.⁶³ Additionally, the newspapers, before the United States entered the war, covered the European war extensively. Prague's weeklies regularly published photographs and short articles about the conflict, and always from a pro-Ally viewpoint. The *Prague Record*, even more than the *Prague News*, was unashamedly anti-German in its outlook. Whether this was due to the relatively large Czech community in and around Prague is uncertain. Although, much smaller, there was also a German-American presence in Prague and the paper leaned Republican in political coverage. One would think the political persuasion of the editor alone would tilt pre-American involvement against President Wilson, who increasingly appeared to favor Great Britain over Germany. Nevertheless, both Prague newspapers openly promoted the cause of the Allies. The *Prague Record* published articles originating from the Bohemian National Alliance. These commentaries advocated independence for Bohemia and complained of Austrian atrocities committed on Czechs.⁶⁴ One particularly emotional diatribe, written by L.J. Fisher, president of the Alliance headquartered in Chicago, declared that "in the first two years of the war four thousand men and women have been hanged for 'high treason' to the emperor."⁶⁵ Whether or not the accusation was true is not important. The importance of the article lies in its impact

⁶³ *Prague Record*, 11 January 1917.

⁶⁴ Two interesting articles appeared in the *Prague Record*. See *Prague Record*, 3 May 1917 and 10 May 1917.

⁶⁵ *Prague Record*, 10 May 1917.

on the Czech community because many readers, no doubt, believed the report in its entirety.

During the war years, emotions ran high in Prague, Oklahoma. Some in the Czech community were only recently removed from their country of birth and most, even if born in the United States, still communicated with relatives in the old country. C.M. Sadlo, who came to the United States in 1898, still had a sister living near Prague, Bohemia. Wes Pospisil, a young man of twenty-three when the war broke out in 1914 and who worked in Prague's harness shop, did not set foot on the shores of the United States until 1909.⁶⁶ The town's shoe repairman, Mike Mitacek, came to Prague in 1910. His mother remained in Bohemia.⁶⁷ Many in the Czech community kept in contact with relatives and friends. In addition to personal letters, the rural Czech community stayed abreast of what was happening in Europe through the local weeklies and through their Czech-language newspapers, primarily published in Chicago or Omaha.

On the other hand, there was also a German community centered north of Prague and many of these immigrants also retained ties with Europe. John Mertes, who ran a hardware store in Prague, was born and raised in Germany. The merchant came to the United States in 1897 at the age of twenty-two.⁶⁸ Although born in Illinois, both of Elizabeth Whitmore's parents (the wife of B.F. Whitmore, Prague's first mayor and owner of a cotton gin frequented by Czech farmers) listed Germany as their birthplace. The same was true of Kate Hudspeth, whose husband ran a livery business.⁶⁹ Many in the German community were farmers living only a few miles from town. These families

⁶⁶ *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census, Lincoln County, OK, South Creek Township.

⁶⁷ William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948), 55.

⁶⁸ *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

with names such as Heinzig, Tripke, Benning, and Wagner, in some instances had been in the United States less than a decade.⁷⁰ What were their feelings about the great European war? No doubt, some harbored ambivalent emotions, especially as it became clearer that the United States preferred Great Britain and the Allies over Germany. However, in a time of war it was natural for some Germans to support the fatherland, at least in the privacy of their homes.

The Prague Czechs loudly voiced their support for the Allies and Czech independence, resulting in heightened tensions in the community. Unfortunately, emotions sometimes boiled over. Fritz Heinzig, a German American who lived through the war years stated that “fist-fights and near riots, caused by bitterness of feeling among foreign-born residents, were common in Prague.”⁷¹ Ray Tower, a native-born resident of the farm town during the World War I period remembered “two cases of near lynching in the Prague community over the expression of sentiment favorable to the cause of the Central Powers.”⁷² He further stated that “[l]ooking at the community as a whole during World War I, there was a general feeling of both patriotism and sadness coupled with bitter hatred [by the Czechs] against the Germans and Austrians in Prague.”⁷³ Granted, these are the memories of older men recollected many years after the war. The passage of time often dims and distorts facts. However, even if we question or dismiss some of

⁷⁰ *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township. Both Ray Tower and Melva Losch Brown recorded that O.R. Blumel, owner of Prague’s harness shop, arrived in Oklahoma in 1905 directly from Austria, where his parents and extended family still lived. They reported that his sympathies were with Austria and the Central Powers during the Great War (See Tower, “A General History of the Town of Prague,” 56; Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 111-112). However, according to the Manuscript Census Schedules of 1910, Blumel listed his arrival to the United States as being in 1894. Furthermore, his first two children were born in Texas. Finally, if this is the same O.R. Blumel – and it definitely appears to be so – as the Blumel who accompanied Prague’s Sokol club to Czechoslovakia in 1920, then despite being born in Austria he most likely was of Czech ancestry.

⁷¹ Tower, “A General History of the Town of Prague,” 56.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 56-58.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

the specifics it appears obvious that emotions ran rampant in the small town and manifested in several ugly incidents. It should be noted that hostility against German Americans in Oklahoma was not exclusive to Prague. Richard Rohrs, in *The Germans in Oklahoma*, concluded that throughout Oklahoma violence against Germans occurred during the entire period of World War I.⁷⁴

In 1915, the Czech community formed a Samostatnost club. At the initial meeting the charter members elected Charles Cerny, one of the town's barbers, as president and Prague's tailor, C.M. Sadlo, as secretary. The club met the first Sunday of each month in the Sokol Hall with the express purpose of raising awareness and funds for the independence movement. However, the meetings were open to the public and advertised weekly in the newspapers encouraging anyone interested in Bohemian independence to attend – the word *samostatnost* means independence in Czech.⁷⁵

The Samostatnost club, in conjunction with the other Bohemian societies of Prague, sponsored Professor Sara Hrbek, teacher of Slavonic languages and literature at the University of Nebraska, to come to Prague and speak at the Czech community's commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the death of the Czech martyr, Jan Hus. Professor Hrbek agreed to come and delivered two speeches to large audiences. Her afternoon speech was in Czech, followed by an English version that evening.⁷⁶ The program which included traditional Czech songs was not billed as a political rally and Hrbek's actual speech was not published. However, according to Joseph Jahelka, Hrbek was an active member of the Bohemian National Alliance whose sole purpose was to

⁷⁴ Richard C. Rohrs, *The Germans in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 42, 44-45.

⁷⁵ *Prague News*, 27 May 1915.

⁷⁶ *Prague News*, 9 July 1915. Sarah Hrbek's name is sometimes printed as Hrbkova, which is the feminine form of Hrbek.

promote Bohemian independence. Thus, it is difficult to imagine the professor traveling the many miles from Lincoln Nebraska to Prague, Oklahoma and *not* mentioning the war in Europe or the Czech struggle for independence.

Two years later, the Samostatnost club brought another speaker to Prague. Ferdinand Pisecky lectured at the Sokol Hall and like Professor Hrbek before him, to an overflowing crowd. On its front page, the *Prague Record* carried an article about the upcoming lecture:

Professor Ferdinand Pisecky . . . will lecture at the Sokol Hall at 7:30 o'clock Thursday evening of this week. The professor was at one time a prisoner of the present European war, but made his escape and came to America about six weeks ago.⁷⁷

These public speeches were more than informational lectures, more than simple emotional appeals to get American Czechs excited about a new, independent Bohemia. They were fundraisers. The Bohemian National Alliance sent out speakers, not only to arouse public opinion for the cause of Czecho-Slovak independence, but to raise much-needed money to support the cause. The total amount raised by the alliance during the war exceeded \$675,000 with many contributions being five to ten dollars.⁷⁸ In his study, Jahelka claims that most of the financial support came from urban workers and rural farming communities. Knowing how passionately Prague's Czechs supported their country of birth, it seems safe to assume both farmers and townspeople helped the cause of Bohemian independence with their pocketbooks.

⁷⁷ *Prague Record*, 21 June 1917.

⁷⁸ Paul Robert Magocsi, "Loyalties: Dual and Divided," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephen Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 680; Vera Laska, *Czechs in America: 1633-1977: A Chronology & Fact Book* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1978), 45.

Prague and the surrounding farm community sent 111 men into the military during World War I.⁷⁹ Three of these young men perished in the war. The first to lose his life in combat was Edward Walla, a young Czech American, killed in 1918 at the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne Forest. To honor the young soldier, Prague named their American Legion Post after him. The Czech community buried their fallen hero in the Czech National Cemetery and erected a small Washingtonian-type memorial so that everyone would always remember.⁸⁰

1917 farewell celebration in Prague for World War I soldiers



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum.

Early in 1918, American Czechs expressed dismay when President Woodrow Wilson announced that his preliminary peace plan provided some autonomy for ethnic

⁷⁹ Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 111.

⁸⁰ The statue commemorating Walla still stands in the Prague National Cemetery. Prague's American Legion Post also retains Walla's name.

groups within the Austro-Hungarian Empire but not complete autonomy. Czechs and Slovaks staged mass protests across the United States clamoring for an independent state. Had they not early in the war took the side of the Allies? Had their young men not readily and energetically volunteered for the Allied cause? Why had they given their hard-earned money to the Bohemian National Alliance if not to see the dreams of their homeland at last fulfilled?⁸¹ Finally in September, after Wilson met with exiled Czech leader, Thomas Masaryk, the president announced his support for the dissolution of the Empire and the creation of an independent Czech-Slovak nation. When the victorious Allies granted the Czechs and Slovaks their own independent country at the peace conference, American Czechs rejoiced. The Czech community of Prague, Oklahoma enthusiastically joined the chorus. By aiding the cause of independence with their money, manpower, and moral support, the small farming town in the middle of Oklahoma did their part. The Sokols and fraternal organizations provided the organizational apparatus for the ambitious Bohemian National Alliance. The Catholic Church joined the effort putting aside their theological differences with the freethinkers. The year 1918 marked a new beginning for the Prague Czechs. No longer did they need to refer to their birthplace as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They now hailed from Bohemia and Moravia, provinces of Czechoslovakia and home of the Czechs.

Czech fraternal associations served an important function within the ethnic community. Although not as large as the freethought organizations, the Czech Catholics organized the first parish and actively participated in the community through charity work and religious instruction. However, the much larger Bohemian Hall and Sokol Gymnastic Organization provided the bulk of the Czech population with entertainment,

⁸¹ Magocsi, "Loyalties," 683.

athletic training and competition, and a link to the past. The fraternal lodges actively sought to maintain Old World customs, traditions, and the Czech language. Faced with a demographic and geographic situation that demanded they make concessions to succeed economically, the fraternal orders futilely bailed against the rising waters of the dominant culture. That they succeeded as long as they did is a tribute to their persistence; the Bohemian Hall continued to conduct all monthly meetings in the Czech language until almost World War II.⁸²

Nevertheless, despite the determined efforts of the lodges, individual Czechs actively and quickly decided to participate in the larger Prague community to prosper and find contentment amongst their diverse neighbors. Many, if not most, did not forsake their old ways but instead lived in both worlds. They owned and operated businesses in the town; they hired and worked for non-Czechs; they were barbers, tailors, saloon keepers, waitresses, clerks, blacksmiths, harness makers; some sold groceries, fabrics, and notions, others hardware or automobiles. At the town's inception in 1902, Czech immigrants energetically joined the community in every way. Sounding almost contradictory, Czech members of both the Bohemian Hall and Sokol Lodge became some of the most notable citizens in the new town. As already noted, Frank Vlasak was a charter member of the Bohemian Hall and very influential in the Czech community. However, he also owned a thriving grocery business in Prague and served as vice-president of Lincoln County Bank. Others such as Josef Cerny, Frank and Josef Klabzuba, George Eret, and Frank Kucera became involved in the local economy and society of Prague while at the same time spending many hours sitting in the Bohemian

⁸² The Bohemian Hall records continued to be written in Czech until late in 1938.

Hall smoking cigars, discussing politics and business, and no doubt reminiscing about their former lives in Bohemia.⁸³

Ultimately, the resolute efforts by the fraternal orders to maintain their European ways ended in failure. Upon the formation of the town, Prague's Czechs, including many in the first generation, actively and vigorously engaged in community affairs. This led to rapid adjustment and acculturation by most. Nevertheless, the stubborn, steadfast refusal of the fraternal lodges to give up the past resulted not in the preservation of a unique and separate culture, but in the inculcation of the young with a distinctive identity. Long after the graves of many original Czech settlers no longer attracted flowery tributes on Memorial Day and Sokol Hall was but a faded sepia print in a centennial memory book, Prague's Czechs remained Czech. That they participated fully, not only in the economic sphere but the social as well, will be seen in the next chapter. It was the social acceptance, even more than the economic necessity, that led to an amazingly speedy adjustment by the small-town Czechs to the way of life of the majority in the community. Nevertheless, regardless of their "Americanization," including marrying outside their ethnic group, many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the early Czech pioneers never forgot who they were. Even if somewhere in their family history their surname changed from Sala to Reynolds or Sefcik to Pritchett, many held fast to their Czech roots.

⁸³ Bohemian Hall records show that the lodge almost monthly purchased cigars (doutniky). It is assumed the members smoked them at meetings or unofficial gatherings.

CHAPTER 7

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS IN THE LIFE OF PRAGUE'S CZECHS

A tired George Sadlo wiped the dripping sweat from his glistening brow. He glanced over his shoulder at the searing August sun and peered intently at Mose Case squatting almost serenely behind the dusty slab. An athletic-looking man from the county seat of Chandler, a man Sadlo and Case barely knew, stood beside the flat slab waving a menacing stick of ash as if he intended to charge the tiny hill Sadlo stood upon and do harm to the young Czech. Sadlo massaged the grass-stained orb resting in his right hand and in determined staccato gestures nodded at Case. From Sadlo's left came the encouraging chatter of Lester Hooter, while from his right John Reel and Fatty Oplinger joined Hooter and barked their confidence and support. Even the cheerful rasping of Wesley Pastusek's far-away voice filtered into Sadlo's ears. Lifting his left leg high into the air, Sadlo rocked backwards before pushing towards the friendly Case and the awaiting stranger from Chandler. Sadlo let loose the sphere and stood stoically as it zipped past the helpless outsider. Mose Case caught the whizzing whiteness, stood and held the ball high before striding to a now smiling Sadlo. The game was over. The Prague Slugger baseball team had won yet another game. This week's victory came against the Chandler Nine by a score of four to one. Prague's baseball club still had not

lost a single game the entire summer.¹

The *Prague Record* covered the details of the August 1916 baseball game between Prague and Chandler in a front page article. George Sadlo, Prague's victorious pitcher, struck out sixteen Chandler batters on the hot day giving up only six hits in the nine inning game. Unfortunately for the baseball team they lost their first and only game of the summer the very next week to Bristow's town team by a score of 7 to 2. Both Czech players mentioned (George Sadlo and Wesley Pastusek) entered the United States Army in 1918 and served in Europe with the American Expeditionary Force under General John J. Pershing.²

Like most Americans, rural and urban, in the first half of the twentieth century, the residents of Prague loved baseball. In 1919, the local newspapers ran articles on both the American and National Leagues of Major League baseball including photographs of each player on the World Series Championship team, the Cincinnati Reds.³ However, Prague's newspapers did not stop covering baseball just because the season ended. During the winter months of 1917, 1918, and 1919, most issues of the *Prague Record* carried short articles written by former Major League umpire, Billy Evans. The articles, titled "Billy Evans Solves Baseball Problems," explained the complex rules of America's national pastime.⁴ And, during the 1920s, the newspaper published pieces that included a

¹ Paraphrased from a newspaper article detailing the Prague victory against Chandler's baseball team. See *Prague Record*, 17 August 1916.

² *Prague Record*, 24 August 1916; For a list of Prague's Czechs in World War I, see Prague Historical Museum, Prague, Oklahoma, American Legion Honor Roll of Prague Czechs serving in World War I.

³ *Prague Record*, 2 November 1919.

⁴ For examples see *Prague Record*, 25 January 1917; *Prague Record*, 9 November 1919.

biographic sketch, advice, and photos of famous major league stars such as Ty Cobb, Lou Gehrig, Tris Speaker, and George “Babe” Ruth.⁵

From the second decade of the twentieth century throughout the period covered by this study, Prague fielded a town baseball team usually referred to in the newspapers as the Prague Sluggers.⁶ To put it simply, baseball was *the* sport in the United States during this time. Whether one lived in an urban setting or in a small town, baseball held a prominent place in the minds and hearts of most male residents. Despite never seeing a Major League game in person, most Americans, especially males, followed the teams and players through the newspapers and beginning in the 1920s via radio. In addition, many small towns throughout the country formed teams and competed against other communities in their area. In 1920, the *Prague Record* reported that the area baseball teams were trying to revive the pre-war league that again would be called the Frisco League. Prospective participants included Prague, Chandler, Weleetka, Sparks, Paden, and hopefully others.⁷ These baseball teams, in general, were not comprised of adolescents, but young men in their late teens and early twenties who took the game seriously and played hard, hoping that a roving scout would see them play and sign them to a professional contract. Towns took great pride in their “nine” and flocked to the games. An illustration of the immense interest is found in the July 6, 1916 edition of the *Prague Record*. According to the paper, Prague’s baseball game against Paden drew over 450 fans. This may not appear a tremendous attendance until we take into consideration that the total population of Prague at this time was barely over one

⁵ For examples see *Prague Record*, 24 March 1926 (Babe Ruth) and *Prague Record*, 7 April 1926 (Ty Cobb). There were many other baseball stories concerning various big-league players throughout the 1920s.

⁶ *Prague News*, 16 July 1915; *Prague Record*, 24 August 1916.

⁷ *Prague Record*, 23 September 1920.

thousand.⁸ And the town of Prague, Oklahoma, was no different in its interest in baseball than most communities across the United States. However, it should be noted that these town teams were not comprised of professional players. During the week, most team members held full-time jobs. For example in 1917, twenty-one year old George Sadlo, Prague's top pitcher, claimed his occupation was musician. The hurler offered private violin lessons to the residents of Prague and later taught music at the public school. Wesley Pastusek, seventeen years old, and Lloyd "Fatty" Oplinger, twenty-three years of age, worked during the week as salesmen, Pastusek in a grocery store, Oplinger in a hardware store. Lester Hooter, Prague's twenty-one year old first baseman worked for the railroad when not playing baseball while Ernest Blumenthal, twenty years of age, worked alongside his father at The Leader general store.⁹ The team practiced in the evenings and played games on Saturday afternoons and occasionally on Sundays. Normally, players received a small portion of the gate receipts, but never enough to earn a living playing baseball. These young men were semi-professional, at best.

The people of Prague apparently evinced much interest in baseball and their home team. During summer months the front page of the *Prague Record* almost always contained an article about the previous Saturday's game. The Prague baseball team represented the entire town; it was not specifically a Czech team and by the large attendance at games it appears the town avidly followed the team. However, from 1916 until he left for the military, Prague's top pitcher was George Sadlo, a Czech and the son of the town's tailor. As mentioned, the 1916 Prague Sluggers won every game except

⁸ *Prague Record*, 6 July 1916; See also Russell Wilford Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma: A Comparative Study of the Stability of A Czech Farm Group in Lincoln County Oklahoma, and the Factors Relating to its Stability," *Bulletin of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College) 39, no. 13 (June 1942): 97.

⁹ *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

one, a 7 to 2 defeat at the hands of the Bristow Browns. The town of Bristow lay thirty-eight miles from Prague. With the automobile still in its primitive stage and roads usually nothing more than grated rock or dirt in 1916 rural Oklahoma, thirty-eight miles was quite a trip, which again shows the love and importance that baseball held to these small agricultural communities.¹⁰

In April 1917 the *Prague Record* published the roster for the upcoming season. Most of the players sported Anglo names such as John Reel, Carl Wilson, Lester Hooter, Mose Case, and a second baseman named Smith. However, Lloyd “Fatty” Oplinger, from the German community, played shortstop and helped out with the pitching chores while Ernest Blumenthal, Jewish son of Morris Blumenthal occupied left field. George Sadlo returned as the Sluggers’ ace pitcher and was joined on the team by another Czech, Wesley Pastusek.¹¹

George Sadlo and Wesley Pastusek were second-generation Czechs. Their parents hailed from Bohemia and Moravia, respectively. Sadlo, born in Missouri, and Pastusek, born in Texas, probably had never been to Europe. Both attended school in the United States and could read and write English.¹² They were American Czechs and appear to fit well into Marcus Hansen’s theory that the progeny of immigrants made every effort to fit into American society.¹³ What could be more American than baseball?

¹⁰ *Prague Record*, 25 August 1916. During the period covered, 1916 appears to be Prague’s best baseball season.

¹¹ *Prague Record*, 12 April 1917.

¹² Although George Sadlo’s father, Cyril, arrived in the United States in 1889, his mother, Emma, was born in Missouri. However, both her parents were born in Bohemia. Wesley Pastusek’s parents emigrated from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1873 and lived in Texas prior to migrating to Oklahoma. See *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township. Apparently Pastusek left Prague sometime between 1917 and 1920. According to the *Prague Record*, Wesley Pastusek lived in Texas in the fall of 1920. See *Prague Record*, 4 November 1920.

¹³ Marcus Lee Hansen, “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant,” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1996): 204.

Karel Bicha in his study of Oklahoma Czechs suggested that “the Czechs of Oklahoma did not immediately embrace the larger society in which they lived” and because of this “they were not the most popular of settlers, partly because of their clannishness and partly because of behavior traits which were all too common among them – quarrelsomeness, suspiciousness, and an inclination to carry small disagreements beyond the point of reason.”¹⁴ The above may very well hold true regarding the earliest settlers, the land-run pioneers of 1891 and the arrivals before the creation of Prague in 1902. The early Czechs in the area lived a somewhat isolated, exclusive ethnic lifestyle. However, once the farm village came into existence, the situation rapidly changed. Czechs participated eagerly in the economy of the new town, opening businesses, providing services, buying and selling alongside the non-Czechs. There is little evidence of Czechs segregating themselves from the larger community, especially economically.

In, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village*, Robert Kutak wrote that “immigrants in cities are often maladjusted because they lack control over their lives; they are moved and influenced by forces which lie beyond them . . . this is not true in an isolated agricultural village where 90 per cent of the individuals are of the same nationality.”¹⁵ Kutak compares an ethnic urban population with that of a rural community that was extremely ethnically homogenous. He does not include in his analysis rural communities like Prague where the newcomer population, although originally living in relative isolation, immediately fell into the minority with the creation of a town. The Czechs of Prague fall into this latter category. The early farming community was probably clannish as evidenced by Lynch’s study which stressed how

¹⁴ Karel Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 33,60.

¹⁵ Robert Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village: A Study of Social Persistence and Change* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1933, repr. ed., 1970), 144.

Czech farmers helped each other get through the tough times of cultivating the coarse prairie. Lynch mentions nowhere in his study that the Czech immigrants helped native-born or ethnic German farmers also located in the area. They appear to have kept to themselves. However, when the Ft. Smith and Western Railroad Company chose Frank and Josephine Barta's homestead as the site of a coaling station and Prague came into existence, circumstances changed. The Prague Czechs faced a decision: either actively participate in the new village or retreat to an even deeper isolation that would ultimately hurt not only themselves but their children. Prague's Czechs proved pragmatic and realistic. Most chose to involve themselves in the inchoate community.

However, many did not envision participation as relinquishing their European culture. Like other immigrant groups, the Prague Czechs exhibited stubbornness in hanging onto their Old World culture, such as their language, cuisine, and music. They coupled their desire to retain the past with an acceptance of their present situation. To make life for themselves and their children as prosperous and conflict-free as possible, they chose to live a twofold lifestyle. Prague's Czechs made every effort to remain "Czech" while thriving in their new homeland. In his pessimistic study of American Czechs, Joseph Roucek posits that "when the first generation will have died there will not be much left of the Czech and Slovak culture patterns in the United States."¹⁶ The evidence suggests that Roucek was mistaken, especially in rural areas such Milligan or Wilbur, Nebraska. Many rural areas maintained traditional customs well into the third generation.¹⁷ In addition, his thesis speculates on the lifestyle and traditions of the immigrant community. He does not include the persistence of Czech identity, the refusal

¹⁶ Joseph Slabey Roucek, "The Passing of American Czechoslovaks," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 39, no. 5 (March 1934): 625.

¹⁷ Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village*, 63-65, 70.

of many people of Czech ancestry to give up their identification as Czech, and their refusal to melt into the cauldron of Caucasian uncertainty. Many Prague Czechs, although rather quickly adjusting to a culture different from their own did not lose their group identity or their sense of belonging to a group outside the native-born white mainstream. Again, this does not mean that Prague's Czechs refused to identify themselves as American or make concessions to the dominant culture. Many immigrants anglicized their children's first names such as Frantisek becoming Frank or Jiri changing to George and beginning with the second generation most Czechs proudly proclaimed themselves Americans. But most never forgot their origins, they never lost their ethnic group identity. Nevertheless, as individual Czechs made the decision to participate in the activities of the farm town, their adjustment period shortened. Once Czechs took this irreversible step, some, especially the offspring of Czech women who married non-Czechs, began the journey away from the close-knit ethnic group to the ambiguity of an "American." Sporting a non-Slavic surname these American-born children, if they wished, could fade into the mainstream of society with little difficulty. Regardless of accepting new associations and boundaries, some of Prague's Czechs resisted the slide into ethnic uncertainty and established a lasting presence centered on a birthright ethnicity that continued long after they laid aside their cultural distinctiveness. Despite practicing a dual lifestyle in which they participated fully in the dominant culture while holding fast to their symbolic roots, Prague's Czechs remained firm in their ethnic group identity.

Like most groups, whether Czech, German, native-born white, or African American, the fundamental unit was the family. Most Czech immigrants to the United

States derived from the rural cottager class and they brought with them the concept of the family as the center. In pastoral Europe, the family was of utmost importance in providing workers to toil the land. These were not urban professionals enmeshed in the capitalist dream of financial success through upward mobility. Instead, these hardy cultivators worked many hours to get the most from the soil. Their ultimate goal was to own a fertile plot of land, build a comfortable home, and raise their children. Their ideas of family solidarity remained intact even after arriving in the United States and forced, out of economic necessity, into industrial jobs or, as in the case of the immigrant farmers living on the periphery of Prague, choosing to move into town and attempt to create a business. Josef Barton claimed that “the locus of membership and alliance in the Czech community was the lineal unit of the family. . . . Czech immigrants, in short, allied themselves in families of three generations.”¹⁸ The extended family was the norm and was of paramount importance to the Czech community. However, regardless of the importance Czechs placed on unity and cohesiveness, this was the historical period known as the Victorian Age. Like the typical native-born American father, a Czech father normally did not pursue close emotional relationships with his children.¹⁹ This was left to the mothers. Mothers were the purveyors of affection – not the fathers. Czech fathers constructed a wall of authority and affection between themselves and their offspring. Fathers were the center of power. Respect was paramount in their minds. This contrived distance enabled fathers to maintain control over their children and because of the more formal relationship, there was less chance of disrespectful behavior.

¹⁸ Josef Barton, “Land, Labor, and Community in Nueces: Czech Farmers and Mexican Laborers in South Texas, 1880-1930,” in *European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 152.

¹⁹ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 58.

Once in the United States, the immigrant family came under intense stress. The family absorbed the shocks of the new culture, language, and economic system. It was to the family that the father, most likely the breadwinner, could retreat at the end of another workday in the new environment. Furthermore, if he and his wife had young children, as these children aged, many times they became culturally separate from their parents. This could place the entire family at risk.²⁰ Czech families, as did other immigrant groups, grasped this tension and attempted to alleviate it either through the fraternal organizations or the Catholic Church, with the secular orders holding more sway in most Czech communities. Prague's Bohemian Hall was for the family and the Sokol lodge specifically focused on the needs of the ethnic group's young.

Writing about immigrants' efforts in adjusting to the United States, Leo Eitinger wrote that "mothers have the easiest, as well as the most difficult time of it."²¹ Eitinger's argument is that most immigrant mothers remained in the home while their husbands went off to work and, therefore, these women experienced less contact with the American culture, which allowed them more time to adjust slowly rather than being jolted by the new culture on a daily basis. In immigrant families, Czech families in particular, it was the mother who transferred much of the family and ethnic traditions to the young. However, Eitinger also argues that immigrant mothers found it exceedingly difficult to deal with their children who grew up in American society and desired to conform in matters of fashion, music, and even food. This, of course, caused conflict

²⁰ Vivian Rakoff, "Children of Immigrants," in *Strangers in the World*, eds. Leo Eitinger and David Schwarz (Bern: Hans Huber Publishers, 1981), 133, 144-145.

²¹ Leo Eitinger, "Feeling at Home: Immigrants' Psychological Problems," in *Strangers in the World*, eds. Leo Eitinger and David Schwarz (Bern: Hans Huber Publishers, 1981), 95.

between mother and children.²² When extrapolated to Prague, Eitinger's comments contain much truth, especially regarding the Czechs living on the rural farms outside of town. These women probably only came to town to shop or attend a Czech or community event and a fissure may very well have formed between them and their public-school educated children. However, the experience of mothers living within the environs of Prague probably differed. These women would have been more aware of the goings on around them and interacted more with non-Czechs than the rural mothers.

Nevertheless, the slower pace of the small town and the seeming acceptance of Czechs by the majority native-born white population surely helped the immigrant women cope with the pressures of adjustment better than their urban kin. Regardless of the situation, everyday life centered on the family. Parents provided affection, security and disciplined structure for the children and in return expected obedience and work.²³ It was through these ties of affection and obligation that immigrant families channeled ethnic identity to succeeding generations. Many times in urban areas, these ties became strained due to the intense stimuli of the dominant society. However, in the comparative isolation and slower pace of a rural farm or village, the family better controlled the social habits of the young.²⁴ Parents were better able to oversee their children's personal habits including recreational activities and social interactions. Furthermore, when the parents openly

²² Ibid.

²³ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 213; Bernard J. Weiss, "Introduction" to *American Education and the European Immigrants: 1840-1940*, ed. Bernard J. Weiss (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), xxi.

²⁴ Tamara K. Hareven and John Modell, "Family Patterns," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, eds. Stephen Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 345; Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Historical Approaches to the Study of Rural Ethnic Communities," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 4.

participated in the various aspects of community life, stress on the family lessened resulting in less friction than if the children alone came in contact with the larger society.

Marriage was one important aspect of family life that immigrant parents attempted to control. It is not so much that they tried to choose specific mates for their children, although this no doubt occurred, but that they stressed the importance of choosing another Czech as their lifetime mate. Most ethnic groups in the United States married largely within their own group during the first and most of the second generation.²⁵ According to Karel Bicha, “adult members insisted their children marry within the Czech group.” Bicha goes on to say that “Czech Oklahomans were conspicuously endogamous for perhaps two generations.”²⁶ Bicha’s thesis is a general application regarding all of Oklahoma’s Czechs. However, Bicha’s assertion, when extrapolated to Prague, does not precisely describe the situation. The early and active participation of Czechs in the economy of the farming town resulted in social integration, dalliances of Czechs and non-Czechs, and ultimately exogamous marriages.

By using various sources such as census manuscripts, newspaper announcements, and cemetery records a sense of the marriage patterns of the Prague Czechs emerges. The census records show the birthplace of the individual, but also the birthplace of his or her parents. Thus, it will be relatively easy to determine who are the immigrants and who are the second-generation ethnics. The third generation will prove tougher to unravel because both the birthplace of the individual and parents will show up in census records

²⁵ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 75; Paul H. Elovitz, “Patterns and Costs of Immigration,” in *Immigrant Experiences: Personal Narrative and Psychological Analysis*, eds. Paul H. Elovitz and Charlotte Kahn (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 65.

²⁶ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 60.

as being somewhere in the United States. This can be especially taxing for third-generation females. With third-generation males, of course, most will sport obvious Czech surnames. When examining undetermined wives shown on census material in the later years of the study, (1920 and 1930) it may be possible to revert to an earlier census manuscript and ascertain the birthplace of the grandparents of the individual in question and thus determine the ethnicity of the wife. However, this can only be possible if the wife's maiden name is obtained. This is where the local newspapers and cemetery records can be of assistance. All marriage announcements in the Prague newspapers contained the wife's maiden name and many cemetery tombstones also displayed a woman's surname before marriage. Thus, if the couple married in Prague or if their final resting place was in one of the Prague cemeteries there is a good possibility of determining the wife's maiden name. By knowing the maiden name of the wife of a Czech immigrant or Czech ethnic, a supposition can be deduced regarding the existence of endogamous or exogamous marriage within the Czech community.

The 1900 census records show forty-two Czech households in South Creek Township, location of the future town of Prague. In all of these households save one, at least one of the married adults listed their birthplace as Bohemia.²⁷ In thirty-five of the forty-two households both marriage partners were born in the Czech lands while five families consisted of a second-generation Czech married to an immigrant.²⁸ The only possible exception to this endogamous portrait was Mary Banghain. Mary, a Bohemian

²⁷ The only non-immigrant household head was Joseph Klabzuba, a twenty-one year old bachelor and second-generation Czech, born in Kansas. Joseph lived with his nineteen-year old brother, Frank, and another second-generation Czech, Eddie Kryche. There were also two households headed by single men and two others headed by widowed heads. However, in all four of these situations the single head's birthplace was Bohemia. See *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township. There were also several Czech families residing in North Creek Township.

²⁸ Four male immigrants married second-generation wives and one immigrant female married a second-generation husband.

immigrant, married George Banghain most likely in Nebraska when she was eighteen and he around twenty-two.²⁹ Her husband, George, listed his birthplace as Nebraska and his parents' birthplace as Iowa. Their two daughters were born in Nebraska, with the youngest being nine years old in 1900. Although it is impossible to state with complete certainty that Mary's husband was not a third-generation Czech, his last name suggests he was not. Thus, out of the forty-two households containing at least one Czech only the Banghain family could be considered the result of an exogamous marriage.³⁰

Does the above analysis support some scholars' idea that marriage patterns remained for the most part within the ethnic group during the first and second generation?³¹ There is little doubt that the early Czech farming community in South Creek Township consisted overwhelmingly of immigrants marrying immigrants or immigrants marrying the children of immigrants. However, a closer look reveals that the situation in 1900 is somewhat inconclusive for any sweeping declarations concerning endogamous or exogamous proclivities. Nevertheless, it does show the closeness of the early Czech communities. Czech immigrants definitely looked for a mate within their group. Of the thirty-five immigrant-to-immigrant marriages, fourteen occurred in Bohemia before emigration. This reinforces the earlier position that many Czechs came to the United States in family units rather than as individuals. Furthermore, the twenty-

²⁹ Nebraska as the couple's place of marriage was deduced using the 1900 census records. The census shows that George and Mary had been married thirteen years. Furthermore, they had a twelve year old child (Edna) born in Nebraska only a year after their marriage. Finally, George's place of birth was also Nebraska. Thus, it appears likely that Mary migrated to Nebraska (home of a substantial Czech colony), met George and married him sometime in 1887. Furthermore, Laura, the couple's second daughter was also born in Nebraska in 1891. Therefore, the Banghains did not come to Oklahoma until at the earliest sometime in 1891 after the birth of their second daughter. I could find no cemetery records recording the entombment of anyone named "Banghain." Thus, it was impossible to determine Mary's maiden name.

³⁰ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

³¹ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 75.

one immigrant households who married after arriving in the United States consisted of many immigrants arriving in the United States at an early age including ten who arrived before their sixteenth birthday and four aged sixteen to twenty. Most, if not all of these, likely arrived as a dependent member of an immigrant family and despite claiming Bohemia as their birthplace had already spent several years in America.

An obvious and simple observation gleaned from the data is that rural Czech colonies in the Midwest clung strongly together. Most of the early Czech settlers in South Creek Township listed their birthplace as Nebraska with the others claiming rural states like Iowa, Wisconsin, and Kansas. These immigrants lived in an environment where they came into social contact with other Czech immigrants. Thus, despite the fact that some arrived in the United States at an early age, their families quickly migrated west and joined close-knit immigrant colonies which practically ensured the marriage of their children to others within the Czech community. Moreover, only eight married couples claimed to be married less than ten years. Considering that the first Czechs arrived in Oklahoma in 1891 with the opening of the Sac and Fox reservation to settlement, most couples married in the United States exchanged vows before migrating to the Sooner state. They met, fell in love, and formed a family before moving to Oklahoma.³²

With the formation of Prague, things changed. During the next thirty years interaction between the Czech community and the community at large in the economic, educational, and social spheres resulted in more exogamous marriages. Third-generation Czechs, those whose grandparents came from Bohemia, displayed little hesitation in

³² *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

choosing a non-Czech as their spouse.³³ Through the years the *Prague Record* contained numerous marriage announcements covering the nuptials of third-generation Czechs with non-Czechs.³⁴ Even three granddaughters of the immigrant pioneer Frank Vlasak married outside the ethnic group. His oldest son's daughters, Marie and Gladys, married non-Czech men with the surnames Vanhooser and Crute, while his youngest son's daughter, Ednamae, married and divorced Herbert Kilgo of Asher, Oklahoma.³⁵ Considering that the third-generation descendant and also the parents all grew up in the United States, it is not surprising that many married outside the ethnic group. This occurred in most ethnic groups. However, what about the second generation, those born in the United States of immigrant parents? Did Prague's second-generation Czechs remain endogamous as posited by Bicha in *The Czechs in Oklahoma*?³⁶

As already noted, the 1890s Czech farming community contained only six second-generation families and all married within the group except for one whose head of household was unmarried at the time of the census. With the creation of Prague more Czechs as well as non-Czechs streamed to the area until by the 1920s there were about one hundred Czech families living in the area including thirty-six immigrant-to-immigrant pairings.³⁷ Again, by comparing cemetery records and newspaper marriage

³³ See *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township; St. Wenceslaus Cemetery, Prague Oklahoma; City Cemetery of Prague, Oklahoma; Czech National Cemetery, Prague Oklahoma; *Prague Record*; *Prague News*.

³⁴ For a few examples, see *Prague Record*, 23 November 1916, 17 February 1926, 14 September 1927, and 8 February 1928. Many other exogamous marriages can be deduced by comparing cemetery records that included the maiden name of the wife with the census manuscripts to ascertain probable ethnicity and the generation of the Czech spouse.

³⁵ See Prague City Cemetery and Czech National Cemetery. William Vlasak along with his wife and daughters, Marie Crute and Gladys Vanhooser are buried in the City Cemetery. Frank Vlasak Jr.'s family including Ednamae (Vlasak) Kilgo, are buried in the Czech National Cemetery. The Czech National Cemetery records contain a paragraph on Ednamae's life including her stint as a school teacher in Asher and her marriage in 1929 to Herbert Kilgo.

³⁶ Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma*, 60.

³⁷ *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

announcements with the census manuscripts a good depiction of second-generation Czech marriage practices emerges. The 1920 census contained sixty-nine second-generation Czech families. Of the sixty-nine households, forty-five married another Czech. Twenty-six of these forty-five married an immigrant and nineteen partnered with a fellow second-generation Czech.

However, the remaining twenty-four second-generation Czechs married non-Czechs. Although these exogamous marriages constitute only about a third of the total second-generation unions, they are a significant number. Interestingly, eighteen of the twenty-four exogamous marriages consisted of a female second-generation Czech marrying outside the group including one Czech farmer's daughter, Agnes Sucha, who married a member of the German community, Max Brauer. Sucha, born in 1903, would have been a young teenager during America's World War I.³⁸ Apparently the hostility between the Czech and German communities during this period did not affect her choice of a lifelong mate.

An examination of cemetery records reveals an additional five exogamous marriages involving immigrants with three of the five spouses being male Czechs.³⁹ Added to the twenty-four second-generation exogamous nuptials, the immigrant marriages bring the total of out-of-group partnerships to twenty-nine. Although endogamous marriages greatly exceeded exogamous marriages the numbers are significant and suggests that Czech society was not closed. Marriages uniting Czechs and

³⁸ Agnes Sucha lived in North Creek Township, directly north of Prague. Her father, Stanley Sucha, immigrated in 1890 and owned a farm. See *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for North Creek Township.

³⁹ The three male immigrants marrying non-Czechs were: George Sala married Julia Miller, Julius Bontty married Bertha Hall, and John Simek married Lillian Turner. See *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township; See also Prague City Cemetery.

non-Czechs were commonplace beginning with the second generation. Thus, it appears that the dual lifestyle many Czechs pursued, the pragmatic approach wherein Czechs participated fully in the community of Prague while attempting to maintain their traditions through the family and fraternal organizations had already begun to break down by the second generation.

A final note on marriage patterns centers on how some Czech women who married outside the group continued to claim their ethnic roots. When a man married a non-Czech his name remained the same. Despite marrying a German or Irish or Anglo bride he kept his Czech last name. Thus, to his dying breath his name proclaimed his Czechness; he was an Opela, a Sala, or Jezek no matter the nationality of his wife. Not so with Czech women. When they married, tradition demanded they change their surname to reflect their husband's. When Alice Babek, a second-generation Czech, married Cecil Olson she became Mrs. Cecil Olson or simply Alice Olson to her friends and acquaintances.⁴⁰ However, it is enlightening how several Czech women who married non-Czechs desired a return to their ethnic roots upon death. In the Czech National Cemetery, which required Czech heritage for burial, rests fourteen graves of Czech women of this period who married non-Czechs. Their husbands are not buried alongside them. The women's graves stand alone. Each woman's married name and Czech maiden name are etched on the tombstone with only one exception, Ednamae Vlasak who divorced her husband, Herbert Kilgo. Why these women's husbands were not buried beside them is unclear. Perhaps, the wife died before the husband and he turned the burial over to her family? Or, perhaps, the husband passed before the wife and she, in her

⁴⁰ Alice Babek did marry Cecil Olson and changed her name to Helen Olson. Source: St. Wenceslaus Catholic Cemetery, Prague, Oklahoma.

dotage, decided in favor of a burial with her birth family and ethnic kinsmen rather than with her in-laws. Or, maybe pride in their heritage prompted these women to ask for burial in the Czech cemetery upon their death? The true reason is unknown and for each woman the motive probably differed. Nevertheless, these graves give testament that some Czech women, of which several were third-generation, continued to consider themselves as Czech. They held fast to their ethnicity despite going through much of their life with a non-Czech last name.⁴¹

In addition, there are five married couples' graves of Czech women and their non-Czech spouse (in the Czech National Cemetery).⁴² These are worthy of note because in two instances the non-Czech husband outlived his Czech wife meaning he agreed to burial in the ethnic cemetery. In the other three cases, the wife outlived her spouse implying she made the final decision on a burial site. However, two of the non-Czech husbands passing before their wife were in their seventies when they died and the other, George Williams, was eighty-one or eighty-two years old. Thus, it is likely that these couples discussed burial plans before their deaths and agreed on the Czech cemetery as

⁴¹ The fourteen women buried alone in the Czech National Cemetery born during the period of study were: Edna Mae Kilgo (Vlasak), Frances Pruett (Stasta), Libby Spurgeon (Vobornik), Anna Farr (Provaznik), Madeline Choate (Salda), Marie Supler (Svoboda), Ella Simmons (Cerny), Helen Brown (Bruza), Ellen Shivers (Bruza), Minnie Emery (Sekera), Violet English (Cerny), Lottie Switzer (Caha), Rosie Hurley (Kolar), and Mary Frances Darrow (Zbavitel). Source: Czech National Cemetery. Third generation Czechs were: Edna Mae Kilgo (Vlasak), Libby Spurgeon (Vobornik), Ella Simmons (Cerny), Violet English (Cerny), Mary Frances Darrow (Zbavitel). In addition, Minnie Emery (Sekera), born in 1915, may have been a third-generation Czech. Author could not locate her name on census manuscripts for verification. See *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township; *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township; *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁴² There are actually more than five non-Czech graves. However, for this study's purpose only the tombs of those born before 1930 were considered.

their final resting place. Again, this points out that these women, even though marrying outside the ethnic group, still identified themselves as Czech.⁴³

The Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups suggests that “often the decision to marry in the United States marked the turning point in national identification and created the first tangible tie to the new land.”⁴⁴ Intermarriage affected not only the individual married couple, but their children, and the entire ethnic group. This appears especially true when a female married outside the ethnic group. Their children would no longer keep the mother’s ethnic surname, but would take their father’s. It is the descendants of these offspring who are very susceptible to leaving the distant maternal heritage and becoming indifferent to their ethnic identity. Richard Alba advanced this idea by positing that “pervasive intermarriage suggests the emergence of a new ethnic group, one defined by ancestry from anywhere on the European continent.”⁴⁵ Although it is arguable whether or not over one third of second-generation marriages being exogamous falls under the adjective “pervasive,” nevertheless it is more than trivial. Furthermore, exogamy did nothing but increase with succeeding generations. Did these marriages outside the group result in the emergence of a new group or the disappearance of the old? Perhaps with some that indeed was the result. However, during this period, many, including Czech women, clung tenaciously to their identity as Czech Americans regardless of their last name.

⁴³ The five couples were: Joe and Helen Tompkins (Leder), Louis and Anna Holman (Smicka), Joe and Julia Nance (Pantlik), George and Effie Williams (Stastny), and Fred and Emma Pierce (Barta). Source: Czech National Cemetery. *The Prague Record* announced the Holman and Smicka wedding. See *Prague Record*, 23 November 1916.

⁴⁴ Paul Robert Magocsi, “Loyalties: Dual and Divided,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* eds. Stephen Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 676.

⁴⁵ Richard D. Alba, “The Twilight of Ethnicity among Americans of European Ancestry: The Case of Italians,” in *Ethnicity and Race in the U.S.A.: Toward the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard D. Alba (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Pau, 1985), 153.

Besides the name, Prague exuded a distinctive Bohemian flavor. The Czech population, both those residing within the town limits and those in the rural sections did not isolate themselves from town activities. They were not an exclusive group, shunning contact with non-Czech members of the population.⁴⁶ In this respect, Prague's Czechs appear different from urban ethnic communities where normally the children most readily accepted the dominant culture. In Prague, adults as well as their children participated in village events and worked for and befriended non-Czechs. Similar to their experiences in a European village, the Prague Czechs participated actively in town activities and organizations. Additionally, friction between the Czech community and the other residents appears practically nonexistent – at least not until the outbreak of World War I.⁴⁷ As mentioned earlier, nativist ideas and outright hostility towards immigrants pervaded much of the United States in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, Prague's Czechs and the non-Czech inhabitants regarded each other with, at the least, respect and most times friendship. However, many in the Czech community relied heavily on their fraternal societies or if Catholic, the local parish Church. These organizations helped the immigrants and their descendants cope with unfamiliar ways and customs which enabled individual members of the group to succeed not only in business but on a personal level. The historical western orientation of these Slavs aided them well after their arrival in the United States. The Dillingham Commission found that the American Czech population was socially and educationally above other Slavic groups

⁴⁶ Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma," 102.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

and almost the equal of German immigrants in education. These attributes assisted the Czechs well in coping with their new environment.⁴⁸

Most of Prague's Czechs maintained a keen curiosity in the happenings in Europe, especially the Czech lands and in other Czech communities in the United States. At least three Czech-language newspapers enabled the rural community to glean information about their country of birth and others of their ethnic group in the United States that their local newspaper might not cover.⁴⁹ The primary Czech-language newspaper read in Prague was *Oklahomske Noviny* (Oklahoma News). Published in Chicago beginning in 1905, the semi-weekly kept the immigrant community apprised of Czechs throughout the United States as well as happenings in Bohemia. An Oklahoma farmer could have the paper mailed directly to him and could read about other Czech farmers in Iowa, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, or keep abreast of events in Chicago, Cleveland, and other urban centers. For example, the October 19, 1905 issue offered a story about an anti-Habsburg demonstration in Brno, Moravia.⁵⁰ The desire to throw off the yoke of imperial dominance did not begin with World War I. Another popular paper published in Chicago was the liberal-bent *Hlasatel* (*The Herald*). Similar to *Oklahomske Noviny*, *Hlasatel* evinced a more politically progressive slant on the news and leaned towards rationalism on matters religious. Although, there is no way of estimating the number of Lincoln County Czechs who read *Oklahomske Noviny* or *Hlasatel*, they were available and most likely read by some if not many. The official newspaper of the

⁴⁸ United States Immigration Commission, *Reports of the Immigration Commission* 20 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1911), 42.

⁴⁹ *Oklahomske Noviny* published the itinerary of a speaking tour by a Professor Isky of the University of Nebraska. Isky visited and spoke in Prague on 1 November 1905. See *Oklahomske Noviny*, 5 October 1905.

⁵⁰ *Oklahomske Noviny*, 19 October 1905.

Western Czech Brotherhood Association printed in Cedar Rapids, Iowa was *Bratrsky Vestnik* (*The Fraternal Bulletin*). Its primary purpose centered on informing members of upcoming events, meetings, and changes in leadership, dues, or benefits. Unfortunately, despite Prague containing an active lodge, there are no surviving issues of *Bratrsky Vestnik* in the Prague Historical Museum or the Oklahoma Historical Society. Thus, it is impossible to determine how many Prague Czechs received the paper. William Earl Martin estimated that at least half of Oklahoma County Czechs read *Oklahomske Noviny* and the rest read either *Hlasatel* or *Bratrsky Vestnik*, with some reading several publications.⁵¹ It seems reasonable to assume that many Czechs read their lodge's newspaper and other Czech-language periodicals probably on par with their fellow kinsmen in nearby Oklahoma County.

In 1902, Franklin N. Newhouse, a dedicated Republican, moved his printing presses from Baxter Springs, Kansas to Oklahoma and began printing the *Prague News*, Prague's first newspaper.⁵² The following year Frank Mullen started a rival paper, the *Prague Patriot*, which claimed independence in politics.⁵³ The papers carried stories from all over the nation as well as local news and both actively sought to please their Czech readers with articles about events in the Czech community. Czechs reciprocated by advertising their businesses and meetings in both newspapers. In 1909, the *Prague Patriot* became the *Prague Record* when Frank Nipper, a newcomer to Prague, bought the *Patriot* and changed its name. A few years later, in 1917, Nipper bought out

⁵¹ William Earl Martin, "The Cultural Assimilation of the Czechoslovak in Oklahoma City: A Study of Culture Contrasts" (M.A. Thesis, University of Oklahoma Press, 1935), 114.

⁵² Newhouse printed the first issue of the *Prague News* on July 24, 1902.

⁵³ Melva Losch Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A., Prague (Kolache-Ville) Oklahoma* (Norman: Hooper Printing, Inc., 1978), 42, See also Tower, 46-47. Mullen gave the *Patriot* to his son-in-law, W.S. Overstreet, in 1905 who sold the operation to B.S. Edwards. It was Edwards who sold to Nipper.

Newhouse's *Prague News* and stopped publishing the rival sheet.⁵⁴ In 1919, deciding to move to Wyoming and begin anew, Nipper sold the *Record* to two men from Hennessy, Oklahoma who in turn sold the entire operation in 1920 to Junia Heath Jones. She returned the newspaper to a Republican tilt and printed the happenings of the small town for many years.⁵⁵

Prague's newspapers, like most small town papers in the early twentieth century, covered all aspects of town life and the surrounding rural community. By reading the weekly newspaper, one could stay abreast of pretty much every happening in the town. Looking at a few stories covered by the *Prague Record* in a sixty day period during 1916 reveals the wide-ranging scope of the newspaper: "Anton Pastusek building an addition to his house." Justice Balaun fined a man \$16.50 for "hogging the road with his wagon and not allowing a Ford to pass." "Outside Paden [about eight miles east of Prague] last Thursday night, police had gun-fight with crowd of party men. One man shot in side after he fired his gun. He paid a fine." "Miss Henrietta Sosensko lost her gold wish-bone pin last Friday night. Finder please return to Miss Henrietta at the New York Bargain Store and receive reward." The papers even published accounts of seemingly ordinary activities such as, "some Wilzetta [a rural community about six miles northwest of Prague] people . . . out car riding Friday night," or "D. Bartek, John Barta, C.M. Sadlo and several others went to the Canadian [River] Wednesday afternoon on a fishing party."⁵⁶ The newspapers, especially the *Prague Record*, reported extensively on the

⁵⁴ Franklin Newhouse remained in Prague. His wife, Lillian, became the postmaster in Prague and Franklin took a job as her assistant. See *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township. See also *Prague Record*, 26 April 1917. This issue of the *Record* details Nipper's buying of the *Prague News* and his plans to stop publishing the *News*.

⁵⁵ William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948), 46-47.

⁵⁶ *Prague Record*, 1 June 1916; 20 July 1916; 27 July 1916; 3 August 1916.

everyday life of their readers. As seen, a resident could not add on to his house or even go fishing without the community finding out. When the wife of a prominent Czech, Dr. John Z. Mraz, died, the *Record* covered her funeral noting how beloved by the community the deceased was and that practically the entire town attended.⁵⁷ If one previously assumed that farmers and small town residents rarely left home, they would be mistaken. Considering only the Czech community, the paper reported trips to various destinations throughout Oklahoma such as Oklahoma City, Stroud, Guthrie, Bristow, and Tulsa. Furthermore, Prague's Czechs traveled out of state as well on visits and vacations to nearby states like Texas, Arkansas, and Kansas, but also to more distant destinations such as Indiana, Illinois, Nebraska, Oregon, California, and New York.⁵⁸

The papers also reported on parties, families visiting other families, and even when a young single man paid a visit to the home of a young single lady. These social events and visits, whether friendly or romantic, show Czechs and non-Czechs personally and voluntarily involved with each other. This is but another example of Prague's Czechs participating in the community and not isolating themselves. The *Prague News* and *Prague Record* contain dozens of examples of Czechs and non-Czechs fellowshiping including a 1915 note where the Pospisil family (Czech) visited the Hensley home Sunday evening.⁵⁹ Apparently the Sojka family residence (Czech) was a popular destination because many non-Czech families such as the Emericks, Hammacks,

⁵⁷ *Prague Record*, 25 January 1917.

⁵⁸ Although the *Prague Patriot* carried few articles on travel, practically every issue of the *Prague News* and *Prague Record* contained a short note on residents traveling. For a few examples of visits both within Oklahoma and to other states see *Prague News*, 16 July 1915; 27 July 1915. See also *Prague Record*, 25 May 1911; 8 June 1916; 15 June 1916; 29 June 1916, 6 July 1916; 27 July 1916; 17 May 1917; 28 October 1920; 6 January 1926; 13 January 1926; 17 March 1926; 21 September 1927.

⁵⁹ *Prague News*, 3 February 1915.

Milligans, and Burnsidés stopped there for visits.⁶⁰ When young Joe Bartosh (Czech) “called on Miss Fannie Nix, Tuesday evening” the whole town probably buzzed.⁶¹ However, the relationship did not last as the 1920 census shows the second-generation Bartosh married to Camellia, also a second-generation Czech.⁶² Parties were always popular events and Czechs enjoyed them as much as the next. When the Burnsidés threw a party the *Record* listed the guests attending and they included several non-Czechs as well as Czechs such as the Vlasaks and Sojkas.⁶³ On Joe Heinzig’s fourteenth birthday in 1926 his mother gave him a big party serving popcorn and birthday cake to the guests which included Charlie, Louis, Fanny, and Agnes Opela and Marie and Anna Mae Simek. Young Heinzig’s heritage was German. Obviously, the hard feelings of the prior decade between the German and Czech community were forgotten as this German family allowed their son to invite his Czech friends to celebrate his birthday.⁶⁴

Notwithstanding experiencing great success as farmers, artisans, and in business, the Czech community also suffered tragedy. One of the worst occurred in the summer of 1916: “Joe Rubac, a prominent Bohemian farmer . . . was run over by a west-bound passenger train Monday afternoon . . . he died in a short time afterwards.”⁶⁵ Apparently, after disembarking Joe Rubac realized he left his suitcase on the train. He re-entered the departing locomotive, retrieved his baggage, and then jumped from the moving train falling underneath. The weight of the passenger car crushed and severed one of his legs. The fifty-four year old Czech bled to death before some good Samaritans could carry him

⁶⁰ *Prague Record*, 22 June 1916; 27 June 1916; 3 August 1916.

⁶¹ *Prague Record*, 6 July 1916.

⁶² *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township. Joe and Camellia Bartosh are buried in the Czech National Cemetery.

⁶³ *Prague Record*, 22 June 1916.

⁶⁴ *Prague Record*, 3 February 1926.

⁶⁵ *Prague Record*, 20 July 1916.

to a doctor. The Czech community and the entire town showered his widow, Anna, with their condolences and food. The Bohemian Hall of which Rubac was a member paid fifty dollars to Anna for burial expenses. The fraternal organization paid an additional fifty dollars to the widow as a death benefit.⁶⁶ Rubac's widow buried her husband in the Czech National Cemetery. To thank everyone for their kindness Anna Rubac wrote a thank-you note, which the *Prague Record* printed.⁶⁷ However, this is not the end of the story. In the weeks to come, the *Record* reported various people visiting the widow, sometimes taking her to their house for a meal.⁶⁸ The community made sure Anna Rubac was not left alone while grieving.

Other than baseball, Prague fielded no other athletic teams during its first decade of existence. The high school did not play their first varsity football game until 1915 probably because of the amount of time and work most residents invested in building their homes, businesses, roads, and other infrastructure necessities. This is not to say that the early residents of Prague did not relax and enjoy themselves. As early as 1904 the town sported a race track, shooting gallery, and bowling alley.⁶⁹ In 1906, Prague added a roller skating rink for the young and old alike and by the end of 1907, two billiard halls opened.⁷⁰ However, beginning around 1915 the citizens of Prague ventured into other

⁶⁶ Bohemian Hall, Financial Accounts Books, 1915-1916.

⁶⁷ *Prague Record*, 27 July 1916.

⁶⁸ *Prague Record*, 10 August 1916; 17 August 1916; 24 August 1916.

⁶⁹ For information on race track see *Prague Patriot*, 17 November, 1904; Dorsey Shooting Gallery see *Prague Patriot*, 20 October 1904, *Prague News*, 7 September 1905; bowling alley mentioned in *Prague Patriot*, 17 November 1904.

⁷⁰ For information on roller skating rink see *Prague News*, 30 August 1906; Prague contained at least five pool halls (billiard halls) over the years. See, *Prague News*, 17 January 1907, 24 January 1907 for information on the Adams & Sangster Pool Hall; Hooter's Billiard Hall opened in the Watts Saloon shortly after statehood. See *Prague News*, 21 November 1907. John Urban opened a pool hall in 1916. See *Prague Record*, 1 June 1916. Another pool hall operating in 1916 was the Lone Star Pool Parlor. See *Prague Record*, 21 December 1916. The Metropolitan Pool Hall first mentioned in 1917. See *Prague Record*, 24 November 1917.

competitions. The *Prague News* reported the town organized a tennis team which, like the baseball nine, challenged nearby towns to matches. And like the baseball club, the tennis team included adults because the article listed Arthur P. Slover, a bank cashier and school board official, as one of the team members.⁷¹ George Sadlo, the baseball team's top pitcher, also played tennis. Other members of the tennis squad listed in the article included men with Anglo names like Fred Miles and Clifford Botts, and a Jewish man, Ernest Blumenthal. Thus, like the baseball club, the tennis team featured non-Czechs as well as Czechs. In March 1917, Prague held a town-wide domino tournament which lasted several days and attracted many contestants, including Czechs. Sam Kolodny, the Jewish immigrant from Russia and owner of the New York Bargain Store emerged as champion defeating former mayor, Benjamin Franklin Whitmore, in the final game.⁷²

Probably the most popular leisure activity in Prague was dancing and the Czech community's Bohemian Hall emerged as the center of the dance craze. Saturday nights became the unofficial evening for taking a date for several hours of dancing and music usually featuring local Czech bands such as Bontty's Coronet Band or the Prykrill Orchestra.⁷³ One of the first bands formed in Prague did so in 1906. The twenty-three member coronet band chose George Eret, a Czech, as bandmaster and John Davis, a non-Czech, as business manager – still another example of inter-ethnic cooperation.⁷⁴ From 1915 to 1930, practically every edition of Prague's newspapers contained an advertisement promoting a Saturday night dance at the Bohemian Hall. In addition, the

⁷¹ *Prague News*, 30 July 1915. The 1920 Census lists A.P. Slover's age as thirty-eight. Thus, in 1915 Slover would have been at least thirty-two years old. See Census Manuscripts, 1920, South Creek Township.

⁷² *Prague Record*, 22 March 1917.

⁷³ For example, see *Prague Record*, 27 July 1916; *Prague Record*; 30 September 1920.

⁷⁴ *Prague News*, 22 March 1906.

weekly advertisements always stressed that everyone in town was invited. Despite being held at the Czech's fraternal building, any couple paying the cost of admission (fifty cents before 1920 and seventy-five cents during the 1920s) could come and dance.⁷⁵ Although the most common venue for dances, the Bohemian Hall was not the only floor where one could waltz or practice the foxtrot. In 1917, Agnes Vobornik and Mary Pastusek held a "Big Social Dance" at the Sokol Hall. The *Record* reported that about seventy people attended the young ladies' party.⁷⁶ The American Legion also held occasional dances as did the Catholic Church.⁷⁷

Besides dancing, the townspeople enjoyed attending live plays. The Methodist Episcopal Church performed "The Thread of Destiny" at Prague's Folly Theater featuring youth from their church as the cast.⁷⁸ The high school drama department staged several plays with some of the performances also held in the evenings at the Folly Theater. In 1921, the high school presented "Valentine Vinegar's Vaudeville Agency" before a sold-out audience. Edward Shultz played the lead role and the cast of teenaged actors included Eddie Klabzuba and Frank Kozak from the Czech community.⁷⁹ The Bohemian Hall sponsored plays as well. In April of 1921, to raise money for Prague's American Legion organization, the Czech fraternal group held a play two nights running.⁸⁰ A few years later, the Bohemian Hall advertised a play in the *Record* with the Czech title, "Osel je Osel," which roughly translates "A Fool is a Fool." The advertisement bragged that the performance featured "Home Talent" and that the play

⁷⁵ First instance of price increase appeared in *Prague Record*, 30 September 1920.

⁷⁶ *Prague Record*, 18 January 1917.

⁷⁷ *Prague Record*, 5 October 1916; 20 March 1920.

⁷⁸ *Prague Record*, 23 November 1916.

⁷⁹ *Prague Record*, 17 March 1921.

⁸⁰ *Prague Record*, 31 March 1921. Later in 1926, the Western Czech Brotherhood also held a benefit dance to help a Czech invalid's family and enable him to buy a wheelchair. See *Prague Record*, 20 January 1926.

would be followed by a dance. Although, the advertisement did not specify the language of the play, the Czech title was published. Thus, the play was most likely performed in Czech.⁸¹

Residents of Prague almost certainly flocked to the Folly Theater in 1917 when it began showing motion pictures on a giant screen. The Savoy Theater, owned in 1921 by the Lanik brothers (Czechs), competed with the Folly for customers.⁸² Besides reporting on the latest Hollywood movie coming to Prague, the newspaper also carried news about neighborhood women holding rook and whist parties including who attended.⁸³

Traveling shows periodically stopped in Prague. Frank Still and his Wild West Show performed before overflow crowds in July 1915, and the M.L. Clark and Sons Circus came to town in September of that year.⁸⁴ Burk's Big Show also arrived in Prague in 1915 and treated the residents to a parade and a rendition of the classic play, "Uncle Tom's Cabin."⁸⁵ The following summer over five thousand people gathered outside Prague on the Barta farm to watch Tex LaGrene demonstrate a flying machine, an airplane.⁸⁶ Vaudeville came to town in 1916 featuring dancing, singing, and comedy for three consecutive nights. The Franklin Show set up a giant tent and offered a different play each night with Vaudeville performed between acts. Adults paid twenty cents and the children got in for only a dime.⁸⁷ Prague held a Big Spring Festival in 1922, featuring eating contests, music, and a baseball game. Before the big event, the *Prague Record*

⁸¹ *Prague Record*, 4 April 1928. The translation of the Czech word "osel" is jackass or donkey. However, like in English the word many times refers to a fool or someone easily deceived.

⁸² *Prague Record*, 3 February 1921.

⁸³ *Prague Record*, 9 May 1917.

⁸⁴ For Wild West show, see *Prague News*, 23 July 1915; For information on circus, see *Prague News*, 17 September 1915.

⁸⁵ *Prague News*, 9 July 1915.

⁸⁶ *Prague Record*, 28 September 1916.

⁸⁷ *Prague Record*, 10 August 1916. The three plays performed by the Franklin Show were: "The Sultan's Daughter," "St. Elmo," and "Why Lindy Ran Away."

advertised that the Terrible Turk, a professional wrestler, would be in town taking on “all comers.”⁸⁸ However, the ensuing editions of the paper did not report anyone defeating or even challenging the Terrible Turk. Perhaps, when the young men in town finally got a glimpse of the Turk, he truly was terrible.

It is impossible to say with any certainty how many, if any, Czechs attended these town events. It seems beyond reason to suggest they did not. We do know that the air show which attracted over five thousand was held on the farm land of a Czech, Frank Barta. In all probability Czechs enjoyed the shows and area happenings as much as their neighbors.

One community event Prague’s Czechs loved was the annual Lincoln County Fair. Each fall, the newspapers listed the yearly ribbon winners and Czechs always fared well. For several years, Rudolph Pospisil was one of the best riders in the county, while Franny Walla, whose husband was an active member of the Bohemian Hall, won numerous first place awards with her canned blackberries and plum jelly. Lydia Sojka excelled in cake making, especially devil’s food cake, while Rosie Vana took home several prizes in tatting (lace work).⁸⁹

However, the biggest town event of the year occurred every July fourth. Festivities began early and lasted all day. The entertainment included music, singing, speeches, recitations, and contests such as foot races, an apple pie eating contest, a

⁸⁸ *Prague Record*, 1 June 1922.

⁸⁹ See any Prague newspaper issued in October after the fair for winners. For a good example, see *Prague Record*, 12 October 1916.

money-grabbing event, fat man's race, and various other attractions. Of course food was plentiful and the celebration normally concluded with a baseball game.⁹⁰

Although the early Czech farming community appears to have been somewhat clannish, there seems little doubt that after the formation of Prague most Czechs, both young and old, actively participated in community affairs. Similar to the economic experience, Czechs contributed to social events from playing on the baseball team to winning ribbons at the county fair. Beginning as early as the second generation, some Czechs married outside their ethnic group. However, despite choosing a non-Czech husband or wife, many continued their allegiance to the Czech community. In the social arena, as in economics, Prague's Czechs practiced a pragmatic approach in their relationships with the larger community. They took part in celebrations and befriended others outside their own ethnic group. This twin lifestyle quickly led to cultural dualism, an almost total immersion in the community which resulted in rapid adjustment to the new American ways and acculturation into the mainstream culture. Nevertheless, some in the Czech community refused to undergo a full identity change; they refused to turn completely Yankee.

Still another aspect of the Czechs' decision to cooperate with the larger community concerns education. If these Czechs truly wished to maintain their European culture they needed to teach their young the ways and language of their forbears. It was imperative. The following chapter reveals how they indeed attempted to do just this while continuing to live in two worlds.

⁹⁰ *Prague News*, 2 July 1915. This issue of the *News* published the entire program for the upcoming Independence Day celebration and is a good example of the day's festivities. Other years mentioned food and entertainment but did not list specific events. The band performing at Prague's Independence Day celebration in 1916 was Bontty's Coronet Band. See *Prague Record*, 15 June 1916.

CHAPTER 8

EDUCATION AND THE CZECH COMMUNITY

Ben Davis, quarterback for Prague High School's football team, barked the signals to the offense in a clear, loud voice that bordered on the musical to many spectators in the stands. Upon hearing the trigger word, the center snapped the football into the open, waiting hands of Davis who wheeled to his left and deftly stuck the football into the midsection of Jim Sala, Prague's halfback and leading rusher before the Seminole defense could tackle him for a loss. Sala tightly cradled the pigskin against his side with his left arm and followed the other halfback, Frank Kozak, as they charged into the maelstrom of the Seminole line. Prague's linemen on the left side, Paul White and Charlie Klabzuba, threw their bodies at their husky counterparts desperately trying to carve an opening in the Seminole defense enabling Sala to speed through. Spotting a linebacker knifing through the gap, Kozak barreled into the opponent knocking him to the ground. Jim Sala burst through the opening afforded him by the efforts of his teammates and sprinted several yards towards the goal line before the Seminole defenders finally dragged him to the turf.¹

Jim Sala, with the help of his teammates, eventually scored a touchdown in a winning effort against Seminole High School. Sala, of Czech ancestry, joined two other

¹ Paraphrased from a newspaper account. Details of the football game between Prague and Seminole including a roster of players are found in the *Prague Record*, 23 September 1920.

Czechs on Prague High School's 1920 fourteen-man football squad. Frank Kozak, whose Bohemian-born father was the town's blacksmith, occupied the other halfback position and Charlie Klabzuba, a third generation Czech, played left tackle for the Prague eleven. Klabzuba's father and mother, born in Kansas of Bohemian immigrants, ran a general store in the downtown business district of Prague and owned one of the finer homes in town.² The three Czech football players, Sala, Kozak, and Klabzuba, were born and raised in the Oklahoma farming community.³

Prague, Oklahoma Football Team 1919



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum

²A booklet published in the late 1920s featured photos of Prague's finest homes and included the Joseph J. Klabzuba residence. *Prague, Oklahoma: City of Opportunities* (n.p.: n.d.), 9.

³*Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

Attendance at public school promoted patriotism, cultivated socialization, and, through peer pressure, enhanced cultural homogeneity. Five days a week, several months each year children from different socio-economic and religiously diverse backgrounds sat close to each other at desks or tables and recited the alphabet, repeated the multiplication tables, and learned about their civic duties as American citizens. During recess, they played games like tag, hopscotch, jacks, marbles, and red rover. The boys chose a best buddy and soon the two become blood brothers while the girls hung out in groups of four or five and talked about how disgusting boys were. By the time the children were no longer kids but energetic teenagers verging on adulthood, they dressed alike, wore their hair in a similar fashion, used the same idioms and slang words, and dreamed of the future. Sometimes, the immediate future included marriage. It was not uncommon, especially in a small town to choose your mate from someone you grew up with, someone from your high school. Rarely did a young man exclude as a possible lifetime partner a cute girl who laughed at his jokes simply because she or her parents claimed as their birthplace a faraway place called Bohemia. Nor did a young Czech normally find himself rebuffed by the slender redhead sitting next to him in geometry class because his last name was Opela or Jezek instead of Smith or Johnson.⁴

For ethnic groups, attending public school hastened acculturation or the “Americanization” of their young. Most immigrants realized the confused look on their child’s face after the first day of school would soon disappear as their son or daughter relaxed in their new surroundings, got acquainted with their classmates, and sadly, over time became indistinguishable from them.

⁴ Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 134-137; Peter D. Salins, *Assimilation, American Style* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 7.

The first Czechs of Prague understood this all too well and tried to establish a Czech School for their children. This school was not associated with the parish, but appears to be simply a brief attempt to form a secular ethnic academy. Unlike their energetic immersion into the economy of the farm town, many Czech parents in the early days of Prague wanted their offspring to attend classes taught in Czech. However, probably due to costs and losing students to the free public school, Prague's Czech School lasted only a short time. Leaders in the ethnic group vainly trying to sustain Czech as the vernacular in the Bohemian community offered language classes at the Sokol Hall. Although popular in the beginning, the weekly instruction failed to stanch the inexorable flood emanating from the public schoolhouse. Czech students wanted to fit in, wanted acceptance from their peers, wanted to be liked.

Immediately upon formation as a town in 1902, Prague established a public school district. The tiny wooden school building, which went only through the eighth grade, at once suffered from overcrowded conditions.⁵ After a quick meeting of Z.C.B.J. officers, the Czech lodge offered Bohemian Hall as a temporary solution. The school board, chaired by Z.C.B.J. member, Frank Vlasak, accepted the invitation and for over two years the Bohemian Hall housed Prague's public school.⁶ Two years later, the aspiring school district hired Dr. Adolph L. Lincheid, a German immigrant, as superintendent of Prague Public Schools.⁷ With Lincheid's guidance the town, in 1909, established a sixteen-credit high school. However, the school remained housed in a

⁵ Lincoln County Historical Society, *Lincoln County: Oklahoma History* (Saline, MI: McNaughton & Gunn, 1988), 186.

⁶ Melva Losch Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A., Prague (Kolache-Ville) Oklahoma* (Norman: Hooper Printing, Inc., 1978), 68.

⁷ William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948), 36-37; Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A.*, 67-69.

cramped, wooden structure. The first graduating class of nine seniors (seven girls, two boys) received their diplomas on May 6, 1913.⁸ Prague built a permanent eight-room brick schoolhouse in 1917. Declared unsafe in 1927, the city tore down the top floor of the building and added a new wing.⁹

This short chronology appears to somewhat contradict or at least question the efforts of Prague's Czech community to establish their own school. The Z.C.B.J. Lodge aided the public school with the use of their building for classes. Furthermore, the influential Czech immigrant, Frank Vlasak, served as chair of Prague's very first Board of Education. Obviously, not all Czechs worried about the impact of the school on their children. Some, such as Vlasak, promoted the public school system. Even the largest fraternal association in the new town supported the fledgling public school. Indeed, as will be seen, other adult Czechs in the ensuing years loaned their talents to the public school.

Most scholars of late nineteenth, early twentieth-century immigration agree that America's public schools eroded immigrant culture. Nearly all educators during this time promoted cultural homogeneity and the virtues of capitalism to their students.¹⁰ Public school teachers fostered universal literacy and through their efforts solidified English as

⁸ *Prague Times-Herald*, 6 August 1987. The members of the first graduating class of Prague High School were Nora Jenkins, Walter Schoggen, Gertrude Jukes, Mabel Jukes, Mattie Roberts, Alda Heatley, Beatrice Mansur, Lora Jenkins, and George Sadlo.

⁹ Prague Historical Society, *Prague, the First 100 Years: Prague, Oklahoma 1902-2002* (Rich Hill, MO: Bell Books, 2001), 53. Children of African Americans attended a separate school. Prague, like most American towns during this period, practiced segregation of the races. *Prague News*, 7 September 1905.

¹⁰ Michael R. Olneck and Marvin Lazerson, "Education," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, eds. Stephen Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 307; Bernard J. Weiss, ed. "Introduction" to *American Education and the European Immigrant: 1840-1940* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), xiii.

the dominant language in the United States. They advanced and glorified the idea of the American Dream where, over time through thrift and hard work, economic success lay within anyone's reach. Another important outcome of public education, and for the most part unintended, was interethnic and immigrant-native socialization.¹¹ This invariably led to friendships and if that friendship involved someone of the opposite sex, possible romance. To fall in love with someone you first must meet them and spend time together and the school house placed pubescent teenagers in close proximity.

Leaders of ethnic communities quickly realized the impact of public schools on their young. Some groups formed private schools, which enabled them to preserve their religious and cultural heritage.¹² The Jewish and Catholic faiths successfully built and operated independent, private schools across the United States stressing the doctrines of their beliefs along with a rigorous academic program. Unlike Jewish centers, which stressed Jewish culture, Catholic parochial schools focused on religious instruction. Thus, attending a private Catholic school did not necessarily mean avoiding cultural decline. Will Herberg's work about the mid-twentieth century United States illuminated this phenomenon, but asserted that by holding onto the religion of their forbears, individual ethnic members retained something of their heritage, their religion.¹³ Although generally accurate regarding future generations of most ethnic groups, Herberg's thesis falters somewhat when transposed onto this small rural Czech community.

¹¹ Salins, *Assimilation, American Style*, 7.

¹² Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 35.

¹³ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960), 16.

When in the fifteenth century the piercing criticisms of Catholic policies, especially the selling of indulgences by Czech priest Jan Hus resulted in his execution in 1415, Czechs revolted against the Church.¹⁴ The terrible and bloody conflicts that followed took on a political cast as well as religious pitting the downtrodden Czechs against, not only the Roman Church, but also their German agents of war. From earliest times, national strife intertwined with religious strife.¹⁵ Following the battle-field victories of the Czech Hussites under their legendary leader, Jan Zizka (1360-1424), Bohemia proclaimed autonomy from the Catholic Church. For over a century, the Czechs preserved a wobbly religious independence despite rejoining the Austrian Empire in the sixteenth century. However, following the 1620 Battle of White Mountain in which a combined force of Catholics that included troops representing the Holy Roman Empire, Catholic League, and Spain routed a much smaller Bohemian army, Ferdinand II, the Holy Roman Emperor, restored Catholicism as the official religion of the Czech lands. The Catholic field commanders occupied the Bohemian capital of Prague and ordered all Protestants to reaffirm their faith or leave. Many left. Those who stayed never forgot.¹⁶

¹⁴ Matthew Spinka, *John Hus: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 130-164; W. N. Schwarze, *John Hus: The Martyr of Bohemia* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1915), 68-70, 134-135.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Wiskemann, *Czechs and Germans: A Study of the Struggle in the Historic Provinces of Bohemia and Moravia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 6-7; Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 58-59, 14-141, 369; Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1940), 284.

¹⁶ R. W. Seton-Watson, *A History of the Czechs and Slovaks* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1943, rpr. 1965), 113; Wiskemann, *Czechs and Germans*, 9-10.

Upon arrival in the United States, many Czech immigrants abandoned the Catholic faith forced on their ancestors.¹⁷ Many grasped the theological tenants of the freethinkers, some joined Protestant sects soon after arrival, others simply left the Church and concerned themselves with material issues. Unlike other ethnic groups like the Irish and Poles, Czechs found little refuge in the official religion of their native country. For many, the Catholic Church acted more as a wedge, splintering the community into two rival camps.¹⁸ Because of the weakening of the Church, parochial schools struggled in Czech communities. Non-Catholic Czechs refused to allow their children to attend an educational institution run by priests and nuns. They much preferred public schools over parochial schools.¹⁹ The situation in Prague, Oklahoma differed little. Czech immigrants founded the Catholic Church in Prague. However, they lacked the funds and students to open a thriving primary school. Instead, like their liberal kinsmen, they sent their children to the local public school and intensified their efforts of inculcating the Roman faith through church activities and Catholic clubs.²⁰

The membership of the Czech community's secular associations, the Z.C.B.J. Lodge and Sokol Hall, apparently understood the destructive impact of public education on their ethnic culture. They realized and worried that after they were gone their descendents might one day furrow their brows in incomprehension when hearing the melodic tones of their ancestor's tongue. Thus, in the early days of Prague, immigrants established a Czech School focused on passing their heritage and especially their beloved

¹⁷ Ernest Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions* (Chicago: Benedictine Abbey Press, 1942), 70; Karel Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 26.

¹⁸ Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions*, 48.

¹⁹ Bruce Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871-1914," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 156.

²⁰ William Earl Martin, "The Cultural Assimilation of the Czechoslovak in Oklahoma City: A Study of Culture Contrasts" (M.A. Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1935), 137.

native language to their offspring. Unfortunately, the only remaining artifact of Prague's Czech School is an undated photograph with a list of students on the back. The children

in the photo appear to

range from about age

five or six to the early

teens. Interestingly, all

of the oldest students are

female. The oldest male

student looks about nine

or ten years of age, while

the photograph's back

row containing eight

female students all appear

older. Comparing the list of student names with cemetery records reveal that birth dates

spanned from 1896 to 1902. Furthermore, only one student (Edward Bartosh) is buried in

the Catholic Cemetery. The Czech National Cemetery contains the remains of eight of

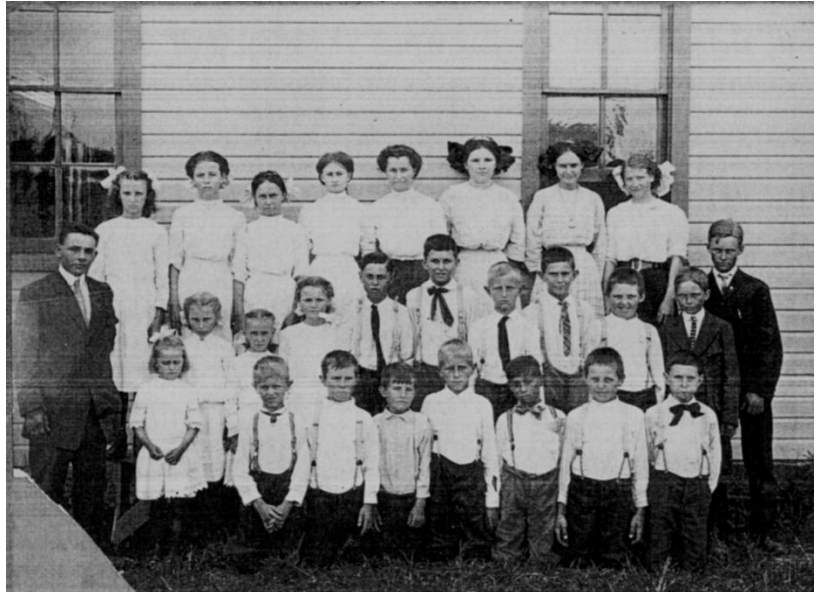
the ten students found in the records.²¹ Several of the young scholars identified later

attended Prague High School. For example, Frank Kozak is pictured in the Czech School

photograph. As noted in the opening anecdote, Kozak played halfback for Prague High

School's 1920 football squad.²² How long the school remained open is unknown.

Czech School, early 1900s



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum

²¹ Unfortunately, only ten of the twenty-two students recorded could be found in cemetery records. Some, no doubt, moved away from Prague before their death. Female students were particularly difficult to locate in cemetery records unless their tombstone recorded their maiden name. Czech National Cemetery; Prague City Cemetery; St. Wenceslaus Catholic Cemetery.

²² The original photograph of the Czech School is in the Prague Historical Museum, Prague, Oklahoma.

However, the school shows an early attempt by members of the Czech community to inculcate their children with Czech culture.²³

A later attempt to preserve the Czech language centered on the Sokol Lodge. The gymnastic society offered language instruction at the Sokol Hall in downtown Prague. Students conjugated Czech verbs, learned the different case endings, and correct pronunciation as if studying in a medieval-era Bohemian monastery overlooking the flowing blue water of the Vltava River rather than a rut-filled dirt street called Highway 62. The Sokol Hall's language classes continued at irregular intervals for many years.²⁴ As time progressed, parents stumbled in their efforts to convince their children the importance of learning the language of a land they only knew through stories and faded photographs. However, the language did not entirely die out. Young people enjoyed using Czech words and phrases when telling an off-color joke or insulting someone. However, the new generation still exuded pride in their heritage. They liked who they were. They simply wanted to speak English.²⁵

It is impossible to know with any certainty the range of feelings Czech mothers and fathers underwent when deciding to send their children to public school. They understood that instruction would be in English. They understood that their sons and daughters would study alongside the offspring of native-born Americans. They realized,

²³ No instructional material remains. Thus, the language of instruction cannot be ascertained with complete certainty. However, since this early school was a definite attempt on the part of the immigrant community to maintain their heritage, including their language, there is a high probability that classes were taught in Czech.

²⁴ Interest in Sokol Hall waned during the 1930s, probably due to Depression-era problems. After World War II, activity resumed but by the early 1970s the organization attracted few members. The town tore down the Sokol Hall building in 1976 and deeded the land to the American Legion. On paper the lodge existed until 1992 and then officially disbanded after almost ninety years of existence. The last three directors were: Jim Pospisil, Frank Sefcik, and Leonard Walenta. Prague Historical Society, *Prague, The First 100 Years: Prague, Oklahoma 1902-2002* (Rich Hill, MO: Bell Books, 2001), 69.

²⁵ Joshua A. Fishman, "Language Maintenance," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, eds. Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 630; Martin, "Cultural Assimilation of the Czechoslovak," 145-147.

surely, that their children would change as a result. Some, no doubt, believed they could lessen the influence of the American school with increased participation in Sokol and Bohemian Hall activities. Others probably recognized the cultural fate of their progeny and sadly accepted it as a result of their decision to emigrate. Regardless, most Czechs comprehended the importance of an education for their young. As time progressed, more and more began sending their children to public school.

Melva Losch Brown, a 1970s resident of Prague, wrote that the Czech pioneers were well educated.²⁶ She based her conclusion on interviews with descendents of the original settlers, not on actual data such as certificates, diplomas, or college degrees. The Czech immigrants to Prague, with few exceptions, were farmers.²⁷ Most originated from small villages in Bohemia and Moravia where toiling in the fields was the future of most young rather than a college education. This does not mean that Czechs did not value education; they did. Congress's Dillingham Commission found that Czech immigrants compared closely with German immigrants in literacy and fared much better in the ability to read and write than other Slavic groups such as the Poles and Slovaks.²⁸ However, the first settlers to the Prague area concerned themselves with etching out an existence on the new land. Planting crops, building fences and barns and a home emerged as their first priority, not schooling for the young and especially not advanced schooling. This mindset continued even after the creation of Prague and included the native born and German immigrants. For several years most students' education in the Barta Post Office

²⁶ Brown, *Czech-Town*, U.S.A., 66.

²⁷ Frank Vlasak appears to be an exception. Vlasak, although owning farm land, operated a general store in Dent soon after the 1891 land run. He continued his business proclivities after the opening of Prague by opening a store in the new town.

²⁸ U.S. Immigration Commission, *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, 12 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1911), 87. See chapter 2 for specifics of the commission's findings.

area of Lincoln County and the early days of Prague ended with the eighth-grade graduation ceremony.

Although probably not “well educated” as surmised by Brown, the early settlers overwhelmingly arrived literate. The 1900 census for South Creek Township listed only four adult Czechs (two men and two women) considered uneducated with two of the four able to read but not write.²⁹ Thus, only two Czech pioneers could neither read nor write. However, the ability to speak English reveals a somewhat different picture. Almost two dozen Czech adults in 1900 revealed to the census taker that they could not converse in English. This equates to almost a fourth of the total adult Czechs listed on the census. The number unable to speak English rises slightly when children (excluding infants and toddlers two years or younger) are included in the total. Although most children spoke English, the census manuscripts list ten youngsters unable to speak English. However, these ten dependents came from only three families. Furthermore, nine of the ten non-English-speaking children belonged to two families, the Pechaceks and Placas, containing no naturalized members.

Josef and Matilda Pechacek and their six children emigrated from Bohemia in 1897. They either arrived in New York and took a train to Texas or what is more likely landed in Texas because Matilda gave birth to a seventh child, Vincent, in the Lone Star state in 1897, the same year of emigration. Sometime after Vincent’s birth, but by the end of 1898 at the latest, the family migrated to Oklahoma Territory and purchased a

²⁹ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township. Illiterate is normally defined as someone who can neither read nor write. Thus, if one can read but not write a better term for that person might be uneducated rather than the offensive term, illiterate. Only two adult Czechs in 1900 fell under the category “illiterate.”

farm in the Czech community of South Creek Township.³⁰ The Pechaceks either arrived in the United States with some money or did quite well on their new farm; by 1900, they owned the property free and clear. Neither Josef nor Matilda could speak English. Their five oldest children ages fifteen, thirteen, eleven, ten, and seven, attended school for three months during the preceding year. However, all claimed no ability with the new language.³¹ How they received instruction without an understanding of English is unclear unless the Pechacek children attended the Czech School. As previously noted, records of the Czech School vanished over time with the only relic remaining being a single undated photograph with an incomplete list of student's names on the back. No Pechacek children are on the list.³² Of the ten children listed on the 1900 census who could not speak English, five belonged to the Pechacek family. They had been in the United States less than four years.

The entire Placa family including five sons and a daughter was born in Bohemia. In 1899, Frances and his wife, Francis, arrived in the United States with their five youngest children. They came to join their oldest son, Josef, who emigrated two years earlier. Reunited, the Placas quickly made their way to Oklahoma Territory where they rented a farm. The four oldest sons aged, twenty-two, eighteen, sixteen, and fourteen, helped their father and mother work the farm. Only the two youngest children attended school and this for just two months. Of the eight family members, three claimed on the

³⁰Although it is unclear exactly when the family left Texas for Oklahoma Territory, the Pechaceks lived in Oklahoma Territory in 1898. Josef Pechacek joined the Bohemian Hall in 1898, at that time located in Dent, Oklahoma; Matilda joined in 1899. See, Bohemian Hall Membership Rolls, 1898 to 1904.

³¹*Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

³²Undated photograph of early Czech School, Prague Historical Society, Prague, Oklahoma. The Pechacek family is not found on the 1910 census. Bohemian Hall updated their membership records in 1912 and show the name Matilda Pechacek. There is an annotation beside her name, "gone." Josef Pechacek is nowhere mentioned on the 1912 membership rolls. See, Bohemian Hall Membership Rolls, 1912.

1900 census an ability to speak English, Frances, Josef, and ten-year-old Jaroslav (Jerry). New to the United States, the Placas became immersed in creating a new home and obtaining economic viability. Similar to the early settlers, the Placas worked the land as a unit with the educational needs of the children considered secondary to the crops. The Placas, with little doubt, spoke their native language on the farm. They most likely encountered the strange-sounding tongue of the majority only on trips to town for groceries and supplies.³³ Thus, the addition of four Placa children to the list of non-English speaking children brings the 1900 census total to nine children unable to speak English.

The tenth and final Czech youngster listed as not able to speak English was Annie (Anna) Kaiser. Her situation appears completely different from the Pechaceks and Placas. Annie, aged fifteen, was the second oldest of six children born to Jan and Anna Kaiser. Except for her infant sister, Francis, all of Annie's siblings spoke English and attended school at least three months during the previous year. Annie did neither. Additionally, Annie could not read or write. Her father immigrated to the United States in 1868 at age fifteen or sixteen. Her mother was also born in Bohemia, however the census taker failed to record her arrival date. Annie and all her siblings except the youngest (born in Oklahoma) claimed Wisconsin as their birthplace. As her brothers and sisters attended school, could read and write, and converse in English while Annie could do none of these, leads to the assumption that Annie Kaiser was mentally challenged. Furthermore, Annie is buried in the Czech National Cemetery alongside her mother and father. The name on the tombstone lists no married name, only her family name. It appears she never

³³ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

married. Thus, Annie Kaiser's situation differed considerably from the Pechacek and Placa youths who were recent arrivals from Europe.³⁴

Unfortunately, the census does not reveal how many children could converse in both English and Czech. The suspicion is the number would be great. Several families such as the Kolars, Bartoshs, Terflers, Spevaceks, Mertas, Kroutils, Smikas, and Novotnys contained at least one parent unable to speak English, usually the mother. However, in every instance, the children proclaimed an ability to converse in the new tongue.³⁵ How did these youngsters communicate with their parent(s)? They obviously spoke both Czech and English. What this suggests is that many Czech families continued to speak their native language at home even after most or all members acquired the facility to speak English.

Ten years later, with the town of Prague now in existence, eight adult Czechs declared they could not communicate in the English language.³⁶ By 1920, the number of non-English speakers in the Czech community fell to three, each of whom was part of the 1910 total. Apparently, none of the three learned the language of the United States from 1910 to 1920. The three Czech-only speakers consisted of a married couple aged seventy-two and sixty-eight and a sixty-seven year old woman (whose husband could speak English).³⁷

The 1900 census also tracked school attendance denoting the total number of months spent in school during the previous year for school-aged youngsters. Generally

³⁴ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township; Czech National Cemetery, Prague, Oklahoma.

³⁵ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

³⁶ *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

³⁷ The three non-English speakers were Elizabeth Petecka, Vaclav and Mary Baestam. *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

speaking, Czech girls spent about six months per year in the classroom and Czech boys about half that time. Additionally, under the rubric “Trade/Profession” the census lists most girls’ occupation as “At School” while beginning around the age of ten or eleven, Czech boys found themselves quantified as “Farm Laborer.” This undoubtedly shows that the first priority for most farmers at this time was not an education for their young, but economic survival. This survival depended on the sons helping the fathers in the fields as early in their life as possible. As illustrated on the census records, young males attended school when they could, but if work needed done on the farm, then their sisters trekked to class without them.³⁸

Moreover, this data alludes to the patriarchal undertones of Czech family structure with two distinct possibilities. Czech fathers believed their daughters should not toil in the hot, sweaty cotton fields alongside them and their brothers. The school attendance records of girls compared with boys lends credence to this assumption. On many mornings, the girls washed their hands and faces, brushed their hair, slipped on their homemade frocks and sauntered off to school. At the same time, their brothers, some as young as ten, donned overalls, a floppy hat, and slipped a patterned handkerchief into their back pocket and took their place in the cotton field at the side of their father. However, a second possibility is that in some families the daughters also provided field labor during planting and especially harvest time. Once the cotton matured, farmers rushed to pick the yield as quickly as possible for fear of a sudden thunderstorm that could flood the fields and ruin the crop. Census data attests that this second scenario is probably true for some Czech families. In a minority of families, the months attending school by gender mirrored the other. For example, despite being recorded as a student,

³⁸ *Census of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

thirteen-year-old Mary Pechacek attended only three months of classes in 1900; the same number of months as her older brother, Joseph, cataloged on the census as a farm laborer. Likewise, in the case of Fannie and Albert Novotny, eighteen-year-old Fannie spent only a single month in the classroom as did her younger brother, Albert, who the census denoted as a farm laborer. In these families and others, girls carried the title of student even if they spent relatively little time at the schoolhouse. Perhaps, the fathers and American society or at least the census recorder, preferred to think of female adolescents as students even if actual conditions confirmed a different conclusion.³⁹

Finally, a glimpse of either economic success or the importance of education to individual families can be garnered by examining census information. For instance, the school-aged children of Josef and Mary Leder, Frank and Fannie Provaznik, and Frank and Terezie Sestak, all attended around six months of school in the year before the census. This included both males and females.⁴⁰ Thus, the economic circumstances of these families was such that they needed less help from their sons or else these particular parents valued education to the extent that they somehow circumvented the much needed and readily available labor supply in order for their young, both boys and girls, to attend school. The economic situation and ideas about the importance of an education differed from family to family. Some believed in and wanted their children to attend school regularly. However, some of these same parents decided the best chance for the family's economic success depended on their children laboring on the farm rather than sitting in a classroom reading Shakespeare or Hawthorne. Other families probably saw little value in an education beyond basic reading and math abilities. After all, back in Bohemia, the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

parents of the early settlers were farmers; they were farmers and their children would be farmers.

The experiences of school-aged children of non-Czech native-born farmers mirrored the latter Czech scenario much closer than the former. Quite simply, the offspring of some families attended class on a regular basis while the children in other families went to school much less. However, a sharp difference observable in native-born families is that in almost every case both sons and daughters attended the same amount of school during the year. If the daughters made it to school, their brothers went with them. This is a marked variance from some Czech families where the brothers occasionally stayed home and worked on the farm while their sisters studied in school.⁴¹

Later census manuscripts did not enumerate the number of months children attended school. They simply listed whether or not an individual attended school. Thus, a detailed comparison between the necessity to stay home and work the farm versus sending the children off to school is difficult. However, some differences protrude from the data. In 1900, only two seventeen-year-olds in the Czech farming community attended school. In both 1910 and 1920, only one young person of Czech heritage in Prague aged seventeen or younger did not attend school. The 1910 census taker recorded fourteen-year-old Agnes Martinek as currently not attending classes and in 1920, the census listed Mary Piter, aged sixteen, as not in school.⁴² Why these teenaged-girls left school is uncertain. Perhaps, a serious illness to either them or a close loved one forced one or both of them to forgo their education, at least temporarily. Perhaps, the census taker simply made an error. In the case of Agnes Martinek, her seventy-eight-year-old

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township; *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

Catholic father, Vincent Martinek, arrived in the United States in 1863 but still declared his language as Bohemian rather than English. Vincent owned his home free and clear and lived, according to the census, on his “own income.”⁴³ Thus, he may have placed little faith in the American educational system and might have even envisioned it as a hindrance to his family’s religious or ethnic way of life. There is no way of telling for sure. Of course, the primary reason why so few older teens, regardless of ethnicity, attended school in 1900 compared with later years is that the early public schools in the area went only through the eighth grade. Once Prague built a public four-year high school most town residents took advantage of the opportunity and sent their young to class.

This was not the case among Czech farm families living in South Creek Township in 1920. As mentioned, among Czech youths under age eighteen who resided in the environs of the town, only Mary Piter did not attend any school during the previous twelve months. However, looking at Czech families dwelling on farms in the outlying rural areas of the township shows almost a dozen teenagers less than eighteen years of age not in school.⁴⁴ Why the discrepancy? Again, each family faced different obstacles and problems including economic, social, and sometimes physical illness or injury as they endeavored to establish a new home in America. Parents needed teenaged children, both male and female, to help on the farm. Cotton production was labor intensive and to a farming family, children truly were a blessing not an added hardship.

⁴³ Agnes Martinek’s mother was fifty-seven. She married Vincent Martinek at age thirty-four. The couple had two children, Agnes and an older sister, Esther, aged nineteen. All three women claimed on the census that they could speak English. *Census of Population: 1910*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁴⁴ *Census of Population: 1920*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

A hand-written list found in the 1904 school notebook of Ellen Whitmore, daughter of the town's initial mayor, provides the earliest record of Prague's students. Whitmore, a member of the first eighth-grade graduating class of six students, listed thirty-eight pupils attending the Prague Public School including three Czechs, Mary Sestak, Joe Leder, and Agnes Martinek.⁴⁵ The Sestak and Leder families belonged to the Bohemian Hall, while the Martineks attended St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church. The number of Czech students attending public school in 1904 was small. This is doubtless due to the existence of the Czech School. Why these three families opted for their child to attend public school over the ethnic school is unclear. Perhaps, distance was a factor. Maybe the public school required only a short walk from their homes. Cost may have been an issue. Parents paid no out-of-pocket expenses to send their child to a public primary or secondary school. However, private schools received no taxpayer funds. Thus, the expense of the private Czech School may have discouraged some families.⁴⁶ Regardless of the reason, the Sestaks, Leders, and Martineks, chose the public school over the ethnic school. As the years passed, more and more Czech families chose to send their children to public school.⁴⁷

Czech children rarely posed discipline problems at school possibly due to their ordered homelife.⁴⁸ Moreover, some did quite well academically. The *Prague Record* lauded Raymond Kolar and Lillian Pastusek as Prague's top seventh grade students in

⁴⁵ Ellen Whitmore, Ensley Barbour, Leoti Overstreet, Cora Casey, Alma Thomas, and Dora Newhouse constituted Prague's first eighth-grade graduating class in 1904.

⁴⁶ There are no existing records of the tuition amount of the Czech School. As a private institution it needed operational funds to buy books and materials and to pay the teacher. Where the money came from, if not from parents, is uncertain. Author found nothing in the records of the Z.C.B.J. Lodge to suggest the Bohemian Hall financed the school.

⁴⁷ Of the three families, Sestaks, Leders, and Martineks, both the Sestaks and Leders were prominent in the Czech community. However, the Martineks, who were Catholic, appear more sectarian and less involved.

⁴⁸ Bicha, *Czechs in Oklahoma*, 39.

English.⁴⁹ Frank and Eddie Klabzuba graduated from Prague High School and attended Creighton University in Nebraska.⁵⁰ Eddie Klabzuba later entered Creighton's dental school and earned his license in 1926. Henryetta Bartosh scored well enough on entrance exams for admittance to nursing school while Oliva Cerny and May Mee Cerveney studied business in Oklahoma City.⁵¹ George Sadlo, a member of Prague's very first graduating class in 1913, earned a teaching certificate and became a band director. In 1928, his Cleveland (Oklahoma) High School band won the Oklahoma Class B State Championship. George and his wife, Emily, later returned to the town of their birth and taught music at Prague until their retirement.⁵² In addition to Sadlo, two other Czech students graduated and entered the teaching profession during this period. Marie Vlasak and Clara Cerny taught at Prague's grade school during the 1920s.⁵³

Czechs also competed alongside their non-Czech classmates in the athletic arena and a few acquired a reputation as outstanding athletes. The high school started a football program in 1915.⁵⁴ In the early years of the football program, Frank Kozak, Jim Sala, and Charlie Klabzuba were mainstays of the squad. During their four years on the team, Kozak and the younger Sala manned the backfield as halfbacks for the Red Devils. During the late 1920s, Wesley Kahanek anchored Prague High School's track team with his specialty being the pole vault.⁵⁵

Apparently, nature gifted George Sadlo with many talents. Besides musical ability Sadlo excelled at track and other sports. In 1913, Sadlo won the Lincoln County

⁴⁹ *Prague Record*, 3 February 1926.

⁵⁰ Paul White, a non-Czech, attended Creighton with the Klabzubas. The *Prague Record* reported the three traveled home together for a visit in 1926; *Prague Record* 6 January 1926.

⁵¹ *Prague Record*, 6 January 1926; 31 March 1926.

⁵² *Prague Record*, 23 May 1928; Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 73.

⁵³ *Prague Record*, 23 May 1927; 4 June 1928.

⁵⁴ *Prague Record*, 27 August 1915; Tower, "A General History," 38.

⁵⁵ *Prague Record*, 14 April 1929.

High School pole-vault championship.⁵⁶ After graduation he pitched for Prague's town baseball team and traveled to other communities as part of the tennis squad. If Prague fielded an athletic team, Sadlo participated.⁵⁷ Unfortunately for Sadlo, an older man from nearby Bellemont completely outshined the Czech athlete. While Sadlo was winning blue ribbons at county track meets, this man was winning gold medals at the Olympics. As Sadlo struck out batter after batter for the Prague Sluggers, this man scored touchdowns for the National Football League's Canton Bulldogs and hit homeruns for the New York Giants of baseball's Major Leagues. Regardless of Sadlo's talent in many sports, the fleet-footed Sac and Fox Indian born only a few miles outside Prague garnered all the attention. George Sadlo demonstrated exceptional athletic ability and his exploits deserve praise. With little doubt, during the second decade of Prague's existence, Sadlo enjoyed the reputation as the town's best all-around athlete. But no matter how good he was, he was no Jim Thorpe.

Rural schools dotted the landscape outside of Prague. These small, often one-room buildings, attracted the children of farmers living too far from Prague to trek to the larger school. Most German farmers lived north of Prague and their offspring usually attended either Center Point or Arlington schools. A few Czech farmers, such as Josef Cerny, Ernest Sala, Stanley Sucha, Frank and Lewis Bouda, and Antonia Dostalick, owned land in the Arlington area and sent their children to school with the German youngsters. Other rural schools near Prague included Red Eagle, Prairie View, and Fairview. Frequently, these small country schools faced financial hardships and held carnivals and pie sales to raise money for needed supplies and equipment or repairs to the schoolhouse.

⁵⁶ *Prague Times Herald*, 6 August 1987.

⁵⁷ George Sadlo graduated high school in 1913, two years before Prague fielded a football squad. Otherwise, he probably would have excelled in this sport also.

Another common practice involved teachers, usually single young women, boarding with local farmers. In Arlington, George “Grampa” Sala and his wife opened their home to many dedicated but penniless educators.⁵⁸ These schools remained small. In 1947 consolidation began. Prague swallowed several farm schools the very first year including Fairview, Center Point, Red Eagle, and Bellemont. In 1900 Lincoln County contained one hundred and eighty-four schools with most being very small. A hundred years later, in 2000, the count dropped to nine.⁵⁹

In education, Catholic and secular liberal Czechs refused to cooperate. Some in the Czech community attempted operating a Czech School. However, with only one student positively identified as Catholic, it appears that most Catholic Czechs eschewed the ethnic school. When Prague opened a public school, some leaders in the Czech community, such as Frank Vlasak, heartily endorsed the free public school system from the outset. As time went on, more and more Czechs began sending their children to the town’s school. However, they continued in their attempts to preserve their culture, especially their language, through classes held at the Sokol Hall. In addition, Prague’s Czechs rejected a passive approach to their children’s education. They encouraged the public school to recognize the special needs of their young, primarily the celebration and preservation of Czech culture. The decentralized structure of these small town schools left them open to ethnic pressures and many times ethnic groups successfully lobbied for

⁵⁸ Prague Historical Society, *Prague, the First 100 Years*, 47. Other farming families mentioned as supplying living quarters for young teachers were the Eddy Hillmans, Jerry Nelsons, and Blant Southernns.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 47-53; Czech farmers living in Arlington area found in *Census of Population: 1900*, Census Manuscripts Schedules for North Creek Township.

favors they might not obtain in a larger, highly bureaucratized system.⁶⁰ For example, the public school in Milligan, Nebraska, where Czechs dominated numerically, offered the Czech language as a course in their high school.⁶¹ In Prague, Czechs focused on the arts, specifically music and dance. George and Emily Sadlo taught music to all grades with George offering violin lessons on the side. The talented George Eret, Prague's first bandmaster, gave lessons to Prague students on various stringed instruments.⁶² Prague Public School instructed its students in the Czech Beseda (circle) dance and formed a Beseda Dance Team that traveled in 1932 to teachers' meetings in Tulsa and Oklahoma City to perform their routine in traditional Bohemian dress. The Beseda dancers included several students from outside the Czech population, such as Albert Brown, Clarence Fennel, Olene Roberts, Kathryn Forth, and Robert Slover.⁶³ Obviously non-Czech students enjoyed Czech dances, too.

Once Czech families decided to send their children to public school they attempted to exert some control over the situation through active participation. This proved especially successful in the arts. Their rural environment and minority demographic circumstances plus the refusal of the secular, Protestant, and Catholic segments to cooperate and form a unified private or parochial school left the public school as the best option for education. The Czech community simply refused to unite

⁶⁰ Olnek and Lazerson, "Education," 307. Victor Greene also writes about how Czechs valued public schools and in some instances actually used state universities to help preserve their culture. Victor Greene, "Ethnic Confrontations with State Universities, 1860-1920," in *American Education and the European Immigrant: 1840-1940*, ed. Bernard J. Weiss (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 199.

⁶¹ Robert Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village: A Study of Social Persistence and Change* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1933, repr. ed., 1970), 63.

⁶² Brown, *Czech-Town, U.S.A.*, 73.

⁶³ Prague Historical Society, *Prague, the First 100 Years*, 45. Czech students identified as part of the Beseda Dance Team were: Eddie, Ernest, and Helen Sestak, Rose and Raymond Svoboda, Emily Bruza, John Sefcik, Marie Pospisil, Emil Kucera, Helen Soukup, Rose Vobornik, Elba Cerney, and Henry Womastek.

because of the religious split. The religious situation of Czech immigrants differed drastically from other ethnic groups. Rather than a primary ingredient of their culture, religion many times served as a source of disagreement if not downright enmity. Finally, Czechs actively involved themselves in practically all community organizations and events. Prague's Czechs participated in civic affairs including the town band, volunteer fire department, and served on various town committees. It is to this final area that we now turn.

CHAPTER 9

POLITICS AND COMMUNITY LIFE IN PRAGUE

Charles Vobornik probably slept little the night of the election. Although backed by the Bohemian Political Association, Vobornik faced a tough competitor for town treasurer in fellow businessman, Jacob Mertes. Mertes, a German immigrant, operated a thriving hardware store on the west side of Broadway Avenue not too far from Vobornik's Meat Market on Main and Broadway.¹ The two Czechs already holding office in Prague, Frank Vlasak and Anton Pastusek, supported Vobornik but as with any office seeker, the candidate felt uneasy. Similar to most residents of Prague, he liked Mertes but still hoped to receive more votes than the affable hardware dealer. Fortunately, neither Vobornik nor Mertes had to wait long. By the following day it was clear that Prague's next treasurer would be Charles Vobornik. In a landslide victory, the Czech immigrant defeated the German immigrant by 106 votes. For the upcoming year, 1907, of the eight town officials three would be Czech.²

Earlier chapters demonstrated the rapid acculturation and accompanying marital assimilation of Prague's Czechs with the larger society. The frontier beginning, rural

¹ The *Prague News*, 7 June 1906 listed the location of the Mertes and Heatley Store as being on the west side of Broadway Avenue. In November, 1906 the *Prague News* placed Vobornik and Kinsey Meat Market at the corner of Main and Broadway.

² Paraphrased from stories found in *Prague News*, 9 May 1907; Russell Willford Lynch, "Czech Farmers in Oklahoma: A Comparative Study of the Stability of a Czech Farm Group in Lincoln County Oklahoma, and the Factors Relating to its Stability," *Bulletin of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College* (Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College) 39, (June 1942): 103; and Melva Losch Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A., Prague (Kolache-Ville) Oklahoma* (Norman: Hooper Printing, Inc., 1978), 137-138.

characteristics and demographic situation of the farming town of Prague hastened the conversion of many Czechs, including the first generation, from “outsider” to respected resident. Indeed with the inception of Prague the minority Czech population participated in every facet of the community. Paramount in this transition was the apparent absence of prejudice and discrimination from the very beginning against Czech newcomers by native-born Americans. This chapter reveals a public involvement in the affairs of the town by ethnic Czechs. Czechs were joiners; they liked being engaged. Not only was this true regarding their fraternal associations but also their participation also overlapped into the community’s civic lodges and local politics. Finally, it appears these small-town ethnics assimilated into the larger society much quicker than their kinsmen living in urban areas such as Chicago and Cleveland or those who made their homes in fairly homogenous rural settlements across the Midwest. From the town’s inception, in 1902, many Czechs made the decision to accept their new environment and actively take part in it. Furthermore, participation in civic institutions began earlier than the second and third generations; some of the early town leaders such as Frank Vlasak, A.G. Balaun, and Anton Pastusek were immigrants.³

With a membership of almost fifty, Prague’s Bohemian Political Association promoted the election of good candidates; good candidates normally translating to good Czech candidates. Chaired by the ubiquitous Frank Vlasak, the organization declared no allegiance to a specific political party, but, instead, searched for and backed anyone they believed good for the town.⁴ Considering the party allegiance of most Czechs in Prague, the evidence is sketchy at best. With the Bohemian Political Association declaring

³ *Census Of Population: 1900*, Manuscript Census Schedules for South Creek Township.

⁴ Brown, *Czech-Town U.S.A.*, 138.

partisan neutrality, one cannot simply state that all or even most Czechs belonged to a specific political party. Perhaps, a look at other Czech communities will provide hints as to political affiliation. Robert Kutak, in his study of Milligan, Nebraska, concluded that early twentieth-century Czechs overwhelmingly voted for Democratic candidates, chiefly due to their loyalty and affection for their favorite son, William Jennings Bryan.⁵ Rose Rosicky agreed with Kutak that a majority of Czechs leaned Democratic. However, she leavened her analysis somewhat by pointing out that the leading Czech (and freethought) weekly of the Great Plains region, *Progress of the West (Pokrok Zapadu)*, consistently backed the Republican Party and must have influenced many new citizens unsure about politics.⁶ In addition, Emily Balch argued that because the first migration of Czechs arrived in the United States earlier than other Slavs, many before or shortly after the Civil War, the Republican Party's anti-slavery stance attracted them. However, later arrivals, especially those settling in urban areas, favored the Democrats. Nonetheless, rural areas remained in the Republican fold.⁷ Joseph Chada, in his *Czechs in the United States*, posited that most Czechs liked the progressive policies and style of Republican Theodore Roosevelt but due to World War I and Woodrow Wilson's support for the creation of Czechoslovakia, many switched allegiances to the Democratic Party.⁸

Besides the two major American political parties, socialism also attracted Czechs. Devout freethinkers especially tended to advocate the overthrow of the capitalist system.

⁵ Robert Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village: A Study of Social Persistence and Change* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1933, repr. ed., 1970), 31-32, 35.

⁶ Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929), 444.

⁷ Emily Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), 394.

⁸ Joseph Chada, *The Czechs in the United States* (Chicago: Czechoslovak Society of Art and Sciences, 1981), 33-34.

However, even among freethinkers, socialist ideas remained in the minority.⁹ Thus, it appears Czechs, like most Americans, supported whichever party they believed best represented their views. Urban residents inclined towards the Democratic Party while rural folks split their allegiance and see-sawed back and forth depending on the candidate and circumstances. Nevertheless, Prague boasted two very successful Czech candidates during this period, A.J. Balaun and Jake Zabloudil – both Republicans. Balaun, a member of the local Z.C.B.J., served for many years as Justice of the Peace in Prague, holding court for minor offenses and citing the marriage vows for numerous young couples. Zabloudil, originally from Nebraska, worked at the State Bank of Prague until winning election as a Republican to the state legislature in 1915.¹⁰

Populism, a grassroots movement focusing on the dreary plight of farmers, also attracted many Oklahoma farmers and those living in rural towns and exerted a powerful voice for progressivism in territorial and later in state and local politics during the 1890s and the first two decades of the twentieth century. In 1904, the *Prague News* reported that spokesmen for the Peoples Party (or Populist Party) were in town holding meetings and campaigning hard for their candidates.¹¹ Although amazingly silent on the affiliation of most city officers, the newspaper did list A. F. Wood, the town's police judge in 1904 and 1905, as a Progressive.¹²

⁹ Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*, 392-393; Bruce Garver "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871-1914," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 148, puts the number of Czech freethinkers at about one in six. Vera Laska's fact book, *The Czechs in America: 1633-1977: A Chronology & Fact Book* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1978), 53, claims Cleveland as the hotbed of Czech socialism.

¹⁰ Lincoln County Historical Society, *Lincoln County: Oklahom History* (Saline, MI: McNaughton & Gunn, 1988), 404-405; *Prague Record*, 6 July 1916.

¹¹ *Prague News*, 1 September 1904.

¹² *Prague News*, 4 May 1905; The *Prague News*, 10 May 1906 reported in 1906 that James Harris defeated A. F. Wood for Police Judge by 6 votes. Neither was Czech.

When comparing the political participation of urban and rural Czech communities, Ernest Zizka, author of *Cultural Contributions*, wrote that “[t]he rural communities were somewhat retarded, however, when compared with the development of Czech communities in the large cities of America in which its denizens achieved responsible positions in public, professional, and commercial life and in the trades.”¹³ Although Zizka’s conclusion may hold much truth regarding many rural communities, the situation in Prague offers another scenario. The Bohemian Political Association came into being soon after the establishment of Prague and within four years, three of the eight town officers were Czech.¹⁴ Keep in mind that from the town’s birth Czechs never enjoyed a majority; they constituted about 30 percent of the total population during this period. Thus, to have control of almost half of the town positions suggests that non-Czech residents showed no hesitation in voting for someone with a Slavic name. These local political victories also hint that Czechs voted as a bloc. If a Czech ran for office, most in the Czech community most likely cast their ballots for fellow Czech. Prague’s Czech population historically stuck together. Regardless of the correct scenario, from the very beginning, Czechs actively involved themselves in affairs of the town. They served on the city council and held positions from town treasurer to mayor.¹⁵ However, Czech candidates were not always successful. The popular Frank Vlasak lost his town council seat in 1917 to the local photographer, William Shumate.¹⁶ Nine years later, Jim Farley, a local barber, bested his Czech opponent, Joseph J. Klabzuba, in another city council

¹³ Ernest Zizka, *Cultural Contributions* (Chicago: Benedictine Abbey Press, 1942), 100.

¹⁴ *Prague News*, 10 May 1906. The Bohemian Political Association remained active until after World War II. Prague’s Czechs became especially incensed after the Munich Conference in 1938 and Hitler’s takeover of Czechoslovakia. The *Tulsa Tribune*, 20 March 1939 reported that both of Prague’s fraternal organizations, the Z.C.B.J. and Sokol, sent letters of protest to Great Britain.

¹⁵ Lynch, “Czech Farmers in Oklahoma,” 103.

¹⁶ *Prague Record*, 5 April 1917.

race by twenty-eight votes.¹⁷ Thus, despite being a powerful voice in the town's political matters, the Bohemian Political Association was not a monolith; it was nowhere close to being a small-town reproduction of a big-city machine.

In addition to politics, Czechs energetically participated in civic lodges. Along with the Bohemian and Sokol Halls, the town of Prague hosted local chapters of the Masons, Knights of Pythias, Woodmen of the World, ODD Fellows, Lions Club, and the American Legion.¹⁸ Many Czechs joined these non-ethnic organizations, especially the Masons and Knights of Pythias. Over the years, the Prague weeklies splattered Bohemian surnames such as Bontty, Balaun, Svoboda, Jezek, Cerny, Leder, Vlasak, and Sojka when listing the officers of these lodges.¹⁹ In April 1927, Prague business leaders established a Chamber of Commerce to encourage and assist economic concerns.²⁰ The group held their early meetings at Sokol Hall with Charles Klabzuba, proprietor of the Reliable Chevrolet dealership, serving as secretary-treasurer.²¹ Other Czech businessmen in the Chamber of Commerce included John Stoklasa, co-owner with his brother of The Boston Store, one of Prague's busiest general stores. Stoklasa served on the Business and Trade Committee while another retailer, Joseph J. Klabzuba worked with the Roads and Highway Improvement Committee lobbying both county and state governments for better transportation infrastructure.²² Prague's Chamber of Commerce also listed Frank

¹⁷ *Prague Record*, 7 April 1926.

¹⁸ *The Prague News*, 27 July 1915, included a directory of the local lodges.

¹⁹ A few examples can be seen in *Prague Record*, 27 July 1915; 1 June 1916; 6 July 1916; 23 November 1916; 23 September 1920; 13 January 1926. Czechs prided themselves on their lodge associations and many times etched their membership on their tombstone. This is especially true of those belonging to the Masonic order.

²⁰ *Prague Record*, 27 April 1927.

²¹ *Prague Record*, 27 April 1927; 31 August 1927. W.H. Hartman was the Chamber's first president and George Jepsen, a cotton buyer and part-owner of the Union Cotton Oil Company and Jepsen Gin Company, the first vice-president.

²² *Prague Record*, 25 May 1927.

Svoboda, Steve Kanak, Charles Babek, and Joe Stoklasa as members during the decade of the 1920s.²³

The Ku Klux Klan, a not-so-civic lodge held meetings someplace around Prague in the early 1920s. The re-emergence of the Reconstruction era terrorist group swept into Oklahoma after World War I. Fueled by fears of communism and radicalism, many white rural residents panicked at the influx of Catholic and Jewish immigrants from what they saw as the backward parts of Europe. In addition, whites became alarmed at the perceived black defiance to the social order as witnessed in the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. The earliest mention of the white supremacy group's activities in the area occurred on the eighth of June, 1922 in the *Prague Record*. In a short article the paper described how two clansmen in full regalia visited a local Methodist church at the end of the service and handed the preacher a note and \$38.50.²⁴ The following week Prague's paper included a rumor "that an order of the Ku Klux Klan was organized last week."²⁵ Every edition of the *Record* during July and August of 1922 contained at least one article covering the activities or beliefs of the organization. The Klan again visited a church in September. Several clansmen dressed in fluid white robes and slitted hoods interrupted Reverend William McElvany of the Methodist church during a revival meeting. The group marched down the narrow aisle of the small auditorium and ceremoniously offered the minister an undisclosed amount of money, which he accepted. The clansmen then promptly left. This story in no way should be viewed as disparaging of the Methodist cleric. A minister accepting a donation from hooded armed men does not equate with

²³ Prague Chamber of Commerce, *Prague, Oklahoma: City of Opportunities* (n.p.: n.d.), 32-34, 37-39.

²⁴ *Prague Record*, 8 June 1922.

²⁵ *Prague Record*, 15 June 1922.

agreeing with them. We do not know Reverend McElvany's racial beliefs. In addition, if the evangelist refused the proffered money he risked open confrontation or the chance that the unknown men might drag him from his bed one night and whip him in front of his neighbors and family. Few whites brazenly defied the Klan. Reverend McElvany appears no different.²⁶

Did Czechs join the Ku Klux Klan? Although impossible to state with complete certainty, one would hardly think so. The Klan despised immigrants, specifically those from southern and eastern Europe. For a Czech immigrant or even second-generation ethnic to enlist in a group that detested their very origin seems foolish. If evidence ever did come to light proving Klan membership of someone in the Czech community during this time, it would be the ultimate evidence of total and complete assimilation. The proposition sounds absurd at its very core. Apparently, interest in the secret organization eventually withered because Prague's newspaper reported no more episodes of Klan activity after the fall of 1922. Whether for lack of support or the community's strict observance of Oklahoma's Jim Crow laws, activities of the hooded band either dissipated or went unmentioned. Finally, absolutely no Klan violence against anyone in the Czech community surfaced in the pages of Prague's newspaper, in Russell Lynch's study of the farming community, or in the two general works on the town. No immigrants suffered lynching, beatings, or any other degradation at the hands of the most prominent home-grown terrorist organization in the United States.

Historically, Czech and musician were almost synonyms. Czechs prided themselves on their prowess with musical instruments and the old Bohemian saying, "*co*

²⁶ *Prague Record*, 7 September 1922; See James Lowell Showalter, "Payne County and the Hooded Klan, 1921-1924" (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 2000).

cech, to muzikant” (if a Czech, then a musician) contained much truth. Of course, during the first decades of the twentieth century, television was unheard of and radio did not air until the 1920s and even then only in metropolitan areas for a few hours per day. Residents of small towns relied on silent motion pictures (until 1927 and the advent of “talkies”) and traveling troupes offering plays, burlesque, and vaudeville. Most entertainment in rural communities originated locally. School plays, concerts, and sports attracted large audiences. Traveling Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian evangelists erected huge tents and held emotion-packed services nightly for two or three weeks to overflowing crowds before moving to the next town.²⁷ Rural as well as town folk attended the worship meetings enjoying the foot-tapping music and singing as much as the fire-and-brimstone sermons. Revivals, although not overtly meant to be, took on an air of entertainment featuring local musicians and singing groups. Czechs attended these open-air services. Czech groups like the Makovsky Band played and sang sacred songs prior to the itinerant preacher expounding upon the genetic legacy of original sin or denouncing rebellious transgressions like gambling, alcohol abuse, and lust.²⁸ These religious meetings were as much social gatherings as attempts to birth still another Great Awakening.

Besides sacred music, Czechs enjoyed playing and singing secular tunes. While researching his thesis, William Earl Martin visited several Czech homes in Oklahoma

²⁷ Most revival announcements and short articles appeared in Prague’s newspapers during the summer months of the second and third decades of the town. For examples see *Prague Record*, 1 June 1916; 1 July 1927. In 1927 Prague’s churches held a “Union Revival” throughout the summer. Today this event probably would be called a non-denominational or inter-denominational meeting. It should be noted that although filled with emotion, these revivals were not Pentecostal in the modern-day sense of the word; they were led by Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians. The Charismatic or tongue’s movement did not start until 1906 in California. It only slowly made its way eastward. Prague’s first Pentecostal Holiness Church did not open its doors until 1945. The first Assembly of God building was erected in 1947. Brown, *Czech-town U.S.A.*, 124-125.

²⁸ *Prague Record*, 6 July 1916.

City in 1933 and 1934. Martin found musical instruments in practically every home he visited and the residents willing to show off their talent with the violin, piano, or horn.²⁹ Prague's Czechs probably differed little from their western neighbors. Shortly after incorporation, Prague formed a town band. George Eret, a Czech, accepted the position as band leader and for the next thirty years members of the Czech community actively and, no doubt, energetically played at town events like Independence Day, Decoration Day, and the Washington and Lincoln birthday celebrations.³⁰ In 1929, residents organized a Municipal Band and again chose a Czech as its leader. Julius Bontty met

Julius Bontty
Prague Band Director



Source: Courtesy of Prague Historical Museum

with band members every Tuesday and Thursday evening at the Sokol Hall for practice. The twenty-member ensemble included both Czechs and non-Czechs and, like the earlier town band, entertained Prague's residents at most community events.³¹

Public safety was always a concern in the frontier town. An out-of-control fire could quickly devastate the brick and wood buildings that lined Main Street. In the early days of Prague, anyone physically able helped put out fires. During scorching, dry summer months fires could

²⁹ William Earl Martin, "The Cultural Assimilation of the Czechoslovak in Oklahoma City: A Study of Culture Contrasts" (M.A. Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1935), 167.

³⁰ A Czech did not always lead the band. Ludie Johnston directed Prague's twenty-four member town band in 1926 which included the following Czechs: Eddie Bartosh, Joe Lanik, Elmer Sojka, Lada Kucera, Billie Kanak, Alfred Spaniel, and Julius Bontty. *Prague Record*, 22 September 1926.

³¹ Prague Chamber of Commerce, "City of Opportunities," 23. Other Czechs on the 1929 Municipal Band included Charles Suva, Jake Simek, Frank Navrah, Charles Jezek, and Frank Sleva. The article did not mention specific instruments played.

quickly spread out of control so anyone in close proximity to the blaze lent their brawn. Real horsepower provided impetus for the fire trucks while the pumps and hoses relied on sheer human muscle. When a fire broke out, anybody in the vicinity rushed to the scene and assisted the hot and smudgy effort. By the 1920s, however, the town of Prague owned a motorized fire truck with a gasoline-powered pump. Similar to practically every community organization or activity, Czechs eagerly became involved. At least two Czechs served on the fire department with Charles Babek holding the position of assistant fire chief during the 1920s.³²

There were no Andrew Carnegies or John Rockefellers or Cornelius Vanderbilts in Prague, Oklahoma. Thus, the small farming town did not contain the wealth of a big city. Primary industries revolved around the production of cotton. The only manufacturing ventures attempted proved to be a short-lived effort by a blind Czech immigrant, Frank Mastena, who produced and sold brooms and the Oklahoma Cigar Manufacturing Company, managed by another Czech, J. Hajek. The cigar factory employed between ten and fifteen people.³³ Possibly the most successful business enterprise, and one that was neither owned nor operated by Czechs, was the Union Cotton Oil Company. It attracted investors from as far away as Chicago. George Jepsen managed and owned a share of the operation with additional financial backing provided by Bertha Ambrister, a wealthy widow, and several out-of-town investors including one from Chicago. However, when the price of cotton dropped after World War I and a boll

³² Ibid. The other Czech member of the fire department was August Bartosh. Both Bartosh and Babek belonged to the Catholic Church.

³³ *Prague Record*, 8 February 1917; *Prague News*, 15 March 1906. The newspaper listed the partners of the cigar factory as J. Hajek, A. J. Balaun, Wes Wostichil, and Mr. Halousek.

weevil epidemic in the late 1920s bankrupted many farmers, the profits of the cotton oil mill dropped precipitously.³⁴

Despite the absence of colossal wealth, community and business leaders emerged in the central Oklahoma town, most of the time the two being one and the same. As noted earlier, from its inception Czechs participated in every facet of the town. From establishing businesses to serving on the school board to running for and holding public office, Czechs comprised an integral part of the community. Furthermore, with time and new generations their degree of contribution suffered no decline. In its 1920s promotional booklet, "City of Opportunities," Prague published photographs of homes of its leading citizens and short biographies of successful merchants and the principal educational and civic officials. Sandwiched between photographs of impressive rock, brick or painted frame dwellings owned by families with names like Long, Wilson, Whitmore, and Duncan are pictures of spacious and well-kept Czech residences owned by the Klabzubas, Bonttys, Kanaks, and Kolars. Also pictured was the Barta Hotel. The last few pages of the booklet contained snapshots and biographies of almost fifty religious, business, and civic leaders. The eleven-page section showcased ten prominent Czechs.³⁵

Czechs showed no hesitation in joining community affairs. Members of the immigrant community occupied civic and political positions in the town ranging from municipal band leader to assistant fire chief to state representative. However, to gain a better understanding of Prague's Czechs, the situation of Czech populations in other

³⁴ William Ray Tower, "A General History of the Town of Prague, Oklahoma, 1902-1948" (M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1948), 50.

³⁵ Prague Chamber of Commerce, "City of Opportunities," 30-40. The ten Czechs featured in the booklet were: Charles Klabzuba, Frank Svoboda, Frank Zajic, C. M. Sadlo, Steve Kanak, Julius Bonty, Charles Babek, Joe Stoklasa, Charles Jezek, and Frank Jezek.

regions of the United States needs exploration. An examination of civic participation of immigrants living in urban areas and rural communities like Milligan, Nebraska whose population consisted overwhelmingly of Czechs should provide a better understanding and assessment of what was going on in Prague.

In urban areas, immigrants arriving shortly before or shortly after the turn of the twentieth century lived in the least expensive housing usually close to their place of employment. Oftentimes immigrants from the same geographic region or village clustered together in ethnic neighborhoods and formed tight-knit communities that might constitute a city block or only a high-rise tenement. However, rarely did a single ethnic group reside exclusively in a single neighborhood. They usually shared their living area with at least one other ethnic group but normally did not socialize with them. For example, in *The Huddled Masses*, Alan Kraut writes that “on New York’s Lower East Side, Jews and Italians shared the neighborhood, but each group held domain over particular blocks. Thus, different groups could live in close geographical proximity and yet be socially isolated.”³⁶ Czechs living in New York, Cleveland, Chicago, or other urban centers realized the same fate. Most worked long hours doing factory work or some other menial job and spent much of their down time in the local saloon, Bohemian Hall, or if still loyal to their faith, in a church pew. With only a few exceptions did they pursue political careers or gain notoriety as city leaders.

Furthermore, even if they wished for and pursued a greater role in their city, anti-immigrant feelings by the native-born majority or the negative reactions of an already entrenched group like the Irish rebuffed their efforts. Urban Czechs, like most “new

³⁶ Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986), 117.

immigrants,” suffered from a lack of acceptance by the majority population. Most of these immigrants retreated to the security of their homes, lodges, or local saloon after a hard day at the factory. Many, long after their arrival, remained psychologically isolated to the point of loneliness.³⁷ They were in the United States but not truly a part of it. It fell to their children and grandchildren to incorporate fully the values, culture, and economic mindset of the new land.

A relatively homogenous rural village like Milligan, Nebraska offers yet another look at a Czech community. In *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village*, Robert Kutak examined the social structure and change from about 1890 to 1930. Established in early 1888, the village of Milligan, much like Prague, benefitted economically with the construction of a railroad. However, from the beginning, Czech settlers numerically dominated the small town almost to the point of it being entirely Czech. In 1900, of eighty-three families living in the proximity of Milligan, sixty-nine were Czech. By 1930 the community consisted of over two hundred households with a total population of 681. Three hundred and thirteen of the residents were Czech immigrants and another two hundred and ninety were the immigrants’ sons and daughters. Kutak found only fifty-three people living in Milligan in 1930 that claimed no Czech blood, with another sixteen stating that one of their parents was Bohemian. During Kutak’s period of study, all village officials were Czech.³⁸ What did this mean for the fairly isolated farming village? How did it differ from the situation in Prague? Milligan Czechs controlled every facet of their environment. From the economic structure, to the social scene, to who ran the town, their voice and decisions dominated. Unlike the Czechs of Prague who, from the very

³⁷ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), 94.

³⁸ Kutak, *Story of a Bohemian Village*, x-xii, 49.

onset, found themselves at a numerical disadvantage these Czechs living in Nebraska were in almost total control of their community. This proved especially true regarding language. If an individual chose never to learn English he/she could shop, run a business, or attend church without fear of ridicule or feeling like an outsider. Although many younger people in Milligan knew English, Czech remained the primary spoken language in the home as late as 1930.³⁹ All the same, Kutak did not portray the community as an unadulterated ethnic oasis in the midst of the Great Plains. He did report American culture creeping inexorably into the hearts of the young. Kutak found that adolescent Czech boys congregated at a local field and played the American game of baseball conversing and teasing each other in both English and their parent's tongue.⁴⁰ Attending a town dance revealed the girls in home-made patterned dresses but wearing their hair in the popular bobbed style of Hollywood starlets. Few young men wore jackets while dancing, preferring long-sleeved shirts rolled up to around the elbow. The local band interspersed fast-paced American music with traditional Czech tunes and if anyone needed refreshments, there were hot dogs and soda pop.⁴¹ This Saturday night dance probably mirrored thousands more across the United States during the 1920s regardless of race or ethnicity.

Nonetheless, the penetration of American ways into this isolated community advanced slower than in demographically diversified areas and primarily took hold with the young. Kutak described the typical Milligan family still claiming roast pork, sauerkraut, and potato dumplings followed by a slice of Kolache and coffee as their

³⁹ Ibid., 63, 65.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁴¹ Ibid., 90-91. Many Czechs loved to drink beer. However, this was the time of Prohibition.

favorite Czech meal.⁴² He portrayed them as rather clannish, not prone to intermarriage, and proud of their Central Hall, which alternated as a saloon and meeting place for several lodges. Prominently displayed on opposite walls of the Main Street structure hung portraits of the martyr, Jan Hus and Tomas Masaryk, the Czech nationalist and first president of Czechoslovakia.⁴³ To conclude, unlike their counterparts in Oklahoma, the Milligan Czechs did not immediately feel the pressure to adjust to everything new. Because of their majority status they could survive economically and socially without a whirlwind tutorial in American customs and language.

In the realm of civic participation and demography the experience of Prague's Czechs differed from urban and ethnically-homogeneous rural communities. The farm-town ethnic group faced much less discrimination than their urban counterparts when aspiring to hold public office or participate in community-wide civic affairs. From the beginning, the dominant, native-born Anglo population accepted their Slavic neighbors. The community voted Czechs to leadership roles in the town government and saw no disgrace in playing instruments under the guidance of a Czech leader. Some, perhaps with a quick wink of the eye, even performed the secret handshake of the Masons with their Czech fraternal brothers. Equally important to this lack of prejudice by the majority population was the decision by many Czechs to participate in community affairs. This decision was an individual's choice not a group pronouncement after a close or lopsided vote in the Bohemian Hall. A few Czechs probably hesitated or outright rejected joining the community-life of Prague. They retreated to their homes and little is known of their lives for that very reason. Some of them perhaps left the small town in search of a less-

⁴² Ibid., 67.

⁴³ Ibid., 2,4.

threatening environment similar to that in Milligan. Most probably just refrained from participating in any activity they did not understand or worried might make them look like a greenhorn.⁴⁴

This early acceptance of the American culture and economic system implies a pragmatic decision to survive in their new surroundings. To succeed in a farming town that contained very little industry one needed to adjust to the ways of the majority population. This would be especially true for a member of an immigrant group. The fact that Czechs constituted a noteworthy portion of the town from its very creation helped. Indeed, the very name of the new settlement signified their presence. The presence of a small black community in the town, a less desirable racial group than the European immigrants, meant that Czechs did not occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder, which surely diminished any prejudice that might have been aimed towards them. However, the rapidity and apparent entrance into Prague's general community of many within the ethnic group, including immigrants, suggests more than a hardheaded assessment of the circumstances. It suggests a fundamental change, a structural assimilation into their new environment. Individual ethnics, including several pioneer immigrants, voluntarily transformed their lifestyle to fit in. Generally speaking, the Prague Czechs joined the new milieu and they did so quickly, much quicker than most of their ethnic kin living in urban or homogeneous rural settings.

This does not mean they gave up their identity as Czechs and tromped into the haziness of American whiteness. They did not wake one morning and see the visage of a Yankee staring back at them in the mirror. Despite attending public school and playing

⁴⁴ Greenhorn was the common term for a newly-arrived immigrant; someone who understood little about the culture of America.

on the varsity football squad or playing in the municipal band or even serving the public as a respected member of the town council, these Czech immigrants did not exile themselves from their heritage. They held firm to their birthright and desperately tried to pass it to their progeny. They were Czech Americans in the truest sense, Czech in their ethnicity but American in their loyalty and outlook. The immigrant pioneers no doubt exhibited much more “Czechness” than their offspring. After all, Bohemia or Moravia was their birthplace – their cherished home. It was the second generation, those born in the United States who maneuvered more easily in American culture. The young played the same sports as their non-Czech friends, listened to the same music, and equally enjoyed watching Clara Bow, John Barrymore, and Mary Pickford on the silver screen. A number of them even fell in love and married someone outside the group. By the third generation most of Prague’s Czechs were probably indistinguishable in their speech, mannerisms, and dress from their friends named Johnson or O’Malley. However, like their fathers, mothers, and grandparents before them, they too joined the Bohemian Hall or participated in Sokol events and valiantly tried to repeat the tricky sounds of the Czech language when their elders spoke to them. By 1930, many of the original Czech settlers were gone. A few moved away, but most had died. Their decision not to isolate themselves into an ethnic enclave but to participate fully in the larger community resulted in a legacy of rapid acculturation and assimilation to the brink of absorption – but not quite. Although outwardly they appeared as American as anyone born and raised in the United States but inwardly, the Prague Czechs remained Czech. They retained their internal distinctiveness; they maintained their ethnic identity.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

Even before the establishment of Prague, Frank Vlasak enjoyed a position of respect among Czech farmers. Known as “Squire,” Vlasak operated a store in Dent, a small town just north of Prague, and aided his fellow immigrants through personal loans. From 1891 to 1902 Vlasak reinvested his earnings in acreage and by the formation of Prague, was one of the larger landholders in the community.¹ Vlasak quickly realized that a better economic future lay in the newly-opened town and relocated to Prague, opening a feed store. Despite his immigrant status, Vlasak’s prescient decision not to shy away from complete involvement in the farm town resulted in success. The Czech entrepreneur bought some prime downtown property and built a two-story structure, the Vlasak Building, on Broadway Avenue selling groceries, dry goods, and general merchandise. Vlasak operated his retail business on the first floor and rented out the second floor rooms to temporary and long-term tenants.² Vlasak remained in business until his accidental death in the fall of 1929 at the age of seventy. Apparently, the widower lit a faulty heater in his home and died of asphyxiation.³ He went to sleep and never woke up. With Frank Vlasak’s death and the death of Josephine Barta, a year later,

¹ Lincoln County Historical Society, *Lincoln County: Oklahoma History* (Saline, MI: McNaughton & Gunn, 1988), 1362.

² *Prague News*, 20 September 1906; *Prague Record*, 30 January 1928.

³ *Prague Record*, 12 September 1929.

the two people most responsible for the appellation of the new town being Prague were gone.

Prague, Oklahoma from its beginning was a demographically diverse farming community on the southeastern edge of the Great Plains region. Named after the capital city of faraway Bohemia, the town affords a different perspective on assimilation and ethnicity than that found in populous urban areas and relatively homogeneous rural ethnic enclaves. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the earliest arrivals primarily left their central European homeland due to religious persecution. The destruction wrecked by Catholic invaders during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) ravaged Bohemia and Moravia causing countless Protestants to flee their ancestral lands. Some migrated to the American colonies with most of these settling in Pennsylvania alongside German farmers. Small numbers of Czechs continued trickling into the United States until the late 1840s when the industrialization of the Austrian Empire pushed many artisans and cottagers to seek better lives abroad. Czech immigration to the United States increased during the next thirty years and swelled even more after 1880 when multitudes of southern and eastern Europeans left their native soil. Besides industrialization, two other reasons inducing Czechs to leave their homes included a severe drought during the 1840s and a population explosion throughout Europe.

The more recent Czech immigrants for the most part avoided the congested eastern cities choosing instead to migrate to the Midwest. Here they sought cheap farm land and many times settled near their European nemesis, the Germans. The incongruous relationship between Czechs and Germans appears inconsistent at first glance. Czechs disdained the Germanic governments that for centuries had dominated them. Spurred by

the rise of nationalism and ethnic consciousness in the nineteenth century, Czechs attempted a failed revolt in 1848 against their Austrian rulers. Nevertheless, despite their political antipathy towards the Germans, the German's geographical nearness and long association with their dominant rivals resulted in a familiarity with western ideas and ways. Indeed, when the United States Immigration Commission studied newcomers, they found that Czechs more closely resembled Germans in their adaptation to the United States than with their Slavic kin, the Poles and Slovaks.

Rather than the natural outcome of a planned migration to the newly-opened land, the origins of the Czech colony in the southeastern corner of Lincoln County resulted from mere happenstance. Already living in the United States and residing preponderantly in Midwestern states, Czech immigrants learned by word-of-mouth and newspaper articles of another land run to be held in Oklahoma Territory.⁴ Desiring cheap land, many families and individuals made their way to the Oklahoma City area in the months preceding the event. Encountering others with the same native tongue, a group of Czech newcomers declared an unofficial pact to claim land near each other. For the most part, they succeeded.

Beginning as a rather clannish immigrant farm community established in 1891 on the former territory of the Sac and Fox tribe, a number of Czech settlers relocated in 1902 to the newly-created railroad town of Prague being developed on the home sites of fellow Czechs. Upon joining the town, the newcomers immediately found themselves vastly outnumbered by native-born Americans. Despite other Czechs moving to the new community during the next decade the group never attained much beyond 30 percent of

⁴ There were several land runs in Oklahoma Territory. The first and most famous was the 1889 event, which resulted in the creation of Oklahoma City, the eventual state capital. The federal government opened the Sac and Fox Reservation for white settlement via another land run in 1891.

the town's population. In spite of, or, more likely, because of their numerical disadvantage, these pioneer Czechs adjusted rapidly to the economic and social conditions of their frontier environment. Although the ethnic group invested much effort in continuing and passing down their language and traditions to future generations, many immigrants participated in the activities of the new town. This resulted in a close association with the majority population and a dual lifestyle for many Prague Czechs. They existed in two worlds. Most Czech immigrants realized they had to adapt to the world of the present; they found themselves in a bustling frontier town full of opportunities but shrouded in a foreign culture and difficult language. However, their familiarity and mindset lay in the world of the past. They understood and, no doubt, cherished the memories, customs, and language of their beloved Bohemia.⁵

Close to the border of Indian Territory, the location of Prague provided impetus to the early economy of the farm town. The economic situation of the town and the interplay of the Czechs from the early Wild West days through the oil boom of the teens and the rise and fall of cotton production resulted in many farms metamorphosing into ranches by 1930. The nearness of "dry" Indian Territory to "wet" Prague in Oklahoma Territory spawned a thriving saloon business. Czechs, proud of their historic accomplishments in brewing, which they continually debated with German brewers, eagerly joined the liquor trade. From 1902 until statehood and prohibition in November 1907 Czech immigrants owned, managed, or worked as bartenders in Prague's saloons. Others such as C.M. Sadlo, Mike Mitacek, and Frank Lanik chose a different route to business success. They offered products or services such as tailoring, shoe repair, and

⁵ Oscar Handlin in *The Uprooted* portrays the confusion and vexation of the immigrant over his/her new environment. See Handlin, *The Uprooted*, 85-90, 95-98.

ginning cotton. These three are but a few of the Czechs involved in business. Czech immigrants and their descendants participated in practically every sector of the local economy from selling real estate and banking to giving violin lessons and waiting on tables. During the first thirty years of the town's existence, Czechs annually accounted for about a quarter of the town's business establishments. Native-born whites and entrepreneurs of Irish, German, and Jewish extraction controlled the rest.

There appears little doubt that most residents of the farm town, regardless of ethnicity, traded with Czech businesses. Likewise, the evidence suggests that Czechs supported non-Czech businesses as well. Although it is impossible to quantify the clientele of each economic enterprise, the evidence for this assumption lies in the fact that Czech firms employed non-Czechs as well as Czechs while non-Czech enterprises regularly hired members of the Czech community to perform duties ranging from bank clerks to lumber yard managers. The general population recognized this ethnic group as an integral part of the community and accepted them wholeheartedly. Two possible reasons for the tolerance lay in the frontier origins and small population of the town. The aspiring settlement needed and welcomed the energy and skills of everyone. However, another explanation was the presence of African Americans in Prague. Because of the dearth of blacks in northern cities at this time, Czechs, along with Poles, Italians, and others of southern or eastern European origins, occupied the bottom of most northern cities' social establishment. They were the common laborers and the unskilled factory workers. This was not the case in Prague. Although small, there was a black presence in the town and it was they who suffered discrimination in the economic and social spheres. African-American workers held the lowest-paying, menial jobs – not the immigrants.

The fact that Prague's Czechs did not occupy the bottom rung of the social ladder should not be discounted when trying to understand the lack of nativist sentiment towards them.

The mere reality that the Czechs already lived and, for the most part, prospered in the Prague area constitutes a final potential explanation for their acceptance. For over a decade Czech farmers built homes and plowed the fields of Barta Post Office, the site of the future Prague, with much success. Upon its creation, several Czechs such as Frank Barta, Frank Vlasak, and Josef Hrdy erected buildings in the new town, hardly the acts of penurious laborers. Furthermore, most immigrant farmers of South Creek Township lived previously in other states. Few were recent arrivals and thus did not possess the wide-eyed awe or strangling anxiety of those new to the United States. In other words, they were not greenhorns. The modest fortunes and life experiences in their adopted land surely helped the Czechs adjust and thrive after their arrival in the United States.

Despite the eager participation of Czechs in the economic realm, they still harbored a deep desire to maintain their Bohemian culture and language. Soon after building their homes and planting their first crop, the Czech community formed a fraternal order to aid their neighbors in times of sickness and death. However, the fraternal lodge also emphasized the preservation of Czech heritage and language and strived through social events to maintain group cohesion. Formed in 1906, the Sokol Hall, another Czech organization, held weekly gymnastic classes and further emphasized cultural maintenance through language instruction. Both of these fraternal lodges traced their origins to the freethought movement which emphasized a secular agenda if not downright anticlericalism and thus attracted few Catholics. Not to be outdone, Catholic Czechs formed their own society in Prague, The Catholic Worker. Although created as a

counter-balance to the Bohemian Hall, the Catholic lodge contained fewer members and stressed charity work and religious instruction. Whereas the more narrowly focused secular Czech associations provided life insurance, direct financial aid to their members in time of need, and afforded them a lively venue to socialize on Saturday nights. The Catholic lodge, due to their smaller numbers and religious focus, offered fewer social events than their rivals and thus impacted group cohesion less than the secular associations. However, Prague's freethought organizations and their Catholic counterparts apparently harbored less animosity towards the other than in some urban centers. Catholics attended Bohemian Hall activities such as dances and plays and, in later generations, joined the secular lodge.

During World War I, Prague's Czechs became involved in the Czech independence movement forming a *Samostatnost* (Independence) Club and sponsoring Bohemian National Alliance speakers such as Sara Hrbek. Jan Hus, the medieval martyr, took on added significance as a nationalist. He became a symbol of someone who gave his life not only for doctrinal truths, but for rebuking German hegemony. Czech communities throughout the United States, including Prague, commemorated the anniversary of the priest's execution. During the war, these events doubled as fundraisers for the Bohemian National Alliance, the primary organization pushing for Czech independence. As the war lengthened, emotions ran high in the small town resulting in fisticuffs between Czechs and Germans and according to one witness, the near lynching of a German man who dared to voice support for the Central Powers.

The efforts of the fraternal organizations to pass Czech culture to the young ultimately proved futile. The dual lifestyle of most Czechs, including immigrants,

whereby they actively participated in every facet of the farming community while also participating in ethnic group functions led to rapid adjustment and acculturation.

However, despite the failure of the pioneer generation to inculcate European ways within their progeny they succeeded in instilling something more intrinsic, something more fundamental. No matter how “American” they became, some in succeeding generations held fast to their identity as Czechs.⁶

Keeping in mind that any decision to interact with others on a social level or participate in community activities lay with the individual, the depth of intermingling by seemingly most of the Czech population remains surprising. From joining the baseball team to entering a homemade cake in the county fair to simply attending a picnic at a friend’s house, Czechs showed no hesitation in becoming involved with those outside their ethnic group. They played football, baseball, tennis, and entered domino tournaments alongside native-born whites and other immigrant groups. Czechs loved to dance, attend the theater, participate in school plays, and celebrate Independence Day by eating a hot dog or watching the town baseball team compete against their arch-rival, Chandler. These amiable interactions hastened the adjustment period and inevitably led to exogamous marriages by both male and female Czechs.

What caused this apparently rapid social involvement in the larger community is ultimately conjecture. That it happened is verifiable, why it happened not so clear. However, the social acceptance of the Czech immigrants by the native born must be considered of paramount importance. Furthermore, this acceptance stretched beyond the bounds of economic necessity. For example, it is simply good business practice for a

⁶ By “American” I mean they became indistinguishable from the native-born in speech, dress, and mannerisms.

merchant to sell products to everyone. In addition, it is economically advantageous for that same merchant to frequent the business of someone outside his or her racial or cultural group if they offered a needed product at a low price. Typically, both of these encounters are purely for economic motives. In other words, a person might very well sell to or purchase a product from someone if the act financially aids them but they might never entertain that person in their home or do the Turkey Trot with them at a town dance. To socialize with someone is an extremely personal choice and a decision that must be reciprocated. It appears the non-Czech residents of Prague accepted the newcomers socially to a degree not found in most American cities. Indeed, Czechs and non-Czechs in the Oklahoma farm town seemed to get along rather well.

One area Czechs strived to control was the education of their youth, both male and female. Besides instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic, public schools served to incorporate civic values such as patriotism and citizenship. Furthermore, the teachers spoke English in the classroom which further strengthened the country's monolingual goal. However, two of the greatest impacts upon the young, and ones primarily unintended, were cultural homogenization and socialization. Some of the early Czechs understood the effects the public school system would have on their children and established their own Czech school. However, the private school proved short lived as more and more immigrant families sent their children to the public school. This was in part due to the religious split among Czechs. Catholic parents refused to cooperate with the secular Czech school and likewise Protestant or unchurched individuals in the ethnic population preferred the public school over a church school.

Nevertheless, Czechs continued to promote their heritage and language through weekly instruction held at the Sokol Hall. These classes normally held on Sundays stressed language maintenance but also incorporated Bohemian history and music. Once Czechs matriculated to the public school, they fared well with several attaining prominence in athletics and academics. After graduation, several Czech students went on to business schools or nursing programs while others attended a university. During the 1920s at least three returned to Prague as teachers and another opened a dental office. Soon after Czech children trooped into Prague's classrooms the adults attempted to influence the curriculum, primarily the arts. Although there is no record of the Czech language being taught in the public school, Czech parents convinced the school board to conduct classes in music and Bohemian dance. Prague High School boasted a Beseda Dance Team that traveled to other towns presenting the unofficial national dance of Bohemia in traditional costume. Moreover, many members of the dance team were not Czech but native-born whites.

For many new arrivals to the United States their belief system and local church lessened the blows, both psychological and material, of their displacement. Religious institutions supplied material relief to struggling immigrant families usually in the form of food staples. In addition, churches offered social activities that afforded adults and children alike a place to come together and mix with other immigrants. For many newcomers, the church became the center of their life. This appears especially true concerning the relationship between the Catholic Church and immigrants arriving from southern and eastern Europe. Because of the large number of immigrant members, some churches in both urban and rural locales took on a decidedly ethnic cast. After 1880,

many urban Catholic churches became ethnic as well as religious centers for groups of Italians, Poles, and Slovaks. In many cases a member of the ethnic group served as priest over the overwhelmingly ethnic parish with the laity under control of local immigrant leaders. Czechs were the only immigrant group which left the Church in large numbers. Due to centuries-long tensions between Bohemia and Rome, many Czechs discarded the religion of their youth soon after arriving in the United States. A few joined Protestant denominations, especially the Presbyterian Church. Others severed all ties with organized religion and focused on simply making their way in the new land. A majority referred to themselves as liberals, rationalists, or freethinkers.

Similar to a religious sect, freethought included both lukewarm followers and devout members such as the uncompromising agnostics and atheists who denounced all trappings of religion and harbored especial hatred of the clergy. Conversely, their ranks also included amiable agnostics who might poke fun at traditional dogma but entertained no ill will towards those who maintained faith in the Church and still others who believed in a deity, just not one actively involved in the affairs of mankind. An important difference between Czech freethinkers and other European rationalists was their nationalist streak which manifested in an anti-Habsburg outlook. During World War I, freethinkers led the fight for independence and used their fraternal lodges to garner support both emotional and financial.

The local Czech fraternal organization, centered on the Bohemian Hall, replaced the Church for most freethinkers with Jan Hus held as almost a saint by many freethinking intellectuals. The veneration of Hus reached its apex in the years before and during the Great War. Although a medieval Catholic priest, the martyred Hus

transcended religious iconography and became a symbol of rising nationalist feelings among the Czech people. While Hus occupied the pedestal of “patron saint,” the lodge’s meeting place, usually called Bohemian Hall or Czech Hall, supplanted the church in importance. Bohemian Halls hosted weddings, funerals, and social events such as dances and plays for their members. Even in death, a member of a freethinking lodge could avoid lying next to a Catholic or follower of Luther. Most secular fraternal lodges built and maintained a memorial park usually referred to as Czech National Cemetery for their deceased members. Thus, from birth to death, liberal Czechs could participate in life’s rituals without ever stepping foot in a church.

However, Prague’s fraternal associations appear more tolerant than their urban counterparts. Although practically no Catholics joined the lodge in the early years, freethinkers and Catholics as well as the few Protestants exhibited amiable relations. Furthermore, as time progressed the Bohemian Hall, once the foundation of the freethought movement, transformed into more of a cultural center attracting both religious and non-religious ethnic members. By the 1920s, many Czech Protestants and Catholics became members of the local lodge with some, primarily Protestants, requesting burial in the Czech National Cemetery.

Like many native-born Americans of this period, Czechs were joiners. They liked being involved. Fueled by the absence of nativist sentiment by the majority Anglo population, many of Prague’s Czechs engaged in the civic affairs of the farming town. Soon after incorporation, Czech immigrants established the Bohemian Political Association. This group, chaired by an immigrant, worked to elect Czechs to local

offices and witnessed much success. For several years, Czechs occupied three of the eight town offices including once capturing the office of mayor.

Prague's civic lodges also attracted many in the Czech community. The Masons, Knights of Pythias, Woodmen of the World, Lions Club, and American Legion all included Czech members with some voted into positions of leadership. In the economic realm Czechs took an active part in the Chamber of Commerce, which should not seem surprising as the town contained many Czech businesses. Besides political and economic matters, a number of Czech residents simply wanted to enjoy the different aspects of village life. Czechs proliferated in the town band and all but dominated the position of band leader. They helped put out fires by joining the fire department and served on the school board. The first chair of Prague Public School's Board of Education was a Czech immigrant. Their situation differed immensely from their urban counterparts who struggled with acceptance and also differed from homogeneous rural areas like Milligan where the ethnic group's overwhelming numbers placed them in control of events. Prague's Czechs were in a minority position in the town. Nevertheless, it appears that most of the native born harbored little ill will towards them. Obviously wishing to succeed both economically and socially, many ethnic members made the decision to join the community. However, their decision did not include discarding their European culture. The pioneer Czechs established lodges which offered financial support, insurance, recreation, and a permanent building in which individuals and families could gather. Most in the Czech population dearly wished to maintain their identity as a distinctive group.

Although beginning as a rather clannish farming community, with the creation of Prague, the immigrants adjusted swiftly to the realities of living in a small, ethnically-diverse town. That they did so quicker than most immigrants living in urban areas and homogeneous rural villages appears convincing. Their assimilation began not with the second generation, but with the immigrants themselves. It was members of the first generation that made the decision to join the larger society in every way possible from opening a store to serving on the school board to playing in the town band at Independence Day celebrations. The overriding focal point of the study centered on the rapid integration of the Czechs into the social and economic mainstream of the town. Like any complex problem, the answers are many and intertwined. Not any one cause stands completely alone as *the cause*. There are various reasons and factors for the outcome.

The geography and demography of the town were important. The relative isolation of Prague encouraged, if not forced, the various elements of the population such as the native-born whites, Czechs, Germans, and those from other ethnic groups to at least tolerate each other to ensure the success of the town and, therefore, themselves. The lack of numbers meant that Prague's Czechs could not control the economic, political, or educational structure of the town. This is different from the situation in Milligan, Nebraska where the Czechs dominated. In Prague, they did not. Therefore, to survive financially, Prague's Czechs could not retreat inwardly. They simply had to reach out to others in the community. This was a pragmatic decision derived at individually. Those living in the town who could not or would not change probably fared worse than those who did. The territorial status and location of Prague further enhanced the prospects of

the immigrants. As a town in Oklahoma Territory, and until statehood in 1907, the saloon industry dominated the town of Prague. Czechs, with a proud history of beer making, entered this trade and with “dry” Indian Territory lying less than four miles away, prospered. This territorial beginning, added to the newness of Prague, afforded many opportunities for enterprising individuals regardless of ethnicity. The frontier status of early Prague also hastened adjustment, especially when compared to the political situation of most Czech communities which were located in established states.

A final ingredient of the Prague Czech’s recipe for rapid assimilation was their acceptance as respectable residents of the community by the larger non-Czech populace. If one cause leaps to the fore as a primary reason for the quick adjustment of the immigrants to their new environment, this appears to be it. From the very start of the town, Czechs participated in every area including the economic sector, civic involvement, and local politics. However, even their acceptance shares a common denominator with other factors such as the frontier location of Prague and the newness of the town. The environment in which the Czech community found itself a part of should not be overlooked. It was a huge advantage for the immigrants. Due to its size, an urban environment can be very impersonal and somewhat segregated on class and ethnic lines. However, most small towns in rural locales tend to be more personal. Someone living in a small town would run into the same people over and over again while shopping, attending school functions, or at community events.

Although this probably holds true for urban dwellers in their neighborhood, a major difference centers on proportion. A city dweller might know many in his neighborhood, in the few city blocks where he performs the everyday functions of life,

but very few outside. While a resident of Prague would know practically everyone in town after only a short period. With a total population of only about a thousand during the early years of the town, keeping separate would have taken effort. These personal relationships between Czechs and non-Czechs seem to have lessened or completely smothered anti-immigrant nativist feelings in Prague, attitudes which ran rampant in most urban centers throughout this era. Another possible factor contributing to Czech respectability was the fact that evangelical faiths such as Baptist and Methodist did not politically or socially dominate this farming community. With a thriving Catholic Church, a German immigrant community close by, and a large contingent of freethinkers and unchurched in the Czech population, the vilification of alcohol and the strict observance of sabbatarian laws appears much less significant in Prague than in other rural areas of Oklahoma. During the first five years of its existence, the town thrived on the liquor trade and many Czechs participated and prospered in the alcohol business with no apparent denigration. Finally, the existence of a black community meant that immigrant Czechs and their descendants occupied a higher social plane than their kin living in large cities. It was the African Americans who performed the menial jobs in Prague, not the Czechs.

Thus, from the very first days of the formation of Prague, Czechs began their transformation from immigrant outsider to respected Czech Americans. The seeming paradox of their lifestyle, that of simultaneously accepting and resisting their new environment, led to rapid acculturation and exogamous marriages. However, for many it also resulted in a lasting ethnic identity. Because of an early admittance into respectability, Czechs (even in the second generation) suffered no loss of pride. It was

acceptable to be Czech in Prague.⁷ Due to this ethnic pride, and despite intermarriage, the Czech population did not melt into a muddled concoction of ethnicities. Prague's Czechs marched to the edge of complete assimilation but would not take the final leap. They refused to give up their most important quality, their identity. In this struggle to keep their group identity, a sturdy remnant remained steadfast. Furthermore, their identity as Czechs appears to stretch somewhat beyond the symbolic ethnicity practiced by many ethnic groups throughout the United States. This birthright ethnicity incorporates much more than a yearly celebration on the first weekend of May or the hanging of a Czech Republic flag.⁸ Although with diminished numbers, the present-day Czechs of Prague continue to meet monthly in the same Bohemian Hall as their ancestors and they still offer life insurance to their members. In addition to the monthly meetings, weddings and other social events are held in the former citadel of freethought. Although occurring less and less, occasionally a class on the basics of the Czech language is offered and Czech Americans throughout the area still request burial in the Czech National Cemetery. The cemetery is a source of great pride.

Further study of Czech populations and other ethnic groups living in small towns appears worthwhile. Research could focus on the similarities and/or differences in the experiences of Italians or Slovaks or Germans. A study of the experiences of another group of Czechs or even a different ethnic group living in an already established town or state and compare them with the experiences of the Czechs living in the frontier town of

⁷ In many urban environments, especially schools, ethnic behavior was frowned upon by the native-born population. For examples, see Leonard Covello, "Accommodation and the Elementary School Experience," in *White Ethnics: Life in Working-Class America*, ed. Joseph A. Ryan (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 100-112.

⁸ The town of Prague annually celebrates their Czech heritage via a Kolache Festival held the first weekend of every May.

Prague. Other possible studies could examine Czech assemblages within Oklahoma Territory, such as Yukon or Hennessey and see if they in any way parallel Prague. These and other studies would shed even more light on the much-neglected plight of ethnic groups living in small, rural towns. Karel Bicha in his study of the Czechs in Oklahoma summed up their experiences when he wrote: “their lives were simple. They farmed. These two words provide both a memoir and an epitaph for the first generation of Czech Oklahomans and a large majority of their descendants.”⁹ As a general statement, this may very well hold much truth. However, for the Czechs of Prague, I believe we can agree that they did much more than just farm.

⁹ Karel Bicha, *The Czechs in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 48.

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VITA

Philip Dale Smith

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctorate of Philosophy

Dissertation: FROM PRAHA TO PRAGUE: ASSIMILATION AND ETHNIC
IDENTITY IN AN AMERICAN FARM TOWN, 1891-1930

Major Field: History

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, November 13, 1955, the son of Rev. Charles W. Smith and Patty Smith. Married in Tulsa, Oklahoma on August 9, 1974 to Pamela Sue Warren.

Education: Received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma in May, 1981; received a Master of Arts degree in History from the University of Tulsa, Tulsa, Oklahoma in May, 1992; completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2010.

Experience: Graduate Assistant, History Department, University of Tulsa, 1990-1992; History Teacher, Sand Springs High School, 1993-1996; History Teacher, Oologah High School, 1996-2005; Teaching Associate, History Department, Oklahoma State University, 2005-2008; Assistant Professor of History, Liberal Arts Department, Tulsa Community College, 2008-present.

Professional Memberships: Southwestern Social Science Association, Missouri Valley Historical Association

Name: Philip Dale Smith

Date of Degree: May, 2010

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: FROM PRAHA TO PRAGUE: ASSIMILATION AND ETHNIC
IDENTITY IN AN AMERICAN FARM TOWN, 1891-1930

Pages in Study: 279

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: History

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of an immigrant group living in a rural environment in the midst of a larger native-born population. The group chosen were Czechs, who settled in the southeastern corner of Lincoln County, Oklahoma after participating in the 1891 Sac and Fox Land Run. The principal sources were manuscript census records, local newspapers, and various town records such as church membership rolls and baptismal records, cemetery, and the minutes and account books of the Bohemian Hall. In addition to primary sources, extensive secondary research is included in the study.

Findings and Conclusions: This work elucidated a little-researched phenomenon: the dilemmas of an immigrant group living amongst a larger primarily native-born white population in a small, somewhat isolated farm town. A primary assertion of the work is that the Czechs of Prague, Oklahoma underwent cultural and structural assimilation more rapidly than Czechs in urban environments or Czechs living in homogeneous rural areas. The reasons for this were many, including the frontier environment of the community which forced the residents to cooperate in order for the town to succeed. Other rationales for the rapid acculturation included the size and rural location of Prague and the fact that the town also included an African American community, which absorbed the brunt of discrimination. A sub-thesis of the dissertation is that despite the quick acculturation, the Czech newcomers established a permanent presence in the small farming town on the edge of the Great Plains. The ethnic group maintained their identity as Bohemians, not in the multicultural sense whereby they steadfastly held to their native tongue and native ways, nor in a symbolic sense in which the only remaining vestiges are public festivals and kolache cafes, but in a much deeper, existential sense they remained Czech; they preserved and passed on an internal sense of distinctiveness.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Ronald A. Petrin
