



Buffalo Tales



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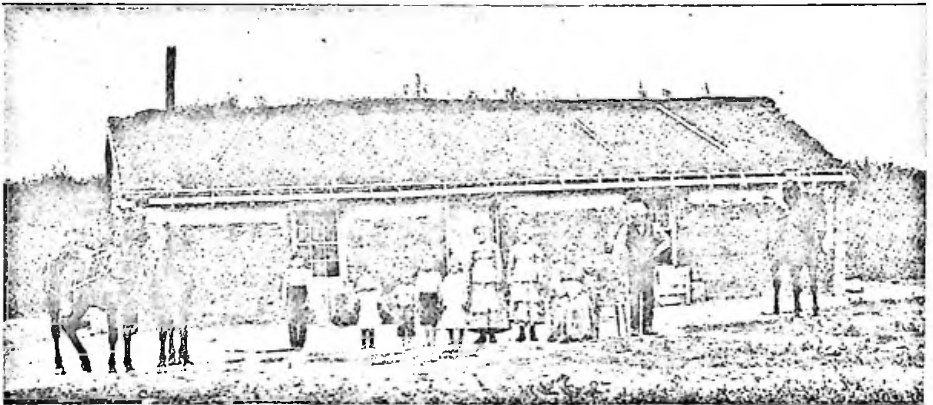
THE CZECHS IN AND AROUND RAVENNA

Part I

by Edith Fiala Abraham

The Czech and Slovak people came to America during the period from the mid-1880's to the 1900's, immigrating from Bohemia, Moravia, Moravian Silesia and Slovakia. Religious persecution, economic hardship and political oppression were the main reasons for seeking more favorable living conditions and opportunities. Some of them saw a chance of making a living for themselves and their families by taking advantage of the homestead lands offered for settlement in the Great Plains in Nebraska in the 1870's. Although the Czechs settled in greater numbers in other counties of Nebraska, a sizable number of them settled in southern Sherman and northern Buffalo Counties.

The first Czech to arrive in this area was Frank Fiala. He was born in the village of Horolice, nine miles from Prague, in Czechoslovakia on April 28, 1843 and came to America in February 1869, landing in New York without one cent of money. He borrowed \$20.00 from an acquaintance and made his way to Chicago. Because he could speak four languages—German, Bohemian or Czech, Hungarian and Italian—he immediately found employment in an immigrant hotel at a wage of \$2.00 per day. He finally saved enough money to pay his fare to Iowa where his mother and step-father were located, they having come to America in 1864. He worked as a farmhand for a year, met a Bohemian girl, Anna Bratrsovsky, at a country dance and after an acquaintance of but twenty-four hours, they were married on April 20, 1870. She had



Frank Fiala Sod House
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BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68847. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Family Membership	\$ 7.50	Institutional Membership	\$10.00
Individual Membership	\$ 5.00	Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly. Contact Alice Howell, Publications Chairman, 237-7858.

Officers and Directors: President, Marian Johnson; Vice-President, Alice Howell; Secretary, Margaret Hohnholt; Treasurer, Leo Henricksen; Directors: Pauline Nichols, Glen E. Wisch, Carl Oran, Leonard S. Silver, Minnett Steinbrink, Chandler Lynch III, Philip S. Holmgren, Henrietta Rhamy, Edna Hehner, Maxine Schroeder.

Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director. Phone 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

A Walking Tour of Central Avenue will take place on Sunday, May 19, at 2:00 o'clock. Members and friends will meet at the Midtown Business Center, 2021 Avenue A. The tour will cover Central Avenue from Railroad Street to 25th Street, and will emphasize historic buildings, longtime businesses and unusual happenings on Kearney's main street. There is no charge.

Work Day. Saturday, June 1, will be a work day at the museum in preparation for the Wagons West Celebration.

Wagons West Celebration. Mark June 8 on your calendar for a day to have a good time. The museum grounds will be teeming with activity—food booths, flea market, music, exhibits. Come prepared to have fun.

Rock Creek Station on the Oregon Trail, Homestead National Monument and the restored Wilber Hotel will be points of interest on an **ALL-DAY BUS TOUR** on Saturday, June 15, sponsored by the Historical Society. Cost will be \$20.00 for members and \$25.00 for non-members. Meals are not included in the tour cost. Contact Alice Howell (237-7858) or the Museum (234-3041) for information and reservations.

At the **Annual Meeting** on April 21, new directors were elected, by-law revisions adopted and annual membership fees for 1986 determined. New members to the Board of Directors were Pat Waddington of Shelton, a 1-year term; Margaret Hohnholt of Kearney, a 2-year term; and Barb Avery of Elm Creek, Frances Link of Ravenna, Glen Wisch and Merlin Berglund of Kearney, 3-year terms. Continuing on the Board are Leonard Silver, Chan Lynch III, Philip S. Holmgren, Marian Johnson, Leo Henricksen and Minnett Steinbrink, all of Kearney; Henrietta Rhamy of Gibbon and Edna Hehner of Pleasanton. New directors take office on June 1. Officers will be elected from the Board.

Retiring directors are Pauline Nichols of Gibbon, Maxine Schroeder of Shelton, Carl Oran and Alice Howell of Kearney.

Volunteers Needed. Now is the time to sign up to be a museum guide on weekends this summer. Volunteers are also needed to be hosts during the Wagons West Celebration. Sign up on Work Day, June 1, or call the museum.

NEW LIFE MEMBERSHIP

Phyllis Roberts Kearney

NEW ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP

Neil and Barb Avery Elm Creek

learned the cigar-making trade in her father's cigar factory, and in the next few years Mr. and Mrs. Fiala, along with farming, operated a small cigar factory of their own. The economic panic of 1873 and a fire that burned their cigar factory ruined them financially.

Among Mr. Fiala's friends were fellow-countrymen Edward Rosewater, of the *Omaha Bee*, and John Rosicky, publisher of the Bohemian newspaper, *Pokrok Zapadu* (Progress of the West). They pointed out to him the opportunities of securing homestead land in Nebraska, so he wrote to the Land Office at Grand Island and secured plats of eleven townships in Sherman and Buffalo Counties showing land subject to homestead entry.

He traveled to Kearney Junction over the Burlington & Missouri Railroad and in his diary noted each station along the B & M. He described the "Laplatte River" as "very wide and very shallow." From Kearney he traveled across country by wagon to Loup City. Erastus Smith, who would later become the founder of Ravenna, and a few others had settled along Beaver Creek. Mr. Fiala was pleased with the looks of the country. He returned to Iowa and a month later, in June of 1878, brought his wife and five children, his mother and step-father, the Joseph Horaks, and his brother-in-law, James Novy, and family. All filed claims on homesteads in southern Sherman County within a three or four mile radius of Beaver Creek, later named Ravenna.

They arrived too late to accomplish much the first year except build their sod houses and outbuildings. They had little money and were glad they could earn some by working for Erastus Smith during the haying and harvest season. The next year they were able to raise crops of their own. Mr. Fiala sheltered many immigrants who came seeking new homes and the privileges of American citizenship. He was not a religious man but was often called upon to speak a few words of comfort in the mother tongue at the grave of a departed loved one.

Although interested in affairs of his area and of the state, Mr. Fiala thought he saw larger opportunities in Florida timber lands, and in 1894 he sold his fine farm, loaded two carloads of stock and horses, and with his wife and twelve children moved to Florida. Due to the dishonest trickery of the agent with whom he was dealing, he lost heavily, his fruit crop was devastated by unseasonable frosts, members of his family were ill, one child died. It was the hardest of times for them and as soon as arrangements could be made, they left Florida and journeyed as far toward Nebraska as their money would carry them. They stopped in Missouri for a year, rented a farm, but the crops were poor and at the end of the year their profits amounted to \$65.00 and a five-gallon can of molasses.

That fall the family moved to Grand Island where Mrs. Fiala's skill as a cigarmaker again stood them in good stead. She and one of the daughters worked in a Grand Island cigar factory for the next five years. Mr. Fiala became involved in insurance business, and several members of the family worked toward the purchase of another farm, this one two miles north of Ravenna. Several years later they sold the farm and bought an eighty which adjoined the townsite of Ravenna on the north.

Frank and Anna Fiala lived out their years in Buffalo County, having reared ten of their fourteen children to adulthood. The writer is one of two granddaughters who now live in Ravenna. The other is Mrs. Bessie Luth, who lives at the Good Samaritan Center. Bessie was the daughter of John and Anna (Fiala) Vesely. John Vesely managed and owned the Ravenna opera house and saloon from 1891 to 1894. There



Anna Fiala



Frank Fiala

were living quarters in the building at that time, and Bessie was born there on May 28, 1893. She will be 92 on her birthday this month.

The families who came to the Ravenna area with the Fialas lived on their homesteads all their lives. Joseph and Veronica Fiala Horak are buried in a small pioneer cemetery in the northeast corner of their homestead, which is known as the Horak Cemetery. Vaclav and Katherine Horak Novy are also buried there. Twin granddaughters of the Novys are Mrs. Joe Dymek and Mrs. Rose Bartunek, both of whom live in Ravenna.

In 1879 other Czech families arriving were Vencil Hervert in northern Buffalo County; Jan Horak, Paul Miller, John Helebrant, Josef Brezina and Blazey Bugno in southern Sherman County. In 1880 to Buffalo County came Frank Vokoun, Vaclav Skala, Vaclav Polka and Frank and Joseph Kriha, and to northern Sherman County, Frank, Vaclav and Vincent Kuticka.

Joseph Hervert was born in Knezice, Czechoslovakia. With his wife Frantiska (Pokorna) they moved to Vienna, Austria, and from there came to the United States in 1842, settling in Iowa. In 1878 with their family they came to southern Sherman County. A son, Vencil Hervert, homesteaded in Schneider Township in 1879. His wife was Mary Skrabal. Vencil bought lots of land and was said to have owned six thousand acres at one time. However, he fell upon hard times, loans he had made were not repaid, and at his death all of his property was offered at auction. His widow Mary found herself penniless until a brother from Missouri came to her rescue. He bought and paid for 160 acres of the land and gave it to her. Another part of the story is that she was given a gun by a friend connected with law enforcement in the area in case anyone came to remove anything to which she was entitled. Vencil and Mary had nine children. Grandchildren are Dr. J. Wm. Hervert, Rose Calvin, Charles V. W. Chramosta, Frank Hervert, George Hervert, Adolph Hervert, James Hervert, Amiel Hervert, Edward Chramosta, Fred Hervert and Frances Link.

American translation of Birth Certificate of Frantiska Pokorna.

The undersigned certifies hereby that, according to the mark (book) of new borns in the parish house of Kozojedy since the year 1785 Mark III-57, FRANTISKA POKORNA, legitimate daughter of Matej Pokorny, tailor and small farmer from Knezice No. 29 (house number), and Katheriny Chmelickove from Gzouu, both belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, on April 18, 1818, in Knezice No. 29, once belonging to district Prague, was born; and the following day from Frantisek Balyna, priest in Kozojedy, according to the Catholic baptism regulation, was baptized.

Godparents were Veronika Kopecka, a farmer's wife, and Jakub Novotny,

retired farmer. both from Knezice. The midwife was Katerina Pokorna.

To certify the truth of this, we add our own signature and the seal of the parish.

The parish house in Kozojedy.

April 10, 1860

P. Antonin Wizner, priest

Paul Miller was born in Bohemia in 1840. His mother died when he was fourteen. His father, with Paul and six daughters, came to the United States in 1857 and settled on a farm in Salone, Iowa. During the Civil War Paul enlisted in 1863 and participated in several battles until his discharge in 1865. In 1867 he married Mary Fiala, a sister of Frank Fiala, in Richmond, Iowa. There were six children, four of whom were living when they came to Nebraska in 1879. They settled on a homestead in southern Sherman County near other members of the Czech colony who came in 1878. Alice Henrickson of Kearney and Ella Naiberk of Ravenna are granddaughters of Paul and Mary Miller.

Vencil Skala was born in Pizen County, Bohemia in 1840. He came to America, living first in Elbone, Tama County, Iowa, before coming to Buffalo County in 1880. He settled on a farm about ten miles south of Ravenna. A son Vaclav married Anna Polka, who died within a year after their marriage. He then married Anna Novotne. The Skalas were successful farmers for their entire active lives. Vaclav and his father Vencil are buried in St. Wenceslaus Catholic Cemetery south of Ravenna. Descendants of Vaclav in this area are granddaughters Carolyn Skala Wilkens of Gibbon and Marvella Skala Psota of rural Sherman County.

Frank Kriha, Sr. was born in 1853 in the village of Viciny, town of Trebon, Budejovice County, Bohemia. He came to the United States, settling first in Tama County, Iowa. There in 1880 he married Katrina Turek. They came to Nebraska the same year and chose to rent farmland south of Ravenna before investing and settling permanently. They farmed their entire lifetime and reared a family of five children. Survivors are two granddaughters, Margaret Kriha Chramosta, who lives on a farm south of Ravenna with her husband Edward, and Mrs. Frank (Elizabeth Pokorney) Schuller of Ravenna.

Vaclav Polka was born in 1849 in the village of Litolhavy, town of Rokycany, Pizen County, Bohemia. With his parents he came to Tama County, Iowa. In 1880 Vaclav came to Nebraska. He married Barbara Vokoun Skrable who had two children from a prior marriage and they settled on a farm south of Ravenna. Besides their regular farm crops they also raised a small garden of tobacco. Vaclav and Barbara had a family of six more children. A son Jan, at age 5, perished in a snowstorm in 1887 or 1888.

A daughter Agnes married John Huryta, son of pioneer Vaclav Huryta of southern Sherman County. John and Agnes Huryta farmed southeast of Ravenna. John was a Buffalo County supervisor from 1933 to 1947.

Descendants of Vaclav and Barbara are a grandson, Edward Polka of Gibbon, and a granddaughter, Rose Vogt of Kearney.

Jan (John) M. Vacek was born May 3, 1855 in the village of Ceteraz, Bohemia. Anna K. Posusta was born May 5, 1858 in the same village. Both were baptized in Bohemia and were married there.

With their two oldest children they came to America, arriving at the Port of Baltimore on July 28, 1879, and apparently coming direct to Nebraska, staying at first with Anna's brother, Jan Posusta, south of Ravenna. In October, 1880, Mr. Vacek

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bought 160 acres of land from the Union Pacific for \$400.00 which he paid in full within five years. They had eleven children, two of which died in infancy. The original farm is now owned by two surviving grandsons, Joe and Charles Chop of Ravenna. Other surviving grandchildren in or near Ravenna are Mary Muegerl Lockhorn, Margaret Muegerl, Joe Muegerl, Blanche Hervert Klein, Clara Hervert Prochaska, Sylvia Hervert Vokoun, Mildren Hervert Hofbauer and Adella Vacek Miigerl.

In religion the Czechs were of the Catholic faith. In 1884 a Bohemian National Cemetery was founded in Schneider Township about twelve miles southeast of Ravenna. In 1912 a church building was acquired and set on the cemetery grounds, and in 1913 became St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church. It was active until 1969. The church is no longer there, but the cemetery, now known as St. Wenceslaus Catholic Cemetery, is well kept and still used.

The first pastors of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Ravenna were of Czech background. The church was established in 1887. Father Coka and Father Philip Maly came to conduct services occasionally. As a mission of St. Paul, Nebraska from 1890 to 1893, Father Broz and his chaplain, Father Vlcek, served. In 1894 Father Hodye commuted from Grand Island to serve the Ravenna church, and in 1895 and again in 1899-1902, Father Chundelak of St. Paul conducted the services. From 1897 to 1899 Father Anton Duda drove from Broken Bow to serve. In 1903 Father Jaroslav Hancik became the first resident pastor, serving until 1906. Father Joseph Macourek then came to Ravenna as a resident priest and remained until October 1949. He also served St. Wenceslaus Bohemian Catholic Church.

Father Macourek was born in Troubkach in Moravia on October 5, 1867. He came to Omaha in September of 1892 and served as pastor in a number of parishes before coming to Ravenna. He spoke five languages, Czech, German, English, Polish and French. He died on July 28, 1952 at the age of 84.

Father Jan Smutny, administrator of St. Mary's parish in Pleasanton, was born in Czechoslovakia in 1918. He came to the United States in 1951 and to Pleasanton in 1958. He also serves St. Gabriel's parish in Hazard and St. Mary's at Prairie Center.

Part II will cover the Czech businessmen of Ravenna, the Lodges and social activities of the Czechs in Buffalo County.

SOURCES

Diary of Frank Flala; family records; Sherman County land records; Rose Rosicky, *History of Czechs in Nebraska*; *Who's Who In Nebraska*, 1940; Our Lady of Lourdes Church Dedication, April 27, 1954; *Fraternal Herald*, Mar. 1984; *Ravenna News*, Jan. 31, 1908, Sept. 5, 1984; personal interviews with Carolyn Skala Wilkens, Rose Kriha, Emme Huryta, Bessie Luth, Mary Chramosta, Dr. and Mrs. Wm. Hervert, and Adella Vacek Miigerl.