



# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

June 1985

## THE CZECHS IN AND AROUND RAVENNA

### Part II

by Edith Fiala Abraham

In 1886 the Burlington Railroad was built into Garfield Township in Buffalo County and Ravenna was founded and became a division station. The village was incorporated October 12, 1886. Many of the early businesses were operated by Czech immigrants.

#### *Joseph Bohac and Barta Kase*

Joseph Bohac and Barta Kase were the first to set up a business in the area that later became the town of Ravenna. Joseph Bohac was born in the county of Hradec in Bohemia and came to America when a young man. Barta Kase was born in the province of Pilsen, Bohemia on August 24, 1861. At the age of 15 he was apprenticed to a shoemaker. He came to America in November 1879. In May of 1884 he married Annie Maly. Their second child Joseph, born October 22, 1886 was the first male child born in Ravenna.

These two men became acquainted in Omaha in 1882 where both were employed as musicians with a traveling show. They then managed a small concert band in Lincoln for four years, then decided to try other business endeavors. Bohac was to find a location for the firm of Bohac and Kase. He bought a ticket for North Platte, but in the Grand Island depot met Frank Fiala who induced him to come to the new town of Ravenna with its new railroad. Bohac telegraphed Kase in Omaha, who agreed to come, and together they hauled enough lumber from Howard City (Boelus)



Cast of the Czech Play, *Divaldo*, late 1930's.  
Ravenna Opera House  
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Family Membership . . . . .	\$ 7.50	Institutional Membership . . . . .	\$10.00
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Phone 234-3041

**WITH THE SOCIETY**

New officers of the Buffalo County Historical Society are Chandler Lynch III of Kearney, president; Barb Avery of Elm Creek, vice-president; Margaret Hohnholt of Kearney, secretary and Leo L. Henricksen of Kearney, treasurer.

**Museum Aides Needed**

Visitors are increasing and Museum Aides are needed—one each week day afternoon and three on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, from 1:00 to 5:00. Can you help?

**Freighting Exhibit Completed**

An exhibit about wagon freighting in Buffalo county has been completed and can now be seen in the exhibit room at the museum. This exhibit is the last phase of the freighting project funded by the grant from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities. It was designed and assembled by John Carter from the Nebraska State Historical Society.

**Thank You - Thank You - Thank You**

Thank you seems to be such an inadequate word to use to express our gratitude to the many Buffalo County Historical Society members and friends of the museum who worked so hard to make the Wagons West Celebration a success. Yes, the extreme heat did curtail activity around the food booths and flea market earlier than we had planned. However, the living history demonstrations and displays in all the buildings continued to attract visitors throughout the day. The public awareness of the museum and its attractions which this Celebration generated made this a very successful day.

Without the help of the many who volunteered on the work day, during the week before the Celebration in helping prepare the grounds, and who worked on Saturday, this event could not have been carried out so successfully. We really appreciate all the time given by these volunteers over the past weeks, and in some cases, months. Give yourselves a pat on the back.

**NEW MEMBERS**

- |                         |                   |                             |         |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|---------|
| Vera Fisher . . . . .   | Amherst           | Alice Hendrickson . . . . . | Kearney |
| Germaine Shea . . . . . | Commerce City, CO | Barry Sherman . . . . .     | Kearney |
| Doris Swartz . . . . .  | Phoenix, AZ       | Quentine Olsen . . . . .    | Kearney |

to build a 14' x 18' shanty, the first frame building erected on the site which would later become Ravenna. Theirs was a harnessmaking and repair business, and they soon had all the business they could handle. These two men watched the town boom with new buildings rising, railroad gangs laying track, prairie schooners coming and going. They continued in business until 1891 when they dissolved partnership, Bohac continuing in the harness business and Kase dealing exclusively in shoes.

*Albert V. Hlava, Hardware*

Albert V. Hlava was born in Stredekluk, Bohemia on April 23, 1856. He came to America with his family about 1866. He came to Crete, Nebraska in 1874, and was married to Anna M. Rezabek in 1878. In 1887 they decided to come to the new town of Ravenna and set up a hardware business, even though there were already three hardware stores in town. In 1889 he sold his business, moved to Pleasanton and had a hardware business there until 1899. He also served as postmaster of Pleasanton for four years.

In 1899 he moved back to Ravenna and again opened a hardware store. The two-story brick building which he built and which housed the Hlava Hardware Store until 1936 still stands on Grand Avenue. In 1936 the store was moved to another location in Ravenna, and after Mr. Hlava retired, the business was managed by his son Lambert, "Dewey", and his daughter Flora, and served the Ravenna trade area until the early 1970's. Of their family of eight children, a daughter Clara survives and lives in Ravenna. Ellwood Meek of Ravenna is a grandson.

*Joseph C. Smaha, Meats*

Born on November 25, 1863 at Nyrosko, Bohemia near the Bavarian border, Joseph C. Smaha came to America alone in 1877. On the voyage he narrowly escaped with his life when the ship he was on collided with another vessel. One ship sank, but not before the passengers were transferred to the other ship which, though crippled, managed to reach New York safely.

Smaha joined his brother George in Omaha and there learned the butcher's trade. In 1886 both men came to Ravenna and started a butcher shop. After four years he managed his own shop. He was the only businessman in Ravenna who in 1936 had been in the same location for fifty years. In 1882 he married Lucy Slavik and they reared ten children.

*Kaspar and Hosek, Dry Goods and Groceries*

Rudolph Kaspar was born in Hrotovicich, Moravia on April 17, 1845. He came to America when a young man, arriving in New York City in 1871. He went directly to Chicago, then to Saunders County, Nebraska, where he met and married Barbara Placek on December 31, 1872. For a number of years they lived in or near the village of Pilsen, moving to Ravenna in 1887.

Jacob Hosek was born in Danna, Bohemia on July 21, 1859. For a short time he and Rudolph Kaspar were partners in the business of dry goods and groceries, housed in two buildings. After dissolving partnership in December 1888, Kaspar continued the business until February 1890 when he sold his store to Joseph Simon. He then set up a saloon which he operated for several years. Eleven children made up the Kaspar family.

Other Czechs in business in Ravenna in 1893 were Frank Benes, Frank Bohac, Jan Fiser (Fisher), Joseph Hach, Anton Hlava, Joseph Hlava, Karel (Chas.) Humpel.

Jan Janecek, Joseph Jelinek, Vaclav Macek, Frank Mrkvicka, Joseph Shebl, Joseph Simon, Vaclav Skala, Joseph Spevacek, Anton Tomiska, Frank Velek and Joseph Velek; in Pleasanton, Frank Soukup and Vaclav Vosypka; in Nantasket, Jan Rocek.

### *Ravenna Opera House*

F. W. Havlicek, a Czech immigrant, was the first owner of the Ravenna Opera House, building it in 1886. It was also called Havlicek's Hall. There was a saloon on the street level with the opera house on the upper floor.

In early 1891 the Havlicek family moved from Ravenna, and John Vesely, also a Czech, assumed management and eventually bought the property. He enlarged the stage and erected a barn behind the main building. When the Vesely family moved to Litchfield in 1894, Joseph Cernik, another Czech, became the new owner and manager. It eventually had other owners. The saloon was popularly known as the Big Onion and the opera house as Finder's Hall.

The Czech people were intensely fond of the theater. Members of the Czech Lodges, as amateurs, annually presented a play, *Divadlo* (pronounced Dee-vahd-lo), in the Czech language, from the late 1880's until about 1940. A variety of traveling entertainers also performed in the opera house, and local dances, masquerade balls and social gatherings, as well as high school graduation exercises were also held there. The opera house was torn down in the 1970's.

### *Ravenna Brass Band*

The association of businessmen Joseph Bohac and Barta Kase led them to continue their musical endeavors as directors of the Ravenna Brass Band which was organized in the spring of 1888. Original members were John Fisher, Dr. Blanchard, Rudolph Kaspar, George Smaha, Jim Kaspar, Fred Hlava, Jerry Hlava, Joe Hlava, Joe Shebl, Charles Mason and two Robinsons (first names unknown). The band was in demand to play at political rallies, fairs and other celebrations within a wide area of central Nebraska. They also played at picnics, wedding dances, public dances, and even accompanied funeral processions, playing a funeral dirge. A weekly open air band concert during the summer months was a regular feature in Ravenna for many years. When Joseph Bohac moved to Washington, Barta Kase assumed the responsibilities of the band until 1931, assisted by Anton Hlava.



Funeral procession of Mrs. Joseph Holub, May 1900.  
First wagon for members of the Ravenna Brass Band.

### *The Bohemian Turners and Sokol Society*

The Bohemian Turners and Ravenna Sokol Society organized on June 9, 1892. They were an athletic group although not much mention is made of their activities until

1909 when Frank Slavetinsky became an instructor and trainer of the Ravenna club.

Frank Slavetinsky was born in Czechoslovakia on November 16, 1884. He came to the United States at the age of 21, having been trained in Czechoslovakia as a sheet metal worker. When he reached New York City he undertook athletic training with the Sokol Society there. He originated many gymnastic drills which were used in contests and tournaments and won many medals for his athletic feats. When he was appointed organizer and trainer for Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas and South Dakota, his travels brought him to Ravenna in December of 1908, where he was to remain for six weeks as an instructor.

In January, 1909 the Bohemian Turners entertained with fancy drills and calisthenics at the Ravenna Opera House. On March 1, 1909, Slavetinsky accepted a contract to stay with the Ravenna Sokol Society for one year. The following August a team of men and a team of ladies represented Ravenna in the tournament at Chicago, which included contestants from other states and from Europe. The Ravenna ladies' special number was a systematic work in calisthenics using baseball bats. Members of the team were Elsie Hlava, Antoinette Erazim, Clara Finder, Vlasta Fiala, Mary Hosek and Vlasta Slavetinsky. They won highest prize for their excellent work but since no trophies or prizes were provided for lady contestants, they were given honorable mention.

**Sokol** in Czech is falcon in English, the symbol of the swift, active and free; the symbol of those who believe in educational progress, the maintenance of the health of the individual, and the symbol of a strong, free nation.

Frank Slavetinsky married one of his Sokol pupils, Vlasta Hach, on August 21, 1909. When his health prevented his continuing his athletic activities, he went into the furnace, heating and sheet metal business in Ravenna. He became a citizen in 1912, and later served on the Ravenna City Council for sixteen years, the longest period of continuous service in the city's history.

#### *Czech Lodges*

The Czechs in the Ravenna area were active in organizations of their own nationality. As early as November, 1885, the Czecho-Slovansky Podporujic: Spolek (Czecho-Slovak Protective Society) was organized at the farm home of Albert Skochdopole in Garfield Township. There were fifteen charter members. The first officers were Albert Skochdopole, president; Frank Fiala, vice-president; Frank Skochdopole, secretary and James Hervert, treasurer. In 1897 the membership



Early Ravenna Street Scene.

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transferred to the Z.C.B.J., "Zapadne Cesko-Bratska Jednota" (Western Bohemian Brotherly Union). In 1971 the word Bohemian was dropped and the name changed to Western Fraternal Life Association. It is still active, although its membership in Ravenna is small.

The Czech women organized an auxiliary to the Z.C.B.J., known as Jednota Ceskych Dam (Society of Czech Women) in February of 1898. There were 23 charter members. The first officers were Mrs. Joseph Shebl, president; Mrs. Anna Jelinek, vice-president; Mrs. Mary Hach, secretary and Mrs. Josephine Valek, treasurer. This organization is active at the present time.

Education has always been important to the Czech people. It was a Czech, John Amos Comenius, born in 1592, who conceived the idea of popular education and it was he who introduced history, geography, natural science, training in mechanical arts and the study of economics and politics in education. In March 1892 the 300th anniversary of his birth was celebrated in Ravenna, as well as world wide. A program at the Ravenna Opera House featured speeches in English and in the Czech language. Comenius was sometimes referred to as Komensky. Komensky Clubs are still in evidence in many leading universities.

Patriotism has never been lacking in the hearts of Czech settlers toward the country they have adopted as their new home. When called upon they have served their country well, first in the Civil War, and since then their descendants have answered the call to military duty in later wars and conflicts.

It has been well over a century since the first Czech immigrants arrived in the Ravenna area. Their children and grandchildren still take pride in their heritage. It has been determined that 6.5% of Nebraska residents can trace their roots to Czech ancestry.

#### Author's Note

Unintentionally omitted in Part I were surviving grandchildren of John Vacek: George Vacek and Lloyd Vacek; of James Novy: Helen Darnell, Hubert Karel, Ann Larkowski and Eva Dusek; of Vencil Hervert: Elsie Guzinski; all of Ravenna.

#### SOURCES

Bassett's *History of Buffalo County; Sobotka, Nebraska and Kansas Czech Settlers; The Ravenna News*, Apr. 16, 1891, Jan. 9, Mar. 17, 1892, Jan. 18, 1894, Dec. 4, 1896, Dec. 8, 1899, Dec. 25, 1908, Feb. 5, 12, Apr. 9, Sep. 3, 1909, Sep. 25, 1925, Aug. 27, 1926, Feb. 24, Mar. 23, 1933, Oct. 16, 1936, Dec. 10, 1942, June 27, 1946, July 14, 1955, July 23, 1959.