

Czech Immigration to South Dakota

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Immigration to South Dakota is not unlike that immigration to many other states. There was both direct immigration from Bohemia and Moravia and immigration from previously established Czech settlements in America. The first known Czechs who spent time in what is now South Dakota were three soldiers of the 6th Iowa Cavalry, Vaclav Ployhart, Frank Mahlek and Frank Svehla.¹ A detailed description of Mr. Ployhart's difficult journey is given in the primary source for the study of Czech history in South Dakota, Josef Dvorak's *History of the Czechs in the State of South Dakota*.² Mr. Ployhart's travels began in his hometown in Bohemia and his travels took him through Prague, Hamburg, Liverpool, Quebec, Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago, Galena (Illinois), Dubuque and finally to Spillville, Iowa. Following the Great Sioux Uprising, he enlisted in October of 1862 into the 6th Regiment of the Iowa Cavalry and was sent to the Dakota Territory, taking part in Indian battles there. After his service, he returned to Spillville and in 1867 married Marie Kostka. He farmed near Spillville until he and his wife left in 1879 for the Dakota Territory, where they settled in Brule County. Later he moved to Oliva, Minnesota where he started a business selling farm implements.³

The first permanent Czech settler was Jan (John) Dufek, born February 9, 1845 (he wrote his name Duffack), who came to Milwaukee with his parents from Domažlice in 1855, when he was about 10 years old. In the year 1862, when he was 17 years old, he volunteered into the Union Army and fought against the South. After the war he moved to Yankton in 1867, and he opened a shoe store. He spoke Czech, English and German and was helpful to the first Czech settlers and was their interpreter. He died in 1918 in Yankton.⁴

It was group of Czechs in Chicago that formed a Czech Agricultural Society that began to initiate the Czech settlements further west, beyond Iowa or Minnesota. The society was created in a tavern belonging to Frank Bem, at the corner of Canal and Taylor streets in Chicago. Mr. Bem would lead the first group of permanent Czech settlers to what is now South Dakota in 1869. Soon four thousand people joined the Agricultural Society from Czech-settled areas in the East. The money collected was used to send Frank Bem, Frank Janousek, and Eduard Strausse to Kansas in the winter of 1868, to see if there was any suitable land there. Apparently there was not, because after their return they set out again in the spring of 1869 to investigate the possibilities of suitable land in northeastern Nebraska. They wrote back to Chicago that there was a veritable "land of plenty" about forty miles west of Niobrara, Nebraska, with pine forests, a place where there would be a flowing stream on every farm. They also wrote that the first

¹ Dvorak, Joseph. comp. *Památní kniha – Dějiny Čechův ve státu South Dakota/ Memorial Book – History of the Czechs in the State of South Dakota*. trans. Laddie Kostel, (Tabor, South Dakota: The Czech Heritage Preservation Society, Inc., 1980), 20.

² This book is currently available in a translated version from the Czech Heritage Preservation Society, 330 W. Yankton Street, Tabor, SD 57063.

³ *Ibid.*, 103-105.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

expedition was to leave Chicago on May 1, 1869. This letter from the scouting party was written as if this party had actually visited the forests and beautiful streams, but in fact it did not even get as far as Niobrara. Nevertheless, the first expeditions of the Czech Agricultural Society set out with members from Chicago (Alois Chladek, Tadeas Pishek, John Pishek, Daniel Cap, Cyril Jandus, Joseph Hrdlicka) from Cleveland (Frank Nedved) from LaCrosse, Wisconsin (Frank Fejfar and his daughter), and Joseph Pechan, who had just come from Bohemia with his family. Arriving in Sioux City, Iowa by train, they bought provisions and livestock, such as oxen,⁵ farm implements, plows and wagons and crossed the Missouri River to Covington, Nebraska.⁶

Under the leadership of Bem, they set out on the road. Bem rode on a borrowed pony and led the way for the others over the hilly and unknown regions. For the night, they always set up camp somewhere near water and prepared their nourishment. Chladek and Hrdlicka had a joint kitchen, and Mrs. Nedved cooked for the rest. Along the way Daniel Cap ate some poison berries and when they came to St. Helena, opposite Yankton, he became seriously ill. Bem was afraid that Cap may die and that it may be thought in Chicago that perhaps he was killed and eaten by the Indians. So Bem tried to treat Cap with milk, which the patient would not take. Then they gave him whiskey, which they had taken along in case of snake bites, and that cured him. It took them four days to get to Niobrara. Before they arrived there, Strausse had left for Chicago and Janousek had shot himself in the leg when he had fallen from his pony and a shot from his revolver accidentally discharged. Arriving at Niobrara, they were very anxious to see the land. Unfortunately, they were very disappointed. They saw only hills and sand, and a scarcity of forests. They regretted that they had not stayed in Sioux City, inasmuch as at that time they could have homesteaded 80 acres adjoining the town. To add to this great disappointment, they found that when they purchased even the most trifling thing in Niobrara they had to pay a quarter (25 cents) for it. So when Bem and Janousek persuaded them to travel 40 miles further west, they listened and went. They left their wagons in the town and borrowed ponies from an Indian trader and went to the area. They arrived there in two days, but saw no forests anywhere except a few cottonwoods along the Niobrara River, and the entire region consisted of nothing but sand hills. Along the river there were a few spots for a couple settlers but nothing for a large colony. They arrived in the evening so made camp for the night. They had brought along some pancakes and bread and while they were eating an Indian appeared with a rifle, and with signs gave them the understanding that he was hunting deer. Shortly thereafter another Indian showed up, then a third and then a whole swarm who all helped them with supper so that hardly anything was left for the expedition to eat. In great fear our dear countrymen started back for Niobrara. They spent the night below a hill and a severe rainstorm came, and the water came running down a ravine so that they stood throughout the night. Along with that, wolves were howling on all sides so that they began to curse America. They arrived safely in Niobrara but found that Janousek was gone. He had left for Chicago. Disappointed and embittered about everything, they too decided to return to Chicago and prepared for their departure. Worst of all was that Bem and Janousek had done much talking to the Indian trader, and had told him they intend to establish a large colony there. The trader was already contemplating what profit this would bring him, but when he learned that

⁵ The oxen were bought in Covington, Nebraska

⁶ Covington, Nebraska is present-day South Sioux City, Nebraska.

nothing would come of it, he became angry and he would not even permit them to water their oxen from his well.

Before they departed on the return trip, it was secretly told them by some people that seven days before about seven miles from the town along the Niobrara River, an Indian had shot a young Dane in the very door of his cabin. The Dane had also settled there with the expectation that a large colony of homesteaders would soon be there. He was buried by the citizens of Niobrara near the log cabin where he had so tragically ended his life. It is evident that such tidings to our first emigrants gave them very little courage to settle near Niobrara.

As they were departing, Charles Myers, an engineer from Yankton, happened to come there and he informed them that in Dakota there was good land and that they should go there. So they set out on the road for Dakota and the same evening arrived at the Santee Agency opposite Springfield, although Springfield did not as yet exist.

They set up camp near the Santee Agency, but an Indian policeman came at once and ordered them to leave the Indian Reservation. He told them that as white people they had no right to be there. Chladek answered him that they would stay there in spite of everything and on that the policeman brought the Indian Agent, a white man, who told them that they could stay but at their own risk. The Indian Agent further told them that in the event the Indians robbed them or killed them, nobody could help them. But they stayed. The next day Pechan, Hrdlicka and Myers went by boat across the river, where Springfield stands today, and they liked the land and country there. Then they returned to the rest of the group and traveled all the way to opposite Yankton where a ferry took them across to Yankton. Even with this crossing they had hard luck because the boat was small and the ferryman did not want to take over the oxen because he was afraid they might jump into the river. Myers then stated that they would have to go to Sioux City for the river crossing, but finally the ferryman was convinced and a flat boat was prepared on which they were taken over to Yankton. This was exactly on the fourth of July in 1869.

In Yankton there was a brewery where they strengthened themselves and waited a few days, and then went out to look over the land. During that time Bem was telling everyone in Yankton that after them there would arrive a large amount of Czechs settlers. This resulted in the citizens of Yankton immediately taking over the land around Yankton as at that time it had not yet been taken up. As a result, our Czechs had to go eight miles further west, where they liked it and commenced to settle.

During this time Janousek was already in Chicago and took for granted that those he had left behind would stay in Niobrara, and he began to write laudatory articles in periodicals about the beauty and promise of the region near Niobrara. It was natural that Janousek did not agree with Bem and his followers, as Bem was writing praises about Dakota. From this there arose among the members of the Agricultural Society great distrust and dissatisfaction, and the Society fell apart. If it had not been for this antagonism there would have been a large Czech community already in the second year.

In spite of this, Bem continued to write to the eastern papers and the third year Czechs started to move here. After that the settlement continued to increase. So under such conditions and experiences these first Czechs opened the road into this state for others. It is therefore proper, and it is the obligation of the writer of this history, to give these first Czech settlers proper attention and space in this work.⁷

⁷ Dvorak, 22-24.

Soon, some of these Czech pioneers and others settled near Lakeport, SD, a small town located on the Yankton–Ft. Randall road. There, near Lakeport on the property of one of the first pioneers, Frank Nedved, they established the first Czech Catholic Church in the Dakota Territory, The Church of St. John the Baptist. However this original building, which still exists today in the Vancura Memorial Park in Tabor, South Dakota, was replaced with a larger chalkstone church located closer to Lakeport.

In 1872, Tabor, the town most identified with Czechs in South Dakota, was founded. Speaking from a 1920 perspective, “Today the town and the area from six to seven miles around are inhabited entirely by Czechs. The town is correctly titled: “Mother City of South Dakota Czechs,” and, furthermore, can with full right make claim that it is “The Heart of Czech Dakota.”⁸ Today, although the situation has changed somewhat, there are still many people of Czech ancestry in and around Tabor.

Some street names in Tabor which reflect the ethnic origin of the original inhabitants of the town include: Ziskov, Vyborny, Janda, Hakl and Chechie. In 1942, Chechie Street was renamed Lidice as a memorial to the village of Lidice in Bohemia that was destroyed by the Germans in retribution for the assassination of one of the Nazi leaders.

Every June, the community of Tabor celebrates Czech Days. A few of the cultural attractions include the Vancura Memorial Park, which has a number of early pioneer buildings, the Tabor 1890 Band, and the Beseda Dancers. One of the most important buildings in the park is a Czech Catholic church that was erected in 1869, making it the oldest Czech church in either North or South Dakota. It had once stood on land donated by Frank Nedved. The 1890 Band performs original music that was written and performed in Tabor during the late 19th century and its present membership even includes descendants of some of the original members. The Beseda Dancers were formed in the 1930s under the leadership of Mr. and Mrs. James Schuch and continues today under the direction of their daughter, Mildred Cimpl. They perform on each evening of Czech Days in Sokol Park and the 2003 celebration saw 84 couples dancing the “Beseda.”

In South Dakota, Czechs later settled primarily in the counties of Yankton, Bon Homme, Charles Mix, Gregory, Tripp, Brule, and Jackson.

The following counties include communities with some association with Czechs: Yankton: Yankton, Lesterville, Utica, Janousek, Lakeport, and Ziskov; Bon Homme: Tabor, Tyndall, Springfield, Blaha, Scotland, Havlicek and Kingsburg; Charles Mix: *Wagner, Dante, Lake Andes, and Geddes*; Gregory: *Fairfax, Gregory, Herrick, and Dixon*; Tripp: *Winner and Witten*; Brule: *Bendon, Vega, Pukwana, Kimball, Ployd, and Eagle*; and Jackson: *Belvidere and Kadoka*.

Joseph Dvorak’s book is certainly the most important work to date about the history of Czechs in South Dakota. Attached to this paper is a list of additional sources that should be helpful to those more interested.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

Table 1

Examples of Immigration to Brule County, South Dakota

Name	Year Moved to Brule County	Previous Residence and arrival date there.
John Houska	1881	Cresco, IA
Holoubek	1881 (approx.)	Bohemia
Joseph Konechne	1881	Spillville, IA
John Brchan	not known	Wisconsin (1872?)
Matt Novak	1882	Grant County, WI (1867)
Mathius Korzan	1882	Spillville, IA (1868)
Frank Chmela, Sr.	1882	Chicago (1881)
Barbara Havlik	not known	Washington, IA (1872)
Frank Matousek	1882	Blue River, WI (1868)
Joseph Matousek	1882	Grant County, WI (1868)
Thomas Brchan	1883	Grant County, WI (1875)
Mlady family	1883	Cresco, IA (1872)
Frances Pridal	1883	Chicago (1874)
Pipal family	1883	Grant County, WI (1867)
Frank Burian	1886 (approx.)	Bohemia
Joseph Duba	1888	Hojkov (Morava)
John Picek	1890	Tabor, SD (1885)
Frank Pekarek	1894	New York, Chicago (1891)
Charles Blazek	1898	Prairie du Chein, WI
Joseph Hora	1898	Iowa City, IA
Frank and Minnie Bravek	1905 (April 1 to April 11)	Voděradý
Joseph Petula	1910	Burwell, NE (1905)
John Petula	1914	Bohemia or Moravia
Regina Shimak	1914	Protivin, IA

Selected List of Sources for Additional Information about Czechs in South Dakota.

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