

**The SPILLVILLE Of Antonin Dvorak’s Sojourn
And Inspirations For The “American”**
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1893 panorama of Spillville, Iowa by Charles Andera. Looking West from hill above river East of town. “1” – South part of town. “2” – North part of town.

Spillville (Spielville) came into being on May 7, 1860 when Joseph Spielman subdivided a forty-acre parcel of land near his crude grist and sawmill and submitted a plat for record. Eleven years earlier, in February 1849, with several other families, he had left Indiana to settle in northeastern Iowa. Recently vacated by the Winnebago Indians the Iowa land was being surveyed and would soon be on the market. The “Iowa-bound caravan of Oldenburgers (Indiana) plodded up over the western rim of the valley on the Enochsburg State road and disappeared”.

In April 1849 the travelers arrived at Ft. Atkinson, a frontier army post recently (February 24, 1849) abandoned by the US Army following the relocation of the Indians. After a brief stay,

exercising their “squatter’s rights” under the Preemption Act of 1838, they moved onto the acreage they wished to own. When the land came on the market, they had the privilege of acquiring it at the minimum price of \$1.25 an acre providing customary improvements such as plowing and fencing had been done. Joseph headed north and laid claim to what had been the site of an Indian village with grain and vegetable fields. Selection of the Indian farm permitted Spielman to plant a substantial crop during the first year in Iowa. Further, since the Indians had cultivated the fields for a number of years, the required improvements were already in place. On 12 November 1850, after Winneshiek County lands were released for sale, Spielman purchased 160 acres, the first of the many parcels he would acquire for subdivision or resale.

For several years Spielman had few neighbors. Most of the land was being purchased by speculators or, as they were commonly called, “land sharks.” During 1854 the population near Spielman’s cabin more than doubled. The new comers included several German, about twenty Czech, and four Swiss families. What had been a trickle now became a steady stream, which continued until all available land was taken.

Not only had there been a large increase in the number of settlers but their character was changing. In 1854 and later, most were relative new comers to the nation, individuals and families who had only recently emigrated from Europe to escape adverse economic and political conditions. Unlike their predecessors who had brought stock and farm tools and household goods, most of these people were at or near poverty level. They came with little more than their bare hands and a grim determination to successfully meet the challenges of the Iowa frontier.

Czech settlers to the area were now outnumbering all other ethnic groups. This started a trend that would make Spillville and its environs a predominantly Czech community. The first Czechs came to Winneshiek County purely by chance. When they left Bohemia (mostly from the area of Pisek, Tabor and Cezka Budejovice), their destination was Cleveland, Ohio. There they knew of Leopold Levy who in 1848 had come to Cleveland from Smetanova Lhota, a village not far from their own villages in southern Bohemia. Knowing that in 1852 he had helped a group of Czech migrants get settled, they were drawn to him also. From Levy they learned of the land office at Dubuque, Iowa, and that it was in Winneshiek County (organized January 15, 1851) where government land was then being sold.

By the year’s end in 1860 nine families were living near Spielman’s mill. A hotel and brewery were being built and several trades and craftsmen provided the nucleus of a business center to serve the farmers scattered through Calmar, Washington, Sumner and Jackson townships. The businesses included two merchants, a blacksmith, a wagon maker, a tinsmith, and a master carpenter. And in the early 1860’s twenty-two Spillvillians marched off to the American Civil War.

There were two churches. The Catholic Germans, under the patronage of St. Clement and served by a priest from Festina, about nine miles southeast of Spillville, first temporarily worshipped in a log cabin at an undetermined location. The St. Clement (*German*) Church brick structure (built 1864) that replaced it still (June, 2003) stands about a mile south of Spillville. Desiring their own church, the Czech Catholic families built a limestone structure dedicated to St.

Wenceslaus on a hill about a mile North of St. Clement Church and just off the Northwest corner of the original (May 7, 1860) plat of Spielville. The first Holy Mass was celebrated on 28 September 1860. Today (June 2003) Spielville's St. Wenceslaus Church is the oldest standing Czech Catholic Church in the United States.

As Spielman sold off his lots, the village slowly grew. By the 1870s, the population had reached 400, a figure around which it has fluctuated little since. Additional businesses established during that period include two breweries, a hotel, a butcher shop, several saloons, a creamery, a harness shop, two flour mills, a furniture store, and two or three black smiths.

During Spielville's early period, several individuals stood out. The first, of course, is Spielville's founder, Joseph Spielman. He is reputed to have been a rugged but kindhearted individual to whom many families owed their prosperity. He was fluent in Czech as well as German and his skills were many. At one time or another he served the community as realtor, banker, miller, lawyer, blacksmith, advisor, brewer, merchant, civil servant and licensed physician.

John J. Haug, who came from Switzerland to Spielville in 1854, was the community's foremost merchant and throughout his life he was involved in civic affairs. Like Spielman, he also spoke Czech fluently. After farming for two years, he worked for Spielman for a time. Then he established a general merchandise business near the mill. In 1860, after securing a post office for the village that was forming, he was appointed the first postmaster. Over the years J.J. Haug conducted his business with a number of different partners. Eventually, to permit time for his other business and civic interests, he sold the store to John Henry Haug, his nephew. At one time or another he was involved with the Big Stone Mill, a creamery, a bank, and owned 1500 acres of land. After being a justice of peace for three years he was county supervisor for six. He sat on the Calmar Township war committee during the Civil War and was a Calmar Township clerk.

John J. Haug was a progressive and astute businessman who believed in giving his customers a square deal. It was probably natural in such a small community that, given his role as a merchant and the constant contact that he had with the local people as well as with the outside world, Haug would assume a role as civic leader. As a Swiss, with a national characteristic of deep concern for personal freedom and being multi-lingual, he was better prepared for such a function than his Czech or German contemporaries. J.J. Haug and then John Henry extended credit to the customers at the stores. That helped many in the community. A frequent spokesman for the community, the Czechs accepted him as one of their own. Their esteem for him was demonstrated in 1910 when St. Wenceslaus Church celebrated its Golden Jubilee. He was the only speaker who was not a Czech, not a Catholic, nor a clergyman. It was an honor they would not have extended to a lesser man.

Notable also is Othmar Kapler, a native of Wurttemberg, Germany. He came to Calmar Township with his parents in 1855. After return from military service in the Civil War, Kapler opened a boarding house. He was a Notary Public, served several terms as a Justice of Peace, was active in civic and church affairs, ran a saloon, and had a general conveyance business. He was Spielville's first mayor, an office he was appointed to by the council after the man who had been

elected refused to serve. Mr. Kapler was a highly respected and popular member of the community.

Charles (Karel) Andera was a lad of 12 years when he came from Bohemia with his parents in 1866. After marriage in 1875 he opened a furniture store and worked as a carpenter and cabinetmaker. Commuting by bicycle, he crafted the alters in the Catholic churches in Protivin and Ft. Atkinson. Most notable however, are the unique cast iron cruciform grave markers that he crafted. Examples of these may be found in Czech Catholic cemeteries from Texas to the Canadian border, from Prague, Oklahoma to Bohemia, New York.

Another whose impact is still being felt was John J. Kovarik (born Aug. 10, 1850 in Vsetec, Bohemia) who came with his parents, John and Mary, in 1868. His love of music rubbed off on many of his students and would indirectly lead to a summer sojourn in Spillville by noted composer Antonin Dvorak. More on this later.

Until a school could be built classes were held in the rectory built in 1866, and then in 1869 to 1870 in the dance hall above Thomas Dvorak's saloon. Only part of the new two-story stone structure was used for education. The rest served as living quarters for Kovarik and his family. Earlier and until his departure to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin in 1866, the children attended classes in the log cabin of teacher Martin Bouska, about one mile East of Spillville. (This "Bouska Log Cabin/School" structure has been preserved and is now on the grounds of the "Bily Clocks Museum", which is the Schmitt house of 1893 where Dvorak lived in Spillville.)

J. J. Kovarik taught the immigrant children, and their children, for over a quarter of a century. As a teacher, he had the distinct advantage over his counterparts in the township schools by being able to instruct in all three of the languages spoken by his pupils - Czech, German and English. The last he learned by attending classes in Decorah, to which he walked. The average number of pupils was about 60. In winter, when the children were not needed for planting or harvest, attendance increased to as much as 110. With that many, Kovarik was forced to restrict his curriculum to basics.

It might appear that with such a large group his charges would be short-changed but that doesn't seem to be the case. He worked hard to give more than a cursory education, and he did so well that several of his pupils went on become top notch professional educators. Prokopius Neuzil became a teacher, a priest, and at age 36 founded St. Procopius College in Lisle, Illinois. Alois Kovarik, a nephew, went on to earn a doctorate at the University of Minnesota and became Professor of Physics at Yale University. James S. Mikesh, an author and theologian taught at Yale and Harvard.

Mary Klimesh, one of his pupils, called J.J. (Kovarik), as he was commonly called, a "very good teacher". She recalled that he was very strict, but kind. The school day started with Holy Mass at which Kovarik played the organ and the children sang. One evening a week he devoted to choir practice. At other times, he taught music to his children and to others. His family's recreation centered on music. Periodically the town's people gathered at the school to sing. He also formed and conducted an orchestra. Frank Bily, one of its members, went on to

play in the Minneapolis Symphony. John J. Kovarik and his wife Elizabeth were the parents of six children, four of whom adopted music as their life's work.

Joseph Kovarik, son of John J. and Elizabeth, who had demonstrated exceptional talent, was sent to music school in Milwaukee at age 13, and then at 18 to the Conservatory in Prague, Bohemia. While there, Joseph chanced to meet composer Antonin Dvorak. They became friends and after completing his training Kovarik, reluctantly, extended his stay in Bohemia. Having accepted a position as Director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, Dvorak invited Kovarik to accompany him and his family to New York and to serve as his secretary.

They arrived in New York on St. Wenceslaus Day, 28 September 1892. While in New York, Kovarik taught violin at the Conservatory and lived with the Dvorak family. Dvorak taught composition, acted as conductor at the New York Philharmonic, and composed, including his famous 9th Symphony, "From the New World".

Dvorak was a country gentleman. He disliked the hustle and bustle of the city. The noise irritated him. He didn't like dressing up. Preparing for the concerts gave him stage fright. Social obligations distressed and bored him.

Dvorak initially planned to spend his 1893 summer vacation at his country home in Vysoka, Bohemia. But fascinated by Kovarik's vivid description of Spillville and its people, the Composer changed his mind and notified his children still in Bohemia to join him. A pleased Joseph Kovarik, who had not seen his family for five years, began making the arrangements to travel to Spillville.

Aboard the train leaving New York at 8:00 A.M. on 3 June 1893 were Antonin Dvorak, his wife Anna, their six children, Otilie, Anna, Magdalena, Antonin, Otakar, Aloisia, sister-in-law Mrs. Koutecka, housemaid Baruska Klerova, and Joseph Kovarik. Interested by locomotives from childhood Dvorak was fascinated by the train's speed and the ever-changing American countryside. At 11:00 A.M. on 5 June they arrived at Calmar, Iowa, about five miles east of Spillville.

There they were met by Joseph's father, with a wagon, and Spillville's Rev. Father Thomas Bily and Protivin's Rev. Father Frantisek Vrba, each with a carriage. After an exchange of greetings, the party settled into the carriages for the final leg of their journey to Spillville. Joseph stayed behind with the wagon to bring the luggage. Driving home he was anxious. What if the Master did not like Spillville? As he approached, Dvorak was standing by the school, smiling and smoking his long pipe. The others were sitting around a table. When he saw Kovarik, the Master called to him, "What a pleasant welcome to Spillville." Joseph need not have worried.

During lunch Dvorak learned that the family had a piano and arranged to borrow it. In the newspaper KATOLIK, Joseph Kovarik wrote:

"The Master occupied the upper floor in the home of Mr. Schmitt (now the "Bily Clocks/Dvorak Museum"). After the piano was tuned, repaired and moved into the dwelling, the

Master undertook a new work. When the piano did not suffice for the outline of his work, he used a reed organ which he had searched out at his neighbor's across the street, at Kovarik's, my father's cousin, who had a harness shop. He went there often, played a couple of measures, then quickly returned home. So began the Master's new work, a piece of chamber music for strings, a quartet in F. Major, Opus 96.

The Master began his outline on the new work on the third day following his arrival in Spillville on 8 June and on 10 June the outline of the first movement was finished. This was an unusually short time, only three days. It is interesting to note that following the last line of his outline he wrote: "Thank God, completed 10.6.1893 - Spillville. I am satisfied It went rapidly." The first movement of the score of his work the Master wrote from the 12th to the 15th; the second movement from the 15th to the 17th, the third on the 18th; and the last movement from the 18th to the 19th of June."

Pleased that his new work had been finished in so short a time, and anxious to hear it played, Dvorak instructed Joseph to copy the parts and formed a quartet. Joseph wrote: *"The parts were transcribed and play it we did. The Master first and my father second violin, my sister Cecelia viola and I the cello. We played the quartet every day, usually in the afternoon. I don't know how a professional would have judged our "harmony" but the Master kept commenting to himself from day to day that the quartet was improving."* (These first playings were in the J. J. Kovarik home, the 'Old (1870) School' (St. Wenceslaus School), in Spillville.)

The Spillville Quartet, as Dvorak first called it, was first played in a public performance in Boston on 1 January 1894. Writing about the event, a newspaper reporter called it the American Quartet. The name stuck.

Since Dvorak never talked about his music, not even to family and friends, one can only contemplate as to the inspirations that led to his Opus 96. The work appears to focus on the sights and sounds of Spillville, the composer's experiences and excitement of the first two days blended with his joy at being with his family amongst countrymen in a rural atmosphere.

From his son Otakar we do know that although he found much of interest in New York City, he did not like living there. In New York, he was homesick for the quiet, simple life with his family and friends at Vysoka. As a young musician he had composed not for money, but for the sheer pleasure of putting his thoughts and observations into music - and at his own pace. . In New York the demands of his contract left him little time for this.

So.....How might Antonin Dvorak, The Great Composer, country gentleman, Bohemian now among countrymen after a nearly a year away from Bohemia, creatively express his inspiration, satisfaction and joy? In music, his specialty. And from what might his inspiration in that *"...unusually short time, only three days."* – and just two days after arriving – spring. Our imagination must lead us to the most euphoric joy and contentment of his coming to Spillville.

In the **first movement** Dvorak tells of his *ride to Spillville* in Father Bily's carriage pulled by a spirited team of white horses that Dvorak credited with having a "gait like thunder" as

together they “flew like birds.” Today the road is relatively more or less smooth and level, but in Dvorak’s time the road was not surfaced and more followed the rise and fall and curve of the rolling land. Occasionally the grades were quite steep forcing the horses to slow down. As the grade changed so did the clippity-clop of the team. The melody reflects the tempo of the team’s gait. The theme of the horses’ gait is repeated in the third and fourth movements. (During his stay Dvorak would borrow the team frequently to take his family on rides through wide expanse of fields he called “prairie” though by then most of the prairie had been converted to fields and pastures.) The day was fair and pleasant as we know from Kovarik’s comment, when he arrived, about Dvorak standing by the school and the others sitting around a table.

The **second movement** is one of *contentment*. As the day ends the summer sun sinks to the Northwest. At dusk, as bats start to skim through the evening sky, the bird songs gradually die down. By dark, now settled in their rooms and weary from the day’s events, the travelers are ready to call it a day. With the interesting and scenic travel from New York still fresh in his mind, Dvorak feels great satisfaction at having chosen Spillville for his vacation. Houses go dark. On the street, unlike New York, other than an occasional patron departing the tavern across the street, there is no traffic and all is quiet. The village has settled down for the night.

Then comes the **third movement, morning and a new day**. Roosters start crowing and the birds are beginning to greet the new day with song. Dvorak is up before most of the residents and walking along a cow path under towering oak trees on the shore of the Turkey River. The melody of a red bird with black wings catches his attention and excites him. Its trill is unlike any in his motherland. He is delighted, yet irritated. The song is so rapid that he has trouble recording it. The bird was a scarlet tanager. At the bottom of his outline of the third movement he identified the bird that so exasperated him as “*that damned bird*.”

In 1925 a monument commemorating Dvorak's visit to Spillville and his contribution to America's classical music was erected on the riverbank of what is now Riverside Park. The site, near a ripple in the stream and opposite the mouth of Spielman’s Creek, was identified by his son Otakar as being the composer’s favorite spot for his communion with nature. It was here that Dvorak is said to have first heard the bird song that so excited him. Did the Master perhaps also incorporate the rhythm of this particular ripple in Opus 96 as later he would the music of Minnesota’s Minnehaha Falls in his Opus 100?

The **fourth movement** reflects Dvorak’s *exuberance* at being *away from stresses and troubles* related to his work at the Conservatory. By seven, he is at the organ in the church loft. In the pews, the grandmothers and grandfathers pray silently as they wait for Father Bily to start Holy Mass. When Dvorak begins playing an old Czech hymn they are startled, then join in with song. Normally on weekdays during summer when the children are no longer in school the organ is silent. Following the service, Dvorak joins them as they excitedly chatter about the surprising event. Though he has never met any of them, he knew most by name and occupation and quickly becomes acquainted. They call him Squire Dvorak and accept him as one of their own. Earlier in the year, following Joseph Kovarik’s vivid descriptions of Spillville, Dvorak had decided to forego his planned return to Vysoka during his four-month summer vacation and accept Kovarik’s invitation to spend the summer in Spillville. In the meantime, Dvorak had Kovarik

draw a map of Spillville and quizzed him almost daily about the residents – so he had a good grasp of the place and people even before he arrived.

Below in italics are Some Cumulative Thoughts and Observations about a typical Dvorak morning as experienced and imagined by co-author Michael Klimesh:

Opus 96 went very Quickly - three days from arrival to start and only eleven more days to completion.

It must have been an intense experience and feelings he wanted to express.

The Master called it the Spillville Quartet.

The time of his sojourn – two weeks before summer starts to one week before its end - is a pleasant time of year.

He rose at 4:00, walked, returned to work, and went to Mass at 7:00.

So... What might the start of the day look, sound, smell and feel like? On Corpus Christi Sunday, June 22, 2003, a longest day of the year and the first full day of summer, it was like this:

Note: The times below are daylight savings time. Convert to standard time by dropping the times back one hour.

4:00am CDT – Very, very faint light on North side of Pletka's hill.

4:30 – Almost light enough to walk an open street with no other light.

4:40 – Light blue sky, with a few little clouds, to Northeast. The moon is about one third. Definitely light enough to walk town streets. Birds are now singing. They rise early too. Several distant owls answer each other. The breeze is pleasant from the South.

4:45 – A chorus of birds sing – cardinals, the other red bird; robins; crows and others.

4:50 – Signs of life intensify. Many, many raucous crows on the West side of town. Various birds everywhere. First human soul of the day passes.

4:55 – At Schmitt's house doves mourn. Many, many birds now fly and call all around. A rabbit here and there crosses a lawn.

5:00 – From the East Bridge Pletka's hill silhouettes against a light blue, whitely streaked, sky. It is light enough to walk easily in all but the darkest woods.

5:06 – At the (since 1925) Dvorak Memorial in Riverside Park, where Spielman's Creek joins the Turkey River, there is silence all around but for the sounds of birds. (Maybe smoke a pipe?) Where is 'that damn bird' today?

5:17 – Back toward the East Bridge the wind makes that special sound as it rustles through the cottonwood trees.

5:25 – More people stirring. Rabbits on lawns. Chimney Swifts dot the sky.

5:35 – The lenses of clouds on the horizon where the sun will rise are shades of purple and rose. Grackles scold.

5:45 – The sun clears the Northeast horizon and the first rays touch the cross on St. Wenceslaus steeple, the tallest building in the village.

5:50 – The North and East side of the limestone St Wenceslaus Church in bright gold and the old cemetery are blanketed in the light of a new day.

5:55 – The sun has reached out to the Old (1870) School, down the hill and across the street from the church.

6:00 – Schmitt's tin shop and the whole town are bright. The sun has fully cleared Pletka's hill.

Imagine – Other sights and sounds and smells in those 1893 days would be typical of a rural, highly self-sufficient, old country farming community – many geese, ducks, chicken (and roosters crowing), pigs, cows, and horses – all kept liberally by the many/most village households.

6:10 – The town is mostly still and quiet. The early risers have gone their ways. It is sixty degrees. The two hour walk about has passed quickly and pleasantly.

Michael F. Klimesh, co-author June 22, 2003

As in New York, most evenings found Dvorak at home playing his favorite card game with Joseph. In mid-June this routine was interrupted by the arrival in Spillville of an Indian Medicine Show. During their 14-day stay Dvorak was there each evening listening to their songs with keen interest. Three members of the troupe he became acquainted with were named Big Moon, John Fox and John Deer. Following the completion of the quartet, Opus 96, Dvorak began working on a quintet in E major, Opus 97. This work, which reflects some of the Indian melodies, was finished on the 1st of August.

Contrary to public opinion during the early decades following Dvorak's return to his home in Bohemia, neither his symphony, *From The New World*, nor the world-famous *Humoresque* were written in Spillville. The former was finished in New York but was copied for publication in Spillville by Joseph Kovarik. The latter, based on one of several sketches he had made in Spillville, was not finished until a year later while he was on vacation in Bohemia.

Homesick for Bohemia in New York, yet wishing to see Midwest frontier Antonin Dvorak had debated his options – Iowa or Bohemia, then chose to accept Joseph Kovarik's invitation. By coming to Spillville he had, in effect, managed both. In Spillville he found an environment that in most aspects was like a transplant from his motherland. From the moment he had stepped off the train in Calmar and all those who awaited him spoke Czech he had felt at home. He enjoyed chatting with the villagers whatever their age. Much of his leisure he spent with his "Trio": namely oldsters Mathias Bily, his neighbor, Joseph's grandfather John Kovarik, and John (Jan) Klimesh.

Spillville was settled by a German, the principal merchant was a Swiss but the community's pioneers were predominantly Czechs. More than any other, due to his love for music, John J. Kovarik put Spillville on the music world map. Had not Dvorak seen and fallen in love with Spillville, the American Quartet, one of his best-received compositions, would never have been written. Interviewed upon his return to New York by a reporter of Evening Post, Dvorak had this to say: "I grew very fond of the people there and they seemed to like me. There was a little Bohemian school (*Built in 1870, in 2003 it is the oldest Czech Catholic school in The United States.*) and my pupil's father was the schoolmaster. Here I played the organ for them every day and on Sunday I played the organ in the church (*Built in 1860, in 2003 it is the oldest Czech Catholic Church in The United States.*) It was a lovely place, miles away from a railroad and all the time I was there I fancied myself in Bohemia."

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They Came To This Place – A History of Spillville, Iowa and Its Czech Settlers

Cyril M. Klimesh, 2nd edition 1992, Methodius Press

Dvorak in Spillville by Joseph Kovarik, in the Czech newspaper **KATOLIK** (Undated clipping circa 1933) translated by Cyril M. Klimesh

Music in Spillville by Alice G. Masarykova, translated from Czech by Esther Jerabek.

Anton Dvorak, My Father by Otakar Dvorak

Recognition

This paper, as a discourse, is based heavily on the life-long collective research, experiences and inspirations of Cyril M. Klimesh. We are grateful to him for its historic preservation and correctness. Its value is priceless.

Michael F. Klimesh

Collaborator

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