

**Wisconsin's Land for the Landless:
Examining the Push and Pull Forces of
Czech Immigration, 1848-1870**

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The various mass migrations that occurred during nineteenth century Europe to the United States were, in part, the result of continent-wide forces experienced by a number of different ethnic groups. The rise of the Industrial Revolution, displacing many workers, together with overpopulation and inefficient land distribution led peoples of Europe to seek economic betterment across the Atlantic. Of course, there are many distinctions within specific ethnic groups that also contributed to a worsening situation for various populations, thus compelling them to leave their homelands.

The situation of the Czech people in the mid-eighteenth century provides an interesting combination of general, continent-wide forces and unique circumstances that motivated many to emigrate. It is especially interesting to note that Bohemian immigrants, people of Slavic origin, are usually associated with the 'new immigration' of 1880-1920 consisting of populations of Eastern and Southern Europe. But the Bohemians experienced a significant migration considerably earlier, at a time associated with the older migrations of Irish, German and Scandinavian peoples. In fact, the Bohemian emigration is the earliest of the Slavic migrations.

This earlier migration, peaking during the 1850s and 1860s, was the result of significant changes occurring in the social, economic and political milieus of Bohemia in the first half of the nineteenth century. A national revival of the Czech language and culture, and political reform resulting from the Revolution of 1848, both contributed significantly to the phenomenon. By themselves, these mainly indirect forces probably would not have propelled the migration of the Bohemians. There were certain push and pull factors at work, which directly led to many families uprooting and leaving lands previously inhabited for centuries. Central to this phenomenon and comprising the majority of this migration was the Bohemian peasantry, who left largely due to a desire for economic betterment. In addition, certain pull factors, emanating from the United States, were having a profound influence on the Bohemian peasants. Specifically, the dominating force was the state of Wisconsin, which actively sought and encouraged Bohemian emigration. Although the immediate economic downturn in the nineteenth century was the key motivating factor for movement, the Czechs who settled in Wisconsin retained certain aspects of their

culture and identity dating back centuries in their history. Finally, through their early emigration, the Czechs of Wisconsin became the cornerstone of Czech-American culture, a culture adhered to by later (and more numerous) groups of Czech immigrants.

Establishment of Slavic Peoples in Bohemia

The Czech population of today is one of Slavic origin, but the Slavs were not the first populations to occupy the geographic area known as Bohemia. The earliest settlers, from the first century B.C., were of Celtic origin and called the "Boii." Ancient geographers named the land "Boiohemum", or land of the Boiians. This name later took on the Latin form, "Bohemia."¹ An important characteristic of Bohemian history is the long-standing conflict with the German population, starting long before the Slavs came to Bohemia. An early Germanic tribe, the Marcomanni, overran the Celtic Boiians in the first century A.D., thus establishing this early hostile German presence.²

In the ensuing war-torn atmosphere of Central Europe during the next few centuries, the Marcomanni were driven to extinction, mainly through the efforts of the Huns.³ Bohemia at this point was lightly inhabited with transient populations and was occupied mostly by Slavonic tribes, who were living in Eastern Europe. In Bohemia, the most powerful tribe was lead by a noble named Cechus, and his followers were called Cechs, gradually the term applied to the inhabitants of all the Slavic tribes inhabiting the area.⁴ The term has been modernized into the form in use today, "Czechs."

Coinciding with the introduction of the Slavic race into Bohemia was a simultaneous peopling of an empire immediately to the east. The "Great Moravian Empire" of the ninth century A.D. was responsible for the introduction of religion, another great influence upon the Czechs that would continue to the present. Two Greek priests, the brothers Constantine and Methodius, were sent by the Byzantine emperor Michael to convert Moravia to Christianity. They achieved success and their influence spilled over into neighboring Czech lands.⁵ Equally important was the fact that Constantine invented an alphabet and translated liturgical works into

the Slavonic language using this alphabet. At the time, there were only minor differences of language between Slavic dialects and this phenomenon marked the beginning of codifying works into the Slavic tongue. The alphabet was named Cyrillic, so named after Constantine's later assumed name, Cyril.⁶

As noted earlier, the German presence in Bohemia existed long before the Czechs inhabited the area. A Czech-German relationship, for the most part a hostile one, intensified during the tenth through fifteenth centuries often crossing political boundaries into the religious arena. Following the conquest of the Moravian empire by the Magyars in the late ninth century, this intense relationship was characterized by a German immigration into Bohemia, one that reached its peak in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁷ The Germans during this time period exerted a strong influence over the Czechs, and were instrumental in the building of a powerful Czech state.⁸ Under certain Czech rulers of the period, Germans enjoyed an elevated status in Czech society. One such ruler was Prince Vaclav, who was assassinated and became known as "Good King Wenceslaus," the patron saint of the Czechs and a national symbol throughout Europe. Thus Bohemia was embarking on a road to a more cosmopolitan and less isolated status with a strong German population inside its borders. Bohemia became a bonafide power in Europe under Ottakar II and Charles IV (1346-1378), and both rulers were tolerant and even encouraging of German immigration. In fact at this time, the Roman Catholic clergy were mostly German.⁹ As Bohemia grew in political stature, its relationship with the Roman Catholic Church grew, and Charles IV, who was also the Holy Roman Emperor, made Prague an important center of Catholicism.¹⁰

Religious Schism in Bohemia

As the Papacy entrenched itself amidst Bohemian life, the financial demands of the Church began to burden the middle and peasant classes, to the point that the divine mission of the church began to fall into question. Particularly disturbing was the financial draining of the Czech silver mines and the fact that the Church owned more than one-third of the land. Also, the majority of the higher levels of the clergy were German and this fact gave the discontent with

the Church a political flavoring.¹¹ This distinction between church and state was one that would often be blurred throughout Czech history.

John Hus, a rector at Prague University, became disenchanted with the excessiveness of the Church, particularly the sale of indulgences, and openly criticized the Papacy. When he was banned to the countryside, he preached and published works (in the Czech language) and built a following among the rural peasantry. Eventually, open conflict began with the Church and the Hussites (as his followers were known), with the confrontation becoming highly politicized with the Church's hiring of 100,000 German mercenaries. After fierce fighting, Hus was summoned to Prague to recant his opinions. When he refused, he was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415.¹²

Hus, through his martyrdom, became an instant hero for the Czech peasants and solidified the position of a new religion to compete against Catholicism. This Hussite Protestantism was deeply rooted in Czech life at the local level, especially through education and the use of the Czech language. Furthermore, even though the Church retained control of Bohemia following the Hussite revolution, their reputation was damaged. Consequently, though tension remained, they allowed the co-existence of the Hussites' religion in Bohemian society.¹³

The importance of this religious schism cannot be overestimated in Czech history, for it bore heavily on the actions of Czechs immediately following their cultural revival in the mid-nineteenth century and settlement into Wisconsin.

Hapsburg Control and "Temno"

The next major event in Czech history was the ascension of the Austrian Hapsburg family to the throne in 1526. The Germanizing policies and movement of the Holy Roman Empire to Prague (under the reign of Rudolf II), set off a series of Protestant revolts in Bohemia.¹⁴ These disturbances culminated in the Battle of White Mountain (Nov. 8, 1620), where Roman Catholic forces crushed the Protestants.¹⁵ The Hapsburgs subsequently violently suppressed any evidence of adherence to Hussite Protestantism. The Czechs suffered a complete loss of independence, including the former religious tolerance. Anyone not declaring allegiance to Catholicism was

exiled from Bohemia, and in many cases executed. In addition, peasant landholdings were confiscated and often sold cheaply to foreigners, mostly Germans; the German language was declared equal to the Czech, and the majority of offices, both administrative and religious, were filled by Austrian or German nobles.¹⁶ Thus, the Czechs entered a period in their history known as “temno”, or the age of darkness, from which a national Czech identity would not emerge for more than two centuries.

Bohemia before Migration – Indirect Push Factors

While certainly not comprehensive, the above outline of Czech history until the nineteenth century outlines important, deep-seated aspects of Czech culture that were to play an important role in their emigration. At the end of the eighteenth century, a distinct Czech culture, suppressed under Hapsburg rule for nearly two centuries, did not exist. The anti-German and anti-Catholic feelings, often inseparable, became central to a Bohemian displacement which materialized as a mid-century emigration to the United States. Also crucial to Bohemia at this time was a linguistic and cultural awakening, the characteristics of which would be an important aspect for the Czech-American subculture established by the peasant immigrants in the United States, especially Wisconsin.

The “Awakeners” and the Revival of a National Czech Identity

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the upper strata of Austro-Bohemian society was German, and German was the official language of the empire. But a group of Czech scholars, who actually knew very little Czech, realized that the peasantry was a major and last repository of the spoken Czech language. It was this point that occupied the attention of these intellectuals who became known as the “awakeners.” Realizing that restoring the use of the Czech language as a medium was essential in conveying the finest thoughts of culture and science, Josef Dobrovsky (1753-1829), the first great awakener, wrote his History of the Czech Language and Literature, which is regarded as¹⁷ the founding work of Czech literary science. Dobrovsky however, doubted the extent to which the Czech language and culture could be established in Bohemian society. The next awakener, Josef Jungmann (1773-1847), like

Dobrovsky a linguistic scholar, took Dobrovsky's work to the next level through the compilation of the first monumental dictionary of the Czech language along with translations of some masterpieces of foreign literature into Czech. Pech notes that the progress of the Czech awakening was sufficient by the fact that Jungmann's death in 1847 was mourned as a national loss and his funeral was attended by thousands, thus making it the first great Czech national manifestation of the era.¹⁸ The next two awakeners, Frantisek Palacky (1798-1876) and Pavel Josef Safarik (1795-1861), contributed more to the establishment of a national Czech identity. Palacky gave the Czech people their first monumental and vastly influential scholarly history, History of the Czech Nation. Safarik's concentration was on early Slavic history, and by providing all Slavs with a respectable genealogy, he legitimized them as an ancient and venerable force in the evolution of European culture.¹⁹ A key turning point in the reestablishment of a Czech national identity was the launching of the first Czech ball in Prague (on Feb. 5, 1840), where for the first time, a social event was held with a language other than German as the language of social intercourse.²⁰ Other balls and theatrical productions followed, thus placing the Czech language and culture on the same competitive level with the German language.

Revolution of 1848

The heightened sense of a Czech national identity motivated the Czech intelligentsia to demand a larger voice in the Austrian government. Like other locations in Europe, the Revolution of 1848 had profound effects for the country's peasant class. Although the revolution was extinguished shortly after it started (in 1849), it did produce reforms that allowed new freedoms for the peasant. Particularly, the revolution abolished feudal serfdom and the hated labor service obligation (roboty) the peasants had to perform for their (mostly) German landlords. They were also guaranteed freedom of movement, which allowed them to migrate internally to the cities to look for employment.²¹ Pech also notes that the Revolution of 1848 stirred agitation among particular groups of peasants in Bohemia.²² Three types of peasants existed at this time: the "sedlak" or farmer who owned between 25 and 100 acres of land and a comfortable farmhouse; the "chalupnik" or cottager peasant, who owned a small portion of land (usually between 5 and

25 acres) and spent part of his time in the employment of the sedlak; and the day-laborer, or "nadenici", who owned no land and lived on the farm of a sedlak or nobleman, for whom they worked.²³ Pech notes that the last two classes of peasants were classified as "landless" and they were the groups most affected by the reforms introduced in 1848. Also, the landless peasantry constituted the largest segment of the rural population.²⁴

Direct Push Factors – Agitation Among the Landless Peasantry

The most striking feature of the emigration of Bohemians in the 1850s and 1860s is that they consisted mainly of the landless peasantry who lived in the southern parts of the province. But what were the factors that directly led to the movement of this large segment of the population?

First, there were the forces of overpopulation and the Industrial Revolution, which existed throughout Europe.²⁵ Machinery replaced low-level workers in the industrial centers of Bohemia (and other places in Europe), and created an expanding and idle urban proletariat. Although the landless peasantry had been guaranteed freedom of movement through the reforms of 1848 and they could escape their small plots of land, they could not find employment in the cities. Similarly, although they were free from their dreaded labor obligations, they did not have the resources to purchase a large parcel of land for themselves. In fact, the landlords and sedlak still retained a large and disproportionate share of the farmland. Moreover, the chalupnik did not have the resources to purchase farm machinery to turn their small pieces of land into a profitable capitalist venture, as did the sedlak and landlords.²⁶

The intellectual leaders of the Czech revolutionary movement recognized the "agrarian problem", but were slow to institute real change to improve the landless plight of the chalupnik and nadenici classes.²⁷ On one hand, the Czech leaders recognized that this largest segment of the population was potentially the most powerful, and hence could be a force that would sway the balance of power to the Czech revolutionary forces and away from the Hapsburgs. However, they did not want to give them too much power too soon, thus putting them in a competitive position with the sedlak and the landlords in terms of purchasing land and voting power. As Pech

notes, the Czech liberals wanted to give the cottagers the right to vote, but soon afterward sought to set limits. In the same vain, the cottagers requested the right to seize ecclesiastical lands but again, the Czech revolutionary elite never sought to accomplish this for that segment of the population.²⁸ Further putting the chalupnik and nadenici classes in a precarious position was the fact that the Czech reformers passed a compensation law, where these peasants had to pay a fee for their newly enacted freedom.²⁹

The situation for the lower two classes of rural peasantry at mid-nineteenth century Bohemia was what Pech noted as the "unfinished business" of the revolution.³⁰ This reference to the landlessness of the chalupnik and nadenici classes provided a situation where, with certain pull factors making emigration to the United States attractive, entire families would not think long before leaving the country they and their ancestors had known for centuries.

Soliciting Emigrants – Wisconsin as a Pull Factor

It may be coincidence that Wisconsin became a state in the same year that the lower two classes of peasants in Bohemia were given new freedoms, became disillusioned with those freedoms, and chose to migrate soon after to a distant land that was actively encouraging their departure. Aside from the more general pull factors common to all groups emigrating at this time, Wisconsin sought to become more direct in attracting emigrants. There is no argument that these general pull factors which included the discovery of gold in the United States in 1849, the attractiveness of the United States after the Civil War, and a decree in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867 lifting emigration restrictions, brought a large share of Czechs to the United States.³¹

In addition, Wisconsin had an attitude that was conducive toward immigrants in its early history. Besides Bohemians; Poles, Germans, Scandinavians and Belgians were actively encouraged to settle in Wisconsin. In fact, the writers of the state constitution framed the document in such a way that it encouraged foreign settlers to feel at home.³² Wisconsin was so eager to attract immigrants from Bohemia and other places in Europe, that they established a two-level canvassing system to publicize the favorable attributes the state could offer them.

At the federal level, Wisconsin appointed a Commissioner of Emigration, stationed in New York. Gysbert Van Steenwyk of La Crosse, the first such commissioner, heavily distributed American propaganda in the Hapsburg lands as well as personally talking to as many immigrants as possible. He inserted editorials and advertisements in foreign newspapers along with handing pamphlets to immigrants on vessels, hotels and taverns.³³ These pamphlets, first distributed in 1848 immediately after Bohemians were granted freedom of movement, described the future potential of the state of Wisconsin. Special emphasis was placed on low taxes, liberal residence requirements, inexpensive land, a climate of religious and political freedom, and similarities in soil and physiography to the lands of Southern Bohemia.³⁴ This was especially attractive to the landless peasants mentioned in the previous section. The language of the pamphlets was especially enticing to them:

"Come! In Wisconsin all men are free and equal before the law ... Religious freedom is absolute and there is not the slightest connection between church and state ... In Wisconsin no religious qualification is necessary for office or to constitute a voter; all that is required is for the man to be 21 years old and to have lived in the state one year."³⁵

The example above is curious in that it played on the fears and agitations the lower classes of the Czech peasantry had experienced throughout the first-half of the nineteenth century in Bohemia. Wisconsin's legislators showed a keen awareness of Bohemian history and the forces that caused their agitation over the years. The careful reference to the separation of church and state shows an acute understanding that this distinction was often blurred in Bohemia. Undoubtedly, they understood that the Catholic church was largely run by a German clergy and that the suppressions of political freedom in Bohemia was inextricably linked to the German Roman Catholic elite. The pamphlet further gained favor by assuring the Bohemian peasant that they would be free to practice their Hussite Protestantism. Also, the reference to the ease with which a Czech could earn the right to vote was no doubt a direct reference to the hedging of the Czech intelligentsia in securing the right to vote for the lower to classes of peasants, the *nadenici* and *chalupnik*. This point was so heavily emphasized in the circulars that one of them stated

that "there is never an election in the state that does not put some, and very often many, foreign-born citizens into office. Indeed, there is no such thing as a foreigner in Wisconsin."³⁶

Solicitation of Bohemian immigrants also occurred on a more local and private level. Counties, along with land and railroad companies, all joined in attracting Bohemian immigrants, with some of the companies sending agents to travel in Europe.³⁷ These companies also sent pamphlets describing the virtues of Wisconsin farmland and the freedom for any hard-working person to earn a decent living. The activities of various Wisconsin counties promoting early Czech settlement were equally as favorable and widespread:

We publish elsewhere favorable comments by the Green Bay Advocate, Green Bay Gazette, and Door County Advocate, upon the proposition to publish pamphlets in foreign languages, by authority of the counties of Brown, Oconto, Shawano, Kewaunee, and Door, for purpose of making known to immigrants the superior advantages offered by these counties. We believe that documents printed in German, Bohemian, French and Scandinavian, ... would do much to swell the number of active, energetic foreigners who are yearly settling among us, and we commend the matter to consideration of our County Board of Supervisors."³⁸

The Bohemians are grouped with the other nationalities associated with the "older" immigration to the United States, and thus, enjoyed the positive welcome that these other groups received upon arrival in Wisconsin. This positive response was one distinct feature that separated the Czech immigrants of this period from those who emigrated twenty to seventy years later.

Nature of Czech Emigration to Wisconsin

The active solicitation of private companies along with state government working at both the federal and local levels established Wisconsin as the choice of settlement for the first Czech farming communities in the United States.³⁹ Bichel also notes that Czech settlement in Wisconsin was the earliest of any of the Slavic-language peoples. The first Czech farming community settled in Caledonia, Wisconsin in 1850.⁴⁰ The first Bohemian settlers of Stangelville (in Kewaunee County) arrived about three months after the Irish immigrants, further identifying the Czechs with the Irish, German and Scandinavian groups.⁴¹ Overall, the Czech settlements in Wisconsin consisted largely of farmers, as well as some refugee intellectuals, and in terms of skills represented an abler group than the more numerous Czech immigrants who arrived later

and settled in other states.⁴² This later group's migration coincided with the "new" immigration of other Slavic peoples occurring between 1880-1920. But this earlier Czech movement was also a geographically representative movement, consisting primarily of the lower agricultural classes emigrating from southern Bohemia, especially the regions of Pilsen and Budweis, the most Slavic and least Germanized portion of Bohemia.⁴³ Specifically, as referred to above, it was the *chalupnik* or cottager peasant who occupied the majority of immigrant arrivals in Wisconsin. The *sedlak* class were too comfortably fixed to want to leave Bohemia and the *nadenici*, although disgruntled with life in Bohemia, were too poor to even think of emigration.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the *chalupnik* class, being in a difficult position to make a living in Bohemia with ownership of only a small piece of land and no resources to make it profitable, could sell that land or use it as collateral in order to raise money for the journey.⁴⁵

The nativist reactions to the arrival of this first group of Czech immigrants to Wisconsin differed with the sometimes negative reaction associated with the later Slavic migrations. In Kewaunee County, Wisconsin, one of the earliest and most heavily settled Czech areas in the state, the new immigrants were seen as industrious and frugal:

"a number of Bohemian emigrants landed at this port [Kewaunee] ... They will help to enrich the County, not only by the means brought with them, but by their universal industry, perseverance, and frugality, which will soon raise them good homes, and whose success will draw their friends around them, thus peopling our County with steady, industrious citizens."⁴⁶

Indeed, the mention of their success in drawing friends to Wisconsin describes the chain pattern of immigration employed by Bohemians. The first settlers arrived in Milwaukee and moved on to other areas in the state, especially Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Racine, La Crosse, Vernon, Grant and Crawford counties. All these early settlements were established by 1857 and with the possible exceptions of Milwaukee and La Crosse, were founded specifically for agricultural purposes.⁴⁷ The inducement of cheap land, as mentioned earlier through the advertisements of various land and railroad companies, attracted the earliest of Czech settlers. This appealed directly to the Czech peasantry and their "landless" problem from the old world. One such land dealer, Edward Decker of Kewaunee, made direct appeals through newspaper advertisements:

"Land for the Landless! Decker sells lands in large and small quantities. Decker sells lands to the poor on reasonable terms ..."⁴⁸

Land would be either be sold as improved (already cleared of trees) or unimproved for a lesser price. If a Czech immigrant could not pay for an improved parcel, he could support himself through the sale of timber cut from his land. Others worked in the saw mills of Kewaunee and on their land during the year until they accumulated enough capital to solely subsist on agricultural production. Succeeding immigrants would come directly from Bohemia through the solicitation of friends and relatives already settled there.⁴⁹

Maintenance of Ties to the Old World

An interesting characteristic of this early period of Czech emigration is that although most migrated for economic reasons, they did not forsake certain beliefs and activities central to their lives in Bohemia. This can be attributed to their rich history and long-standing battles with religious tolerance and a national self-identity.

Different Czech scholars place varying amounts of emphasis upon the main subject categories associated as the leading causes of Bohemian emigration, 1848-1870. Certainly, all of them (religious, social, political and economic causes) played significant roles in the mass migration. Balch identifies a triple ferment existing in Bohemia in the mid-nineteenth century. She identifies the desire for political independence, a resurrection of a national self-consciousness (described earlier in this paper) and a spirit of religious questioning and vehement challenge of Christianity.⁵⁰ Capek argues that the migration from Bohemia stemmed largely from economic causes.⁵¹ Taggart, in his study of migration motives of Czech immigrant families in Wisconsin in the 1850s and 1860s, named 88% of the families claiming socio-economic causes, with only 4% claiming religion as a major cause for emigration.⁵² Seemingly, there is widespread agreement among scholars that economic causes, especially the "agrarian problem" referred to earlier, were the dominating force behind Czech migration. However, interesting questions associated with large migrations remain: Did other facets of Czech life survive the resettlement process or were

they forsaken as they assimilated into a new life in the United States? Were there certain social and religious aspects of Czech culture that survived, or perhaps prospered, in Wisconsin?

Due to the Czech peasants fierce adherence in keeping the Czech language alive during the dark age of their history, and the equal ferocity with which they questioned the Catholic Church, the Czechs of Wisconsin did in fact continue many aspects of their culture. The differing religious sects among the Czechs, unlike many other groups which had one continuous religion in their history, gave them a unique subculture in Wisconsin, and later throughout the United States. Czech Protestantism, dating back to the Hussite Wars, was an established sect in Wisconsin. The Czech Protestants garnered a desire to worship in the manner of their ancestors and in the Midwest they established independent and unattached (from American Protestantism) branches of Bohemia's Reformed Church.⁵³ Simultaneously, even though the Catholic faith was questioned by many peasants in Bohemia, it remained the faith of a large portion of them and actually prospered among the Czechs in Wisconsin. The unique organization of the Catholic Church in the United States differed markedly from the clergy and hierarchy that existed in Bohemia. Chada notes that the main difference was the disappearance of the social barrier between the layman and the priest in the old country. In America, the clergy and the laymen had to work hand in hand in many undertakings, including the building of the church.⁵⁴ A third sect among the Wisconsin Czechs called themselves "neverici", meaning non-believers or liberals (also called Czech free-thinkers or Progressives). The neverici may in fact have had a religion, but it was of their own interpretation and not associated with any church.⁵⁵ This sect, which evolved from the rejection of both the Catholic and Protestant faith and formalized with the leadership of the political and religious radicals of 1848, was first formally recognized in the United States in Racine, Wisconsin, through the addition of a Progressive supplement in the first Czech-American newspaper, Slavie, in 1861.⁵⁶ This movement established fraternal organizations as a means for social gatherings and interaction. Fraternalism soon became a way of life for many Czechs as these organizations would be formed shortly after the resettlement process for the immigrants. Examples are the "sokol" or patriotic gymnastic society and the

"Slovenska Lipa", a fraternal group originating during the revolutionary days of 1848. Even though these groups were formed by the Czech intellectuals of the revolution, they were embraced by the peasants who emigrated to Wisconsin. The Kewaunee Enterprise of January 10, 1866, mentions a meeting of the "Bohemian Society, Slovenska Lipa."⁵⁷ The Slovenska Lipa grew rapidly in Kewaunee County as Czech emigrants "were inducted with a great sense of loyalty."⁵⁸

As Bicha notes, Wisconsin Czechs established a distinctive "national life" for all Czechs in America, especially in the realms of journalism, religion and fraternalism.⁵⁹ Perhaps the best picture of the various religious schisms that the Czech immigrants brought with them to Wisconsin is described in a letter written in 1889 by V.F. Mashek to Reuben Gold Thwaites, director of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Mashek's letter described the Bohemian settlements of Kewaunee County:

"Before emigrating to this country they are with but few exceptions adherents of the Catholic Church. A great many still cling to that faith and maintain their churches and schools. But a large part of them have broken from Catholicism and have as yet accepted no new creed. The reason for this lies not in a lack of sincerity or in a want of leaders but arises primarily from the past history of their nation which during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the battle ground of the struggle of Protestantism for reform against the evils and corruptions of the Roman Church."⁶⁰

Conclusion

Wisconsin's role as a leader attracting Bohemian immigrants perhaps can be best described as opportune historical timing. The availability of land in a newly formed state actively encouraging homesteaders to build its population coincided perfectly with a group of hard-working farmers from southern Bohemia who, because of circumstances in their home country, had very little or no resources with which to make a decent living. Although Wisconsin stood at the forefront of the Bohemian immigration effort for more than two decades in the nineteenth century, its dominance as the main attraction for Czechs ceased by 1870. Many of the original counties settled by Czechs experienced population losses as they moved to the interior states of Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois and Minnesota.⁶¹

This earlier "old" Bohemian immigration of 1848-1870 is often overlooked in history compared to the much larger "new" immigration occurring from 1880-1920, a movement consisting mainly of industrial workers, the majority of whom gravitated toward urban life. Yet, this older immigration set a tone for more than just assimilation into a new way of life in America. They set in place a cultural structure for future generations of Czech immigrants.

Perhaps the importance of the older Bohemian migration then lies more with its influence upon later generations of Czech immigrants rather than the numbers involved of the movement itself. To be sure, the movement itself was large enough to be considered significant. The older migration sent almost 44,000 Bohemians to America between 1850-1868, with over 10,000 settling in Wisconsin by 1870.⁶² This coincides directly with Benes' claim that the peak immigration years for Bohemians in Wisconsin were 1856-1870.⁶³ If we compare the size of the early Bohemian migration with other groups associated with the older migration reported in 1870, we can see that it is nowhere near the size of the Germans (162,314) and the British Isles including Ireland (90,001).⁶⁴ However, the fact that the Czechs of Wisconsin, though "outnumbered" by the other ethnic groups, were able to establish a subculture almost immediately after their arrival is amazing. While the topic of the Czech-American subculture could occupy volumes, it is easy to understand that the Czechs brought with them aspects of their cultural identity, one which had recently been "awakened" in their homeland. Frank Benes, a Kewaunee County settler writing his remembrances in the early twentieth century noted:

"These emigrants [Czechs] brought with them a great understanding of national loyalty as well as freedom. In the year 1856 they attempted to organize a Czech Club called 'Slovanska Lipa'."⁶⁵

Forming a cultural club in 1856, practically the moment after arriving in Wisconsin, shows a group of people loyal to their homeland and extremely proud of their heritage. Truly, the dark ages of Czech history in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries created a lasting imprint for future generations. The Czechs of Wisconsin were so steadfast in their beliefs that they held true to three different religions in a new country which was predominantly Protestant. This fact, together with the establishment of Czech fraternal societies illustrates the multi-cultural nature of

this group, at a time when "multiculturalism" did not exist and assimilation was perhaps the order of the day.

Notes

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42. Bicha, p. 194.
43. Ibid.
44. Taggert, p. 6.
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46. Kewaunee County Enterprise, June 19, 1867, p. 3.
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