

Tomas Abrman's Trip to the Midwest

In the last edition of our Newsletter, you had the opportunity to read about the wonderful Czech Festival in Wilber, I hope you liked this article! This time, let me introduce you to other Czech traces in the American Midwest, specifically in Nebraska and Iowa.

As we can read, for example, on Wikipedia, both Nebraska and Iowa have been important centers of the Czech community in the American Midwest since the beginning of Czech immigration to the United States. The largest wave of immigrants from Bohemia to the United States of America began at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when the increasing affordability of vessel tickets made the journey to America accessible even to the poor rural classes. The stories of emigration agents, who were paid by shipping companies and depicted overseas as paradise on earth, also motivated people to travel. Does it also remind you of the current situation with illegal migrant smugglers to Europe? History does indeed repeat itself.

About 350,000 of Czech immigrants went across the ocean until the beginning of the First World War alone. Other reasons why our predecessors decided to leave Bohemia were political emigration from Austria-Hungary, the abolition of serfdom in 1848, and the general situation when most resources were owned by feudal social class. Today, everyone has the opportunity to become a successful YouTuber and earn millions 😊, however, in the 19th century it was much more difficult to achieve a better life if one was born into a lower social class. Well, and of course, the influx of family members who had the advantage of being able to rely on their relatives who were already in America and further, what is probably the most important, the accommodating immigration policy in the United States, including and the allotment of agricultural land, which attracted not only farmers, but also associated craft professions. However, this changed with the Immigration Act of 1924, which introduced quotas in the US for the number of immigrants from Eastern Europe, among others, and thus limited immigration, at least in the period before World War II.

During my journey through the American Midwest, I first flew to Omaha, Nebraska, where the first Czech immigrants arrived around 1860 and where they significantly contributed to the political, social and cultural development of the city. In 1880, Czechs were already the most numerous ethnic group in the city, and in 1893 Antonín Dvořák even visited Omaha and performed there. His visit to the United States inspired him to write the 9th Symphony "From the New World", known as the "New World Symphony" for short. To this day, the Little Bohemia district is an important Czech monument, where the Prague Hotel, the Sokol Auditorium, and the Bohemian Cafe were located, all of which were important places for the Czech community. Unfortunately, the cafe was closed in 2016, so I decided to go to the Czech and Slovak Education Center and Museum in La Vista, which is a suburb of Omaha, instead.





It is a beautiful smaller museum organized into thematic rooms, focusing for example on Sokol, Immigration, Music, "Bohemian Cafe", and an educational center that serves as a multi-purpose room for various workshops and presentations, as well as a "Gift Shop", where I tasted great homemade cakes (Kolace)!

But most importantly, I met a group of volunteers with Czech origins who run the whole place with incredible enthusiasm. I was also very interested in the vision in which the local Czech community would like to build a community center in the future, such a smaller Czech town! Great ambition for the future.



It would be great to have a similar museum in Masaryktown to present Czech and Slovak culture to the wider public. For more information about the museum in La Vista, you can visit the website "<https://czechandslovakmuseum.org/>".

My next trip was south to Wilber, which was presented in my previous article. From Wilber I headed to Nebraska's capital, Lincoln. Here, as in Wilber, the annual Czech festival, the Nebraska Czechs of Lincoln Annual Czech Festival, takes place. I did not come across any Czech sightseeings or landmarks in Lincoln, but the Czech footprint was present in the form of various artefacts in the local Nebraska history museum.

My next trip went directly to Cedar Rapids, which is the center of the Czech community in Iowa, via a stop in the capital, Des Moines. The biggest Czech attraction here is the "Czech Village & New Bohemia" district, as well as the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library.



Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

Czech Village, located south of downtown Cedar Rapids next to the Cedar River, has a very long history. In 1871, a meat factory was established here, which attracted the first Czech immigrants to the community, who of course began to develop their community, including the construction of a church, a Czech school, and later a theater, Sokol and the like were added, thus the growth of the community was stimulated by the arrival of other Czech immigrants. By the way, the local school, founded in 1870, is the longest operating Czech school abroad in the world! Every summer, teachers from the Czech Republic come to the school and teach the students. Another interesting fact is that Tomáš G. Masaryk gave a lecture at this school in 1907. It cannot be overlooked that the Czech communities in Cedar Rapids, but also in Omaha, which I mentioned earlier, were among the largest American financial sponsors of TGM during the First World War for his activity in political lobbying for the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia. So, actually, we owe Czech immigrants in Nebraska and Iowa for the creation of the Czech state! Today, Czech Village and New Bohemia is a sought-after neighborhood full of restaurants, music, art and culture scene. Personally, I would compare it to, for example, Kensington Market or the Distillery District in Toronto.



Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

My last stop in Cedar Rapids was the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library, located right in the aforementioned Czech Village. Originally established in 1974, a new building was later constructed at a cost of US\$2.6 million (roughly half donated by compatriots) and was officially dedicated on October 21, 1995 in the presence of Presidents W.J. Clinton, M. Kováč and V. Havel. The main activity is oriented towards the preservation of Czech and Slovak artefacts of the 19th and 20th centuries, as they were collected from the donations of many immigrants.



In addition to the permanent collections (e.g. the exhibition "Homelands: The Story of the Czech and Slovak People" opened in 1999, the collection of Czech folk costumes, which is the most extensive in the USA, and several thousand other artifacts documenting both life in the old homeland and the life of immigrants in the USA) the museum also includes a relatively large library (over 10,000 volumes), an archive and a research room. The museum also includes the so-called Immigrant Home, which is a recently reconstructed original building of Czech immigrants.



The museum also has changing exhibits. During my visit, it was, for example, a beautiful exhibition of Alphonse Mucha's art. From the permanent exhibitions, I really liked how the museum treated the theme of the fight for freedom, which is constantly repeated in Czech history, from the Austrian Empire, through Nazism, to communism. This is a visually very original exhibition.



For more information, visit <https://ncsml.org/>. I hope you enjoyed this little excursion following Czech traces in the American Midwest. I highly recommend it to everyone and wish you a pleasant journey if you decide to follow in my footsteps!