

# Wilber, Czech Capital of the USA

Let me give you a question before we start. Are you aware of Wilber's location or have you even heard of it? If not, no problem. Nothing to be ashamed of. Nobody else knew that either when I told my friends and coworkers in the Czech community of Masaryktown that I am planning to go there 😊. But, it's not just a town like any other! The largest Czech cultural event in North America takes place each year here!

But first things first. Wilber is a small, approximately 2,000-person farming town in the American mid-western state of Nebraska, which lies in the middle of cornfields approximately an hour's drive from the state's capital, Lincoln. What makes it special, however, is that not only here, but throughout Nebraska, there is a large community of descendants of Czech immigrants who began coming to North America around the end of the 19th century. At the beginning of the settlement of the Midwest, up to 80 percent of Czechs lived in Wilber, and even today up to 40 percent of the locals claim to have Czech roots.

The local community started organizing the Wilber Czech Festival about 60 years ago, and it has since grown into a three-day event in August, which this year was visited by around 40,000 people. I found out about this festival more or less by accident while surfing Google and planning a trip to see a friend in Iowa. I personally went to Wilber on Friday afternoon (August 2), when the festival was already in full swing from Thursday evening, with the intention of staying until Sunday.

The sign "Wilber, Czech Capital, USA" greets visitors as soon as they arrive in the city. In 1963, Wilber was declared the Czech capital of Nebraska, and in 1987, by signing a decree, President Ronald Reagan elevated it to the Czech capital of the United States! You can see that we still have a lot of catching up to do in Masaryktown!



After parking, I was pleasantly absorbed by the local atmosphere, many visitors heading to the center wore traditional costume vests, or even full costume, various accessories with Czech motives and similar. I even started to feel a little ashamed of my normal outfit. The surprise continued on the local main street around which the festival was held. Czech signs on buildings attract attention, for example the Town Hall with the Czech flag and the words "Truth wins / Pravda Vítězí", the cultural center, the Czech Museum, then the local Sokolovna, the butchery "Karpisek", but also "Fountain/Kašna" or benches asking you "How are you?/Jak se máš?", ideal for a selfie photo. Of course, as part of the festival, the street was also richly decorated with decorations in the form of Czech flags and lined

with various stands with handicrafts, souvenirs, food trucks or stands and in the center with a stage where a polka band was playing. This is where I was embarrassed for the second time, and that was when during the break the local MC mentioned that "Every Czech is a musician", while I am completely unappreciated by any musical talent. After the initial walk to see what's around, I ended the evening in Sokolovna, where Czech specialties were served, and, of course, polka music was played. By the way, do you know where the name "Polka" comes from? Although it might seem related to Poland, it was originally a reference to the word "half/půlka", due to the half-step typical of this dance.



The second two days, i.e. Saturday and Sunday, I focused on specific activities I personally was curious about. The festival has a very varied program for different preferences or age categories of visitors. Various attractions for children, such as a children's tractor race, carousels, a children's theater, puppet shows in Sokolovna, and for adults various musical performances, a dance competition, traditional art activities such as a quilt show, a traditional costumes exhibition, an art show, but also cooking courses, and last but not least, fun events, such as a Kolache-eating contest, a "duck and dumpling" run or a not quite typical Czech beach volleyball, a

motorcycle parade, a very popular among the locals "bingo" and much more! Of course, I must not forget the "beer garden"! Given the temperatures over 30 degrees in the shade, a beautifully chilled Czech beer was more than appropriate.



But back to my program. The first thing on Saturday morning I decided to solve my boring outfit and went to the local "Czech Craft Shop" to buy a traditional embroidered costume shirt with a hat and feathers to better fit the local atmosphere. Only later did I learn in a lecture on costumes that the type and number of feathers that boys wore on their hats had a very practical meaning - for example, they indicated whether they were single or how many girlfriends they had. As a result, I have to apologize if I sent any girl the wrong signals, or even false hopes, with my ignorantly chosen hat! Suitably dressed, I then went to the Czech Museum. The exhibition is absolutely stunning, and you can see that the locals are quite proud of it! The biggest pride is the collection of costumes. However, I liked the historical practice of the local Czech dentist and the historical examples of the interiors of the homes of Czech immigrants the most. For me personally, the visit was a great inspiration as a member of the MMI Board, it would be great to have such a museum with Czech artifacts here in Masaryktown. Wouldn't there be a volunteer among the readers who would

take on this agenda within MMI? 😊 By the way, volunteers! Most of the festival, but also the staff, e.g. in the Craft Shop, museum, community center and others, are volunteers with incredible enthusiasm for Czech culture and patriotism! Sometimes it was even touching, for example talking to an older tailor in the Craft Shop, who only learned Czech in elementary school in America as a child. And she did great! After the museum, I went for lunch, a classic dumpling-pork-sauerkraut and tripe sausage meals were served by volunteers in the local church.



Then followed the highlight of the entire weekend! That is the "Parade"! It started with a march of veterans carrying the American flag. Here, as the only one of the viewers standing around, it did not occur to me that I should take off my head covering (and ideally put my hand over my heart) when the flag was passing by. Anyway. This was followed by a range of performers, musical ensembles, a parade of former Czech and Slovak misses across the United States, representatives of the Czech community in Canada, including the President of the Czech and Slovak Museum in Cedar Rapids, or the honorary Czech consul. But I, as a Czech, wanted to see something typically American though too! As part of the event, a parade of American motorcycles and old-timers, firefighters, soldiers followed among others...and Trump's Republican supporters

and politicians passed by as well, I should not forget to mention 😊. It was obvious that we were in the American Midwest.



Later in the afternoon I went to see a children's talent show, especially young singers, where it was touching to see the Czech enthusiasm of the younger generation, which gives a very good feeling for the future. It is clear that the Czech tradition in Wilber, or Nebraska, is not really in danger of disappearing. I ended the evening with a theater performance by local volunteers, which took the audience through the Czech past, from the "Father/Praotec" Czech, through the Hussites, to the 19th century and immigration to America. What I missed on Saturday was the choice of the queen, i.e. Miss Czech and Slovak though! This is truly a "big deal!" in the Czech community! Check out the trailer for this article on Masaryktown Facebook page, where I have attached photos of the presentations of selected queens from the local community center. The girls are incredibly proud of their awards!

I very much came for lunch on Sunday, along with some souvenir shopping and to see the young local folk dancers, known as the Wilber Dancers, perform traditional Czech folk dances. Please take note that certain events, such as the "Parade", were repeated from Saturday. For those who plan to attend, I suggest Friday afternoon and Saturday might be ideal.



The whole weekend was absolutely incredible for me. We also have great events here in Masaryktown, such as the Czech and Slovak Day, but I certainly wouldn't expect an event 10x bigger in the middle of the fields in Nebraska, which has a smaller population than Toronto! I highly recommend it to anyone considering a trip to the American Midwest! And it's not just Wilber. I visited a lot of other places in Nebraska and Iowa while I was here. For example, the smaller, almost family-friendly, Czech and Slovak Museum in La Vista, the National Czech and Slovak Museum in Cedar Rapids, the awesome Czech residential neighborhood "New Bohemia" in Cedar Rapids and much more. I also went to see the European neighbors, for example the Swedish Museum or the historical settlement of Amana Colony, which were Germans. But I will write about that in the next article. If you were to plan a trip, you will find links on the Internet with a lot of other information, for example the website of the festival in Wilber, information about the Czech community and the like. I think the reputation of the boring American Midwest is very much undeserved! Have a nice trip!