

# NEBRASKA TRAILBLAZER



No. 24

Czechs in Nebraska

## WHO ARE THE CZECHS?



Has your family ever discussed where your ancestors came from? We are all Americans but our family roots can be traced to foreign countries. Many of us can trace our ancestry to Europe, Africa, Asia, or Mexico. Even Native Americans are believed to have come from Asia thousands of years ago. In the late 1800s and early 1900s many people came to the United States from Europe.

Czechs were one of the nationalities which **emigrated** to the United States of America. Many Czechs settled in Nebraska. Bohemia (*Čechy*)\* and Moravia (*Morava*)\* provided most of the Czech **immigrants** to Nebraska.

The Czechs are descendants of Slavic tribes that moved into Bohemia about 1,500 years ago. The area they lived in was the crossroads of the European continent. Many people tried to rule their land. After a long period of German rule Czechs began to follow their own customs rather than the customs of the Germans. This period in Czech history was between 1789 and 1848. It is called the **National Revival** because it revived customs Czechs could not follow under German rule. Two conflicting views of life developed from the National Revival. The conflict was between the Czech Catholics and the Czech freethinkers, who believed reason should replace religion. The ideas from this revival were transplanted to America by the immigrants.

\*Czech words

**emigrate:** the act of leaving one's country  
**immigrant:** one who leaves his or her country and moves to a foreign country

Imagine what it would be like for your family to move to a foreign country. You would have to learn a new language and different customs. Some of your relatives would stay behind and you might not see them for a long time or maybe never. What could cause your family to consider moving to a foreign country? List three conditions.

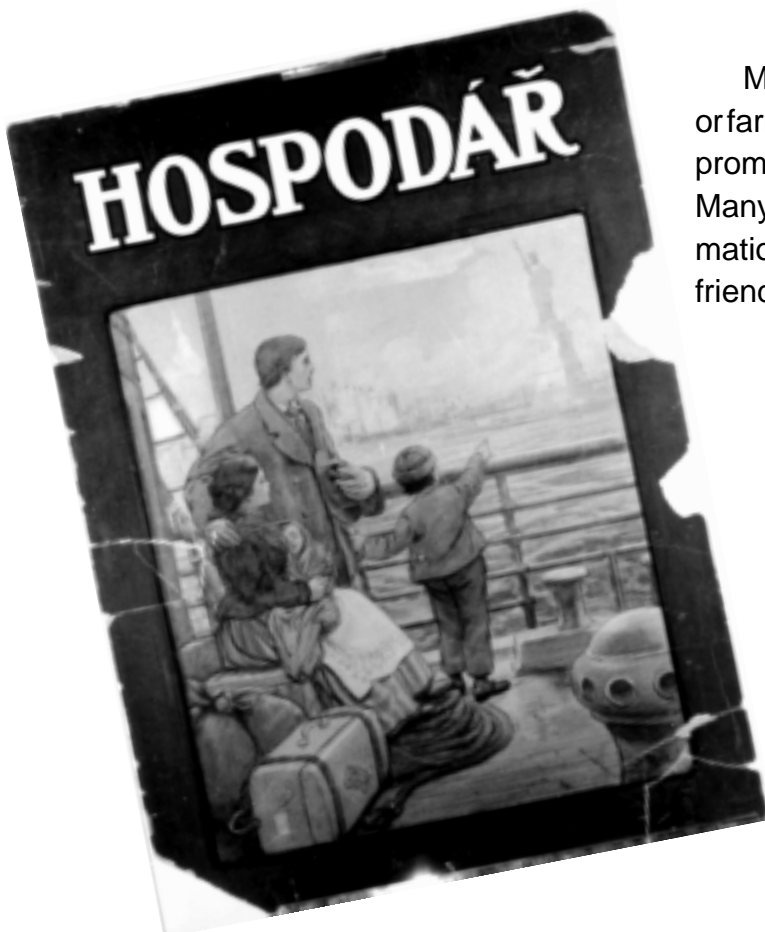
1.

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## COMING TO AMERICA

The Czechs left Europe for several reasons. There was a shortage of farm land in their country. Farms were too small to make a good living. For many peasant farmers the thought of owning land was only a dream. People often sold their small land holdings to pay for the trip to America. Czechs also left their homeland due to political and religious prejudice and to avoid military service.



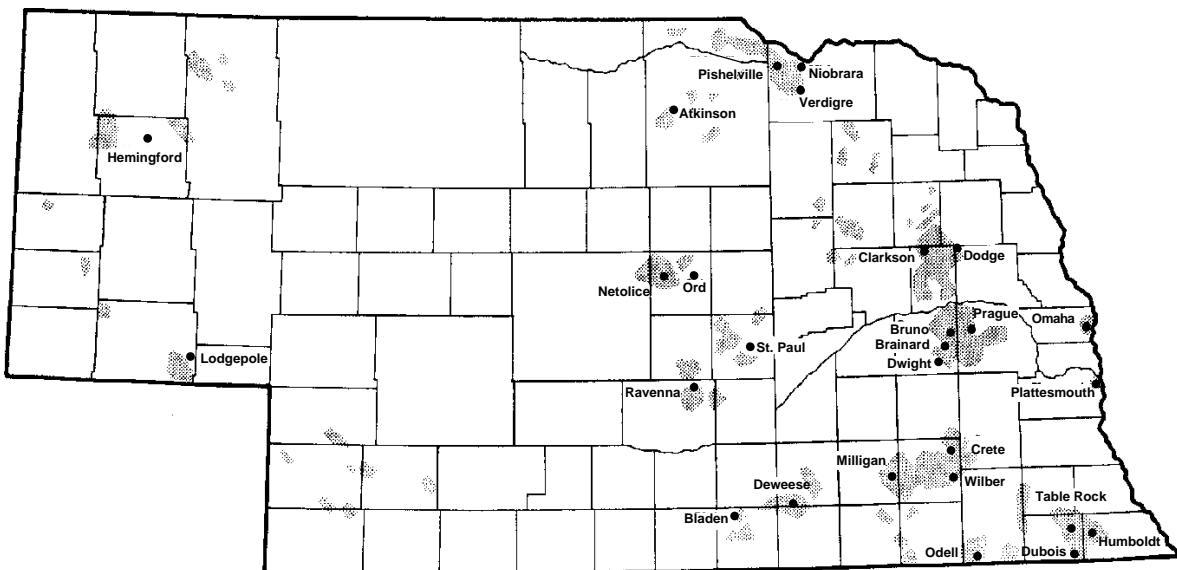
Magazines like the *Hospodář* (husbandman or farmer), an Omaha agricultural journal, helped promote Czech settlement in the United States. Many families emigrated on the basis of information in such magazines as well as letters from friends and relatives.

Advertisements like this one influenced Czechs to come to Nebraska. Nebraska was a new state and needed people to increase its population. The Burlington and Missouri Railroad, which had large areas of Nebraska land for sale, printed advertisements in the Czech language. It showed the first six years on an American farm and the "ease" with which success could be achieved. Most of the Czechs who came to Nebraska were farmers, but tradesmen and professional people came, too.



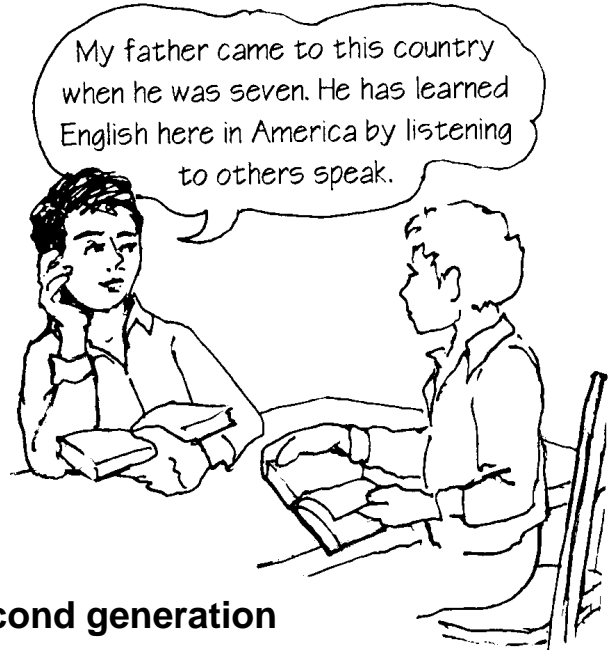
### Czechs in Nebraska 1891-94.

By this time, major settlements were established. These settlements expanded over the next several decades (one **decade** is ten years).



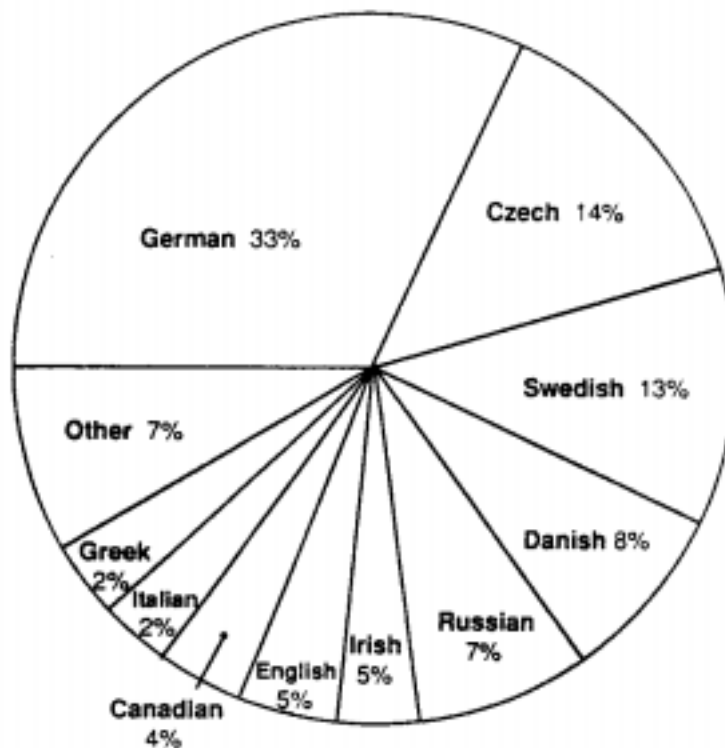


**First generation**



**Second generation**

By 1910 about 540,000 **first** and **second generation** Czechs lived in the United States. Over 50,000 had settled in Nebraska. Fourteen percent of Nebraska's foreign-born residents were Czech, the largest percentage of any state.





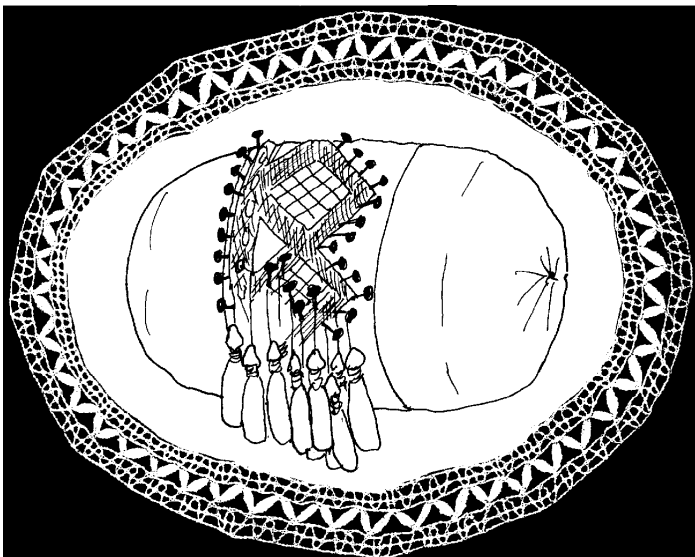
## Czech Clothing and Costume

In the Czech homelands, costumes were worn in the villages for festive occasions such as Sundays, weddings, and holidays. Most Czechs owned one set of traditional clothing that they wore on all these special days. Originally, you could tell what region a Czech was from by the decoration of his or her traditional clothing. By the time of Czech immigration to America, clothing that showed regional origins had become rare. In Nebraska, everyday clothing for Czechs was similar to clothing worn by other Nebraskans. Czechs continued to wear traditional clothing for theater performances and many still wear costumes today during Czech festivals.

Czech costumes are elaborately decorated with bright, lively colors and symbols like hearts, bluebirds, and doves. Daisies, tulips, and poppies are also used. Costumes are often trimmed with handmade lace, embroidery, and ribbons. Red or black vests are very common for men and women. Women's costumes often include aprons, which are sometimes the most elaborate part of the costume.



Dr. Olga Sadílek Štátný of Nebraska modeled a costume from her mother's home of Kralovice in Bohemia.



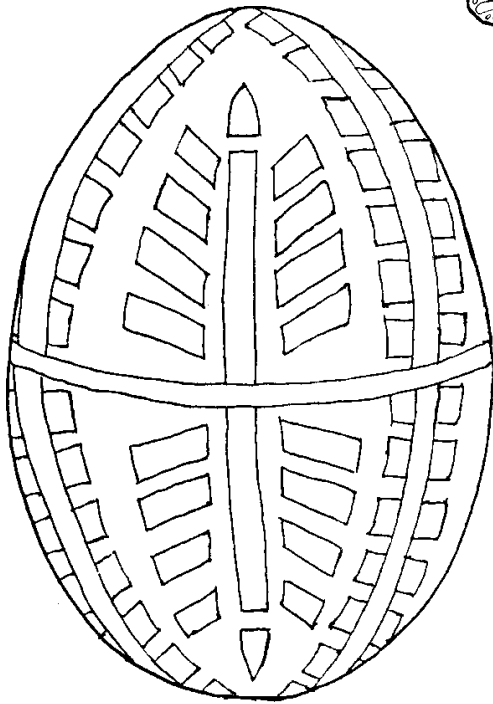
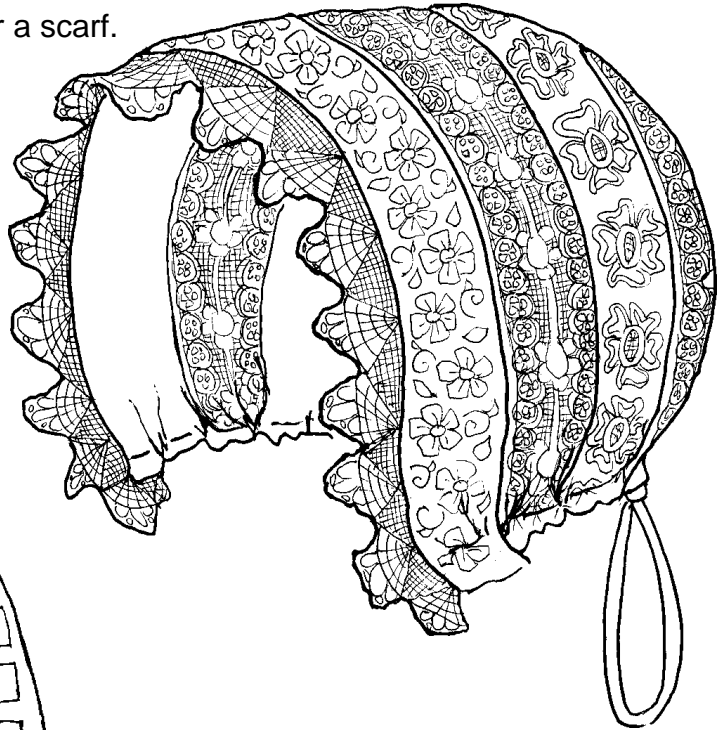
Bobbin lace is made with bobbins of threads, pins, and a pillow or cushion. This lacework is done by hand, twisting the thread around the pins stuck in a pattern on the cushion.

An unmarried boy may wear long feathers in his hat (one for each girlfriend). A married man wears a short feather in his.

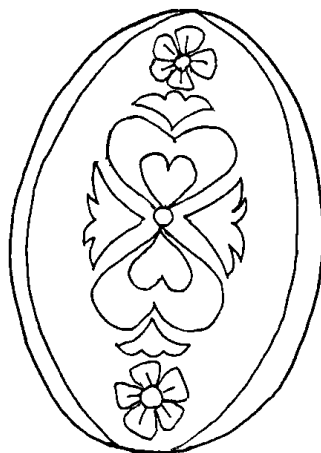
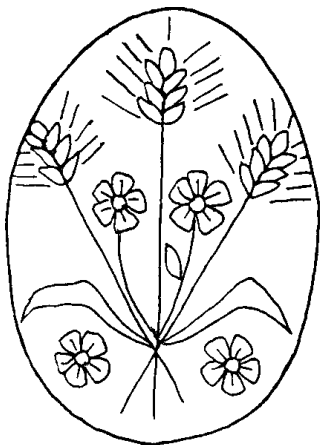


An unmarried girl may wear flowers tied with long ribbons in her hair.

A married woman wears a small lace  
and embroidered hat or a scarf.



Hen and goose eggs are painted  
or decorated with bits of straw and  
exchanged with family and friends as  
symbols of good luck.



Are there any people in your school or community who are recent immigrants? If they are willing to tell why they left their former country, compare their reasons to the ones you listed that would cause your family to emigrate. Also compare their reasons to the reasons the Czechs emigrated.

## TRANSPLANTED CUSTOMS OF THE CZECHS

When the Czechs emigrated to the United States they brought only a few personal possessions with them. They also brought the customs of their homeland to America. Following these customs helped make their new country seem more like home. These traditions influenced the way they built their houses, the food they ate, their language, social groups, music, and religion.

### Czech Associations

The fraternal benevolent society, originally organized by freethinkers, was the most important Czech institution in Nebraska. In addition to providing insurance for members, many of the fraternal organizations tried to preserve Czech language and culture by establishing free schools, gymnastics classes, drama, dances, concerts, and cemeteries.

The ancient Czech legend of Prince Svatopluk is shown on the curtain of the Clarkson, Nebraska, Opera House. Svatopluk called his sons to his deathbed. He asked each son to break a single stick, which each did easily. However, none of them could break a bundle of three sticks. Czech-Nebraskan fraternal organizations put the moral of this story, "strength in numbers," into practice.



## Sokols

When Czechs came to America, they organized Sokols in many of their communities. Sokols emphasized gymnastics, calisthenics, and physical fitness for people of all ages. In 1865 the first Sokol in America was formed in St. Louis.



The first Nebraska Sokol was formed in Crete in the 1870s. Sokol halls can still be found in many Nebraska towns such as Crete, Wilber, and Omaha. Sokols in Nebraska are still very active today.

Today, American Sokols have many members who are not Czech, but they still strive to teach Czech heritage and preserve the principles on which Sokols were originally founded.

Men and women at the Tělocvičná Jednota Sokol Omaha watch a practice session. Courtesy of: Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, owned by KMTV and on permanent loan to Western Heritage Museum, Omaha.

## ZČBJ

The ZČBJ, Západní Česko-Bratrská Jednota (Western Bohemian Fraternal Association), was founded in 1897 in Omaha. The ZČBJ became the leading promoter of Czech culture in America.



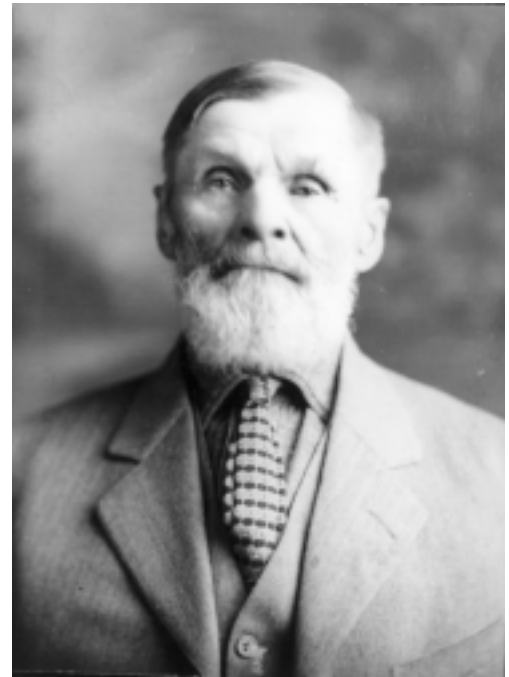
ZČBJ gathering at Tábora Hall, rural Saline County. Women and children were members in equal standing with men.

## Education

Czech-Nebraskans brought their desire for education from the Old Country. Settlers began special schools for children and offered English-language classes for adults. Some taught the Czech language, history, and culture.



Log schoolhouse in the District 76 Czech community of Box Butte County, about 1915.



Frank Znamenáček became the first Czech public school teacher in Nebraska in 1869.

## WORKING CZECHS

### Agriculture

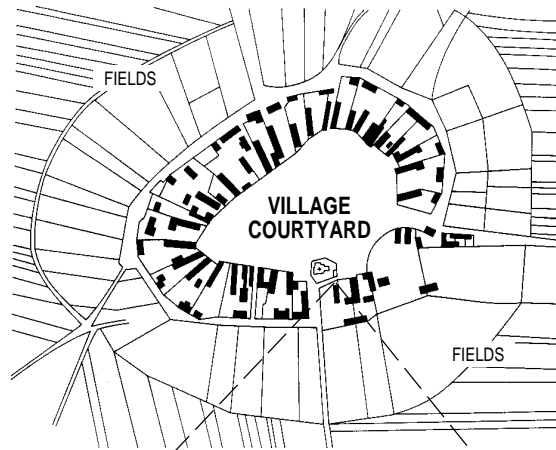
Farmsteads in the Czech homelands were built close together in small villages. All of the buildings were connected around a central courtyard. Every day farmers would leave the village to work in their fields that surrounded the village.

In Nebraska, farms were larger and people lived on the farm rather than in a village. This made people feel isolated since the nearest farm might be several miles away. The house remained the center of home life, but in Nebraska it was built as a separate structure. Pioneer Czech-American houses like the log house pictured below were built using traditional Old Country room arrangements and construction materials.

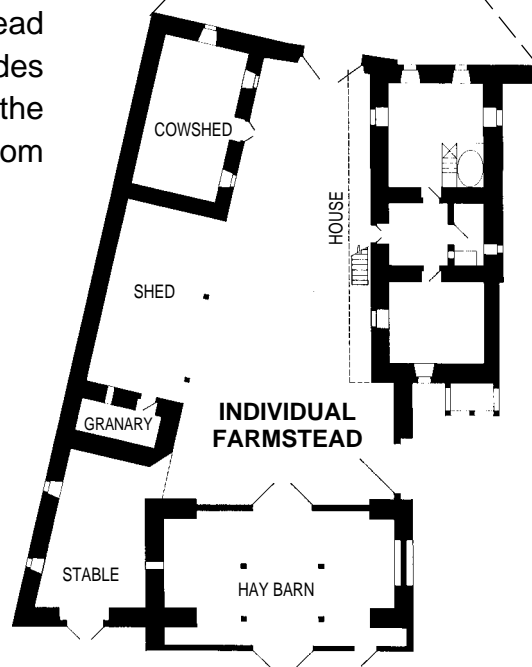
Farming was the most important occupation for Nebraska Czechs, as it had been in their homeland. Czechs became excellent farmers and quickly adopted advanced American agricultural methods.



Veselý house in Knox County, Nebraska. This three-room house with attached cowshed is similar to the buildings that were in use in the Old Country when the Czechs came to America.



The most common Czech farmstead had buildings connected on three sides forming a courtyard. A wall enclosed the fourth side. Entry into the house was from the courtyard.



## Businesses and Trades

Skilled immigrant artisans established a variety of early businesses in Nebraska. Though many craftsmen returned to farming after coming here, others used their training in the business world. By 1900 Czech businessmen ran most of the stores and shops in Czech communities.

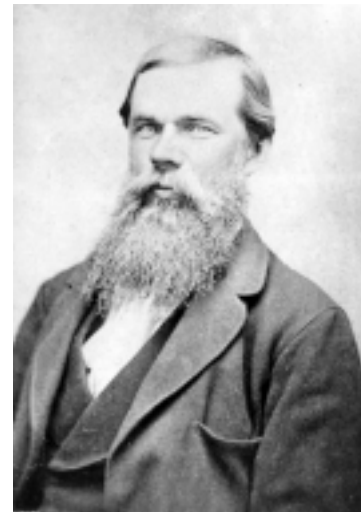
C. F. Dvořák's *Český obchod* (general store), Comstock, Nebraska, about 1906. Store sign in Czech on this otherwise American-looking street.



## Professionals

Not all Czechs were farmers or craftsmen. Many succeeded in a variety of professions.

Frank Folda founded the first Czech bank in the United States, the Banking House of F. Folda in Schuyler.

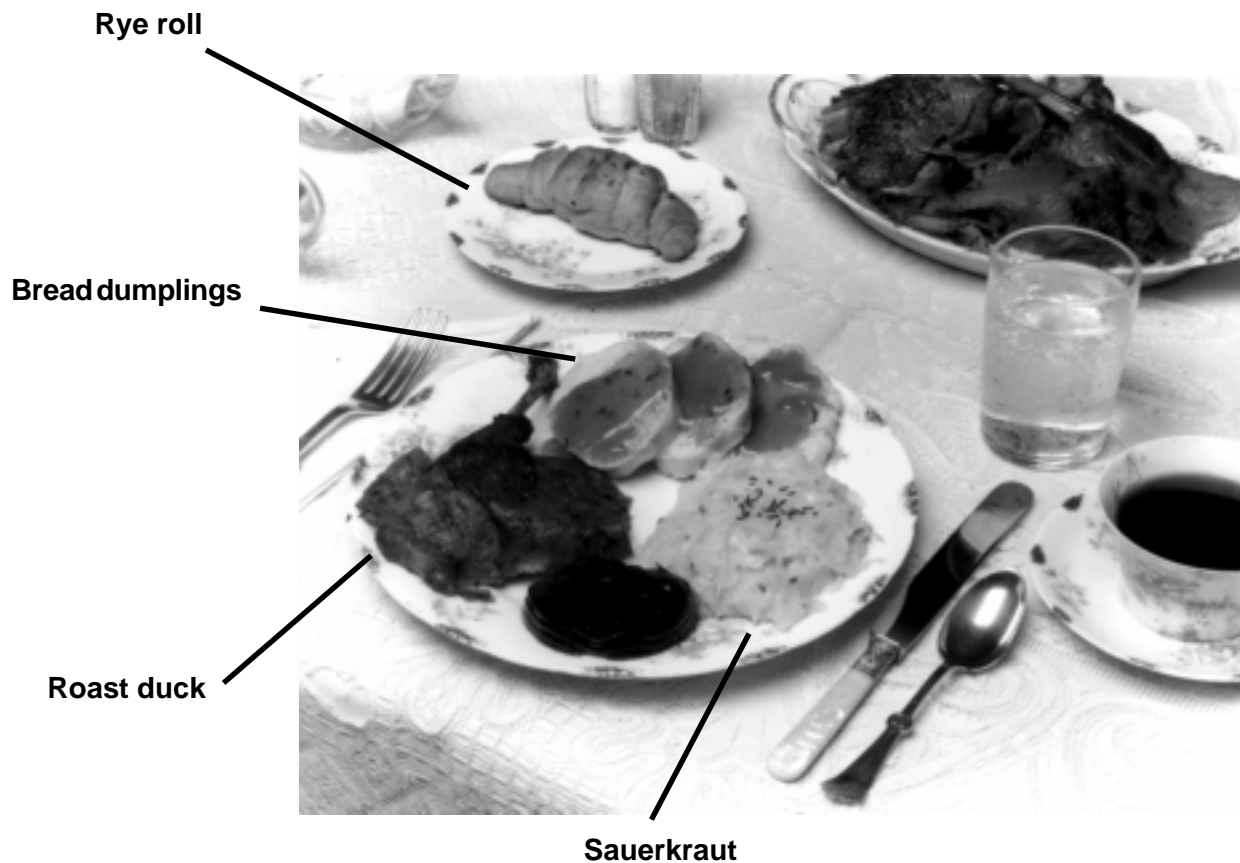


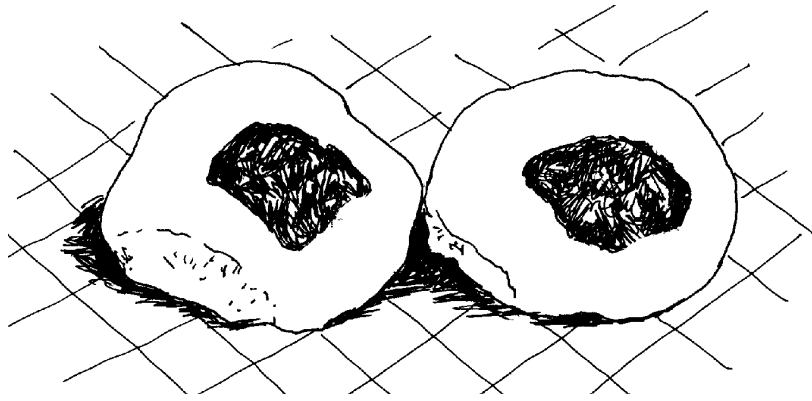
Dr. Olga Sadílek Štátný was an important Czech-Nebraskan physician. Born in Wilber in 1878, Štátný opened a medical office in Omaha in 1914.

## Czech Food

After Czechs came to America, the food they prepared reminded them of their Old Country heritage. Most traditional Czech dishes originated as simple peasant meals. Today, these foods are often cooked at festivals or special occasions to celebrate Czech heritage.

Ingredients for traditional Czech dishes could be easily obtained on Czech farms. Popular Czech meals include pork and dumplings, pork sausage, roast goose, roast duck, or rabbit with prune dressing. Each of these favorite meals could be served with dishes such as sauerkraut, potato soup, bean soup, potato or bread dumplings, rye bread or rolls.





The best known Czech food is the *koláč* -- plural *koláče*. It is a golden pastry baked from yeast dough and topped with a spoonful of sweetened poppyseed, prunes, apricots, or other fruit filling. Many Czechs tell a story about the origin of the *koláč*. A mother in the Old Country was baking bread and broke off some dough for her young daughter, Libuše, to play with. Libuše kneaded her dough into flat circles and grabbed some plums off the table and plopped them into the center of the dough. She put her little cakes in the oven with her mother's loaves of bread. Libuše's father came into the kitchen and found Libuše's cakes on the table. When he bit into one, the hot juice from the plum burned his mouth and he hopped around the table. When the pain went away, he remembered how good it tasted. Word of the new pastry spread to other villages and eventually throughout Europe and even to the United States.

Some foreign traditions (or customs) like food, gain popularity beyond the ethnic group that introduced them. Can you think of foods from foreign countries that are so popular today that almost everyone eats them? List three of these foods.

1.

2.

3.

## Czech Quiz

1. The Czechs left Europe because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Gymnastics, calisthenics, and physical fitness for people of all ages is promoted by \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Draw a picture of the best known Czech food, the \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Most Czechs who came to Nebraska made a living by \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Many Czechs paid for their trip to America by \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Most of the Czechs that emigrated to Nebraska came from the provinces (division of a country) of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Magazines like the \_\_\_\_\_ helped promote settlement in America.
8. Draw three symbols used to decorate Czech costumes. Label them.
9. List five Czech foods that might be eaten for dinner. \_\_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.
10. By 1910, about \_\_\_\_\_ first and second generation Czechs lived in America.
11. If you were a Czech child, why would you want to come to America?

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