



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Tools of Ethnic Identity

Full Citation: Raymond Screws, "Tools of Ethnic Identity," *Nebraska History* 88 (2007): 42-54

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH2007Identity.pdf>

Date: 2/08/2013

Article Summary: The "melting pot" view of American society may hold some truth, but settlements of Czechs and Swedes established in Saunders County, Nebraska, between 1870 and 1910 were surprisingly slow to melt.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Magne Goranson, Soderholm family, S G Larson, F N Swanberg, Frantisek Sulak, Joseph Simanek, Father Wenceslaus Kocarnik, Augusta Stenholm Flodman, Ernst Olson

Nebraska Place Names: Saunders County

Churches Mentioned in the Article: Edensburg Evangelical Lutheran Church, Malmo; Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Bethlehem Church, Wahoo; Evangelical Covenant Church (later Swedish Evangelical Mission Church), Mead; Saints Cyril and Methodius Czech Catholic Church, Plasi; Saint Wenceslaus Catholic Church, Wahoo; Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Morse Bluff; Czech Presbyterian Church, Weston; Bethesda Presbyterian Church, Malmo

Schools: Luther Academy, Wahoo; Saint Wenceslaus School, Wahoo

Organizations: Wartburg Society, Czech Slovonic Benevolent Society, Western Bohemian Fraternal Association (ZCBJ), Sokol Gymnastic Society, St. Ludmila Lodge, Western Czech Catholic Union

Keywords: clustering, chain migration, Augustana Synod

Photographs / Images: Grace Swedish Lutheran Church, Wahoo; St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church, Wahoo; 1915 confirmation class, Grace Swedish Lutheran Church; Saunders County map showing Swedish and Czech clustering; S G Larson; Grace Swedish Lutheran Church Band; Czech prayer book from Valpararaiso, Nebraska; Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Morse Bluff; Prague Presbyterian Church; Swedish Bible from Malmo, Nebraska; Western Bohemian Fraternal Society building; Luther Academy, Wahoo; Sokol; Gymnastic Society members at the Brush Creek Sokol Hall in Saline County, 1924

TOOLS OF ETHNIC

BY RAYMOND SCREWS

THE YEARS BETWEEN ABOUT 1870 AND 1910 brought a wave of Czech and Swedish immigrants to Saunders County in eastern Nebraska. Like most immigrant and ethnic groups in the United States, they used their churches and schools, as well as social and cultural organizations, as tools to delay absorption into the dominant society.

But these institutions used consciously or unconsciously, would have been much less effective without another tool that often was unavailable to other immigrants: the deliberate establishment of homogeneous settlements and neighborhoods, often called clustering. More than any other single characteristic of these communities it was clustering that allowed churches, schools, and clubs to work their magic.

IDENTITY

To a surprising degree, Swedish and Czech immigrants in Saunders County, Nebraska, retained their ethnic identity and resisted assimilation.

Saunders County, about fifteen miles west of Omaha, is mostly rural and had the most concentrated populations of Czech and Swedish immigrants in Nebraska. In 1910, about 46 percent of the county's residents were either Czech or Swedish by birth. In raw numbers, the county was third in the state in its populations of first-generation Swedes and Czechs. By percentage it had the fifth highest Swedish population and the fourth highest Czech population.

Czechs clustered in the western Saunders County townships of Bohemia, Chester, Elk, Newman, and Chapman where, in 1910, they made up almost 89 percent of the population. Swedes clustered in the central and south-central townships of Mariposa, Center, Marietta, Stocking, Richland, and Wahoo, where they constituted about 55 percent of the population. In northern Stocking Precinct, near the center of the county is the county seat, Wahoo. It was an island of mixed ethnicity in the middle of the Swedish cluster¹

Maxine Seller defines ethnic communities as, "groups of people tied together by common national origin, common language, common religion, and perhaps common physical characteristics." Those elements are intertwined with clustering and are factors that slow assimilation. Frederick Luebke maintained that "the degree of concentration necessary for the maintenance of ethnic language and culture is also related to the social distance perceived by an ethnic group

between its own distinctive way of life and what it discerns as the culture of the host or receiving society." Luebke also understood that immigrant groups would always be pushed assimilate. However, if they could maintain "a separate cultural identity," Luebke argued, the group could have "an ongoing history." Luebke also argued, "Once its distinctiveness as a group disappears it ceases to exist as an ethnic minority group."²

Alan Kraut wrote that immigrant experiences in Europe "would shape . . . the character of their neighborhoods," and William Carlson Smith, argued that immigrants felt "grievous shocks" when they were thrust into American Society. Smith wrote, "Cultural divergences, ranging all the way from food habits to religion, oftentimes produced inner conflicts and caused embarrassments that develop sensitiveness and self-consciousness."

Such shocks reinforced the clustering in small towns and rural neighborhoods of Czechs and Swedes in Saunders County. The ethnic clusters helped immigrants adjust to American society and reinforced a strong ethnic identity that could last for several generations, as it did in Saunders County, where Czech and Swedish clustered areas are easily identifiable today, and ethnic identity remains strong.³

Continuing "chain" migration, family members following early immigrants, fueled clustering. Railroad promoters encouraged chain migration by recruiting groups of families to immigrate together,



Above: **The Grace Lutheran Church in Wahoo continued to hold services in Swedish well into the twentieth century.** NSHS RG1121-13-25 (Digitally enhanced and restored)

Opposite: **St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church, Wahoo, Nebraska, built in 1922, was said to be the largest Bohemian Catholic church in the state.** NSHS RG1847-7-1 (Digitally enhanced and restored)

understanding that before long more groups of people from the same places would follow. Thomas Archdeacon observed, “Once started, the flow of immigration contributed to its own maintenance. The early immigrants themselves attracted relatives and friends from their old to their new land.”



Marcus Hansen wrote that as chain migration progressed, European arrivals tended “to take complete possession of a township with sons, sons-in-law and nephews.” Writing in the 1930s, Hansen did not use the term clustering, but that is the phenomenon he described.⁴

Paul Schach, describing the effects of a common language rather than shared ethnicity to demonstrate clustering, argued, “Immigrants to the Great Plains usually tried to settle among people of

Alan Kraut argues that immigrants had to learn English to survive in America, but grants that they could avoid the pressure of learning English by clustering, as was the case for Czechs and Swedes in Saunders County. The rural nature of the county, where Czechs and Swedes could remain separated by several miles from English speakers, made life without English easier.⁵

The Swedish language flourished on the Great Plains. In 1910, 13 percent of adult Swedes in Saunders County spoke Swedish exclusively, and it is possible that many who claimed to also speak English knew only Schach’s “smattering.”

A Swedish Baptist minister recruiting Swedish immigrants to Nebraska claimed they would not need to know English, and many Swedes probably arrived believing that was true, and Magne



1915 Confirmation Class, Grace Swedish Lutheran Church, Wahoo. Churches were the primary means for reinforcing ethnic identity. Courtesy Allan Pearson

their own language or dialect. Under such circumstances,” Schach declared, “the adult settlers remained monolingual or, at best, acquired a smattering of English.” Marcus Hansen believed that as immigrants came to America their language and customs “tended to limit [their] association to people of [their] own kind.”

Goranson, who arrived in Nebraska from Sweden in 1910, complained, “The Andersons [with whom he first stayed] spoke Swedish to me all the time . . . so there was little chance to learn English.”⁶

Marcus Hansen wrote that blending into American social life was impossible for communities that retained their own languages, and that was the

case in Bohemia Precinct, where a high percentage of Czech adults never learned English. Joseph Svoboda believed that the Czech language persisted in Nebraska because Czech immigration remained high after 1900. New immigrants, clustered settlement, and, as Carl Wittke argued, a strong desire to retain their language and culture probably all were factors.

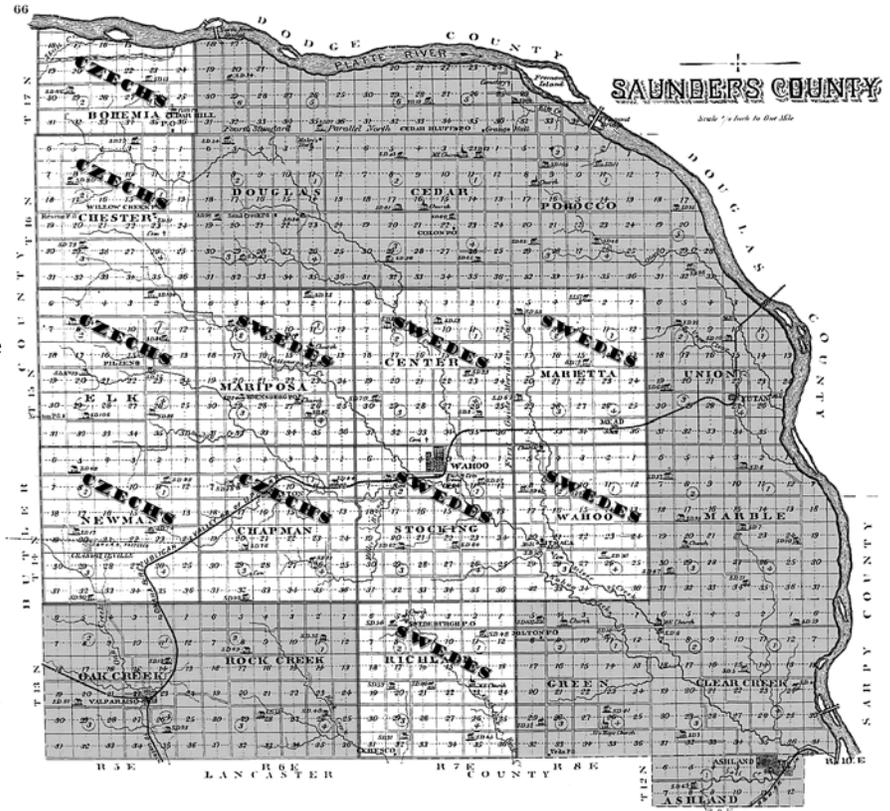
Bruce Kochis writes that the Czech language in Nebraska, unlike other European languages, was resistant “to Americanization.” Mila Saskova-Pierce offers another explanation for its persistence. In Europe, she explained, the Czechs continually fought German influences, and the “the Czech language became for all Czechs the strongest symbol of their national identity.” Czech immigrants carried this symbol to America, and it was widely used, especially in clustered areas.⁷

Clustering accommodated ethnic groups, fostered cohesiveness within their communities, and allowed ethnic groups to build churches and schools with minimal outside influence or pressure. Thus homogeneous ethnic communities often remained unassimilated.

Some scholars have suggested that immigrants came to the United States to become Americans, but Alan Kraut argued immigrant ethnic groups had to decide what to keep from their old-world culture and what to discard. In adjusting to American society, he argues, the cultural elements they chose to keep were as important as those they tossed aside. Philip Taylor wrote that for their lives to be “bearable,” immigrants found it necessary to “preserve features of their national tradition and culture.”⁸

In heavily clustered areas, however, the sheer weight of ethnic tradition and culture may have allowed immigrants few options. Through about 1910 Saunders County Czechs and Swedes, do not seem to have given much if any deliberate thought to keeping or discarding aspects of their cultures. The goal was simply to maintain ethnic identity. Joseph Svoboda stated that emigrants in Czech settlements “recreated an image of a Bohemian setting as they remembered it. This Czech-American setting gave them security and social satisfaction.” Svoboda says, “Czech customs prevailed.”

James Dowie says Saunders County Swedes “clung together,” living close to friends and relatives, and longed for familiar surroundings when they left. In the late nineteenth century, for example, girls from the Soderholm family left Saunders County to work in Omaha, the urban center of Swedish immigration in Nebraska. They



Swedish and Czech clustering is evident in Saunders county where emigrants from the two ethnic groups dominated township populations. Base map from *The Official State Atlas of Nebraska*, Philadelphia: Everts & Kirk, 1885

wrote back imploring relatives to visit because there were so few Swedes in the city.⁹

Religion was the second most important factor in ethnic identity and cultural conservation. In fact, as Carl Wittke observed, some consider religious and ethnic institutions as the primary forces retarding assimilation and encouraging “separatism.” “Of all immigrant institutions,” wrote Frederick Luebke, “the church was the easiest to establish, the most effective in its mission, and hence the most long-lived.”

The ethnic church’s mission was not simply to bring God to the people. It also dominated immigrants’ activities and time, thus helping maintain ethnic identity and slow assimilation. According to Luebke, churches “could so dominate an immigrant’s life that he had few meaningful contacts with members of the host society.” Maxine Seller describes ethnic churches as a primary influence in rural communities “where the immigrant . . . had few other outlets.” Although scholars differ about the relative influence on assimilation of Catholic and Protestant churches, it seems clear that in Saunders County both were

Raymond Screws is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. He is the former program officer of the Nebraska Humanities Council.

relatively conservative influences that contributed to forestalling assimilation¹⁰

Swedish churches of all denominations were the foundation of life in America for many Swedish immigrants. At least through the turn of the twentieth century, most held services in Swedish. Typically Swedes did not use English in church, although they freely spoke English in society, especially with people of other ethnic groups.¹¹

Saunders County Swedish Lutheran churches and the Nebraska Conference of the Augustana

Synod worked to preserve Swedish ethnic identity and the Swedish Lutheran faith. Through the first decade of the twentieth century, few churches of the Augustana Synod held exclusively English services. George Stephenson declared that even after 1900, a minister in the Augustana Synod “who could not preach in Swedish found his field narrowly circumscribed.”

Terrence Jon Lindell suggests, however, that even before the founding of the Augustana Synod, Swedish Lutherans had begun to Americanize, instituting reforms including doing away with the bishops. The first Augustana Synod pastor in Nebraska, S. G. Larson, was sent in the late 1860s, in part to reverse this trend. By 1871, Larson,

was encouraging Swedes to relocate into tighter ethnic clusters to strengthen churches of the Synod, and thereby strengthen Swedish identity.¹²

Saunders County Swedish Lutheran churches continued to use the Swedish language and actively promote Swedish identity into the early twentieth century. Pastors of the Lutheran Church in Swedeberg, for example, were said to speak and write Swedish well. Charles Fredrick Sandahl wrote that the Reverend F. N. Swanberg of the Swedeberg church “had a masterly command of the Swedish language both in speaking and writing. It was a treat to hear him speak, and likewise a treat to read his numerous articles in the Swedish press.” In 1905 and 1910 the Edensburg Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malmo published booklets in Swedish commemorating the church’s thirty-fifth and fortieth anniversaries.

In 1919, the Lutheran Church in Ceresco still held two services, one in Swedish and one in English. The last Swedish Lutheran Church founded in Saunders County was the Swedish Evangelical

Lutheran Bethlehem Church in Wahoo. At the cornerstone laying ceremony in 1906, all but one of the speeches were in Swedish. As in many ethnic churches in the U.S., English was introduced in the Bethlehem Church during World War I. It was not until 1947, however, that Swedish fell entirely out of use.¹³

Other denominations competed with the Lutherans for members, the most influential being the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church. The rivalry apparently was fierce, and it was said that the Swedish Baptists attempted to destroy the Swedish Lutheran Church. In a Swedish settlement outside Saunders County, Swedish Baptists are reported to have verbally assaulted a Swedish Lutheran pastor and attempted to break the congregation apart.¹⁴

The rift between Swedish Lutherans and other denominations grew through the 1870s and 1880s. Dissidents formed the Mission Covenant Churches, and a key dissident community in Saunders County was Swedeberg. The centennial booklet of the



The first Augustana Synod Lutheran pastor in Nebraska, S. G. Larson, arrived in the state in the late 1860s.
Courtesy Raymond Screws



*Czechs did not mingle
with other nationalities
as a rule even for
spiritual purposes.*

Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wahoo church explained its small congregation in the early years by declaring, "There was a Swedish Mission church, a Swedish Baptist church...besides Swedes hostile to all religious groups and preachers in particular."¹⁵

The founders of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Mead were, for the most part, former Lutherans who departed over doctrinal disagreements. In 1890, the Mead Covenant Church joined the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant of America. Although no longer Lutheran or part of the Augustana Synod, the church continued to promote Swedish identity.¹⁶

Similarly, Saunders County Czech churches, while continuing to promoting Czech ethnic identity and cultural conservation, "split into two militant camps" according to Carl Wittke.

In Europe, four out of five Czechs were Catholic, but many Czech immigrants to America turned away from Catholicism and religion in general. Some estimates say that half of all Czech immi-

grant to the U.S. became either freethinkers or Protestants. In Saunders County, however, Czech Catholics outnumbered Protestants and freethinkers combined. Catholics, non-Catholics, and freethinkers lived in close proximity, however, and the doctrinal divisions seem to have neither affected Czech identity nor hastened assimilation.

Kenneth Miller suggested a simple reason for Saunders County's departure from the national norm: Rural Czechs, especially farmers, were more likely to be Catholics than their urban counterparts. Moreover, the U.S. Catholic Church advocated sending priests fluent in immigrants' native languages to ethnic churches, in part, according to Richard Linkh, because conservative Catholics believed that "Too rapid assimilation would endanger the faith . . . and thus they wished the process to take several generations." Linkh also contended that Czech Catholics in America often were considered "irreligious" by other Catholics, and countering that perception may have been another reason the U.S. church supplied Czech priests to Czech communities, consequently supporting the slowing of assimilation.¹⁷

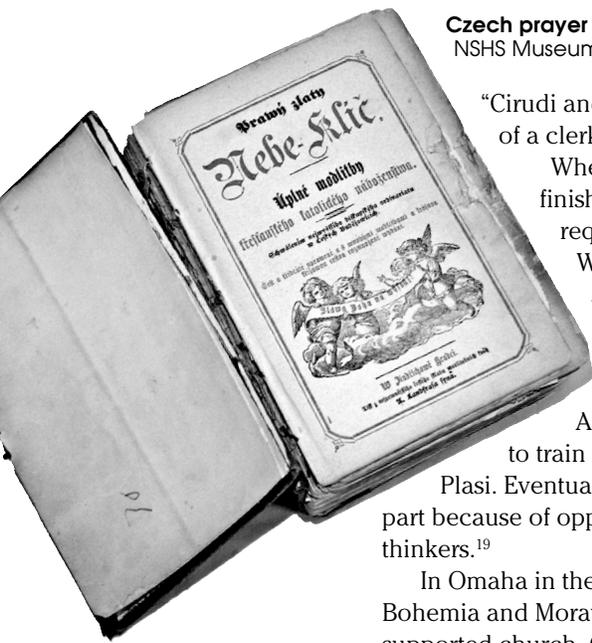
Nevertheless, Czech churches did not always get Czech-speaking priests. Sister M. Aquinata Martin wrote that the Czechs, "Clinging to their own language and customs . . . did not mingle with other nationalities as a rule even for spiritual purposes, so they created a problem; they needed their own churches and priests who could speak their language."¹⁸

Few Czech-speaking priests were available in the early years of Czech immigration to Nebraska, but by 1871, a Czech Jesuit priest, Frantisek Sulak, had conducted several baptisms in Saunders County and said Nebraska's first Czech-language mass in the home of Joseph Simanek, a western Saunders County farmer. A few years later the first Czech Catholic church in Saunders County was founded at Plasi in Elk Township. Named Saints Cyril and Methodius, after the two saints who brought Catholicism to the Slovaks, its deed read

Social organizations sponsored by churches, like the Grace Swedish Lutheran Church Band, were a means for communities to reinforce the ethnic identity of their children. Courtesy Raymond Screws



*In 1914 about
50,000
ethnic Swedes
were living
in Nebraska.*



Czech prayer book from Valpariso, Nebraska.
NSHS Museum of Nebraska History

“Cirudi and Medrudi Company,” the error of a clerk unfamiliar with the saints.

When the church building was finished in 1878, the members requested a Czech priest, Father Wenceslaus Kocarnik, and he soon arrived. The area’s Czech population grew, and the bishop decided that more Czech priests were needed.

A Czech Benedictine Monastery to train Czech priests was planned for Plasi. Eventually the plan was dropped, in part because of opposition from the area’s free-thinkers.¹⁹

In Omaha in the 1870s, where immigrants from Bohemia and Moravia were accustomed to a state-supported church, Czech Catholics refused to support a priest. But that was not the case in Saunders County. Sister Martin wrote, “From Wahoo west, [Saunders County] was a Bohemian settlement. [It] was not only predominantly Catholic but had an entirely different spirit. In Pilsen [Plasi], seventeen miles from Wahoo, the people, without a priest among them had collected \$1500 for a church.”

The second priest at Plasi arrived in 1885. Of German background, he could not speak Czech. More serious, however, was the rejection of Catholicism by several members of the Cirudi-Medrudi Company, although the organization still ran the church. The conflict between Catholics and non-Catholic Czechs was sometimes intense, but they were united in their desire to maintain their ethnic identity, and the struggle did not affect the culturally conservative nature of the church.²⁰

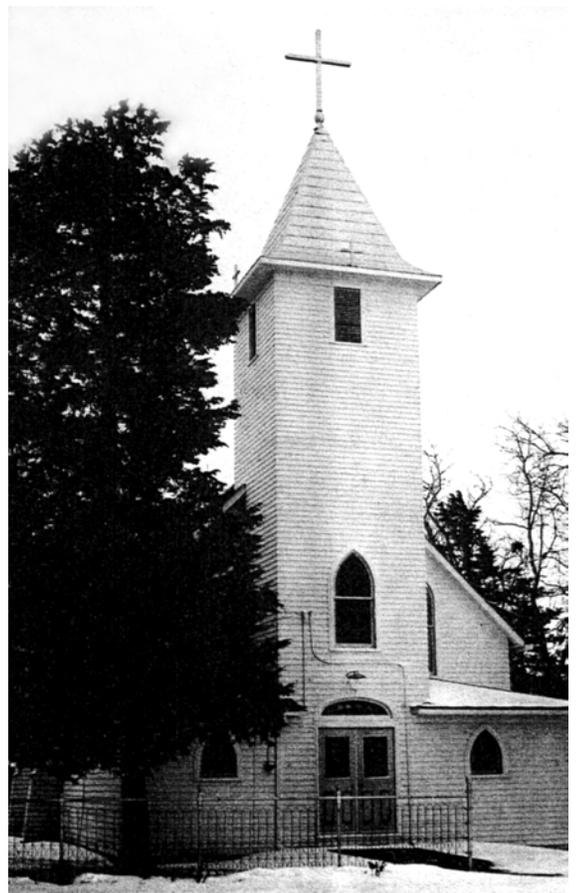
Czech Catholics from Wahoo, where there was no church, traveled to Plasi to attend mass or journeyed more than twenty miles to Fremont. In the mid-1870s, Czech Catholics from Moravia established a parish in Wahoo, and by 1878 the St. Wenceslas Catholic Church had been built. Because Wahoo was ethnically mixed, it was more difficult to counter outside influences there than in rural areas, and the Wahoo Czech were elated to have a church.

Nonetheless, even rural churches struggled to find Czech priests. About 1880, for example, the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in northern Saunders County held mass only once per month because of the shortage of Czech priests. Records of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church show that both Czech and Latin were used liturgically during the early years. It is clear that Czech Catholics in the

county hungered for Czech masses conducted by Czech priests familiar with Czech customs, and by 1890, most Czech communities in Saunders County supported a Czech Catholic church.²¹

Because of persecution by Catholics in the homeland, Protestant Czech immigrants tended to mistrust Catholics, and Protestant Czechs clustered separately in Nebraska. By the turn of the twentieth century, two thirds of the immigrant Protestant Czechs lived in northern Saunders County and Colfax County (across the Platte River to the north-west of Saunders County).

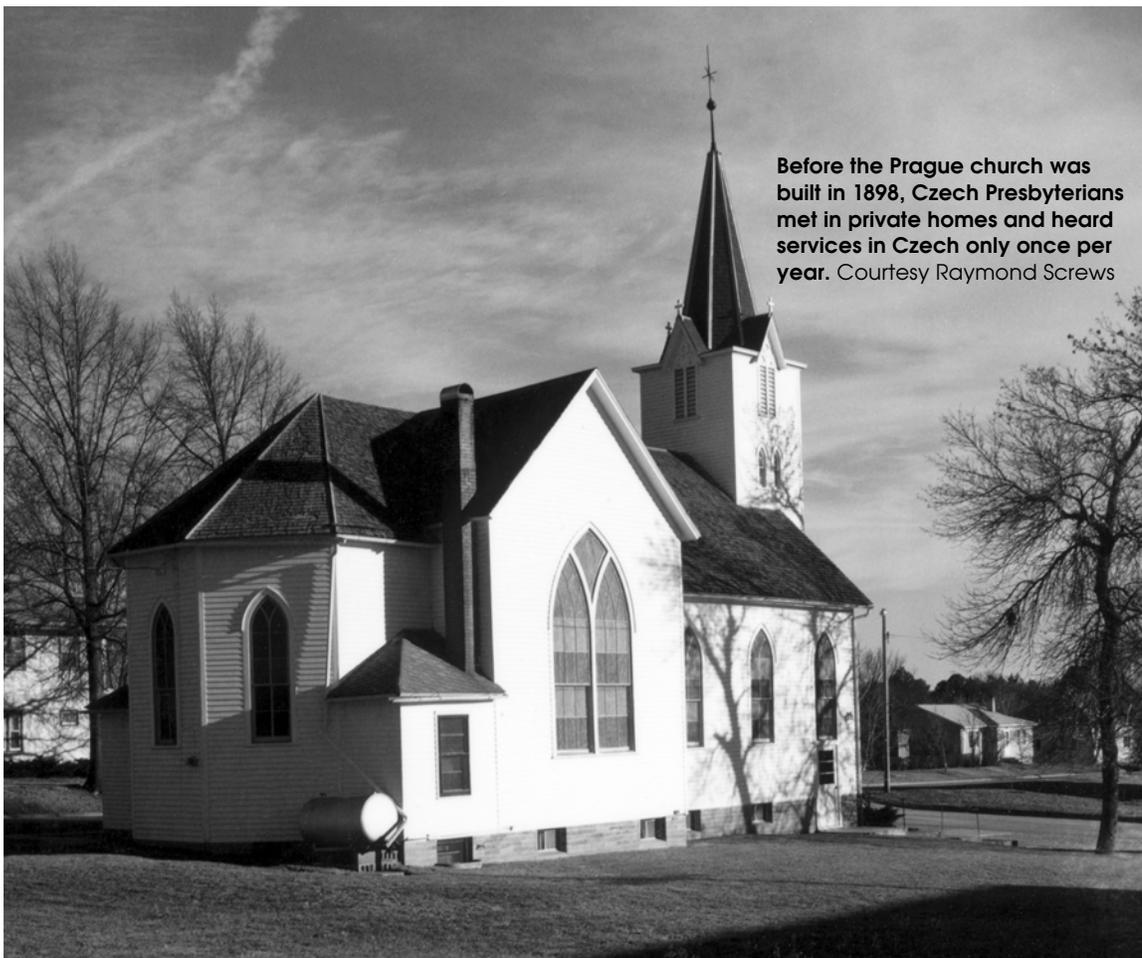
Like the Czech Catholics, Protestants also were culturally conservative and clung to their ethnic



In 1880 a visiting priest held Czech language services once a month at the Sacred Heart Catholic church in Morse Bluff. Rural communities struggled to find Czech-speaking priests. Courtesy Raymond Screws

identity. The original constitution of the Czech Presbyterian Church east of Weston in Saunders County is written in Czech, and in its centennial history traces the church’s lineage to Jan Hus (c.1369–1415), a Czech reformer considered heretical and burned at the stake by the Roman Catholic Church.²²





Before the Prague church was built in 1898, Czech Presbyterians met in private homes and heard services in Czech only once per year. Courtesy Raymond Screws

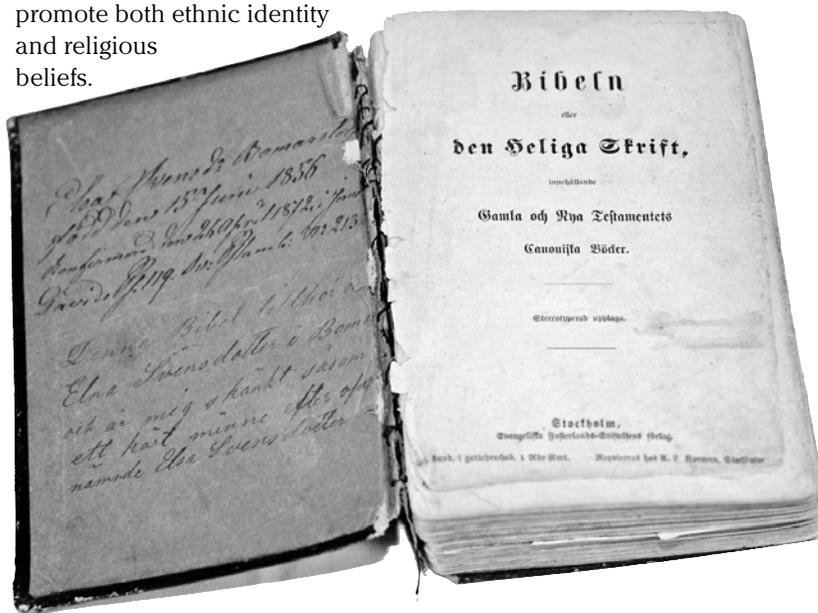
In 1910, the Weston Presbyterian Church joined the newly organized Central West Presbytery, founded because the Czech Presbyterians felt inadequately served by established presbyteries and believed the mixing of ethnic groups would dilute Czech culture. A sentence from a short Czech Presbytery history is a clear statement of the role of the church in promoting ethnic identity and slowing assimilation: "It is undoubtedly true that when you get a homogeneous group together, all those in it have similar characteristics, their needs and problems are very much alike, and they can understand each other better." In fact, it was not until 1952 that Weston Church minutes were first written in English. In Prague, a small town north of Wahoo, Czech Presbyterians met in private homes and once a year heard a Czech-language sermon from a visiting minister.²³

The third tool used by Czechs and Swedes to maintain their ethnic identities was education. William Carlson Smith saw schools in America as "the most important agencies promoting assimilation," but in clustered ethnic areas, this was seldom true. Many immigrants viewed public schools with suspicion and believed that children

attending them would forget their own customs.

According to Terrence Jon Lindell, an educational system could promote ethnic identity and cultural conservation, only if it could "insulate ... children from the influences" of established public schools and those of other ethnic groups. Czechs and Swedes sent their children to parochial schools or founded private schools that could promote both ethnic identity and religious beliefs.

Swedish Bible from Malmo, Nebraska. NSHS Museum of Nebraska History



*Until 1941, both
Czech and English
were used
in graduation
programs at
St. Wenceslaus
School in Wahoo.*

Maxine Seller contended that many immigrants preferred parochial schools because “the public schools were considered hotbeds of atheism.” In Saunders County, the largest ethnic religious school was the Swedish Luther Academy.²⁴

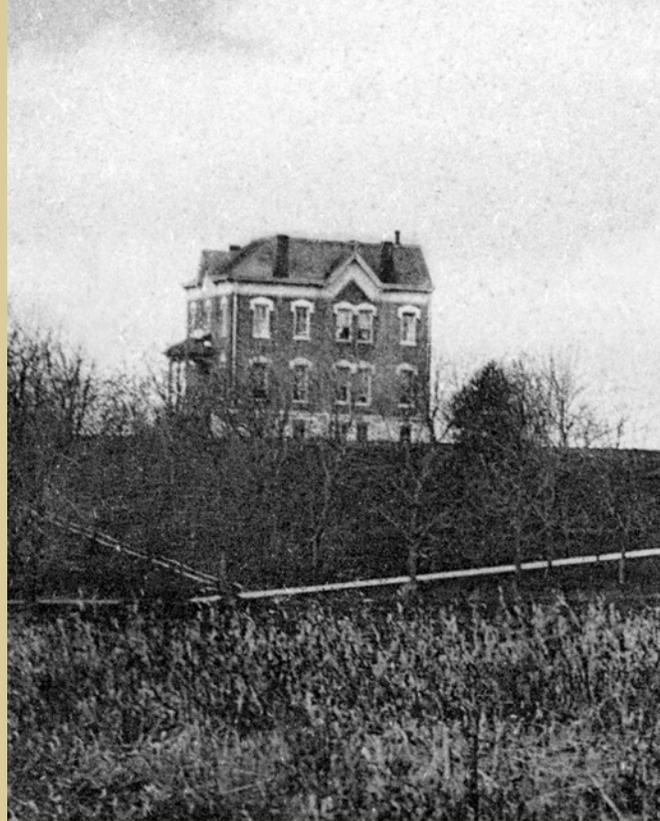
Czechs were among the most literate of all immigrants groups during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but between 1880 and 1910, Czechs in Nebraska typically did not send their children to high school, although many attended elementary school. In part that was because in rural areas, although English was usually the primary language of instruction, most of the students spoke Czech to each other. That was seldom the case in public high schools.

Czech Catholics favored parochial schools. Others, particularly the Czech freethinkers, “often attacked the parochial school,” wrote Joseph Cada, because they “teach so much religion that there is little time left for anything else.” Eventually Saunders County Czech children attended both public and parochial schools.²⁵



Czech emigrants formed several fraternal lodges, including chapters of the widespread ZCJ (Western Bohemian Fraternal Society). NSHS RG1847-13-11

In Czech clustered areas of Saunders County the use of Czech was fairly common even in public schools. For example, in School District 113, in Newman Precinct, just northwest of the village of Touhy, some school board minutes from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are in Czech. In District 94, in Elk Precinct, many entries in the treasurer’s book are in Czech, especially between the 1890s and 1905, the period of intense Czech clustering in the precinct.



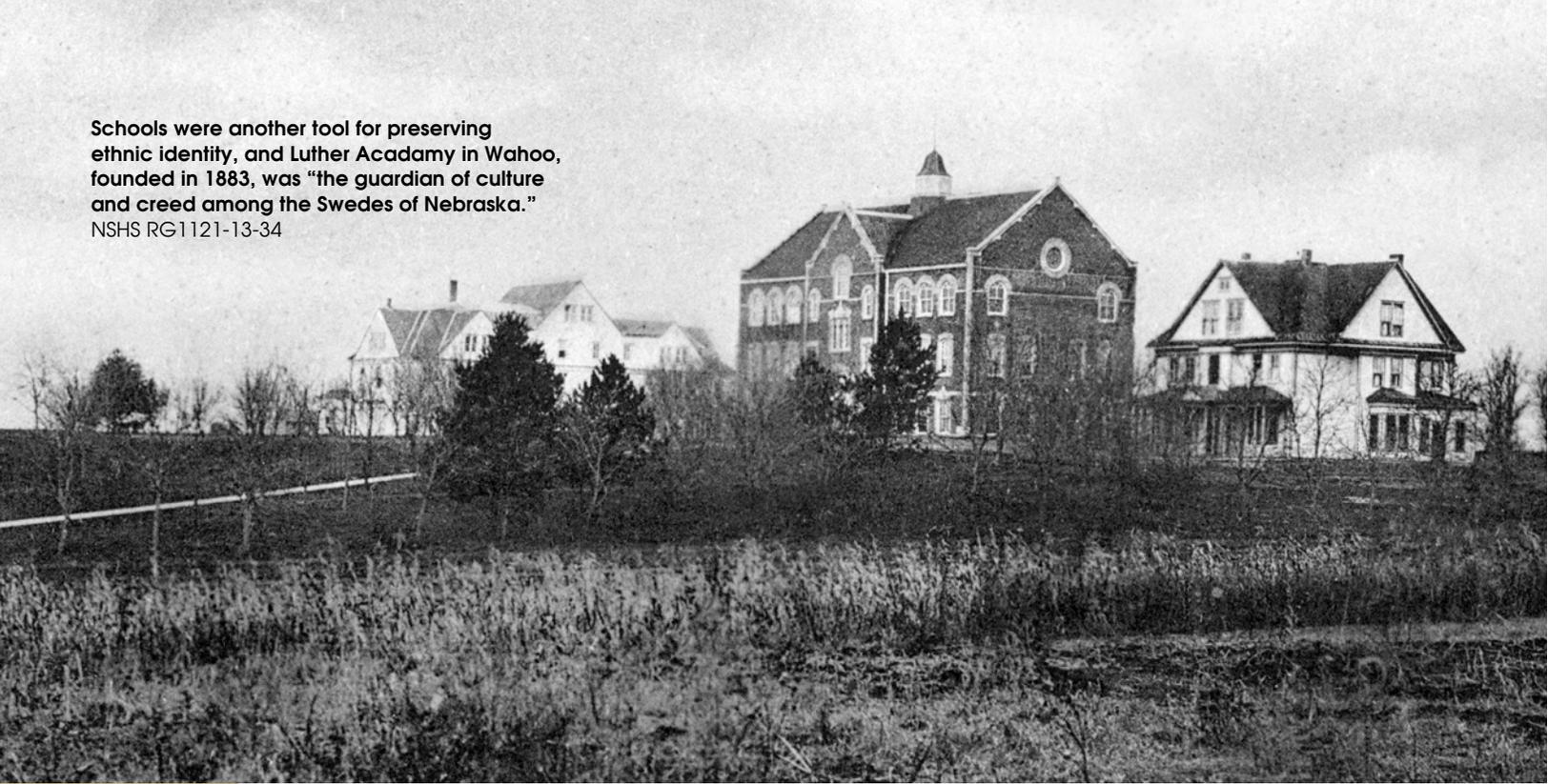
Some schools recorded minutes in both English and Czech, sometimes with English words spelled phonetically as if they were Czech. Nevertheless, few of the early teachers in Czech areas of the county were Czechs; new immigrants did not have ample time to train teachers. By about 1900, however, more Czech names appear as teachers in the rural schools in the Czech clustered area.

Parochial schools also used the Czech language. Until 1941, both Czech and English were used in graduation programs at Saint Wenceslaus School in Wahoo. Moreover, some public schools offered Czech language classes. From its establishment in 1889, the Prague school taught one Czech class per week, and many Prague teachers were Czech.²⁶

Education was also an important tool for the Swedes. In the first decade of the twentieth century Scandinavian immigrants had the highest literacy rates of all ethnic groups in the United States. C. Emanuel Carlson argued that, unlike the Czechs, Swedes embraced American public schools, although James Dowie points out that a level of distrust occasionally surfaced. Some Swedes believed that students would retain their language and heritage only if they attended Swedish Lutheran schools. One remedy was summer parochial schools, often held in public school buildings. In the late 1870s, Augusta Stenholm Flodman attended a Swedish summer school in Saunders County, and had learned to read Swedish at Sunday school as a young child.²⁷

Swedish parochial schools, where Swedish language classes and religion could be taught

Schools were another tool for preserving ethnic identity, and Luther Academy in Wahoo, founded in 1883, was “the guardian of culture and creed among the Swedes of Nebraska.”
NSHS RG1121-13-34



freely, began to gain favor in Saunders County. Terrence Jon Lindell wrote, “The language instruction was necessary so that the children could know the heritage of their ancestors and would know God in the same terms.” As early as 1878, the Bethesda Church, a Swedish Evangelical Mission church in Malmo, voted to start a school with instruction in Swedish, and in 1883, the four hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther’s birth, Swedish Lutherans established Luther Academy in Wahoo. From its conception, Luther Academy epitomized Swedish identity and cultural conservation under the umbrella of the Lutheran church. In the early twentieth century the school added a two year post-high-school program and became Luther College and Academy.²⁸

James Dowie wrote that Luther Academy was “a school established to perpetuate the ideals of Swedish culture and the Lutheran creed,” and although its articles of association reveal little about the cultural purpose of the school, the document declares that it was “subject to the control and management of Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church of Nebraska.”

Ernst Olson, who attended Luther when it first opened, forty years later recalled the cornerstone ceremony: “The Wahoo Band marched to College Hill, with the stars and stripes and the flag of Sweden waving to the breeze.”²⁹

The first two presidents of Luther Academy, according to Dowie, envisioned Luther as “the guardian of culture and creed among the Swedes of Nebraska,” a vision that guided student recruit-

ment. In 1886, the school’s fourth catalog explained that the school was open to any student, but especially to students of Swedish background.

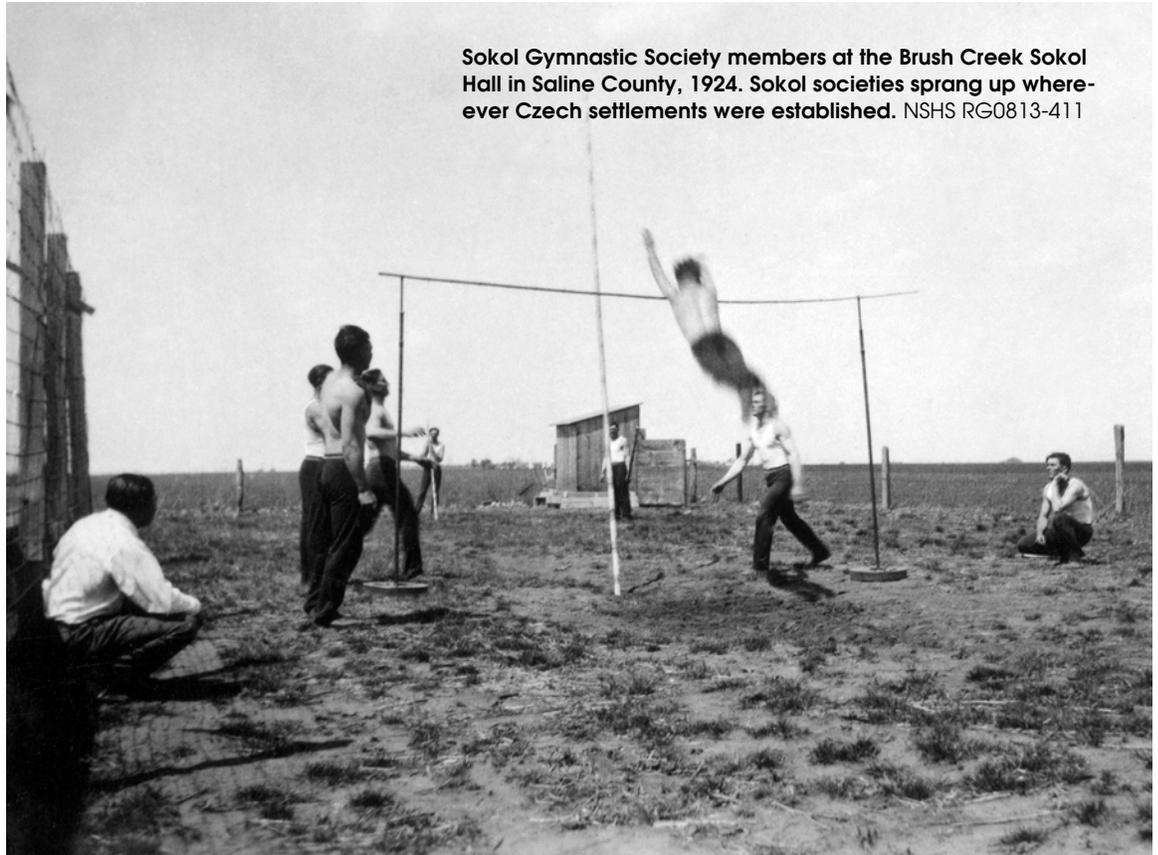
By the mid-1890s, Luther apparently hoped to add diversity without turning away from the Swedish mission. In 1895, the school catalog explained, “Luther Academy is an institution controlled by Swedish American citizens of Nebraska. But it is not a ‘Swede School’ in the sense that only Swedish is spoken or taught.” By 1902, the school announced, “Luther Academy is open to the Christian youth of our land, and especially to the young people of the Conference.” “Conference” meant the Nebraska Conference of the Augustana Synod. A 1907 editorial in the *Luther Academy Visitor*, obviously directed to Swedish Lutherans, asserted, “Remember that when you come to Luther Academy you come to your own school, your own church, your own people, your true friends.”³⁰

The school’s 1884–85 catalog for was entirely in Swedish. The following year the catalog was in English. In the 1888–89 catalog Swedish predominated, but a few sections were in English. In 1892–93, the entire catalog was again in English. Throughout its first decade the catalog reflects a sporadic use of English, followed by a reversion to Swedish.³¹

During the 1880s, a prospective student could be admitted if proficient in either Swedish or English. By the early 1900s, Swedish language and literature classes were compulsory for many students. As late as 1908, students were required to take Swedish classes.

In 1929 the ethnic
Czech population
of the state
was at least
60,000

Sokol Gymnastic Society members at the Brush Creek Sokol Hall in Saline County, 1924. Sokol societies sprang up wherever Czech settlements were established. NSHS RG0813-411



“The Bohemian people in the United States are unusually strong on organization.”

Sarka Hrbkova



NSHS RG0813-410

In 1905, a program presented by the Wartburg Society, to which all Luther students belonged, was conducted in Swedish, and in the first decade of the twentieth century, many commencement addresses were in Swedish. This immersion in Swedish language and culture fostered a campus environment in which ethnic identity remained strong and assimilation was delayed.³²

Clubs and organizations, primarily fraternal lodges, were also instruments of ethnic identity and cultural conservation in Saunders County. Sarka Hrbkova wrote in the early twentieth century, “The Bohemian people in the United States are unusually strong on organization. Judging alone by Nebraska’s Bohemian lodge membership one might easily believe they are inveterate ‘joiners.’”

On the other hand, Swedes rarely joined ethnic organizations or lodges. Terrence Jon Lindell writes that most Swedes who joined fraternal organizations, were town dwellers, and Saunders County was mostly rural. In any case, as Lindell reveals, the Augustana Synod disapproved of secret societies.³³

Within the Czech community, both secular and religious lodges emerged (usually at odds), and Oscar Handlin argues that such “institutions for

adults” were more important to ethnic groups than were ethnic schools. They certainly were important repositories of Czech identity. Freethought organizations performed a similar function, as did Czech benevolent societies formed during the late nineteenth century, including the Czech Slovonic Benevolent Society and the Western Bohemian Fraternal Association (ZCJB), both active in Saunders County. By 1900, the ZCJB had become the dominant Czech benevolent lodge in Nebraska. The Czech athletic society *Sokol* was also important in preserving Czech identity. Kenneth Miller called it the most influential of all Czech societies.

Religious-based organizations also promoted ethnic identity and cultural conservation. For example, in 1900 a lodge of the Bohemian Roman Catholic Central Union, called St. Ludmila, was formed in Prague. In 1896, a group of Czech Catholic settlers near Plasi formed a social organization, and members of the Plasi church organized a Western Czech Catholic Union in 1899.³⁴

Czech and Swedish immigrants in Saunders County, Nebraska, between 1870 and 1910 used several strategies to preserve ethnic identity and forestall assimilation. Both groups used religion and education; the Czechs also used social organizations and lodges.

The success of the three institutions relied on clustering, the formation of ethnically homogeneous communities. In Saunders County both the Czechs and the Swedes created the necessary population base in heavily clustered, homogeneous settlements. Although both groups had some contact with the dominant population, they remained relatively isolated, and the agents of cultural conservation prospered, keeping both groups identifiable into the twenty-first century. 📖

NOTES

The author wishes to thank Kenneth Winkle, Timothy Mahoney, and John Wunder of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln History Department.

¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1910; Federal Census, Saunders County, Nebraska, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Vol. III (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913), 52–66.

² Maxine Seller, *To Seek America: A History of Ethnic Life in the United States* (n.p.: Jerome S. Ozer, 1977), 3; Frederick C. Luebke, “Ethnic Minority Groups in the American West,” in *Historians and the American West*, Michael P. Malone, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 394–95.

³ Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880–1921* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982), 73; William Carlson Smith, *Americans in the Making: The Natural History of the Assimilation of Immigrants* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1939), 51; Seller, *To Seek America*, 3, 147.

⁴ Frederick C. Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains,” in *The Great Plains Experience: Readings in the History of a Region*, James E. Wright and Sarah Z. Rosenberg, eds. (n.p.: University of Mid-America, 1978), 277–78; Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 37; Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940), 62.

⁵ Paul Schach, “Introduction,” in *Languages in Conflict: Linguistic Acculturation on the Great Plains*, Paul Schach, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), vii; Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History*, 11; Philip Taylor, *The Distant Magnet: European Emigration to the U.S.A.* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971), 212; Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 114–16.

⁶ Folke Hedblom, “Swedish Dialects in the Midwest: Notes from Field Research,” in *Languages in Conflict*, 31; 1910 Federal Census, Saunders County; Allan Kastrup, *The Swedish Heritage in America: The Swedish Element in America and American-Swedish Relations in Their Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Swedish Council of America, 1975), 447; Magne B. Goranson, *Autobiography of Magne B. Goranson* (n.p., 1972), 5.

⁷ Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History*, 203; Joseph G. Svoboda, “Czechs: The Love of Liberty,” in *Broken Hoops and Plains People: A Catalogue of Ethnic Resources in the Humanities: Nebraska and Thereabouts* (Lincoln: Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, 1976), 168; Carl Wittke, *We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant* (n.p.: Case Western Reserve University Univ. Press, 1939; revised edition, 1967), 414; Bruce Kochis, “Czech in Nebraska,” in *Languages in Conflict*, 117; Mila Saskova-Pierce, “Czech-Language Maintenance in Nebraska,” *Nebraska History*, 74 (Nos. 3 & 4, 1993): 209; Kochis, “Czech in Nebraska,” 113.

⁸ Milton M. Gordon, “Assimilation in America: Theory and Reality,” *Daedalus*, 90 (No. 2, 1961): 281; Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 112; Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*, 215.

⁹ Svoboda, “Czechs: The Love of Liberty,” 164; James Iverne Dowie, *Prairie Grass Dividing* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1959), 27; Mable S. Forbes, “Soderholm Family,” n.d. Family History Collection, Saunders County Historical Society, Wahoo, Nebraska.

¹⁰ Carl Wittke, “Fissures in the Melting Pot,” in *The Immigration of Ideas: Studies in the North Atlantic Community*, J. Iverne Dowie and J. Thomas Tredway, eds. (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1968), 144; Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains,” 278, 284; Seller, *To Seek America*, 157, 158; Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 121; Smith, *Americans in the Making*, 150; Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History*, 147; Gordon M. Riedesel, “The Cultural Geography of Rural Cemeteries: Saunders County, Nebraska” (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha), 65–67.

¹¹ Kastrup, *The Swedish Heritage in America*, 230; Terrence Jon Lindell, “Acculturation Among Swedish Immigrants in Kansas and Nebraska, 1870–1900” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1987), 140, 142; Dowie, *Prairie Grass Dividing*, 27–28, 16; Riedesel, “The Cultural Geography of Rural Cemeteries,” 67–68.

¹² Charles Fredrick Sandahl, *The Nebraska Conference of the Augustana Synod: Survey of its Works with Sketches of its Congregations, Institutions, Organizations, and Pioneers* (Rock Island, IL: The Nebraska Conference, 1931), 7; George M. Stephenson, *The Religious Aspects of Swedish Immigration: A Study of Immigrant Churches* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1932), 350; Lindell, “Acculturation Among Swedish Immigrants,” 71; *Ninetieth Anniversary: Alma Lutheran Church, Mead Nebraska* (n.p., 1960), 4.

¹³ Sandahl, *The Nebraska Conference of the Augustana Synod*, 47, 219, 228, 260; *Luther Academy Visitor*, Wahoo, Nebraska, Vol. II, No. 11 (October, 1906): 2; *Bethlehem Evangelical*



Illuminated Czech Book of Mass, Saline County, Nebraska. NSHS Museum of Nebraska History

Lutheran Church, Wahoo, Nebraska, 1883–1983 (Wahoo, Neb.: Ludi Printing Co., 1983), 8.

¹⁴ Sandahl, *The Nebraska Conference of the Augustana Synod, 43; Fifty Years: The Swedish Evangelical Mission Association of Nebraska, 1886–1936* (n.p., Swedish Evangelical Mission Association of Nebraska, n.d.), 22–23.

¹⁵ *Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 6.

¹⁶ Centennial, 1876–1976: Evangelical Covenant Church, Mead, Nebraska (n.p., 1976), 6–7.

¹⁷ Wittke, *We Who Built America*, 416–17; Joseph Cada, *Czech-American Catholics, 1850–1920* (Chicago: Benedictine Abby Press for Center for Slav Culture, Lisle, IL., 1964), 1; Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 227; Kenneth D. Miller, *The Czecho-Slovaks in America* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1922), 123; Riedesel, “The Cultural Geography of Rural Cemeteries,” 66–67; Archdeacon, *Becoming American*, 125; Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 135; Richard M. Linkh, *American Catholicism and European Immigrants, 1900–1924* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1975), 3–4, 39.

¹⁸ Sister M. Aquinata Martin, *The Catholic Church on the Nebraska Frontier (1854–1885)* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1937), 131; Sister Loretta Gosen, *History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska, 1887–1987* (Lincoln, Neb.: The Catholic Bishop of Lincoln, Inc., 1986), 3–4;

¹⁹ Martin, *The Catholic Church on the Nebraska Frontier*, 130; Margie Sobotka, ed., *The Tepee and the Church: Early Territorial Catholic Vital Records of Indians & Settlers, 1838–1877* (Fremont, Neb.: Eastern Nebraska Genealogical Society, 1997), 31; Saunders County Nebraska History (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1983), 76; Gosen, *History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Lincoln*, 124, 125.

²⁰ Martin, *The Catholic Church on the Nebraska Frontier*, 163; Gosen, *History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Lincoln*, 125.

²¹ Gosen, *History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Lincoln*, 129, 131; *St. Wenceslaus Parish of Wahoo, 1878–1978* (n.p., 1978), 5; *Centennial Commemoration of Sacred Heart, 1879–1979: The Lovely Church on Cedar Hill* (n.p., 1979), 6.

²² Bruce M. Garver, “Czech-American Protestants: A Minority Within a Minority,” *Nebraska History*, 74 (Nos. 3 & 4, 1993): 151, 150; *Czech Presbyterian Church: Centennial, 1882–1982* (n.p., 1982), 2–3, 7; *Weston Presbyterian Church of Hope, Weston, Nebraska, 1880–1980* (n.p., n.d.), 1–2.

²³ *Central West Presbytery (Bohemia), 1910–1948: A Historical Sketch* (n.p., n.d.), 1–2, 3; *Central West Presbytery*, 3; *Weston Presbyterian Church Minutes, 1895–1981*; *The History of Prague, Saunders County, Nebraska, 1887–1937* (Prague, Neb.: *The Prague Herald*, 1937), 31.

²⁴ Colin Greer, “Immigrants, Negroes, and the Public Schools,” in *Divided Society: The Ethnic Experience in America*, Colin Greer, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 86–87; Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 140; Smith, *Americans in the Making*, 206; Lindell, “Acculturation Among Swedish Immigrants,” 148; Seller, *To Seek America*, 162.

²⁵ U.S. Immigration Commission (1907–1910) William P. Dillingham, *Statistical Review of Immigration, 1820–1910*, and *Distribution of Immigrants, 1850–1900* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 85; Sarka B. Hrbkova, “Bohemians in Nebraska,” in *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XIX. Albert Watkins, ed. (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1919), 158; Kochis, “Czech in Nebraska,”

113; Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 281; Cada, *Czech-American Catholics*, 59.

²⁶ “Information on School District 113, Saunders County, Nebraska,” unpublished manuscript, n.d. Saunders County Historical Society archives, Wahoo, Nebraska; “Treasurer’s Account Book” for School District 94, Saunders County, Nebraska, 1874–1905; “History of the Saunders County, Nebraska, School Districts 19, 94, and 106, for the 1976 observance of the U.S. Bi-Centennial,” unpublished manuscript, 1976, 2, 4; *The History of Prague*, 17.

²⁷ Dillingham, *Statistical Review*, 84–85; C. Emanuel Carlson, “The Best Americanizers,” in *The Swedish Immigrant Community in Transition: Essays in Honor of Dr. Conrad Bergendoff*, J. Iverne Dowie and Ernest M. Espelie, eds. (Rock Island, IL.: Augustana Historical Society, 1963), 31; Dowie, *Prairie Grass Dividing*, 200; Lindell, “Acculturation Among Swedish Immigrants,” 155; Augusta Stenholm Flodman, “Memories,” n.d. Family History Collection, Saunders County Historical Society, Wahoo, Nebraska, 6.

²⁸ Lindell, “Acculturation Among Swedish Immigrants,” 156; *Fifty Years: Swedish Evangelical*, 33–34.

²⁹ Lindell, “Acculturation Among Swedish Immigrants,” 159; B.E. Bengtson, “Luther College: A Short History,” unpublished manuscript, n.d., 1; Dowie, *Prairie Grass Dividing*, 41; “Articles of Association,” *Luther Academy*, Wahoo, Nebraska, 29 March, 1883, “Miscellaneous Record B, Saunders County,” p. 100; Ernst W. Olson, “Luther College in the Making: The Founding of the Nebraska Conference School and Some of the Men who Donated the Means,” *The Lutheran Companion* (Augustana Synod, 1923 [?]), 1.

³⁰ Dowie, *Prairie Grass Dividing* 145, 201; “Luther Academy, Fourth Year, 1886–87, Wahoo, Neb.,” (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1887), 7; “Twelfth Annual Catalogue of Luther Academy, Wahoo, Nebraska, and Announcement for the Year, 1895–1896,” 5; “Luther Academy: Twentieth Annual Catalogue, 1902–1903 (Wahoo, Neb., 1902), 39; *Luther Academy Visitor*, August, 1907, 4.

³¹ “Luther Academy Corner-Stone Laying,” program, 12 April 1903; *Katalog over Luther Academy for Skolaret 1884–1885* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, n.d.); “Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Luther Academy, Wahoo, Nebraska, for the Illrd Academic Year 1885–86,” (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1886); “Catalogue of Luther Academy at Wahoo, Nebraska, Sixth Year, 1888–9” (Wahoo, NE: The Wasp Printing Co., 1889); “Catalogue of Luther Academy, at Wahoo, Nebraska, Tenth Year, 1892–93” (Wahoo, NE: The Wasp Printing Co., [1893]).

³² “Luther Academy, Fourth Year,” 7; “Luther Academy: Twentieth,” 11–17; “Luther Academy: Twenty-Fifth Annual Catalog, 1907–1908” (Wahoo, Neb., 1907); “Wartburg Luther Academy,” Tegner Program, 1905; “Commencement [Program] Luther Academy, May 19–23 1901.”

³³ Hrbkova, “Bohemians in Nebraska,” 147; Lindell, “Acculturation Among Swedish Immigrants,” 238–41.

³⁴ Oscar Handlin, “Education and the European Immigrant, 1820–1920” in *American Education and the European Immigrant: 1840–1940*, Bernard J. Weiss, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 12–13; Wittke, *We Who Built America*, 416; Bruce M. Garver, “Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871–1914,” in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, Frederick C. Luebke, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 155; Garver, “Czech-American Freethinkers,” 153; Riedesel, “The Cultural Geography of Rural Cemeteries,” 66–67; *The History of Prague*, 15, 36, 21, 22, 24; Miller, *The Czecho-Slovaks in America*, 82; *Centennial 1877–1977, Sts. Cyril & Methodius, Plasi, Nebraska* (n.p., 1977), 13–14.