

Slovak: Proud Settlement on Grand Prairie

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The Slovak community in southern Prairie County was founded in 1894, as the result of efforts by the Slovak Colonization Company of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The company, begun by Peter V. Rovnianek, purchased several sections of land in the area known today as Slovak. The initial group of new arrivals numbered some 25 families headed by farmers or coal miners. They built a community house as shelter until permanent homes could be erected. This hotel-like structure was near a presently standing building which once housed the Melkovitz Store. In 1895, county surveyor L. P. Hardeman laid out 160 acres for a town, including a park, school, church and streets, as well as farm lots. However, farmers became much more spread out with the shift from hay cutting to rice culture which occurred by around 1915. The original church was a Russian Orthodox congregation, St. Mary's, built in 1900. Before that, worship services were held in the community house. The church was rebuilt in 1941. This later building was moved to Stuttgart in 1959, where it exists as part of St. Albans Episcopal Church. In 1915 a second church was begun at Slovak, and named the Church of Sts. Cyril and Methodius. The congregation erected a new building in 1961. A parochial school was built in 1936 and served until around 1967. The Slovak community is still largely engaged in farming, with its kinship and social focus centered around Sts. Cyril and Methodius Church, 'The Shrine of the Prairie.' The following narrative, excerpted from a 1911 government publication, *Immigrants in Industries*, gives very good insight into the Slovak community as it was a century ago:

"Slovaktown, located 14 miles south of Devalls Bluff and 12 miles north of Stuttgart, Ark., contains about 50 Slovak families and 250 persons. The heads of these families were born in Europe, but the majority of them worked in the mines of Illinois or Pennsylvania before coming to this locality. Their farms vary from 30 to 300 acres and are somewhat scattered. Most of the land in its natural state is clear of brush, and the whole region forms a natural pasture for cattle. The majority of the farmers are in the dairy business. Others sell corn and oats, while occasionally some sell a little garden truck [produce] in the neighboring towns.

The Slovak Colonization Company, with head offices in Pittsburgh, Pa., bought 10 sections of land in this locality about 1894. They mapped out a town site of 160 acres in the center of the tract, which they divided into house lots 70 feet by 150 feet. Broad streets and avenues were laid out, a lot was set aside for a church, another for a schoolhouse, etc. The company intended to make a model town in the midst of the prairie, advertised extensively in the Slovak newspapers, and finally ran excursions from Pennsylvania and Illinois, carrying home seekers to view their property. In 1894 the first excursion came with 50 people and a few bought land. The second excursion was run in 1898 and seven stayed. The company sold tracts of 40, 80 or 120 acres of land for \$5 to \$12 an acre, requiring a certain percentage in cash and the rest on time at a fixed rate of interest from 6 to 8 percent. Several Slovaks who came on these excursions bargained for

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land but returned to their homes to continue work in the mines until they had saved enough money to warrant their embarking in the new enterprise.

All the settlers came originally from Austria-Hungary, where some had been farmers for themselves, while others had worked on their parents' farms, so that agriculture was not entirely new to them. During the early years on the prairie the Slovak settlers had a hard struggle. They were so far away from civilization that they were obliged to depend wholly on what they raised for their subsistence. Some of the men left their families for four or five months of the year and went to the East to continue their work in the mines to secure money to improve their farms. The colony has not grown rapidly, nor can it be said that the venture has been an unqualified success, but these conditions are probably due to the remote location of the settlement rather than to the settlers or their methods of agriculture. To all appearances these people are doing as well here as any other race would under similar circumstances. During the first eight years several families deserted the settlement, but within the past few years, none have left and a few new settlers have come in.



The former St. Mary's Russian Orthodox church building from Slovak, moved in 1959 to its present location at St. Albans Episcopal Church in Stuttgart. *(all photos by Glenn Mosenthin)*

The majority of the farms are under 100 acres, and several are only 40 acres. Hay, corn and oats are produced by all the farmers. Some raise sweet potatoes and Irish potatoes, others raise cabbage, turnips, peas, beans, radishes, lettuce and onions, but none are raised in large quantities. The most important industry is dairying. The Slovaks have gone into the industry quite heavily in

the past two years, some keeping as many as 40 cows, while the average is about 15. The cream is sold to a neighboring creamery and the skimmed milk is used on the farm for feeding the young livestock. A number of the Slovaks sell from \$50 to \$400 worth of calves, beef cattle, and hogs yearly. The houses occupied by these settlers are well-built frame structures, containing four, six or eight rooms. Many of the houses are neatly painted and the majority are well kept and orderly. The barns are well built and are sufficiently large to accommodate the large number of cows, horses and mules.

Most of the produce sold is hauled either to Devalls Bluff or Stuttgart. Devalls Bluff is on the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad and Stuttgart is on the St. Louis Southwestern Rail-road; but in either case the farmers must haul their produce about 14 miles, but fortunately the roads are fairly good. Of the 50 Slovaks owning property, 80 percent are free from debt. Their farms vary in value from \$1,000 to \$10,000, but the average farm is worth about \$2,000. The coming of the immigrants to this wilderness has more than doubled the price of land. At first worth \$5 to \$12 an acre, it now sells for \$10 to \$30 an acre. This increase can be attributed wholly to the presence of the Slovaks.



1915 church cornerstone, now at the new church.

The Slovaks patronize the banks very little; but they seem to be constantly improving their land and increasing the quantity of their livestock. Some farms carry \$1,000 to \$2,000 worth of livestock. Many of the farmers own 20 cows, 5 to 10 horses and mules, and large droves of hogs. Evidently the proceeds of the farm are invested in additional land or livestock rather than deposited in savings banks. These people are neat and courteous, and in dress and manners are essentially like American farmers in the vicinity. The houses are furnished with simple furniture and few ornaments. In spite of the fact that they are an isolated colony, they seem to be as fully Americanized as many of the Slovaks found in or near the cities. They live well because they raise their own produce. The women and children work about the house more than in the fields, although at haying time all who are old enough assist. There is very little sickness in the locality. A few young

men have left their homes and gone to distant cities to enter various trades, but the number has been small. None of the Slovaks have gone into business. The Slovaks of the community are practically an independent group. Their recreation and amusements are their own. Their neighborly visiting seems to be almost the only form of enjoyment indulged in, although the younger

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people occasionally have dances among themselves. They associate with Americans when occasion demands, and they are said to be very obliging if an American asks a favor. The land company that organized the settlement bought up so many sections of land that in some places the Slovaks have no near American neighbors, and this, together with the fact the immigrants are by nature peaceable, has led to a practical absence of race prejudice or feeling.

The majority of the Slovak families are Roman Catholics; the remainder are Lutherans. The Catholics have a small church which they built several years ago [1900]. Services are conducted every fourth Sunday of the month, the priest coming from Stuttgart. The children of the Slovak farmers attend two public schools in the neighborhood, where they constitute less than one-half of the attendance. They mingle freely with the Americans and are said to be apt pupils. They learn to read and write both English and Slovak, the former at school and the latter at home from their parents. Slovak children, as a rule, do not attend school after they are 14 or 15 years old. In the locality there are 75 men of voting age and nearly 90 percent of this number have their full naturalization papers. These people take a minor part at elections and only a few have held public office. Some have served as school directors and two have held the office of road overseer. Aside from these petty offices, the part the Slovaks have played in politics is very insignificant.

The Slovak farmers in this settlement are reputed to be on excellent terms with the few American neighbors that there are in the locality. They are spoken of as honest, intelligent, industrious, of steady habits, and intelligent. They apparently prefer to live by themselves, associating with the Americans only when necessary, but they are quiet and law-abiding in all respects. The coming of the foreign-born agriculturists to this prairie section of Arkansas caused an immediate uplift in conditions of agriculture. They



Sts. Cyril and Methodius School, built 1936 and used until about 1967.

introduced no new crops, but they brought with them the capacity for hard work and have cultivated and improved the land and made dairying an industry of importance in the vicinity. Without doubt the locality was settled much more quickly than it would have been had it not been colonized by the land investment company. In fact, the Slovaks have built up a community as prosperous as any in this part of the state, and all the improvement and progress is entirely due to them. With improved transportation, the colony would spring into even more prominence than it

has already attained. There are a number of children of the second generation, but they have not reached an age when their influence is felt in the community. A few of the young men are employed away from home. Some are working as farm laborers on neighboring farms, while others are in the towns, working as clerks. The remainder are at home aiding their parents with the farm work. These young men and women are Americanized both in dress and manner and probably in the course of time will continue the farm work where their parents leave off.

Six of the families have been in the locality ten years or over. Seven bought land either before or on their arrival, one family only having rented land previous to purchase. Nearly all have increased their holdings by the purchase of more land, and in all cases the value of the property has advanced. A few apple, pear and plum trees are found on some of the farms, and all have at least ten peach trees, but the fruit industry is not of enough importance to be profitable. The number of cattle kept on each farm is large in comparison with the numbers found in some foreign localities. Mules are found to average four to the farm. Half the farms carry an indebtedness, but in every case the amount of livestock owned is nearly large enough to pay it off. Corn is raised by all, but it is used to feed the stock. Hay is raised, some of which is sold. Oats are sold, one farmer selling \$650 worth as an average for the past two years. The selling of cream has proved a profitable industry to these people, and a glance at the dairy products sold will prove this statement. A decided increase was shown in the amount of cream sold during the year 1909 over the previous year.”

William P. Dillingham, *Immigrants in Industries, Part 24: Recent Immigrants in Agriculture* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1911), 425-430.



Sts. Cyril and Methodius Church, Slovak, Arkansas – ‘The Shrine of the Prairie.’