

## A STORY ABOUT THE SOCHOR FAMILY & The Usefulness of Social Media

*NOTE FROM THE EDITOR: As I perused records of the Table Rock Historical Society, I came across a brief family history of the Sochor family. It was dated 1966 and not signed.*

*I well and fondly remember Joe and Dolores Sochor, charter members of the Table Rock Historical Society. They both graduated in 1945. I went to school with their children, David and Diane (Classes of 1968 and 1971), as well as the children of Joe's sister Mary Ann, Joyce and Nancy Workman (Classes of 1969 & 1975). I thought I would try to flesh out the family history a little in their honor. Here is what I ended up with.*

According to History Nebraska, some 50,000 immigrants from the Kingdom of Bohemia came to Nebraska between 1856 and World War I. Jan and Anna Sochor and their four oldest children can be counted in that number. ("Jan" is pronounced like John except with a Y sound instead of our J.) The children were three daughters (Anna, Marie, and Josie) and a son, Jan, who was known as John, Jr. They set foot on American soil on October 26, 1872.

To begin sorting out the family history, I wanted to figure out *specifically* where they came from. The 1966 history said they came from "Opatoo Humpalec." but modern maps showed only Humpalec. There was a town within about 8 miles of it called Opatov. Both towns were in the highlands of the south of what was once Moravia, but is now in the Jihlava District in the Vysočina Region of the Czech Republic. Was Opatoo really Opatov? And which did they come from, Opatov or Humpalec?

I turned to a Facebook group called Nebraska Bohemians, a growing monster of a site administered by Dan Sanley, a master historian and storyteller. Many from the Czech Republic have joined this Facebook group. They are curious about descendants of those who left long ago, curious to see the flowers that have blossomed from their Czech roots. In my mind, they are "New Friends from the Old Country."

I posted an image of the opening lines of the family story showing "Opatoo Humpalec." The response was immediate.

It turns out there was indeed a typo. Jan Ritter Sýkora explained that the village of *Opatov*, now with a population of 200, is within a political district (think our counties) also called Humpalec that encompasses Opatov.

I learned more than just the location of Opatov. Before passing along some of those fun facts, let me take a break to tell you about the Sochor family once they arrived.

### The Sochors in Nebraska

Their Nebraska home was a dugout, a cave dug into the side of a hill. Jan made a living for his family by farming. To break up the sod, he had a horse and a plow. With the aid of a second horse borrowed from a neighbor, he could plow up 3 acres a year. They lived in the dugout for many years. A last child was born there, daughter Sofie. Anna, the mother, died soon after that. Great

difficulties ensued as Jan tried to keep the family together after his wife's death.

As John, Jr., the only son, grew up, he worked the farm with his father. He was able to go to school only in the winter. When he became old enough to carry the whole responsibility for the farm, Jan the father secured outside work. Just as some farmers today survive by working salaried jobs on top of the grueling work of the farm, so Jan Sochor brought home

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Joe Sochor and his wife Dolores. Both were charter members of the Historical Society and both were descendants of families who immigrated from the Kingdom of Bohemia. Joe was the last descendant of Jan and Anna Sochor to live in Table Rock.

Sochor History

John Sochor Sr. and family come to the United States from Opatoo Humpalec, Czechoslovakia in 1870. They homesteaded four and one half miles northeast of Dubois, Nebr. living in a dugout. There were four daughters: Mrs. Mary Straka, Mrs. Sophie Kabstajnek, Mrs. Josie Sochor and Mrs. Anna Nedela and one son John Jr. John Jr. was born December 28, 1887 and was three years old when

Opening of the 1966 Sochor history

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money by working as a stone mason. He walked to Brownville, Nebraska for work, leaving on Sunday night and returning on Saturday. Today, the driving distance is about 40 miles, but in those days people going on foot to Brownville shortened the distance a mite by going cross country. This was so for many years. For example, when a young Gordon Bethel, founder of the Table Rock Historical Society, walked to Brownville for work after his father died in 1910, even then he went cross country. He said there were few fences then.

Jan did more than just walk the distance for work. Echoing other families of the early days, the Sochor family remembers, "Many times he carried home a 50 pound sack of flour and groceries" on that journey.

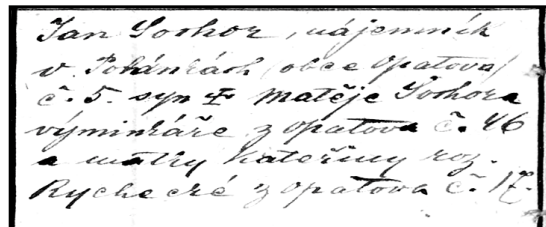
In 1888, a catastrophic blizzard hit the Midwest, the School Children's Blizzard. The temperature dropped incredibly fast to become incredibly cold, the wind was tremendous, and blowing snow made for virtually zero visibility. People died, including children trying to make it home from school, and many cattle and other farm animals froze to death. The Sochor family still lived in the dugout, and it may have been a preferable place in such weather. However, the drifting snow covered up their home and trapped them there. They had to poke holes up through the snow with a broom for air. Their livestock survived the blizzard because they were in an enclosure made of hay and the animals ate the hay and made openings for air, and the snow provided a means to slake their thirst.

### Back to the subject of Opatov

Now that I've related what was in the 1966 family history, let me go back to the starting point of this article, Opatov and social media.

New friends from the Old Country -- Gabriela Vcislo Svatos, and then Marek Horák -- posted Czech birth records for John Sochor, Jr., who was born in 1868. I asked Marek for help translating them. From her translation, I learned the mother's name, which I have used throughout this story. The 1966 family history hadn't recorded it. She died when John, Jr., was young and her name had been lost to memory. Her name was Anna, maiden name Junkova. She was the daughter of Josef Junek, a crofter from Proseč, and his wife Rozina, maiden name probably Malouzková (Marek said this was not easy to read.) By the way, a crofter is someone who lives and works on a very small farm and perhaps has work outside the farm.

Moreover, the record provided information about Jan Sochor, the father. He was a tenant in the



Above. The 1868 birth record of John, Jr, Sochor provides information about his father, and also establishes that they lived in Opatov House Number 5. Below. House Number 5 today.



Polánky section of Opatov, living in House Number 5. Jan was the son of Matěj Sochor, "life tenant" from Opatov, House Number 46, and Kateřina, maiden name Rychecká, from Opatov, House Number 17.

It was also from Mark that I learned that House Number 5 in Opatov still stands. She posted a picture of it! Looking at it, one cannot help but compare it to the dugout that the family lived in here. One might wonder why they left a nice home to live in a dug out. However, History Nebraska says that many from that area were essentially middle class, people who were making at least a comfortable living. Had they been wealthy, they could have stayed. Had they been poor, they could not have afforded to travel so very far and to have money to establish themselves once in America, even by the most modest of means.

In America, each of the children married, all to other immigrants from the Kingdom of Bohemia. Anna, the Cont'd next page



Gabriela Vcislo Svatos of the Nebraska Bohemians Facebook group, who posted John Sochor, Jr.'s, birth record from 1868

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oldest by six years, became Mrs. John Nedela and was married by the time of the 1888 Blizzard. Mary became Mrs. Joseph Straka. Sophie became Mrs. Peter Rabstajnek. And Josie became Mrs. Charles Sochor. A Sochor married a Sochor? Charles was born in Bohemia in 1866 (probably as "Karel"), and may have been a cousin; his parents were Joseph & Katie Sochor. And John, Jr.? He married Mary Fencil.

Jan Sochor eventually sold the original farm and bought one northeast of Table Rock. And later he and his daughters Mary, Sophie, and Josie, with their families, moved to Oklahoma during the oil boom. He died there in 1903 and he and also those daughters and families are buried there.

The farm northeast of Table Rock became that of John, Jr., whether by purchase, gift, or inheritance I do not know.

John, Jr., and Mary Fencil Sochor had three children. There was a little girl, Anna, who died at the age of 10. And there were two sons – Lou (born in 1898) and Frank (born in 1903).

John, Jr. and Mary Sochor's son Lou graduated from Table Rock in 1919. Lou worked at the bank for a year and a half then helped with the farm. In 1926, he married Emma Vrtiska. They had two children, Mary Ann and Joe, who graduated from Table Rock in 1944 and 1945. Mary Ann married Duane Workman and Joe married classmate Dolores Karas. Mary Ann and Joe in turn each had two children. Mary Ann had daughters, Joyce and Nancy (Classes of 1969 and 1975). Joe had a son and a daughter, David and Diane (Classes of 1968 & 1970).

John, Jr. and Mary Sochor's son Frank graduated from Table Rock in 1920. Frank moved to town after his mother Mary died in 1944, taking his father John, Jr., with him. John, Jr., was 76 years old by then and unable to continue farming. Frank was more interested in radios than farming. He attended a radio school in Denver and entered into the "electrical business." In 1949, Frank married Olga Rabstajnek. He was 46, she was 50. They had no children. John, Jr., Frank's father, died in 1952. In 1959, Frank, with Raymond Giles, founded the Table Rock Electric Company, and eventually became the sole proprietor. Then Lou's son Joe Sochor, Frank's nephew, joined the business, running



THE FRANTISEK & JOSEPHINE FENCIL FAMILY with 10 of their 12 children. Their daughter Mary Fencil, at the far right, married John, Sochor, Jr.

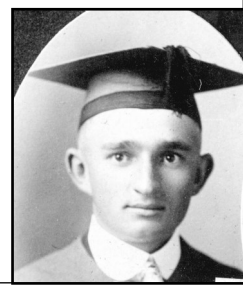


THE JOSEPH & THERESIE VRTISKA FAMILY. At far left is son Joseph Vrtiska. His granddaughter Emma Vrtiska married John Sochor, Jr.



John, Jr., Sochor's tombstone in the Czech National Cemetery, Oklahoma City. The inscription is in Czech. **Zde Odpočívá, Jan Sochor, Zem. 27 Srpna 1906, v stáří 78 Roku.** Here rests John Sochor, died September 27, 1906, aged 78.

Right: Frank Sochor, Class of 1920. Son of John & Mary Fencil Sochor, brother of Lou Sochor.



it until he died in 2018.

Joe Sochor was the last of Jan and Anna Sochor's descendants to live in Table Rock. Joe's sister Mary Ann Workman had died in 1995. Both Joe's and Mary Ann's kids moved away after high school graduation. Joe's wife Dolores was the last person named Sochor to live here, and she moved away to live with son David. We have no Sochors left in town, but, still, our closest Sochors are not so far away. Mary Ann' Sochor's daughter Nancy Workman Crook lives in Humboldt and her daughter Joyce Workman Gerdes lives in Auburn.

The children of Joe and Mary Ann Sochor, those four cousins—Joyce and Nancy and David and Diane -- are only the third

generation born in America. Three generations and 150 years after the family came to Nebraska from House Number 5 in the village of Opatov in the Bohemian-Moravian highlands.

There are still Sochors in the little village of Opatov, by the way. Indeed, one of the members of the Opatov municipal council is David Sochor. True story. Thank you to another of our new friends in the old country, Vladimir T. Gottwald, for that tidbit!



Lou & Emma Vrtiska Sochor (middle) with their children Joe and Mary Ann. Lou's father, John Sochor, Jr., was born in the village of Opatov in 1868. Lou was the first generation born in America, Joe & Mary Ann the second.

## DESCENDANTS OF JAN & ANNA SOCHOR IN TABLE ROCK



John Jr. had sons Lou and Frank. Frank had no children. Lou had two, Mary Ann (at left) and Joe (at right), and Mary Ann and Joe each had two children as well. And those children had children.

Left, Mary Ann Sochor Workman (Class of 1944) with her children, Joyce Workman Gerdes, Class of 1969) and Nancy Workman Crook (Class of 1975). Right: Joe Sochor (Class of 1944) with his children David Sochor (Class of 1968) and Diane Sochor Lewis (Class of 1971).

