

Knechtel Family

Around the world, but just across town: Finding the Knechtel and Kostohryz Families of Iowa, North Dakota and Minnesota

By Scott Phillips

I was born and bred a Buckeye. My family's move from Cleveland, Ohio, to Minnesota in 1969 was a wrenching shock, compounded by snow deeper than any of us Buckeyes had ever seen. As I prepared for a Wisconsin skiing trip that winter, I recall my mother asking if I knew where I was going. I said, yes, we just get on Highway 12 and go east. In a halting whisper she said, "You mean to tell me we are west of Wisconsin?"

We laugh about the story to this day. It was a shock to be west of Chicago, and we thought we had left all our relatives behind in Ohio. What we didn't know, and wouldn't find out for decades, was that there was family all around us and just across town in Minnesota. Minnesota was home for 35 years. I married a 100-percent Italian from Hibbing – quite a feat for a half-Cornish, half-Bohemian kid from Cleveland.

Ohio Family Memories

Back in Ohio, our home was Family Central. My mother, the magnet that drew family to our home and the glue that held it together, suffered probably the greatest initial trauma from the move. In Ohio, every Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, birthday, 4th of July, anniversary and even some Saturdays the extended family would spend the day with us.

As a youngster, I loved these gatherings, especially those with the Bohemian side of our family. My Bohemian grandmother, who lived with us most of my life, would get really happy and excited. I would hear her on the telephone party line, speaking in Czech. Then, some of my favorite foods were being prepared – knedlíky (potato dumplings), zeli (sauerkraut) and roast pork. If I was especially lucky, the knedlíky would be filled with a peach slice. Even my Italian wife grew to love the food and Czech fanfare so much that on a recent crisp autumn day she begged me to make knedlíky for her.¹ Up to my ears in potato flour that day, I fondly recalled those family gatherings.

Searching for Bohemian Roots

Now fast-forward forty-plus years and join me as a genealogist digging deeply for his Bohemian roots. I researched my maternal Bohemian ancestry (primary surnames of Vicha and Knechtel) for several years. I had begun with hardly any information at all, not even a home village for the Vichas, but I was pleased with how far I had come. In the early stages, I spent most of my time finding my ancestral villages of Milevsko and Rataje, Bohemia – a research story that I told in *Sloto*, the journal of the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library.²

As genealogists and family historians, we know that we don't work in a vacuum. While we toil away in solitude, there are always family or friends somewhere ready to lend a hand. Such was the case when I received an email from my good friend in The Netherlands, Peter Knechtel. Peter has been working on the Knechtel family for decades. He has written books on the

family tree, and has a wealth of data, knowledge and contacts.³ His email described a dead end in his research. He had encountered a Frantisek Knechtel, born about 1835 in Bohemia. Frantisek had possibly lived in Cleveland, Lidgerwood, North Dakota, Protivin, Iowa, and/or St. Paul, Minnesota. His question was "Is this Frantisek Knechtel yours?"

I dove right in, partly because I can't resist a genealogical mystery, but mostly because Peter is a genealogy friend, and "a friend in need is a friend indeed." I had several Frantisek Knechtels in my family tree, but for one I had no information beyond his parish birth record from Bohemia.⁴ This shortcoming was resolved with the help of automatic reminders on my Outlook calendar to review new additions to my tree on MyHeritage.com at regular intervals.

Finding Frantisek

Might the stray Frantisek Knechtel in my tree be the Frantisek that Peter had tracked through the Upper Midwest? As always, my search started with a plan and a budget. I build a plan that addresses the basic news reporting questions: who? what? when? where? and why? I knew I probably would need some local, in-country help. Unless I win the lottery, enabling me to jet off to the Czech Republic, I need a realistic budget. In addition to the usual expenses for Internet databases and documents, I might need help from researchers in other states and in the Czech Republic.

I began with a review of all the information I had previously gathered on the Knechtel family.

As I sifted through more than a half dozen Frantisek and/or Frank Knechtels (not to mention the multiple permutations of the spelling of Knechtel) I began to think there actually was a chance that this unknown Frantisek could be Frantisek Seraphinus Knechtel, born about 1834, death date unknown. Frantisek Seraphinus was my first cousin four times removed, so this was a very exciting possibility. From census records and other documentation, I saw that this might be the Frantisek Knechtel and family who lived in Protivin,⁵ St. Paul,⁶ and Lidgerwood.⁷ I knew of no family in these places. I knew little about these communities; they had never been part of family discussions or legends.

My first step was to look in my address book for the "best" living relative to ask for help. My cousin, Barbora Knechtel in the Czech Republic, and I had found each other online some years earlier in the course of our research into the Knechtel families in Bohemia and Cleveland. It wasn't until much later that we discovered that we are related. Neither Barbora nor I knew anything about Frantisek beyond the information from his baptismal record: his parents Matej Knechtel and Marie Anna Nejedly Knechtel; his birth August 5, 1834, and his home village, Píseč, Praha-západ, Bohemia. However, we both thought this might be the correct Frantisek.

A next step was to consult Leo Baca's nine-volume series, *Czech Immigration Passenger Lists*. There in Volume VIII was the enticing entry of Frantisek Knechtel [sic], accompanied by his wife, Catha, and daughters Barba, Maria, Antonia and Anna.¹⁷ I got the shivers as I read it. It could have been another dead end, but there was something about this family that seemed promising.

Many records from the eight archive districts in the Czech Republic had been indexed, catalogued and made available on the Internet, but the records for the parish of Praha-zapad had not been.¹⁸ Because my willingness to ask for favors from family extends only so far, I asked Barbora to recommend a researcher in the Czech Republic. David Kohout got the call and served me well.¹⁹

He quickly confirmed that Frantisek Seraphinus was indeed the son of Matej Knechtel and Marie Anna Nejedly Knechtel. David also sent me images of Frantisek's marriage record, as well as birth records for his children. The electrons beamed off the screen: there was the name of Katharine Himl on the marriage certificate for Frantisek and the names of Anna, Barbora, Maria and Antonie Knechtel on the birth records.²⁰ This was everyone on Leo Baca's passenger listing. Happy? I think "ecstatic" is more like it!

After I had emailed the news to Peter and while I was doing my Happy Genealogical Historian Dance, I realized that the next step would be more difficult: a search for the trail of four unmarried women. Not an easy task, but the adrenaline was not to be denied: I needed to trace my newly discovered family members.

Following Frantisek and Family

The next step on my Go-To-List was databases at FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com. They pointed me to the Upper Midwest. Aware now that the family had emigrated from Bohemia in July 1875, I started with the 1880 U.S. Census. Having landed at Baltimore, Frantisek's family made its way to the farmlands of Winneshiek County, Iowa. There in the Census were "Frank and Kate Knechtel" [sic]. I was happy to find them, but disappointed that their girls weren't listed.

The only thing I could think to do next was to move forward with "Frank and Kate." This is when I fell in love with state censuses, commonly taken in years ending in 5. The Iowa Censuses of 1885 and 1895 nicely bracket the notoriously absent 1890 U.S. Census. The 1925 Iowa Census is a special treat because it asked for parents' names, ages, birth places and maiden names. Some kind Iowa soul was thinking of us genealogy folks when she or he crafted that 1925 Iowa census.

Up to 1900, I could find no sign of the four female offspring. Then, in the 1905 Iowa Census, it looked as if Frank had a new wife, Elizabeth, who added to my confusion by going as Lizzie at times. Then in the 1920 Census, I found Frank and Elizabeth in Lidgerwood, North Dakota. Then, in the 1925 North Dakota State Census, Frank was gone. However, I found Elizabeth/Lizzie in the 1930 U.S. Census back in Protivin in Winneshiek County, Iowa. She was living with

a daughter, Emma – not a name I was expecting. Perhaps she was Elizabeth's daughter from an earlier marriage.

The image shows two historical marriage documents from Minnesota. The top document is a "Marriage License and Certificate" from the State of Minnesota, Ramsey County, dated 1891. It is for Frantisek Knechtel and Katharine Himl. The bottom document is another "Marriage License and Certificate" from the State of Minnesota, Ramsey County, dated 1891. It is for Frantisek Knechtel and Elizabeth Knechtel. Both documents include the names of witnesses and the officiant.

Koskiryz-Knechtel marriage license, Ramsey County, Minnesota, 1891
So, there I was in 1930, realizing that I needed to get into the non-digitized records and begin to take some calculated chances. These would be based on best guess hunches. Hunches can be dangerous, but sometimes they pay off.

My first guess: Frantisek died while he was in or near Lidgerwood, and his widow moved back to family in Protivin. In the North Dakota Department of Health's easily searchable free Public Death Index,²¹ I found only one Knechtel and ordered his death record. Then I began to look for the local newspapers surrounding Lidgerwood. After speaking with a reporter for the successor to *The Lidgerwood Monitor*, I found its historic archive at the State Historical Society of North Dakota.²² It only took one call and a most helpful archivist began searching for an obituary for Frantisek.

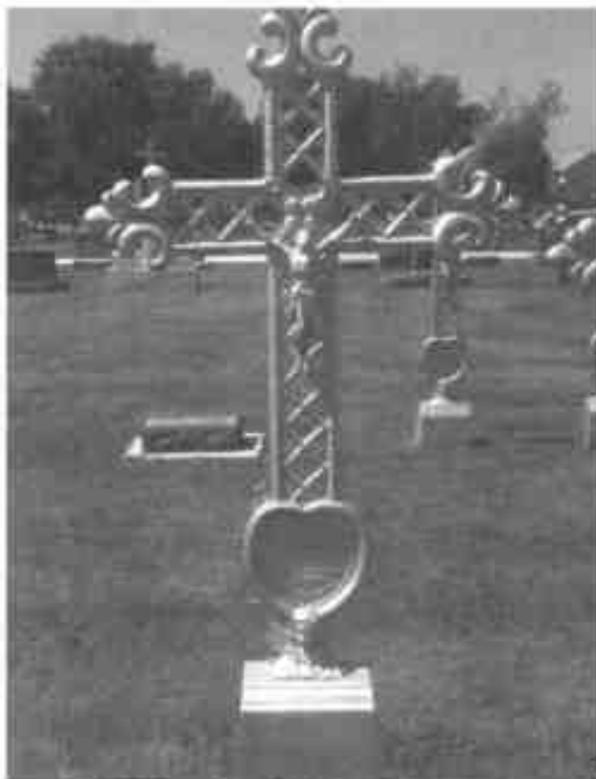
My second guess: Frantisek's first wife, Katharine, and his second wife, Elizabeth/Lizzy, might have died in the Protivin, Iowa, area. It didn't take long to find the website

of Protivin's Czech Heritage Partnership.¹¹ It led me to some truly knowledgeable volunteers whose families have lived in the historic Czech communities of Protivin, Spillville, and Little Turkey Creek. I connected with Gene Kovarik and Ed Samec, who promised copies of obituaries, research and a contact at the main cemetery in town.



Katerina Knechtl gravestone, Holy Trinity Cemetery, Protivin, Iowa

Then came the really hard part: waiting. While waiting, I studied the history of the Lidgerwood and Protivin areas and discovered two more wonderful resources. One was a history of Protivin, *The Protivin Community Past and Present*.¹² The other was an anniversary book titled *Lidgerwood - Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow*.¹³ These books are chock full of surnames and family histories. I also learned of the unique Bohemian grave markers called *Anders' Crosses*.¹⁴



Anders' cross, Holy Trinity Cemetery, Protivin, Iowa

Then it happened! The first nugget, from the Historical Society of North Dakota, was an obituary for Frantisek Knechtl, conveniently published on page 1 of the *Lidgerwood Monitor*.¹⁵ It identified Frantisek's four daughters, with their married names. Additional evidence came in various forms from North Dakota and Iowa.¹⁶ A wonderful volunteer in Lidgerwood even tramped the local cemetery in 95-plus degree weather and sent me photos of the gravestone of Frantisek Knechtl.



Frantisek Knechtl gravestone, Lidgerwood, North Dakota

Now, I could begin tracing the four Knechtl daughters. As 'un-luck' would have it, I began with the oldest daughter, Barbora. She married Vojtech Panosh and remained in Protivin. Next in line was Marie, who married William Ruzicka in Protivin, moved to North Dakota, then on to Yukon, Oklahoma, a community known to this day as The Czech Capitol of Oklahoma. The next daughter, Antoinie, also stayed in Protivin after marrying Jacob Malek. Finally, I began work on the youngest, Anna, who, according to the obituary, had married Anthony F. Kostohryz.

Just as I was ready to dig into Anna and Anthony, I received a marvelous manila envelope in the mail. Jaw-droppingly thick, it came from the Canadian County Genealogy Society in Oklahoma.²¹ A volunteer researcher, Jean, had gone above and beyond the call of duty, locating a living Ruzicka descendant who allowed Jean to copy photos and documents from family albums and send them on to me. There was even a picture of Anna Knechtl Kostohryz and the notation that she had married in St. Paul, Minnesota. The marriage certificate confirmed Anna and Anthony's marriage in St. Paul in 1891.²² I was back on my home Minnesota tundra!

I soon discovered that the Knechtl family had stayed tight-knit, even though they had dispersed across Iowa, North

Dakota, Oklahoma, and Minnesota. How nice of Minnie and Mary, two of the Ruzicka daughters, to visit Aunt Anna Kostohryz in St. Paul at the time the 1900 U.S. Census.²³ Thank you very much for that trip, girls.

Soon I was awash in Minnesota information. I discovered that Anna and Anthony had at least five children and well over 25 grandchildren. Before I knew it, I had forsaken my genealogy and history databases and moved on to Google to look for real-time information. Kostohryzes were spread all over Minnesota, so, as it turns out, when we were living in the Twin Cities we were surrounded by family, but didn't know it. Now we have more than 85 Kostohryz family members in our tree to learn from and about.

To cap off everything, I am in regular contact with several of my Kostohryz cousins on Facebook and email and having a wonderful time catching up on all that has been happening for the past 121 years!

As always, certain people deserve special thanks for helping me with my research. My most important "thank you" goes to my wife, Mary Kay, who is a terrific editor and who allows me to pursue my genealogy passion. I also owe special thanks to Bruce Lynn for his help in Lidgerwood. In Protivin, I thank the volunteers of the Czech Heritage Partnership and in Yukon,

I am especially grateful to Jean for her superlative assistance.

(Indicates)

1. Lawrence Phillips, oral discussion with Scott Phillips and Juan Rada, 18 January 1999.
2. Recipe for knedlicky: 2 pounds potatoes, 8 tablespoons lard, 10 tablespoons flour, 1 tablespoon salt, 1 egg. Peel potatoes, boil, then rice. Add lard, flour, salt and egg. Work dough well. Add flour if dough is sticky. Divide into dumplings. Place in boiling water. Knedlicky are done when they float.
3. Scott Phillips, "How I Got to Milwaukee: A Voyage through History to Find My Great-grandfather", *Stor* 11:1 (Summer 2010), 12-15.
4. "Nite Knechtel," *Descendants of the Families Knecht-Kneig-e-Kneig, etc.* <http://family-knecht.tripod.com>, accessed 13 March 2012.
5. Prague Archives, D. Kohout, 16 May 2011.
6. 1900 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Winnebago County, Iowa, digital image, www.ancestry.com, 2010.
7. Ancestry.com, *Minnesota Marriages Index, 1828-1950* (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, 2009).
8. 1920 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Richland County, North Dakota, digital image, www.ancestry.com, 2010.
9. Leo Baca, *Czech Immigration Passenger Lists: Baltimore: 1834-1879*, Vol VIII (Richardson: privately printed, 1998), 72.
10. The eight administrative archives in the Czech Republic are Prague, Northern Bohemia, Western Bohemia, Central Bohemia, Eastern Bohemia, Northern Moravia, Southern Moravia and Southern Bohemia.
11. David Kohout, <http://genealogypro.com/illioibout.html>.
12. Prague Archives, D. Kohout, 16 May 2011.
13. North Dakota Department of Health/Vital Records, <http://ndhealth.gov/vital/>, accessed 25 March 2012.
14. State Historical Society of North Dakota, <http://history.nd.gov>, accessed 25 March 2012.
15. Czech Heritage Partnership, <http://www.czechheritagepartnership.org>, accessed 26 March 2012.
16. Protivin Historical Preservation Group, *The Protivin Community: Past and Present* (Decorah, Iowa: Arrandson, 2005).
17. Lidgerwood Cemeterial Committee, *Lidgerwood - Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow* (Garrison, North Dakota: J & M Printing, 1985).
18. For more about the history of Anders's Crosses, see Cy Klomish, "The Search for Anders Graveyard Crosses: The Unique Cemetery Art of a Czech-American Immigrant," <http://www.klomish.com/crosses/first.html>, accessed 26 March 2012.
19. "Frank Knechtl," *Lidgerwood Monitor*, 24:51 (20 March 1924), 1.
20. Lidgerwood, North Dakota, Community Museum, Inc., P.O. Box 36, Lidgerwood, North Dakota 58055-0036.
21. Canadian County Genealogical Society, <http://www.nobweb.ancestry.com/~krcgsl>, accessed 27 March 2012.
22. Ramsey County Department of Public Health, St. Paul, Minnesota, Marriage Licenses and Certificates, Annie Knechtl and Tiney Kostohryz, 19 November 1891, http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/ph/yr/marriage_records.htm.
23. 1900 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Ramsey County, Minnesota, digital image, www.ancestry.com, 2012.