

New Book to be Released – January 2022

MINNESOTA’S “BIG WOODS” MUSICIANS: A Narrative on the Rich Tradition of Music in the Culture and Life of the People Who Emigrated from South Bohemia to the Communities in and Around New Prague, Minnesota

This book, researched and authored by Sr. Anita Smisek, OP with narrative assistance from John Chromy tells the amazing story of how the immigrants that came from the farming villages and towns of southern Bohemia brought with them their love of music, and how the playing and singing music made bearable the hard work of clearing trees, building homes and creating farms in the “Big Woods” of south central Minnesota in the late 19th century.

Being a lifelong music teacher, singer, organist-choir director and a descendant of one of the “Foundational Musical Families”, Sr. Smisek’s research has resulted in a very moving description of immigrant families including musical instruments and sheet music among their few essential possessions brought from the old country. In analyzing old family documents, browsing through old newspapers and interviewing in the 1970s elderly musicians, she has pieced together a narrative that describes how families playing and singing together brought some joy and merriment to pioneer life.

The narrative documents that some of the immigrants were skilled musicians back in the old country who brought their performing talents, teaching skills and willingness to provide music for family, church and community gatherings. It shares with us how the “**Founding Musical Families**”, the Sery’s, Komarek’s, Smisek’s, Hovorka’s, Kovarik’s, Drozda’s, Jasan’s, Jirik’s and Herda’s taught their children by candlelight in their log cabins to love and play music, and extended this gift to the children of friends, neighbors and to the schools.

It records the development of the many musical groups (bands, orchestras, choirs) in the communities in and around Veseli, Lonsdale, Montgomery and New Prague, Minnesota and includes fascinating inserts from the *New Prague Times* which report on the many competing bands, multiple dance halls and community music performances back in the 1880s & 90s. And that most of the musicians were farmers by day and musicians by night.

This narrative reminds us of the days in the early 20th century when local Bohemian musicians commuted to Minneapolis and St. Paul to perform with symphony orchestras, to study music and to teach aspiring classical musicians. It brings to light the rise of the large dance halls (American Legion, Hermann’s, Hardeggers), the development of big bands in the 1930s and the tradition of public wedding dances.

This narrative of the tradition of music among the Bohemian immigrants and their descendants is dramatically illustrated with **170 photos, dating from the 1870s to the present**, of musicians and musical groups across the “Bohemian Triangle”, including color photos of current bands, Czech singing groups and Czech dancers. Individuals who have made an important impact on the local music scene, including two nuns, Sr. Valeria Prechal and Sr. Imata who introduced the joys of music to thousands of school children are also featured along with Hall of Fame musicians, Jerry Minar and Roman Rezac of concertina band fame and Ray Valek.

All in all, this 116-page book tells a wonderful story of the many joys and good times the inherited love of music brought to the lives of our Czech communities here in America. It is a gift not to be forgotten. The addendum on pronunciation of Czech names is of “special interest” and the Index of Names in the document is invaluable! **ISBN: 0-9774934-0 Copyright: © 2021 Anita Smisek, OP, Sinsinawa Dominicans, Inc. asmisek@sinsinawa.org 1-608-799-1300 585 County Road Z, Sinsinawa, WI 53824-9701**