



**MANY ONLOOKERS GATHERED** near the Sappa Creek bridge on U.S. Highway 83 south of Oberlin as movers brought the Old Bohemian Hall into town, where it was placed on the grounds at the Last Indian Raid Museum.

# Lodge used for area dances

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Many people remember the good times they had at the Old Bohemian Hall when it was located northwest of Jennings. Crowds came from miles around to enjoy the dances, but the question was often asked, "Which came first, the lodge or the dances?"

Actually, it was the Zapadni Cesko-Bratrska Jednota (ZCJB) Lodge No. 13 of Jennings, which was chartered on July 26, 1905.

During the last quarter of the 19th century, many Czech immigrants settled in an area about halfway between Jennings and Kanona, along Big Timber Creek. According to the records written by Joseph Vavroch, the lodge was organized on July 29, 1905, at the home of Joseph Petracek a quarter mile north of the hall site. The early-day leaders decided to form the fraternal brotherhood with some means of financial security through insurance. The parent organization was known as the Western Fraternal Life Association.

The first meetings, which included 23 charter members, were held in members' homes. The Czechs, called Bohemians, liked to get together for entertainment and in 1906 they built the lodge hall seven miles northwest of Jennings on land donated by Joseph Petracek Sr. on his farmstead. Materials were paid for by donations and loans and the original hall which now stands at the Last Indian Raid Museum, was built by members.

It was used for meetings and gatherings including family reunions, box suppers, political rallies, masquerade parties, funerals, Czech school, Czech plays and many dinners



**DARYL HARTZOG OF JENNINGS** carried out some items from the original basement of the Old Bohemian Hall. The building was deeded to the museum by board members and moved to the museum grounds, where it has been completely restored.

and dances. Music was provided by members and friends and many big name polka bands. Armistice Day and Christmas Day dances were annual affairs for many years.

In 1936, a group of lodge women formed a drill team and initiated a large group of new members. Gymnastic teams were very important in Bohemia in the 1800s as a way to build national pride and patriotism, according to the late Vivian (Cilek) Bishop.

Mrs. Bishop said that most families in the early days rode to the dances in lumber wagons. Coal-oil lamps were used at first and later Aladdin lamps before electricity came to the country in the late 1940s. Among favorite dances were square dancing, the schottish, waltzes and two-step. "Tag" and "Ladies" Choice" were also highlights during the dances.

Charles Votapka Sr., a member of the lodge, fearful that children would not be taught Czech reading and writing in the home, used his influence to secure the services of James Ruzicka, a native of Bohemia, according to a history of the family written by his granddaughter, the late Hazel Barrett, in 1972. He worked as a farm hand during the week and taught reading and writing classes on Sunday at the hall. Among families taught were the Cileks, Hesses, Petracesks, Petraseks, Mazaneks, Flaskas, Kaspars, Shimmicks and Skubals.

Many people have special memories of the old hall. Marie (Heilman) Zimmerman, who accompanied her parents, Henry and Blanche Heilman, and their family to the dances, said she remembers dancing to the music of Lawrence Welk's orchestra and Joe Poluka's Polka Band.

"It was the highlight of the week to get to go there, and everyone had a good time," she said.

Kenny Krizek said, "My mother taught me how to dance the polka and waltz there. When I was young, everyone went to Jennings on Saturday night to do their trading, then after the stores closed at 9 p.m., everyone headed for the old hall for the dance."

Neoma (Kusy) Tacha said her mother, Marye Flaska, ran the kitchen and her step-father, Joe Flaska, was the manager for many years.

"He loved to sing, "The Prune Song," during the dances with his arms crossed over his stomach in the Bohemian native language.

"There are so many good memories, the older couples gracefully gliding across the floor dancing the polka, waltz or an occasional modern tune. The Old Bohemian Hall may not be in the same location, but there will always be the good memories," she said.

"If these walls could talk," said Vaile Rohan, "They would have many stories to tell."

The building was moved to the Last Indian Raid Museum grounds in Oberlin in April 2000, after it was deeded to the museum by the lodge members. Since that time, museum board members and volunteers have installed new windows, siding and a new floor, restrooms in an addition on the main floor and a kitchen in the basement.

It has since been used for dances, family gatherings, alumni reunions, receptions, and even a recent wedding.

The Old Bohemian Hall will once again be a lively place when the museum celebrates its 50th anniversary on Saturday.