

Yesteryears

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Slovak Club formed 75 years ago, in 1924

By Lois Firestone

They were experts at their trade, the Czech and Slovak immigrants who gravitated to Salem from Austro-Hungary and Monaca, Pa. when the National Sanitary Co. was established. Not only were they expert enamelers whose technical skill could detect the slightest degree of coloring in the molten enamel and metal, they were valuable as foremen because they were multi-lingual and could talk to the workers in many tongues.

John S. Jobes and his brother-in-law, Michael Hurray, the first Slovaks to come to Salem about 1908, possessed a little known formula for mixing enamel and quickly rose to prominent positions at the plant. Jobe was the company's first superintendent and Hurray was employed as a foreman.

Attracted by their glowing accounts of the city as a place to live and work, other Czech-Slovaks soon arrived. Among them were Peter Duriga, Martin Debnar Sr., Mike Slaby, Mike Catlos, John Ulicny, Joe Machulkas, Joe Vild, John Sertic, John Sobotka, Joseph Hurray,

Martin Zatko, Martin Catlos, Peter Cibula, Martin Kermit, Matthew Chlebo and Mike Ulicny.

The group's first club was the Slovak Gymnastic Sokol Union, a physical culture group begun in 1912. The club was still operating in the 1950s, when Peter M. Duda was president.

In 1915, a club was organized for Slovaks, Czechs, Croations and Serbians, called the All-Slavs Alliance. The purpose was "to preach and practice loyalty and devotion to the democratic institutions of America," at the same time cherishing and preserving "the worthwhile customs and traditions of our ancestors." Among the charter members were Adam Cibula, John Blistan and Martin Catlos.

The first Czech-Slovak Educational Club was formed in 1916 with 30 members. In 1924, the club bought the old Red Cross building on South Ellsworth Avenue for a meeting place.

A \$40,000 addition was built on the south side of the club

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The site of the Slovak Club is steeped in history. The brick building (above) was built about 1853 and trazed in 1995 to make way for the new facility. The historical landmark was private homes for industrialists as well as a stopping place for soldiers shipping out to Camp Sheridan in Alabama during World War I. Members enjoy a convivial evening at the club in the 1950s, (below) attired in the traditional costumes of their native land. The Salem's Czech and Slovak immigrants originally came from Austro-Hungary, first settling in Monaca, Pa. before moving to Salem when the National Sanitary plant opened.



Andy and Margaret Kemats, managers of the Slovak Club for 16 years, beginning in 1944 when Andy left the West Point coal mines to take the job.

Slovak
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house in 1949, and the name was changed to the American Slovak Club. In 1956, the club had 100 members including Czech, Slovak, Polish and Slovenian nationalities. Officers were George Sabona, Mathew Tomsha, Peter Duda, John Weiss and Martin Catlos.

The site of the club, a half acre on lots 55 and 56 originally owned by John Straughan, one of the founders of Salem, is significant historically. The brick building was the fourth to occupy the southwest corner of Wilson Street and South Ellsworth Avenue. The first was a log church built in 1809 by the Baptist Church and used for both Baptist and Methodist worship services. Eleven years later, the log house was replaced with a small brick building. In 1830, that a frame building was erected. The Baptist cemetery was on adjacent lot 57, north of the church on the northwest corner, later the site of the Church Budget building.

About 1853, the frame building was replaced with the brick house which was remodeled and expanded over the years. The home was residences for two businessmen, William Silver, treasurer of the Silver Mfg. Co.; and Simeon Sharp, one of the owners of the Buckeye Engine Co. The house was the site of a funeral business and home of the Salem Community Service Association before the Memorial Building was constructed in 1924.

Boy and Girl scouts had offices there and area soldiers camped out in the house during World War I before shipping out to Camp Sheridan in Alabama. Red Cross offices were located there during the city's typhoid epidemic of 1920 and 1921.

Marcella Kemats Gabriel has fond memories of the Slovak Club brick house which was

replaced in 1995 with a modern new facility, and shed more than a few tears when the old club home was torn down to make way for the new. Marcella's parents, Margaret and Andy Kemats, were club managers for 16 years beginning in 1944 when Marcella was five years old.

Andy Kemats was relieved to leave his life as a coal miner in West Point, and move to Salem with his family of six youngsters to assume the position at the Slovak Club. Marcella was the baby of the family, followed by Pauline, Andy, John, Marge and Barbara. Andy got a day job at the Sanitary and Margaret ran the club during the day. At night, they worked together.

The Kemats family lived in quarters set aside for the club management. A bathroom, small kitchen and living room was situated at the rear of the huge club room on the first floor, and the family slept in the three bedrooms on the second floor.

On the third floor, whiskey, beer and wine was stored. "I was always afraid of that attic," Marcella says. "We could always hear the strangest noises coming from up there."

With the bathroom situated in the club room, the Kemats children had to choose a time for bathing when few if any patrons were around, so privacy was at a premium.

Nevertheless, they all enjoyed living there, Marcella says.

For the Kemats children, the move to Salem from West Point was stepping into a world of luxury. "We couldn't get over it," Marcella says today. "We had electricity, the ice man brought us huge chunks of ice, and we could buy bread at a store, rather than baking it ourselves. That house holds a special place for me. Even though it's gone, going back to the new building revives so many memories. I'm sure the telephone booth they've got today is the same one they had back then; if it is, underneath the shelf is carved the initials MK and EG."

Marcella and Eugene Gabriel were back at the club last weekend for the 75th anniversary celebration of the founding. Her nephew, David Fortney, her sister Barbara's son, is president of the Slovak Club. "I always have such a good time there," Marcella says. "The people are so nice, and I enjoy the picnics and the polka bands. And being there sets me to reminiscing about my growing up years."

A veteran war plane

One of the most enduring military aircraft was the Avro Anson, a twin-engine plane flown by Britain's Royal Air Force from 1936 to 1968. The versatile Anson was nicknamed "Faithful Annie" for its reliability. It originally was used in anti-submarine warfare by the RAF Coastal Command. It also was used as a transport, for navigation training and as an air ambulance.



Taking part in Salem's Sesquicentennial celebration in 1956 are Slovak Club members who dressed up as their ancestors did 100 years earlier (top photo). In bottom photo, families enjoy one of the club's numerous home cooked dinners in the 1950s.

Liberty, symbol of patriotism

By Lois Firestone

For the immigrants coming to the United States from the old country, the Statue of Liberty was the symbol of the freedom to live a new life in a democracy. Its beginning was the seed of an idea that grew out of a casual dinner conversation between a French historian and a sculptor.

It took place in 1865 during a banquet in a town near Versailles, France. Historian Edouard de Laboulaye had recently published a three-volume history of the United States, a country he ardently admired, and was aware of the country's approaching centennial celebrating its independence.

When he suggested to his dinner partner, sculptor Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi that France should present the Americans with an impressive gift, Bartholdi immediately thought about a massive statue. The idea died at the dinner, but was revived in 1871 as the sculptor sailed into the mouth of the New York harbor on his first visit to the U.S. The 12-acre Bedloe's Island would be a perfect site for the pedestal of a huge statue, he thought.

Before the ship docked the

artist completed rough sketches of his "Liberty Enlightening the World." Five years later, she was unveiled, 152 feet high and weighing 225 tons, her flowing robes comprised of over 300 sheets of hand-hammered copper.

The moving lines, "Give me our tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free" wasn't added until 1903, when she was identified with immigrants entering on Ellis Island.

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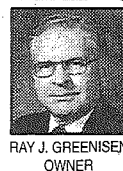
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