

## The Czech Texans



*Frances Drozd Mendl in an embroidered Czech outfit, c. 1933.*

Czech presence in Texas has been clear and profound. For this group of Slavic peoples, language preservation marked, at one time, their ethnicity. Other traditions are obvious—foods and music among them—and for these people, farming was not just an occupation but a philosophic life goal.

Many Czechs arriving from 1850 to the First World War considered the establishment of a self-sufficient farm as the most desirable, proper, creative way of life, not simply a way to make a living. On the ideal Czech farm, the family raised one cash crop (cotton or corn in Texas) and produced everything else they needed. The cash crop bought anything that could not be grown or made at home.

Before a Czech wedding could take place, the prospective couple had to own or rent land on which to farm. Nearly all farms created a prosperous life for the first two generations. The Czech way of life is also described in other words: responsible work.

The Czechs, arriving long before the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, were a Slavic people of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. Texas became home for many of the Moravians, and the Moravian dialects became Texas Czech. Perhaps because of their many European years of domination by other peoples, Czechs arrived in Texas with a love of democracy and individuality.

Immigrants settled in some 250 Czech communities mostly on the Blackland Prairie. Lavaca and Fayette Counties were heavily settled, with small centers appearing in Brazos, Burleson, and Williamson Counties. North of these areas, Czechs settled in Bell, McLennon, Ellis, Hill, and Kaufman Counties. Texas's Coastal Plain, below and within the German Belt, attracted hundreds of families.

Fayetteville, originally a German settlement, became Czech by the 20th century. The city is often called the "cradle of Czech settlement in Texas."

Many Czech families, even though not settling nearby, passed through on their way up-country.

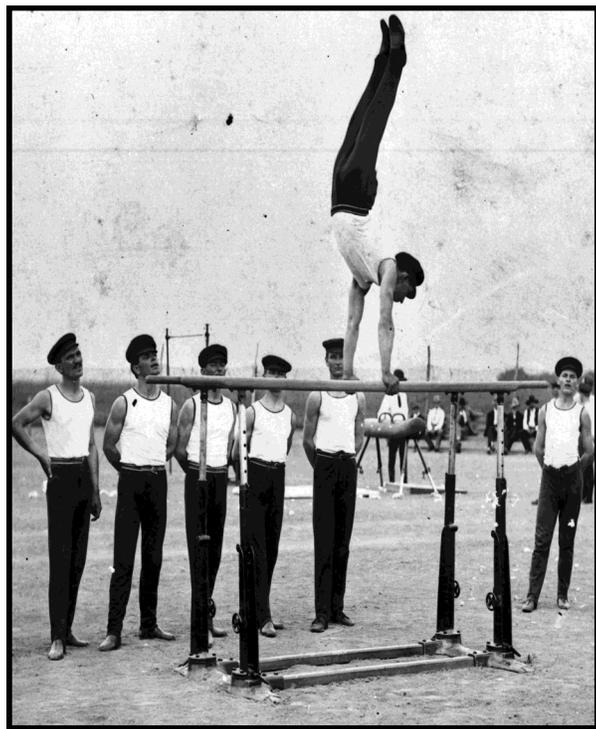


*Baca's Family Band, Fayetteville, 1907*

For the Czechs, the retention of language, in addition to the establishment of farms, was key to their culture. Czech language classes were started everywhere there were Czechs. School lessons in Czech were held at Cat Spring by 1855, and Josef Mašík opened classes at Wesley in 1859. By 1870 the school at Praha combined Czech with English instruction.

This emphasis led to a widespread organization of Czech-language newspapers. Some 33 publications were established, and, even though the use of Czech dramatically declined, two papers remain: *Našinec* at Granger (using the Moravian-Texas dialect) and *Hospodár* at West (using the Czech of Prague).

Such a strong retention of language undoubtedly has much to do with the oral literatures—folktales, sayings, and songs—that remain in Czech areas. Czech communities, supported by strong fraternal and insurance organizations, still embrace wedding ceremonies, foods, music, and recent costume reproductions that are unmistakably European.



*Sokol meet in Granger*

Czech organizations were not all fraternal. In 1915 Czechs were instrumental in influencing the University of Texas at Austin to establish a Chair of Slavic Languages. One of the most interesting organizations is the *Sokol* (“falcon”), which advocates the equal development of both mind and body. Essentially classical Greek in concept, the organization was founded in Prague in 1862, making its way to Texas by 1908. *Sokol* groups engage in gymnastics, dancing, singing, art, and literature.

Today, over 200,000 Czech descendants maintain several community museums and a number of festivals in the state. Most Czechs have now left the family farm for urban occupations, as did most people in Texas, but some smaller settlements remain on the map and in people's hearts.



*Wedding of Charles H. and Bertha Knesek Cmajdalkda in Fayetteville with the Fayetteville City Band*

# TEXANS ONE AND ALL: THE CZECH TEXANS

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ PERIOD: \_\_\_\_\_

The “push-pull” theory says that people migrate because things in their lives *push* them to leave, and things in a new place *pull* them.  
*Instructions: Decide what environmental factors push and pull people. Complete the graphic organizer below using the word bank.*



**Environmental Push Factors**

**Environmental Pull Factors**



**WORD BANK**

Natural Disasters	Good Weather
More Living Space	Drought
Crowded Cities	Farmable Land

## Czech Settlers in Texas

In 1852, sixteen Czech families landed at Galveston. They were the first group of Czechs to arrive in Texas, although there were already a few Czech people in the state.

Most of the early Czech settlers were farmers and settled in central Texas. Many believed that having a farm was the best and most creative way of life. Farming for them was more than just making a living.

The Czechs looked for good land for their farms. A story says that when they saw some good land, they turned off the road. They kept going until their ox carts got stuck in deep mud. This thick, black soil that stopped their carts would be good for growing crops so that’s where they settled.

Today, Czech Texans live all over the state. Many of them live and work in cities, but their grandfathers were probably farmers.

When did the first group of Czech families arrive in Texas?

\_\_\_\_\_

What kind of work did most early Czech settlers do?

\_\_\_\_\_

According to the story, how did Czech settlers decide where to live when they arrived in Texas?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Digging Deeper

Using **Texans One and All: The Czech Texans**, answer the following questions about why Czech immigrants moved to Texas and what their life was like in the state.

Many Czechs that moved to Texas in the 19th century came with the goal of starting self-sufficient farms. What was grown on an ideal Czech farm?

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How can Czech life be described in one word? \_\_\_\_\_

Find the list of counties where Czech settlements could be found in Texas. Use your gazetteer to locate these counties, and shade them in on the map below.



Why do you think Czech settlers chose to live in these areas?

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## Preserving Czech Culture

In addition to farming, what did Czechs believe was the key to holding onto their culture?

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How did Czechs ensure that this part of their culture continued?

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Why do you think this part of their culture was important to them?

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Do you practice cultural traditions that are important to your family? Why or why not?

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## Summarize What You Learned

Write 2 sentences to summarize what you learned about Czech Texans and environmental push and pull factors.

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