

For MORE than
FIVE DECADES, YUKON'S
CZECH FESTIVAL
has BEEN a CELEBRATION
of SONG, DANCE, and a
UNIQUE CULTURE.



Folk

Medicine



Story & Photography by DAVID JOSHUA JENNINGS

Dancers in traditional Czech *Kroje*—the national dress of the Czech Republic—warm up before the Oklahoma Czech Festival in Yukon.



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from the three historical regions of the Czech Republic—
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audience to join in. They do so eagerly and en masse.



LAUGHING AND JOYOUS, holding hands and proceeding two-by-two, the dancers outfitted in traditional Czech *Kroje*—the national dress of the Czech Republic—promenade out of Yukon’s Czechs Inc. Building and form a circle before the crowd. Their arms are locked, and they are ready to leap and prance around in circles while the polka band plays nearby. The scene is reminiscent of some central European village fair. A gentleman strolls by wearing what looks like a hat from Peter Pan, holding *klobasy* smothered in sauerkraut. Little girls in embroidered skirts, each adorned with a halo of flowers, two-step past, giggling. Other men stand nearby with wooden axes, ready to swing them in unison.

This is the Oklahoma Czech Festival, one of the largest free outdoor festivals in Oklahoma. For hours, with the aroma of fresh-baked kolaches in the air, men, women, and children from Oklahoma Czechs Inc. perform dances from the three historical regions of the Czech Republic—Bohemia, Moravia, and Czech Silesia—inviting the audience to join in. They do so eagerly and en masse. Soon, nearly everyone is dancing.

THE FESTIVAL BEGAN in 1966 as a one-off event to celebrate Yukon’s seventy-fifth anniversary by honoring the city’s Czech heritage. But demand for a repeat the next year was so intense that it has persisted ever since.

Oklahoma City resident Elaine Benda, who coordinates all the dancing at the celebration, has been involved with the festival since before she was born. Her mother, LaVerne Svejkovsky Benda, who helped create the celebration, was eight months pregnant with Elaine during the inaugural event. From 1950 until she passed her responsibilities to her daughter, LaVerne was in charge of organizing the dance routines and teaching traditional dances to the Czech community in Yukon.

“These dances are precious to us,” Elaine says. “They are our living history, passed down person to person to each of us in our community.”

Top left, LaVerne Svejkovsky and Victor Benda began dancing as teenagers before eventually getting married. Top right, the Bendas in their Beseda dance circle in the early 1950s. Right, junior royalty enjoy their reign following the festival at the Oklahoma Czech Hall.





The festival, Benda says, is an expression of a community that is deeply rooted in its heritage. The celebration may have begun more than fifty years ago, but traditional music and dance have been a part of Czech culture in Oklahoma since before statehood.

The first Czechs to arrive to Oklahoma Territory were part of a larger wave of central European immigration to the United States from the mid-1850s to the beginning of the first World War. Having fled the Habsburg Empire's rule over Czech-speaking lands for political or economic reasons, once in the United States, many Czechs organized immigrant colonies in Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, and Texas. From there, they were drawn to Oklahoma by the land runs of the late 1800s. During the runs, a number of Czechs organized themselves, agreeing to try to claim land close to one another. The resulting claims helped establish the roots of the Czech communities in towns such as Yukon and Prague.

When founding or moving to a new town, one of the first priorities for Czech immigrants was to

Left, Elaine Benda, whose mother LaVerne Svejkovsky Benda helped found the festival in 1966, has participated since childhood.

build a dance hall. Benda recalls her grandparents' stories. They would take hours-long weekend drives down dirt roads after long days on the farm to reach the nearest Czech Hall, where the dancing sometimes lasted until dawn.

"After all that toil of working on the farm," Benda says. "And then sometimes getting stuck on dirt roads at two in the morning on the way back because of a rut in the road or a flat tire—it shows their dedication to getting to the Czech Hall. It shows how much they loved it and how important it was to them."

It's no surprise that this love of song and dance is so deeply rooted in Czech culture and community. These performing arts were a way to preserve Czech identity in their homeland during the three-hundred-year rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which suppressed Czech language and culture. Once in the United States, these touchstones helped hold Czech people together.

STARTING IN THE morning and going all day long, Yukon's Czech Festival offers a sense of this togetherness, but the festivities always reach their apex at the nearby Czech Hall in the evening. First constructed in 1899, Yukon's Czech Hall is a center

Left, the *Mužská kolo* dance—translated as "men's circle"—is a men-only dance and comes from south-central Moravia in the Czech Republic. The Oklahoma Czechs Inc. Building exterior includes a mural depicting the Czech capital of Prague.



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of Czech-American culture in Oklahoma. A polka dance has happened here every Saturday night since 1930. These days, dances are powered by the music of two local polka bands: the Masopust Polka Band and the Bohemian Knights.

The dances a visitor might see at the Czech Hall or the festival were brought by early Czech settlers and immigrants to Oklahoma, with each community and each dance perhaps having a different story and lineage. The Beseda, for example, was developed in the 1800s and became a symbol of pride and unity in the Czech Republic. In Yukon, Anna Smrcka, an officer of the Yukon Sokol lodge, learned it from a man known as Professor Kadlec, who was visiting from the old country and introduced the Beseda to a dance group at the Yukon Czech Hall in 1922. Smrcka taught it to LaVerne Svejksky Benda, who in

Dancers gather for a group photo outside of the Czechs Inc. Building in Yukon.

turn taught it to her daughter Elaine, who continues to teach it today.

Other dances have a different lineage. Many were passed down by Elaine's mother, or introduced by Elaine, who taught herself a number of traditional Czech dances from documentaries she acquired during a trip to the Czech Republic in 1996. Benda says these dances serve as a link to her ancestors and a shared past in central Europe. They are reminders, she says, of the sacrifices that made it possible for Czech-Americans to be where they are today.

"Most of us here have family in the Czech Republic," Benda says. "Even if it's an eighteenth cousin, there is a connection. Nearly everyone has relatives over there, and it's nice to think we're all connected, that we're doing the same thing, that there's this family tree that stretches across the world, that they're having festivals and events and dances and carrying on the same traditions, just like we are here, thousands of miles away in Oklahoma." ■

GET THERE

THE OKLAHOMA CZECH FESTIVAL
Saturday, October 6 in downtown Yukon. The parade kicks off at 10 a.m. on Main Street. czechfestivaloklahoma.com.

YUKON CZECH HALL
Dances are every Saturday night at 8 p.m. 205 North Czech Hall Road in Yukon. (405) 721-4396 or czechhall.com. Those wishing to learn more about Czech dancing classes may email ebenda@aol.com.