

Heritage Happenings

Newsletter of Friends of Bohemian National Cemetery

Winter Issue ~ Vol. XIX No. 3

January 2023

carol jean smetana, editor

Mission Statement:

Promote the historical significance, enhance the beauty, and preserve the artistic heritage of Bohemian National Cemetery

Vision:

Create an appreciation of BNC in local, national, and international audiences



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What's New with Friends of BNC

As you drive into the cemetery, the World Wars I and II Memorial, with its 44-foot flagpole, is in direct view. The memorial consists of eight stone panels depicting scenes of the battles and/or geography of the fighting in each war. One of the World War II panels shows the swastika, hated emblem of the Nazis. The World Wars I and II Memorial was dedicated on September 21, 1952,



as part of the celebration of the cemetery's 75th anniversary. The dedication, attended by a huge crowd, was a really big affair with the Fifth Army Band, songs by the Bohemian men's chorus Lyra, and a wreath-laying.

This important memorial has greeted visitors for over 70 years, but the wear and tear of Chicago winters have taken a toll. The stone steps are crumbling, and the whole structure needs to be repaired or

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Live from BNC

As reported in the last issue of *Heritage Happenings*, the World Wars I and II Memorial has experienced considerable deterioration since its dedication in 1952. More than ever as our veterans age and die and memories of them fade away, our war memorials and monuments become ever important in keeping alive their memory and sacrifice. Friends will be sending out a

mailing soon to announce a fundraising effort to make important repairs to this memorial.

One of the ongoing concerns raised by Chicago's city drivers and visitors to Bohemian National Cemetery involves the persistent and annoying development of roadway potholes. This past November, Power Paving Co. was

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Heritage Happenings

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Manuscripts, articles, photographs, and advertisements for *Heritage Happenings* may be submitted to carol jean smetana, 511B 9th St, Las Vegas, NM 87701-3911 or emailed to her at editor@friendsofbnc.org.

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from the editor's laptop

Research is one of my passions, which is why I enjoy writing the stone stories. I always find information I don't have room to include in the story. For instance, one art historian suggests that Charles Sarka, the hero of this issue's story, might be considered "the father of the American graphic novel," based on an unpublished 1921 manuscript, written and illustrated by Sarka, called Song Without Music. (See <https://www.artinsociety.com/the-discovery-of-an-early-graphic-novel.html>.)

And there's always "one more source" to research. Charles Sarka's papers, which include an unpublished diary he wrote during his travels in Tahiti, are housed at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Will there be any mention of his family and Chicago youth in his papers and letters? Next time I'm in Washington DC . . .

Finally, a couple of administrative notes. If you haven't renewed your membership recently, please take time to do so now. If you are unsure about your membership status, you can email me at editor@friendsofbnc.org (or contact me via mail at my Las Vegas address at left), and I will let you know if you need to renew.

Friends of Bohemian National Cemetery has changed its mailing address to 5255 N Pulaski Rd, Chicago, IL 60630-1701. We no longer have a post office box.

*Na shledanou
carol*

Děkuji Vám!

Chuck Michalek for writing the report on the use of our grant monies from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic;

Carol Jean Smetana for so expertly editing our newsletter and monitoring our Square account to receive monies on the webpage.

Welcome to Our New Members!

Carol Crosson ... Clarendon Hills IL
Raymond Hemzacek ... Hinsdale IL
Barbara Huaman ... Elmwood Park IL
Mary Ellen Janda ... LaGrange Park IL
Zdenka Novak ... Chicago IL
Kathleen Riha ... Lyons IL
Lisa Smisek ... Dyer IN
Barbara & Jerry Sullivan ... Lemont IL
Richard Sykora ... Cicero IL

What's New with Friends of BNC

(continued from first page)

possibly rebuilt—the experts don't yet know which. This will be our focus for fundraising in 2023.

SAVE THE DATE!

Friends of BNC is cooperating with several Czech organizations and the Bohemian National Cemetery Association to help host a commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the birthday of Mayor Anton Cermak. Cermak is the most famous resident of our cemetery, and many government officials visiting Chicago from the Czech Republic make a pilgrimage to the cemetery to lay a wreath at the Cermak family mausoleum. All members of Friends of BNC are invited to attend this special event on May 6, 2023, that will include a gathering at the mausoleum in Section 21, followed by a presentation honoring Cermak's life. We will post more details as they become available on our website, www.friendsofbnc.org.



Anton Cermak was born on May 9, 1873, in Kladno, Bohemia. He died on March 6, 1933. He was entombed three days later in the Cermak family mausoleum in a ceremony reportedly attended by 150,000 people. The mausoleum, with its Art Deco elements, was built in 1928-29 by the Heller Brothers monument firm.

Marge Sladek Stueckemann
President

Upcoming Events at Bohemian National Cemetery

Saturday, May 6
Celebration of 150th anniversary of
Anton Cermak's birth.
Watch for details on our website.

Winter office hours:
8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. weekdays;
Closed Saturday and Sundays.

Cemetery Grounds are open from
7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m daily.

Stories of the Stones: A Race with Death

by carol jean smetana

The Classical Revival sculpture of a mourning woman keeping eternal vigil over the graves in the Kučera-Dubsky family lot at Bohemian National Cemetery stands on a pedestal engraved with eleven names. But the names of one couple interred in this lot are absent: Marie Boček Šárka (1854–1904) and her husband Mathew Šárka (1845–1928).

Marie and Mathew were Bohemian immigrants who married in Chicago on May 19, 1873. They had three children: Julia, born in 1874; Marie, born in 1878; and Charles, born in 1879. In 1880 the family, including Mathew's parents, was living on DeKoven Street near St. Wenceslaus Church, in the old Praha neighborhood northeast of Pilsen. Mathew worked as a picture frame gilder to support his family.

In 1900 Mathew was still working as a gilder. He and Marie and their daughter Marie were living in South Chicago. Their daughter Julia had married two years earlier and was living nearby with her husband John Todd. Their son Charles had left Chicago to pursue a career as an artist and in 1900 was living in Philadelphia. Charles would later recall that his father Mathew had supported his interest in art when Charles was a boy, encouraging him to develop his skills by copying pictures that Mathew

was framing and by drawing portraits of his sisters.



Sister Julia by Charles Sarka, late 1890s (Image from Philip McCouat, "Sarka of the South Seas", Journal of Art in Society www.artinsociety.com)

By the age of 16, Charles was illustrating news events as a staff artist for the *Chicago Record*, where he worked for several years before moving east.

In early 1904 Marie Šárka, only 50 years old, fell gravely ill. A newspaper article reported that, wanting to see her only son one last time, she sent word that she was dying to Charles, who at the time was in Tahiti painting. And thus began what the *Chicago Tribune* would describe as Charles Sarka's "long race with death."

Several papers, including the *Tribune* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, published dramatic accounts detailing how "Twenty days

ago, realizing that she was near death, Mrs. Mathew Sarka... had a message sent to her only son at Tutuila [an island in the South Seas]. Sarka was fortunate in catching a homeward-bound vessel the next day and made a quick voyage to San Francisco." Charles, "not halting in his nineteen days' journey from the South Sea Islands ... arrived at his South Chicago home six hours before his mother passed away."

The newspaper stories were perhaps embellished a bit. Charles had sailed to Tahiti in August 1903; he and a fellow artist planned to spend several months



"Last Link of Union Loop at State and Van Buren Street" illustration by Charles Sarka, *Chicago Record*, January 1, 1897. The caption read in part: "At State and Van Buren streets the contractors for the Union Elevated loop have erected the largest single span on the system. It measures more than 100 feet, and a day and a half was taken in getting the iron in position."

exploring the islands, sketching and painting. In a newspaper interview from the 1930s, Charles recounted that he and his friend would always be sure to be in Papeete, Tahiti, for “steamer day,” when the ship from San Francisco would arrive.

According to newspaper reports, Charles was in Tahiti when he learned his mother was ill. In this scenario,

WINS. LONG RACE WITH DEATH.
Charles Sarka Comes from South Sea Islands in Time to See His Mother.

Not halting in his nineteen days' journey from the South Sea Islands, Charles Sarka, the cartoonist, won a race with death yesterday when he arrived at his home in South Chicago six hours before his mother passed away. He had broken the record for a quick passage from the remote part of the Pacific ocean, where he had received tidings of his mother's dangerous illness. Twenty days ago, realizing that she was

Chicago Tribune, February 21, 1904

Charles, as was his habit, would have been in Papeete when the ship (and its cargo of mail) arrived. When he received news of his mother's illness, he booked passage on the steamer's departure the next day.

Charles and his friend are listed as passengers on the SS *Mariposa* that departed Papeete, Tahiti, on January 22, 1904, and arrived in San Francisco on February 3. The journey, which took 12 days and six hours, was reportedly delayed several hours by engine trouble, rough seas and a headwind. Early Thursday morning, February 4, the ship and its passengers cleared customs.

There's the problem: Marie died on February 19, two weeks *after* Charles had

returned to the United States. According to her death certificate, Marie had been ill for six months with heart problems. Two weeks before her death, around February 5, she developed a kidney disease, which would be the immediate cause of her death. But Charles and his artist friend arrived in San Francisco on February 4. Is it possible their departure from Tahiti, after spending five months there, had been planned and had nothing to do with Marie Šárka's illness?

The *Tribune* claimed Sarka hadn't halted “in his nineteen days' journey from the South Sea Islands.” At the time, rail service between San Francisco and Chicago was provided by the *Overland Limited*. Trains departed daily in both directions, and the eastbound trip, departing San Francisco at 7 pm local time, took about 85 hours—about three and a half days. If Charles caught the train the evening of his arrival in San Francisco, February 4, he would have reached Chicago at 9:30 am local time the following Monday, February 8. But Marie died February 19, at 12:45 am in the early morning, and the papers reported that Charles arrived only six hours before his mother passed. Did Charles actually travel directly from Tahiti to Chicago, without any interruption in his journey?

Perhaps he had been in San Francisco, not Tahiti, when he learned of his mother's condition. Perhaps Charles had already returned

home to the east coast. Perhaps word wasn't sent immediately upon Marie taking seriously ill. Perhaps he took a different train, one that arrived in Chicago late in the afternoon rather than early in the morning. Perhaps Charles had already been in Chicago several days before his mother died.

So this may be an apocryphal story, but still we can believe in its essence: a son, long absent from his family, returns home in time to be with his mother during her final hours on earth.

“For six hours he sat at the bedside of his mother, who had made a desperate battle against death, that she might once more greet her son.”

“His mother revived in her son's presence and was able to speak with him before she died, at 12 o'clock.”



During World War I, one of Charles Sarka's illustrations was made into a poster to support the war effort. (Image from UBC Library Digitization Centre, no restrictions, via Wikimedia Commons.)

Donations

Leadership

(\$10,000 and above)

Chuck Michalek

Benefactors

(\$1000—\$9999)

Carol Crosson

Carol Krauser

Pavla Peroutka

Jim Trnka

Patrons

(\$500—\$999)

Marilyn Cerny

CSA Fraternal Life District 12

Joan G. McAvoy

Jane Pugh

Brad Suster

Sponsors

(\$100—\$499)

Edward Avis *in memory of* Roy Brabec

CSA Fraternal Life (matching funds for lodge donations)

CSA Lodge Harrison/Hus/Garfield

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George and Beth Drost

Lori-Jo Fergle

MaryEllen Flaks

Joseph and Lillian Hahn

Joanne Herber

Jeanne Hoesley

Edward Kletecka

Karen Kramer

Kimberly Kubat Martin *in memory of* Kabat, Čermák, Sheber, Linhart,

Rejlek and Beneš family

members *buried at BNC*

C & R Malin Charitable Fund

Barbara Pechota

Raymond Riha

Bill Rosol

Marge Stueckemann *in memory of* Wayne Wolf and Thelma

Malecek

Cheryl Svoboda

Donors

(\$25—\$99)

CSA Lodge Woodrow Wilson

Patricia DeVoe

Raymond Hemzacek

Kevin Hurbanis

Walter Johnston

William and Crystal Kerins

Joann Poplar

Sikorovsky Fund

Janet Smart

Richard Sykora

Gerald Vovis

Thank you all for your generosity.

Your donations help preserve and restore Bohemian National Cemetery.

Checking In at BNC



Visiting Bohemian National Cemetery

are (left to right): Chuck Michalek, Friends of BNC volunteer; Markéta Pilátová, Czech journalist; and Ondřej Pometlo, Deputy Consul General of the Czech Republic in Chicago



Columbarium Restoration Project Committee

on the steps of the crematorium/columbarium building are *(left to right):* Chuck Michalek, Linda Tassin, Chuck Betzold

Live from BNC

(continued from first page)

again contracted to repair sections of BNC’s roadways.

Another ongoing maintenance concern involves falling trees and branches, which continue to be removed by Chuck Betzold’s weekly team of volunteer “lumberjacks.” Our ongoing appreciation is extended to volunteers and donors who help maintain the cemetery.

Recent visitors to BNC included several employees from CSA Fraternal Life’s main office. Anna Thrush, CSA Compliance Officer, and Kelly Deegan, Fraternal Programs Manager, visited some of our historic buildings and monuments. BNCA and CSA enjoy a longstanding

fraternal relationship going back to the cemetery’s founding. During BNC’s centennial year of 1977, there were 27 CSA lodges who sponsored BNCA delegates. Members of CSA’s network of fraternal lodges continue to



CSA Fraternal Life employees Kelly Deegan (left) and Anna Thrush in front of the CSA symbol in Ceremony Hall

serve as both BNCA delegates and board members and participate in yearly volunteer Join Hands Day activities at BNC.

This past fall, Prague magazine writer Markéta Pilátová visited BNC, accompanied by Ondřej Pometlo, Czech Republic Deputy Consul General in Chicago. In her article, written for the Czech-language magazine *Respekt*, Ms. Pilátová described her trip to the cemetery and her admiration of its historic legacy and the fraternal spirit evident during her visit.

Chuck Michalek
Friends of BNC Volunteer
Wednesday Volunteer

Columbarium Restoration Project Update

Last year marked a significant accomplishment for Friends in achieving some of the goals set out in the 2014 “Survey and Master Plan for the Columbarium/Memorial Hall Building” document. In fall 2022, thanks to ongoing donations and support, significant repairs and improvements were made to the crematorium/columbarium building’s north façade and main stairway entrance. One of the challenges involved repositioning large limestone segments of the cheek walls, which had begun to shift out of alignment due to

Chicago’s freeze-thaw cycles. Replacing these large curved limestone pieces would have been cost-prohibitive. The recent work repositioned pieces to stabilize them and allow for grinding and repointing of connecting joints. Sealants and caulk were used to seal stairway intersections, and the entire north façade received a power wash followed by grinding and repointing of masonry. Be sure to check out the improvements during your next visit to BNC.

Much of the planning and communication with contractors and the BNCA

Board involved a dedicated committee of volunteers and Friends of BNC members: Chuck Michalek (chair), Linda Tassin and Chuck Betzold (see photo page 6).



Friends of Bohemian National Cemetery

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Website: www.friendsofbnc.org



Heritage Happenings January 2023

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL REMINDER

Your membership in Friends of Bohemian National Cemetery is vital to the preservation of our cemetery. As a member, you will receive our quarterly newsletter and be entitled to discounts on merchandise. Above all, you will enjoy the satisfaction of knowing you are helping to maintain, improve and beautify Bohemian National Cemetery.

Our membership year is January - December. This means that **all memberships, except those renewed for two years last year, expired December 31, 2022.** New members joining in the last quarter of a year (Sept.-Dec.) receive those 3 months as a bonus, and their membership year begins the following January.

Renew now, if you haven't yet done so—by mail or save a stamp and renew on our secure website <https://friendsofbnc.org>.

Memberships:

One year: \$30 individual; \$40 family;
\$25 senior

Two years: \$55 individual; \$70 family;
\$45 senior

Send renewal form with check payable to
Friends of BNC or credit card information
to:

**Friends of Bohemian National
Cemetery—Membership**
5255 N Pulaski Rd
Chicago IL 60630-1701

Friends of BNC is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit
public charity. To make a tax-deductible
donation to fund improvements at BNC,
please write a separate check with a
notation on the memo line. Thank you.

Membership Renewal

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip Code (+ 4) _____

E-mail _____

Phone Number _____

Type of Membership _____

For credit card payment (Visa, Master Card, Discover, American Express), include:

Card number _____ Expiration date _____

Security code _____ Signature _____