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The American Sokol Organization in Manitowoc County: Physical Fitness Through Gymnastics

By: Eugene Krejcarek

Editor's Note:

For 130 years the American Sokol Organization has helped to instill in youngsters and adults a strong sense of the value of physical and moral fitness. The Sokol movement was popular among many Manitowoc County youth of Bohemian descent during the early 1900's. Local units were established at Polifka's Corners, Melnik, Rosecrans and Manitowoc. The Sokols promoted the benefits of regular exercise, encouraged adherence to traditional values and helped preserve the customs of the Bohemian ancestral homeland.

The author of the monograph, Eugene Krejcarek, is a retired Manitowoc elementary school teacher and principal, and a life member of the Manitowoc County Historical Society. Gene was born on a small 5-cow farm in the Town of Franklin, and has fond memories of his active involvement with the Sokol unit at Polifka's Corners.

This is the second monograph written by Mr. Krejcarek. An earlier work on "Fishing in Manitowoc County" (#9) appeared in 1969. He is also the author of "Agriculture" published by the society in 1990. Gene's interest in his Bohemian heritage is reflected in other published articles on plants, seeds and cooking traditions. He is currently writing the history of the "Rahr School Forest" and "Lumbering in Manitowoc County" for future publication.

WHAT IS SOKOL?

Sokol is an organization dedicated to the physical, mental and cultural advancement of its members and the children who attend its gymnasiums. It is based upon the theory that only physically fit, mentally alert, and culturally

well-developed citizens can form a healthy, strong nation.

"Nazdar!" is the official Sokol greeting which is interpreted as meaning, "On to victory" or "On towards success." The word Sokol means Falcon in English, the daring, fearless bird, famous in song and story. It was adopted as the official name for the organization because of its independence, strength, and fearless defense of its domain. It flies high with the eagle — ever on guard.

The organization was conceived in Prague, Czechoslovakia, by Dr. Miroslav Tyrs in 1862. Its fundamental ideas can be practiced in any democratic, freedom loving nation. It is intense in its patriotism, sincere in its search for truth in every phase of life, and determined in its efforts to make this country ever stronger, finer, and better as a home for its people.

Dr. Tyrs was an exceptional philosopher, aesthetic, art critic, teacher and leader of men. He was above all an ardent patriot. He was born in Tyrol, Austria, on September 17, 1832. He was orphaned at age seven; but with the help of his uncle, he received a good education, graduating with honors from Charles University. He was interested in athletics, especially gymnastics and realized that any nation must be physically fit, morally

strong, and intelligent, to secure its independence and retain it. He was promoted to Doctor of Philosophy at Charles University and was a member of the editorial staff of Rieger's Encyclopedia as he formulated his Sokol plan.

Tyrs describes the Sokol's Credo as follows:

"Our first and overall task rests in the premise that before any other demands we must preserve our nation in that general vigor, that does not allow a nation to die, in that steady and fresh strength, in that physical, spiritual and moral health, that will not allow any decay to set in and with that no



Dr. Miroslav Tyrs
Founder of the Sokol Movement

stagnation, that worse, even criminal action perpetrated upon nations."

According to Tyrs, the Sokol Physical Training Goals included the following:

- 1) To strengthen and improve the health of individuals.
- 2) To train people of strong will, capable of self-denial, people of firm and constant characters who can put their plans into action.
- 3) To form of them competent working units.
- 4) To teach them to work for society and in society.
- 5) To make them the basis of a healthier posterity.
- 6) To increase their defensive capacity.
- 7) To influence them by beauty, and to inculcate in them a sense of beauty.
- 8) To make them forever conscious that liberty and freedom are a priceless gift, its protection a sacred duty.

Considered as the co-founder of the Sokol organization was a man named Jindrich Fuegner. He became Tyr's natural partner in the Sokol movement. He drew to the young Sokol organization many outstanding men of his time



Commemorative Stamp issued by the government of The United States on February 15, 1965, honoring the centennial of the Sokols in America.

Another name who spearheaded the movement was Dr. Joseph Scheiner. He worked as an assistant to Tyrs and remained in charge for 32 years. His brilliant mind created hundreds of editorials that guide the Sokols to this day. He was the father of the instructor's school in Prague. During World War I, he led the underground and became Inspector General of the Czechoslovak army. A fearless, noble, and understanding man, he helped lead his nation to world recognition.

A final name, but certainly not any less important, is that of Renata Fuegner-Tyrs. She was the daughter of one founder of Sokol and wife of another. She married Dr. Tyrs at age 18. Her interests were intense in languages, science, and creative arts. She was superintendent of Prague Girls Technical School and later director of Prague Technical High Schools. She was the first woman honorary member of the American Sokol Organization. She was active in encouraging the retention of folkcraft and needlework as well as the use of native costumes. Her work in humanitarian causes brought her the love and respect of the entire nation.

She was in the forefront of the battle for women's rights, the education of all girls, and especially active in her efforts for children.

Sokol organizations were strong and large in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Poland and Russia before the Nazis and Communists dissolved them. Membership was close to two million.

Sokols are active today in England, France, Switzerland, Austria, Canada, Argentina,



Polifka's Corners Sokol. Edwin Hynek, Trainer (deceased). Bottom row, left to right: Clara Chizek, Viola Krejcarek Popelar, Marcella Krejcarek Frellich, Grace Krall Hynek, Jean Chizek. Middle row: John Sleger, Erwin Kubsch, Ted Zigmunt, Eugene Krejcarek, Gordon Popelar, Joe Hynek (deceased), Norman Kubsch, Robert Van Haren. Top row: Edward Krejcarek, Clarence Popelar, Melvin Krejcarek, Harvey Polifka, Jerome Sleger.

(Photo Courtesy Gordon and Vi Popelar.)

Brazil, South Africa, Belgium, Australia and Morocco.

It was natural that as Bohemian settlers arrived in the United States, they would bring the Sokol philosophy with them.

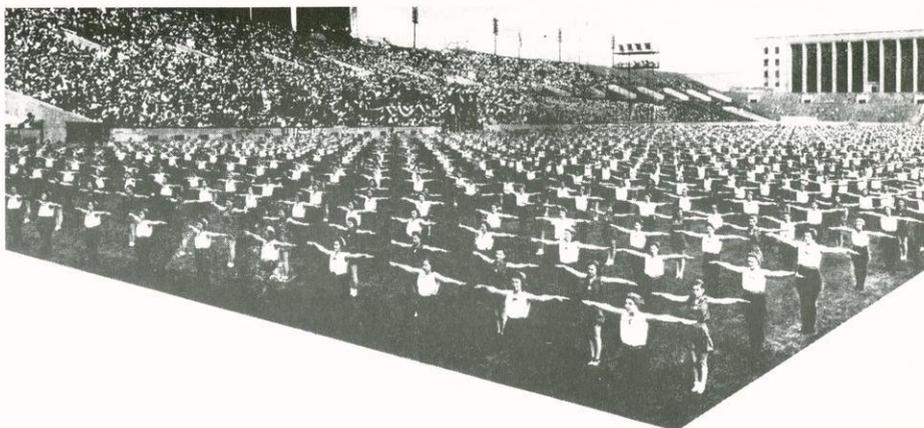
The first Sokol unit in the United States was formed in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 14, 1865. From this group of sixty-seven men grew the huge Sokol movement in America.

Local Sokol units built their own gymnasiums, summer camps, athletic fields, and libraries. Membership in the Sokols today is about 250,000. Children, juniors and adults actively participating in gymnastics average about 500,000.

To honor the Sokol Centennial, a United States Postage Stamp was issued in 1965.

MANITOWOC COUNTY SOKOLS

Several Sokol units were organized in Manitowoc County. Local units were located at Polifka's Corners, Melnik, Rosecrans, and Manitowoc. Your author was active in the unit at Polifka's Corners. In the Book of Minutes, it reports that its first meeting was held on October 10,



1934 SOKOL SLET

Soldiers Field — Chicago Illinois

1932. The meeting was presided over by instructor Joseph Zeman who came from Chicago.

Elected to officer positions were:

President Clara Chizek
 Vice President Mike Popelar
 Secretary Erwin Kubsch
 Treasurer Wencil J. Hynek
 Dues Collector Adolph Polifka
 Training Conductor Reuben Tesarik

Dues were established as follows: male members, 20c per month; female members, 10c per month.

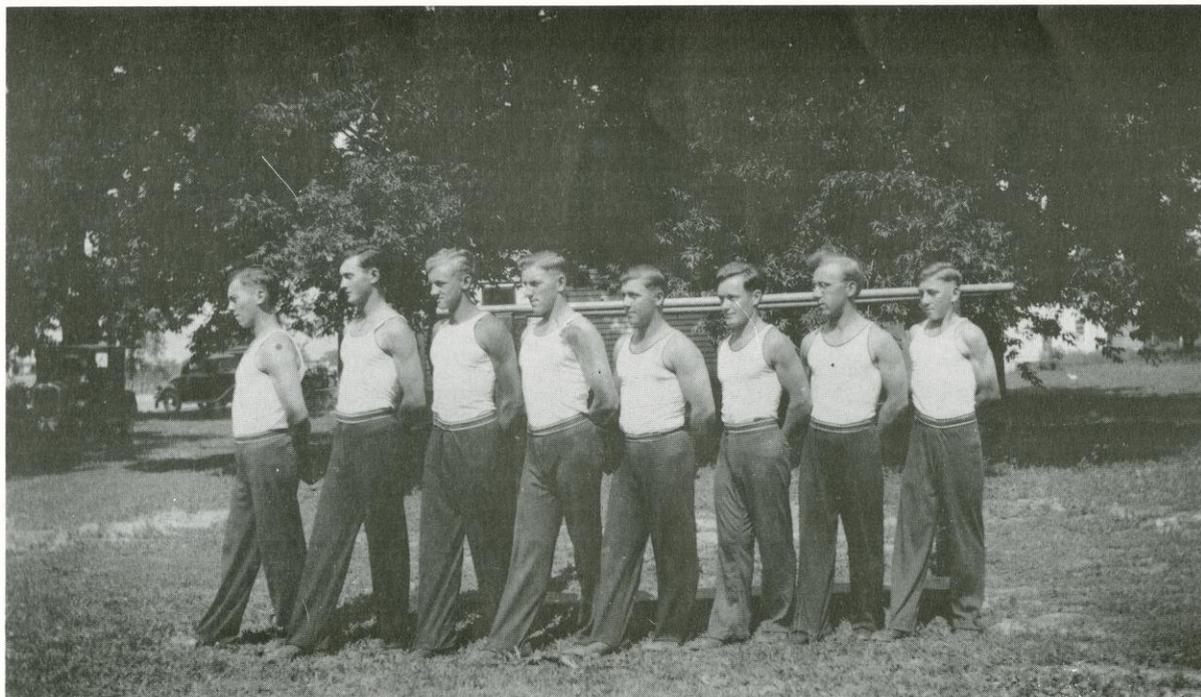
At the unit's second meeting on November 14, 1932, it was agreed

to hold a dance, the proceeds of which were to go to the treasury of the Sokols. Chosen to serve as ticket collectors were Jacob Sleger, Wencil Hynek, Joe Hynek, and Wencil J. Hynek. Bartenders were Mike Popelar and Emil Krejcarek.

In other business, the initiation fee of \$5.00 was sent to the headquarters of the American Sokol.

At a special meeting on November 17, 1932, results of the benefit dance were reported as follows:

Proceeds in full	\$65.35
Dance expenses	5.90
Net	59.45



Polifka's Corners Sokol. Left to right: Edwln Hynek, Gordon Popelar, Eugene Krejcarek, Joe Hynek, Norman Kubsch, Robert Van Haren, Erwin Kubsch, John Sleger.

(Photo courtesy Gordon and Vi Popelar.)

Equipment expense	5.07
	54.38
Cost of equipment	50.25
Net	4.13

An explanation of the actual physical activity of the unit is necessary. Aside from the business meeting held on the second Monday of each month, all registered members reported to the dance hall at Polifka's Corners every Tuesday and Thursday evenings for a two hour training session. This usually began with various calisthenic exercises followed by marching skills. The largest part of the session was devoted to gymnastics and equipment use. The equipment included parallel bars, horizontal bar, rings, horse, and buck. Instruction was provided by Joseph Zeman. It's interesting to note that at the January 9, 1933, meeting after the American Sokol office suggested our unit pay \$25.00 for Mr. Zeman's board, favorable action was taken. It was also decided that Mr. Zeman be retained for six more weeks.

The Polifka's Corners Sokol unit was officially initiated into the National Union of Sokols on April 1, 1933.

On September 15, 1933, Reuben Tesarik was replaced as training conductor by Edwin Hynek. Edwin was highly skilled, and also received special training in Michigan.

As the training sessions continued, all members began to demonstrate improvement in the use of various equipment. The horizontal bar was most popular, but it was impossible to perform the Giant Turn because of the low ceiling. It was necessary to install a trap door in the ceiling which was raised upward as the horizontal bar was used. As the Giant Turn was performed half of one's body was in the attic.

Several evening performances were scheduled periodically to demonstrate skills achievement to parents and friends. These programs also included total group involvement in full uniform in calisthenics to the rhythm of a

pre-selected song.

Activities on the horses and rings were the downfall of this writer. The iron cross on the rings was attained by only a few members.

In recognition of the exceptional progress of all members, it was decided on June 3, 1934, to send a team to the Chicago Sokol Festival or Slet.

Two drivers were offered \$15.00 each to provide transportation to Chicago. Housing was arranged through the Sokol office for members to stay in private homes in Berwyn and Cicero during the days of the festival in June of 1934.

The Calisthenics Exercises, performed to music in unison in full uniform, were held in Soldier's Field. Unit and individual gymnastic and track and field competitions were held at Morton West Stadium in Berwyn, Illinois.

The Polifka's Corners Team was recognized as a well-trained exemplary unit. Following the two days of competition, the team had



The Nesper family was a prominent one in Manitowoc. This photo, taken in 1910, shows the four brothers and five sisters in their Sokol uniforms. Left to right are Ladimer, Milosh, Bohumil, Zdenek, Ladonia, Julla, Alvina, Blanka and Vlasta. Ladimer was vice president of Manitowoc's Ceska Americky Sokol Gymnastic unit and Bohumil was financial secretary. Bohumil served as a physical education teacher in the Manitowoc schools. The Sokol unit met twice a month at the Opera House.

(Photo courtesy Nora Nesper Manthey.)



Seven young men from Manitowoc won the world Sokol championship at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. The gymnasts trained at The Opera House formerly located on North Eighth Street, Manitowoc. The four Nespor brothers, in the back row, from left, were Ladimer, Milosh, Bohumil and Zedenek. In the front row were the Messrs. Sixta, Kralnik and Kaderabek.

(Photo courtesy Jay Getsler.)

the opportunity to visit the Chicago World's Fair.

In the minutes of April 15, 1935, it was moved we begin the "drilling of calisthenics" for the Cleveland Sokol Festival scheduled on June 23. At a subsequent meeting on

June 11, 1935, it was moved that no one from our unit be sent to Cleveland.

On several occasions in the minutes, the purchase of wood to heat the hall received attention. It speaks of buying two cords of

wood for \$3.00 from Joseph Shavlik. One Saturday was devoted by the members to removing old stumps from the Reuben Zaruba woodlot in Greenstreet to use as fuel, at no cost.

The last meeting recorded was on February 23, 1937. Apparently, there was some question as to the future of the unit. A ruling was made to the effect that "if anyone joins or becomes reinstated without paying all back dues and initiation fees, he or she will not be entitled to any equal value of shares if our Sokol at any time becomes dissolved."

As this writer remembers, it seemed that as the members became older, they found it difficult to attend meetings. The earlier spark of involvement was lost to the many new activities available, each demanding its share of one's time.

As an enthusiastic participant, this writer remembers only the real benefits derived. I was a member during my high school period. Having an organized program available close to home provided us with "quality things to do." My understanding of drugs at that time was that it was happening in distant countries — like the opium in China. Although we were developing our bodies physically, we never referred to the training as a "physical fitness"



Polifka's Corners Sokal. In front: Jean Chitzek. In back: Marcella Krejcarek, Clara Chitzek, Grace Krall Hynek. On bars: Viola Krejcarek Popelar.

(Photo courtesy Gordon and Vi Popelar.)



Polifka's Corners Bohemian Players, 1931-32 Front row, left to right: Harvey Polifka, Marcella Krejcarek Frellich, Viola Krejcarek Popelar, Joseph Hynek (deceased), Ludmilla Baumann Birkholz, Elmer Chizek (deceased). Back row, left to right: Frank Benes, Director (deceased), Charles Krizek (deceased), Reuben Tesarik (deceased), John Shtmon, Norman Kubsch, Lydia Tesarik (deceased), Gene Krejcarek, Edwin Hynek, (deceased), Mrs. Otto Krainik, Assistant Director (deceased).

(Photo courtesy Eugene Krejcarek.)

program so eagerly participated in today. We were developing self-assurance and a self-image sometimes lacking today. My brothers, my sister, and I are proud we were Sokols!

Membership in the Polifka's Corners unit included the following family names: Hynek, Kubsch, Popelar, Krejcarek, Sleger, Shavlik, Chizek, Polifka, Feit, Baumann, Tesarik, Zigmunt, Van Haren, Kummer, Benes, Zeman, Sladkey, Krainek, Krizek, Shimon and Lensmeyer.

The Melnik Sokol Unit trained at Brockville in a small hall in the rear of Kliment's Grocery Store and Tavern. Stanley Bartzol of Chicago was their instructor.

Membership of the group included the following family names: Fierst, Mleziva, Novy, Zeman, Skarivoda, Hlinak, Dworak, Shimon, Rezek, Lepich, Suchomel, Pech, Kliment, Rozum, Soukup, Trocil, Ruzek, Straka, Dusek, Rowe, Pagel, Kostlevey, Dohnal and Prochazka.

The Rosecrans Sokol Unit trained at the Rott Pavilion in Rosecrans. Unfortunately, the

Polivka Corners Takes Second In Sokol Meet

Boys and girls of Polivka's Corners Sokol won second place in the National Sokol Festival in Chicago last weekend. The class, which was under the direction of Edwin Hynek, consisted of Edwin Hynek, Bob Van Haren, John Sleger, Joe Hynek, Gordon Popelar, Eugene Krejcarek, Theodore Zigmunt, Erwin and Norman Kubsch, Viola Krejcarek, Marcella Krejcarek, Grace Krall and Olive Lensmeyer.

Article from The Manitowoc Herald-Times, Wednesday, June 20, 1934

unit lost its meeting place when the hall was destroyed by fire in 1932.

Membership in the unit included: Frellich, Rott, Shestak, Petska, Chvala, Charney, Swetlik, Stransky, Maresh, Wagner, Korals, Jebavy, and Skarvan.

Seven of the unit's members performed in Chicago.

The Manitowoc Sokol unit has an interesting history because of its involvement with the

Manitowoc Opera House. Court House records show that on January 19, 1870, the "Slovenska Lipa" purchased the land, Lot 14 of Block 117, from the village and county of Manitowoc for \$400.00. The Opera House was completed in 1889. In 1890 the Sokol became joint owners for \$5,000. A large equipped gymnasium on the first floor became the training center for their members. John Nespors directed the group. Later his sons, Milosh, Ladimar, Bohumil, and Zdenek, assisted him. Joe Kaderabek and Anton Kotlovy were also involved.

Five Nespors daughters also shared the spotlight: Ladonia, Julia, Alvina, Blanka and Vlasta. Julia was quoted as saying, "We were quite a group dressed in white middies with black ties, full black bloomers, black stockings, and soft shoes."

In 1904 the Nespors brothers, with Sokols Sixta, Krainik, and Kaderabek, captured the Sokol Gymnastic Championship at the Sokol Slet held at the Saint Louis World's Fair.

A detailed description of the

Opera House and its activities is reported in Occupational Monograph 24 of the Manitowoc County Historical Society written by Ruth Pech Gillespie. Ruth's father, Stephen Pech, was the Opera House manager from 1901 to 1921.

Bohumil Nespore served as a physical education teacher in the Manitowoc Public Schools.

Sokol classes had the opportunity to develop physically and perform as a team in a well-equipped exercise room in the basement. There were dumbbells, parallel and horizontal bars, rings, mats, horses and weights. This room later became known as "Little Bohemia."

Other names involved with the Manitowoc unit included: Krainik, Pech, Sindelar, Musil, Mlada, Cizek, Cerney, Clyda, Zeman, Peterik, Schimonek, Stupecky, Kostoulatsky, Pilger, Fanta, Kolar, Slovansky, Geisler, Henrichs, Bruechert, Manthey, Rein, Sladkey, Marek, Parez, Shimek, Slivansky, Holsinger, Vitek, Salak, Spivacek, Pelisik, Warhamik, Spigelbauer, Koral, Benes, and Teteak.

CZECH PLAY PRODUCTIONS

As the Polifka's Corners Sokol unit was organized and continued with its training program, another activity was being discussed and

promoted. It concentrated on the production of Czech language plays both for the purpose of perpetuating the Czech language and to possibly use as a fund raiser.

At the unit's January 31, 1933 special meeting preparation was begun for producing the play "Sin of a Forester." The play date was set for February 19. Admission rates were 25c for adults and 10c for children. Net proceeds from the play were \$75.07.

This resulted in the decision to give the play at Bolt, Wisconsin, on March 5. Net proceeds totalled \$11.95. Next stop for the players was Slovan, Wisconsin. Assisting with the directing of the play was Frank Benes of Manitowoc.

This sudden rise in popularity and the additions to our treasury brought forth the next play, "The Mill on the Ottawa River," on June 11. Net proceeds — \$45.24. It was also given at Slovan on October 14. A Sokol dance on January 21, 1934, netted \$70.95. Our treasury was bulging.

A picture was taken of "The Mill on the Ottawa River" cast and seventeen copies, one for each cast member, were ordered for a total of \$13.60.

A third play, "Tulachka Krev," was ordered. Still another, "Song of Bohemia," was reported on May 22, 1934. This play was also presented at the Terrace Gardens in Manitowoc's Opera House.

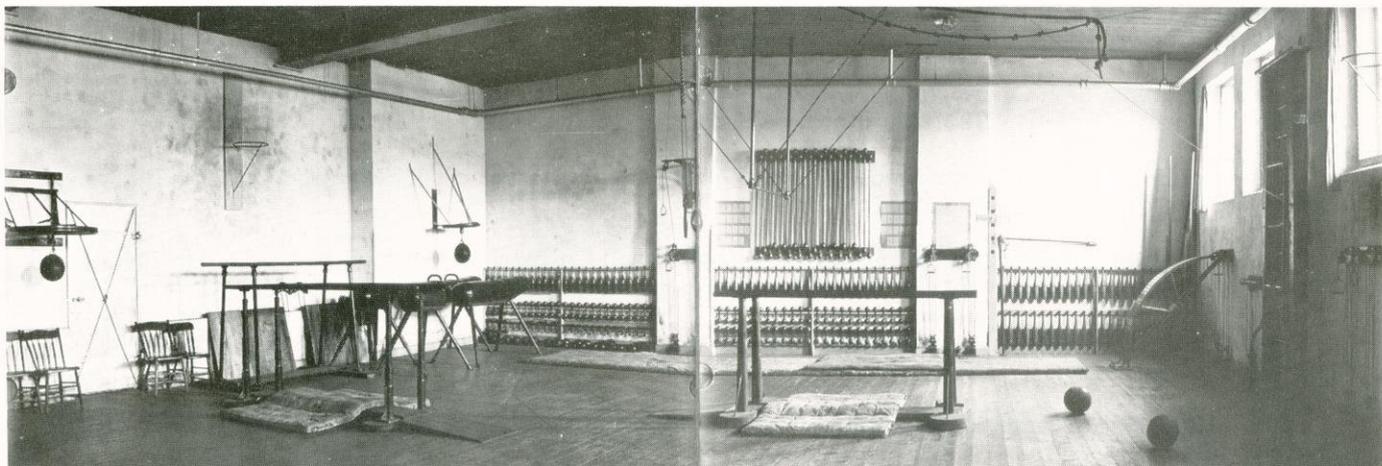
On May 25, 1936, it was reported that the play, "Inherited a Million," was given at Tesarik's Hall, Tisch Mills.

At the last meeting on record, February 23, 1937, Mike Popelar was elected president; Charles Krizek, vice-president; Erwin Kubsch, secretary; Wencil Hynek, treasurer; Ted Zigmunt, dues collector; and Edwin Hynek, trainer. At that meeting, a balance of \$198.34 was reported by the treasurer. To close out the account, checks were sent to Cerebral Palsy, Salvation Army, Kossuth National Cemetery, and the Animal Shelter.

Still more play activity was planned. Charles Krizek was chosen to pick yet another play and its cast and to take responsibility of rehearsals, but this was never consummated.

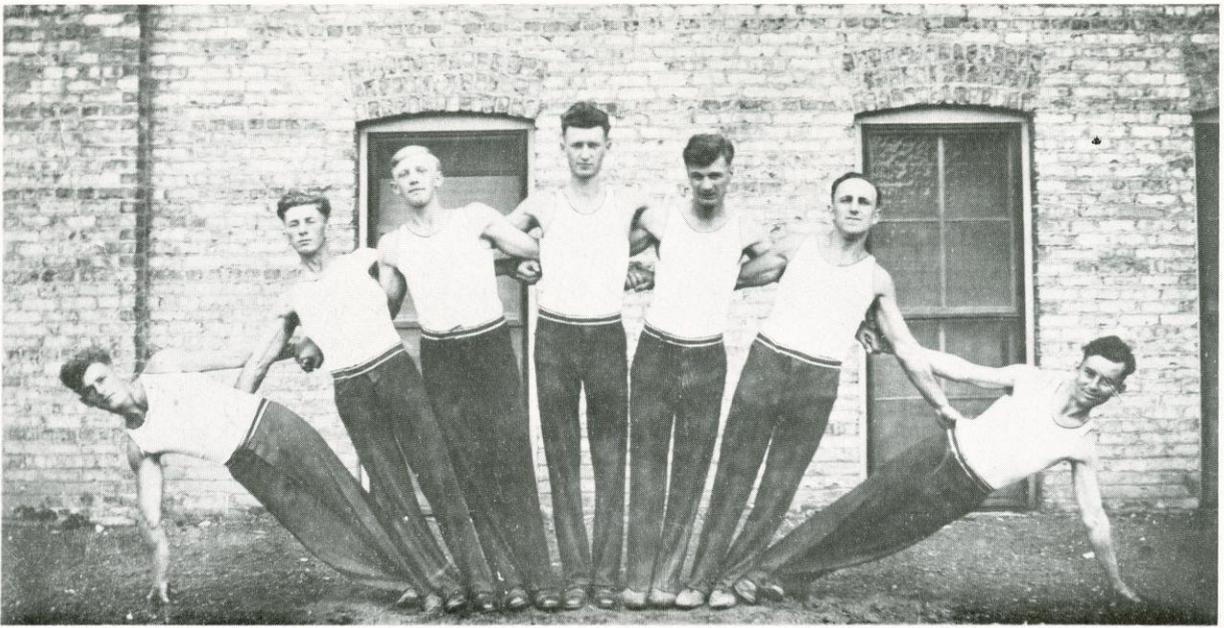
CONCLUSION

The four Sokol units in Manitowoc County continued through the early 1930's. As participants became older they continued their education or sought employment away from their home area. Communication and travel to attend training sessions became difficult. Some married and began raising families of their own. Other interests demanded priority. With these changes some of the luster of participation disappeared. But values derived



When members of the Bohemian Community in the Lakeshore Area wanted to exercise, either individually or as a Sokol class, they gathered at the Opera House in Manitowoc. There they had an opportunity to develop physically and perform as a team in a well equipped exercise room in the basement. There were dumbbells, parallel and horizontal bars, rings, mats, horses, weights and basketball hoops.

(Photo courtesy Jay Getler.)



Rosecrans Sokol. Left to right: Joe Maresh, Jim Frelch, Jim Chvala, Frank Zeman, Emil Stransky, Ted Shestak, and Ed Suchomel.

(Photo courtesy Jim Frelch.)

will always bring happy memories. Health benefits will always remain.

The American Sokol Organization today is active with local chapters in 50 cities from the East to the West Coast. The only Wis-

consin community to still have an active unit is Milwaukee where a local unit was founded in 1868. According to president Jerry Zelenka, Milwaukee Sokol currently has 141 members. The organization sponsors a gymnastic

program for 75 youth in the Milwaukee area, holds monthly meetings with programs on Czech culture and heritage, and participates in Milwaukee's annual Holiday Folk Fair.

Additional Reading

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Ceske Slovanska Lipa Opera House, by Ruth Pech Gillespie. *Occupational Monograph 24*. Manitowoc County Historical Society, 1974. Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

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Our Task, Aim and Goal and The Foundation of Physical Culture. Originally written by Dr. Miroslav Tyrs. Translated by James L. Cihak. Third edition. American Sokol Organization, 1980. Berwyn, Illinois.

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