

SPJST History

A Proud Past. A Bright Future.

Between 1834 and 1900, approximately 200,000 people of Czech descent immigrated from their native lands to America. A good many of those ended up in Texas.

Generally stated, the Czech immigrants and their families stuck together. In the 1880s, Czech pioneers in Texas joined other people of Czech descent in the United States in a fraternal benefit union called the **C.S.P.S. - the Cesko-Slovanska Podporujici Spolecnost - now known as the Czechoslovak Society of America (CSA)**. At the time, the C.S.P.S. was the largest organization of the Czech immigration community in the United States. The organization was formed in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 4, 1854, and was the first fraternal benefit society of its kind in the nation. One of the main purposes of the C.S.P.S. was ". . . to foster and preserve the Czech language in this new nation and (to preserve) the general moral, spiritual, and economic well-being of our countrymen." The first Texas C.S.P.S. lodge was organized April 13, 1894. By 1897, there were 27 C.S.P.S. lodges in Texas.

In spite of this rapid growth, considerable discontent was expressed by members from Texas and the Midwest that the organization's insurance premium guidelines were overwhelmingly skewed in favor of eastern industrial workers. Texans leading the efforts to reform these pricing concerns were **I.J. Gallia** and **J.R. Kubena**. The leader of the reformists in the Midwest was **Jan Rosicky** of Omaha, Nebraska. Rosicky had made previous attempts at reform as early as the C.S.P.S. Convention in New York in 1886, where he spearheaded an effort to set mortality premiums for the western states according to the mortality rates of the western states.

Multiple requests for reform were largely unheeded and shortly after the 1896 convention, Texas delegates decided to secede from the C.S.P.S. In December of that same year, Texas delegates gathered in La Grange and set about the task of forming a new society. They directed two of their members to provide a Texas constitution: Augustin Haidusek, Frank Cihal, and Jan R. Kubena. In March 1897, the constitution was submitted to the Texas C.S.P.S. lodges for their consideration. Seven of the 25 Texas lodges approved the constitution and withdrew from the older society.

These seven lodges represented the vanguard of the fledgling SPJST organization. Official records of the Society indicate that **SPJST started its operations on July 1, 1897, as the *Slovanska Podporujici Jednota Statu Texas (Slavonic Benevolent Order of the State of Texas)***, with 782 members and 25 lodges. SPJST received its state charter on August 12, 1897. Kubena, widely regarded as the "Daddy of the SPJST" became its secretary - a position which he held until 1938 when he was killed in an auto-pedestrian accident in Galveston.

The name of this fraternal benefit society is of course SPJST - originally chartered as the *Slovanska Podporujici Jednota Statu Texas (Slavonic Benevolent Order of the State of Texas [SPJST])*, and it would not be the proud impacting brotherhood organization without J.R. Kubena.

To non-members, SPJST is a concept that is sometimes easily misunderstood. To some, it's strictly an insurance company; to others, it's a social club; and, finally, to others, it's a cultural preservation society. So who's right? **At its best, SPJST embodies the characteristics of all these definitions, demonstrating that its strength lies in its diversity.** SPJST is a society that members can join for any number of reasons. It's a "package deal" built upon the idea of addressing human needs - financial, social, and cultural. **The ability to meet those needs and uphold**

strong human values is the mortar that holds the society together.

What's most important to the member depends on his or her station in life. What a seven-year-old wants from his membership is a lot different than what an 80-year-old would like to see. The sale and purchase of life insurance has long been a cornerstone of membership in SPJST. As such, the Society offers a wide range of life insurance programs and annuity plans designed to meet the varying needs of its members.

The fraternal component of SPJST further enhances membership by emphasizing Czech heritage and the social and civic responsibilities that members share with each other and the communities in which they live. There are few limiting factors placed on local lodges and how they choose to meet their fraternal obligations. Really, what it comes down to is initiative and imagination. The guidelines which describe how the business of SPJST is to be conducted is found in the SPJST By-laws. SPJST members have regular lodge meetings and conventions every four years to address the big issues. Reform and innovation are healthy processes and they are what keep SPJST growing.

Reform and innovation, in fact, provided the basis for the founding of SPJST.

Setting Up

SPJST's first base of operations was located in Fayetteville, Texas.

The reason being that the central figure in administering the affairs of the Society, Secretary J.R. Kubena, had his personal business operations located in that city. Until his death in 1938, Kubena administered the affairs of SPJST out of a single room in his general merchandise store. It wasn't until the early 1930s that the other officers were made full time and additional office space was needed. In 1932, SPJST Supreme Lodge officers rented the building which had previously housed the Fayetteville State Bank for a rental fee of \$30 per month. That building served two, then three, Supreme Lodge officers until the early 1940s when the records and offices were moved to a larger building on the square in Fayetteville.



Society with a Purpose

From the outset, SPJST lodge meetings and social activities made members feel at home and provided them with the economic security of fraternal life insurance. But, there was much more to SPJST than that . . . Through participation in lodge meetings and SPJST conventions, members learned and applied the democratic processes of their newly adopted homeland. They grew to appreciate the value of free speech and to express their opinions.

Moreover, they learned how to conduct meetings and the importance of voting. Having learned and adopted these American values, SPJST members became better citizens.

SPJST served its purpose well. During SPJST's first 50 years of existence, American society and lifestyles changed dramatically.

Our state and our nation was becoming progressively more industrialized. At the same time, the country was becoming more urban and less rural. Many people - including the sons and daughters of the early members - moved away from the farms and into the towns and cities. In many cases, they took SPJST with them. Thus, it was during this time that many of our urban lodges were established. It was also during this time, following the 1952 Convention in Houston, that SPJST moved its state headquarters

to Temple.



The Move to Temple

The move from Fayetteville to Temple was made during the months of August and September of 1953. A decision had previously been reached to completely renovate and remodel the third floor of the Professional Building at Second and Central in Temple to house the Supreme Lodge officers. As the years passed, it became increasingly evident that adequate and suitable quarters would have to be sought elsewhere, and the solution seemed to lie in the construction of a new building. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held on October 25, 1969, with formal dedication ceremonies of the new building, located at 520 North Main Street in downtown Temple, which took place on Sunday, January 31, 1971.

Again, operating in this new environment, SPJST had an important mission to fulfill - to provide its members with identity and support at a time when life in America was becoming increasingly impersonal and unstable. Again, SPJST members rose to meet the challenge. The legacy of these days - the S.P.J.S.T. Rest Homes, youth program, and cultural enrichment programs - including the SPJST Library, Archives and Museum - remain with us today.

Looking Forward to the Future

Achieving success in the future will be a challenge; however, it, too, will be possible. Just as SPJST's forefathers learned to adjust, SPJST must respond to meet the financial and fraternal needs of its members in these changing times. One of the most significant fraternal developments in SPJST over the past few decades has been the increase in volunteerism and human services projects. In lodges all over the state, members are committing their time and energy to the support of worthwhile causes, helping people in need by working in hospitals and old age homes, and raising money for many causes, including scholarships, food banks, volunteer fire departments, drug abuse programs, and various charities. *They have taken the best that SPJST has to offer - a tradition of helping people to care for their families - and have extended it to their communities.*

Children, members, and leaders of SPJST are left with this thought: "Whether you are a descendant of Czech heritage or not, remember the undeniable courage and important sacrifices the earliest settlers made to give you a respectable sense of true honor as you thrive in the SPJST organization . "

There is great hope for the future of fraternalism and SPJST. With a renewed commitment to its members and the communities that SPJST serves, the best is yet to come. Simply stated, SPJST is an idea that is still in the making.