

SLAVONIAN HALL***The Early Croatians of Old Tacoma in Pierce County***

According to a 1984 report produced by the Washington State Historical Society and written by Mary Ann Petrich and Barbara Rojé, many Croatians who came to Pierce County were from the Adriatic coastline of Croatia, known as the Dalmatian Coast - the islands of Hvar, Vis', Korcula, Brac', and Sholta. They were seafaring people who had left their homeland because of economic and personal problems brought on by pressures from the Hapsburg regime. Having heard from others who had made this journey earlier, many set their sights on making Washington and the shores of Puget Sound - known to resemble their Adriatic homeland - their destination. (Petrich)

The Boarding House

When young men first came to Tacoma, it was sometimes predetermined whether he was to call himself Austrian or Slavonian. Some parents wrote ahead to friends in America who operated boarding houses and asked them to look out for their offspring. Mary Barbare Love and Helen Pakasich Kanick wrote, "If the young man came to Sera Kate, who was the widow of George Petrich, he was automatically a Slavonian. If he came to the Boarding house of Sera Perina, who was Mrs. Nick Radonich, he was automatically an Austrian." (Love)

Jelica Mullan (not pictured) recalled working at a boarding house, located a few feet from the railroad tracks, that had once been an Indian longhouse. There was a large dining room, kitchen and one bedroom on the first floor. All the boarders were Dalmatians; since there were not enough bedrooms, men slept in tents behind the house.



Jelica Dulcic Mullan (center, light blouse) came to work at the Radonich Boarding House in Old Town in 1906, when she was 14. That is where she met her husband, Nick Mullan (one of many fishermen residing there); they married when she was 18.

Immigrant Memories

Jelica Mullan, reminiscing about her arrival in Old Town Tacoma on December 25, 1906, "America wasn't the way I expected it to be... My first impression after greeting relatives and then stepping on a board that threw one of my traveling companions into the mud was wood and more wood, mud and more mud, we came to a wooden, muddy America." When daylight arrived she was heartsick. In her beloved hometown of Starigrad, the streets were paved with cobblestones and wood was used only on the doors and shutters of the stone houses. America seemed to have only wooden houses, wooden buildings, wooden streets and sidewalks - except for those that were not mud!"

Benevolent Societies

In the late 1880's the Austrian Benevolent Society was formed. On March 19, 1900 the Slavonian American Benevolent Society was formed. The existence of two lodges did create conflict, a fact best be illustrated through the following article that appeared in the Tacoma Daily Ledger, March 19, 1900:

"Rival Societies Ask Coin Split Among the Austrians is the Real Cause of Case Against Andrew Guich"

"A split in the Austrian society is the real cause of the injunction secured against Andrew Guich and the efforts of Peter David to secure the keys to the society's strong box. Guich is holding the keys and will not surrender them until the status of the two societies is determined. And to determine that will bring out a knotty point of law, somewhat similar to that in the Theosophical society split of a few months ago.

The money which Guich holds belonged to the Austrian Benevolent Society. Peter David was elected president of the society several weeks ago and made a demand for the keys to the strong box. Dissatisfaction among the members resulted in the formation of a new society, known as the Slavonian American Benevolent Society and the election of new officers. This society claims membership of sixty-eight and as most of the members belonged to the old society, insist the strong box is its property. Under the circumstances Guich will not turn over the property to either society."

Feelings were intense and there was dissatisfaction on both sides, but in time the Slavonian American Benevolent Society (SABS) became the official lodge. The SABS became incorporated on April 10, 1901 and has survived and thrived throughout the years. In that same year SABS decided to build a hall. The Society borrowed \$3,000 from Andrew Beritch, which was duly repaid. This loan, together with other finances and donated labor and talents of the members, produced the magnificent edifice of that era - "The Slavonian Hall".

The lodge played an important part in the lives of the community. During its early history, it was one of the most active benevolent organizations in the City of Tacoma. Besides its social significance, it paid sick and death benefits to its members. In 1912, the women established a section to help assist the widows and persons dependent upon deceased members. It had a band and drill team that participated in community parades, and members presented plays using local talent from among the families of the area.

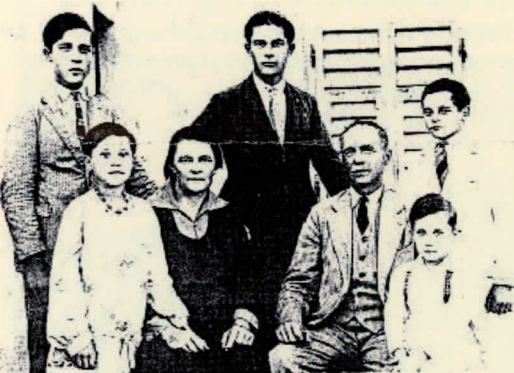
continued from page 4

Rituals surrounded the funerals of departed SABS members. The American flag flying above the hall was lowered to half-mast at the passing of a member. This custom continues today and the Croatian community still looks to the flag as a bellwether of such solemn tidings. Mourners visited the home of the deceased where he/she was placed in the parlor of their home. The wake lasted all night with family, friends, neighbors and lodge members bringing food and drink. The next day, with solemn, dramatic demeanor, the members of the lodge - led by a band resplendent in gold-braided uniforms - marched in front of the horse-drawn hearse with great dignity, pomp and ceremony to the church.

When local shipbuilder Stephen Babare died in 1910, the members of the lodge marched about ten blocks from his residence at North 32nd and White Street to St. Patrick's Catholic Church to attend a Requiem High Mass. After the mass, bank and lodge members continued on to South 17th and Jefferson Avenue. Here, they lined up on both sides of the streets. As the horse-drawn hearse and the mourners went by on their way to the cemetery, the men removed their derby hats in salute, while the band played "Nearer My God To Thee". This ritual was abandoned in 1915. Matt Cuculich was the last member to be buried in this manner. (CROWN)

Over the years since its founding The Slavonian Hall and the SABS has served as a gathering place for dances, group sing-alongs, and celebrations from Christmas to the annual Velika Gospa barbecue in August. In 2001 lodge members commemorated 100 years and commissioned a sculpture that honors the founders and their lives as fishermen and families who kept the home fires burning. The bonds and deep sense of pride in our Croatian heritage has held strong. Today the Slavonian Hall is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and continues to celebrate its 112 years of traditions with food, dancing, singing and sharing our common heritage.

A FAMILY STORY



Sam & Helen Kazulin with 5 of their 7 children. Their son, Mike, followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a boatbuilder. He had a shipyard on the Hylebos Waterway where they built fishing boats.

A love story in a glass...

Sam Kazulin first set out for America because times were desperate, financially, for many in the region. His wife, Jelka (Helen), was a Skansi. Her relatives had established Skansi Boatyard in Gig Harbor.

Having learned the boatbuilding trade in a shop along the harbor of Sumartin, Sam decided to go and work in Gig Harbor, U. S. A. He went 3 times, each time staying a few years, and sending his earnings home for the family.

As he was preparing to leave, Jelka gave Sam a simple, handblown glass and told him, "Here, you might get thirsty on the ship." This might seem like an odd gesture today, but consider:

- 1) The fragile item must be protected to survive, just as their future life together must be tended to;
- 2) In a time when public health was still misunderstood, the fact that Sam had his own personal drinking glass may have protected him from illness.

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