

Dvorak in Spillville

Could have been different. Could have been a whole lot different. Anton Dvorak wasn't just the neighbor's distant cousin house guest. He'd already spent a year as the head of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City, where he taught composition and led the choir and orchestra. The year was 1892, and the conservatory was celebrating four hundred years of European/American history with a true European at its head.

Dvorak was sophisticated, celebrated, and mightily accomplished, and his sojourn in rural Iowa might well have been totally different. He could well have been snobbish, a petulant pain in the Czech butt. But one of his most trusted devotees, a man who'd spent time at the Prague Conservatory, then accompanied Dvorak to New York and acted as his interpreter, Jan Joseph Kovarik, recommended that Anton Dvorak spend a summer in tiny Spillville, Iowa, where he made his abode in a community of 400 or so Czech Bohemian immigrant farmers--his people, you might say.

By habit and inclination, Dvorak set and maintained a spiffy daily schedule to which the Spillville-ites could set their old-country clocks. The maestro arose at four, walked around town and up the Turkey River for an hour, then returned home, had breakfast, did a little composing, and headed off for St. Wenceslaus Church to play the organ for morning mass at seven. Like "clock-work."

The word on the Spilleville street is the old Czech women who gathered daily for mass were shocked when the old organ began to play one morning. In no time at all they grew to love his music so greatly he was asked to play for their weddings. . . and their funerals.

Often enough, down at the pub he'd play cards and drink beer with the locals. He loved hearing old folks talk about homesteading—Czech folks had come

to northeast Iowa in the late 1860s and 70s. He loved them and Spillville loved him, although his Czech maid got snooty when he took notes for his music on the six-inch cuffs of his white shirts.

He'd just finished the *New World Symphony* when he came to town, but his Spillville sojourn resulted in new compositions, including the "String Quartet in F" (in just thirteen days) and the "String Quartet in E-flat." Even though it was Iowa Czechs that drew him to town, even though he wanted to be among his people after a wild year in New York, his time in the northeast corner of the state made him more sure that American composers needed to lend an ear to their own native notes--both African-American and Native American.

Northeast Iowa has a lot to commend itself--a rolling, wooded countryside one simply doesn't associate with the prairie, not to mention towns like Spillville and Decorah that may, in twilight or warm summer mornings, feel strangely European right here in "the tall corn state." You ought to visit.

There's an old story about Dvorak and Spillville that's probably myth, but it goes like this. On one of his early morning walks along the Turkey River, he rounded a bend to find a rural woman bathing. Clothed or unclothed? Think the worst--or the best. Regardless of attire or lack of it, that morning's delight resulted in his *Rusalka*, the story of a water nymph, one of the Czech composers few lyric operas.

Ah, you can't believe everything the descendants of those Spillville folks will tell you either. There's a heavy quantity of myth about it, you can bet on that. But what's indisputable is that such warm-hearted mythology grew out of love.

And it could have gone the other way--"World renowned artist comes to town, nose in the air." But it didn't. Not at all. And it's as sweet a story as you can hear anywhere in the tall corn state.