

# The History of Millcraft in Bohemia

by Ladislav Blahnik

Millcraft is without a doubt, one of the oldest and most important crafts in our country. In the oldest times serfs and feudal servants used stone hand mills for milling grain for castles and feudal estates. Later cattle were used to propel the mills. In a chronicle by the historian Hájek of Libočany, it is mentioned that in the first half of the 8th Century (around 718), the mills were improved and began to use water for energy. Windmills are mentioned in the 11th Century, and some can still be seen as historical monuments. In the 14th Century there is also mentioned so-called boat mills which were built on navigable and large-surface water areas. These can still be seen in Slovakia.

In olden times when work in a mill was still very difficult and tiresome, millers were known to possess above average strength. We can read that millers were courageous defenders of our homeland, with their strength they participated decisively in fighting against its enemies. In Bečkovský's chronicle there is a story about a miller Jiří (George) of Doupov, founder of the millcraft coat of arms, who, for his contributions to the defeat of Hungary in 1116, was elevated to knighthood by Duke Ladislav.



*Blahnik family at Dobříkov near Loučim/Smržovice. House #32.*

*L to R: Petr Blahnik, Otakar Blahnik, Anna Blahnik, Ladislav Blahnik, Otto Blahnik. Photo taken 1973.*

Since the early days, milling was very much respected and mills as property belonged to feudal, church, and lay aristocrats, to monasteries, and later to cities and rich citizens (meaning people living in cities). Therefore, mills were not recorded in ordinary books, but in state records. The proprietors of these mills couldn't do the milling themselves. They always had to hire a licensed miller. Mills were always free and millers were always freemen, not serfs, as we can see from a record of 1415 stating the owner of the mill in Vážany was freeman Roháč who was head of the Brethren Church (something like Moravian). In 1604 Baron Petr of Kathary is mentioned as the proprietor of the free mill of Bejsov(sp). Also records from 1656 mention that farm fields in Rousinov belonged to the free mill of Rousinov.

Water mills were known even before the birth of Christ, but in our country the beginning of water mills date back to the 8th Century. The 12th and 13th Century were the era of their highest expansion. For example, in 1100 a water mill was established in Klášter Hradiště nad Jizerou (note: Klášter was a monastery and the town was Klášter Hradiště nad Jizerou to distinguish it from other towns with the same name, Klášter). Another mill was established in 1190 at a monastery at Louka in Hobzu near Znojmo. King Přemysl Otakar permitted the building of many mills and the number peaked between the years 1241-1341 because farmers were farming larger areas in grain and it was impossible to mill the grain using the household stone mills called "žernov". One of the most enthusiastic sponsors of millcraft was King Karel (Charles) IV (called "father of the country"), who financed the building of ponds and reservoirs and was conducting sophisticated regulation of some rivers. He established the Old Court of Country Millmen (a national court) which was unique in Europe for no other country and no other craft had it. Millcraft was reaching its highest peak of fame and was known as the "king's craft". The old court of millmen had fixed rules according to which mills had to be run, and if there were disagreements, they had to follow the rules. These disagreements could be related to water rights, water levels, wheels, reservoirs, and channels so the other mills on the same stream could not be harmed. The verdict of the old court of millmen was final and had to be followed even by kings and feudals because there were no appeal rights. This court was entrusted and was taken seriously not only at home but also abroad. For example, in 1548 King Ferdinand I requested experts from this court to

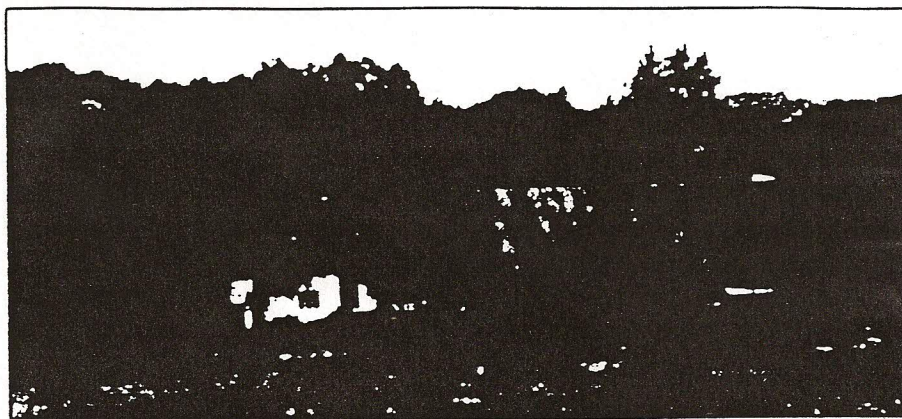


help arbitrate disagreements between Hungary and Štyrsko (or Styria, a part of Austria). These two countries had disagreements related to water rights. This court was in operation for almost 500

years and was abolished by Emperor Joseph II.

Millcraft was becoming more perfected and sophisticated and millwork was becoming more complicated. Therefore, those wishing to become master millmen had to be "všeuměl" (someone who knows everything). In times of "cechu" (translator describes as "brotherhood of people employed in a certain craft" . . . probably guilds), the exam which everyone took who wanted to become a member of the association was very difficult, very severe, and also the project each candidate had to perform was not easy. Either he had to build a water wheel, a thumb wheel, or shaft, to form and put in place the stones, or to repair or build a new bridge by his own hand. Only if this graduation project was accepted was the candidate accepted as a master. Millmen had to be familiar with all industries which were somehow related to water - - paper mills, textile instruments, leather tanning, water treatment works. They also had to know about the systems by which water was brought to houses, castles, and gardens. They also learned about the pumping of water from basements and wells. They knew how to drive piles, and to build and repair wheels, reservoirs, and banks. These activities were only to be done by master millmen and fines and punishments were imposed if some other profession intervened in these activities. From this we can see that a master millman at that time had to be an engineer, builder, carpenter and other related professions rolled into one. No other professional was able to build an entire mill. A mill owner could not hire anyone except a master millman to run and manage his mill.

The hiring of master millmen had several conditions. In the first type of arrangement a master millman was hired for a specified annual salary plus a bonus of goods. The other mill workers' salaries would be paid



*Blahnik Mill (By Blahniks). Photo taken 1973.*

by the mill owner who also paid all maintenance and repair costs. The master millman was obliged to perform all difficult and skilled repairs to the mill and its equipment with the help of the mill work-

ers. Under another type of arrangement, a master millman had a contract stating that he would get a portion of the profits and would contribute in the same proportion to the cost of the maintenance. The contract also stated who was responsible for the salaries of the mill workers. The third type of arrangement was one in which the master millman rented a mill for "interest". The amount of the payments to be made to the mill owner were stated in the contract. Until 1655 the master millman of the free mill in Podolí had to pay his interest (2 Zlatý and 15 groš) on the days of St. George and St. Wenceslaus. His payment also included two pigs, barley for the brewery, and all the grain the owner needed for his cattle. The value of all this was estimated at 20 "zlatý" (gold coins). In 1750, the owner of the mill in Velešice was receiving 15 zlatý. In this case there was no mandatory labor (such as that performed by serfs) owed to the mill owner. These "interest" millmen could transfer their rights to their children with the approval of the owner. It often happened that several generations of a family would operate a single mill. The fourth kind of millman constituted a kind of aristocracy among the master millmen. This man owned his own mill. Mills were very expensive and few millmen owned their own, but we can find some recorded. For example, in 1542 Petr Maly from Mlýniště bought a free mill in Podolí near Pozořice for 150 bags of money (mišenský\*).

*\*Editor's Note: The Czech to English dictionary by Ivan Poldauf gives the meaning of mišeňský as Borsdorf apple or Meissen (city in East Germany) china.*

The millmen had an association which protected their rights. Initially it was a brotherhood that took care of spiritual things such as burial, but in time they became professional associations concerned with material

*Continued on page 12.*



matters. In 1352 the disagreements and problems of millmen, bakers and their employees in Brno reached serious proportions. The Margrave of Moravia (lower than a king, but higher than a duke) ordered the city council of Brno to issue a mill law to settle these disputes. According to records, the oldest mill law was issued in Olomouc, so the city council of Brno sent a delegation to Olomouc to gain some expertise regarding their law. That same year a mill law was passed which ended the disagreements. In 1404 King Václav IV gave the mayor and city council of Prague permission to establish or build boat mills to travel the Vltava River and to bake rolls and white bread so sufficient stockpiles were available to poor people. The bakers and millmen were very close to each other. In articles from 1601 we can read that the country millmen who move to the city can become bakers. Other benefits conferred upon millmen by the kings and feudal rulers who fixed their rules included the freedom to buy grain and sell it to the bakers and to sell flour and bakery products to make a living if he had no mill. The associations were abolished in 1859 and thus began the decline of all crafts, mainly because the later associations did not have the great responsibility and power as those granted previously by the kings.

The millmen were not only famous for their strength but also for their knowledge. This is evidenced by the extent of their responsibility in the old court of country millmen from whose verdicts there was no appeal. This is of such great significance that it is hard to understand today. Their right to build all types of mills (paper mills, tanneries, and bridges) is very admirable at present and almost seems like a legend. Our old forefathers wanted their sons to have the best possible education. They did not hesitate to spend a lot of money for that. It is interesting to recall how many sons of our nation, since very old times, were born in Czech mills. These are names which will forever remain in Czech history and forever be our pride. For example; Daniel Adam of Velaslavín (1546-1599) was the son of a millman and later the owner of many Prague mills. He became a professor at Prague University and was so wise that his whole era was called, "Veleslavín Era." A very famous painter of Emperor Rudolf II was born in a mill at Křivoklát. Another famous man, called "the teacher of the nations," was Jan Amos Komenský who was born in a mill in Uherský Brod. (Editorial note; Comenius (1592-1670) as we know him, was an educator and bishop who wrote the first reading book in Europe to have illustrations. He encouraged broad,

general education and the establishment of more schools and universities.) A former millman from Prague who was one of the most famous music composers of the 18th Century, Josef Mysliveček, became famous in Italy and later throughout all of Europe was known as "Il Divino Bohemo" which means "the divine Czech." He was one of Mozart's teachers and had a great influence upon him.

While a member of the old court of millmen, Václav Veselý, in 1731, published a book with 650 pages which covered the science of mathematics, geometry, and trigonometry, according to which people could measure heights, distances, depths, and weights, and could survey fields, forests, ponds, etc.

During the so-called "awakening period" of our country (18th-19th Century), the Czech nation was rekindled from national and language depression which was brought about by the disagreement between the Bohemian feudals and the Emperor and the lost war at Bila Hora (White Mountain) near Prague in 1620. (Editorial note: refer to "The Judgement of God" publication which profiles the lives of the Chods or border guards in which the Blahnik name was a great participant. The Chods lost the war and were sold to the Austrian Lamminger). In this awakening period, the Czech millmen contributed significantly to the national realization of the people. Many famous men came from millmen circles. Catholic priest and poet Boleslav Jablonský, poet Karel Hynek, lawyer František Ladislav Rieger who is referred to as "the father of our modern nation," writers and politicians, František Sušil, Peter Fastr, Alois Pravoslav Trojan, Karel Krouský, and others.

In 1848 a Moravian Congress was called to abolish mandatory labor. One of the famous politicians was a millman from Rousinov, Dominik Špatenka. From our mills we can name many more men who became famous for the position they reached in the establishment or as artists. The famous family of painters, Maneš, was founded at the end of the 18th Century by master millman candidate, František Maneš. Other famous artists were opera singer Antonín Vávra, actor Jan Vávra, writers Ignác Herman, Josef Svatopluk Macha, Jiří Sumin, Amálie Vrbová as well as Duke and Archbishop cardinal of Olomouc, Dr. František S. Bauer, and cardinal of Olomouc, Dr. Leopold Prečan. The leader of the resistance during WWI and the Chairman of the Agriculture political party and later Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia, Antonín Švehla, was also a millman. At the beginning of WWI, another millman,





*Blahnik Mill. By Blahniks just south of Loučim. Which is halfway between Klatovy and Domažlice.*

*L to R: Otto Blahnik, Ladislav Blahnik, Joel Blahnik, Peter Blahnik. Photo taken 1973.*

Josef Durich, went to Russia. He was the Chairman of the Brotherhood of Millmen. He was a Congressman and became the First Vice Premier of the government in exile. During WWI and WWII the millmen of Czech mills should receive credit for nourishment of our people. Many millmen paid with their lives for this illegal activity during WWII.

Millcraft was always purely Czech. Even in 1736, Emperor Charles VI gave mill laws in Czech. Also the names of the equipment and parts were only in Czech. In other crafts the present names of parts, works, and names of professions are often of German origin. The mill working crew had typical Czech names like "Stárek" (senior), "Mládek" (junior), "Samomlec" (independent), "Prášek" (the lowest profession in the mill, usually a young boy), "Pytlíkář" (the one who puts the flour in the bags), "Stupar" (platform loader), "Pilař and Sekerník" (carpenter), "Krajánek" (the one who goes from mill to mill usually bringing news, etc.). (Editorial note: these explanations of the names are by the translator, not included in the original text). The population used to call a millman, "pan otec" which means "mister father" and which is no longer used, but gives an idea of the honor and respect the millers received.

During the second half of the 19th Century there was a very significant change in our mills. There was a great advance in machinery and the old Czech mill changed with new and more advanced machines and

more complicated methods of milling wheat. The competition with the importation of Hungarian flour made this period very difficult for our mills and to keep up with progress Czech millmen were forced to retool. New energies were developed for operating the mills. The conversion to steam, gasoline, and finally electrical energy was very expensive. After the millmen's associations were abolished anyone could become a millman by simply buying or renting a mill. In 1929 millcraft was again established as a profession, requiring a license.

At this time the Czechs had the most advanced milling profession in the world. Besides the small and medium sized mills which used the traditional mill stone were modernized to use rolling mills and were motorized. Larger mills were like industries. This change can be revealed in the statistical comparison made in 1934. From the entire number of 9,220 mills in the Republic of Czechoslovakia there were 7,618 finishing mills (using rolling mills). From these rolling mills 120 were fully automated, 883 half-automated, and 6,615 manual. Gravity mills using stones numbered 1,602. Revolutionary changes began after WWII when all mill industry was nationalized and concentrated in large industries. Some of the small and medium sized mills were kept but were used only for the production of the grain feed for cattle. I remember those old pictures from our youth of bringing the grain to the mill and getting the flour back to satisfy the needs of the farm families or the pictures of the heavy mill wagons pulled by the strong Belgian horses with polished harnesses. These pictures are now only old memories. Former mill owners mostly became farmers, but it was some kind of rule that small and medium mills have a farm on the side, but after WWII everything was nationalized.

A few explanations: "Šalanda" was a big room in the mill where even in the last century the people who brought grain and waited for the flour were spending their time. It was like a social gathering of those who waited. Sometimes they even had to wait during the night and this might have been the origin of the Czech proverb; "Who comes earlier, mills earlier." In that room the father millman would provide refreshments for those who waited and they discussed local events, farming, and national politics.

In the 18th and 19th Century, when all the people could read and write, it was the place where the first newspapers were read and the millman was the only

*Continued on page 14*



subscriber in the entire region, besides the priest and the teacher. The millman and his crew were usually very out-going and knew many jokes and the "Šalanda" was a place of good Czech humor (which was immortalized by writer Karel Tumor in his book, Czech Mill ("Českých Mlýnů"). Currently in literature the millman is shown to be a good, wise, patriotic, progressive person. Many writers and chroniclers were millmen.

"Krajánek" were candidates for master millmen who traveled from mill to mill to get their experience (for young men). They were very well liked in the mills, not only because of their skill in occasional repairs but also because they brought news. Indirectly they should receive credit for bringing progress to millcraft and to agriculture. That was, of course, in a time when there was no communication. In that time when few could read and write, the "krajánek" was very much welcomed, especially if he was a good storyteller and a merry person. He usually stayed on only for the time of the repair and when finished, he went on to another mill. Some krajáneks came on a regular schedule and were impatiently awaited by the crew and the master millman. In the last 100 years we know the krajánek only in photos and literature. They are pictured with a stick in hand and a rolled blanket under his arm, a flat hat, and happily walking by a creek through the beechwood to the next mill. I wonder how they would feel if they could now come to life and walk the same path from mill to mill today. For example if they would go to our mill, "Na Blahnikách" and a little bit upstream they would witness the last phase of the revolutionary change which is the demolition of the mill which was sold by our forefather on April 27, 1696 to Jan Janusovi Deimbove for 1,100 pieces of gold. He might be able to imagine these 600+ years of his life with the slow changes from the stone gravity wood wheel through the rolling mill with the gasoline engine helping to generate electric current. This nostalgic imagination reminds me of the two "krajáneks" who came to see this old mill in 1973 and its tragic end, all the way from the United States.

*Editors Note: The author of this piece, Ladislav Blahnik is a distant relative of Joel Blahnik of Fish Creek, Wisconsin. This article was the fulfillment of a promise made by Ladislav to Joel to share his knowledge of the history of Millcraft in Bohemia. Special thanks to Joel Blahnik for sharing this information with the membership of CGSI.*



## CZECH & SLOVAK GENEALOGY

# Do You Know Your Roots?

YOU PROVIDE A FAMILY NAME...  
WE DO THE REST!

Contact: Tom Hrcirik (A.G.) 209/798-1490

31910 Rd. 160  
Visalia, CA 93292  
USA

Lukov 35  
Zlin 76317  
Czech Republic

## Advertising Rates

We will accept limited advertising. We generally do not accept ads for products, only services. The rates for the following approximate ad sizes are: full page (6½" x 8½") - \$150; one-half page (6½" x 4") - \$90; one-half column (3" x 5") - \$50; and column width (3" x 2") - \$35. Prices are per issue. All submitted advertisements must be camera-ready. Queries are free to members.

Ads must be approved by newsletter committee