MASARYKTOWN:
A SUCCESSFUL ETHNIC EXPERIMENT

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One man's vision nearly sixty years ago blossomed into what is today one of Florida's more colorful and relatively unknown ethnic communities. Marsaryktown was the inspiration of Joseph Joscak, former editor of a now defunct daily Czechoslovakian newspaper, The New Yoreky Dennik. The small Florida settlement is a viable testimony to the pioneer spirit of its founder. The town was named for a philosopher-statesman and first president of Czechoslovakia, Thomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937).

Masaryktown is situated in the southeast part of Hernando County about thirty miles north of Tampa in the eastern section of the Pithlachoscotee Basin (Fig. 1). Using the circulation of his newspaper to promote his dream of establishing a community for Czechoslovakian immigrants, Joscak issued an appeal for settlers in 1924. He struck a re-

Fig. 1. Location of Masaryktown.
sponsive chord among his readers, many of whom were employed in the mines and factories of the Industrial North.

Initial interest centered in the Orlando area, but later a tract of some 24,000 acres straddling the Pasco-Hernando County line appeared more desirable to the committee which had organized to investigate potential sites. Both land tracts had drawbacks; the Orlando region was reported "too swampy" and the Pasco-Hernando County area was labelled a "cold pocket" by University of Florida agriculturalists. However, a check with local orange grove operators influenced the search committee to select the later site. The Hernando Plantation Company was formed, composed solely of Czechoslovaks. The company began to purchase the land and develop the community.

The new settlers or share holders, approximately 125 of them, came mainly from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Meeting in Washington, D.C., the group proceeded south to Tampa. For three days the group explored the area, then in a typical Slovak tradition of good luck, broke bread and buried it at the site of their new community.2

The serious task of clearing land, building structures, and planting orange groves began in 1925-26. The growing of oranges would be the economic foundation of the agricultural experiment. Construction of homes and public and commercial structures commenced. Layout conformed to the rectangular grid (Fig. 2). Imbued with patriotism for both their old and new countries, settlers named the north-south streets of Masaryktown after U.S. presidents and the east-west streets after literary, political, and military figures of Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia. Thus today bi-national junctions of Lincoln and Hviezdoslay, and Garfield and Stefanik are found. An exception to the street naming plan is Wilson Boulevard, a major east-west street. Woodrow Wilson died the year Masaryktown was founded. He had been a friend of Masaryk, the latter cementing intimate American associations by his marriage to a Brooklyn, New York woman.3

Except for Czechoslovakian names printed on street signs, mailboxes,

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Fig. 2. Street plan of Masaryktown.
and a few small commercial or public buildings, there is little outward manifestation of the ethnic heritage of the community which would distinguish it from other small rural Florida towns. For the most part homes are modest, well-kept, one story structures with spacious lawns set well back from the relatively narrow residential streets. The abundance of trees and occasional unpaved streets helps to create a relaxed, rural atmosphere. The few non-residential structures such as the community volunteer fire department, small library-museum (containing more than 3000 books in English, Czech, and Slovak), minute post office, old roadside motel, large hardware-general store, and hotel-restaurant building, are strung out along both sides of U.S. Highway 41, the main artery of town. The civic center and community churches (Catholic, Lutheran, and Baptist) lie west of the highway in the residential sector.

By early 1926 new arrivals had formed a community of some forty-three families, twenty-four dwellings, a two-and-one-half story hotel, and a future that looked promising. More than 800 acres had been cleared and planted with fruit trees, primarily orange groves. Both a sawmill and rock crusher plant had been incorporated into the development. Mid 1926 was a boom period for the community. The hotel overflowed with visitors and newcomers set up tents and other temporary housing. A mayor was elected and a civic group began to work with the new European immigrants, instructing them in regard to their new American status and preparing them for citizenship. As 1926 came to a close, the inhabitants of Masaryktown numbered approximately 300.

Killing frosts during the 1926-27 and 1927-28 winters devastated the newly planted groves. The economic disaster forced many residents to abandon the area, but others remained to experiment with alternate cash crops, such as onions, sweet potatoes, eggplant, and cucumbers. Market possibilities, however, were limited and unreliable, so many disappointed farmers returned to the north to resume their former lives. A few hardy and determined families remained during the Depression years eking out a living through truck farming and poultry raising. On the eve of World War II only thirty-six families lived in Masaryktown.

It was, however, during this ebb in the community's fortunes that Stephen Ostruba moved into the area and introduced poultry on a commercial basis that proved the salvation for Masaryktown. Soon incubators were installed, chicken houses were constructed, and a thriving egg and poultry industry resulted with ready markets in the expanding urban areas of Tampa and St. Petersburg.

With their new found success the poultrymen of Masaryktown embarked on an egg cooperative in 1934, the Hernando Egg Company. Expansion and success continued except for the war years of the 1940's when all but two of the community's young men joined the armed forces, resulting in manpower shortage and production slowdown. The return of the veterans to their homes and families helped to accelerate growth of the industry and community. Soon Masaryktown farmers were leaders in the state's poultry industry. Prior to 1950, Florida was and importer of eggs and produced less than half its needs. The 1950's and '60s, however, were periods of exceptional expansion and growth, and it was during this period that Florida became an egg exporter. Masaryktown was the leader in the state's poultry industry. Local resident A. G. Mazourek was recognized as the prime mover by his foresight in helping to organize a new cooperative in 1952, the Hernando Egg Producers, Inc. With the new cooperative and with guidance from the agricultural departments at the University of Florida, the farmers' collective began to purchase feed and sell their products more efficiently. Individual farmers were no longer at the mercy of the narrowing margin of profit which was found in the old system.
Today, Masaryktown is recognized as having the leading egg producers' cooperative in the southeastern United States. High standards in the cooperative and the processing of more than 2000 cases of eggs per week help make Masaryktown the largest egg handler in Florida. This success story has evolved out of struggle, not only with war, labor shortage, market fluctuations, and other human institutions, but also with natural calamities. In addition to the killing frosts of the early years, a disastrous flood in the spring of 1960 following a two-day deluge inundated lowland areas and created an inland lake in the community some seven feet deep. More than 20,000 laying hens drowned. As a result of this catastrophe, a successful drainage canal was constructed along the eastern and southern boundaries of the town to prevent excessive run-off into the basin from the higher ridges on the east.

Such disasters and shared experiences within the community served to bolster the support system of the proud people. It is difficult to produce a definitive statistic of the Czech-Slovak ancestry of the community's 800 or so inhabitants. The ethnic flavor is still there, however. Traditionally each year on the Sunday closest to October 28th, Czechoslovakian Independence Day, the community presents a folk festival in the local civic center. Food and dancing highlight the annual event, but "chicken-plucking" contests and a "Miss Drumstick" competition have been included in the festivities. The women work diligently to prepare special Slavic delicacies including kolacky, Danish-like nut rolls, and a giant apple strudel. The strudel prepared for the 1981 celebration measured 75 feet in length and required 150 pounds of flour, 25 pounds of butter, 3 bushels of apples and many crates of eggs. The menu also included, appropriately, 1,000 pounds of baked chicken garnished with a special rice dish and locally grown beans and cabbage slaw.

Although this celebration was begun as a local one, it now attracts visitors from all parts of Florida. In 1981 over 1,000 people attended the festivities. Following the serving of dinner, which lasted three hours, the crowd was treated to a program highlighted by singing and dancing reminiscent of the "old country." Traditional Czechoslovakian folk dances were performed by the local Beseda dancers attired in handmade costumes. They were accompanied by a local band that delighted the audience with their color, one could hear plans being made for an even more lavish future celebration. Masaryktown has indeed maintained its distinct identity and maintains its link between old and new worlds.

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2. Ibid., p. 2


4. Ibid., p. 224.


7. Interview with Anna Matis, Librarian, Masaryktown Public Library, January 1981.