



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

**Sandwiching in History Tour  
Kocourek and Son Hardware Store  
110 E. Front St., Hazen**

April 11, 2025

By Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Hazen Mayor David Hardke



*Kocourek and Son Hardware Store  
Photo by Ashley Sides, 2025*

## Welcome and Introduction

I'm Ashley Sides with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, and I'm excited to welcome you to the Kocourek and Son Hardware Store. I want to thank Mayor David Hardke of the City of Hazen for letting us do this tour today.

When you look at this historic building from the street, you immediately notice the name: Kocourek and Son. That’s fitting, because that name is the link that connects this brick building to seemingly every aspect of local history. Today’s story is mostly about a person named John Kocourek. If he had been merely a small-town hardware store owner, that alone might have been enough to make him locally famous. But this store, as iconic as it is in Hazen, may actually be one of John Kocourek’s more modest legacies.

## Jan Kocourek Comes to America

His story starts in Europe. He was born in 1862 in the small town of Mirodice in the Písek district of South Bohemia. Today that’s part of the Czech Republic, but in 1862, Bohemia was a Czech region of the Austrian Empire. In his homeland, he would have been called Jan Kocourek [pronounced Yan Kots-oh-rek]. And did you know that the surname Kocourek means “little tomcat”?

When Jan was about 19, he was chafing under compulsory military service, which every man had to serve actively for 3 years beginning at age 18, on top of which he would then owe an additional 9 years in the reserves. Jan had a more independent streak in him and didn’t fancy that kind of life. In 1881, he petitioned the district authorities and obtained a pass for a leave of 90 days to visit America. He arrived in Chicago and never looked back. A quarter-century later he was telling a reporter about it and said, “I have that pass yet, the 90 days have never expired.”<sup>1</sup>

As a 19-year-old in Chicago with “10 cents in his vest pocket and not a word of English,” he got started working in a lumber yard.<sup>2</sup> There was a very large Czech population in Chicago, and Kocourek was the type who made friends and connections easily. In 1883 he married a young Czech woman named Anna Řeháčková, and between 1884 and 1890 they had three children: Christina, Annie, and Frank.<sup>3</sup>

In Czech they say, “Kolik jazyků umíš, tolikrát jsi člověkem.” That means for every language you know, you are that many people. In Chicago, Jan Kocourek learned English and became John Kocourek. In personal correspondence that he wrote in later years, even when writing in the Czech language to other Czech immigrants, he signed his name in English: John Kocourek. He embraced his new country fully.

<sup>1</sup> “Kocourek–Wilkin Real Estate,” *Grand Prairie Recounter—Special Edition*, 1907.

<sup>2</sup> “Kocourek–Wilkin Real Estate.”

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*, Hazen, Prairie, Arkansas; Roll: 73; Page: 5; Enumeration District: 0097 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900).

## Hazen and the Real Estate Business

At some point in Chicago in the 1880s he found a new employer, Frederiksen & Co., and became a traveling land agent.<sup>4</sup> For a brief time in 1888, he bought and sold land in Minnesota. But by 1889 the company he worked for was going bankrupt, and in the meantime through his work as a traveling land agent, he found an even better prospect: Arkansas. Specifically the Grand Prairie.<sup>5</sup>

In 1890, with baby Frank just months old at the most, the Kocourek family moved to Hazen, Arkansas.<sup>6</sup> The landscape must have seemed exotic—flatlands of open prairie grass, interspersed with some woodlands, as far as the eye could see. For someone who grew up in the rolling hills and forests of South Bohemia, not far from the mountains, in a country that had been settled and cultivated for a thousand years, and then had moved to the urban jungle of Chicago, the empty expanse of the virgin Arkansas prairie could have been forbidding and inhospitable, or full of adventure and potential. Kocourek saw the potential.

Hazen had between 450 and 650 people at this time (depending on who was counting).<sup>7</sup> It had been a community for around 20 or 30 years, as the settlement coalesced around Dr. William C. Hazen's home and the little station that he established along the old Memphis and Little Rock Railroad in 1871. Although surveyed and laid out in 1873, it had only been incorporated as a town in 1884, about six years prior to Kocourek's arrival. Hazen<sup>8</sup> was a farming community and

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<sup>4</sup> In a letter written on March 7, 1907, Kocourek mentions having worked "in the land business for the last 22 years," which might imply that he got into this line of work around 1885. (John Kocourek to W.E. Braddock, 7 March 1907, Kocourek and Son Hardware Company Records, BC.MSS.16.02, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Bobby L. Roberts Library of Arkansas History & Art, Central Arkansas Library System.)

<sup>5</sup> P. Grønvold, "N.C. Frederiksen," *Danmarks Nationalleksikon*, last modified July 17, 2011, [https://biografiskleksikon.lex.dk/N.C. Frederiksen](https://biografiskleksikon.lex.dk/N.C._Frederiksen), automatic translation in Edge Browser.

<sup>6</sup> John may have gone ahead of them as early as 1889. In a 1907 letter to a prospective customer, he mentions having lived in Hazen for 18 years already (though he says the same in a March 1908 letter), and a *Grand Prairie Recounter* article on "Kocourek–Wilkin Real Estate" from 1907 also states that he moved to Hazen in 1889. However, his son Frank was born in Chicago in May of 1890. (See the following letters in the Kocourek and Son Hardware Company Records: John Kocourek to A.E. Hahn, 14 September 1907; and John Kocourek to A.E. Hahn, 2 March 1908.)

<sup>7</sup> The 1890 U.S. census said 458, but Goodspeed said 650. The larger number may have been more accurate; *České osady v Americe* mentioned 700 inhabitants in 1891 (p. 6). However, the *Arkansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory* for 1888-1889 also went with the 450 figure. See census reference in Chris Smith Weems, "Hazen (Prairie County)," *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/hazen-prairie-county-966/>; see also *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas* (Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1890), 680.

<sup>8</sup> Curiously, the name Hazen might be mistaken for a Czech word. *Házen* means "thrown," and at least one Czech visitor might have been fooled, because in a letter he spelled the town's name with a long "á" as if it were a Czech word. But since it was named for an English surname, it had nothing to do with the Czech language other than coincidence. (J.F. Štastný, "Z Cesty do Arkansasu," *Svět*, August 30, 1919, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045068/1919-08-30/ed-1/seq-3/>.)

thanks to the railroad was the largest commercial center in the county, shipping primarily hay, cotton, and fruit.

Even though the Kocourek had just left the big city of Chicago for a rural Arkansas town, they found plenty of amenities in Hazen. For supplying their daily needs, there were six general stores, two drugstores, two grocery stores, and a meat market. Other services they might rely on included the post office, two blacksmith shops, and the two livery stables. Various commodities were processed at the steam cotton gin, sawmill, gristmill, and the numerous hay presses for the benefit of both producers and consumers. White people and Black people each had their own school, and each also had two churches. And the Kocourek must have seen it as a positive sign of a growing city that there were two hotels and one or two real estate offices, but only one undertaker.<sup>9</sup>

And despite the abundance of services, the market was not at all saturated. Not for someone as industrious as John Kocourek. He recognized that there was abundant opportunity for another real estate agent and got to work immediately, opening his own office in 1890. A map of Prairie County from 1892 shows plenty of settlement to the north of Hazen, but mostly empty fields to the south.<sup>10</sup>

Kocourek sold land to anyone and everyone, of course, but rather than be satisfied with just a local clientele, his strategy was to promote immigration to Prairie County from other parts of the U.S. He knew of some very productive channels to work and took out ads in publications in major markets in the Midwest, especially in Czech-language newspapers and magazines.

## European Immigration to the Grand Prairie

After 1850, thousands of Czechs—or Bohemians, as they were usually called then—immigrated to the United States. By 1890, 170,000 Czechs had left their homeland, with the majority heading for the USA.<sup>11</sup> They clustered in cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cedar Rapids, Racine, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Cleveland, and New York. Large numbers also moved to farms in rural Texas, Nebraska, and other states. In the cities they tended to Americanize fairly quickly, although they did often remain very active in Czech community organizations and associations. In country villages they tended to keep their language and cultural traditions alive at least into the third generation or so.<sup>12</sup> Many of the Czech associations published periodicals in the mother tongue in cities like Chicago, New York, Omaha, Pittsburg, Cleveland, etc., which were

<sup>9</sup> *Biographical and Historical Memoirs*, 680. Goodspeed said there were two real estate offices in Hazen in 1890. It's unclear if that is counting John Kocourek's agency.

<sup>10</sup> J. G. Thweatt, *Map of Prairie County, Arkansas* (Higgins & Co., Engravers and Printers, 1892). <https://www.loc.gov/item/2011589608/>.

<sup>11</sup> Dagmar Hájková, *Naše Česká Věc: Češi v Americe za První Světové Války* (Nakladatelství Lidové Noviny, 2011), 9

<sup>12</sup> Hájková, *Naše Česká Věc*, 16

distributed to thousands of subscribers across the United States.<sup>13</sup> Kocourek was well-connected within this expatriate community, and he knew how to attract fellow countrymen to buy property in Arkansas.

Kocourek's impact on Hazen was immediate. By early 1891 he already had Czech customers visiting from Nebraska, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Texas, and elsewhere to investigate and often purchase property. One satisfied customer, Jan Borecký from Little Rock, wrote to the Czech magazine *Slavie* in October that "our people are making a mistake if they overlook Arkansas. Many have already bought land here this year, and soon there will be a Czech settlement near Hazen."<sup>14</sup>

If you were a Czech immigrant in a big Midwestern city looking for opportunities, an ad like Kocourek's in your monthly magazine might really catch your eye:

**Read, Consider, and Act!**

Anyone who is looking for a piece of good land for yourself and your family, don't neglect to investigate Prairie County in the state of Arkansas, where many countrymen have already made purchases. There are beautiful and valuable forests there, and a prairie on which cotton is cultivated and where the peach crop seldom fails. The climate there is truly mild, and you can't go wrong buying a piece of land like this. A free map and description of these lots can be had by writing to Jan Kocourek, P.O. Hazen, Prairie Co., Arkansas.<sup>15</sup>

Kocourek knew that seeing is believing, and he trusted that if prospective buyers would visit Prairie County, see the land and its crops for themselves, and have a good experience here, they would be sold. The Czech magazines often had articles written by people sharing about their visit to Hazen, being hosted by the Kocourek family, and finding the country to be just as advertised. John confided in later years, "Of course there are many ways to induce immigration to any locality in any state. My experience in the land business for the last 22 years, is to go straight up North and get them, bring them down here, stay with them and make them buy, whether they want to or not."<sup>16</sup>

In the early days he could get free train passes from the railroad companies for people to travel and see the Arkansas Grand Prairie, but after 1907 the law changed and he would offer to

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<sup>13</sup> Hájková, *Naše Česká Věc*, 22

<sup>14</sup> Josef Pastor, *České Osady v Americe* (1891), 133.

<sup>15</sup> John Kocourek, "Čtěte, Sudte a Jednejte!" *Slavie*, Vol. 32, No. 1638, February 15, 1893. (Translated by the author.) This same ad was run in many editions of *Slavie* that year.

<sup>16</sup> John Kocourek to W.D. Braddock, 7 March 1907



refund their round-trip ticket if they came and didn't find conditions to be as he promised, or he might pay for their railroad fare regardless just to get them to come.<sup>17</sup>

The Marak family is an example of one that settled here and had a positive experience. A visitor wrote about them:

They have lived in America for 29 years and moved here from Everest, Brown Co., Kansas. When asked why they relocated to this region, Mrs. Marák answered that in Kansas they had little land for their large family; here they bought 200 acres with five acres of woodland. And she boasted, saying that everything that is planted in the ground grows bountifully. It's just that there is just a bit more rain than is needed. ... They paid \$8 per acre, and Mrs. Marák stated that they would not sell now for even \$20 an acre.<sup>18</sup>

Kocourek has been given credit for settling several hundred families here, the majority of whom came during the panic of 1892 and 1893, though many of them ultimately moved back east.<sup>19</sup> As Kocourek recalled years later, "The first settlers settled on this prairie about [1892], they were poor and started making hay as this was so much easier to make a little of money quick. Great many made quite a little of money and bought some more land while others failed and left the country, which is the case in any country."<sup>20</sup>

"Several hundred families" may be an exaggeration, even if many of them did leave; another source says that Kocourek induced 65 Czech families to move here.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, some 75 Slovak families moved here beginning in 1894. Many Slovak immigrants worked in coal mines in Pennsylvania and other parts of the northeast. But conditions were poor. Some Slovak advocates, like Peter V. Rovnianek, thought their people would do better by farming. Rovnianek and other visionaries established the Slovak Colonization Company and visited some prospective farming regions in Kansas, Missouri, and Northwest Arkansas, but it wasn't until John Kocourek showed them the land in Prairie County that they decided to set up a colony. The land was set aside and excursions were arranged to bring prospective buyers to

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<sup>17</sup> John Kocourek to Wellington Holmes, 4 March 1908; John Kocourek to A.E. Hahn, 14 September 1907; Conley House, "The Legacy of a Hardware Store," *The Grand Prairie Herald*, August 30, 2000, 8.

<sup>18</sup> A. Janeš, "Z Hazen, Arkansas, II." *Slavie*, May 3, 1893, 8, [https://scriptum-backup.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/scriptum/slavie/slavie\\_1893-05-03\\_ocr.pdf](https://scriptum-backup.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/scriptum/slavie/slavie_1893-05-03_ocr.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> "Kocourek–Wilkin Real Estate."

<sup>20</sup> Kocourek to Hahn, 2 March 1908, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Dallas T. Herndon, *Centennial History of Arkansas* (S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 2:969. Then again, an 1899 issue of *The Choctaw* magazine, featuring a description of Hazen, said that "to-day there are over 300 thrifty Bohemian families settled on the prairies about Hazen," but the source of this information was probably Kocourek himself. See *The Choctaw*, vol. 1, no. 4 (July 1889), 8.

see the land 50 people at a time.<sup>22</sup> Several families bought land south of Hazen and established Slovaktown, now known as Slovak. Many of them had to work a few more years in the mines of Pennsylvania and Illinois, sometimes going back and forth between their new and old homes, before they had saved up enough capital to establish homes and farms on the new land.<sup>23</sup> Some couldn't make it work in Arkansas, and they left. Others got stuck here because they had spent all they had and couldn't return. Many found early success by raising milk cattle, but it was rice cultivation after 1904 that really brought the Slovak farmers prosperity.<sup>24</sup>

And it wasn't just Czechs and Slovaks who came to settle on the Grand Prairie, although they made up large constituencies in this area. Kocourek characterized it this way:

The general class of people that have settled on our prairie, are Americans, Germans, Bohemians, some Danes and Slovaks. As a rule, they are farmers from the North principlly [*sic*] from Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, and Indiana. As a rule, all are healthy and are doing well. In many cases people having Rheumatism up North get well down here, this country is not good for people who have Asthma.<sup>25</sup>

(Ironically, he wrote this at a time when he himself had been suffering from rheumatism for two months.<sup>26</sup>)

## Kocourek and Son Hardware Store

Apparently John Kocourek was good at selling things. Around 1892—so within two years of settling in Hazen—right as his real estate business was taking off, he also opened a hardware store.<sup>27</sup> It was housed in a frame building with a pitched roof and a covered porch in the front, and it stood at the site of this present building. Initially the sign on the front just said “Kocourek Hardware.” At the time, the Kocoureks’ son, Frank, was just 2. But as Frank got older and began to help in the store, at some point the name was changed to “Kocourek and Son Hardware.” Family lore said that young Frank slept downstairs with his father, and John told him nearly every night that someday they were going to have a really big store.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> “Slovak Colonial Society,” *White River Journal*, October 20, 1994, 14; Peter V. Rovnianek, *Zapisky za Živa Pochovaného: Z Môjho 25 Ročného Verejného Účinkovania na Národa Roli Dedičnej* (Matica Slovenská, 1924), 273; Šťastný, “Z Cesty do Arkansasu”; W.J. Lauck, “Slovak Farmers Now in Arkansas,” *Times Dispatch*, March 24, 1912, 1.

<sup>23</sup> LeRoy Hodges, *Slavs on Southern Farms* (Government Printing Office, 1914), 11-12.

<sup>24</sup> Lauck, “Slovak Farmers Now in Arkansas”; “Slovak Colonization,” *White River Journal*, October 20, 1994, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Kocourek to Hahn, 2 March 1908.

<sup>26</sup> John Kocourek to Joseph Mekota, 2 March 1908.

<sup>27</sup> Ralph S. Wilcox, “Kocourek and Son Hardware,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, Little Rock, April 10, 2015, sec. 8, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> House, “The Legacy of a Hardware Store.”

That time came in 1906. They raised up the little wooden store, rolled it on rollers to the back 40 feet of the lot, and continued to operate out of it while they built this spacious new brick building, which was finished in 1907. Then, once the store moved into this building, the original wood building was removed, and the one-story warehouse area was added to the back.<sup>29</sup>

Architecturally speaking, this store is a textbook example of the Twentieth-Century Commercial Style. What is there to say about it? You know it when you see it. These are the traditional brick store fronts that line every historic downtown in much of America. According to the book *American Vernacular Design: 1870-1940*, "In vernacular design, it was the most popular storefront for the longest time."<sup>30</sup> The Kocourek and Son building fits the generic description of this style given in the book:

Brick-front organization resulted from the interaction of elements on the grid that underscored the front. Display space was conventional, whether the entrance was on- or off-center. The large windows framed by the building's corners and the panel of brick between floors dominated the lower level. These stores were often narrow and deep, and the windows were a source of light as well as an invitation to inspect goods. The upper levels had more options, including single or double oriel windows, panels of brickwork, brick friezes and cornices featuring corbeled or otherwise arranged brick, tin cornices with elaborate patterns, parapet walls of various profiles, decorative lintels or sills (especially continuous types that linked windows), and string courses or sections of belt courses that divided the wall laterally.<sup>31</sup>

The store sold hardware and furniture. It also sold Weber Wagons, buggies, harnesses, auto supplies, farming implements, tractors, mowing machines, etc. Kocourek liked to claim that, though other stores might have more stock, none had greater variety.<sup>32</sup> It was said that Kocourek and Son was the largest hardware store between Memphis and Little Rock.<sup>33</sup> Items could even be stocked on the second floor, or purchased items could be held for pickup, by means of an ingenious lift.

## Life at the Kocoureks'

Kocourek was very active in both of his businesses, but of course he had help. His son Frank worked in the hardware store with him after he became old enough, and since 1900 a man

<sup>29</sup> House, "The Legacy of a Hardware Store."

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Wilcox, "Kocourek and Son Hardware," sec. 8, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Wilcox, "Kocourek and Son Hardware," sec. 8, p. 12-13.

<sup>32</sup> "John Kocourek, Merchant Prince," *Arkansas Democrat*, October 5, 1911, 56; House, "The Legacy of a Hardware Store"

<sup>33</sup> House, "The Legacy of a Hardware Store"



named Ed Wilken partnered with him in the real estate business.<sup>34</sup> Kocourek still wrote numerous letters each day corresponding with clients around the country on matters of real estate, he continued hosting visitors and showing them the best farms in the region, and traveling around the state on business to represent Prairie County interests.

The Kocoureks lived on five acres in town.<sup>35</sup> They had an orchard with 48 types of fruit trees from around the world, plus vegetable gardens—visitors considered it a small farm. Growing up with parents who had orchards and vineyards in Europe had given John a love of cultivating plants. (When he first arrived in Hazen, he boarded at the hotel until he could get a home of his own, and while there he planted the yard with all kinds of flowers.)<sup>36</sup> They had several cattle and two horses that were only used for pulling carriages.

The Kocoureks always had servants or hired help to help with things on the property or the hardware store. Early on he employed a Black American gardener, but often they hired young immigrants from Central Europe.<sup>37</sup> For example, in 1907, John offered a Czech job seeker from Chicago \$180 a year for tree pruning, animal care, and anything else needing to be done. If he could speak some English, he could earn additional wages for helping out in the hardware store.<sup>38</sup> In 1910 a German from Bohemia lived with them as a private servant; he had been in the States five years but could not speak English yet.<sup>39</sup> In 1920 John and Anna took out ads in Czech papers seeking an older girl or woman to live with them and care for the house; they didn't mind if she had a child.<sup>40</sup> Later that year they had two young Czech women in their home, one who kept the books at the hardware store and one as a domestic servant.<sup>41</sup> In 1930 John (now widowed) had two domestic servants lodging with him—one Bohemian-born and one second-generation German.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the small “farm” at the home place in town, Kocourek owned several farms amounting to some 2,000 acres, much of which he leased out to other farmers or sharecroppers.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Kocourek–Wilkin Real Estate.”

<sup>35</sup> J.P. Wachal, “Dopisy: Arkansas,” *Slavie*, August 9, 1893, 8, [https://scriptum-backup.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/scriptum/slavie/slavie\\_1893-08-09\\_ocr.pdf](https://scriptum-backup.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/scriptum/slavie/slavie_1893-08-09_ocr.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> “Kocourek–Wilkin Real Estate,” *Grand Prairie Recounter – Special Edition 1907*; House, “The Legacy of a Hardware Store”

<sup>37</sup> Janeš, “Z Hazen, Arkansas, II,” 8; Census records from 1910, 1920, 1930

<sup>38</sup> John Kocourek, Letter to Jiří Jehlička, March 12, 1907

<sup>39</sup> 1910 U.S. Federal Census

<sup>40</sup> “Různé: Přijme se starší dívka neb žena...” *Hlasatel*, February 27, 1920. Same ad also in March 2, 1920 issue.

<sup>41</sup> 1920 U.S. Federal Census

<sup>42</sup> 1930 U.S. Federal Census

<sup>43</sup> Janeš, “Z Hazen, Arkansas, II,” 8; Wachal, “Dopisy: Arkansas”; Šťastný, “Z Cesty do Arkansasu”; Herndon, *Centennial History of Arkansas*, 969; Kocourek to Hahn, 2 March 1908.

## The Rise of Rice Farming

Although Kocourek touted the ability of this prairie to grow a variety of crops, the soil wasn't as good for cash crops like cotton as in other places; that was one reason settlement came relatively late to this region. It's also why many early settlers raised cattle, and it's why much of the land was still virgin prairie by the turn of the century, and one of the major exports was prairie hay. It wasn't the most lucrative crop, but you didn't have to cultivate it, just harvest it. Under the topsoil is a layer of clay that water doesn't penetrate. Around 1904, however, it was demonstrated that this was a perfect environment for growing rice.<sup>44</sup> Farmers in the area soon gained an interest in this new crop. Land agents like Kocourek also quickly realized the newfound marketability of the prairie land.<sup>45</sup> In letters we have from John Kocourek written in 1907, he was already doing everything he could to promote rice cultivation in the area. To prospective buyers he would write:

This is not only a good country for general mixed farming, stock-raising and dairying, but we have raised the finest quality of rice upon our prairie that has ever been raised in the world. ... Our success in raising rice in this country never has been advertised, and in fact very few people out side of this county and adjoining counties know very little about it. ... I am sending you small sample of rice that we have raised here last year, also small rice book that will give you great deal of information about it.<sup>46</sup>

This rice book was presumably an early version of a 28-page booklet called *Grand Prairie Rice Lands* published in 1910 by Kocourek & Wilken, which shares glowing information about the budding rice industry in the region, the suitability and still-affordability of the land for this prosperous crop, and the additional amenities that are available in Hazen. For Kocourek's early promotional efforts, historian Dallas Herdon wrote in 1922 that "he was one of the first to undertake rice culture in this region and his labors have demonstrated the possibility for the production of the crop in this section of the state, thereby contributing in large measure to the material prosperity of the district."<sup>47</sup>

## A Banker and Business Representative

As if all this wasn't enough of a contribution to his adopted homeland, John Kocourek was a driving force behind the local bank. He was one of the founders of the Bank of Grand Prairie in

<sup>44</sup> "Grand Prairie," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/grand-prairie-2996/>

<sup>45</sup> J.M. Spicer, *Beginnings of the Rice Industry in Arkansas*, 1964, 15.

<sup>46</sup> John Kocourek to A.E. Hahn, 14 September 1907. This letter has a handwritten note that says, "Same was sent W.L. Dillon, Mendota, Ill.," plus at least 11 other names and cities added as well.

<sup>47</sup> Herndon, *Centennial History of Arkansas*, 969.

1896 and served on its board of directors for its entire existence.<sup>48</sup> In the 1920s he was the bank's vice president, with his old real estate partner Ed Wilken as president, and in 1928 he himself became the president of the bank.<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, the bank couldn't survive the Great Depression, and it closed in 1932.<sup>50</sup>

Although all of Kocourek's energies were fully invested in improving his local community and region, he may have still given the occasional thought to his country of origin. He and his son Frank contributed to a collection being taken for the construction of a Sokol gymnastics hall in his birthplace of Mirovice, and once during a visit to Cleveland he took out an ad in a Czech paper looking to meet others expats from his hometown.<sup>51</sup> And during the First World War he promoted Liberty Loan drives for the war effort, selling thousands of dollars' worth of bonds to Czech and Slovak farmers in the area.<sup>52</sup> This was a way that many Czechs and Slovaks supported the Allied cause in the war, hoping for the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire so that their native lands could create independent nation-states, or in this case, two nations in one state—Czechoslovakia.<sup>53</sup>

John Kocourek used to travel the state and the nation to represent the business interests of Hazen. Little Rock newspapers would report things like, "Mr. John Kocourek, the well-known real estate owner and agent for Grand Prairie land, of Hazen, was in the city yesterday."<sup>54</sup> Or, "The rice crop in Prairie County this year was beyond expectations," said John Kocourek at the Merchants' Hotel yesterday."<sup>55</sup> In 1913 he was one of 750 delegates from Arkansas to the National Farmers' Association meeting in Plano, Illinois. The delegates were "representative farmers whose work in agriculture has attracted the attention of the State Department of Agriculture."<sup>56</sup> In 1916 an exhibition and advertising train called "Arkansas on Wheels" was toured around the South, East Coast, Northeast, and Midwest to showcase the best of Arkansas industry and resources and promote settlement and trade. Newspapers statewide reported that "John Kocourek, of Hazen, one of the most successful businessmen of the state, ... will act as the foreign commissioner, presenting the advantages of the state to the foreign peoples who

<sup>48</sup> Šťastný, "Z Cesty do Arkansasu"; *Polk's Bankers Encyclopedia* (Bankers Encyclopedia Co., Publishers, March 1927), 63, 84; "Bank of Grand Prairie, Hazen, Closes Doors," *Arkansas Gazette*, January 17, 1932, 2.

<sup>49</sup> "New Head of Bank at Hazen," *Arkansas Gazette*, January 16, 1928, 2.

<sup>50</sup> "Bank of Grand Prairie, Hazen, Closes Doors."

<sup>51</sup> "Mírotickým krajanům k povšimnutí," *Hlasatel*, February 3, 1920, 5; "Upozornění!" *Svět*, August 28, 1922, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Herndon, *Centennial History of Arkansas*, 969.

<sup>53</sup> Buying war bonds did not necessarily always mean support of the native homeland, though. European immigrants felt pressure to prove their loyalty to America, and purchasing war bonds could be a way to signal their commitment to the United States and to the Allied cause in the war. Kocourek's motivation in selling the bonds is not known, but it would have certainly been considered patriotic.

<sup>54</sup> "Personal Points," *Arkansas Gazette*, December 12, 1895.

<sup>55</sup> "At the Hotels," *Arkansas Gazette*, November 17, 1912, 20.

<sup>56</sup> "Delegates Named to Farm Congress," *Arkansas Gazette*, September 17, 1913, 11.

are attracted to the train in the various cities.”<sup>57</sup> In another example, when state officials came to Hazen to inspect local dairies, Kocourek was one of two men who accompanied them as representatives of the local businesses.<sup>58</sup> In other words, when it came to advocating for the business interests of Hazen and the region, you always found John Kocourek there.

## The Cotton Belt Route Reaches Hazen

Hazen already had the Rock Island Railroad, which helped local farmers export products via Little Rock and Memphis, but Kocourek had always dreamed of a railroad line that would link to Stuttgart in the south and connect the community of Slovak and all the farms along the way to better open up the hinterlands.<sup>59</sup> He got his dream in 1910. That year, the Cotton Belt Route leased a small regional railroad called the Central Arkansas and Eastern that was starting to expand into rice country so they could operate it as a branch line.<sup>60</sup> Carlisle was hoping it would come north and connect to the Rock Island tracks at their town.<sup>61</sup> But railroad officials met with businessmen of Hazen, who secured the right of way for the tracks, and so it came into Hazen. The Cotton Belt was elated and claimed that now they were “going to beat the Rock Island with a railroad line through the rich rice belt of Prairie County.”<sup>62</sup> Kocourek wasn’t named, but he was a city alderman (elected in 1909) and given all we know about him, he was certainly involved with advocating for the line into Hazen and obtaining the right of way to make it happen.<sup>63</sup> The Cotton Belt spur line was completed in 1911 and came into Hazen on South Chester Street and joined the Rock Island tracks just west of the depot.

With the railway station now serving two rail lines, and with the explosive growth of rice production in the county, the small existing station was replaced by this larger, better depot in 1915. This of course benefited the Kocourek and Son Hardware Store, because it increased the traffic of customers coming into town from rural areas to buy and sell. A farmer from the Slovak area, for example, could ride to the Cotton Belt line, hitch up his horse and board the train to Hazen and hop off at this depot, right by the hardware store, where the train would park for

<sup>57</sup> “Close Contracts August 20 and 24,” *The Prescott Daily News*, August 15, 1916, 1; “City and County to Be Advertised Thru North, East,” *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, August 17, 1916, 1.

<sup>58</sup> “Dairies Endeavor to Abide by Laws,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, May 29, 1914.

<sup>59</sup> House, “The Legacy of a Hardware Store.”

<sup>60</sup> “Stuttgart Sure of a New Railroad,” *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, May 27, 1910; *Nineteenth Annual Report of The St. Louis Southwestern Railway Company (Cotton Belt Route) Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1910* (St. Louis: St. Louis Southwestern Railway, 1910), 8, quoted in Glenn Mosenthin, “A Brief History of the Central Arkansas and Eastern Railroad Company,” 1.

<sup>61</sup> “To Extend Line to Rice Region,” *Carlisle Independent*, June 10, 1909.

<sup>62</sup> “And After Meeting Claim Their Line Will Beat the Rock Island Through Rice Belt,” *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, August 28, 1910.

<sup>63</sup> “At Hazen,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, April 8, 1909, 2.

four hours. The farmer would have four hours to shop at the stores and take care of business in Hazen before taking the train back home.<sup>64</sup>

## Highway 70 Comes to Downtown

Did you drive in to Hazen today on Highway 70? And did it conveniently take you right through downtown and lead you right up to the Kocourek and Son Hardware Store? If so, you have John Kocourek to thank for that. When the national auto trails were first being established in the early 1900s as automobiles became widespread, the Bankhead Highway was one of the original highways established in the United States. It ran east-west and entered Arkansas from the east along what would become U.S. Route 70, which was established in 1926. But at the time, that was just a gravel road running along Jackson Street at the south end of Hazen. Highway 70 was to become a fancy concrete highway billed as the “Broadway of America,” but John Kocourek thought it would better serve Hazen if the highway came through the downtown business center. He lobbied the governor and the state highway department, and, as president of the Bank of Grand Prairie, he and the bank’s owner worked to secure deeds to the land needed for the highway to run through the city center, which were obtained in 1930, making the Hazen stretch one of the last sections of Highway 70 to be settled.<sup>65</sup>

## A Family Business Legacy

John Kocourek died on October 21, 1936, at the age of 74.<sup>66</sup> He had lived in the United States for 54 years, the last 16 of them as a U.S. citizen.<sup>67</sup> He was buried at the Czech National Cemetery south of town. The cemetery had been formally established in 1895 when Kocourek himself donated the land for that purpose.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> House, “The Legacy of a Hardware Store.”

<sup>65</sup> “Deeds to Highway Right-of-Way at Hazen Secured,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, July 30, 1930, 2; House, “The Legacy of a Hardware Store”; “OBITUARY: John Kocourek, Business-Civic Leader of Hazen, Succumbs,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, October 22, 1936.

<sup>66</sup> “OBITUARY: John Kocourek, Business-Civic Leader of Hazen, Succumbs,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, October 22, 1936, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Kocourek gained full U.S. citizenship on November 10, 1924. He was one of 11 foreign-born residents to be awarded citizenship that day by the U.S. district court judge in Little Rock after satisfactorily demonstrating an understanding of the American system of government. Eight other applicants were denied and told to study civics before trying again, as “the number of ignorant voters in the United States already is sufficiently large,” and “the qualifications of the citizen should at least comprise a fair knowledge of the form and divisions of the national and state governments.” “Citizenship Denied by Federal Judge,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, November 11, 1924, 10.

<sup>68</sup> John Kocourek had been traveling up north in the early 1890s to recruit settlers. He became very ill with a fever and was taken in by a local family named the Hondls to recover. While convalescing at their home, he convinced them of the opportunities in Prairie County. They soon moved there, but had not been there long when the father, John Hondl, was struck by lightning and killed while working in the field in 1894. Hondl’s wife, Anna, set aside an

After John’s death, his son Frank continued running the hardware store as he had been doing with his father for three decades. Frank’s wife, Erma, was also involved, and their son, Frank, Jr. (called Dink) joined them in running the store after his military service in World War II ended. So once again the store was true to its name Kocourek and Son. Additional people were also employed in the store, of course. Frank died in 1965, and Erma died in 1979. Dink sold the store to his friends Conley and June House in 1980, but he continued working in the store under them for another 15 years until he passed away in 1995. The Houses retired and closed the store in 2000, then sold it to Greg and Barbara Rawn.<sup>69</sup> Having operated from 1892 till 2000—including 93 years in this building—the Kocourek and Son Hardware Store claimed to be the longest continuously operating business between Memphis and Little Rock.<sup>70</sup>

The building needed work and some thought it would be better to tear it down and salvage the building materials. But it was sold to the Rawns because they had plans to preserve and use it.<sup>71</sup> They opened an antique shop here in 2006, and it was in business until at least 2015. They added a sign out front that said, “Antiques,” but they didn’t mess with the historic Kocourek and Son sign, which of course is still there.

## Historic Preservation Saves the Past and Paves the Way for the Future

The building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2015, but a few years later, the Rawns were ready to sell it. If the City of Hazen hadn’t stepped in and bought it in 2019 or 2020, it likely would have been dismantled for materials. After the city acquired it, it became eligible for Historic Preservation Restoration Grants from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. In 2022 it was awarded \$120,000 to repoint the masonry, and last year it got \$50,000 to restore 8 historic double-hung wood windows and begin the process of removing the rotting flooring and joists and installing drainage.

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acre of her property to bury him on. It was matched by an adjacent acre from Peter Marak’s farm, and John Kocourek bought both acres, which he donated to the Czech National Cemetery Association in 1895 for the “purpose of providing a desirable burial” for Czech countrymen. Kocourek may have continued to do favors for the unfortunate Hondl family, according to a March 2, 1908, letter to Joseph Mekota. (See Mike Polston, “Czech National Cemetery,” *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, June 16, 2023, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/czech-national-cemetery-18542/> (accessed February 23, 2024); and Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, “Czech National Cemetery,” Arkansas Register of Historic Places Nomination, 2010; “Tona Hondl Poduska, Good Samaritan, 104, Helped All on Prairie,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, August 12, 1994, 4B; “Out of State,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, August 12, 1994, 7B)

<sup>69</sup> House, “The Legacy of a Hardware Store.”

<sup>70</sup> Wilcox, “Kocourek and Son Hardware.”

<sup>71</sup> Zoie Clift, “A Visit to the Historic Kocourek and Son Store in Hazen,” Arkansas Tourism, March 8, 2012, <https://www.arkansas.com/articles/visit-historic-kocourek-and-son-store-hazen> (Accessed April 7, 2025).



There is still more work to do, as Mayor Hardke can tell you. They are working hard on this restoration to preserve the building with the ultimate plan to turn this place into a community history center with an emphasis on presenting the histories of the local families, as well as to use the building as a community center for events, showers, receptions, etc.

The Kocourek and Son Hardware Store is already so wrapped up in the history of Hazen, it's only fitting that the building will continue to preserve the history of the community.

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