

Dear Members, Family, and Friends of St. Maria Otok Cres Benevolent Society,

The “Dobrotvorno Drustvo Otok Cres Sveta Maria” received its charter from the State of Illinois in the County of Cook for benevolent and educational purposes on February 2nd, 1917. The first board of directors were: George Velcich, John Velcich, Anton Sablich, Domenic Deskovich, and Christ Sablich. They adopted the name Sveta Maria from their home parish in the town of Beli, on the Island of Cres, where most of the members had received the Sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, First Holy Communion, and Marriage. The location of their first meeting place was 2226 Wentworth Ave., Chicago, Illinois.

A Brief Historical Perspective

World War I had already been in progress for three years. February 2nd, 1917, was the day before the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Germany in response to Germany announcing its new policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. The Great War in Europe bred a mistrust of most foreigners in the United States precipitating the 1917 Immigration Act which was passed by Congress on February 5, 1917. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of this act was the exclusion of all aliens over sixteen years of age who were illiterate. Despite the 1917 Immigration Act, Eastern and Southern Europeans still dribbled in but were merely tolerated. It was also the year before the 1918-1919 influenza epidemic that infected one third of the world’s population and killed fifty million people.

Chicago’s population was growing at a fast rate as immigrants from Eastern Europe migrated to Chicago to work on its railroads, and in its steel factories and stock yards. Twenty six years had passed since Pope Leo XIII called for just wages and humane working conditions in his encyclical *RERUM NOVARUM*, addressing the dignity of labor and the rights of workers. Worker Unions fighting for workers’ rights were still in their infancy. Meanwhile, communist ideology was offering a utopian alternative to the sometimes harsh realities of capitalism. Yet, working conditions were still dismal in comparison with today’s standards. Another seventeen years would pass before President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” would provide programs like Social Security for the common working man and woman and their families. Life expectancy for the average male in the United States was between 50 and 55 years of age. And, illness and disease generated by the unsanitary conditions of the Chicago River regularly plagued Chicago’s working population.

Finding Community in Chicago

During these difficult and harsh circumstances, our forebears found comfort and refuge in two places. The first was in the parish community of St. Jerome Croatian Church on South Princeton Ave., and the second was their beloved “Drustvo” or “Club.” St. Jerome Church provided for their spiritual needs and gave them a sense of belonging, a sense of community, and a connection to home. At the same time St. Jerome Croatian Church provided it’s parishioners with the means to preserve their culture while helping them make the transition to a new American culture, as it still does today for so many

Croatian immigrants. The “Club” provided it’s members the same connection to home and community, but it also gave its members a place to relax, pour some wine, cook up some of their favorite dishes, play cards, sing their favorite songs, reminisce about the days of their youth, and forget about their cares for a little while. There was a noble aspect to the club as well. One of the club’s purposes was to lend financial support to the widows and orphans of its members by paying for their members’ funeral and burial costs.

“Cresani”

The Islanders of Cres were, and still are, a unique subculture within the Croatian Community in Chicago. For, the Islanders of Cres were not quite as Croatian as their mainland cousins, not quite as Italian as the Venetian Lion of St. Mark that dotted their Island’s landscape would suggest, and certainly not as Austrian as the Austrian coat of arms on their mail boxes would claim. The Islanders of Cres were their own people. Just as islanders throughout the world, no matter what continent, seem to always be slightly off-center from their mainstream mainland counterparts, our forebears were no different. They bore their own unique blend of culture, cuisine, dialect, songs, and dances. The club and its members served to preserve that culture as they still do today.

Today you can still find a warm embrace or firm handshake, a welcoming smile, a good game of bocce or cards, and of course, good wine and singing at the “club.”

Cause for Celebration

And so, what are we celebrating? We are celebrating 90 years of our Island’s Culture in the United States, particularly in the City of Chicago. We commemorate the strength, courage, and resilience of our people who struggled to make a better life for themselves and their children in a new country. We venerate the memory of all those who have died. And, we give thanks to God for all that we have received. Won’t you please join us! Let’s not wait for another funeral to have a reason to see each other. Come! Let’s celebrate Life!

Sincerely,

John G. Perovich
President
Sv. Maria Otok Cres Benevolent Society