Czechs came to Texas in the mid-1800s for the same reason as the Germans: a search for the freedom and opportunity lacking in their native land. The first Czech immigrants were mostly farmers from Bohemia, who began to settle in the Fayette County area in the 1850s. The main tide of Czech immigration came from Moravia after the Civil War, adding a new cultural imprint to the social mix of Fayette and nearby counties. To help adjust to their new life, the immigrants developed Czech religious, benevolent, and sports associations to nurture their community and culture.

In the 1840s, limited opportunities, political and cultural repression, and forced military service in the Austro-Hungarian Empire led many Czechs to seek a better life in America. Most of the immigrants came to Texas from northeast Moravia and southeast Bohemia directly by sea to Galveston. From there they founded Czech colonies in Austin, Fayette, Washington, and Lavaca counties in the 1850s. Settlement spread from these “seed” colonies in a process called chain migration, whereby Czech communities maintained their cultural contacts while expanding into new territory. The Czechs’ arrival once again altered the cultural landscape of Fayette County, transforming the German town of Fayetteville, for instance, into a mostly Czech community.

Joseph Peter and his family were among the early Czech immigrants to Texas. The family came from Moravia in 1856 and established the Fayette County community of Dubina (“Land of Oaks”). Peter’s son Joseph, Jr., personified many Texas Czech immigrant stories. He began as a blacksmith, and during the Civil War the young Peter hauls Confederate cotton to sell in Mexico. After the war Peter became a successful merchant and cotton gin owner. In the 1880s he represented Fayette County in the state legislature. Among those who worked the lands of Joseph Peter, Jr., were Fred Svecina and former slave Tom Lee (pictured on Panel 4 in this exhibit).

At the same time that Czechs were embracing the Texas way of life, they developed powerful institutions to preserve their language and cultural identity. One of these was a Czech-language press, represented by this 1892 election issue of the La Grande Srovala (“Freedom”), whose front page lists all the candidates for local offices. In 1896, the Slovenic Benevolent Order of the State of Texas (Slovenska Podporjujaca Javnost Stanja Texas, or SPJST), was created in Fayette County as a regional fraternal insurance organization. SPJST lodges have since provided places for music and dances and have promoted Czech language and culture, including the study of Czech at both the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University.