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Print Page

Sister City signs spring up around Little Falls

By **Madison Blask**

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LITTLE FALLS — The story of the new green signs that have popped up around Little Falls is a tale of two cities, sister cities that is. This is a story told in three parts; beginning in the late-1800s with the immigration of around one thousand Slovaks, from the Myjava region of Slovakia, to Little Falls, the creation of the United States Sister City program by President Dwight D Eisenhower in 1956 and ending with the placement of these signs.

The immigration of Slovaks to Little Falls began with one single immigrant. The young Anna Mocko arrived in the United States from the Myjava region in 1892, beginning her new life on a farm in Minnesota. A few years after starting her new American life Anna set off on a train to visit friends in Little Falls, New Jersey. One slight miscommunication later and Anna discovered herself to be in Little Falls, New York. Fortunately, Anna found a friend in the Little Falls Ticket Agent, George Boyle, who spoke enough German to find Anna a place to stay. At the time, Little Falls was about the same size as Myjava and with similar surrounding hills and valleys it was not hard for Anna to feel at home in the community.

With such a positive experience in her newfound residence, Anna wrote affirmative letters to her friends and relatives in Myjava encouraging them to follow her example and start new world lives in Little Falls. Slowly at first, then aggressively, Slovaks left the Myjava region with their sights set on America. Although many Slovak immigrants created homes for themselves in large cities across the United States, the most dense population joined Anna in Little Falls, New York. In fact, so many joined her that Little Falls began being referred to as "Myjava in America," solidifying the bond between the two communities.

Over time, the Slovaks adapted to life in Little Falls. Fighting through the language and cultural barriers that came with moving to a new country, many found factory jobs. However, they did not just come to America to work, but to continue their lives. As the population of Little Falls grew so did the number of intermarriages between Slovaks and people of other ethnic groups in the community. Although only a thousand Slovaks moved to Little Falls in the late-1800s to the early-1900s, they quickly assimilated, creating homes, families and a unique culture. So much so that many current residents of Little Falls can still trace their family lines to this first wave of immigrants, and ultimately, Myjava.

Thanks to Anna Mocko, Myjava, Slovakia and Little Falls, New York, will be forever bonded. But how do we truly commemorate this connection? Thankfully, there is a way. In 1956, in post-World War II America, President Eisenhower held a White House conference on citizen diplomacy. His enthusiasm towards creating a free and peaceful world for all sparked the support of tens-of thousands of Americans. The result was People-to-People International, an organization the world desperately needed as a nightlight amidst the fog of the Cold War. This society exists as the foundation of Sister City International, which became its own independent organization in 1967.

According to its Wikipedia page, Sister City International is a nonprofit citizen diplomacy network that creates and strengthens partnerships between communities in the United States and those in other countries. Many families in Little Falls have always been aware of their personal connections to Myjava, Slovakia, but it was not until 2014 that it was made official. Peter Adasek, as a representative of the Little Falls Historical Society, travelled to Slovakia and met with the Myjava mayor to obtain the documents, which were then hand carried to former Mayor Robert Peters. Through the official efforts of Peters, current Mayor Mark Blask, and the Little Falls Historical Society, Sister City status was officially established in 2014. Mayor Blask was happy to aid this process in any way he could and is thrilled that the city finally has a way to make its Slovakian pride public.

"The sister city signs around Little Falls look fantastic; we have received several compliments already on the one in front of City Hall. Many thanks to the historical society for spearheading this effort," said Blask.

Little Falls is not alone in commemorating this connection; the next time you are in Myjava you can visit the Little Falls exhibit in their local museum.

Thanks to the generous funding by Little Falls resident and Myjava descendant Martin Babinec and the support of the Little Falls Historical Society, in July of this year the city of Little Falls found a way to publicly showcase this unique connection. New dark green signs boldly displaying "Sister Cities Little Falls, NY Myjava, Slovakia" joined by the national flags of both countries can be found at five entry points to the city and in front of City Hall.

"It is a thrill for me to see the Sister City relationship come together," said Babinec. "Signs are now up in both Little Falls and Myjava as a visible reminder to all on the important connection between our two communities."

Enter Little Falls from any direction and be reminded not only of our past, but of our bright future, and most importantly, this tale of two sister cities.

For more information on this sister city connection, visit the Sister City Exhibit in the Little Falls Historical Society. Open Monday through Friday, 1 to 4 p.m. and Saturdays 9 a.m. to noon.



This "Sister City" sign has been installed on the front of Little Falls City Hall. TIMES TELEGRAM FILE PHOTO

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