

John Nowak (Novak)
Town Caledonia (Tabor), Racine County
1853 – 1895



Figure 1 John Novak pieces with family attribution. Photo courtesy of the Kenosha Public Museum. Ken Dearolf photo record, circa 1975.

Kenneth Dearolf described John Novak pottery in “Wisconsin Folk Pottery” as redware with glazes that were “shiny brown, yellow-brown, and red-brown” from first-hand observations of ware in the possession of family descendants.¹

John Nowak or Novak was an immigrant from Bohemia, once apart of eastern Germany which today lies within the Czech Republic. It was an area of mixed Germanic and Slavonic languages, and the spelling and pronunciation of Nowak's last name evidently reflects linguistic challenges which occurred upon immigration to an Englishspeaking country. In the German language, the letter 'W' is pronounced like the letter 'V' in English, so that the German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm's name sounds like 'Vilhelm.' So it is that John Nowak's name was pronounced 'Novak' in his native land, which spelling he eventually adopted in his new home, although its correct spelling was with the letter 'w'. Trouble with language apparently also affected information provided to English-speaking census enumerators and other record keepers, resulting in confusion and inconsistencies over time.

Nowak was born in March or April, 1819, his father named Joseph, mother not listed,²

“He learned his trade in Hungary. He walked to Hungary wheeling his little black trunk on a wheel barrow. After learning to be a potter in Hungary, he returned [to Bohemia] but was now prosperous enough to hire a man to push the wheel

barrow with the trunk. He later became head of an organization of potters numbering about 80 members.”³

He married wife Anna, born May 6, 1825, in their native land and the couple was blessed with the birth of their eldest daughter Maria in 1851. Accompanied by his brother Anton, the little family came to America in 1852 and initially settled in Chicago for a year before removing to Racine County.

“He first located on land on the Michna Road but when he brought his wife there from Chicago. She sat down on a tree stump and was so unhappy [that] she cried. He then purchased land on Lake Michigan by warranty Deed dated October 15, 1866. He selected the site on Lake Michigan because of the clay found there to carry on his trade.”⁴

In 1853 Nowak purchased ten acres of land in Section 7 in Town Caledonia along the lakeshore, which appears to have been the source of his clay. This was a very small enterprise indeed, valued at only \$250 at the time of the 1860 census, and yet he identified his occupation as farmer rather than potter.⁵ The census that year also enumerated three additional children in the household: Joseph, age 5, Anna, age 3, and John Jr. at 1. None of the children are reported to have attended school the previous year, and all were reported as born in Bohemia, though the younger three were actually born in Wisconsin. This also suggests language difficulties just as the Nowak/Novak name spelling reveals confusion with the English language.

It is difficult today to realize just how primitive and isolated the Town of Caledonia was at that time, though located only a few miles north of Racine:

“They emigrated to this country after their marriage, settling on the little farm in the Town of Caledonia, where they resided for the past forty years. By unremitting labor they have succeeded in establishing for themselves a good home well stocked and supplied with all the farming accessories. Forty years ago [1860] Racine County was almost a wilderness. There were but a few houses and here and there dotting the farm and uncleared timber lands were little log huts that now [1901] have been transformed into new and modern homes. The forests have been chopped down and the lands put into excellent condition for the farming industry.”⁶

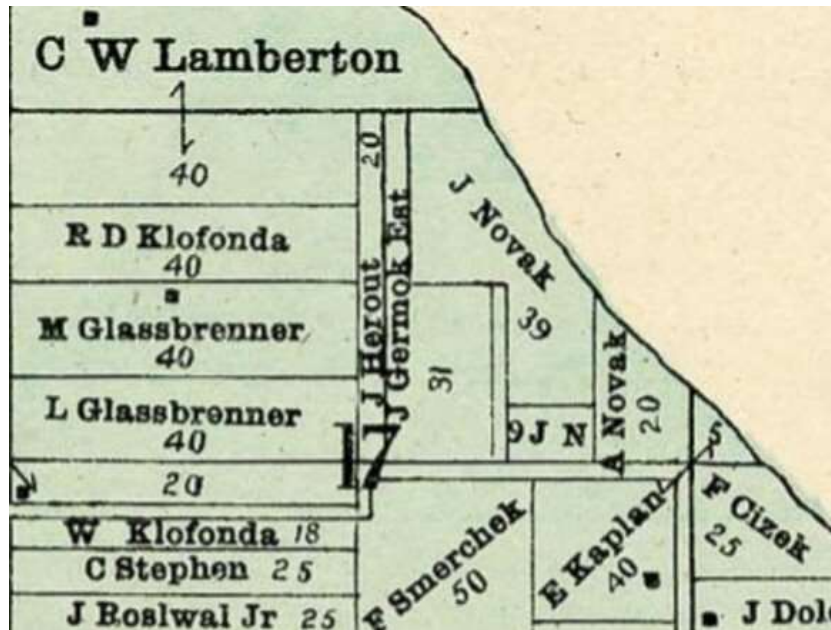


Figure 2 1899 Town of Caledonia, Racine County Plat Map showing Nowak parcel of land on Lake Michigan.

If there is one unifying trait among immigrants from Bohemia it is poverty. This part of Europe is characterized by mountainous terrain and large families, and upon arrival in Wisconsin they were compelled to seek out and settle upon marginal and inexpensive farmlands which they improved by dint of hard work and frugal household practices. Having a trade or practical skills could be combined with small-scale agriculture to eke out a precarious existence as the family established themselves here. John Nowak's training as a potter helped sustain them through the lean years in a belief that tomorrow would be better.

And, indeed, it would be. By 1866 they had purchased additional lands in section 17, increasing the farm's value sixfold to \$1500 and personal wealth almost doubled to \$300. Language barriers apparently caused John Nowak to age only 8 years over the previous decade to age 50, and he again reported his occupation as 'Farmer'. Wife Anna (45) was keeping house for her husband and five children: Maria's name had been Americanized to Mary (19, without occupation), Joseph (15), Anna (13), John (11) and Winifred (3) all remained "At Home" and none reported attending school the previous year. The younger three children now were reported (correctly) to have been born in Wisconsin instead of Bohemia, suggesting some improvement with communication skills. ⁷

The 1880 Census continued inconsistencies from a decade previous, husband John now 62, still farming, and wife Anna (56) keeping house. By this time the family had adopted the English spelling of their stated name as Novak. Older children Mary, Joseph and Anna no longer dwelt with the family, while the two younger boys John (21) and Winifred (13, now calling himself Vincent), reported "assist on farm." ⁸ The Bohemian farms were indeed modest in size: in 1890 John Novak reported owning 39 acres, brother Anton 20 acres, and son John only 9 acres, all

located in section 17, Town of Caledonia. This undoubtedly was a family affair insofar as sharing labor was concerned.⁹

Thus far no printed source had mentioned Nowak's other occupation as potter, that is until a state business gazetteer appeared in 1895.¹⁰ Like so many rural Wisconsin potters, agriculture formed his primary source of income during the summer months while throwing and firing his wares became a wintertime occupation. Yes, clay must be dug during mild weather when the ground was not frozen, but otherwise the pottery business made good use of his time when cows did not have to be milked or field crops sown, cultivated, and harvested.

The 1900 Census reveals a large extended family under one roof.¹¹ Potter John (81) then reported no occupation but still owned his farm and was a naturalized citizen. His wife, now called Annie, 75, still kept house; they had been married 50 years and she had borne 7 children, 5 of whom yet survived. Son Vincent (33) lived in with his parents and operated the farm. He was married to Winifred (31) and they had 3 children: Vincent (8) at school, Miran (no age given) and daughter Vlasta (8), apparently a twin of Vincent. Son John Nowak Jr. (41) owned the farm next door where he lived with wife Mary (38), daughter Rosle (10) and John Jr. (7). Both children attended school within the year. A year later the senior Nowak's celebrated their golden wedding anniversary:

A Country Celebration.

Mr. and Mrs. John Novak, two of the oldest residents of Racine County, celebrated their golden wedding anniversary at their home in the town of Caledonia yesterday afternoon and evening, over one hundred relatives and friends being present to take part in the commemoration of the event, among whom were children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The day was pleasantly passed away in different forms of amusement; the old folks indulged in reminiscences and told of the days of their youth, how they loved, courted and married, and how Cupid captured two young hearts in the foreign lands of old Bohemia just fifty years ago Mr. and Mrs. Novak, who are well and favorably known throughout Racine County, are enjoying good health and the prospects are bright for many more years of happy married life. During the day they were presented with many numerous appropriate gifts as tokens of the esteem in which they are held by their friends and relatives, among the presents being an elegant clock.¹²

Potter John Nowak died Feb. 19, 1903, at the age of 83 years and 11 months, still listed as a Farmer by occupation. His estate consisted of land, property, and farm implements; pottery or potter's tools received no mention. His beloved wife Anna died just 4 years later, on April 21, 1907, aged 81 years and 11 months. His final burial place is listed as Caledonia, hers as the Bohemian Cemetery, undoubtedly resting beside one another.

An interesting account of Nowak's pottery is described in a 1956 Racine Sunday Bulletin article. Winfred Nowak (mentioned earlier as wife of son Vincent) had just one a baking contest. When interviewed, she discussed her father-in-law's pottery making. "When my father-in-law came Caledonia it was hard to get dishes and cooking utensils and settlers came from miles around to buy pottery as soon as it came out of the kiln."¹³ The very same ware that Dearolf later photographed is shown in the article. Winifred, at the time, also possessed some tools for pottery making from John Nowak and remembered him at his potter's wheel. These pieces have hopefully been passed down in the family.

Mrs. Winifred Novak Treasures Pottery Caledonia-Grown Wheat Provides Flour for Bread

By Mary S. Edwards

From flour to finished loaf, the homemade bread baked by Mrs. Winifred Novak is a product of Racine County. So, for that matter, is Mrs. Novak, who was born 87 years ago about two miles south of the home which she now shares with her daughter, Mrs. George Smerchek, on the Novak Road.

The road cuts through land settled in 1852 by Mrs. Novak's father-in-law, John Novak, a master potter, who chose the site because of the ceramic clay he found there in the banks of Lake Michigan.

Some of the products of Novak's potter's wheel are among the prized possessions of his daughter-in-law. Among the items that have been preserved are a pitcher which she used for cooking as a bride. Now, however, the pottery is carefully guarded against breakage.

"When my father-in-law came to Caledonia," Mrs. Novak explained, "it was hard to get dishes and cooking utensils and settlers came from miles around to buy the pottery as soon as it came out of the kiln."

Along with pottery muffin tins, a pottery cake pan and a variety of pitchers and bowls, Mrs. Novak has some of the tools which the potter used in plying his art and she recalls seeing him work at his wheel.

Mrs. Novak's parents came

of yeast (Mrs. Novak uses baker's yeast which keeps under refrigeration until used up.)

Place yeast in bowl, sprinkle with sugar or honey and add one-half cup of the milk. Let stand while flouring bread board with 1½ cups of the unbleached flour. Add remaining warm milk, the molasses and salt. Add remaining one-half cup of unbleached flour, alternately sifting and beating. Toss dough on the floured board and let stand about 10 minutes.

Melt the shortening and put into bowl. Work flour on board into dough. Put dough into bowl of shortening and knead lightly to work shortening into dough. Cover and let stand until double in size. Shape into loaves, let rise about 15 minutes, then bake for 10 minutes at 350 degrees and then for 40 minutes at 375 degrees.

Rebarborovi (Rhubarb Cake)

2 cups flour
½ tsp. salt
½ cup sugar
1½ tsp. baking powder
½ cup shortening
2 eggs
½ cup milk
¾ cup sugar
8 cups diced raw rhubarb

Sift dry ingredients, reserving ¾ cup sugar, and cut in shortening. Beat the eggs and add with the milk. Grease an 8x12x2 loaf pan and in it spread ¾ of the dough. Ar-



Three generations admire the work of a fourth in photo above, at left, as Mrs. Winifred Novak, today's cook-of-the-week, Mrs. George Smerchek, her daughter, and Virginia Smerchek, her granddaughter, exhibit pottery made by Mrs. Novak's father-in-law. Novak, a master potter, settled in Racine County in 1852, and made the pottery shown from ceramic clay found in the banks of Lake

Michigan. The utensils center, with a raised rim, Granddaughter Virginia, Park Department, is an admirer of her grandmother's particular of the whole who plays in center photo.

flour and butter and heat until in a moderate oven about 20 minutes. Sprinkle with pow-

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Figure 3 Winifred Nowak describes her father-in-law's pottery as well as her bread making prowess. Racine Sunday Bulletin, June 10, 1956.



Figure 4 These redware pieces were found within twenty miles of Caledonia and bear close similarities to Nowak's pottery but cannot be positively attributed to him. Sadly, the provenance has been lost as has happened to so much Wisconsin unmarked earthenware.

¹ Kenneth Dearolf, Wisconsin Folk Pottery, Kenosha Public Museum, Kenosha, 1986, p. 31.

² 1900 Manuscript Census states April, Death Certificate states March of the same year.

³ Type written manuscript from Al Pietkovich, 1972. The late Mr. Pietkovich was perhaps the earliest researcher to address Nowak pottery and the authors owe him great thanks and deepest respect.

⁴ *IBID.*, At the time of their arrival in Chicago it had been 30 years since the Fort Dearborn Massacre on the site of that city, certainly a caution to newly arrived immigrants.

⁵ 1860 Manuscript Census, Racine County, Town Caledonia, p. 15.

⁶ *Racine Journal*, November 5, 1901.

⁷ 1870 Manuscript Census, Racine County, Town Caledonia, p. 45.

⁸ 1880 Manuscript Census, Racine County, Town Caledonia, p. 246.

⁹ Racine City Directory for 1890-91, p. 450.

¹⁰ Wisconsin State Gazetteer for 1895, p. 1457.

¹¹ 1900 Manuscript Census, Racine County, Town Caledonia, p. 64.

¹² *Racine Journal*, November 5, 1901.

¹³ *Racine Sunday Bulletin*, Sunday June 10, 1956, p. 29.

Special thanks to Gerald Karwowski for finding the fascinating article on Winifred Nowak's pottery and bread making.