

## JOHN STOLFA, SR.

From Tistin, Moravia in 1866 to Ardmore, Oklahoma in 1966

By Florence S. Braun\*

It was only after his retirement as an entrepreneur of small business—a tenure of fifty-seven years in Southern Oklahoma—that John Joseph Stolfa, Sr., had time to take stock of himself.

He came to this country from Tistin, Moravia (Czechoslovakia) in 1889, at a time when conservatism and nationalism were feuding in Central Europe and filling the masses with confusion. He sought an escape from the economic pressures and a new way of life elsewhere.

John Stolfa, born December 12, 1866 in the little town of Tistin, Moravia, came from a long line of military career officers in the Moravian and Austrian armies. After completing school in 1880, he decided to learn a trade that would give him a change of pace, and finance a trip to America.

He served three years as an apprentice tailor in Prague, Moravia. The next three years he traveled as a journeyman into Prudnik, Poland, and Graz and Vienna, Austria. In 1887 at the age of twenty-one Stolfa was drafted into the Austrian army under Emperor Francis Joseph. Moravia at that time was under Austrian rule.

A general restlessness prevailed on the continent. Prussia was consolidating the new federation of German States and relegating Austria to second place. France was still hungry for further annexations, and Russia was having its own brand of trouble in the south. Another war could break out momentarily.

These underlying forces helped Stolfa shape his destiny. With a singleness of purpose he boarded the German S.S. *Elbe* at Hamburg in 1889 and sailed for New York. As the steamer pushed into port, nostalgia hit him. Here he was without family, friends or money, but he remembered he was a man now, and was determined to mount his hurdles wherever he met them. Nothing this side of heaven would make him turn back.

As Stolfa touched American soil, he thanked heaven for this hour's fulfillment. It meant so much. He immediately bought a railroad ticket to Flatonia, Texas to join a settlement of his countrymen there. Soon after that he intended to look up his great uncle, General Francis Sypers, a former officer in the Mexican army under Emperor Maximilian, and now somewhere in Mexico. By this time Stolfa had only a few coins left in his pocket, but he had a growing reserve of courage. With new de-

\* Florence S. Braun of 8041 Dean Place, Washington, D. C., contributes this sketch of her father, John Stolfa, who celebrated his 100th birthday at Ardmore, Oklahoma, on December 12, 1966. Her story is based on his reminiscences and family records.—Ed.

termination and numerous handouts, he survived his personal crisis. "It was rough going," he said years later, "but at that time I was very happy to get a piece of dry bread with a little lard on it."

A few weeks later, he left for San Antonio, where he hoped to get a lead on his uncle's whereabouts. The city fascinated him. It was colorful and cheerful—Mexican vaqueros with their broadbrim sombreros and bright striped serapes, and the western cowboys with their ten-gallon hats and easy saunter. Stolfa became aware of a new kind of freedom in San Antonio.

#### TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

By 1869 the Southwest was still in the throes of the transitional period following the Civil War. The price of farm commodities was down, and many ex-soldiers drifted into town, hoping to find a more lucrative living with shorter hours. But they found nothing. Many of them turned to outlawry, roaming the plains from Texas to Kansas, robbing banks and trains, rustling cattle and committing wanton murder.

After repeated interviews, Stolfa finally found employment in a tailor shop. Then he went to night school to learn the English language. He had not been long in San Antonio when he was approached by three unemployed ex-sailors looking for a meal ticket. They soon persuaded him to take a trip with them to Australia:

"There wasn't much I could do but join them. They outnumbered, outsize and out-talked me. We hopped freights to El Paso. While there for a few days, I had an opportunity to outfox them and returned to San Antonio, and back to my old rooming house. There I found a letter from a great aunt, Countess Consuelia Sypens in Moravia, informing me that my uncle Francis had died six months ago. For many years he had been an exporter in fruits and vegetables between Yucatan and New Orleans. The Mexican government found he left no estate and no family."

Ten months later Stolfa decided to strike out on his own. He went to Lampasas, Texas and opened his first tailor shop, equipped with a tailor sewing machine, two long pressing irons, a coal stove, cutting shears, tape measure and a shingle on his door.

In 1882 he married Johanna Lucas, a milliner and daughter of a Texas pioneer family. A severe drought struck the area early that year, and continued all through the following year. Creeks and wells dried up and cattle by the thousands died on the Texas plains. Without further hesitation, Stolfa loaded his family and equipment into a covered wagon and headed north towards Indian Territory. As he rolled over the dusty country he en-

countered some of the bleaching buffalo bones left from the great slaughter in 1883. To him that was a tragedy and a blight on the history of the Southwest.

#### DEPRESSION OF 1893

Stolfa came to Ardmore, Indian Territory, early in December 1893, and temporarily established his family in the leading hotel. He conveniently found space in a room on the ground floor for a tailorshop, and immediately set up his equipment. Then three weeks went by without a single customer appearing. He became discouraged. His funds were running low, and his perseverance was running thin. Then one day a Methodist minister walked in and ordered a frock coat. When he departed, Stolfa rushed out to borrow the money to buy the material for the coat. In two weeks the coat was finished and delivered. Business picked up after that.

Southern Indian Territory became the unwilling haven for numerous cattle rustlers. The Texas Rangers could only pursue them as far north as the Red River and the U.S. Marshal took it from there. Stolfa met a number of these notorious characters in his tailor shop when they came in to purchase fancy duds with hard cash. They dubbed him the only white man in the territory because he could mind his own business. He did, however, have great respect for their *hardware*. Among these customers were the Dalton boys, and remnants of Belle Starr's gang, besides the Younger brothers and Jesse James bands.

One day at the request of the sheriff, Stolfa made a black death mask for a member of the Dalton gang, who was hung the following day behind the jail in Ardmore. Hundreds of people from the countryside, in a holiday mood, came with their children and lunch baskets to witness the hanging.

#### CATTLE VENTURE

By 1896 the flow of currency was tight. Stolfa began to trade merchandise for cattle, and accidentally found himself in the cattle business. He leased some government land south of town and built two ranch houses on it—one for his family and one for his in-laws, and called the spread the "Lazy S Ranch."

Four years later he sold this herd of Texas cattle and bought a small herd of Durham and Jersey, and opened a dairy north of town. He created so much competition for Mr. West, another dairyman, that the latter had to buy him out in self defense. In the transaction, Stolfa received a piece of real estate west of town on which he built a small house and moved in. He had sold his tailor shop several years before, and now was between business ventures.

Shortly after this move in 1902, Stolfa's wife, Johanna, who had been suffering from a lingering illness, took a turn for the

worse and died, leaving four small children. Stolfa was now in debt for the second time since he came to Indian Territory. Despair gnawed at his very soul, and he had no one to turn to. Suddenly, an agent from the Marshall Field Company of Chicago, knowing Stolfa's background as a promising merchant, offered him a stock of men's wearing apparel on long term credit, providing he would go back into business. The proposition was tempting and timely and Stolfa accepted it.

### COTTON BOOM

"From 1892 to about 1908," Stolfa recounts, "Ardmore, Indian Territory, was the largest inland cotton market in the world. Wagons filled with 500-pound bales of ginned cotton lined the streets of the city, and brokers came from everywhere to sample the staples and buy according to their needs. Between 20,000 and 50,000 bales of the commodity traded hands during a season. Business moved at a fast clip."

"Did you buy into cotton at this time?" he was asked.

"No, I didn't have that kind of cash, but I didn't miss the excitement."

In 1906 Stolfa married Josephine Wallrapp of St. Louis, Missouri, an accomplished musician and bookkeeper. In time she became his business assistant. After returning from Europe in 1910, Stolfa found cotton dragging the market, and saw an opportunity for investment. "I investigated the situation," he said, "and then built two 100-foot platforms on my back acre. Cotton in the fields was worth only 5c a pound. I offered the farmers 7c in cash and 10c in trade. The old barter system began to work, and I quickly acquired 300 bales and stored them on my open platforms where they remained several years."

"As World War I expanded, there was a demand for smokeless gun powder made from cotton. The price of the commodity immediately arose to 29c a pound, and Stolfa disposed of all he had in storage. The price continued to soar till it hit 40c and then plunged. Many investors holding cotton for higher prices plus storage fees, lost heavily.

Stolfa liked to experiment with types of business. He went into the grocery business from 1915 to 1918, at which time he built a large store on the property west of Ardmore. He foresaw further depressions looming in the distance, and decided to buy up the grain in the countryside, paying 35c a bushel for corn, and 45c a bushel for wheat. He also bought oats and sorghum, and turned to making chicken feed. The price of grain went up in 1920, but in 1921 another depression hit the country.

Four years later Stolfa went back into the grocery business on U.S. Highway 77 in the southwest part of the city where he remained through the 1929 depression. He sold out in 1934 when

the NRA (National Reconstruction Administration) moved in and limited his operations. That act became unconstitutional in 1935, but Stolfa had already retired.

#### LATER YEARS

John Stolfa had an adventurous life, laced with positive thinking and sheer drive. He had his share of ups and downs in business ventures, but he also had the capacity to bounce back into his proper perspective. As a realist, he combined European thrift with American opportunity, lived within his means, pushed his talents to full strength, and enjoyed a fruitful life. What he lacked in capital, he made up for in courage.

In his early quest for independence, he carved a niche for himself as he traveled over that long trek from Tistin, Moravia in 1866 to Ardmore where he celebrated his 100th birthday in 1966. Through the shifting scenes and changing moods of the century, he had emerged as a middle American, being neither early nor late.

While living through eight depressions 1873 to 1937, he reared twelve children, learned six languages, and succeeded at four different types of business without the benefit of subsidy from a parent company. Finally on May 31, 1963, at the age of ninety-six, Stolfa collected his own life insurance policy, having outlived the mortality tables.

John Stolfa's only claim to fame is his longevity. He says, "God has been good to me and the years have been happy ones."