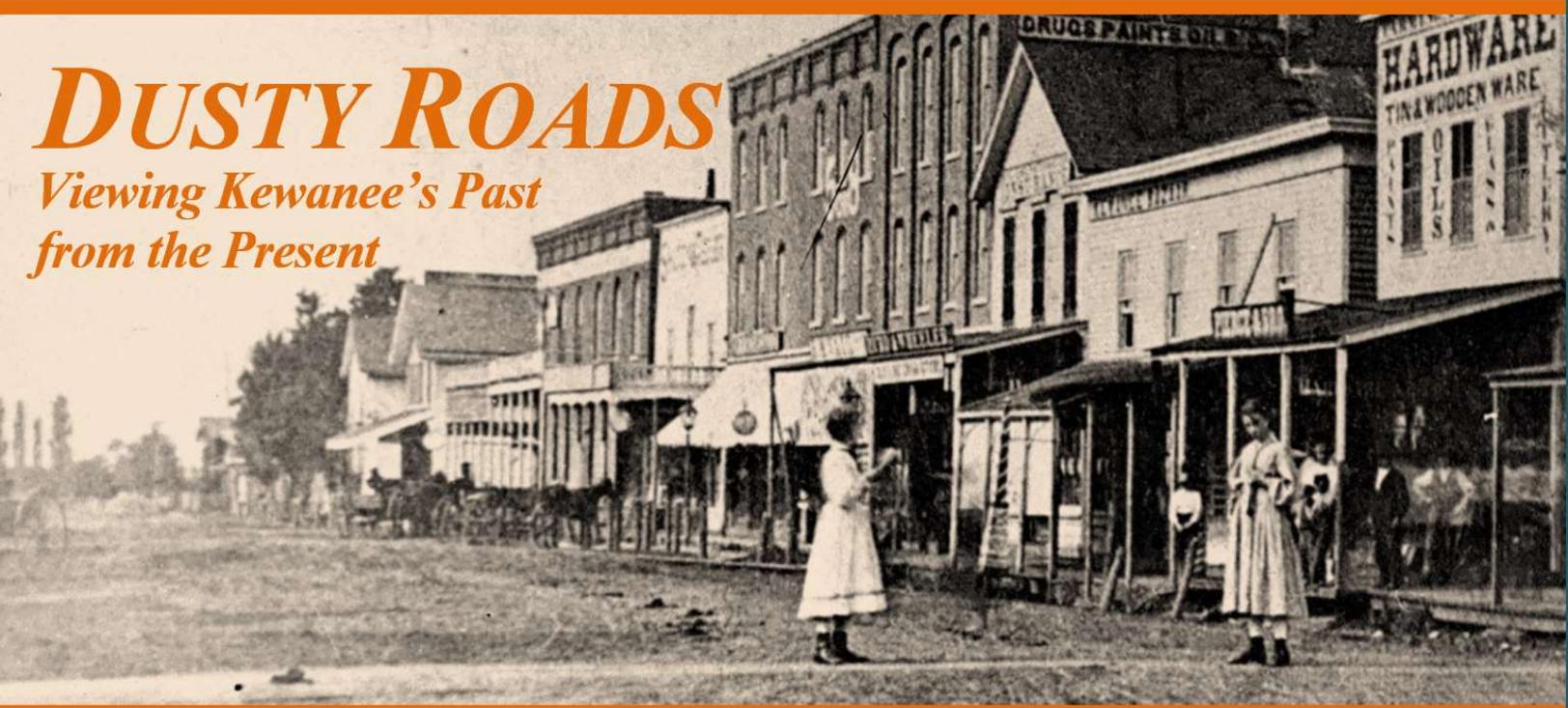


DUSTY ROADS

Viewing Kewanee's Past
from the Present



by Dean Karau

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Do You Believe in Magic?

My Kewanee Grandma's Polish Wizard

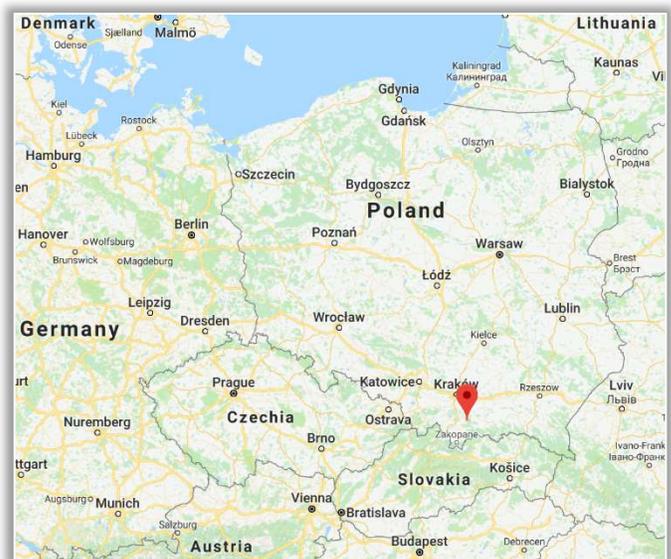
So goes the first line of the Lovin' Spoonful's 1960's classic song. Some today would chuckle and then, with tongue in cheek, answer yes - why else would Harry Potter, Game of Thrones, and video games galore be so successful.

But perhaps there's a secret desire *to want* to believe in magic in today's frenetic world.

Is that so different, though, from what our ancestors believed when giving over their mysterious, debilitating ailments to the local equivalent of a wizard? And were those local healers really sorcerers with magic powers, or were they intelligent men and women who understood better than others the wonders of natural healing - and then simply became good marketers of their considerable skills?

Let me use my grandma as example. She was born in 1884 in a mountainous region in the Western Carpathians. It was part of the old Austro-Hungarian empire, in what earlier had been, and is now again, southern Poland. (An aside – some of my aunts and uncles growing up in the first decades of the twentieth century often referred to themselves as Austrians, not wanting to admit to Polish heritage for

fear, I suppose, of being deemed a dumb “Polack.”) As an 18 year-old in 1906, Grandma and two other young girls from her village braved the long, difficult journey from Lubomierz to Kewanee, by wagon, boat, and train.



What was life like back in Lubomierz before she left? Well certainly hard, very hard, at least for those in Grandma's social strata. The village was in a long,



Lubomierz today.

narrow valley, and farms and pastures rose up from the valley into the surrounding mountains, cleared by earlier generations. Most tended fields and livestock, some worked at a glassworks or in the forests, while many of the young girls worked as maids for the more well-to-do. And most of the peasants were poor.

While there may have been a doctor for the well-to-do, the peasants could not afford to go to one. But they had Bulanda.

Tomasz Chlipała, called Bulanda, was one of the most famous Lubomierz residents. For over 50 years until his death around 1913, he grazed up to 800 sheep in a clearing under the second highest peak in the mountains above Lubomierz.

However, Bulanda's fame was not as the result of his shepherding acumen, but it derived from his reputed ability to cast spells and heal both animals and humans. At a time when doctors were unavailable to the peasants, Bulanda set broken bones, purportedly healed various diseases, and otherwise offered relief for his neighbors.

Bulanda's legend among the people began when he ostensibly healed the local priest's cattle, although I doubt the priest saw it the same way.

In another example, Bulanda was credited with aiding the construction of a new church in the village by causing a freeze when wet weather was hampering lumber from being transported to the building site. With the freeze, the lumber could be skidded to the site.

Peasants living in Polish villages at the end of the 19th century still tended to believe that most of the ailments they suffered were either God's punishment for sins, or the result of spells cast by someone.

While they may have turned to their ecclesiastics for help regarding sin, turning to someone who had a reputation for casting spells made sense, an ability to counter the harmful spells cast by others.

As Bulanda's stature as a shepherd and reputation as a healer grew, he became an authority in the local community. In addition to healing, Bulanda also helped settle disputes and was involved in other village matters.

Despite the popularity that Bulanda enjoyed, it did not go to his head. Rather, he was regarded as pious and righteous. His income was derived from shepherding, and he took little in the way of compensation for his other work.

In 1904, Bulanda built two chapels, one in Lubomierz and one in the cleared fields where his sheep grazed. The mountain chapel still stands today. Pope John Paul II, the "Polish Pope" would have stopped there when hiking in the mountains as a young priest in nearby Krakow.



Bulanda's mountain chapel

As befitting a real sorcerer, Bulanda foresaw his death. At the end of a feast, he left the house and said his final goodbyes, to the surprise of his host. He died that same night.

Tomasz Chlipala's funeral was remembered as a great event that attracted hundreds of people - both those who he healed during his lifetime and those who had asked him for advice. When spoken today, the word "Bulanda" still evokes a keen interest in Lubomierz and the surrounding area.

Bulanda was considered a sorcerer and many legends circulated about him. Although Bulanda's supernatural abilities are likely figments of the peasants' imagination, he was certainly a skilled medical practitioner and herbalist.

It's likely that my grandma, her family, and her friends knew Bulanda, and just as likely that some of them were beneficiaries of his skills. I've talked with my cousins, but none of us recall her ever mentioning Bulanda.

While a devote Catholic, I nevertheless suspect my Grandma may also believed, at least to an extent, in Bulanda. After all, don't we all want to believe there's at least a little magic in our lives?



My Polish Grandma and her family, ca 1930 in Kewanee



Dean Karau is a Kewanee native who moved away when he was 12 years old. Now retired, he continues to enjoy the outdoors, genealogy and history. He returns regularly to Kewanee to explore his roots and the history of Kewanee and Henry County.