

# THE SLOVENE NATIONAL BENEFIT SOCIETY IN CLEVELAND: A CENTURY OF SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

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A century after its inception, the Slovene National Benefit Society is still a vital presence within the Slovene communities of the United States. Known by its Slovene initials, SNPJ, the Slovenska Narodna Podporna Jednota has been the country's largest Slovene-American organization for much of its history and exerted an influence upon the course of Slovene-American events. The SNPJ has been particularly prominent in the greater Cleveland area. Every fourth member is found in Northeast Ohio. SNPJ lodges have been at the forefront of each major event in the Slovene history of the city, from the construction of national halls to assistance for the homeland. SNPJ members are active in every parish, hall and organization and hold elected office in many of them. The Society's tradition of involvement inspired some members as local leaders: mayors, business achievers, writers, performers, politicians and even a senator.

The SNPJ's core activities have been insurance and investment products presented with a variety of fraternal benefits and accented by a common Slovene heritage. At one time, it boasted as many as 71,000 members in nearly 600 lodges. The SNPJ reinvented itself at critical times in response to its members' needs. As a result, the organization has had an eventful and fascinating development, reflecting the trends and themes in American immigrant history.

Soon after the start of the 20th century, Cleveland, Ohio, became the third largest Slovenian city in the world. The 1910 census listed more than 14,000 self-identified Slovenes with possibly thousands more documented as Austrians, Germans, Italians, Slavs, Krainers and other nationalities. It was once estimated that nine new Slovene settlers arrived in the city each day. Since the 1880s, Slovene emigrants, like countless other Europeans, were pulled into the gritty factories of Great Lakes cities like Cleveland, where steel and related manufacturing were the dominant industries and jobs for unskilled laborers were abundant. Slovenes soon created and maintained their own cultural infrastructure with parishes, national centers, media and organizations, as well as banks, taverns, stores and services.

Nationality-based fraternal insurance societies helped immigrants find security and comradeship in the New World. Inspired by Germans, Czechs and other immigrant neighbors, Slovenes formed fraternal insurance societies, such as the Kranjsko-Slovenska Katoliška Jednota (Grand Carniolan Catholic Union, KSKJ, 1894) and the Jugo-Slovenska Katoliška Jednota (South Slavonic Catholic Union, JSKJ, 1898), to protect

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themselves financially against illness or death. The concept was initially unfamiliar to these new Americans from the Slovene lands, and early fraternal societies adopted the Czech word for union, *jednota*. Most Slovene-American lodges merged to become national organizations. They also expanded into cultural and athletic activities.

The first organizations sometimes restricted membership by religious preference or political point of view. Several independent, "free-thinking" lodges sprung up after 1900, including *Društvo Naprej* (Lodge Forward), founded in March, 1904, in Cleveland. President Jože Zavertnik heard of a movement in Chicago to unify these like-minded lodges into a national group. *Naprej* members reviewed the bylaws and then voted to join the fledgling *Slovenska Narodna Podporna Jednota* (SNPJ) on the first of May. The lively meetings, freedom of discourse, and pro-labor stance attracted new members and the lodge grew rapidly.

The *Naprej* lodge soon became a driving force within the Cleveland Slovenian community, as well as the SNPJ. Six founders were eventually elected to the National Board. Zavertnik became the first editor of the *Glasilo SNPJ* (SNPJ Herald), the predecessor to the *Prosveta* (Enlightenment). The lodge initiated discussions on the construction of the Slovenian National Home (1914), a Slovene nursing home (1920) and an SNPJ recreation center (1929), as well as the creation of an advocacy group to promote Slovenia after World War I. Members were generous with causes as varied as striking Pennsylvania miners, Colorado flood victims, Liberty Bonds, war relief in Slovenia, and even the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti. With nearly 800 members by 1923, it was the largest lodge in the Society as well as the country.

Early SNPJ members were concentrated around bustling St. Clair Avenue, a major business thoroughfare on the near northeast side. As membership in the *Naprej* lodge burgeoned, some members chose to form new lodges, based on neighborhood geography, shades of opinion, or regional kinship in Slovenia. The first new Cleveland SNPJ lodge appeared in 1906. Hundreds of Slovenes began moving several kilometers down St. Clair Avenue, to the growing village of Collinwood. They were attracted to the new railroad yards, auto factories and fresher housing stock. By the time of annexation to the city of Cleveland in 1910, Collinwood was on its way to becoming one of the most heavily industrialized areas of the world. Lodge 53, *V Boj* (Into the Battle), became the first to serve Collinwood members.

Women were granted equal status in the SNPJ years before they received the right to vote in 1920. In 1910, women members from Lodge 5, *Naprej*, met with the officers to create a ladies' lodge to boost enrollment. Frances Lausche, mother of the future Ohio Governor and Senator, Frank Lausche, became the president of the new Lodge 137, *Napredne Slovenke* (Progressive Slovene Women).

World War I and the events surrounding the creation of a unified nation of southern Slavs, *Jugoslavija*, generated intense pride and political involvement among Slovenes across the United States. A veritable Slovene Renaissance evolved in Cleveland, with the construction of new cultural halls and the founding of drama and music societies. Most families subscribed to at least one Slovene-American newspaper and enjoyed

books by Slovene authors and recordings of Slovene music. Taking advantage of the opportunities, resources and technology available to them, Cleveland Slovenes developed their cultural expression to a level inaccessible to most Slovenes in the homeland.

New societies and clubs organized around the city. SNPJ members were elected to the boards of the Slovene Republican Alliance (Slovensko Republikansko Združenje), the Yugoslav Socialist Federation (Jugoslovanska Socijalistična Zveza) and other newly-formed groups which advoca-

ted causes such as the support of a Slovene state within Yugoslavia, or workers' rights. Where Slovene cultural activity was its most vital and varied, in Cleveland, Chicago and Pittsburgh, ideological divisions sometimes developed between community leaders, with conservative Roman Catholics on one side and labor-oriented liberals on the other. Most SNPJ members were at least nominally Roman Catholic and many also belonged to the faith-based *jednotas*. A few even took an interest in other beliefs, such as Unitarianism. In the spirit of Yugoslavism, Cleveland Slovenes, Croats and Serbs united to establish Yugoslav cultural organizations and centers. Some SNPJ members joined Croatian and Serbian fraternal groups. This was also the era of Pan Slavism and it was not unknown for an SNPJ member to turn up in the ranks of a Czech or Polish society. Most SNPJ members were of Slovene background but not all. Non-Slovenes joined because of marriage, friendships, proximity or attraction to SNPJ activities.

The Naprej Lodge was instrumental in the opening of the Slovenian National Home in a large residence purchased on St. Clair Avenue in 1916. In 1919, four Slovene halls opened around the city, including a new building in South Collinwood. SNPJ lodges led or participated in the fund-raising for each hall. New SNPJ lodges popped up across Cleveland and established themselves as significant entities within their neighborhoods, as well their Slovene communities. Lodge 135, Brooklyn, created in 1916, was the first to organize on the west side of the city to serve a smaller but active settlement of Slovenes. Members helped construct the West Side and West Park Slovenian Homes. The Slovenian National Home on St. Clair Avenue opened in 1924 and immediately established itself as the cultural hub of the community and the largest center in the country. The construction cost of \$106,000 was raised through the sale of shares. One in four shares was purchased by a Cleveland SNPJ lodge. Nearly every lodge was affiliated with and held meetings in one of twelve Slovene halls in the Cleveland-Akron-Lorain area.

By the 1920s, the Slovenes of Cleveland created a bustling, American Ljubljana. Hard-working immigrants enjoyed the fruits of their factory labors. Slovene-owned



*Comrades Lodge 566 Ladies' Basketball Team, Cleveland, 1930.*

businesses and institutions made it possible to live comfortably without even learning English. Fraternal lodges were important to every family and the SNPJ led in enrolment. The lodges hosted dances, concerts, picnics, athletic meets and fund-raising events that appealed to Slovenes and others as well. The SNPJ's success prompted some fraternal groups and independent lodges to merge with the Society.

With innumerable SNPJ and Slovene community projects under way, coordination became essential. In 1927, representatives from each Cleveland lodge met to form an organization to promote the SNPJ and its activities. The Cleveland Federation of SNPJ Lodges also became a clearinghouse for information important to Slovene-Americans. The Federation immediately involved itself with construction projects at Slovene halls and the development of English-speaking lodges.

Although the Slovene National Benefit Society championed the perpetuation of Slovene language and culture, it also encouraged members to learn English, obtain citizenship, and become productive and patriotic Americans. A new generation of Slovenes, born in the United States, was coming of age with English as its primary language. Lodge meetings and communications had been in Slovene. In an effort to attract and keep new and youth members, Cleveland lodges sponsored the formation of six English-speaking lodges, beginning in 1926 with Lodge 566, Comrades. Other fraternal societies also offered language alternatives.

Younger, American-born members participated in sports, such as basketball, baseball, softball and golf, and, on Labor Day, 1935, the Federation sponsored a nationwide SNPJ athletic weekend. This event became the first National SNPJ Days celebration. As members and activities increased, the lodges of the Federation sought a warm-weather venue outside of the city. Acreage was purchased in rural Kirtland and the SNPJ Recreation Grounds opened in 1939. The first board was made up of twenty-four men representing six lodges.

Several ladies of the Napredne Slovenke lodge created the Progressive Slovene Women of America in 1934 to foster educational, social and welfare activities and maintain ties with the homeland. In 1938, the Napredne Slovenke sought to increase youth involvement and organized a juvenile circle in Cleveland. Youth Circle No. 2 held its inaugural meeting at the Slovenian National Home only days after the first circle was announced in Walsenburg, Colorado. A second circle, No. 3, affiliated with the Slovenian Workmen's Home in North Collinwood. The main activities were handicrafts, bowling and singing. The Federation attempted a youth chorus in 1943 with many circle members.

The occupation of the Slovene lands in World War II prompted Cleveland fraternal societies to form the Yugoslav Relief Committee to collect funds for shipments of food, clothing and medicine. This effort quickly evolved into a wide-scale lobbying and relief group, the Slovenian American National Council. It was founded in Cleveland in 1942 with representatives from 528 organizations. Officers of Cleveland SNPJ lodges held leadership positions. More than \$1 million was raised, with the Ljubljana Children's Hospital as the primary beneficiary.



*Summer Picnic of SNPJ members and Singing Society Sloga, Cleveland, 1937.*

The 1941 merger of the Slovenian Progressive Benefit Society (Slovenska Svobodomiselna Podporna Zveza, SSPZ) with the SNPJ helped make up for memberships lost during the Great Depression. SNPJ rolls reached an all-time high in the years following World War II. However, the profile of the Slovene-American family was changing. Couples were often of mixed European heritage and many moved away from Slovene settlements for work opportunities and better weather. Employees opted for job-related insurance coverage and let their SNPJ policies lapse. For a few, membership in Slovene organizations seemed irrelevant to the pursuit of the American dream and even detrimental to it. Cold War politicians raised suspicions about progressive and nationality-based organizations and the support of Slovenia within a Communist-led Yugoslavia. The founding generation of SNPJ members, the devoted core of Society, was passing from the scene.

The baby boom of the 1950s reinvigorated SNPJ youth circles and a new group, Circle No. 77, formed at the West Park Slovenian Home. Local activities were more varied, with sports tournaments, youth choral concerts, Miss SNPJ competitions and cultural programs. The Cleveland SNPJ Athletic League was organized at this time, to coordinate bowling, basketball, softball and other sports events. Cleveland members joined SNPJ tours to Slovenia. Events attracted SNPJers from other states and Cleveland members traveled to National Days celebrations and competitions in Pennsylvania, Chicago and elsewhere. Cleveland lodges sponsored dances at Slovene halls and on summer Sundays at the SNPJ Recreation Grounds, affectionately known as the "SNPJ

Farm." These entertainments popularized the new Cleveland-style polka sound and brought many young couples together. An influx of younger Slovenes, political and economic emigres from Yugoslavia, enlivened the Cleveland scene. Many were sponsored by SNPJ families. Relatively few joined the Society, but social events at Slovene halls and the SNPJ Farm helped introduce them to American ways.

Cleveland has been the site of four quadrennial conventions and eleven National SNPJ Days weekends, plus several bowling tournaments. The first Youth Convention was hosted by the Cleveland Federation in 1963. Many Cleveland members served on National Board and committee positions. A Regional Vice President is elected at each convention. There is also a regional director for athletic involvement.

Innovative fraternal programs were brainstormed at Cleveland Federation meetings, such as the SNPJ Blood Bank and the SNPJ Debutante Ball, where young women were formally presented to the community. The Cleveland lodges championed the creation of the Slovene Home for the Aged. The SNPJ also supported the opening of a Cleveland-based Yugoslav consulate, led by an ethnic Slovene. In the 1960s, the Cleveland Athletic League promoted a Young Adult movement to encourage members between 18 and 30 to become involved in the management of the Society. Many of today's SNPJ leaders, both national and local, emerged from this effort.

The children of the youth circles became goodwill ambassadors for the Society in the 1960s. The Slovenian Junior Chorus of Circle No. 2 performed regular concerts of Slovene songs and dances in national costumes at the Slovenian Society Home in the northeastern suburb of Euclid. The group traveled to other Slovene communities, appeared on television, and recorded albums. In 1968, the singers embarked on the first of three concert tours of Slovenia. Membership peaked at a 1971 concert with 92 children. The Mladinski Pevski Zbor of Circle No. 3 staged popular musicals, inspired a youth bowling league, and hosted an annual circus fair at the SNPJ Farm. Circle No. 77 also appeared in concert and visited Slovenia. Circle No. 94 was established in Lake County in the 1970s for young members in the far eastern suburbs.

The development of the SNPJ Recreation Center in Pennsylvania in the 1960s gave Cleveland members a convenient new summer destination. Situated near the Ohio border, the facility was in the geographic center of SNPJ membership and less than a two-hour ride from Cleveland along major highways. Swimming, sports, music, dining and camaraderie with a cross-section of members made for a pleasant day trip. Lodges sponsored cabins for overnight stays at reduced rates. Clevelanders maintained trailers at the site and a close-knit community of guests developed. Youth weeks, family weeks and teen leadership conferences acquainted young members with their peers from across the United States. Cleveland polka bands and entertainers from the homeland, such as Lojze Slak, Alfi Nipič and Miha Dovžan, performed at the Center and the SNPJ Farm in Kirtland, Ohio.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the SNPJ was among the first groups to sponsor low-cost tours of Slovenia. Non-stop chartered flights carried Clevelanders to Ljubljana in less than eight hours. Members renewed family ties and became familiar with the



*SNPJ Slovenian Junior Chorus (Mladinski pevski zbor), Circle no. 2, directed by Cecilia Dolgan, Euclid, Ohio, 1974.*

land and culture of their parents and grandparents. Youth Circle No. 2 responded to the 1970s mania for Slovene accordion music with a "button box" ensemble in addition to singing concerts. The popularity of the young players inspired the Super Button Box Bash, an annual festival of Slovene-American accordion clubs. With as many 1,500 in attendance, the music marathon became the Society's largest event outside of the Slovenefest weekend at the Recreation Center in Pennsylvania.

In the 1980s, the average member was turning gray. As with all nationality-based fraternal societies, membership was in steady decline, especially youth enrolment. It was not unusual for lodge officers to hold positions for twenty, thirty or even fifty years. Such dedication had its price; younger members were discouraged from running for office and less active lodges stagnated. However, at the SNPJ National Conventions, the "Young Adult" generation was asserting itself and assuming leadership roles.

A Cleveland headquarters for the Slovene National Benefit Society had been debated since the early years of the organization when it was discovered that the main office might have been inadvertently -- or mischievously -- incorporated in Ohio. Cleveland was already home to the Ohio-based American Mutual Life Association (AMLA), founded as the Slovenska Dobrodelna Zveza in 1910. In 1990, AMLA was Ohio's largest Slovene organization with a statewide enrolment of about 11,000, compared to 9,000 for the SNPJ, out of a national total of 43,000. The city was also home to about a dozen lodges of the KSKJ, now the American Slovenian Catholic Union, and a lodge each from the American Fraternal Union (formerly the JSKJ) and the Western Slavonic Association, chartered in Denver, Colorado, in 1908. The Progressive Slovene Women were centered here and the Slovenian Women's Union was an important presence. With dozens of other lodges and cultural institutions, as well

as five parishes and ten halls, the greater Cleveland area was still the cultural heart of Slovenes in America. About half the SNPJ membership lived in smaller communities scattered across southwestern Pennsylvania, while a quarter was concentrated in the Cleveland area. With a head office in distant Chicago, many Penn-Ohio lodges felt out of touch with the leadership of the Society. A friendly rivalry had always existed between the Cleveland and Pennsylvania member bases, especially on the issue of relocating headquarters. Lodge 5, Naprej, led the call for a move to Cleveland. An independent study targeted Pittsburgh as the better choice and a new building opened in the suburb of Imperial in 1994.

When Slovenia's move for independence from Yugoslavia was met with violence in 1991, Slovene-American organizations mobilized under the aegis of United Americans for Slovenia. SNPJ members served on the Cleveland-based board and as volunteers for assembling mailings, White House phone-ins, and circulating petitions for the United States to recognize Slovenia as a sovereign, democratic nation. The effort was renewed to a lesser degree in 1996 to promote United States acceptance of Slovenia as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Whenever dignitaries from Slovenia visit Cleveland, local SNPJ representatives are invited to meet with them.

In recent years, Cleveland SNPJ lodges have focused upon their jointly-owned asset, the SNPJ Recreation Grounds. The pavilion was restyled, kitchen and bar equipment updated, and a new comfort wing built. Nearly every local lodge and affiliate hosts a dance and the Ladies Auxiliary of SNPJ Farm prepares dinners featuring Slovene specialties like smoked Kranjske klobase (Carniolan sausages) and krof donuts. Youth league bowling and adult bowling events are still popular. An annual golf tournament raises funds for the Pediatric Clinic in Ljubljana. The Federation of Lodges sponsors programs by octets and cultural groups from Slovenia visiting Cleveland. The SNPJ also supports Slovene-American publications and radio broadcasts with paid advertising. SNPJ seminars update secretaries and sales representatives on changes in coverage and new products.

Demographic changes continue to have a negative affect on membership in fraternal societies such as the Slovene National Benefit Society. Since the millennium, the loss of factories and jobs in "rust-belt" cities, such as Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Detroit, accelerated the exodus of young people to other parts of the country, far removed from their ethnic attachments. As occurred during the Great Depression, some struggling young families stopped their insurance payments or cashed in their policies. Grandparents who paid for their grandchildren's memberships passed away and coverage was discontinued. As a result, the average member is approaching retirement age. Lodge officers and volunteers are often pensioners with more time to dedicate to their Slovene interests. As leaders pass away and are not replaced, lodges become inactive or merge with stronger ones.

Several trends among Cleveland SNPJ members have become evident in recent years and reflect changes within the Slovene community itself:

As with Slovenes in general, very few SNPJ members still live in the city of Cleveland proper. The majority are found in the eastern and far-eastern suburbs.

Most Slovenes do not marry Slovenes, yet both spouses may belong to the SNPJ or other Slovene organization or parish. Their children may identify with the nationalities of both parents by attending, for instance, the SNPJ Slovenian Junior Chorus and Irish dancing lessons.

Engaged extended families are key to the maintenance of Slovene activities, to sustain interest and provide a source for manpower.

Children now have more sports and clubs to join and their Slovene affiliations may suffer for it.

More Slovene and SNPJ families are one-parent households.

Most Slovene and SNPJ families are Roman Catholic, but may no longer belong to a Slovene parish.

Most Slovenes identify with the Democratic Party, but more and more are attracted to Republican principles and vote accordingly.

More non-Slovenes hold elected office in Slovene organizations.

Old rivalries between Slovene-American groups are mostly distant memories and relations are cordial and even mutually supportive when a show of unity is needed.

Slovene music is replacing the Slovene language as that which differentiates the group from other nationalities and energizes its organizations. Slovene music can include traditional melodies, commercialized folk music from Slovenia, and the "Slovenian-style" American sound combining old songs with rhythms from jazz and country music.

At its century mark, the Slovene National Benefit Society appears financially stronger than ever, with assets well over \$100 million. Enrolment is declining, but members carry higher-value policies and take advantage of investment programs. Some families find that ethnic fraternal insurance may be their only affordable option for coverage. Adults who participated in SNPJ circles and youth bowling, now involve their children. Middle-aged members are showing a new appreciation of their Slovene roots and traditions. As their children move out on their own, "empty-nest" couples become active again.

Whenever faced with challenges, Cleveland SNPJ members demonstrated resourcefulness. A recent example addressed the shortage of traditional Slovene women cooks for dinners and special events. A group of SNPJ men learned how to prepare krof donuts, bread and other dishes to assist kitchen workers at SNPJ affairs.

Slovenes continue to be one of the most recognized nationalities in the Cleveland area. The Slovene National Benefit Society still dominates the Slovene scene in Cleveland. SNPJ lodges continue to meet at Slovene halls and help support them. Lodges are fewer in number but ethnically stronger than ever. Through affordable insurance, Slovene-themed activities, and the dedication of volunteers, the SNPJ will endure in Cleveland for decades to come.

Sixteen SNPJ lodges and four subsidiary organizations are currently active in the Cleveland area:

The membership roster of Lodge 5, Naprej, reads like a who's-who of Cleveland Slovenes. As the city's charter SNPJ lodge, Naprej, was led by early business leaders, such as funeral director Joseph Žele, storeowner Joseph Kalan and jeweler Frank Černe. Many members were well-known cultural figures, like performers Antoinette Simcic and Eddie Kenik and choral director Josephine Turkman, who managed Tivoli Imports, the country's only store for books, recordings and products from Slovenia. Josephine Zakrajsek was a founder of the Progressive Slovene Women. Dennis Eckart was a U. S. Congressman and Dr. Karl Bonutti served as Slovene ambassador to the Vatican. National Board members included Ludvik Medvešek, Josephine Tratnik, Doris Sadar, Dennis Eckart and Richard Tomsic. Barbara Elersich and Amanda Fordyce reigned as Miss SNPJ.

In the 1920s, Naprej became the single largest Slovene lodge in America. Lodge 5 promoted youth enrollment, SNPJ team sports, and English-speaking lodges. Naprej members also took the lead in addressing controversies of the day. Issues, such as the mistreatment of striking miners, Japanese-American internment camps, or the McCarthy inquests, prompted statements of protest. Naprej women created a satellite lodge in 1910. They maintained a high profile on the local Slovene scene until their return to Lodge 5 in 1972. The lodge hosts an annual picnic and dance at the SNPJ Farm. Members still meet monthly in the original Slovenian National Home, a Victorian mansion. Lodge 139, Na Jutrovem (The East), joined Lodge 5 in 2003 and membership increased to 500. Naprej records, including the first minutes of 1904, are archived at the Western Reserve Historical Society, the city museum of Cleveland.

Lodge 53, V Boj, produced four National Board members, Frank Barbic, Joseph Siskovich, Matt Petrovich, and Joseph Durn. The V Boj Lodge initiated the building of the Slovenian Workmen's Home on Waterloo Road in North Collinwood and is still the major shareholder. Many lodge members served on its board of directors. Lodge members managed the SNPJ Farm in its early years. Members established Lodge 614, Strugglers, as an English-speaking lodge, and a women's lodge, No. 748, Svoboda, which eventually merged back into Lodge 53. SNPJ Circle No. 3 was founded with the help of Joseph Durn and Frank Cesen, the Prosveta columnist. Cesen was also president of the Ivan Cankar Dramatic Society. Louis Jartz was one of the first promoters of the Slovene Home for the Aged. His commentaries in the Prosveta were entertaining and irreverent.

Lodge 126, Cleveland was chartered in 1910 by 22 Slovene immigrants as Društvo Primož Trubar, with the assistance of National Treasurer Frank Korče. The lodge was named in honor of the father of Slovene literature. The lodge name was retitled "Cleveland" with the merger of Lodge 444, Delavec (Worker), in 1926. Long-time lodge secretary Blas Novak served in many positions on the National Board. He was a co-founder of the Slovene Home for the Aged in Cleveland. In the early 1960s, the lodge hosted the first SNPJ golf outing. Annual picnics enable Lodge 126 to support



*Cooks prepare krofi for a dinner and dance at the SNPJ Recreation Grounds, Kirtland, Ohio, 2001.*

the SNPJ Scholarship Fund, the SNPJ Recreation Center in Pennsylvania, and charitable organizations. In commemoration of the centennial, a linden tree was planted at the SNPJ Farm.

Lodge 142, *Mirni Raj*, began in 1910 with 26 applicants. The official name was *Mir* (Peace). Members met in private homes and the basement of St. Mary's Church until the Collinwood Slovenian Home opened in 1919. Lodge *Mir* was a founder of the Slovenian Co-operative Stores (*Slovenska Zadruga*), as well as Lodge 158, *Loyalites*, the *Soča* Singing Society, and the SNPJ Farm, where members hold an annual dinner and dance. John Grosel, Louis Kaferle and Jennie Zaman were national officers in the SNPJ. Kaferle was a popular *Prosveta* columnist and Zaman promoted the Young Adult movement and the Slovenian Heritage Center at the SNPJ Recreation Center in Pennsylvania. Three young women from the lodge have been selected as Miss SNPJ. Prominent members included America's Polka King, Frank Yankovic, and Ohio Governor and Senator George Voinovich. In 1974, Lodge 312, *Vipavski Raj* (*Vipava Paradise*), organized in 1916, merged with *Mir* to become *Mirni Raj* (*Peaceful Paradise*).

Lodge 147, *Vodnikov Venec* (*Laurels of Vodnik*) was organized in 1910 in honor of the Slovene poet Valentin Vodnik. Members raised \$11,000 for the construction of the Slovenian National Home and sought land for the SNPJ Farm. The lodge moved to the Slovenian Workmen's Home in 1979. For twenty years until 2000, Lodge 147 hosted a Slovene arts and crafts fair at the Farm. In 1925, Lodge 178, *Jadranska Vila* (*Nymph of the Adriatic*), merged with Lodge 147. Lodge 442, *Slovenske Sokolice* (*Slovene Sokol Ladies*), joined in 1982. SNPJ Lodge 28, *Lunder-Adamič* originated

in 1909 as an SSPZ lodge named for the victims of an Austrian police action during a protest in Ljubljana. It combined with Lodge 147 in 1994. Betty Rotar was a member of the National Board.

The original Lodge 158, Loyalites, was called Zavedni Sosedje (Conscientious Neighbors) and, later, the Pioneers. Around 1954, the Pioneers joined with No. 590, Loyalites, an English-speaking lodge at the Collinwood Slovenian Home. The lodge currently meets at the Slovenian Society Home in Euclid. With 1,500 members, it is the largest Slovene lodge in Ohio and one of the most active within the SNPJ. The Loyalites have hosted regional and national bowling tournaments, as well as clambakes, steak roasts, raffles and dances, frequently at the SNPJ Farm. A holiday breakfast with St. Nicholas attracts 200 children. Loyalites members have held positions on the SNPJ National Board and Athletic Board, as well as within Slovene-American organizations. Many perform volunteer service within the Slovene and Cleveland communities.

Lodge 173, Slava, was founded in 1911 by Slovenes from the Vipava region who worked at the brickyards at East 49th Street and Harvard Avenue on the southeast side of the city. After World War I, the name of the lodge was changed for a while from Slava (Glory) to Jugoslavija Irredenta (Unredeemed Yugoslavia), in reference to the Italian occupation of the members' home territory.

West Park was a suburb of Cleveland when local Slovenians organized Lodge 257, Delavec (Worker), in 1916. Delavec members were instrumental in the opening of the West Park Slovenian Home on West 130th Street in 1919. The lodge still sponsors dances and benefits at the hall. Lodge 135, Brooklyn, founded in 1916, and Lodge 742, Commodores, an original English-speaking lodge led by National Board member Camilus Zarnick, merged with Lodge 257.

Slovenes from the karst plateau around Mount Nanos started Lodge 264, Nanos, in March, 1916. The group was affiliated with the West Side Slovenian Home on Denison Avenue, where many members served on the board of directors. Dances and fund-raising events kept members involved into the 1970s.

Lodge 355, Fairport, was founded in 1918 in the lakefront village of Fairport Harbor, 35 km east of Cleveland. It was first named Vztrajnost (Perseverance). Members opened the Fairport Slovenian Club in 1947. Lodge membership is 130.

The West Side Slovenian Home was the site of the first meeting of Lodge 544, Velebit, in March, 1930. The lodge was named for the highest mountain in Croatia. Activities peaked in the 1940s with dinners, dances and raffles at the hall. Julia Sustersic has served as secretary for fifty years.

Members of Lodge 5, Naprej, organized Lodge 566, Comrades, as the English-speaking counterpart of the charter lodge in 1926. In the 1960s, the lodge became one of the largest in the SNPJ. Lodge 566 hosted the first Mother's Day dinners at the SNPJ Farm and annual dances at the Slovenian National Home in the 1960s. Proceeds from their annual picnic dance benefits improvements at the Farm, such as the children's playground. Joseph Fifolt and Robert Lamm were National Board members. Denise

Lamm was crowned Miss SNPJ in 1972. Lodge 26, Združeni Bratje, merged with the Comrades in the 1990s.

Antonia Zagar, 94, Marian Candon, 95, and Vera Candon, 95, were high school students when they were elected to the first board of Lodge 576, Spartans, founded in 1927 under the banner of the Slovenian Progressive Benefit Society (SSPZ). Vatroslav Grill, publisher of the daily *Enakopravnost* (Equality), was President of the English-speaking lodge. The SSPZ joined the SNPJ in 1941. The Spartans sponsored dances, picnics, bus tours and boat trips. The Starlight Ball was an annual formal or costumed event at the Slovenian National Home. Themes included Ancient Rome, a Hawaiian luau, a Wild West saloon and a three-ring circus. Proceeds from these events benefited charities, like the Slovene Home for the Aged, and SNPJ activities, such as youth circles and the SNPJ Scholarship Fund. The Spartans present a picnic dance each year at the SNPJ Farm.

Lodge 604, Utopians, branched off from SSPZ Lodge 26, Lev Nikolaj Tolstoj, and became an English-speaking lodge within the SSPZ in 1927. The Utopians name was selected by lodge president John Spilar as "a place founded upon ideas envisioning perfection in social and political organizations." The Utopians were active in bowling, golfing and baseball, especially after joining the SNPJ in 1941. The lodge sponsored regional and national bowling tournaments. The Utopians present an annual dinner at the Slovenian Society Home and a picnic dance at the SNPJ Farm for their 600 members. Notable Utopians included recording artists Johnny Pecon and Tony Vadnal, and radio personality Tony Petkovsek. John Spilar served on the SNPJ National Board

Lodge 614, Strugglers, organized as an English-speaking lodge, under the auspices of Lodge 53, V Boj, in 1927. Members chose a name that reflected the spirit of the times. John Lokar was the first president with Walter Lampe as secretary, a position he held for 45 years. Lokar served on the National Board. The lodge has been one of the more active groups on the SNPJ scene and still hosts annual picnic dances at SNPJ Farm. Beginning in the 1930s, members enjoyed athletics and traveled to SNPJ functions in other towns and states. Team bowling was a favorite pastime and the Strugglers hosted two SNPJ eastern regional bowling tournaments. Hawaiian luaus were a popular theme for the Strugglers' dinner-dances in the 1950s. The group often used the Society's English initials, SNBS, rather than SNPJ.

Lodge 781, River, was founded in Rocky River, a lakefront suburb west of Cleveland, in December, 1982, by William Grmek, long-time National Board member. The River Lodge sponsors an annual fund-raising event. Lodge 17, Bled, originally affiliated with the Lorain Slovenian Home, located in an industrial port 50 km west of Cleveland, merged with Lodge 781 in 2002.

The Slovenian Junior Chorus of Youth Circle No.2, carries on Slovene traditions through music, performance and travel. In 1938, the women of Lodge 137, Napredne Slovenke, organized a youth circle offering music, handcrafts and bowling, in affiliation with the Slovenian National Home. Interest waned during World II and the circle revived in 1955 as a children's chorus under the direction of Anton Schubel. He also

led Cleveland's Glasbena Matica singing society and was a member of the Metropolitan Opera chorus. The young singers made regular concert appearances. Upon his death in 1965, Cecilia Valencic Dolgan, a trained vocalist, added musical duties to her role as circle director and moved the group to the Slovenian Society Home in Euclid, closer to where most young members lived. The chorus began a schedule of twice-yearly concerts or musical plays, in addition to visits to Slovene communities. Children learned Slovene and American melodies and dances and performed in Slovene costumes. The Slovene Peasant Wedding (*Slovenska Kmečka Ohceta*) and Hansel and Gretel (*Janko in Metka*) were performed entirely in Slovene as recently as the 1990s. Few children understood the language and lyrics and pronunciation would be explained to them. Dolgan wrote original musical plays for the group, as well as English lyrics to Slovene songs. Many members mastered the button accordion and performed in ensembles. The Super Button Box Bash, begun by Circle No. 2 in 1982 to showcase Slovene-American accordion clubs, has become Ohio's largest SNPJ event.

The chorus performed for Slovene groups in California, Florida, New York, Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Washington DC and Canada. Concert tours of Slovenia were organized in 1968, 1983 and 1993. The children recorded two albums of songs and appeared on television. The group was honored by the American Slovenian Polka Foundation at its Polka Hall of Fame awards ceremony, as well as by the government of Slovenia. One in five Miss SNPJ winners was a Circle No. 2 member. Some of today's younger leaders within the Slovene community emerged from the group. Membership has remained steady at 30 to 40 children for some years. Agnes Turkovich has served as assistant director since 1955.

The Cleveland Federation of SNPJ Lodges was created in 1927 as an umbrella organization to promote the Slovene National Benefit Society to the greater Cleveland community. Representatives of local lodges and subsidiaries meet to discuss the business of the Society and share news and information relevant to the SNPJ and the Slovene community. The Federation also mediates between its affiliates in cases of grievances and disputes and advocates on behalf of local lodges to SNPJ headquarters. When a large-scale SNPJ event takes place in Cleveland, such as quadrennial conventions, National Days celebrations and athletic competitions, the Federation manages the logistics and coordinates volunteers. Local delegates attend Federation caucuses before conventions to review issues affecting the Society. Fund-raising efforts focus upon the SNPJ Farm and youth-related endeavors.

Over the years the Federation supervised SNPJ fund-raising for Slovene hall projects, Slovene reading rooms, Slovene language classes, the Slovene Home for the Aged, the Yugoslav Cultural Garden, and Slovenian Co-operative Stores, as well as the Red Cross and other mainstream American causes. The lodges of the Federation purchased an ambulance for the Cankar Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. Many high-profile SNPJ programs were incubated at Federation meetings, including the Young Adult movement, the SNPJ Blood Bank and the SNPJ Debutante Ball. The

effectiveness of the Cleveland Federation inspired other clusters of SNPJ lodges to join forces for greater regional impact.

The Cleveland Athletic League (CAL) was formed in 1947 with rules, guidelines, and a constitution approved by the Society's National Athletic Director. CAL encourages and promotes athletics, sportsmanship and family activities among Cleveland lodge members. The league supervises bowling tournaments, golf outings, softball, basketball games and dances. Two generations have grown up with weekend youth league bowling. Each season culminates with an awards ceremony. The Don Gorjup Golf Open has been a spring tradition for 40 years. Gorjup was CAL president for 30 years.

The SNPJ Recreation Grounds evolved from the need for an official SNPJ Sloveni dom, or national hall, in the Cleveland area. Private, Slovene-owned farms outside the city offered outdoor entertainment in summer months with music and food, along with the free flow of wine, beer and hard liquor -- illegal during the years of Prohibition and tightly-regulated after repeal. The Cleveland Federation of SNPJ Lodges sought its own rural property in 1929. Fifteen hectares of land were purchased near the village of Kirtland, 25 km east of Cleveland, and the Recreation Grounds opened in 1939. A board of directors was appointed from among lodge representatives.

The "SNPJ Farm," as it is known, now includes a large dance pavilion with a full restaurant kitchen and bar, a caretaker's residence with a smaller, private bar, an outdoor stage, balina courts, a children's playground, playing fields, a nature walk, and extensive parking. Over the years, other features included cabins for overnight stays, a regulation mini-golf course, a Slovene hay-drying rack (kozolec), and a memorial to the Progressive Slovene Women of America.

SNPJ lodges and affiliates host dances and dinners on Sundays from May through September. The Ladies Auxiliary of the SNPJ Farm cooks for dances, dinners and breakfasts. During the week, the facilities are rented to Slovene organizations and other groups, and available for family events and weddings. Attendance peaked in the 1960s with as many as 3,000 attending National SNPJ Days celebrations. Sunday dances range in attendance from 200 to 900, depending on weather and the entertainment offered. Entertainers from Slovenia are frequent guest performers.

Main events are the Independence Day dance on the first Sunday of July, the Slovenian Grape Festival on the last Sunday in September and the Harvest Masquerade Ball on the first Saturday of November. The traditional Grape Festival closes the picnic season with a parade of singers and characters dressed as Slovene village officials. The proceedings are delivered in Slovene and English. A dance follows the ceremony. The interior of the pavilion is festooned with grapevines and hanging fruits and treats. "Thieves" are caught and fined or locked up in a makeshift jail. The Harvest Masquerade Ball attracts more than 400 guests in costume.

*Cleveland, Ohio, 4 April 2005*