

Collector: Jim Leary

January 22, 1981

Informant: Edwin Pearson and others
Iron River, Wisconsin

ETHNIC HERITAGE
SOUND ARCHIVE & RESOURCE CENTER
NORTHLAND COLLEGE, ASHLAND, WI

After visiting Einard Maki, Matt and I drove to Iron River to eat bad pizza. He then dropped me off at the local Presbyterian Church and returned to Ashland. The Western Bayfield County Historical Society would be meeting in Iron River that night, and Greta Swenson and Sue Ellen Smith were about to arrive to conduct one of their Ethnic Heritage meetings. I'd catch a ride home with them.

I won't comment on all the goings-on, but will focus on a few happenings of interest to me. One of the participants in the meeting was Mrs. Hirska of Oulu who played a fictional Finnish character "Rauhha Kainttappa." Apparently there are several Oulu women who dress up to do humorous ethnic skits. Mrs. Hirska wore a fake nose and eyebrows over her glasses, a faded print dress, ragged muskrat stole, long johns with ripped knees, a pair of high top work boots with the laces loosely drawn, and a round hat with bits of lace and cloth flowers. Altogether, she looked like a north country Minnie Pearl. I taped her session and the recording will show that she used the "I'm just the down trodden hick wife of a barbarous Finn" approach.

After the formal program whilst people were consuming various eats, I overheard joketelling from a gaggle of men:

Eino is walking into town and he thinks he sees Toivo coming the other way. But, when he gets up to the man, he finds that it wasn't either one of them.

Chief among the joke tellers was Edwin Pearson of Maple. Pearson, also a Swede button accordion player, has an extremely dry sense of humor and a deadpan delivery. He, I think, told the internationally known numskull joke about the fool who marks the good fishing spot by painting an "X" on the side of the boat. Nearly all of Pearson's jokes were ethnic, fairly detailed, and localized. Also joining in with a similar repertoire was Ture Shelin. Howard Peddal, author of Wisconsin Log Marks, told some very good humorous local anecdotes, including three about the Vervel clan. One was the famous tale about the Vervels tying a stick of dynamite to the tail of an obnoxious dog. The beast ran under their porch and it blew off. Another saw the old man going to the courthouse in Washburn to get some sort of welfare money; when complications arose, he objected in a loud voice and insisted that he was entitled to whatever he asked because: "I raised nine soldiers, two school teachers, and a whore." The third concerned an unsavory character from

docks in Superior who'd come to visit. The man had just rolled some sailors in the Twin Ports and had a fat wallet. The Vervels plied this fellow with drink and, when he was in a stupor, thinned his wallet. When the victim complained to the old man, he simply replied: "Yup, the boys'll do that sometime."

Also participating in the talk was an old Dane who told the well known tale about the bull "surprising" the cow. There were many more jokes and stories told; I can't recall them, however. But the few narratives recounted here indicates the richness of this region's storytelling tradition. With luck, I can do some serious future work in this important area.