

Nick Vukusich

There is little to add to the JMKAC report.

Supplementary materials: 1) color slides and B&W prints.

Availability of instruments: Vukusich does not have a tamburitza for loan on hand, but would have to make one. He is quite willing, however.

Special considerations: Give Vukusich plenty of advance notice so that he can make an instrument by the time it is required. If deemed useful, we might want to make use of the color slide I took of a Vukusich tamburitza along with other items to be raffled off at a Croatian doings.

JMKAC--WFAS

ARTIST: VUKUSICH, Nick

(Last Name in Caps)

SKILL: tamburitza maker

DOCUMENTATION: Photo Nos.: 4/24

Slide Nos.: 24/29-24/32, 36/14-36/18

Tape Nos.:

INTERVIEW DATA: Contact Dates: February 1 & March 6,
1986

Interviewer: James P. Leary

Artist's Address:

Milwaukee

Phone:

County: Milwaukee

Biographical Information:

Date and Place of Birth: 1923, Ironwood, Michigan

Training: Vukusich learned woodworking, especially how to use planes and squares, while summering with his grandfather as a young boy in Mellen, Wisconsin. Roughly twenty years ago, he taught himself to make a tamburitza by taking an old one apart to see how it was made, then using it as a pattern.

Occupation(s): Vukusich came to Milwaukee after high school in 1941. He worked for Kearney Tractor, with time off for military service, until 1948. Then he worked for Unit Grain and Shovel and other places for several years before spending 34 years as a welder with General Electric's Hotpoint plant in Milwaukee.

Group Affiliations (Ethnic, Religious, Social): Croatian-American, fan of tamburitza music and at-home musician.

Other Pertinent Data and Comments from Field Experience:

Vukusich's wife, Mary Ann, plays tamburitza, as do the couple's three daughters, Beverly, Jane, and Nancy.

Description of Skill: (Objects produced/activities practiced, quality of work, audience for work; how/when acquired skill, how often practiced, how expresses group/community values)

The tamburitza is a pear-shaped lute-like instrument introduced into the Balkans by the Ottoman Turks centuries ago. For Serbo-Croatians it has become a

national instrument which is both symbolic of musical heritage and actively played in tamburitza ensembles. Nick grew up hearing and playing the music before making the instruments in the aforementioned manner. He has practiced his art constantly during his spare time in a small shop in his basement. In all, he has made 25-30 instruments, mostly for family members, but also for musicians in Milwaukee's Croatian-American community. One of his tamburitzas was recently raffled off at a tamburitza gathering in Milwaukee. The winner was envied for Vukusich is recognized as a master craftsman in his community. It takes him roughly 200 hours to make an instrument, and it may take him six months to two years to find time to complete one.

Description of Work: (Types of work, titles, functions, years created, media and techniques, sizes, condition, suitability for exhibition and availability for loan)

Types, titles, functions, and years created have already been noted. Let me focus on media and techniques here. Vukusich begins by steaming two pieces of 3/4" rosewood and placing them in a vise-like wooden mold that he made to match the shape of the instrument's body. The rosewood forms the sides of the instrument. Then Nick glues the neck, with an ebony fretboard, tail piece, and back onto the sides. For his backs, Vukusich often uses bird's eye maple from his brother's Michigan farm, or curly maple, also known as "fiddle back" maple, that was cut by his grandfather in Mellen some 60 years ago. Cedar support braces are applied while the instrument is still in the mold. Vukusich then removes the instrument from the mold and glues the top, which has also been braced, in place. The top of the instrument is spruce inlaid with rosewood, which is in turn inlaid with tiny floral pieces cut from mother-of-pearl

I believe that Vukusich would be willing to loan an instrument, provided he has one finished that no one is playing. If we have some section of the exhibit that displays musical instruments, his are well worth including.