

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

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

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Informants: Olavi Wintturi & Bill Hendrickson
Herbster, Wisconsin

The February heat wave continues. Matt Gallmann picked me up in Washburn at 8:30 a.m. as the snow melted. The Northland car, unfortunately, had not been left for us with a full tank, nor was its credit card to be found, so we sought out a gas station. Then we were off along County C to Herbster. Bill Hendrickson, dressed in his wool and overshoes, was waiting for us with his piano accordion. He piled into the car and we drove the half mile or so towards Bark Point and Olavi's place. The ever active Wintturi was out in his shop working at some task, but, upon our arrival, he dropped what he was doing and led us to the house. The sidewalk was strewn with sawdust which Olavi had put out for traction in icy weather. Since snow and ice were melting, however, the stuff made a fine mess and we were careful not to track it into the house.

Matt and I had visited Olavi many times and Bill on two occasions. Consequently, they were ready to play and we set the equipment up in the kitchen right away (see diagram). As Matt and I had planned, he would run the recorder, keep the levels adjusted, and monitor the tape; I would ask questions, keep a log of the proceedings, take occasional pictures, and swing the microphones around when need be.

Bill had made a list of songs to play, so we began with him. As my previous notes reveal, he has been making a concerted effort for some time to recall the old songs he used to play. He keeps a pad handy and writes down titles when they come to him; he also records those numbers soon afterwards. Accordingly Bill struck out with a Finnish waltz. As Matt pointed out to me later, Bill's rhythm while playing is quite good. But his hearing is off so that the playing of his left and right hands don't always harmonize well. Nonetheless, he pushed on resolutely for five tunes until his arthritic shoulder got tired. Then it was Olavi's turn.

As usual, Olavi was a little shy about playing. Although he's been playing harmonica since the age of nine and is very good, and although he enjoys performing, it's always been a little hard to get him started. Harmonica, of course, has been more of a private, at home instrument in the north. Additionally, I think Olavi was a little intimidated by the Nagra recorder and the mike stands hovering in front of him. We also later learned that Olavi, ten years younger than Bill, used to sit and listen to his tunes at the dances. The two men had seldom played together, if at all, and Olavi may have felt uncomfortable "on display" before his elder. Finally, while Bill - who also played for public dances - had pretty strong notions

of song titles and standard tune structures, Olavi - who played at home - often mixed diverse phrases together and cared less for titles. Once coaxed, however, Olavi launched into his usual concise harmonica style.

He played about thirteen numbers - some Finnish, some "English" - while occasionally consulting Bill's song list. Amidst play, some interesting incidents came to light. The two men recalled going for car rides with a group of males and females who would sing songs in Finnish and English. One woman, Mrs. Walden Oberg of Port Wing, had a thick notebook into which she had entered favorite songs. Also mentioned were a couple of old lumberjacks, including Bill Kauppi, who lived on Bark Point and sang "dirty lumberjack songs" that "came over from Finland." As near as I could tell, these songs ("Mama Naki" and "Ten Fingers") were not concerned with a lumberjack's occupation, but rather were the sort of bawdy song common to male groups. Sometimes the tunes to these songs were played at dances and there appear to have been clean verses to some of them. Olavi remembers his mother singing "Ten Fingers" without the "dirty words," but, according to Bill, the verses deal with a man's ten fingers tickling a woman's genitals.

Olavi's playing also recalled dances at the Finnish Hall on Bark Point. He leapt up and demonstrated how the "Rattikko" and the "Butterfly" dances were performed. Then Bill took over on the accordion for awhile. From 9:40 until 11:40 the two men traded off. Sometimes Bill would play a tune and then Olavi; other times they would each play four or five at a stretch. It was pretty clear that they both enjoyed getting together.

As noon approached, Olavi brewed up some instant coffee and pulled out half a dozen store bought donuts and some cookies. We all shed our equipment and instruments for a break. Shortly after noon, Bill played a few more tunes on his list that we hadn't got to yet; then Olavi, recognizing that Bill's eightieth birthday was a month away, played "Happy Birthday." "Silent Night" followed as the last tune. A Christmas hymn played in daytime "Silent Night's" quiet celebratory air seemed oddly appropriate: a song about light amidst darkness, a testament to life amidst age.

Matt and I packed up our stuff since we had another appointment pending, bid goodbye to Olavi, and drove Bill home. As we covered the short distance between the two men's houses, Bill told us that he had a ten year old tape of his singing which we could copy. He used to sing alot and felt he did it well, but now "my

voice is hoarse and I can't get up high." The tape, which he'd played for no one else, had both Finnish and "English" songs. Bill gave us a taste of one - reciting a late 20's piece about the prescribed behavior for bachelors wishing to attract women. Looking straight ahead, he performed the verses in a jaunty style, then grinned mischievously when he finished. I couldn't help feeling that this doughty old timer, playing music despite an arthritic shoulder and crippled fingers, felt some strong bond with the figure in his verse.

Back at Bill's we stopped briefly and followed him to his back shed. There he showed us a handmade wooden sled. Using a "steam box" and a pipe, he had bent the runners and he took pride in showing us that they were "all one piece." He used the sled in his backyard to haul wood to the basement furnace. And in that basement he also played his accordion. I picture him there in the cold of winter: hauling split wood from stacks in the yard on his handmade sled, feeding the furnace, then settling into the warm glow to play his tunes.