

Collectors: Jim Leary and Matt Gallmann

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Informants: Edwin Pearson and Matt Saari
Maple, Wisconsin

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A folklorist entering the field must always be prepared for bizarre encounters. People are often filled with confusion, suspicion, amazement, and nervousness by tape recorder wielding fieldworkers. Small wonder, then, that like emotions might be raised in the hearts of fieldworkers by their quarry. Our session with Edwin Pearson and Matt Saari probably ran all parties through the gamut of enumerated emotions.

I had met Ed Pearson some weeks before at a meeting of the Western Bayfield County Historical Society. A tall, strongly built Swede of 70, he had farmed for years in the Cloverland area and was a witty talker and storyteller. I learned too that he fooled around occasionally on the "push button" accordion and knew a few Swedish tunes. Since Fritz Swanson, a piano accordionist, was the only Swede we'd recorded who played secular music, it seemed a wise plan to give Ed a try.

Accordingly, I called him and arranged a session. He seemed a little nervous over the phone, but, when we arrived, his uptightness had apparently vanished. The Pearson house, a red-shingled, ten year old frame structure, sits on a hill half a mile south of Maple and commands a fine view of Lake Superior and the lights of Duluth. Ed led us in and introduced us to his wife, Eunice, and a neighbor, Sigmund Swanson. We were clearly in the abode of Swedes. There was an old country landscape framed on the wall, a Dala horse perched on a kitchen ledge, and Swedish and American flags waved above the hallway.

Ed informed us that his Finnish neighbor, Matt Saari, had consented to play for us. Apparently, this was a rare treat since Matt played little these days and never for strangers. Sig Swanson departed and Matt and I headed outside to follow the Pearsons to their neighbors' house. Outside, Ed told us that he was happy to have another player around since he, too, seldom played outside of a family contest. He also added that "sometimes the tunes flow right out of me, but sometimes I'm stiff and nervous and can't play a thing." We both acknowledged the hope that we would soon enter "the right atmosphere for playing."

Roughly a mile south of the Pearsons, Matt and I spied what looked like a Finnish home: a drive way shielded by pines, a small house, and a cluster of outbuildings - including the requisite sauna. Hilda Saari, all smiles, met us at the door. She was a stout, bespectacled woman in her late seventies, with

gray braided hair and a cotton country woman's dress. We followed he from the porch, through the kitchen and dining room, into the living room where seventy-nine year old Matt was reclining on the couch. It was at this point that events took a strange turn.

Matt - short, broad, fair-skinned, with mischievous blue eyes, and a playfully combative manner - was totally surprised to see us. As we later learned, his wife Hilda - knowing that Matt wouldn't consent to play for us if asked - simply told Ed to bring us over so as to trick her husband into playing. Thrust into this situation, we muddled ahead - setting up our equipment and making small talk. Fortunately, Hilda and Ed Pearson did the work of hauling out Matt's two and three row Hohner button accordions while encouraging him to play. The chorus was soon joined by the couple's son Ray - a stout, mustachioed man of forty. In this way Matt Gallmann and I, obvious intruders in the eyes of Matt Saari, were relieved of also assuming the role of prodder and interrogator.

Insisting that he was too old to play, that he didn't like to play, that he couldn't remember tunes anymore, Matt nonetheless began to squeeze out some notes on his button box. He played a half dozen Finnish numbers (waltzes, a schottische, and a polka) in a beautifully controlled style. Neither Gallmann nor I could identify the tunes and Saari named only one: "Shoemaker's Waltz" - a tune that Ed Pearson told us was in Finnish and Swedish repertoires alike. Saari told us that he didn't learn any of his tunes from records, but from some "old lumberjacks" who played in the area. One of these men was Jack Kauti and Matt refers to several of his tunes as "Jack Kauti's Waltz" or "Jack Kauti's Polka."

Shortly, however, Matt's memory of tunes, despite the prodding of his wife and son, began to fail. This may have been intentional, since the context was becoming increasingly unusual. While Matt was playing, several other visitors arrived. As it turned out, it was the Saari's 55th wedding anniversary and neighbors and relatives were beginning to drop in. Probably in acknowledgement of their presence, Matt stopped playing. Unfortunately for me, my back was turned to the growing audience and I didn't know more people had arrived. Seizing on Matt's pause, I began to question him about his life history. He was rather difficult and laconic in his replies, but I did learn some interesting information. He was born in Maple in 1902 of strict Finnish Lutheran parents who frowned on secular music. He got his taste for dance music by listening to the lumberjacks' festivities. When a

young man with little money, he brought a team of horses to help a neighbor hay and received a button accordion in payment. Thereafter, when "there was no one else to play," he held forth in the Maple Hall and in a local school house, but, for religious reasons, never at house parties. As near as I could tell, his playing in the school house was surreptitious and along the lines of the Oulu youths' technique of dancing in abandoned houses. Apparently, Matt and his friends gained entrance to the school house by climbing in the window.

After questioning Matt for awhile, however, I became convinced that he was in no great mood for talk or playing. I asked Ed if he might give us a few tunes. Unfortunately, the whole scene had made the man a little agitated. Matt Saari, having forgotten a tune, comically asserted "it went under the bench" as he glanced below the couch. Ed's style was to play in a rapid, jerky fashion, punctuated by statements of "cancel that" when his fingers went awry.

As Ed would soon tell me, he was born in 1911 in Wahoo, Nebraska, but traveled with his family to northern Wisconsin in 1920 when a drought hit Nebraska. The family farmed cut over acreage in Wisconsin, and Ed, too, took up farming. Like the Saari family, the Pearsons were religious and not inclined towards playing music. Ed, however, was charmed by the button accordion. He saved up money from trapping weasels to buy his first instrument, then practiced in the back 40 'til he got some tunes worked out. Like Matt, he played for an occasional dance, "when no one else would play." Unlike Matt, however, he had no old Finnish lumberjacks around to inspire his playing and imprint ethnic melodies in his mind. He does know a few Swedish songs (Helsa Dan Dar Hemma, Johan Pa Snippen, Bornsdoms Hemmet), but most of the numbers in his repertoire are American popular pieces: "Tiptoe Through the Tulips," "When It's Springtime in the Rockies," "Have I Told You Lately How I Love You."

After a barrage of such pieces, nervously rendered by Ed, I asked Matt Saari if he could come up with a few more Finnish numbers. He played three more - two untitled and one labelled only "Jack Kauti's Polka." Finishing the tunes, he laid down his instrument and commanded Matt Gallman to play something. Matt G. pumped out five Finnish numbers on Matt Saari's button accordion to the latter's obvious satisfaction: "You're a real musician, not like us."

By this time, coffee and cake had been laid out and the recording session, mercifully, halted. Everybody sat around the dining room table for the sugar and

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caffeine fix that Scandinavians apparently thrive on. Matt Gallman and I, in backwards fashion, explained what our project was about. Matt Saari told us that he'd made tapes of his playing every time he'd "thought of" a tune he used to play. We could come by and copy the tape sometime. Mrs. Saari and son Ray also told us that Matt was a collector of old gas engines and clocks. Matt Gallman and I later agreed that, time permitting, we ought to stop by this feisty fellow's abode for a tour of his collections.

After the dishes were cleared away we packed up our equipment. Just as we were departing, the anniversary hoopla picked up as assorted grandchildren and great-grandchildren arrived. Mrs. Saari thanked us heartily for coming, while her husband thrust a Hohner button accordion instruction book into our hands and told us, with a mischievous look, that it was nice meeting us. We followed the Pearsons out the drive and, feeling beat from our labors and strung out on coffee, raced toward Ashland at high speeds.