

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
March 21, 1985

Clarence Giese Home
Rural Mayville, WI

As the notes concerning Zum Kripplein Christi explain, I had spoken with Mr. & Mrs. Armond Boeder in hopes of setting up a recording session. We'd agreed on a date and I showed up at the Boeders around 1:30 p.m. Armond, feeling under the weather from a touch of flu, met me at the door and was his usual standoffish self. He was engrossed in watching some film on the tube, although I was able to engage him in brief conversation about the plight of farmers nowadays. His sons run two dairy farms with Holstein cattle and Armond, now largely retired, helps with the fieldwork from Spring through Fall. Mrs. Boeder, Vivian, soon appeared. The plan, as arranged previously by phone, was to meet at the Boeders, then travel to a neighbor's where interviewing and singing would take place. Vivian expressed misgivings, however. The neighbors, Clarence and Loretta Giese, were nervous about my coming and wanted to simply talk and "rehearse" today, with a recording session to follow at some later date. Sure, said I, knowing that a session that's ostensibly a rehearsal can often yield better material than a command performance.

That matter settled, Vivian called the Gieses and I headed off to meet them. Their modern ranch style home stands on the Giese Century farmstead--it's the first place on the left past highway 33 on county trunk AY. Clarence--a sturdy man approaching seventy--met me at the garage door and welcomed me into the kitchen. It turned out he was a fiddler and his instrument rested on the kitchen table while a book about Wisconsin's Century Farms was spread out on the breakfast bar. The book was published by the Inter-Collegiate Press, 6015 Travis Lane, P.O. Box 10, Shawnee Mission, Kansas 66201-9954. It presented

narratives documenting the state's family farms and was interspersed with many interesting historical photographs. The Giese entry contained family portraits of various generations along with a threshing scene from the early 1930's-- Clarence guessed he was about seventeen when it was taken. Once in the Giese home, I soon learned that it was Clarence who was nervous, not his wife Loretta. The pair played piano -fiddle duets in nursing homes, but were otherwise strictly domestic players and Clarence was feeling a little rusty and on the spot. Too boot, Vivian and Loretta, childhood friends, had invited three other women over (Marianne Christian, Frieda Giese, and Irma Brandenstein) and Clarence felt a little awkward in the presence of so many women.

As visitors arrived I set up the recording equipment in the basement recreation area. The Gieses had a round card table and participants seated themselves around it. We began the taping with an account from each person present of their family background, birth, and involvement with music (the women were predominantly preachers' daughters, and all had long been members of church choirs and active singers), then I asked some general questions about occasions where singing prevailed. Picnics and birthday parties were recalled vividly and the ladies burst into spontaneous song. They had brought along various songbooks and were soon paging through them to sing out numbers that, in most cases, they had learned "by heart" and performed as children. Books included the Lieder Perlen so often cited by Phil Bohlman in his M.A. Thesis on German Music in Wisconsin, along with the Unser Liederbuch (Reading, Pennsylvania: 1893), and the Liederschatz. For roughly forty-five minutes the ladies paged through their books, then joined in singing old favorites. Throughout Clarence sang along sporadically, protesting that these tunes were unknown to him or, at least, scarcely remembered. Seems as though there may be some difference between male and female repertoires. For the most part I refrained from

interjecting too many questions and simply let the session take its course. But an inquiry about New Years' Shoots brought instead an enthusiastic account of shivareeing that extended from bygone days up until the present. Here a wedding song, "Hoch Sie Leben" (sp?), was rendered with gusto.

Following nine unaccompanied songs, Loretta and Clarence combined on piano and fiddle while the ladies sang four more numbers. Under the circumstances, I wasn't able to probe for too much information about Clarence's playing, but I did learn a little. He took up the instrument at age 12, played for awhile, then quit for several decades before taking up the bow again in the late 1950s. He had written out the titles and chord changes for about fifty titles on a few sheets of paper that he rested on a music stand while playing. Perhaps a quarter of the numbers were German pieces and they included, besides the numbers on the Index, "Lott is Todt" and "Herr Schmidt." There were also the usual pop favorites like "In The Good Old Summertime," along with C&W hits. Indeed a sheet music version of "When My Blue Moon Turns To Gold," complete with Roy Rogers' picture, graced the piano; and numerous country songbooks--WLS Barn Dance, Mac & Bob, Karl & Marty, LuluBelle & Scotty--were tucked away in the piano bench. Clarence informed me that he'd listened plenty to the National Barn Dance on WLS while growing up. He also confessed that he'd composed some waltzes and polka sporadically since 1959. His nephew, Normy Dogs, an old time band leader and car salesman in the West Bend area, performed a few.

After the fiddle-piano/vocal combination, Loretta brought out refreshments to soothe the throats of singers. She gave Seven Up/Cranberry juice concoctions to the women and then asked what I'd like. Wary of offending pious Wisconsin Lutheran sensibilities, I said I'd have the same. Loretta hesitated, then wondered if I might like a beer. Figuring that perhaps this was the expected drink for males, I said fine. With that, Clarence chimed in: "I'm glad you'll

take a beer. I thought maybe you were one of these holy Wisconsin Synod Lutherans." That took me a little by surprise, but, as it turned out, only Vivian Boeder was in the Zum Kriipplein Christi congregation. The rest were of the Missouri Synod and attended various area churches, including the old "River Church." Frieda reckoned she disliked all of this emphasis on synods and figured they all believed in the same things anyway; Clarence figured that they were "Missouri sinners" and "Wisconsin sinners." I was happy to agree. After this break, Clarence and Loretta combined on five piano-fiddle duets. They were a little rusty and mistakes were made, but some tunes were executed quite well and at least three of them were new to me. The group closed by singing a hymn--one of the few performed despite the presence of preachers' daughters--from the Unser Liederbuch. Loretta made some Sanka and brought out plates of chocolate chip cookies and freshly baked and buttered banana bread. I packed up the equipment and offered some explanations about the purpose of the project, I also promised to send them a copy of the tape, but the major portion of conversation was devoted to the pleasure all of them had found in an afternoon of singing; they hadn't done this in years and the activity recalled an earlier, simpler time of unified communities.