

Collector: Jim Leary

December 7, 1980

Informants: Matt Radosevich, Frank Hobena,
Frank Pagac, Andrew Imrick, Ann Yachinich
Keystone Town Hall

The aforementioned people, residents of the Moquah/Benoit area, attended our community meeting at the Keystone Town Hall. Matt brought his button accordion and played a few tunes in his animated style (see my notes on the Moquah Hunter's Dance), including "On Wisconsin," the "Notre Dame Victory March," and various Croatian numbers: Kukavica Waltz, Ja Sam Sirota, Samo Nemoj Ti. Beyond this, Matt gave me a Yugoslavian song book put out in Milwaukee (Zice Drmalice), a list of a program put on in Ashland by the Gogebic Range Tamburitzans, and a song sheet issued by the Croatian Fraternal Union, Lodge 993, of Mukwonago, Wisconsin.

I had heard of Frank Hobena, a Slovak sax player, from Stan Stangle and others. Somewhere in his sixties, Frank had grown up west of Ashland in a non-musical family. Nonetheless, he had a great desire to learn to play and studied music while working in Detroit. He played with the Baltimore Colts band while working there, in the Ashland City Band, in various of the area's "modern" bands, and with a smaller group that played ethnic weddings within a fifty or so mile radius. While mostly a "modern" musician, Frank knew many "old time" or ethnic numbers. He also has vivid recollections of going to dances at Ashland's Bohemian Hall in the early 1930's. During hard times, when gas was scarce, a dump truck driver from Ino put a canvas over the dump area of his vehicle and hauled big crowds of people to the Bohemian Hall dances. Frank informed the management and they let this man in free thereafter. Frank told me a great deal more, but it will be best to interview him separately after Christmas.

Frank Pagac and Andy Imrick are two Slovaks who, although not musicians, had vivid memories of players in the Benoit/Moquah area. They recall an early band which featured bass fiddle, clarinet, fiddle, and button accordion (Dorothy, Andy's wife, apparently has a picture of this group and I ought to get a copy). Standing out in memory was an old fiddler named Susienka. His wife Barbara recently died at 90. The couple apparently didn't get along well and lived in separate houses on the same property. He used to charge her money to drive her to town. This Susienka thought himself a hot musician and would play anywhere and at a moment's notice: the Marine Club, the First Bank in Ashland, etc. People used to trick

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him by putting butter on his bow. Frank and Andy recalled another musician, the bass fiddle player for the old Moquah band, who was tricked. People used to trick him by putting money in his instrument. One night, they substituted the caps from beer bottles. On the way home from the dance this musician, thinking himself rich, stopped to examine his take. Upon discovering the beer caps, he smashed the bass on the bridge.

Another man, now dead, named Letko used to get "all snarled up" and play for house parties and weddings. Andy and Frank recalled one wedding where a 70 year old man married a younger woman. During the raucous dancing she fell over backwards, and her dress flew over her head revealing her bloomers. "Old Man" Letko paused amidst playing, took a healthy gander, then took up the tune again.

Like the fiddler recalled by Fritz Swanson and Walter Levine, some of these old time musicians were comics and legendary characters.

Also in attendance was Ann Yachinich who runs a flower shop in Ashland. Croatian and originally from Hibbing, she has a large collection of old Serbo-Croatian 78's. Most of them were ordered from Chicago and Ann reckons she got them because she liked to sing. Since there were fewer singers of Serbo-Croatian songs here than on the Minnesota Iron Range, Ann reckons she bought records so she could sing at home.