

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
April 19, 1985

Anton Wolfe
2325 Ellis St.
Stevens Point, WI

Anton Wolfe is a concertina maker based in Stevens Point. Mel Knaack praised his instruments and I had often heard of his "boxes" when talking with other concertina players. Together with Star in Chicago, Karpek in Milwaukee, Christy Hengel in Minnesota, and Brown in New Ulm, Minnesota, Wolfe is one of the few American manufacturers of concertinas. Accordingly I figured a visit to his shop would enhance my understanding of the concertina as an instrument central to German American dance music in the upper midwest.

I found Wolfe in his shop in the early afternoon. He is a thin man in his early sixties with a rather owlsh face--round, with a broad forehead and sunken eyes--and was dressed in green workman's clothes. His shop, which doubles as his residence, is a converted grocery store within a residential neighborhood. The section facing the street, what would have been the old store area, has two long counters--one dividing the room, the other against a wall--where assorted tools and concertina parts were arranged. While these counters stretched the long way of the rectangular room, a desk for accounts and paperwork occupied the back wall opposite the storefront's picture window. The back of the first floor held living quarters, while the entire basement was a shop filled with powers saws, die punches, a few specialized machines purchased from Rudy Patek's shop, raw materials (aluminum sheets for reed plates, steel for reeds, wood, etc.), and finished parts.

Upon arrival I chatted briefly with Wolfe before interviewing him. Since my main purpose was to take some pictures of his shop while he showed me just how his concertinas were made, I didn't set up the tape recorder, but took notes instead. Wolfe was born in 1922 in Moquah, Wisconsin--a Czech and Slovak

agricultural settlement in Bayfield County. Despite his German last name, Wolfe is Czech. His parents were immigrants and they farmed in the Moquah area.

Wolfe became interested in the concertina when just a "little shaver." He recalls listening to many old time bands on radio in the 1930s: Czech radio on Sunday afternoons live from Omaha; New Ulm bands like Whoopee John on Sunday over WTCN in St. Paul; Joe Fisher from Mt. Vernon, Iowa on Cedar Rapids radio. At age 22, in 1944, he bought his first concertina, one he still owns, from C. A. Wunderlich, a German company (actually, he didn't buy it direct, it was used).

He seldom played out since he was "a fussy player," but he did play a few times in Bayfield county at dances in country school houses. Naturally I quizzed him about concertina players and old time musicians I knew in the region, and he knew Louie Kolonko, Bob Mathiowetz, and Tom Johanik. Shortly after the war, it was understandably impossible to get concertina parts from Germany. Wolfe's reeds needed repair and he did the work himself. As notes on a flier he distributes and on an album featuring players of Wolfe concertinas attest, Wolfe became more and more involved with the repair of concertinas to the point that he became interested in making his own. In 1967, shortly after his mother's death, he gave up farming and purchased concertina stock and equipment from R. Patek, formerly of Chicago but retired to Weyawauga, WI. He also moved in 1967 from Moquah to Stevens Point in Portage County--a place which combined a central location in the midst of Wisconsin with UPS and airport facilities and access to various highways. For a time he worked at a welding shop, and then for several years as a maintenance man at the University of Wisconsin--Stevens Point. Wolfe has been devoting his full time energies to concertina making for the past ten or five years.

As his publications attest, Wolfe makes all parts of the concertina himself.

(excepting engraving of the outer box, something he used to do but has farmed out recently). In addition he has designed and assembled several machines, including die punches that are tailored to his specifications; and a good deal of the wood (including basswood, birch, and maple) going into his boxes comes from his old Bayfield county farm. Typically Wolfe works on individual concertina parts for much of the year until he has a stock built up, then he works steadily to assemble the instruments. He makes concertinas in a variety of standard keys (see his flier), but he is unwilling to invest the time required to do custom work. For example, he turned down one man's request to build a 130 button concertina since it would require too much screwing around with his dies to make it profitable. In addition to making his own parts and doing his own assemblies, Wolfe also makes parts for other concertina makers: Brown, Star, and Hengel. Despite his expertise, Wolfe is largely self-taught. He did not apprentice with Patek, or follow instruction books.

Wolfe's flier complains about the "piano accordionisation" of the concertina that came with a shift in European manufacturers from Germany to Italy; he also notes that Star concertina is now Italian owned and has some of its parts made abroad. Accordingly Wolfe reckons that the "sound" of his concertinas is highly sought after by "Dutchman" bands in the U.S. The record referred to above is on Jerry Minar's JBM label (Jerry Minar and Friends, Featuring the Anton Wolfe Concertina, JBM48183), and it features playing by such Dutchman stalwarts as Ernie Coopman and Karl Hartwich. At the same time Wolfe grouched a little about the local "Polacks" whose music he didn't particularly like and who preferred Star concertinas (originally owned by Chicago Poles, but now, as aforementioned, Italian-owned). He did, however, speak favorably of "The Jolly Chaps" and the "Polka Stars," local Dutchman style bands dominated by Polish-American players.