

FIELD NOTES

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April 17, 1985

Thiede's Tavern
Assorted Musicians
Burnett, WI

Charlie Zimmerman, who I'd recorded earlier, suggested that I get in touch with John Greenwood of Beaver Dam. Greenwood is an insurance man of English background who was raised in Iowa County. He later lived in the New Glarus area before settling in Beaver Dam. At age forty, some half dozen years ago, Greenwood took up the button accordion and he now plays piano accordion as well. At the same time he began to seek out older players in the area and formed a "closet accordion players club."

After talking with Greenwood over the phone and meeting with him at Rudy Burkhalter's Accordion Jamboree held at the Chalet St. Moritz in Middleton, we agreed to meet at Thiede's Tavern in Burnett where John said he'd have several musicians of German background to play for Lewis and me. We arrived at the spot at 6:30 P.M. and heard accordion music while we unloaded our gear. Thiede's is a family run place on a shady street in Burnett--the town itself is only a spot in the road dominated by Peachey Brothers Feed Mill. A pool table and a half dozen tables were scattered over a spacious floor, posters for local events and farm auctions were pinned to the walls, and above the long wooden bar where Mrs. Thiede presided was an enormous replica of a marlin leaping through the water--a pretty strange artifact for a Wisconsin Tavern in the heart of wild goose country.

John met us and introduced us to the musicians he'd gathered: Lenny Rahn played piano accordion; Harlan Blaisdell played three row button accordion, clarinet, and foot cymbal and bass drum; and Clarence Metzdorf was a concertinist. It turned out that Mildred Hamilton, German despite her English married name, also

played piano accordion. She went home and soon returned with her instrument. Meantime I was setting up the equipment while Lewis took pictures of the musicians without microphones stuck in their faces. Harlan's clarinet playing was woefully out of tune and his drum and cymbal thumping didn't add too much to the playing. Consequently, with John's advice and assistance, I decided it was best to ask the musicians to quiet down while I interviewed each one separately; then I would record each one separately. This worked pretty well and the tape index will show that the lives of the musicians, excepting Harlan who's Czech and was raised in Iowa, dovetail with those of others raised in Dodge County. Mildred's early years were spent in Lebanon township where her parents delighted in house parties dominated by concertina; she had taught accordion and put together accordion bands while sometimes playing with Burnett's famous polka son, Don Peachey. Lenny had played with the old time band of Les Marose, mentioned at various times by Milt Bruni, that played at the Schwartz Ballroom in Hartford among other places. And Clarence grew up in the Hustisford area where he took lessons in the late 1920s from Irving DeWitz. The recording part of the evening went pretty well too, although it was impossible to eliminate Harlan's insistent drumming except by closely miking the squeezeboxes left and right reeds.

Since Lenny's repertoire was not rich in German tunes, he played only four or so; the same applied to Mildred who, incidentally, played her tunes rather stiffly and with considerable mistakes while looking at notes in a tunebook. Harlan offered a few Czech standards, some Bernie Roberts numbers, and a German laendler that, although it was a very good tune, he couldn't quite work out. Clarence was clearly the star of the show. His concertina playing is both technically skillful and full of feeling. Unlike many of DeWitz's students, he

is not reliant on sheet music (although he brought a sheaf of Silberhorn and Sajewski arrangements purchased half a century ago from DeWitz music), but instead plays from memory in a lively fashion while occasionally grinning at his audience. When interviewing Clarence, I coaxed out some "raw" verses sometimes sung to "O Sussana" and I got C to sing one verse while playing. Other than that his tunes were all ones that I've recorded already in several versions--except for a circle two step that I've only heard Irving DeWitz play before, and # 12 on the tape which is preceded by a verse auf Deutsch.

After recording three tapes of talk and music, I shut off the machine. Then, at John's request, Clarence launched into a lively version of Glenn Miller's "In the Mood." As the applause died I played back a portion of the evening's taping while putting the equipment away with Lewis' help. As usual both the musicians and the patrons enjoyed what they heard. While all this was going on, Mrs. Thiede put together a "lunch" of hot dogs and kraut, potatoe salad, bread, pickles, and sandwiches. The twenty-five or so patrons dug in. I didn't notice any money being exchanged and I'll have to try to remember to ask John Greenwood whether or not this was a regular occurrence or something done specially for the occasion. In any case Thiede's was a great place, inhabited by an older local crowd of both men and women, that captured much of the atmosphere of the house party.