

Collectors: Jim Leary, Greta Swenson
and John Snider

February 21, 1981

Informants: The Bethany Baptist String Band
Mason, Wisconsin

During the first year of this project Marina Herman had recorded an elderly man, John Westlund, from the Mason area. Westlund, now deceased, played Swedish hymns on an autoharp (termed simply "harp"). Although he had recently amplified his instrument, he had been playing it for many years in a "string band" at Mason's Swedish Baptist church. Indeed, other members of his family had been in this band and "string bands" had existed in Mason since roughly 1910. I had seen pictures of other Swedish string bands (with violins, guitars, pianos, and autoharps) in scholarly works, so I was anxious to encounter this group.

Accordingly, I called Reuben Wicklund (Mason's chain saw dealer) whose name I had from Marina. He suggested that I call Ray Larson of Larson Picture Frame. Ray, a former pastor at Bethany Baptist, headed up the string band. The phone call went well. Larson was most cordial, reckoning that the string band needed to practice within the week. Accordingly, I drove out to the church (six miles west of Mason on County E) on Saturday night. Greta Swenson, a folklorist and a Swedish-American, came with me to take pictures and ask questions of her own. Assisting too was John Snider, an English teacher at Northland College. Since Matt Gallmann's band was playing a date that night, John helped monitor the tape while I asked questions and kept a log of the recording.

We arrived at the country church shortly after seven. Several people were there before us, setting up and tuning their instruments; the rest appeared shortly afterwards. There were ten musicians in all, of varying ages. The oldest musicians (all in their seventies by my guess) were Lily Westlund (nee Wicklund) on guitar; Reuben Wicklund on autoharp ("harp"); George Wicklund on violin (not called "fiddle"); Ray DeLap on an amplified lap steel guitar; and Mrs. Signe Westlund on piano. Also joining the group was a Norwegian Lutheran from the Birch Lake area, George Dybedol, on guitar. The church's non-Swedish pastor, Mark Scheribel (in his late 30's), played guitar. Ray Larson, the present "leader," looks to be around fifty. He plays autoharp, his wife Elaine chimes in on vibraphones, while their daughter, Priscilla (an eighteen year old), played autoharp. These ten are presently the core of the string band. At one time, they've numbered as many as twenty-three

musicians; and Ray Larson showed me a 1973 picture with sixteen players. Apparently, Mark Scheribel hopes to encourage younger people to join in as the older players drop out. But from what I could determine, although old, none of them have lost their pep.

Ray Larson greeted us in a friendly manner as we arrived. He suggested that we go ahead and set up whilst the group tuned their instruments and rehearsed a few songs. Before doing so, however, I exchanged a few words with the effervescent George Dybedol. Marina and I had recorded some of George's hymns a year and a half before, I had heard him sing at Clarence Isberg's funeral, and had listened to him sing honky tonk and other secular songs on Rose Swanson's tapes. George joked that he thought we might be carrying instruments in our equipment cases; he also reckoned "I see you've got the basketball team" when he saw the 6' 4" Snider.

We were in the main church hall and the group aligned itself largely on a platform behind the preacher's podium. (The appended diagram shows the main hall's layout.) They began with an "English" hymn, then ran through a half dozen or so Swedish numbers. It was immediately apparent that most of the musicians played the old Swedish numbers "by heart:" only Mrs. Larson, her daughter, and pastor Scheribel followed notes. In between songs, I asked various questions and discovered some important information. The first string bands began around 1910. The salmodikon wasn't used in the community. Swedish congregational singing and preaching vanished from regular services around 1925. While Ashland and Duluth once had similar string bands, they have long since disappeared.

After about an hour, with the first tape reel nearly expired, I stopped the machine to play some music back to the band. To my horror, none of the sound came across. I fiddled around the machine, with increasing nervousness and embarrassment, in an attempt to figure out what had happened. I was, and still am, baffled. Fortunately, I had jacked the superscope cassette player into the Nagra, and the session was picked up on the former machine. Greta also helped out as I struggled with technology. Using her own Swedish background, she requested several Christmas hymns, and the group knew a few which they played and sang.

By this time I was able to put on another reel, record briefly, test the playback, and insure that all was again well. To my delight, the string band consented to play their Swedish numbers again, plus a Christmas song that Greta had elicited.

This time their playing was much more relaxed than before. They also sang, especially Ray Larson and George Dybedol. When all the hymns were completed, we adjourned to the church basement for a hard earned "lunch" of cookies, cake, ice cream, and that Scandinavian necessity - coffee. Once downstairs, I had a brief conversation with pastor Mark Scheribel. He asked why I was taping the group, and was delighted to hear the project's purpose. Although neither a Swede nor a Mason native, Scheribel is a strong supporter of the string band. He recognizes their importance, not simply as an extension of ethnic heritage, but also as a vital force within his present church. He announced his hopes that younger people would join the group, and he also mentioned that he hoped Bethany Baptist would put on a Swedish midsummer celebration in June.

Ray Larson, during his pastorage, had organized this event when it occurred some years ago. As I understand it, the celebration consisted of the string band's playing, songs by Bethany's Swedish chorus, and a feast of Swedish food in the church basement. Ray, with whom I next struck up a conversation, also showed me a folder full of programs documenting the string band's travels to perform in church's and rest homes in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Since the late 1960's, the group had made roughly three dozen forays: to Ogema, Superior, Iron River, Grand View, Wentworth, Drummond, Ashland, Cumberland, Balsam Lake, Frederic, Amery, Hayward, Birch Lake, Exeland, and Bayfield in Wisconsin; and to Duluth, Forest Lake, Grand Marais, Trade Lake, and Red Wing in Minnesota. Ray also showed me an Ashland Daily Press feature on the group (12/27/74). He talked, too, about pictures he has assembled from earlier midsummer festivals. Greta will be tracking down these materials at a later date; meantime, I offered my services to help with the midsummer festival in any way possible.

While Ray and I talked, over food and coffee, George Dybedol was entertaining at the other end of the table. Apparently, he and Ray occasionally sang at funerals. One time, they were both pretty nervous about performing and, as George described it, the sweat fairly rolled off both in the hot weather. Another time, they were at a funeral where the casket was of uncommonly heavy gauge steel. Eight men were having difficulty hefting it. Dybedol, noted as an exceptionally strong man, was called to grab the "heavy end." He complied and "dragged eight men to the grave." At another funeral - this one in Birch Lake where Ray Larson was presiding - George came forward in case he was needed to sing. Ray told him, without realizing

the potential putdown in his words, "That's okay George, we've got good singers here." George's humor is worth commenting on.

Although clearly religious, the entire group was full of joking and fun. None were stiff and overly pious. For example, Priscilla Larson and her mother teased Ray about a sermon ("The Ten Strings") that he enjoyed performing on special occasions. And the whole group didn't mind joking about events like funerals. They had a great deal of fun with other matters that might've been regarded, from a narrow perspective, as blasphemous. To give a few more examples, they had fun recalling how they termed a church in some town ("Fallen Timbers?") as the "Fallen Church" of the "Fallen Baptists." They also enjoyed religious and ethnic humor from the Norwegian Dybedol: Christ is walking along the road to Galilee. He sees several people along the way. Finally, he meets a man who is weeping. "Why do you weep?" asked Jesus. The man replied "I'm weeping because I'm a Swede," and the Lord sat down and wept with him. Later on, Greta told me that this sort of joking was fairly typical of the Swedish-Americans she's known.

By the time the joking was through, the dishes were whisked away and we fieldworkers went upstairs to pack up our gear. It was 10:30 and, after thank yous all around and promises to meet again, we departed.