

SLOVENIAN BUTTON ACCORDIAN PROJECT

Tape Notes

5/4/84

jwb

INTERVIEW WITH: Willy Verant

AT: Verant Home  
331 NW 10th Street  
Chisholm, MN 55719  
218-254-4066

Tapes: Reels SBB 08,09,10  
cassettes CSBB 6,7  
Slides: Sheet 2; 7-10

DATE: Friday, May 4, 1984

Tape begins with Willy playing "Somewhere My Love".

Willy Verant was born in Chisholm and raised in Balkan Township, rural Chisholm. His parents were from Lugatsa (sp) Ribenea near Ljubljana, Yugoslavia.

Willy's father arrived in the United States in 1880 and went to Eveleth where his brother had a boardinghouse.\* The family later moved to Balkan. His father enlisted and served in the Spanish-American War, returned to Eveleth, married, and the entire family, including his uncle, moved to Chisholm and then to Balkan Township to live on a farm. Willy grew up "on a farm, played the squeezebox in the hay barn because Mother wouldn't listen to it."

Willy is sixty-two, on sick leave, and will soon retire. He was a salesman for twelve years. Before that he serviced heavy equipment in the mining industry.

Willy started to play at age eleven. His dad had a brand new squeezebox, a four row Lubas, and he didn't want his sons to play it. Willy's older brother "got a hold of it and near wrecked it." Willy and his younger brother decided to learn how to play. The instrument was in bad shape, the reed blocks were loose, etc., but the two repaired it enough to be able to play it. His older brother had left home by this time.

In 1940 Willy bought a three row Proster from his cousin for \$25.00. "That was my whole fortune." Later his brother Leonard moved to Detroit to work and bought a Mervar. He left it with Willy when he was in the Army and sold it when he came home. When Willy came out of the service, "well, we didn't have a squeeze box", so he began to play piano accordion. He started playing dance jobs in 1938 with the button box at first and then with the piano accordion for thirty years.

Willy talks about the difficulty in buying a button accordion after World War II. In mid 1970's he went back to the button accordion. He talks about his repertoire and his band. He played every Saturday night in Chisholm for eighteen years, eight years at the Slovenian Home and ten years at Clark's Bar.

\*(NOTE: Eveleth was not settled until 1894 - JB)

Willy talked about the music he heard during his childhood. His family had recordings of Matt Hoyer and others from Cleveland. Some of the local players were: Bill Ruper, Beanie Boben, Frankie Kromar (Ely), Press Brothers (Johnny from Gilbert). He talked about the Slovenian Hour and Frankie Smoltz and the music on the radio played by local players.\* The fellows would go to Cleveland, learn a new song and bring it back and play it on the radio.

The "Beer Barrel Polka" brought the polka to popularity--the post World War II era of polka popularity "until Elvis came into the picture." It was the heyday of accordion music. Almost every house had a piano accordion.

Willy prefers the button accordion. "More fun." He "gets a kick out of it" and likes to find unusual chords. He has had no formal training but the band and orchestra required him to have knowledge of chords. He talks about learning chords from the other band members. He learned by ear.

Willy talked about his father whose name was Joseph and who was a good player. He didn't learn from his father though, his father died when Willy was eleven. His father had three brothers and they all played. Willy thinks he bought the Lubas in Eveleth and the Lubas was made in Yugoslavia.

Willy's accordion is Italian made, sold by Zollar in Cleveland, and carries the Zollar name. It has four rows A-D-G-C. It has the capability to change octave reeds via switches. It is about a 1960 model, and he bought it from Lefty (he can't remember the last name), in Ely who bought it new. It has Slovenian style fingering with a stepped fingerboard. The fingerboard causes some problems--"clinkers" or wrong notes because he was used to a flat fingerboard. He can't slide his fingers. He calls the flat fingerboard a "slew plate". His instrument has fourteen buttons per row and the standard box has ten buttons per row so his accordion has an extra octave in each melody row. He also has a Fleis accordion but likes the Zollar because it's easier to play.

Willy talks about his repertoire. "I like to play everything." He discusses the limits of the instrument--diatonic half tones are missing. He plays scales and demonstrates chord progressions. Some chords and notes are not there. This is frustrating.

Willy talks about where he plays, the Mesaba Button Box Club, and discusses music as relaxation, satisfaction. He recommends any instrument as "good therapy" and enjoyment. He also talks about the old songs, Moja Dekla and Trebani.

End Tape 1

\*(NOTE: See Smoltz notes for more information about live radio programs in 30's)

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WILLY VERANT

Tape 2, cassette 1, side B ( CSBB 76 )

note: Verant played one song after another with little separation between them. He often "doodled" between numbers, but all selections have clean starts, most have clean endings as well. No titles are mentioned.

- ✓ "Everywhere You Go" polka
- ✓ " " polka
- ✓ "Baby Face" polka
- ✓ " " waltz
- " " two-step (clinker)
- \* "Suze Liju Plave Oci" waltz
- "Tony's Polka (Novak's?) "
- ✓ " " polka
- " /Moja Dekla"
- "Moja Dekla"
- " "
- " "
- \* "Caravan"

WILLY VERANT, cont.

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"Spanish Eyes"

"Sweet Gypsy Rose" fades out at end of cassette  
end cassette CSBB 7 side B

2nd cassette, side A (CSBB 8)

✓ "Sweet Gypsy Rose"

End Reel 2

✓ " two step

" polka

" polka

\* " polka

" waltz

" waltz

\* " MY waltz

WV: "What songs do you like?"

" polka

✓ "O Ja" waltz

" waltz

\* "Off the farm" waltz, original composition  
"right out of the hay barn."

WILLY VERANT, cont.

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3

" polka

" polka, cassette side ends

cassette CSBB ~~8~~ side B  
same polka in full

✓  
"

WV: "That should be enough noise."