

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
April 20, 1985

Concertina Jamboree
VFW Hall
Wausau, WI

As the tape index and newspaper article regarding Dan Gruetzmacher will reveal, the Central Wisconsin Concertina Club has an annual "jamboree." Consequently I planned a trip, in part to augment Phil Bohlman's fieldwork in the region, and in part to fill out some gaps regarding my interest in the concertina.

In the latter case, I knew that Dan's wife Sue handled the Henry Silberhorn collection of concertina music and that it had passed from Silberhorn to Pat Watters, now deceased, of Music and Dance News, and thence to The Gruetzmacher's. I wanted to get a copy from Sue of Silberhorn's sheet music list inasmuch as he has historically been the major supplier of concertina sheet music, and of German tunes in particular, to upper midwest musicians. I hit the jackpot here as the Gruetzmacher's kindly donated five items from the Silberhorn collection.

1. A twenty page, three column, alphabetical listing of Silberhorn's output.
2. Silberhorn's German Song Album No. 3 (Chicago: Henry Silberhorn, 1913). It contains a dozen tunes while listing the twenty-four titles found in volumes 1 & 2.
3. Henry Silberhorn's Instructor For The Concertina (Chicago: Henry Silberhorn, 1927), a reprint of the 1911 edition.
4. Henry Silberhorn, Fifteen Children's Songs and Games With Words Arranged and Published for the Concertina (Chicago: Henry Silberhorn, 1928).
5. Four sheets containing eight tunes, some of which supplemented Silberhorn's concertina boosting publication, The ^{Booster} Banner.

I had hoped too that the Gruetzmacher's might have had copies of The Banner inasmuch as the aforementioned Pat Watters sometimes published excerpts from it in his Music and Dance News, but no luck. Nor did the Gruetzmachers have any photographs from Watter's collection, nor did they have back issues of M & D News. They told me that Watter's widow, Marie, might've had the stuff, but she has died recently. And they also informed me that Watters had wanted them to take over his paper, but, considering the price he wanted and the fact that the couple already had full time jobs, the Greutzmacher's turned him down. So much for the track of Silberhorn.

The jamboree was held in Wausau's VFW hall, along the Wisconsin river, near Wausau's downtown. The building was new and its ground floor, where the event took place, was a large open squarish room. A raised platform for musicians occupied the north end, while a bar and a kitchen took up the east and west walls. There was a large space, perhaps 25 x 30, for dancing on the tiled floor immediately in front of the musicians' stand, and this dance area was encircled with chairs and tables.

According to the Gruetzmacher's, the VFW doesn't charge for the use of the hall' rather they get the beer and food concessions. The Concertina Club makes its money through donations--plastic buckets for this purpose were prominently displayed at entryways--and by raffling off champagne and other items. Their expenses entail local promotion, notices sent to interested parties from out of town, and pay for a "featured artist."

When I arrived at noon--the event was to start at 1 PM--the star of the show, Doug Erickson, was setting up his equipment. He's a young man, in his twenties, who plays the "organtina"--an electronically modified concertina--while backed by a drum machine and singing. The other musicians were members of the local

concertina club or out-of-town players. These people played gratis and picked their spots by signing up on a sheet at the entrance.

The out-of-town musicians are part of a midwest concertina crowd who typically travel to numerous such events throughout the year. I recognized several from pictures and write-ups in Pat Watters' paper; some of them were also members of the Concertina Hall of Fame. Harold "Zimmy" Zimmerman, 82, of Union City, Michigan (a small town in southern Michigan just north of South Bend, Indiana) was one such visitor. He specializes in concertina tricks--strolling with a tiny amplifier strapped to his waist and playing the instrument over his head and while lying on his back. There were other visitors present from Rockford and Chicago, Illinois and from the Milwaukee area (Max King among them). For many of these regulars, the event served as a big reunion and they spent their time gabbing in the hall's lobby or while next to the bar.

There were also plenty in attendance who sat in chairs and danced periodically. Most, I'm guessing, were a local crowd and most were fifty or older.

I only stayed for six hours and, as Dan assured me, the best musicians and the biggest crowds were ahead of me. But I didn't want to make a long drive in the middle of the night, I had met some interesting players, already, and the place presented numerous recording problems, so I figured it best to depart.

With regard to players I met, Lawrence Hopfensberger and Alfred Schmidt are worth particular mention. I had seen Hopfensberger's picture while visiting Dorothy Bertolas, the daughter of Max Peters, in Menomonee Falls. From the man himself I learned that he was born in 1910 in Appleton of German parents. His family moved to Abbotsford in 1915; then L lived in Appleton again from 1928 until 1942 before moving back up to Abbotsford to farm. He has been playing the concertina since his youth and in 1927 met Max Peters while the Peters Brothers were touring in northern Wisconsin. Thereafter he became friends with them and

saw them whenever they were in the area. Since the Peters disbanded in the early 1940s, however, L lost touch with Max until the early 1970s when they renewed their friendship, especially when L was visiting relatives in Milwaukee. The tape index will reveal that L's repertoire leans heavily toward German concertina tunes with some Western and pop standards thrown in. He plays in a slow, deliberate way while seated in a homemade wooden chair and casting sidelong glances at his sheet music, but his sense of timing is strong and his playing is at once stolid and rustically charming.

Unlike most of the other musicians gathered, Alfred Schmidt played a three row Hohner button accordion by ear. I didn't get his age, but he looks to be in his fifties. He now lives in Rockford and, incidentally, was present for Rudy Burkhalter's accordion jamboree in Middleton, but he was born in Albert Lea, Minnesota. His grandparents were born in Germany and came over to the U.S. His dad played button accordion too and bought Alfred his first instrument at age six. Excepting two Yankovic numbers, four of the six tunes he played were German, and three of them were ones I wasn't familiar with: I Give You My Heart, Seven Days and Seven Nights Polka, and a tune played by Johnny Helget (sp?) from New Ulm. A said he learned these songs from tapes, but there were other songs he learned from his dad. Perhaps he's worth a visit at some future point.

Other players included Gruetzmacher himself, who proved to be a master of styles and of his instrument, and "Concertina Eddie" Borhardt, in his twenties and from nearby Little Chicago, who played Dutchman style.

I taped 22 numbers filling two reels, but I'm not too hopeful about their quality. All of the concertinas were fitted with internal mikes which were jacked in turn into a pair of amplifiers; meantime an additional mike was sometimes put on the concertina and the sound from that mike was put out through the p.a. speakers. With all the din from speakers and the hall's bad acoustics,

was tough to hear what I was recording let alone get a good sound. For Hopfesnberger and Schmidt, I put the mikes right up to their bellows, so the sound will at least serve to indicate their playing style and repertoire. Oh yes, I forgot to mention one other aspect of the trip. I had hoped to take in an old time band on Friday night. Sue Gruetzmacher reckoned that Schmidt's Ballroom, out in the country on county A, didn't have Friday night dances, but I should try Leo's Cafe and Bar in the 700 block of Third Avenue. I went there and found the place to be a typical old timer bar of elongated rectangular shape. There was really no place for a band and dancers, but two musicians--on concertina and drums--were wedged against one wall, while drinkers and dancers packed the limited space between band and bar rail. The band, two women in their twenties from Wisconsin Rapids, had a music stand proclaiming "The Girls," and the barmaid called them "The Girls From Rapids." From their gender, chosen name, and repertoire of Polish and C&W numbers, it's pretty clear that they take their inspiration from Cloquet, Minnesota's Renata Romanek and Girls, Girls, Girls.

Daughters
of Al
Wyrd,
Concertina
Dealer