

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
March 11, 1985

Maplewood Nursing Home 643-3383
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Sauk City, WI

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(Madison line)

The Home's activities director, Kathy Tucker, had written to the Wisconsin Folklife Center inquiring about the German Project and suggesting that several people in the Sauk City area would be of use to us. Accordingly I drove over to meet with Ms. Tucker. The Maplewood Home is a modern institution on the northeast side of Sauk City and there I sat down with Kathy Tucker in an activities room. She told me that many of the residents were of German heritage and indeed I'd noticed a preponderance of German names when scanning the resident's list in the lobby. A "German Club" meets most Wednesday afternoons and has been meeting for several years.

Customarily Club members are wheeled into a room and several volunteers conduct a sing-along. Tucker offered some names and phone numbers:

Margaret Wittwer, a first generation German-American who immigrated in the 1920s and who sings. 592-3744 [a Lodi telephone number].

Marcella Sprecher, who doesn't sing but plays the piano. 544-3643.

Zelpha Hooks, a Swiss. 356-9055.

These woman, according to Tucker, are in their sixties. I called Sprecher to arrange to record on Wednesday March 20. She seemed willing but doubtful. Some local school children were going to perform during part of the Club's hour, Margaret Wittwer was hobbled with arthritis and might not appear, and few of the center's residents were consistently in good voice. Looks like I'll have to take my chances.

While conversing with Ms. Tucker, a resident, Emma Schmitt, wheeled into the room. I talked with her for ten minutes or so and learned that she had come over to this country in the mid-1920s at the age of 22. She worked in New

Jersey and Chicago and had been a "lady's tailor." She reckoned that there were many German songs known to her, but her speech was hindered (by a stroke?) and I concluded she wasn't the best candidate for solo performance.

While in the activities room, I was also given two song books--photocopied compilations--that the residents used for regular German Club and for the Christmas season. The former compilation, 22 pages, was culled from several different sources. There were German/English versions and musical notes for songs like "Du, Du Liegst Mir Im Herzen"; German/English lyrics but no music for a trio of songs celebrating youthful merriment ("Als wir jungst in Regensburg waren," "Schon ist die Jugend," and "Freut euch des Lebens"; handwritten German lyrics for "Muss I Denn," "Mein Hut Der Hat Drei Ecken," and a few others that were unfamiliar to me ("Wiegenlied," "Der Gute Kamerad," etc.); and fourteen selections, with scripted lyrics and musical notation, taken from the Evangelischen Gemeinschaft hymnal (this denomination is now merged with the Methodist Church). The seven page Christmas compilation contained eight handprinted carols including "O Tannenbaum," "Stille Nacht," and "Ihr Kinderlein Kommet."

I learned that the compilations were the work of the Center's former activities director, Ann Ruland [I'm not quite sure of this last name, but was told her husband is Victor]. The Methodist or Evangelischen Gemeinschaft selections were culled from the hymnal of Walter Zick, age 93, who lived in the home, had been a farmer, and was a member of the Denzer Methodist congregation in rural Sauk County.

I met with Mr. Zick in his room. Not the best setting. His roommate had a color TV with soap operas blaring while he sat a few inches from the screen: the pleasures of afternoon media are not to be impeded by failing sight and hearing. Walter sat in his chair by the window, ignoring "General Hospital" and

we talked a bit. Zick was quite sharp and appears fairly sturdy. He's a blocky powerful looking man of medium height and was dressed in greenish work clothes with the pants held up by suspenders. An aerial shot of his former farm home graced the wall. I learned that Zick's song repertoire was heavily weighted toward hymns and, in telling me about his church, he lent me a copy of a history chronicling the "leben und wirken" of one of its stalwarts, R. Jackel, Jakob Albrecht und seine Mitarbeiter (Cleveland, Ohio: Berlegt von W. F. Schneider, 1879), 335 pp. According to the Harvard Dictionary of Ethnicity, German Methodism was established in this country in 1864, peaked early in the 20th century, and, by 1924 or thereabouts, began to merge with "English" Methodist churches.

Since I lacked a tape recorder and since Zick's roommate was immersed in drama, I figured the best time to record this man's singing was during the upcoming German Club meeting. We said goodbye with the promise of meeting again soon.

On the way back to Madison, I swung through the village of Roxbury [a brief account of the history of this community together with bibliographical references to historical sources, appears in Laura Frey's paper for my Folklore in Wisconsin course, summer 1984]. An imposing brick Catholic church dominates the tiny settlement, although kitsch German eateries--a Gasthaus and a Dorfhaus--are present as well. The cemetery has a number of cast metal crosses--some iron, some of an alloy silvery in color--that include at least five distinct patterns. Dates are often fuzzy, but I noticed 1869 as an early example and 1895 as a later one. Also evident in this vicinity--along county Y and county KP--are numerous shrines to the Virgin Mary. They were all different, but fell into two categories based on materials of construction. Some were housed in stone and/or concrete grottos, while others had wooden coverings. In most cases the statues were wintering indoors and it seems to me

an early summer visit--when virgins are out and flower gardens are in full bloom--would be the best time to capture these devotional artifacts.

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I returned for German Club and met Zelpha Hooks, one of the song session leaders, prior to setting up recording equipment. Roughly sixty and widowed, Mrs. Hooks was a stout energetic gray haired lady who immediately began to enlighten me about the many Swiss settlers in the Sauk County area. She herself is third generation and has some German ancestry too. My arrival caught her unawares, or she would've brought along several Swiss and German songbooks. Perhaps a separate visit would be worthwhile?

Mrs. Hooks went off to visit her father, a resident, and I set up for recording. German Club takes place in the Maplewood cafeteria where the tables, suspended by metal arms from the ceiling, can be collapsed upwards thereby clearing the area. A piano was pushed out from the wall and chairs were arranged in a half circle around it with spaces left for the residents who were soon rolled in in their wheel chairs. Marcella Sprecher arrived and began to set up her piano music. Her shy, quiet telephone manner was replicated in person and she again suggested that I wouldn't find much here in the way of high quality singing.

Moments later Zelpha Hooks arrived with her dad, a trim man in his eighties dressed in blue jeans, a plaid shirt, and a sleeveless sweater vest. He immediately sang me the first verse of "Lauterbach." By this time twenty-five or so residents had arrived and the singing began.

Typically Marcella would play a melody through once, then Zelpha would lead a sing-along. As predicted, the response was neither overwhelming nor impressive.

Emma Schmitt, Walter Zick, and two or three others sang out; the rest whispered the words, simply stared at their songbooks, or just listened. Consequently Zelpha's voice, the piano, and a low rustle was about all that could be heard in a room that, given its spaciousness and many hard surfaces, was the worst accoustic arena imaginable. Matters improved from the fifth song until closing as Margaret Wittwer appeared from Lodi. She appears to be in her mid-fifties, was born in Germany, and has lived in Wisconsin for thirty years. Possessed with a strong, sure alto, she joined with Zelpha in providing a strong vocal lead that the residents might follow. She also adopted the Merv Griffin technique of seizing the Home's microphone and amplifying the voices of certain singers, like Walter Zick, amidst performances. A few other notable happenings: Zelpha does some yodeling and, at her dad's suggestion, I asked her to yodel; during the next song, "Elternliebe," one elderly resident struggled with her emotions, then got up and walked out--apparently this song about young love always gets to her. The song session closed with Margaret's solicitation of rhymed prayers in German by residents. Three or four people responded, and then the session closed.

While I was packing up the equipment, Zelpha asked me a little more about the project, then offered a snatch of "Fuchs, Du Hast Mein Gans Gestohlen," a tune learned from a German neighbor girl. Unfortunately I didn't have the tape recorder on for this, but I believe Phil Bohlman has captured several performances of this song. Zelpha's dad, not to be outdone, reckoned he was the Home's champion storyteller, and he offered a pair of anecdotes about a farmer and a preacher as proof.

Margaret Wittwer gave me several copies of Die Hausfrau, a German-American magazine published in Chicago. It often contains snatches of traditional song and poetry that Margaret and Zelpha share with their audience. Margaret

stressed her interest in the project's outcome and her hopes that we might return to the Sauk City area to offer a slide/tape show. She also stressed that her home in Lodi can be reached without calling long distance from Madison, and that she'd be willing to help in any way she could. Perhaps we could call upon her for translations in the absence of Phil Bohlman? Finally Margaret said she'd played a Hohner button accordion along with her sisters while growing up in Germany. They'd sit outside in fine weather when many neighbors were out walking and passersby would often stop to listen.

Oh, yes--one more addition. One of the Home's staff members informed me about a women's choral group, "Die Machens," that performs in the Sauk City area. Apparently the members are in their mid-thirties through mid-forties, but I couldn't get a good notion of their repertoire from the staffer. Their director is Penny Hall, 113 Helen St., Sauk City, 643-6828.