

FIELD NOTES

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McFarland, Wisconsin

Karl and the Country Dutchmen
Park Ponderosa Ballroom

The Park Ponderosa is a large ballroom and supper club operated in McFarland by Flo and Don Ring for the past fifteen years. Don heads a house band that plays old time music with an emphasis on big band ballroom music. Dances are held every Friday and Saturday night, and frequently on Sunday afternoons and Wednesday nights. The appended schedule shows an oldtime emphasis, but rock bands (of the oldies/fifties style like Little Vito) are booked as are an occasional country and bluegrass act. The Rings advertise fairly extensively in polka and ballroom papers. I've seen their ads in Entertainment Bits, Wisconsin Polka Boosters, and Dancing USA.

In the old time field there's no particular ethnic emphasis to the acts booked. Karl and the Country Dutchmen are clearly in the German style and a German Fest is projected for February 23; Roger Bright plays Swiss/Alpine music; Polish acts are booked like Syl Liebel and the Jolly Two; and there's Steve Meisner and Louie Bashell in the Slovenian style as well as Don Peachey's old time amalgam.

As dance hall's go, the Park Ponderosa is quite spacious and well kept up. There are a few corny western motifs ala Bonanza (wagon wheels and steer horns on the wall), but they aren't too obnoxious. Tables and booths line the dance floor and there are two bars. Admission was \$3.50 and beer was three bucks a pitcher. Not cheap. The crowd was mainly oldsters: predominantly folks from their fifties through seventies. I'm told that an even more senior crowd is likely to appear on Sunday afternoons when darkness, the hour, and winter weather don't keep folks at home. There was also a sprinkling of kids and a fewscore people in their twenties and thirties. People were in well dressed

"casual" attire: not suits, but not jeans. And the place was packed. Easily three hundred people, with a good share of them teeming on the dance floor whenever the band played.

Karl and the Country Dutchmen hail from Orion, Illinois. According to Entertainment Bits (Feb-March, 1982, p. 15), they've been together since 1974. That article gives the following personnel: Karl on concertina; Amy Sampson of Orion, first trumpet, flugel horn, mellowphone, and bass (i.e. bass horn or tuba); Holly Hartwich on drums; Joyce Hartwich, piano; Norma Hartwich, tuba and vocals; Greg Scritssmeir, East Moline, bass and valve trombone; Mike Cielecki, Durant, Iowa, second trumpet, flugel horn, vocals; Bernie Williams, Mount Joy, Iowa, drums; Tom Paulsen, occasionally, on second trumpet. No doubt they can't all travel with the band on the year round basis and there may well have been some personnel changes. On the 26th Karl Hartwich played concertina, his three sisters tackled keyboards, drums, and tuba, and two men played trumpet and trombone.

The men in the band wore dark slacks and whitish dress shirts, with only alpine hats, festooned with pins, suggesting their "Dutchness." Because of the pack of the crowd, and because they were hidden at the rear of the bandstand, I didn't get much of a look at the women performers, but they seemed to be wearing loose fitting dresses with floral prints. No doubt the image of jolly alpine men and wholesome farm women is important to Country Dutchmen (and women).

From the time of our arrival, about 9:30 until 11:30, the band took no break, but milled around instead on the bandstand between "sets" of three or four numbers. Sets generally centered on a particular dance form: there were waltzes, polkas, foxtrots, one set of schottisches (for the local Scandinavians?), and one set of circle two steps to mix the crowd. The band

took its first break around 11:30, and Karl and his male cohorts came tok the bar for a brew. I'm not ceertain what the women did. In between sets, dancers would often approach the bandstand to make requests. The band had a stack of printed fliers (appended here) that announced their schedule. TKhey range considerably throughout the upper midwest, performing in such German hotbeds as New Ulm, Minnesota, Bloomer, Wisconsin and the Milwaukee area. From the number of dates they play (often three in a weekend in three different locales), it's clear that they are in demand. Indeed they have loyal fans who follow them around. I met one man in the Men's Room who reckoned he wouldn't get home until four AM. He said he usually did more drinking than dancing at these events, but this was his wife's band and she had to travel to see them whenever they played.

The band's style was decidedly German: gentle melodic concertina, exuberant tuba, and chorusing horns. Many of the polka and waltz melodies also sounded German, although I'm not yet familiar enough with the genre to have recognized titles. The band offered none. Nor was singing a big part of the act. Most of the vocals were in English for C&W numbers like "Please Release Me," "Waltz Across Texas," and "San Antonio Rose." The drummer did sing one German number late in the evening, however. And they launched into a "concertina oompah" number (concertina and tuba only) just as we were leaving. Since they still had an hour to play when we left and the crowd was thinning down to a hard core, I left wondering if some virtuoso or whoop 'em up numbers were to come. The only way to know is to see this band next time.

In summation, it's worth saying that asserting Germanness and , especially, old time Germanness was not an overwhelmingly important concern to this band. It was present in the instrumentation, certain aspects of dress, the band's name, some of the repertoire and style. On the other hand, there was little reference, if any, to ethnicity by the band, the few vocals were, with a single exception, in English, no peculiarly German dance forms were played, and

a good share of the repertoire borrowed from country music and from the larger "Polka Music" repertoire (I did recognize "Blue Skirt Waltz", for example). Typical of upper midwest folk music.

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