

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
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John & Elisabeth Till
Rural Cumberland, WI

I had heard of the "Singing Tills From Tills Hills" more than a decade ago, and with regularity since then. They have sung for many public gatherings and for clubs in my native Barron county and I have several newspaper stories about them clipped from the Rice Lake Chronotype. In 1975, while combing northern Wisconsin and Michigan's upper peninsula for traditional artists to involve in the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife, my friend Jens Lund had visited with the Tills, photographed them, and recorded their music.

Meantime I had also read, in journalistic and anecdotal accounts of "characters" in Wisconsin, the story of John Till, the barefoot "plaster doctor," who cured many with his salves and potions in northwestern Wisconsin [particularly useful, for its factual account, is Earl Chapin's Tales of Wisconsin (River Falls: University of Wisconsin-River Falls Press, 1973), pp. 42-45]. I did not realize, however, that the two were related until my dad pointed it out prior to my session with the Tills. The two John Tills are father and son.

The singing John was waiting for me, propped on a lawn chair, outside his country home in the woods off county H near Beaver Dam Lake in Barron county. At 73, he's wiry and spry with a broad and mischievous grin and a lilting accent that sometimes sounds German and sometimes sounds "stage Norwegian." Mrs. Till would return shortly from an errand, so John and I sat down on stuffed chairs in a sun room and, immediately, he began to talk. If father was at all like son, it's easy to see how the plaster doctor won followers. Till is a beguiling and artful talker, weaver exaggeration and humor with fact and serious detail. Before I could set up the tape recorder, he had already told me a good deal

about his dad's career as the apprentice of a blacksmith and herbalist hermit in the Austrian mountains, as a lumberjack in Wisconsin, and as a famed curer. [The account of his father was illustrated by an oft-folded newspaper clipping showing huge crowds thronging outside a hotel while awaiting treatment, and by the sheet music and lyrics (some of the clumsiest doggerel I've ever seen) of a 1909 ballad honoring John Till and authored by Samuel Tufts of Knapp.] Not surprisingly, the life of Till the younger drew more from his father than a charming manner. When his dad was deported in 1922, John traveled at age nine to the ancestral Austrian mountain village where the elder Till purchased a large farm. It was in Austria that John learned to play the violin and double-necked "Schrammel guitar" and it was there that he was eventually vulnerable to Hitler's draft. The attached clipping and the tape index tell the rest of the story regarding John's life and that of his wife, Elisabeth, prior to their arrival in the United States in the late 1940s.

By the time I had set up the recorder, Elisabeth arrived. Blond and vivacious, she was soon showing me watercolors of flowers and sketches of grandchildren that she had made and framed for display on the walls of their home. A self-confessed artist and singer, she handles the serious and sentimental part of the "program" when she and her husband perform, with John adding levity through jokes and comical facial expressions (a skilled raconteur, Till is also illustrating a book of jokes--he showed me a 20 plus page manuscript that's underway).

After interviewing the pair to get the facts straight regarding their lives and music, I recorded roughly 17 songs. The Tills are very fine performers. John's guitar work is simple and understated yet very solid. Both he and Elisabeth handle melody and harmony with precision and feeling, and they are very adept yodelers. Given the fact that John began his Austrian musical education by

learning "Schrammel music" of the Viennese cafes and that both he and Elisabeth sang songs in their villages while sitting outside in the evening, I suspect that their repertoire consists largely of popular songs current in the 20s and 30s and cast in a mountain yodeling style. This suspicion of popular, as opposed to folk, origin is underscored by the fact that most of the lyrics (at least insofar as I could tell from John's translations) deal with love, the seasons, and the homeland, and not with the doings of mountain peasants; the tunes meanwhile stray from dance tempos and folk melodies. Nonetheless, there is plenty that is regional and Austrian in both the lyrics and, especially, the vocal style.

Enough with speculation. Besides Austrian yodel songs, the pair perform a few yodeling cowboy numbers and they have rendered American songs like "She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain" in alpine style. Such delightful eclecticism has made them a hit with their audiences.

After an hour and a half of taping and plenty more conversation, I had to pack up and leave, much to the couple's disappointment. They wanted me to stay for dinner, but family commitments prevented me from consenting. Perhaps another time. I left with a promise that I would make copies of the tapes for them. Mrs. Till longs to appear on the Johnny Carson show and is convinced that a good cassette recording will provide their entree. I wish them luck.