

Collectors: Jim Leary and Matt Gallman

January 13, 1981

Informants: Bill Hendrickson, Eino and Helvi Okkonen,  
Olavi Wintturi  
Herbster, Wisconsin

Matt Gallman picked me up sometime after eight o'clock and we drove, through wisps of fog, on County C towards Herbster. Enroute, I unfolded to Matt my usual fieldwork strategy of eliciting life histories first, then carrying on to talk about the music. We arrived at Bill Hendrickson's place about 9:20 and found him emerging from his basement. Since his accordion was down there we followed him down. Bill, who is quite trim, was dressed in wool plaid from head to foot. As I introduced Matt as a musician, Bill immediately asked Matt to exchange tapes of each other's playing. Bill's tapes were kept in the basement along with two cassette recorders. He told us that it was his strategy to select only songs that he liked from records and transfer them on to tape. Beyond Finnish numbers, he had many C & W favorites by Bill Anderson, Johnny Cash, Lynn Anderson, and so on.

Bill was also recording his own numbers. He was in the habit of carrying a small notebook with him and, whenever he remembered an old song he used to know, he'd jot the title down so he could later tape the song and thereby preserve it. Beyond Finnish songs in his repertoire, I noticed that some of Bill's small notebooks listed popular tunes like "Red Wing" and "Little Brown Jug." Bill's decision to tape his own music seems to be partly related to his preservationist sensibilities. He is engaged upon compiling a memoir of the early days of Bark Point and has now written some seventy pages.

After looking at Bill's tapes a bit and promising to send him some music to listen to, he loaded his accordion into a cardboard box (the case was upstairs) and we drove the short distance to the Okkanens. The couple was just finishing breakfast and as we entered, Helvi Okkanen (nee Wintturi) announced that they'd been up the night before til one or two playing two handed pinochle. (I think she was a little proud of this achievement.) We settled about the kitchen table and everyone made a big fuss over Matt's button accordion. He obligingly played several Finnish tunes. Mrs. Okkonen tapped her feet enthusiastically and both Bill and Eino smiled and watched the performance with keen interest. As the tape reveals, both had been childhood friends and had learned button accordion together.

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The interview (detailed in the log) consisted of two parts. During the first phase I, rather artificially, elicited brief life histories from the three, then we turned to talk of music. During the second phase, Bill played eleven tunes (nine Finnish) from a list he'd prepared. The non-musical part went fairly well, although there was occasional confusion - Eino was a little shy and Bill was hard of hearing. At one point Helvi brought out various old photographs which are carefully preserved in a family album. It is worth mentioning that she has a good shot of the locale's Finnish hall and another group picture showing Eino with his piano accordion. Bill chimed in that he, too, has an old picture of himself at home with his accordion.

Bill's playing also went pretty well. I shifted both microphones to face him so as to gain a full impression of the sound (see diagram). As stated in earlier notes, Bill layed off playing for many years and his hands are now gnarled by arthritis. Consequently, as he put it, "I make mistakes." Generally, what I did was give him a little time to go over the tune before we actually taped it.

Once Bill's playing was over, I put away the tape recorder. I knew, of course, that as soon as the machine was put away other relevant conversation might emerge; but, since I'd stuck the machine atop the kitchen table and since I knew that coffee was nearly ready, I figured it was time to put the stuff away. Predictably, Eino and Bill launched into a diatribe of how they didn't like the music nowadays, this "rock and roll." They objected to its repetition, its volume, its emphasis on rhythm at the expense of melody; they didn't like the fact that it was hard to understand the singer, and that it was tough to distinguish individual instruments. Bill then reiterated his affection for some C & W artists.

Meantime Helvi had set the table with cheese and crackers and some cookies: the Swedish "Fattigman" and some others filled with apricot jam. Matt and I cleaned up on that and the Okkonens, whose grandson and both whose fathers were named Matti, commented favorably on Matt's name. Shortly thereafter, Matt played the Finnish favorite "Maillman Matti" with the assembled Finns joining in on the words. The Okkonens both had fine, high voices. Bill, who merely hummed, reckoned that he hadn't been able to sing for several years - his throat had gone hoarse. Bill had been trying to recall the tune that Matt played for some time. He confessed that he only recalled part of it and had been mixing up the rest with another tune.

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By this time it was a bit past eleven and, with Bill's lunchtime coming on, we bid farewell to the Okkonens and took him home. Upon letting Bill off, we again promised to send him a tape and he also agreed to let us record his Finnish 78's.

With the day still young, Matt and I then whirled by Olavi Wintturi's. The Okkonens had tried to call him, but he hadn't answered. Figuring he might be in his shop, we drove up to the door and found him inside. Olavi was in cheeful spirits. The previous day, with "another old bachelot," he'd unthawed water pipes for a couple. The exercise, the knowledge that he was fit at nearly seventy-one, and the experience of helping someone combined to put him in a fine mood. He kidded Matt a little about being married, then showed us around his shop. This time he pulled out a birch bark Finnish basket that his father had made some sixty years before, a hand-crafted wooden rake, and an . There were various other old tools: including a broadax, laying about the place.

I told Olavi where we'd just been and asked him how to locate Einard Maki - a Finnish harmonica player whom he'd mentioned before. Olavi led us inside to find the Maki place in his platbook. Once this was accomplished he, as usual, entertained us with other mementoes: pictures of him raking and stacking hay on a recent foray to Finland, and a series of books by Port Wing native Helma Skogsbergh (That Was Then; From These Shores; and Comes The Day, Comes A Way, all published by Covenant Press in Chicago). Additionally, Olavi showed Matt his recently acquired, but difficult to play, harmonica. He played us a few Finnish pieces - one slow, one fast - on an older harmonica; the tunes were after the styles of Okkonen and Hendrickson. As we were leaving, Olavi also informed us of another Finnish harmonica player - Wayne Kainu, a retired barber in Washburn. We departed promising to return with our wives for a visit.