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Informant: Frances Wroblewski
Autumn Manor, Washburn
Collector: Jim Leary

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In April I'd given a slide show on ethnic music at the Washburn Senior Citizens' Center. Fran Wroblewski was there and she remarked enthusiastically that her late husband John had been a fine player who'd "worn out five accordions" in his time. Mrs. Wroblewski seemed to know plenty about Polish music in the region so I asked if we could get together.

On the appointed day I was ushered into Fran's efficiency apartment in the Washburn Senior Citizens' complex. I had forgotten it, but Fran had had a stroke, her right side gives her problems, one leg is in a brace, and she has trouble walking. Nonetheless, her disposition was cheerful. She is a short, fair skinned woman with twinkling intelligent eyes and curly hair. Right away, we settled into chairs, I reiterated my purpose, and the interview commenced. Those who listen to the tape will note that there's plenty of background noise. Since the apartment's kitchen and living room were separated only by a bar or counter, the refrigerator's hum was inevitable. Because the building housed older people, it had to be kept warm and the furnace kicked on and off intermittently. To boot, the care taker was busily mowing the lawn outside the window. Despite all this we proceeded.

The interview was a bit peculiar because Mrs. Wroblewski was giving me information, not about herself, but about her late husband. Consequently many of her answers to my questions, while cheerfully given and factually important, lacked the richness of detail and enthusiasm with which a musician's recollections might bristle.

As the tape index will show, John Wroblewski grew up in Washburn on "Pollock Hill:" a cluster of homes up and to the east of Washington Avenue. As a young boy he got a button accordion from a musician who was a boarder. He wore out two such instruments before getting a more fashionable piano accordion. In the late 1920's through early 1930's, John played with a violinist and guitar player for dances in Washburn, Ashland, and in the rural halls. They played plenty of Polish numbers, but also modern tunes. Their audience was of mixed ethnicity. After John and Frances were married, his playing was curtailed to Washburn house parties, especially silver wedding anniversaries, with Polish neighbors. On these occasions, he'd be joined by the fiddling Zinski brothers.

In addition to telling me about her husband, Fran told me of her own Polish background - both on and off the tape. She was born in 1913, a Milenski, the

oldest of eight children, on Ashland's east side. Both of her parents had come from Poland and her dad was an ore puncher. The family was hard workers. Her dad bought a shack, then built the family a larger house of hardwood timbers culled from an old oredock. One quarter of the lot was a garden, and in another quarter were pens for 100 geese. Mrs. Milenski and the Kotny's were the chief goose raisers on the east end, and the job of herding the fowls fell to Fran. Because of the family's flock, they supplied many feathers for local feather stripping parties. Fran has two feather pillows and a "feather tick" that came from the family geese.

Mrs. Milenski was, apparently, quite a woman. She grew up in a part of Poland which was alternately under Russian and Polish domination. Part of the story of her passage to this country is on the tape, but a few stories weren't and I'll sketch them here.

Apparently Mrs. Milenski could read Polish, but she couldn't write it. Fran asked her why and she replied that every time the Russians got in power, their language was pushed in the schools. She told of how one of her school teachers was caught by the Russians with Polish schoolbooks. For this crime the woman was shot in front of her students. Mrs. M. also used to tell Frances of how they'd hide their cattle under their homes from the Russian soldiers. One time her brother, in his early teens, went out with the cattle to graze and never returned. The family attributed this happening to the Russian soldiers and gave the boy up for dead. Luckily, he'd been put to work in the army tending horses and has survived. He returned to the family at age 21 with his wife and a child.

Because of her mother's experiences, Frances has always been happy to be an American. While her parents may have loved their Polish culture and the countryside, the old country's wars and social inequities forced them to leave. They had no desire to go back.

Frances also had some harrowing tales to tell about the depression. Her father was without a job, but refused any sort of government assistance. The family stayed alive with their garden and livestock and Mr. Milenski hitch-hiked to Grandview to clear land for a farmer in exchange for cordwood and hay for the family cow. Tragically, during this spell a six year old daughter had an abscessed tooth. The family lacked money for a dentist and the little girl died from her affliction.

Despite the hard times she's experienced, Frances retains a cheeful disposition. Certainly because of this, she has plenty of friends who visit her for coffee and conversation. And so, our interview ended with a cup of coffee and some homemade cookies. Before I left I snapped a picture of an old photo showing John Wroblewski with a piano accordion. Mrs. Wroblewski also kindly lent me some Polish records to tape and I look forward to talking with her again when I return them.