

Collector: Jim Leary

February 2, 1981

Informants: Assorted visitors at  
Lakeview Terrace Apts.  
Washburn, Wisconsin

On the evening of Monday, February 2, Phil Martin gave a sound/slide presentation in Washburn. Entitled "A Kingdom of Fiddlers," the program concentrated on old time fiddling and house parties, particularly amongst Norwegians, in rural Wisconsin. The audience was comprised primarily of senior citizens and they were very attentive - especially when pictures and reminiscences concerning houseparties dominated the show.

Not surprisingly, various people spoke to me after the event about their own experiences with old time ethnic music and house parties. Vivian Brevak (a Norwegian-Swedish "half breed" who married a Hungarian) recalled playing second fiddle to her father at house dances when she was a youngster in the 1920's. Mrs. Brevak now plays only the accordion and she was full of lamentations about the way in which the houseparty had been superceded by trips to the tavern.

Mr. and Mrs. Ed Nelson, a Swedish couple who were not musicians themselves, recalled that Washburn's best known fiddler, until his death fifty years before, had been an Irishman named Ben Gilpin. Gilpin, who was roughly eighty when he died, had been a timber cruiser. He had a long mane of white hair and Ed Nelson recalled, as a kid, watching Gilpin fiddle while perched on the stairs of a house.

Another woman, whose name I've unfortunately forgotten, informed me that her Norwegian father was one of a family of six or so fiddlers in Barron County, Wisconsin. And Phil Holzer, in whose house I now live, told me that, as a young man, he used to think nothing of walking five or six miles to a house dance, frolic through the night, then walk back home at daybreak to do the chores. Phil remembered that, besides Hugo Maki, another Finn held forth on the accordion at parties: Vern Louko, who lives in rural Washburn.

Also present at the event was Mrs. Esther Fingeroos of Washburn - a frail, elderly woman who still plays accordion and reckons she knows more than one hundred tunes - many of them are hymns.

I will certainly have to do follow-up interviews with Vivian, Vern, and Esther. But, beyond yielding more grist for the folklorist's mill, this event (centered around the showing of Phil Martin's production) demonstrates the value that the area's old timers place upon their cultural traditions, and the pleasure that they derive from communing with their past.