

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

March 23, 1981

Informants: Waino & Lempi Laamanen  
Howard Laamanen  
"Jingo" Viitala Vachon  
Trimountain, Michigan

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Jenny "Jingo" Vachon (nee Viitala) was born in Rural Toivala, Michigan in 1908. Her father, born in Finland, had been a hobo and part time farm laborer at age nine. As one of his country's rural poor, he was naturally on the side of Russia's peasants and working class who rose up to throw off Czarist rule, and thereby free Finland from foreign domination. In other words, Jingo's father - who mined, homesteaded, and logged in the U. P. - was a "Red Finn." Her mother, of educated Finnish stock, was of religious "White Finn" stock. Late in her life she joined the dundamentalist Apostolic Lutheran sect.

Jingo seems to have inherited her mother's yen for education and her father's hard-working, free-thinking proclivities. At 63 she looks and dresses "young," and her labors balance the domestic and the artistic. At age twenty-one she married Stan Vachon, a Frenchman eleven years her senior. The couple raised eight children and had another die at age three. Handling the cooking and cleaning chores, Jingo also found time to write. She has published verse and short articles, many on the Upper Peninsul, in numerous magazines; and she's authored three books of local history. Presently, she's taken up painting.

With regard to our particular interest, music has been a big part of Jingo's life. Growing up in a large family, listening to her mother's singing around the house, she learned to play various instruments along with her brothers and sisters. At various times in her life, she has played six string guitar, twelve string guitar, fiddle, dobro, and harmonica. Currently, she plays mostly the 12 string, sometimes with a harmonica.

Influenced by her neighbors, the radio, and 78 records, Jingo not only learned Finnish tunes, but also an abundance of "hillbilly" songs. In the late 1930's, teamed up with a female friend on guitar and dobro, she performed Yodelling Jimmy Rodgers' tunes over local radio. Beyond learning and playing Finnish and Hillbilly tunes, Jingo has also put her energies into composition and translation. As the tape index will show, she's made up localized dialect songs about subjects like "Eino Maki's Pig." She has worked out Finnish words for the "Wabash Cannonball" and has rendered various Finnish songs into English.

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Amongst Jingo's musical friends from Toivola was Lempi "Ted" Laamanen, present wife of Waino Laamanen. The couple lives in Trimountain and all three have kept in close touch through the years - often playing and singing together at St. John's Day celebrations at Agate Beach near Toivola. Waino is a gifted performer on mandolin and tenor banjo. Like Jingo, he combines C & W tunes ("Under The Double Eagle") and even pop tunes ("When You Wore A Tulip") with his Finnish repertoire. Waino's father apparently played the kantele. Like Jingo, Lempi's mother was a good singer. On March 23, Matt and I were lucky enough to record all three, along with the Laamanen's son Howard (guitar and tenor banjo), at the Laamanen home in Trimountain.

Matt had met Jingo during the summer of 1980 while working in the Copper Country. They had played music together and, when Matt and I planned a recording trip to the U. P., we enlisted Jingo's help. Accordingly, she set up a session with the Laamanens. When we arrived at their place shortly before noon, they'd already been playing for awhile - recording Finnish tunes on a cassette machine for us in case we'd been detained. We settled around the kitchen table with the bunch, explained our purpose, and began setting up the equipment. Howard - some sort of maintenance supervisor at Michigan Tech - looked at our Nagra equipment with considerable interest. He was a tall bespectacled man in his late 40's, with a high forehead, graying hair and a friendly, talkative manner. Howard's dad Waino was shorter, much quieter, and grayer - probably in his early 70's. He too was very friendly and, as the afternoon progressed, he often came out with a witty comment and a broad grin. Dark haired Lempi, in her mid-60's, had a rosy-cheeked, wrinkled, merry face resembling a dried apple. She immediately adopted the hostess role, offering us tea, coffee, homemade Finnish sweetbread, and, later on, chunks of sausage.

Since everybody was in a loose, conversational frame of mind, Matt and I decided to conduct a general sort of interview first. We asked about house parties, musical influences, repertoire, and the like. As the tape index shoes, and as I've mentioned above, the group's influences were a combination of "hillbilly" music and Finnish songs and dance pieces. Matt and I thought this was a particularly happy combination since string band versions of what had been known to us primarily as accordion tunes gave a new dimension to the music. For roughly two and a half hours Howard, Waino, and Jingo entertained us with mostly Finnish tunes, sprinkled with hillbilly offerings.

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Although labeling herself as unable to sing, Lempi quickly overcame her shyness and joined in with Jingo who boomed out verses in a low, rich voice.

The session was a relaxed one thanks in part to Lempi's suggestion that we all partake of a shot of shiskey to loosen us up. Jingo held her nose as she swallowed hers in one gulp; apparently it was the first whiskey she'd swallowed since being a teenager. Somewhat devilishly, Lempi offered Jingo some homemade wine to wash down the booze, but the suggestion was laughingly declined.

For the most part Jingo ran the session. Since the 1930's she has filled notebooks with song lyrics. She brought along an old notebook, sheets of lyrics she'd typed, and one recent songbook (Suomaluisa Kansanlauluja, Detroit: Finnish Bi-Centennial Committee, 1977). Using these printed devices to augment her memory, she played and sang many songs, with the Laamanens accompanying. Waino did his part, too. His technique was simply to jump into a Finnish tune on the mandolin and the others would follow. While playing he bent his gray head over the instrument, shutting his eyes in a beatific smile. Lempi, too, prompted several songs by singing verses or humming tunes to the others.

As he had done at Art Moilanen's, Matt aided the session by playing the Finnish tunes he knew, then asking the others for their versions. Towards the session's end, we abandoned our quest for strictly Finnish music (the well being pretty dry finally) and Matt pulled out his instrument to jam with the others. The afternoon turned out to be quite a party, and appropriately so. Apparently the Laamanen's house was once owned by the Dahlmann family. A festivity at the dwelling was immortalized by South Range's Finnish poet and singer, Hiski Saloma: "Dahlmannin Paartit," Columbia 311-F, a "comic song." (The Laamanens had a beat up copy of the record and showed it to us.)

At roughly 3:30, we decided it was time to pack up. Jingo had invited us for dinner, we had another session tentatively set up for the evening, and it was time for a little R & R. As we were ready to head out the Laamanens blessed us with another treat. A lumber camp cook in her teens, Lempi has long been a baker, gardener, and cook extraordinaire. For twenty-seven years she made jam from local thimbleberries for commercial sale. To our delight, she presented Matt and me each with a jar of her thimbleberry jam.

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Then we set out with Jingo from Trimountain to her home in the woods west of Toivola. After marrying Stan Vachon, Jingo and her husband moved to Arizona where they ran a store and gas station. Sometime in the 1950's they settled in St. Ignace, Michigan where they lived until four or five years ago. Their present rustic home is on land they'd owned for sometime, but kept only as a vacation home.

After picking up some hamburger at the Toivola store, we bumped along washboardy roads to the Vachon's trailer. Their large St. Bernard bounded out to meet us and, as we walked toward the entrance, Jingo informed us that she'd trained the beast to pull firewood on a sled. Once inside the Vachon home, Jingo set to work preparing dinner. She refused our offer of help, saying that the kitchen has always been her domain and she actually prefers doing the work by herself. Weary from a couple of intense days of recording we slumped in chairs and gazed at our surroundings.

The Vachons had put considerable energy into making their place comfortable. The living room area had been brightened by three picture windows and a large wood stove with glass walls occupied the space's center. I also noticed on the way in that the Vachons had put a roof on the place and we learned later that they planned several more additions to the structure.

Stan Vachon arrived as we were resting. Of medium height, powerfully built, with a high forehead, dark complexion, and small moustache, he looked a true Frenchman. He was limping slightly and we learned that his leg had been badly broken a year or so before during a logging accident. Like his wife, Stan had a youthful and active mind. He spoke with some enthusiasm about his interests in wind and solar power, gardening and eating natural foods, and about his energy saving designs for wood stoves.

Dinner was soon ready and we sat down to a noodle, burger, and vegetable casserole along with homemade bread. Jingo, brought up on Finnish yogurt, drank buttermilk. While we ate, we talked politics. Matt and I were happy to hear that the Vachons possessed progressive views and weren't, like many of the older people we've interviewed, enamored with Reagan and convinced that America's youth had been corrupted by sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

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After the meal we waited in anticipation of a piano accordionist, Bucky DeForge. Although of French ethnicity, Bucky reportedly played Finnish and Croatian tunes, as well as Yankovic numbers. Jingo had arranged with him for a 7:00 visit to her home. When the time came, however, he did not appear. A few telephone calls suggested that he'd gone bar-hopping and we failed to locate him. Apparently, he usually likes to have a few snorts to get his courage up to play. Although disappointed at not being able to record DeForge, Matt and I were slightly relieved.

We had been with Art Moilanen the night before and early in the morning, with Jingo and her friends in the afternoon, and sleep looked better to us than another recording spell. We decided to head for Houghton's Douglass House Hotel. As we left Stan and Jingo gave us each a quart jar of homemade raspberry jam. With warmth and generosity, they invited us to return for a visit anytime. I hope we can take them up on it.