

Collector: Jim Leary

October 22, 1980

Informants: Fritz Swanson & Angie Swanson
Sanborn Road

At roughly 2:30 in the afternoon, having had enough of paperwork for the day, I sojourned down the Sanborn Road to Zar's Melodee Bar. From local conversation and my researches into the files of the Daily Press, I knew the place to have been a haven for old time dance music since at least the late 1940's. Fritz Swanson, for example, had played there in the early 1950's. The place lay on the right hand side of the road only a few miles south of Ashland. It is a sprawling one-story affair, sided over with aluminum, and combining living quarters, bar and dance floor under one roof. The place was empty, but for one customer, when I entered. I inquired of the bar maid, who turned out to be the owner's daughter, if the place had been in her family long. She replied, "At least 25 years." I discovered that her parents were usually found at the bar around five or six o'clock and that might be a good time to interview them about their role in the bar, the bands that have played there, the regular wedding dances which take place there on many weekends, and other matters. (More of this in a later report.) Following these preliminaries, I asked the bar maid if she knew how I might reach Fritz Swanson, as I'd heard he'd moved nearby. No luck. I tried the phone book, called, and got better directions. The Swanson's live in a trailer in the yard of a farm owned by their daughter and her husband (Charles Lavasseur). The Lavasseur home was a rambling, well kept ranch house with a statue of the Virgin Mary in front (the sign of a Catholic, no doubt). I drove beyond it and parked by the Swanson trailer.

Mrs. Swanson (nee Angie Guski) let me in, having remembered me from a visit I had made to the couple's Indian Lake tavern the previous summer (see notes concerning that session). Since I was arriving unexpectedly, I didn't bring in a tape recorder or camera, but rather a notepad and Pekka Gronow's Studies in Scandinavian American Discography. The book had pictures of several Swedish performers who I hoped would spark Fritz's memory. At 83, he looked a bit run down since the last time I'd seen him - unshaven, with tired eyes behind his thick glasses. He wore heavy wool clothes and slumped in an armchair with a walker in front of him. I noticed a wheel chair on the porch. Mrs. Swanson, a Pole from outside Washburn, was younger and lively in her manner, but she complained of heart trouble. The trailer's design and some built-in cabinets and a bar gave the place a "modern" look, but there were knit pillows, family photographs and other artifacts that made the place cozy. Everything was very clean and in order. The couple spends a good deal of time at home, especially Fritz

and, accordingly, their livingroom furniture was swung in the direction of a giant colored TV.

We talked briefly about the sale of their old tavern at Indian Lake - a place they'd owned since the 1930's. With Fritz's poor health, the tavern was too much work to keep up - especially after Mrs. Swanson had been robbed by a shotgun wielding oaf. They sold the place as a home to the family which owns Larson Picture Frame. Ironically, the Larsons are Swedish Baptists who do not approve of dancing.

Then, after briefly explaining my purpose, I showed Fritz the Gronow book. He got a big kick out of a picture of Olle Skratthult (aka Jalmar Peterson) who he'd seen play on several occasions. I asked Fritz if he still played Olle's "Nikolina." Fritz said that he once played but, as during the previous visit, he was too old and no longer could get his brain and fingers to cooperate. I suggested that perhaps Fritz could think about some of the songs he used to play and I could come back the next day to interview him about his background and his tunes. Fritz said that would be fine. Meantime Mrs. Swanson was trying to coax Fritz to bring out his accordion and attempt to play a little. He refused, a bit sadly I think, saying that he was "too tired" and couldn't play. Undaunted, Mrs. Swanson brought out a stack of cassette tapes, some of which had music by Fritz on them. The tapes were made on a cheap Panasonic portable, obviously using a built-in mike, during a session in the old tavern. Predictably, the sound quality was dreadful, but Fritz's playing came through as being very exciting: forceful, inventive, danceable. He must have been a real virtuoso in his day. Over the recording Fritz claimed that he "could never read music." Noting how the tune made Fritz "light up," Mrs. Swanson suddenly burst into tears. I felt extremely moved and a little embarrassed. She really loved her husband and his playing, it seemed to me, and to compare what was with what is was a sad moment for her. When the tape was over, she mused that she might like to "die while dancing." Beyond being a poetic notion, death dancing was a very real notion for Mrs. Swanson. With her heart condition, she need to "take a few pills" (nitro glycerin??) after a brief waltz.

Some of the Swanson's tapes were of other local musicians, while some came from records. They seemed to belong to an informal network of local Swedes who exchanged tapes with each other. Fritz mentioned his sister-in-law, Rose Swanson, who had tapes made by Walter Levine, a now deceased singer of Swedish songs.

Beyond tapes, the Swansons had a considerable number of 78 records. There were a few Yankovic selections and quite a few Scandinavian ones. I made tentative

arrangements with Mrs. Swanson to buy or borrow these records, but I will also try to make her a tape of them.

I might also mention that the Swansons still maintain ties with several local musicians and singers. Bob Mathiowetz - a German and former local band leader whose father played with Whoopee John in New Ulm - was at their place the previous Sunday. Roughly 65, Mathiowetz can play button accordion, trumpet and the chordovox. Apparently, it was that instrument which he was demonstrating to them the previous Sunday. Mrs. Swanson was especially impressed with its "fancy" features. Beyond Mathiowetz, the Swansons mentioned Clarence Isberg who would sing Swedish comic songs once he'd had "a few snorts." I decided to visit Isberg since he lived just down the road, so I made arrangements to come the next day (October 23) for a complete interview session. I suggested that the couple might see if they could dig out any old photographs. Fritz responded by pulling out a picture of himself as a cook in the lumber camps more than 60 years ago. Fritz went on to mention that he'd played button accordion there. We talked a bit more about his playing and he mentioned considerable jamming by 3-4 accordionists and banjo players at his Indian Lake pavillion. He also spoke of playing for the Vasa Order at mid-summer at his tavern; he played for Ashland's Runeberg as well.

Fired by this additional information, I headed out for Clarence Isberg's.