

DOWN HOME DAIRYLAND/TAPE INDEX

Concertina Millie Kaminiski
Muskego, Wisconsin
October 12, 1989

Interviewed by J.P. Leary
Nagra 4-L recorder

1. Announcement.

2. Dad had a bandonion. Millie was going to grade school and wanted to learn how to play something. Took harmonica lessons in school for 50 cents a lesson. Too expensive, not satisfying. M started fooling around with the number system for the five row bandonion. Found a song she knew and tried it out. After that asked her dad, but he didn't have time. Managed to learn more at concertina club picnics. When her dad thought she was really interested, figured she'd better switch to concertina. Had to learn a new keyboard. Took three lessons with a teacher, then three more, and that was the end of it. Taught herself from there on. The Lord gave me the talent. [Good quote, long, DHD.]

3. Would go out on little jobs with her dad, watch what he and the other guys did. Dad called circle two steps. First job was a little wedding. During WWII. All the guys were gone, asked to play by a couple of guys from the south side of Milwaukee who played bass fiddle and guitar. Used to play every Sunday afternoon in Bingo's Tap. Used to use sheet music, but started faking it. "Of course it was a novelty to see a girl play concertina in Milwaukee." [DHD]

4. Was on radio and TV at WTMJ, played at State Fair Park, played up north, on WLS, on Frankie Yankovic's program.

5. Dad's name Harvey Lemke, her's Mildred Lemke. Dad played lots of weddings and dances, active in a concertina club. Millie got help from the man who wrote the music for the club. Used to have doings at a barn with kids sleeping over and men playing. Man who taught and transposed the music from piano music to concertina was Al Giese.

6. Henry Silberhorn had good music, but a push and pull way of playing. M didn't like the herky-jerky approach, likes to play the melody one way at a time.

7. M got into the world concertina Hall of Fame at Union, Michigan. First woman, not awarded for being that great, but for promoting the instrument.

8. M grew up in the country, then the Town of Wauwautosa. Just dirt roads then, not a heavy German neighborhood.

9. On concertina clubs. Dad belonged to one. M has a picture in the house dating back to 1899 or so, has a later picture from 1911 or so with her dad in it and other men she know.

10. Clubs would go to Jefferson Hall, Bohemian Hall, in Milwaukee. Sunday afternoons, with concertinas, drums, a few horns. Had big dances. "Lot of people went to those, I know that." [DHD]

11. Nowadays clubs still going, but it takes so much work to keep them going. M was involved in the Milwaukee Concertina Club for awhile.

12. M born in Milwaukee on the north side, won't say when. [Late 1920s.]
13. M's mother died when she was 14. Had to stay home from school to take care of the family. Learned to play the concertina at home when no one was around.
14. There were a lot of people very surprised to see a woman playing, especially when she goes out of town. Recalls advertising Star Concertinas at Brown's Music in New Ulm. This year played at Gibbon. [DHD?] Welcomed to play there by drummer and ballroom owner Cliff Hermel. Gibbon was first time Millie saw Karl Hartwich.
15. On Millie's style. "I think everyone just has a style of their own." People on the south side want a slow polka because they want to do a Polish hop. Tries to play to that tempo, but if the music is just for entertainment, not dancing, plays faster. Difference between being a musician and an entertainer. Max King, Pee Wee's brother, is a real musician.
16. Millie met Pee Wee in Louisville, introduced him as Pee Wee King who is Max King's brother. Pee Wee floored by this because it had never happened to him. Max King's real name is Irvin.
17. On Concertina Millie name. Went on WTMJ for the first time, and on TV. Gordon Hinkley, announcer, asked her if she wanted to be Millie and her concertina or Concertina Millie. Chose the latter and the name stuck. [DHD.]
18. Common instrumentation, concertina, drums, guitar, maybe a horn, if a 5th person possible banjo, and maybe another horn to harmonize. Does certain concerts with this instrumentation at Humboldt Park. Has a "heavy left hand" so doesn't really need a bass player.
19. Plays everything but rock and roll: tangos, rhumbas, slow tunes, some country, polkas and waltzes. Calls circle two steps, does schottisches, plays the bird song, does the Hokey Pokey, March Waltzes, and the Broom Dance. You watch the public to see what they like.
20. Does a lot of strolling with a banjo player.
21. Sticks around Milwaukee because she doesn't like to travel much. Goes up the the Dells twice a year. People are appreciative and dance and a musician likes that. Have played in various distant places, but only when on vacation. Has played in Florida, Minnesota.
22. Karpeks'. Played for their wedding. Through the years Karpek fixed her instruments. Doesn't know what people will do if they go out of business. People come there from all over.
23. Always has been a hangout. People come in to learn new tunes. Play and sit around. Would gather every Thursday night and play and then go up to a tavern. "It was just like a George Karpek Club." [DHD edit.] George would put Millie's name on, fix a bracket or a wire or a plug. Once locked her keys in the car and needed money to call her husband. Used to toss money in her case. George glued a silver dime onto her concertina. [DHD edit.]

24. El Rio Drive, one of Verne Meisner's, with Millie humming.

25. Explanation of broom dance, then plays it with calls to the tunes of alternating marches and waltzes: On Wisconsin/a waltz/Notre Dame Victory March/a waltz. . . . "That's the way the broom dance goes." [DHD edit.]

26. Explanation of Circle Two Step.

27. Bird Song.

? 28. "This is the Waltz Quadrille that they played years ago . . ." Plays tune once through, tape expires as second time around begins. [DHD?]

End of Session