

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

March 9, 1981

Informants: Mr. & Mrs. Eskel Hokenson
Gary Hokenson
Sand Bay, Bayfield CountyETHNIC HERITAGE
SOUND ARCHIVE & RESOURCE CENTER
NORTHLAND COLLEGE, ASHLAND, WI

Fritz Swanson, Hugo Maki and others told me of the playing of piano accordionist Robert "Tiny" Hokenson - a huge fisherman and musician noted for performing "modern" numbers. It wasn't until I spoke to Ashland's Rotary Club on February 24th that I heard of Robert's uncle, Eskel Hokenson - another fisherman/musician, now nearly eighty-nine. Someone in the audience reckoned that if I wanted to know about music "years ago," I ought to see Eskel. Accordingly, I called the man's house and asked if Matt and I might come by to record. He was a bit deaf and turned the phone over to his wife. Cautioning us that her husband's instrument had fallen apart years ago, but recalling with pleasure house parties held in their house, she invited us over.

On the appointed day, Matt and I took Highway 13 north through Red Cliff, then turned onto County K for five miles, past Robert Hokenson's, to stop at his uncle's place. As Mrs. Hokenson had said, the white house stood in a piney grove and there was a new red pole barn nearby. We entered through the front door into a large living room, recently refinished, and filled with cushioned couches and chairs. Mrs. Hokenson had been hooking a rug, but she put her work aside and bade us sit down. Eskel, apparently "restless" that there was no work at hand, had gone out to walk a mile or so. While we waited, the couple's son Gary, a big overalled fellow in his mid-40's, came in. We made a bit of small talk and learned that Gary had held a number of jobs. Growing up "on boats" with his fisherman father, he entered the Coast Guard for four years, then he spent 7-8 years as a lineman for Bayfield's Power Company; now he works seasonally for the Army Corps of Engineers on Mississippi River barges.

By this time our quarry arrived. Eskel was clad in a parka, wool shirt, and wool pants. Lean, weathered, and spritely, he had mischievous blue eyes and looked capable of walking much more than a mile. "Heard you used to play a little?" I queried as he shed his coat. "I used to play a few peppy ones. Made 'em jump." Then he settled into his chair and, once the recorder was set up, I began my questions. For all of Eskel's enthusiasm and his crusty good humor, the interview was brief. Apparently it was fifty years since he'd played. He'd taken up the accordion in his late teens; his first instrument (a one row button accordion) was destroyed in a fire; he wore out the second two-row affair; a third button accordion was borrowed and, when its owner moved around 1930, Eskel had no money to buy another. And so, he quit.

From what Matt and I could gather, Eskel's neighbors were Swedes' Swede Finns, and "all kinds of people." He played a few Swedish tunes but plenty of "square dance" tunes like "Turkey In The Straw." The dances were held in local houses and barns from the turn of the century until the early 30's, and there were several local callers. Square dances appear to have been very popular in Ashland and Bayfield counties in the 20's and 30's amongst people of all ethnic backgrounds. In our interviews are accounts of such dances from Herbster, Sanborn, Highbridge, Ashland, and Washburn. Unfortunately, Eskel couldn't recall much about what specific tunes were played, nor could he tell us much about the dance calls used. Since he was, by 1981, an extremely inactive bearer of tradition, Matt and I shut off the recorder and Matt held forth with a few Swedish tunes on button accordion. We hoped that by this technique Eskel's memory might be spurred. Matt played the Swedish version of "Kulkurin Valssi," "Johan Pa Snippen," and 'Life in the Finnish Woods," all of which Eskel remembered playing. He enjoyed Matt's music considerably and chuckled with pleasure at the instrument's "good sound." Mrs. Hokenson recalled how her husband used to stretch the bellows of his instrument to their limit so as to coax out the maximum volume. I imagine this stretching technique was also valued because it was "flashy."

The taped session pretty well ended with Matt's playing, but, as is always the case, we learned some interesting things while the machine was off. During the recording, Eskel had spoken briefly about a dancehall, now demolished, that he'd helped erect on Sand Bay. Apparently the place was maintained by the Sand Bay Men's Club and, in the 1930's, it was quite a place. Bands from around the area held forth and the Men's Club made good money by serving a "lunch," over which Eskel presided as cook. People came from as far as Herbster to enjoy the festivities and there was always plenty of home brew and moonshine. In keeping with the law (and, perhaps, with Swedish-American customs), the stuff was consumed off premises: "There were a hundred cars parked there and, by every steering wheel, a pint of whiskey."

Eskel recalled with glee how once, when the weather was bad, he, his fellow cooks, and the hard core revelers consumed a huge amount of drink which had been intended for a larger crowd. One prankster boiled hot dogs in the coffee. On other occasions, the Hokensons recalled fights at the place. Eskel came near to entering one when a rowdy slung his accordion over a barbed wire fence. Instead, he spent his immediate energies on taping the instrument back together.

Informants: Mr. & Mrs. Eskel Hokenson
Gary Hokenson
Sand Bay, Bayfield County

- 3 -

March 9, 1981

While this conversation continued, Mrs. Hokenson scurried to bring us the inevitable cups of coffee along with chocolate cake and caramel rolls. As usual, we devoured the goodies. Since Eskel's store of music related talk was pretty well exhausted, I decided to ask him about his wood craft. He'd mentioned earlier that his dad had been a carpenter and, since Gary had admitted to doing the living room's remodeling, I figured such skills must run in the family. As it turned out, Eskel had been a master of the broadaxe - hewing timbers for the Sand Bay dance hall and for numerous local docks. He'd also built numerous boats in connection with his fisherman's trade - from small skiffs and "pond boats" for emptying pond nets, to the larger fishing tugs. The fishing boat he built has been restored by the park service and rests at their Sand Bay site.

Talk might've continued in this direction for some time but the afternoon was growing late and Matt and I were hoping to drop in on another musician before four. We packed up the equipment and, tendering thanks for our hosts' graciousness, slid out the door - hopelessly bound by our musical mission to being one track field-workers.