

FIELDWORK NOTES

Interviewer: Philip Martin

November 8, 1984
German-American Project

Informants: Wilfred ("Willie") Gesch
and Frank Rehberger,
Sheboygan, WI

Willie Gesch was recommended as an informant by David Aplin at Maywood Environmental Center; he also made the initial contact with Mr. Gesch, so that when I called him earlier in the week to set up this interview, Mr. Gesch was acquainted with the project and eager to help. At his suggestion, he also suggested inviting over Frank Rehberger, who lives just a few houses from Cooper Elementary School, where the interview was to take place. Mr. Rehberger is a somewhat older man (in his early 80s?) who has been active in the past few years teaching German as a volunteer aide to Cooper students. The two, Gesch and Rehberger, have a close friendship based on mutual respect and common interest in speaking German, German songs, etc.

I met Mr. Gesch in his office (he is the principal of Cooper Elementary). He suggested we do the session in the counsellor's office down the hall, where I proceeded to set up the equipment (recorder, two mike stand and mikes), while I chatted with Mr. Rehberger about trips to Germany, and our project. Mr. Gesch joined us, and we began the session.

Right as we began, I realized that the water-pipe register in the room had begun to clank noisily and frequently. I considered re-locating the session, but since I had taken some time to set up and the two informants looked ready to begin, I decided just to go with it and hope the register would quiet down. It did not until late in the interview, so the recording is probably unsuitable for broadcast, except in certain segments; on the other hand, the content and atmosphere of the session was very productive, so it may have been the right decision. It was very annoying to me, however.

The session was very productive, as Mr. Gesch began by singing a song, explaining how his father & father's brothers would gather around their kitchen table in Franklin, Wisconsin, for singing sessions in the home. Mr. Gesch was very descriptive, and had some very nice anecdotes about that procedure, how he took part in it as a youngster, how he learned the music in that context. He also had some interesting passages about Katzenmusik customs (including a spoken recitation given at such occasions), and some other background material on the community in Franklin (Sheboygan Co.) where he grew up (a Lippe-Detmoldt community, see also interview with Harlod Roeder).

Mr. Rehberger had a very different background. He was born in Austria, and came to this country at age 9 to join his parents (after having spent several years with relatives while his parents settled here in the U.S.). His interests lay mostly with the singing societies, with his repertorie focusing on music from classic, religious hymns and other composed sources. His affection for this music was very deep, and his voice very strong and accomplished. He said he preferred to stand as he sung, and remained standing for nearly all the interview, standing up straight to sing, eyes closed or looking off in the distance. Otherwise he leaned against the room wall, or, for a while, sat in the chair. This was in contrast to Mr. Gesch, who sat for the entire session.

Mr. Rehberger's anecdotes were a little sketchy; he seemed not positive what kind of information was wanted from him, and, background-wise, had not so much in common with the Sheboygan-German experiences of Mr. Gesch. He could be a very good reference source on the area singing society tradition, and might be drawn out in more detail on a follow-up visit to him in his home.

(continued)

All in all, a very productive session with valuable material elicited; many thanks especially to Mr. Gesch's enthusiasm for doing this type of reminiscing, singing and interacting with both myself and Mr. Rehberger to keep the flow of conversation and singing moving.

After recording an initial part of a second tape, Mr. Rehberger had to leave to meet company at home. We took a short break to say goodbye to him and walk him out; then Mr. Gesch and I returned for a few more questions, finishing out the second reel of tape (on the American Folklife Center's Nagra).

During a second pause later in that reel (recorder stopped for a pause), Mr. Gesch mentioned that he, as the youngest child in his family, seemed to have a special interest in this old-time material, unlike his brothers and sisters. He seems to have participated avidly in this German-Sheboygan culture all through his life, and still has a special enthusiasm for it all.

He also mentioned that his wife is of Dutch background, from the Oostburg/Cedar Grove area where he now lives. He says that when they were first married they spent quite a bit of time with his family, during which his wife picked up a bit of German language herself; she has also learned to cook German-style over the years, to fix the dishes that Mr. Gesch likes.

From a few remarks, it sounded like perhaps he was retiring from his position within a year or two, as principal of the school.

He mentioned that many memories come back to him during the course of a session of reminiscing, and I suggested that perhaps I might be interested in doing a second, follow-up interview with him, again on general memories of the Franklin community, to which he seemed agreeable.

The session was begun ca. 6:00 PM, and concluded ca. 8:00. Two 7" reels were recorded, in stereo (one mike for Gesch, one for Rehberger); I sat opposite them and did not have a mike for my questions.

field notes by Philip Martin
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