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Informants: Rudy & Edith Hukkala
Washburn, WI

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Gail Syverude of the Washburn Senior Citizens' Drop-In Center had told me Rudy Hukkala had formerly sung with Chicago's Sibelius Male Chorus. And while ethnic art music isn't the particular focus of this project, I figured it might be worthwhile to meet with Hukkala anyway. Perhaps he had grown up in the north country (since he lived here now), perhaps he knew a few folk songs as well?

After setting up an appointment, Matt and I arrived shortly before 2:00. The Hukkala's live in a trailer house on Washburn's Omaha Street and Rudy and Edith met us at the door. He is a man of medium height, with a face, glasses, and dark hair. Although 76 years old, Rudy had a casual, friendly, young man's air about him as he ushered us into the place. Ten years younger, Edith was thin and bespectacled with grey hair and high Finnish cheekbones. The pair had evidently recently finish lunch as Edith had been washing the dishes while Rudy enjoyed a smoke. A news and call-in program played on the radio. Immediately, Rudy asked us if we'd like a beverage. We reckoned "Sure" and Rudy came back with "What'll it be?" While I generally feel that a few beers lubricate the flow of an interview, I was hesitant to ask for a brew. Plenty of Finns were religious and of temperance inclinations. No point in starting out on the wrong foot. "What've you got?" I replied. Rudy quickly mentioned milk, pop, coffee as I held back. When he got to bourbon, scotch, gin, and beer, I felt safe. Matt and I chose beers and Rudy poured himself a scotch, allowing that he never drank alone and was happy for the opportunity to savor a drop in company.

While the drinks were being fixed, I cast my eye about the place. The furniture was nothing special - mostly the kind of stuff that comes with trailers. But there was something special about the place. Like the homes of most couples who've moved from houses into tiny apartments or trailers, it was packed. Laden bookshelves showed that the pair were probably avid readers; meanwhile there were several interesting portraits and natural scenes on the wall which proved to be paintings by Rudy's brother. Unlike the fastidious domain of many oldsters, the place was just messy enough to be comfortable. "Make yourselves at home. We live casual here," Rudy told us.

With drinks ready and the machine set up, we began the session. Rudy rocked back and forth in his favorite chair, smoking, sipping his highball, and telling his story. As the tape index shows, he was born in the Copper Country in 1905 and

lived there until his early 20's. His mother was a highly religious woman and member of the Apostolic Lutheran Church. She sang plenty in the home. Rudy's dad was a drinker and not religious. Apparently he wasn't musically inclined. As a young man, Rudy went to Chicago where he held numerous jobs: ushering, selling shoes, selling job printing (I think). He also began singing in the choir of the Suomi Synod Lutheran Church and in 1933 joined in an all-Chicago Finnish Chorus to perform at the World's Fair. He sang in that chorus, named for Sibelius, for forty-three years. As the index and programs copied from Rudy indicate, the chorus performed arranged compositions, mostly accapella. Their repertoire included plenty of songs in English, but more Finnish numbers. Some of these were, of course, adaptations of folk songs. Rudy also sung plenty, after a few drinks, in taverns or at parties. But he wasn't especially inclined to sing "Maillman Matti" or the like; rather he performed American songs in "Barbershop" style or soloed out rousing ditties like "The Road to Mandalay" from the end of the bar.

On several occasions during the interview, I tried to get Rudy to sing a few Finnish songs, but he begged off. Apparently he's so accustomed to singing in a large chorus with parts worked out that he's reluctant to sing by himself: "It just doesn't sound right."

While Rudy was offering his experiences, Edith (sitting behind him with her coffee and cigarettes) jogged his memory and added some of her experiences. She let on that she'd grown up in Marengo, so, when Rudy was through, I asked her questions about her background. As the tape index shows, she told mostly about her parents who farmed in the area, and she remembered hearing and singing many Finnish songs which her neighbors played on their Victrolas.

After a little over an hour, and another round of drinks, we concluded the formal part of the interview. Rudy dug out programs of the chorus to show us, and the couple set up a stereo to play a record that the chorus had made some years prior. As the sound carried from the speakers, Edith pointed out her husband's parts. She also offered translations of the songs and told us how they affected her emotionally. It was clear that she shared her husband's love of music and accapella singing.

Following this listening session, we sat down to talk some more and Rudy, pleased that he had friends to share a drink with, offered us another beer. As it often does once the tape recorder has been shut off, the conversation began to take

some interesting turns. Since I'd done fieldwork among members of Marengo's Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church, I decided to ask Marengo-born Edith what she knew of them. As it turned out, that church has had many schisms through the years. The first one, in the early 1900's, involved her mother's stepfather who headed a sect opposed to the emotional, trance-like "jumping" that went on in the church. This man, whose name I unfortunately can't recall, was conservative on many areas of doctrine. As late as a decade ago his followers avoided the use of televisions and radios. The more emotional sect was led by a man named Kovala. Recognizing this name as the same as a man I'd interviewed, I asked about Arne Kovala and was told that he was the old minister's son. Edith went on to say that Arne, "Like many ministers' sons, was wild in his youth" - alternately drinking and confessing. She took him for a conniver, and suggested that he'd been involved in some shady practices with Mutual Funds. Drawn on by a combined love of gossip and a desire to get a clearer picture of the Marengo area, I asked about Charles Karye, another man I'd interviewed. Edith took him for an "opportunist." Apparently his first wife, Arne Kovala's sister, committed suicide after being unhappy in a marriage with a husband who was miserly. Later, Karye married the widow Lempi Luoma who, said Edith, was a "good looking, sexy woman" in her youth and remained attractive to this day. Edith couldn't figure out why the two were wed a few years ago; today, they're divorced but Karye is "always hanging around her."

Edith went on to talk about struggles in the 1930's between Communist, Socialist, and non-affiliated members of the local Co-ops. As Arne Alanen has documented in various scholarly articles, the disputes were frequently quite bitter and sometimes left members of different factions polarized and not speaking to one another - even if they were related.

Throughout her discourse Edith showed no particular malice nor vindictiveness toward the people she mentioned. Mostly, she was appalled by what she took to be hypocrisy and petty disputation - be it in religion or in politics. She and her husband seemed to be open to a wide variety of viewpoints. And both had been out and about in the world a good deal. Rudy was a bachelor until the age of 41 and Edith didn't marry until she was thirty-one. By that time Rudy had been in Chicago and in the Pacific with the infantry. Edith had worked in Superior Co-ops and in war-related industry in Chicago. The two were also avid readers and, through their musical interests and their love of socializing, they met people of diverse backgrounds. Accordingly, they learned tolerance and an appreciation of diversity.

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After another beer, Matt was summoned to play some Finnish tunes on his button accordion. He offered "Kulkurin Valssi," "Maillman Matti," "Villi Ruusu" and a few more. The couple hummed and sang along whenever they knew the words. Then Matt played "Rattikko" and Edith recalled dancing this number with a big, homely, and loveable Finn in Superior. She also recalled doing a special dance to the tune "Ten Fingers" (played elsewhere by Bill Hendrickson with "dirty" lumberjack lyrics), and she leapt up to show the steps.

By this time it was nearly five and Matt and I made motions to go. With characteristic hospitality, the couple offered us food, but, with the dinner hour approaching, we declined. Before leaving, Rudy asked us both to write in a guest book they kept. "I don't want to forget this afternoon," he added. We replied that our sentiments were the same and, lugging our equipment, we slid out the door - but not before promising to return with our wives for more conversation and, of course, "a cocktail."