

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
April 16, 1985

Alte Kameraden Band
Trinity Lutheran Church
Freistadt, WI

Freistadt, settled in 1839 by Old Lutherans, is the oldest German settlement in the state of Wisconsin and the original church, Trinity Lutheran, has had a band and chorus associated with it, albeit not continuously, since the early 1840s. Naturally Lewis and I were interested in talking to members of the band and in discovering whether or not they had any old photographs to be copied. I called Mrs. Alice Wendt, archivist and curator of the Ozaukee County Museum, to see if she could be of assistance. She didn't think she had much of use, but promised to write if she unearthed any information. Meanwhile she referred me to Earl Hilgendorf, owner of a monument business in Mequon, descendant of the area's original settlers, and director of Alte Kameraden. We arranged to meet with Hilgendorf in the lobby of the church school and on the appointed day he was there along with an older man, Harry Suelflow, 86.

The two men were quite willing to talk, but were reluctant to let us prowl through the church archives. They were also mysterious about revealing who might have either the time or the authority to allow us to look. Instead they brought out several pictures which Lewis copied on the spot and, in addition, they sold us some relevant pamphlets while telling us some worthwhile information as I took notes.

The pamphlets included:

History of the Trinity Lutheran Congregation, 1839-1954, by Roy A. Suelflow and August R. Suelflow [with brief mention of the bands and choruses].

By the Grace of God, by Pastor G. R. Brueggemann [a social history of the community apart from religious activities and including interesting sections on weddings, Christmas, and "Fun and Recreation"].

Pomerania, Its History and Its People, by LeRoy Boehlke.

In addition we bought one of two records by Alte Kameraden (and learned that a third is about to come out). Citations for the two records follow:

The Freistadt Alte Kameraden Band, Gemutlichkeit aus Freistadt, privately issued by the Band, Stereo 707N3A.

_____, Oktoberfest mit Die Alte Kameraden, KLP-109.

As for the information conveyed verbally, here's a summary of my notes. The earliest photograph of Trinity's church band dates from the 1870s. From that date through roughly 1964 the band was nearly continuously in existence, with numerous personnel changes of course. The band played regularly in the summer for church picnics held for their own and neighboring congregations; they also played for weddings and parades. About 1942 certain members of the church band balanced their sacred playing of hymns and overtures with secular dance tunes in a new group called, appropriately for the times, "The Victory Band." It was these musicians who formed the nucleus for what was to develop into "Alte Kameraden" in the mid-1960s. Nowadays not all members of Alte Kameraden are affiliated with Trinity Lutheran (Rollie Braun, for example), although the band does play for an annual church affair, a "Mission Festival," to raise money for foreign missionary work. During the demise of the church band and the rise of Alte Kameraden, Earl Hilgendorf directed a church band composed of school kids and veteran players from the middle 60s until roughly 1972 when he had a back operation and could no longer devote his time to the band.

These scattered comments pretty much capture what was gained through conversation with Suelflow and Hilgendorf; other useful information can, of course, be found in the aforementioned publications and by listening to the record.