

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
April 16, 1985

Badger Button Box Club
Schwabenhof
Menomonee Falls, WI

I had read about the Badger Button Box Club in Music and Dance News and, since several of the names appeared to be German, I figured they were worth meeting--especially when I learned they played every two weeks at the Schwabenhof (an eatery, tavern, hall, and clubhouse for several Donauschwaben Societies in the greater Milwaukee area). Richard March gave me the phone number of the president, Hank Magayne and informed me that the group was at least partly Slovenian in orientation and composition. This made sense since similar Slovenian button box clubs are common in Waukegan, Illinois, Cleveland, and on the Mesabi Iron Range.

Nonetheless I called Hank. Yes, there were some Germans in the Club, yes they played some German tunes. And so we came. As it turned out, the group played only one German tune, Bemier Wald; Hank Junemann, a German from the Marshfield area, had married a Slovenian woman and hadn't played German tunes for some time (he reckoned that the higher pitch of his Slovenian button accordion and the brisker tempo of Slovenian dance tunes contrasted plenty with the slower oompah driven German numbers of his youth); finally, George Scherer, manager of the Schwabenhof and a member of the club, had left his box at home and was unwilling to be put on the spot amongst his more polished fellows. Obviously the session was a wrong turn for Lewis and me, but, inasmuch as the group includes Germans and plays at the Schwabenhof, it's worth offering further remarks; and it's also worth offering comments on the Schwabenhof itself.

As explained in the program booklet for their annual dance, the club was formed in 1976. Members, most of whom were present, include: Eddie Gallun, Rudy

Kotras, Joe Krevs, Hank Magayne, Hank Junemann, Frank Murn, Ed Sterbenz, Emil Zortz, Lenny Baraga, George Scherer, and Rudy Maierle. All but banjoist Maierle play three and four row button accordion. Baraga's instrument was of Austrian make and decorated with edelweiss flowers, but most of the rest were Slovenian Melodija boxes--many of which had been brought over by Hank Magayne who regularly traveled to Europe. As is evident from the program, club members Hank Magayne and Eddie Gallun have their own orchestras; in addition the clubs annual gathering combines their music with that of other button box clubs and with the music and dance of German groups including, in 1984, D'Holzacker Baum, the Mandolin Orchestra, and the Donauschwaben Dancers.

A similar multi-ethnic lineup is planned for this May's annual gathering and the club was discussing arrangements while we met with them. If our April 16 session is any indication, typical meetings involve practicing of old tunes as members sit or stand in a rough circle around a table while sipping beer in between squeezing their boxes; then there's a break for snacks (it was potica on 4/16) followed by a business meeting. All this took place in a meeting room off of the Schwabenhof's main bar.

While the club was meeting patrons in the main bar listened to juke box rock and roll while watching the Brewers/Tigers game on the tube. They were mostly a younger set--late teens through late twenties. Meanwhile in other rooms a mandolin club rehearsed, and, in two other areas, teen age choral groups and German concert bands practiced. Formerly Bert Phillips Ballroom--a place noted for old time and big band dances since the late 1930s--the Schwabenhof is owned by the United Donauschwaben of Milwaukee, Inc., an aggregation including "Verein Der Apatiner," the "Donauschwaben Pleasure Club," "Milwaukee Sport Club," and "Mucsi Family Club." The building is filled with banners, trophies, plaques, and photographs relating to this various groups. [It's worth noting that the

Bavarian Inn operates in a similar fashion for the Milwaukee area's United Bavarian Societies.] Several posters and fliers announced that the place's hall likewise offers events of interest not only to the German-American public but also to the public at large. There are monthly fish fries combined with dances featuring Harry Kosek and the Red River Boys. Kosek is a second generation German American who was raised along the Red River Valley (in Alberta?) before coming to the Milwaukee area; another of his band members hails from Antigo. Another poster advertized a May 4 "May Dance" with Johnny Hofmann and His Herzbuben, a popular Milwaukee German-American band for the last quarter century.