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Collector: Jim Leary

October 29, 1980

Informants: Clara Sveda & Mary Prestil
Ashland, WI

John Chapple of the Daily Press recommended that I contact Clara Sveda if I wished to know about Ashland's Bohemian community. She was no trouble to find, as she works in Northland College's library. I informed her about the project, suggested that she contact some friends of hers in the Bohemian community, and asked if she might arrange an interview session with them. We set up a meeting for 7:00 p.m., October 29th, at Clara's house on 13th Avenue East. Mrs. Mary Prestil, an 83 year old woman long involved with the local Bohemian Hall, would be there.

I arrived on time and found the two ladies waiting for me. Mr. Sveda (Ignatius) had gone to the church hall for bingo night. Not only does he enjoy playing the game, but he socializes during the event. In fact, Clara let on that her husband went to the hall at 6:30 to talk even though the games didn't commence until seven. Left uninterrupted, except by an occasional yap from the Sveda's Irish Setter, I explained my purpose to Mrs. Prestil and outlined my strategy for the interview to both women. Mrs. Prestil caught on immediately. She is a short, broad woman (not fat, but sturdy) with a head of white curls and sharp, attentive eyes. She wore an older, but neat and clean, floral print dress of the sort I associate with elderly country women. Clara, roughly sixty and trim with reddish brown hair and glasses, was fashionably attired in a brown sweater and skirt. She, too, grasped my purpose readily.

Since the kitchen, not the living room, seemed to be my host's chosen gathering place, I set up my recorder on the kitchen table (see attached diagram), stretching a microphone toward each woman. We proceeded to speak, over a whole range of topics, for two hours. Both women were attentive and enthusiastic, prodding and assisting each other to answer my questions as fully as possible. I did have some trouble pinning the two down to exact dates, but they always could tell me what went on within a few years. A detailed summary of the contents of the session may be found on the tape log.

Throughout the evening I felt that the two women repeatedly expressed the sentiment that the Bohemians on the East Side once had a real community. People worked hard, but they socialized plenty. There were dances, neighborly visits, dinners at each other's houses, and a myriad of activities revolving around their Hall. People didn't have much money, but they did things with and for each other and they got along fine. Now, the two comment the way that television has cut into homemade music; the

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way that taverns have displaced Hall activities; the way that the quest for money and mobility has isolated people, made them more aloof and selfish. The session was, for them, a bittersweet immersion in the past. Both worry now about the fact that the fraternity may have to give up their Hall. This concern weighs especially heavy on Clara who, as treasurer, must pay the fuel bills and manage the books for the place.

But all was not melancholy. A real high point of the evening for everybody was Clara's piano playing and singing of five Bohemian songs. Despite the fact that a hoarse larynx marred her once-soprano voice, Mary joined in on a few. During the play back, Clara sang along with herself on the tape.

Beyond giving me plenty of information themselves, the two referred me to several others who played in Bohemian bands and sang Bohemian songs (see the index for details). They also brought out pictures of participants in the Bohemian Hall activities as well as some 78 records, several songbooks, and some Bohemian sheet music. Clara generously consented to allow our project to Xerox the songbooks, photograph the pictures, and tape the 78's any time.

At around 9:30 we adjourned for cake and coffee. After copying down Clara's list of 78's, I packed up the equipment, bid goodbye to the two, and headed home.