

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

March 11, 1981

Informant: Ray Maki
Bayfield County, Wisconsin

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Matt Gallmann has known Ray Maki for several years, has been learning Finnish tunes from him for nearly that long, and has written about him in earlier notes. Today was the first time, however, that Ray had been interviewed formally. These pages will recount what went on and will also describe, probably redundantly, Ray's surroundings.

After interviewing Eskel Hokenson on March 9, Matt and I stopped in briefly at Ray's on our way home. Ray and his wife Vera live in a red fram house, amidst several outbuildings, next to the Onion River Tavern, half way between Washburn and Bayfield. On the front wall of the house cut-out pieces of wood, in the shape of coffee cups and a pot, are marked with "The Makis," "Ray," and "Vera." To the right of the house is a storage shed over which hangs a sign inscribed "Puu Santa" - "Woodshed" in Finnish. And across a driveway, and further up the hill, is another frame outbuilding decorated with an old saw blade, an ox yoke, and other artifacts. Matt had told me that Ray bought and sold musical instruments, appliances, and tools, and that he had a more or less "permanent yard sale." These buildings held Ray's wares. No sooner had we gotten in the door than Ray, after greeting his friend Matt, was inquiring if we were in the market for a washing machine or a freezer.

At 71, Ray is a tall man with a shock of straight silvery hair combed back, a broad red face, and a burly frame - although his middle is quite huge. He wore a plaid wool shirt, dark green wool pants held up by suspenders, and boots. He looked like a man of the woods and, as he led us into his living room, I recalled that he had been a trapper all his life. Although it was only about four, Ray was eating dinner. His wife, Vera, also rose from the table to greet us, told us that Ray was a diebetic and liked to eat early to "work off his starch." Probably a decade younger than her husband, Vera's hair is still blonde. Also seated at the table was Vera's mother who I'd guess to be somewhere in her eighties. Among other foods, Ray was eating rabbit which he'd recently trapped.

We sat down, shedding our coats, and Matt inquired about when the couple had returned from wintering in Florida. Ray said they'd been back for awhile and then he launched into tales of his hunting and exploratory adventures in the Florida Everglades. Apparently, Vera had gone with her mother to stay at Fort Meyers on

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the Gulf, while Ray spent most of his time in the panhandle with an old friend. This friend - a Florida "hillbilly" who formerly worked in Waukegan and summered in northern Wisconsin - had been a neighbor of Ray's.

Since the afternoon was expiring, Matt and I couldn't stay too much longer. We told Ray that we'd like to interview him and record his music on a good tape recorder two days hence. He agreed and we arrived on the appointed day.

Vera and her mother had retired into the place's back rooms and Ray bade us to set up our equipment in his kitchen/living room. Prior to the interview, Matt had warned me that Ray sometimes either "clammed up" or leapt from subject to subject when asked about his background. Consequently, I took pains, before we began taping, to make it clear to Ray what kinds of questions I'd be asking and why. The technique worked pretty well. Ray was highly conscious of the recorder's being on. As a result, he was a little stiff and formal, but he also concentrated on answering the questions and, being a natural talker, he provided information with considerable detail and artistry.

From the taped sessions and later conversation over coffee, I'll sketch out a little of Ray's life history. He was born in rural Washburn's "Finn Settlement," where his father had homesteaded, on February 2, 1910. The oldest of seven children, he had grown up familiar with farm work, carpentry, lumbering, and trapping - tasks performed by his Dad, Matt Maki. I had a tough time getting out of Ray a chronology of his occupations, but he did give me some fragments. During the 1930's depression years he traveled about the country for seven years - seeing the sights and odd-jobbing. He mentioned Chicago and the Dakotas in this context. During World War II he was a guard at du Pont's munition plant in Barksdale. He also worked as the foreman of a road and tree felling crew for the county, and he spent a half dozen or so years on Lake Superior boats hauling gravel and dolomite. At some point he built the Onion River Tavern and operated it. He is a reformed alcoholic and his condition probably precipitated the sale of the tavern. Throughout his life he has also trapped: raccoon, coyotes, fox, mink. He has owned land for this purpose and even now maintains a cabin in the woods which he slips off to for several days at a time; other times, he's trapped on various people's land - from Sand Bay to the Benoit area. Finally, as I've mentioned before, Ray is a trader

and seller of used merchandise. Through all these pursuits he's managed to maintain considerable independence. He and Vera, according to a sampler hanging from their wall, were married in Bessemer, Michigan in 1941. They have a son and a daughter.

Ray (actually he was born with the Finnish name of Reino) learned button accordion by picking up his dad's instrument. Apparently Matt Maki was quite a fine musician and played for plenty of local dances, along with some other musical neighbors. Unlike younger brother Hugo, Ray stuck with the button accordion. He played for dances in the thirties in various local schoolhouses, but never had a yen to perform "professionally." Significantly, nearly every tune in his repertoire has some ethnic designation - German, Norwegian, Swedish, and, mostly, Finnish. He remembers only a few tunes by name: they are melodies he picked up by ear at local dances or from his dad's playing. Consequently, during the recording phase of the session, Matt Gallmann prompted Ray's playing by humming him parts of various tunes. Ray also found other tunes by fingering the buttons until certain combinations struck his memory. Then he'd often press out the melody with his right hand before coming in with left hand chords. Ray's current button accordion is a three-row Holmer, purchased from Croatian Matt Radosevich (see earlier notes). Perhaps since Ray played two-row for most of his life, he ignored the third row while playing. When playing, Ray like to "stretch out" the bellows. He would also close his eyes and bend his head slightly; and even when his eyes were open, they stared off into space. I guess that he was concentrating on the tune and how to execute it, but the familiarity with which he ran through certain numbers also convinced me that he liked to lose himself in the beauty of each tune and the memories associated with it. After all, the accordion was a constant companion during his hermit days in the trapper's cabin.

Like many other Finns, Ray had stories to tell of Viola Turpeinen. After playing some nineteen tunes (although several were repeats) we put away the equipment and adjourned for coffee. Enjoying Vera's wonderful homemade bread, sugar cookies, and donuts, we listened as Ray spoke of seeing Viola play at Marengo's Minersville Hall when he was very young. She also, apparently, played at the Finnish Hall of Washburn's "Finn Settlement." Ray admired her drive and her timing: "You could always dance to her playing." He told a tragic story of how John Rosendahl (who Matt and I thought to be Viola's first husband) was not married to Viola. The

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two were about to be married and were about to play at "The President's Ball" (Innaugural Ball?) in Washington. As they were mounting steps to the place where they would perform, Rosendahl fell, breaking his neck and a Stradivarious violin to boot. He died and Viola, broken hearted, later turned to drink. Ray had never heard of Bill Sjrola (sp ?) who Matt and I understood to be Viola's second husband. The tales of this woman are many and often conflicting.

As a finale to the afternoon, Ray pulled out his scrapbook and showed me clippings and pictures (dating back to the forties at least) which documented his trapping prowess: coyotes, raccoons, even a few bears. Then it was time for us to depart. As we slipped out the door, characteristically, Ray reiterated the fact that he had appliances to deal. Matt had located a potential buyer and the two planned on a future meeting.