

## Karpek Accordion Company

The Karpek Accordion Manufacturing Company, its showroom and workshop, is situated on the near south side in Milwaukee in what is now a predominantly Mexican-American neighborhood. Begun by Russian immigrant Andrew Karpek in 1915, the business was run by Andrew's son, George (1918-1988) and his wife Grace, until George's death in 1988. Now Grace carries on with the help of her daughter Georjann and several part time repair workers like Don Koepke.

Both Andrew (who died in 1942) and George were extraordinary craftsmen, makers of concertinas, button accordions, and especially piano accordions. From the 1920s through the early 1950s, the Karpek company employed craftspeople and accordion teachers until the guitar-driven rock and roll boom dulled youthful interest in squeezeboxes. Thereafter George cut back on staff and devoted most of his energies to repair work and selling used instruments. He still did some custom work, however, for noted polka musicians like Frankie Yankovic, and, like the Baldonis, he had some instruments made in Italy, to his specifications, with the Karpek name.

These later instruments with the Karpek brand are not so stunning as an array of piano accordions crafted from the 1920s through the 40s. Multi-colored, inlaid with pearl and rhinestones, bearing the Karpek name, these instruments are breathtaking, especially with the bellows extended revealing a diamond pattern.

Although in decline, the Karpek company remains a hangout for squeezebox players from Milwaukee and southern Wisconsin. Thursdays in particular are days when regulars gather to try out instruments or sit around and talk on chairs set up for the purpose. When George was still living a regular bunch would gather in the late afternoons, play music together, then parade to a local tavern for an evening of spirited playing.

Supplementary Materials: 1) an article from Milwaukee's Business Journal written just prior to George's death; 2) a set of promotional matches with a picture of George Karpek and Lawrence Welk; 3) a photocopy of an article about Andrew Karpek that appeared in the late 1930s in The Milwaukee Journal; 4) a photocopy (of poor quality) of sections relevant to accordion-making written by Andrew Karpek's daughter, Olga, Olga and Jim Russell, This Is Our Lives (Privately Printed and Bound, 1975); 5) an accordion catalogue from the 1930s with an array of historical photographs (being copied by Lewis Koch); 6) taped interview & index; and 7) color slides and B&W prints.

Availability of Materials: Grace would be willing to loan an accordion, one of the older ornamental models, and, if desired, some of the raw materials that go into an instrument.

Special Considerations: If a Wolfe concertina can't be borrowed, perhaps a Karpek concertina would serve.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for  
Cedarburg Cultural Center  
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): October 12, 1989  
Interviewee: Grace & Georgann Karpek  
Address: [REDACTED]  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Phone: [REDACTED]

Equipment Used: Superscope C-202LP  
Stereo: no           Dolby: no  
Tape Brand/Length: Sony HF-60  
Amount Used: Side 1: 1/3  
                  Side 2: none  
General Subject: musical instrument  
                  making  
Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary  
  
Recording Location: Karpek store  
Other People Present: numerous  
                          customers

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

I met with Grace Karpek, widow of accordion and concertina maker George Karpek, in the family business on South 16th in Milwaukee. It was a Thursday morning and numerous customers were coming in for repairs, to look over new and used instruments, to jam a little, and to talk. The phone was also ringing pretty steadily. Consequently there was little opportunity for a formal tape recorded interview. Fortunately Mrs. Karpek and her daughter, Georgann, had a great deal of printed documentary material set out for me to peruse and copy. I did a little tape recording--of an exchange with a customer--to get some "ambience" that might work well for the radio series, "Down Home Dairyland," and I also interviewed Georgann briefly about her children's involvement with the accordion.

Note: The balance of this tape, however, is taken up with a session at the Baldoni music store; see the Baldoni cover sheet and tape log for the balance of the content of the tape on which the Karpeks also appear.

TAPE INDEX

Interview With: Grace Karpek and customer,  
and Mrs. Karpek's daughter, Georgann

Date: October 12, 1989

Tape 1, Side 1

1. Announcement.
2. A customer from Madison wants to get a new strap and have a reed fixed. Speaks with Grace Karpek and Don Koepke. [Good excerpt for Down Home Dairyland.]
3. Georgann: Sons are 11 and 15. Have taken great interest in old accordions since grandfather died. Taking apart, putting together, cleaning up.
4. G thinks there's little future in the accordion business, however. "They say it's coming back, but years ago there were so many kids taking lessons and today there just aren't."
5. Majority of customers are old timers. Lot of repairs, lots coming in to say hello., and to sit around and play and talk, especially on Thursdays. [Could be used with some editing for DHD.] Chairs have been in the place for years, numbers have gone down as guys have died.

END OF SESSION AT KARPEK'S