

SLOVENIAN BUTTON ACCORDION PROJECT

jwb
field notes
6/7/84

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Tapes: none
Slides: none

I drove to Ely from Saint Paul, a 5½ hour trip, arriving at JE's house about 3 P.M. JE, age 65, is disabled from a stroke he suffered in July, 1983. I first met him in February, 1978 in conjunction with the "Ethnic Heritage on the Iron Range" musical programs sponsored by the Iron Range Historical Society. Up until the time of his stroke, he played a chromayic button accordion, and recently purchased a computerized amplification system the allows one to program a variety of accompanying sounds, from drum beat to various synthesizer reproductions of other kinds of instruments. He became ill before he was able to fully utilize this new back-up system.

He is of Slovenian descent, 2nd generation. His parents came from the Ljubljana region of Austria, now Yugoslavia. He was born in Ely and has lived there all his life. "I've been playing for 43 years. I started when I was 12. I inherited a three row box from my uncle." The accordion was a diatonic box with a Slovenian style fingerboard. He later bought a four-row diatonic and sold the three-row. He played in a small orchestra, three piece, accordion, bass, guitar. The change to a chromatic accordion came at the encouragement of a friend named Peppie Laine, who convinced John that the diatonic box was too limited for a professional musician. The nature of the instrument precludes playing many chords and popular songs were often impossible to play. The chromatic box, although still a button fingerboard, was capable of playing all keys, all chords. For several years he played every Saturday night a a bar/restaurant on Lake Vermilion, near the Aronson Boat Works south of Tower, about 25 miles west of Ely. He worked in the underground mine at Ely and played with his orchestra and alone in the Ely area. He has a scrapbook of mementos from many civic events, banquets, programs where he is listed as providing "dinner music." He walks with a cane, has some disability in his left side and finds that his speech becomes slurred when he is tired. He is disappointed with his rate of recovery. He's a bit lax about his physical therapy program. He is saddened by the fact that he hasn't the strength to play his accordion.

He suggested that I talk with the Techars of Hibbing, father Joe and son William F. Among his papers is a program from a button accordion contest held in Ely on Staurday, April 15, 1978. Joe Struna, Ely, was the winner. Joe is a friend of John's. The contest was sponsoered by the Range Polka Club. It was one of only two contests that have been staged on the Range in recent years. The other was in Chisholm at the Slovenian Home. The contest aspect of the gathering doesn't seem to go over too well with the players, unlike the fiddle contest circuit. Button box players prefer to get together to play and listen to one another without the rigors of judging who is best.

JE also had an old catalog from the Castiglione Accordion and Distributing Co, 12644 E 7 Mile Rd, Detroit, MI 48205 that listed several button accordion available from the company. These included: Helikon Bass accordion; Novak, Austria; Delicia, Czech; Scala, Brazilian, (German) note-somewhat confusing listing; Melodija, Yugoslavia; and Stradivarius Concertinas, no source listed.

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John Erzar, Ely, cont.

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John's wife Mary came home during our conversation and John asked about a photograph of him and his group that was taken at the Depot in Duluth and a search began. The photo turned out to be one of the Mesabi Button Box Club, of which John is (was) a member. It was to be an album cover photo for a planned L.P. by the Mesabi Club. Oscar Fryckman, Hibbing, is the main organizer of the Club and its projects. John has taken part in a number of their trips to perform in town and cities across the Range and throughout the country.

Son Dean stopped in to visit also. He worked at Minntac in Mountain Iron in the east pit garage, was laid off last year. Not called back until recently.

John was the Master of Ceremonies at the button box jam session held at the Slovenian Home in Ely on Saturday, May 19, 1984. Clarence Indihar told me that day that he was responsible for getting the groups ready to go on to perform, and John was to introduce them. John did not play at the session, but did his master of ceremonies duties.

I asked John if he knew of an elderly woman button box player in Ely. He immediately knew who I was referring to and offered to call her to see if she would let me interview her. He did so and I left shortly to visit with Mary Gotchnik.