

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
February 27, 1985

Will Eske
Home Plate Inn
New Lebanon, WI

Will Eske has been a hard man to track down. Several people have recommended him as the man to see regarding German-American old time music in the Watertown area, but my attempts to meet with him have been foiled by scheduling problems. Today was no exception. I arrived at the appointed time, found no one home, returned half an hour later with the same result, then finally succeeded around 3PM after having talked with the Schliewes. As it turned out, Will had been to a funeral and, since the restaurant would open soon, our session was unfortunately truncated. But what was related was certainly worthwhile.

Eske is a tall, rail thin man with close cropped hair and glasses, energetic and tanned at 61. His Home Plate Inn testifies to his passion for baseball and he has been involved over the years with local "hardball" teams, not "this easy slow pitch stuff." The Eske's live in a spacious basement underneath their establishment just off highway 109 in Old Lebanon. I noticed a miniature collection of beer mugs in a glass case on the wall in testimony to German ethnicity as I set up the equipment, then we both settled into rockers for the half hour of taping (interrupted by periodic cries for help from upstairs where other family members were having a tough time contending with table setting and bar tending duties).

As the index will show, Will is a fine talker whose knowledge of old time music and rural culture is vivid and rich. He was instrumental in engineering the merger between the two Lebanon bands and he has been involved with music ever since his teen years. An astute listener to bands like Whoopee John (and others noted on the index from both New Ulm and Wisconsin), Eske led his own seven piece band which played, as the "Will Eske Band," throughout the region in , I'm

guessing, the late 40s and early 50s. They had four in the front row doubling on trumpet, clarinet, saxophone, and some brass instrument, with accordion (probably piano accordion), drums, and bass (either string bass or tuba) in the back row. Today Eske's "Yankee Dutchmen" favor a repertoire of German tunes and other ethnic "standards." He's put together a little book of sheet music, rectangular in shape, from pages torn out of Vitak-Elsnic publications. I copied some of the titles: Hal-Lie, Hal-Lo (with Ach du Lieber Augustin and Du, Du Liegst Mir Im Herzen), Baruska, Little Brown Jug, Lindenau, Lauterbach, O Sussanah, Helena Polka, Blue Eyes Waltz, St. Paul Waltz, Clarinet Polka, Holzauktion (listed as a Rhinelander Schottische), Schuhplater Tanz, and Warum So Schnell [Why So Fast] which is a "gallop."

It's with this band, members of which are attired in clown suits, that Eske plays in various parades. He had some color snaps of the members hamming it up by rolling around on the pavement while playing some classic oompah tune. Clothed in more overtly German duds, lederhosen and Alpine caps, the band played several years ago for a concert in Watertown during which a stamp honoring Carl Schurz was dedicated. The band's performance, a snatch of it anyway, was filmed and included in a documentary about German-Americans shown on public TV a few years ago.

Besides being a fine commentator on music, Eske was also very knowledgeable about old time communal events: threshing, butchering, wood gathering and cutting, quilting, corn husking, feather stripping. And he talked some about house parties and birthday parties featuring numerous cakes, card games (shapskopf for the men who smoked prodigiously, and rook for the women). I wish we'd had time to go on and on, but duty called the proprietor and I took off, but not without acquiring a few new contacts.

As president of the musician's union, Eske gave me the name of the Knaacks

[name, address, and phone number in my notebook] who both play concertina in the "Watertown Dutchmen." He also mentioned Harley Jaeger, dwelling between Lebanon and Watertown near a big bend in the road and across from the Immanuel Lutheran Church. Jaeger had played concertina 50 years ago, but Eske wasn't sure he played since. I knocked at the place and talked briefly with Jaeger--a sturdy, bald, keeneyed man of 70 dressed in overalls. He reckoned he hadn't touched the instrument in 50 years, but that he'd played numbers like "Lott is Todt." He figured his repertoire wouldn't differ from that of Ed Peirick and, perhaps because of my abrupt appearance and the proximity of the dinner hour, he didn't invite me in. I left him a copy of the press release explaining the project and he reckoned, most likely without conviction, that he'd contact me if he could think of anything useful.

Oh yes, Will Eske has a fine picture of the Old Lebanon Band picturing his uncle with a clarinet and several violinists. Most of those present are named on the back of the frame. I took a couple slides of the picture, but it would be worth returning with Lewis to get a good copy.