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Field Notes on the Moquah Hunter's Dance

Jerry Novak, the Bohemian singer and historian of the Moquah area, informed me that Tom Johanik's band, "The Po-Ka-Teers" would be playing Thanksgiving night at the Moquah Men's Club. Tom Johanik's dad, Phil, was the Moquah community's old time Bohemian button accordion player. Now deceased, he played for the Moquah dancers in their 1930's, 1940's and 1960's incarnations. Tom had been a dancer and harmonica player during the Moquah Dancer's late 1940's performances. I had called him previously to inquire about recording tunes his dad played. Tom told me he had very little time as he was getting in wood, helping a relative build a house, and splitting work between Ashland High School and the Vocational School. Nonetheless, he wanted to record these tunes, and reckoned he might try to make a tape when he had time. Although Tom's repertoire with his band would differ from his private playing of his father's numbers, I figured it might be a good plan to record the live performance of a working "old time" band. The Po-Ka-Teers were doubly interesting since Tom's guitar player was Skip Radosevich, the son of the old Croatian button box player Matt Radosevich.

Together with Janet Gilmore, Greta Swenson, Matt Gallman, and Sara Poynter, I arrived at the Moquah Town Hall shortly before eight. The band was just setting up and I introduced myself and the others with me. Greta asked if she could take pictures and I reiterated my request to record. No trouble with either. The problem was with where to place the tape recorder. I considered putting the machine right in front of the band, but since their speakers were spread out and the machine's presence right in front of the band would make me overly conspicuous, I decided to set up in the back of the hall. The band members also reckoned this was the best spot since I'd get a better mix of sound (although there would be plenty of crowd noise). I'm not entirely sure how happy this choice was since the recording is a little rough and, in places, the crowd noise is pretty obtrusive. Nonetheless, we carried on.

Before discussing the evening's events, it seems wise to describe the setting and some of the people gathered. The Moquah Town Hall is a recently built and well maintained structure just off County G in Moquah. The first floor is primarily comprised of an entrance way, a pine paneled and wood floored dance hall, and a kitchen (see diagram). The basement is simply a big open room with cinder block walls, a



cement floor, and, most importantly, a bar. A whole range of people were gathered. There were small children accompanying their parents, teenagers, young men in hunters' clothes, and adults of every age. No one was formally dressed. The band members wore matching black pants and red shirts. Tom Johanik was a sturdy man of about 50, with greying jet black hair and a small moustache. He stood nearly six feet tall, but his drummer Phil, a curly headed fellow in his late 20's, was a few inches taller. Skip Radosevich was small and slender, in his mid 30's, with black hair.

Shortly after eight, the band led off with a polka. Two older couples, seasoned dancers, took the floor. Clusters of small children, young hunters, and older couples occupied the chairs. For the first dozen songs or so, few people danced. The band's repertoire was primarily contemporary "polka" music - much of it from Frankie Yankovic and Polish bands like Lil' Wally and Eddie Blazonczyk (sp ?). There were, however, a few pop ("Five Foot Two") and country and western numbers thrown in ("Green, Green Grass of Home," "Your Cheating Heart"). As the band played, many people spent their time scurrying to the basement while the free beer lasted. A few others inquired what we were doing, and our explanations generated a fair amount of interest. John Kramolis and Stanley Augustine, for example, spoke with me about reviving the Moquah Dancers, with Tom Johanik's help, for the summer Pioneer Days. Matt Radosevich was there as well, with some friends of his from Milwaukee. To my delight, he offered to play later on in the evening.

After 15 numbers or so, many people (probably aided by beer) commenced dancing. After the 22nd number Matt Radosevich borrowed Tom J's "button box" and a piano accordion was found for Matt's friend Tom Hosni (another Croatian). Apparently the two had played in Milwaukee bands together during the "depression days" of the early 1930's. Matt's playing was a real delight. In contrast to Tom Johanik, who had a rather stiff and forced sounding style of playing, Matt's accordion work seemed very fluid. He danced as he played and made a great show of pulling out and pushing in his instrument. Part of the two men's stylistic differences doubtless stems from their personalities, but they can also be attributed to the fact that Matt played by ear while Tom appeared to be looking at his stand of sheet music while he played.

Shortly after ten the music stopped and there were drawings for various prizes like firewood, an ammunition belt, and a 22 rifle. The second set began with a few



waltzes, but swung quickly into a succession of polkas. People danced enthusiastically now, and a number of special dances were performed: "The Circle Two-Step" which combined polkaing with promenades and circle dances; and the "Flying Dutchman," which involved a sort of leisurely Rockettes line dance alternating with frenetic swinging of partners. Another change was the band's switch to rock 'n roll for a few guitar dominated pieces like "Johnny B. Goode" and "Proud Mary." These rare-ups appealed particularly to the boogalooing younger set.

The crowd began thinning out as midnight approached, and the band's music ceased shortly thereafter. But as the lights came on and the club members began to straighten up the place, Skip Radosevich began playing some old country waltzes on piano accordion. A few other old timers were gathered around him, occasionally singing along. Skip reckoned that he had learned the tunes by listening to his dad. He felt that it was his duty to learn them and to see that his children learned them so that the old Croation music in his family would not fade away. Treated to that final moment, we packed up and headed home.