

Chapter 34

The Concertina

Program 34 Performances

1. Karl and the Country Dutchmen, "Mississippi Valley/Chicken Polka."
2. Peters Brothers, "Alte deutsche Melodien."
3. Hans Wilfahrt ("Whoopee John"), "Kinder Polka."
4. Irving DeWitz, "Ländler."
5. Alvin Styczynski, "Krakowiak."
6. Syl Liebl and the Jolly Swiss Boys, "Heinie Polka."
7. Karl [Hartwich] and Brian [Brueggen], "Green Is Green."
8. Art Altenburg, "Wedding Dance."
9. Karl and the Country Dutchmen, "Chopsticks."

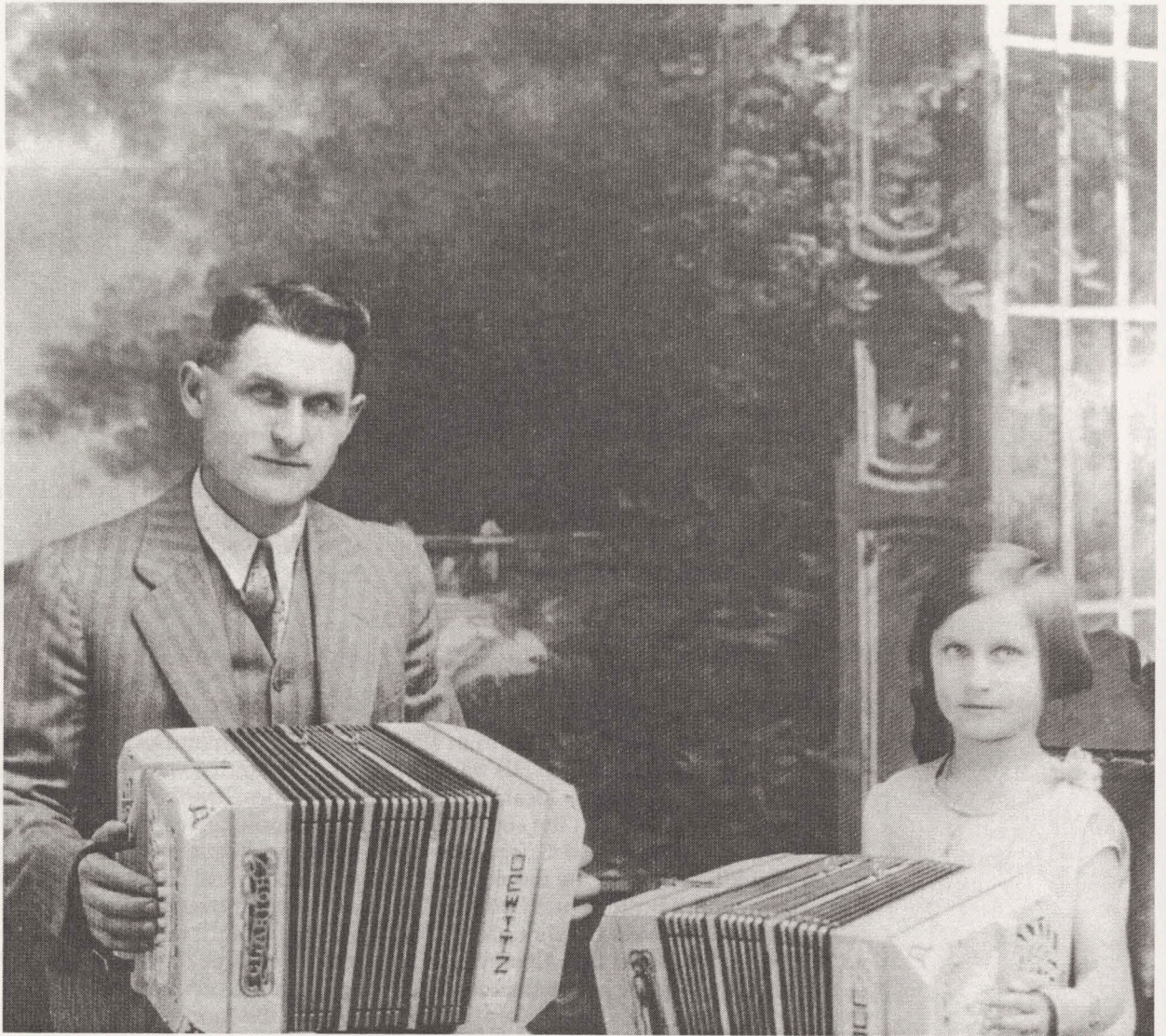
Seven Roads out of Hustisford

Irving DeWitz was born on a farm in 1896 in heavily German Dodge County, Wisconsin, near Hustisford. His parents, Frank and Emma, were good dancers who strutted their stuff at local halls and house parties. Frank even played violin by ear, and Irving liked the sound. But he was completely captivated when he heard a neighbor named Griebe play the concertina. While jostling dancers in a cramped kitchen faced the music, DeWitz squeezed behind Griebe so he could see the man work buttons and bellows. The hours went by, he recalled, and "I fell asleep looking over his shoulder." Young DeWitz dozed, the music persisted. Irving remembered that "it stayed in my head two, three days" (DeWitz 1985 I). Soon Irving DeWitz had a chance to get a second-hand concertina, but he insisted on a new one and his skeptical father put up the money.

In 1913, DeWitz played for his first dance. He only knew a waltz, a two-step, and a square dance. "A woman flew out the window during the square dance." Undaunted, Irving played on.

He took lessons from a local player named Haack, then traveled to Chicago for an intensive course from Henry Silberhorn. In his first year he earned enough money to pay back his dad; in the second year, he was able to purchase a new wardrobe; and, with the third year's proceeds, he bought a new Ford Runabout. "There were seven roads out of Hustisford, and I drove on every one to play dances." By the late 1920s he was playing over Poynette's WIBU radio. He had also begun to sell concertinas, sponsor public programs featuring traveling concertina virtuosos, give lessons to local students, and form his charges into a club that, from 1937 to 1952, entertained the public with an annual program. By the 1970s Irving DeWitz had taught some five hundred men and women to play concertina—many went on to form their own bands.

Irving DeWitz's involvement with the concertina exemplifies that instrument's varied history in the Upper Midwest. The boxy "German concertina," as distinguished from the hexagonal "English concertina," was given its modern form by Carl Friedrich Uhlig (1769–1874) of Chemnitz, Germany. A portable instrument



Irving and Lucille DeWitz, Hustisford, 1929 **Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection**

of the reed organ family, the concertina has two reed-filled boxes with exterior buttons that are joined by a bellows. When a push-pulling player “works” the bellows and buttons, the air forced against select reeds produces tones. The right hand conjures melodies, while the left offers bass accompaniment. And like the related button accordion, the concertina is diatonic with different notes on the “push” and the “pull.”

Concertina Evangelists

Never as popular as the accordion, the concertina was nonetheless well established among the immigrants from eastern Germany and Poland who fled war-torn central Europe in the late nineteenth century. Most who brought concertinas were content to play them amidst informal family and neighborhood doings, but others had greater ambition. Henry Silberhorn, a German immigrant to Chicago, was a veritable concertina evangelist. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Silberhorn imported and sold instruments. More importantly, he also gave



Art Altenburg in his Concertina Bar on Milwaukee's south side, 1988 Photo: Jim Leary

lessons, encouraged the formation of concertina clubs, and produced a series of instruction booklets and collections of tunes arranged for the concertina.

Henry Silberhorn's Instructor for the Concertina (Silberhorn 1910) eschewed musical notation for a tablature format that was aimed specifically at those who wished "to learn to play the concertina without having previous knowledge of music." Once competent, a concertina player could teach others. And once a basic stock of tunes had been mastered, there were other Silberhorn books to buy: three volumes of a *German Song Album* (1910–1913), *Fifteen Children's Songs and Games with Words* (1928), and numerous arrangements of "international" and American tunes. Meanwhile Silberhorn kept up with his clientele, which included Irving DeWitz, through a concertina-boosting periodical, the *Booster*.

Concertina lovers in the Upper Midwest were similarly inspired by such barnstorming musicians as the legendary Peters Brothers, whose itinerary included both urban centers and rural communities like DeWitz's Hustisford. Max, Wilhelm, and Helmut Peters were teenagers when their parents, Paul and Anna, immigrated to the coal mines of Henrietta, Oklahoma, in 1912. The boys worked in the mines, but a local theater owner heard them play at a birthday party and offered them a job. From 1912 through 1941, the Peters Brothers worked the vaudeville circuit clad in lederhosen and plumed alpine hats. World War II and the decline of vaudeville ended their travels, but Max Peters settled in Milwaukee where he played regularly until his death in 1983 (Peters 1981 I).

Two wars with Germany not only stifled public concertina players like the Peters Brothers, but they also curtailed the concertina supply. The instrument,

however, would not be denied. Thanks to concertina-playing immigrants, promoters like Silberhorn, and disciples like DeWitz, the concertina had already become essential to the Upper Midwest's Polish and Dutchman polka styles, and it was the focal point of concertina clubs throughout the region. The periodic unavailability of Arnold, Lang, and Wunderlich concertinas from the old country, meanwhile, stimulated the rise of American-made concertinas: Patek, Pearl Queen, and Star in Chicago; Brown and Hengel in Minnesota; Karpek and Wolfe in Wisconsin.

In the 1990s, concertina players throng to Art Altenburg's Concertina Bar on South 37th in Milwaukee, one of several regional squeezebox centers. Concertinas of various makes line shelves, an entire wall is covered with photographs and clippings of active concertinists, and players jam there each Thursday night. Altenburg is an enthusiastic supporter of the World Concertina Congress, which, not surprisingly, is based in the Upper Midwest. Predictably, Henry Silberhorn was a charter member of that organization's Hall of Fame, and Irving DeWitz joined his company in 1978.