

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
February 26, 1985

Milton Bruni Home
Jcn. Co. AY & Astor Rd.
Iron Ridge, WI

The previous week, while driving in search of Zum Kripplein Christi Church, I'd passed a remodeled cheese factory, high on a ridge road, where a piece of white wooden fencing faced with a cutout of a treble cleff juttet from the snow. Since factory made fences don't come in that design and inasumuch as folks often decorate their yard with artifacts expressing their interests, I figured it wouldn't hurt to return and inquire about old time music. On Monday, February 25, after finishing a visit with Mrs. Bob DeWitz in Hustisford, I returned.

A dog on a chain greeted me, but I soon learned that the beast's bark exceeded his bite (perhaps the dog sensed I wasn't a salesman or an emissary of some millennialist cult). Milton Bruni--a broad shouldered man of medium height, bespectacled, with greying black hair and a quiet, whimsical manner--met me at the door. Yes, he was a musician, a bass horn player: "I've blown two tubas straight and I'm working on a third." No sooner had I explained the project than he led me into a living room and opened a cabinet wherein were kept an impressive collection of Swiss and Swiss American LPs (roughly 100), and I learned that there were 78s of Swiss groups (like the Moser Brothers on Victor) stored elsewhere. Unfortunately the record player wasn't working, so I couldn't listen to music, but there was plenty of interesting talk from Milton. He is second -generation Swiss American, a former cheesemaker, and a neighbor of Germans aplenty in "Town Herman." Indeed his wife, Grace, is of German background.

Bringing out an old folder, Milt informed me that he had played with numerous town marching bands over the past fifty years: in Iron Ridge, Hartford, and Lebanon. In the case of the latter aggregation, he showed me pictures and read

me names concerning the various Schliewes (Edwin, Waldemar, Wayne) who had served and still serve as officers of this 100 plus year old organization. Milt had also played, while in his early twenties, with the Art Sohre Band: a group of friends, most of whom were in the Iron Ridge Band in the late 30s and early 40s, who played polka music, fox trots, and a little jazz at area nightspots.

Milt drew out several posters, one for a wedding dance and the other for doings at The Lighthouse, from those days and, remarkably, he had set down a brief history of the band, along with records of its dates and income, in a small notebook. [I borrowed this subsequently and a copy is appended to these notes.] Realizing that there was still much to talk about and that my time was short, I made arrangements to return the next afternoon.

Milton led me into his kitchen where he had set up two tape recorders (about which more will be said soon) and where rested a sheet of notebook paper filled with the names of local bands. Milt had spent the previous evening combing his memory and calling a few friends so as to set down information about the bygone regional music scene. I reproduce the contents here.

Henry Schellinger Orchestra

He is in his 70s, lives at 634 Center St., Hartford. Tells of playing for \$2 per man in the early 30s.

Les Marose Orch. Mayville Area--Western type--30s.

Skipper Leone and her Deck Hands--Hartford, Slinger area.

She is still alive, lives in an old peoples' home, Hartford. 30s.

Valeski Family Orchestra. Allenton area, 30s, early 40s.

Tony Salerno & Hist Orchestra--Madison, 30s.

Ray Miller Orchestra--Neosho area--mid-30s.

Happy Hayseeds Orchestra--Madison--late 30s.

Weiss Harmonizers--Allenton--early 40s.

Babe Schonate--Watertown--mid-40s.

Freddy Palmer Orchestra--Mayville--late 40s.

Bernie Roberts Orchestra--Hustisford-Watertown area--late 30s.

Syl Groeschl--North of Fond du Lac (Pipe?)--late 30s. Son now playing,
Tony Groeschl.

Do Do Ratchman Orchestra--Sheboygan Area? Late 30s.

Lester Pusch Orchestra. Hartford. Early 40s.

Cousin Fuzzy Orchestra--mid-40s.

Pep Babler Orchestra--mid-40s.

Johnny Lavardo--Mayville area--late 30s, early 40s.

Art Sohre Orchestra--Hartford--mid-40s.

Normie Dogs & Orchestra--West Bend--50s. Still playing.

Fritz the Plumber polka music from Milwaukee, WMIL and later WYLO at Jackson
35+ years in radio, used to be on 5&6 days per week, now semi-retired
and is on WYLO on Sat. 10 to 12. This varies as WYLO is a daytime AM
station. He has a huge collection of polka music. His name is Norman
Margraff and he lives in Mequon.

Hartford Radio has a half hour German program week days 5:00 to 5:30.

As the tape index will show, I had Milt comment at greater length on each of the
entries to this list.

While I set up the Nagra, Milt read over my copy of the history of the Art Sohre
band and corrected the mistakes I had made while adding last names of certain
players. He also showed me a beautiful color picture of the band seated behind
their music stands; the instrumentation included bass horn, two saxophones (with
one sax player doubling on baritone horn), drums, two trumpets, and piano
accordion. I shot a few snaps of the portrait with my camera, and perhaps the
picture can be copied more expertly at a later date.

With equipment readied, a two hour taping session began. As the tape index will
indicate, the session ranged greatly to include comments on Swiss people in the
old country and in Wisconsin, the Bruni's Iron Ridge and Town Herman community,
cheese making, religion, sports, and politics, but music was the central focus

As might be surmised from the band history and listing of regional orchestra, Milt is a historian with a love of detail and the ability to convey that detail with accuracy and vividness; in other words he's a fine and compelling talker, full of anecdote and expression. The index will show many instances of well told tales: Milton rejects the violin, getting paid with gas by the Weiss Harmonizers, Karl Bruni's journey to Dodge County, and getting stuck on a high ridge while returning from a winter job.

The final portion of tape holds rough copies of tapes in Milton's collection. I simply stuck one of the Nagra's microphones in front of the speakers on the tape recorders. Inevitably the quality isn't too good and Milt and I whispered and moved around while all this was going on; to boot, Milton's wife Grace arrived in the midst. The first set of retaped music comes from cassette recordings of 78s made by the Art Sohre Orchestra in the 40s. Milt explains that the crude recording process employed resulted in the records' spinning at a faster than actual tempo. The band's style shows plenty of influence from Lawrence Duchow's Red Raven Orchestra as it works through ten numbers. Most of them are pop or "modern" tunes, but there are several polkas and waltzes in old time style. In every case the playing is delightful. I'm guessing that if the actual 78s were played on a good turntable and an equalizer, a pretty clean tape might be made of this material. Besides the Art Sohre material, Milton played me snatches of a tape he'd made on reel to reel of a polka band composed of Hartford City Band members. The occasion was a dance held at the Armory in 1964. The playing is again wonderful and in the Czech style with zany clarinets prominent.

Tape four on the Nagra spun to an end while the copying was going on and , as the afternoon had disappeared, I figured I'd better get back to Mad City. We made our goodbyes and I promised to send Milton copies of my field notes and the tape index. For his part, he reckoned he would dig out his Moser Brothers 78s

along with a playlist that the Art Sohre Band followed in making up its sets.

I should certainly be able to return sooner or later as I hope to record some German hymns from the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod old timers at Zum Kripplein Christi anda visit to WTKM radio in Hartford is likewise a must. [Incidentally, Milton told me that this radio station sells polka records in a little shop. It's there that I might might find the records of Glen Moldenhauer, a concertina playing farmer and band leader living two farms north of the Brunis.]

Finally, I shouldn't close these notes without commenting briefly on what seem to be three of the major strands of German-American music in Dodge County: concertina bands, brass bands, and church singing. Irving DeWitz is most clearly the driving force in the first instance and a record of his importance surfaces in many other notes. Church singing was important in the case of Nora Kaczor and, as Milton also attested, was and still is of profound importance in the region's Protestant ethnic churches. Brass bands--whether old time city bands, or current high school bands--are the school for scores of Wisconsin polka bands: particularly those favoring German or Czech styles. Music teachers dominate many semi-professional bands (like that of John Check), and their students feed into more local aggregations. Bands, along with music teachers, lessons, and playing by note, were established from the onset in the upper midwest's German-American communities. There were a handful of musically literate settlers in every first generation community and, through their influence, a great proportion of musically inclined second generation folks learned to read music and play from arrangements. Like Irving DeWitz, Fred Kaulitz, Ed Peirick, and many others, Milt Bruni had parents who played by ear, but he and his siblings took lessons. Moreover many of his neighbors did the same. In this way Milt and his fellows acquired musical knowledge, at least in

part, through institutional channels and, by virtue of their training and the proliferation of the mass media from the 20s and beyond, they were exposed to a wide range of musical styles; at the same time, however, training and eclecticism produced a core of players who have kept alive at least a portion of the old time ethnic tunes familiar to earlier generations. In this seemingly paradoxical fashion modernization has served to preserve tradition.