

Informant: Fred Swanson
Mrs. Swanson

Address: Mason, Wisconsin

Fieldworkers: Jim Leary
Matthew Gallmann

Fred Swanson's name was given to me by John Dybedahl, a man I met while playing my fiddle in a tavern in Grandview, Wisconsin.

Jim and I arrived at Fred's tavern at about 12:30 p.m. Mrs. Swanson was behind the bar so we ordered a beer and then Jim introduced us and began explaining the project. Mrs. Swanson said that Fred couldn't play much anymore but she mentioned that she had some tapes of Fred playing a few years ago.

At this time Fred entered the room in his walker. We talked with Fred while Mrs. Swanson went looking for the tapes. Fred mentioned that his tavern used to have a dance hall that he built an addition onto. He said that he would hire orchestras from as far as Duluth, Minnesota. He mentioned that he himself has played as far away as Bessemer, Michigan.

Apparently, Fred learned to play on the button accordion but then went onto the piano accordion. While Fred was explaining this to us Mrs. Swanson set up the tape machine and put on a tape of a man playing music in Grandview. It sounded very much like Jimmy Rodgers.

Fred mentioned that he learned a lot of songs off of old records which he bought in Ashland, Wisconsin, or from a mail order house in Minnesota. He mentioned two "pros" from the old country named Lager and Olsen.

Then Fred told us about seeing Thorston Skarning, a three row chromatic accordion player, in Mason around 1917.

Fred is now 81 years old. He was born on a homestead three miles up in the woods. Fred was born in a log cabin. (Jim at this point was asking many questions about a variety of things.) Fred told us that the logs on the house

were hewn on both sides.

Fred's father was a logging foreman, worked on railroad bridges and farmed.

Fred worked in the woods. He said that his "dad stuck me in the "cook shanty". Thus, Fred has cooking skills and used them at home after he worked in the lumber camps.

Fred said now that he (or his father) sold his farm in 1914. Then he talked about a "Sliver" factory that he worked in. "Sliver factory" is a slang term for veneer factory.

Fred's family is from Smolun, Sweden. Jim mentioned that this was where a family in "The New Land" (an emigrant movie) was from. Fred seemed to be familiar with this movie.

At this point a recording of Fred came on with Duane Olby playing banjo. This was recorded two years ago.

Fred mentioned that there were many good "professional" fiddlers in the lumber camps, many of them Norwegian. Jim asked Fred if he remembered any songs from the lumbercamps. Fred answered by saying that he quit singing when he went to school, for the kids made fun of him because he sang too loud.

Apparently there was never a singer in Fred's orchestras. Then Fred mentioned Walter Levin used to sing Swedish songs but has since passed away.

Jim asked about the dances of the past and specifically whether or not they used to take breaks at midnight for food. Fred confirmed that this was something that they did.

Now I snuck out for a minute to relieve myself and while I was gone Jim and Fred talked about hunting.

When I came back into the tavern (the outhouses are outside) there was a song playing on the tape machine that Fred said was one of the oldest Swedish waltzes he had ever heard. The title was the "Stove Poker Waltz" and Fred learned it from a record.

Fred told us that his father used to come home from the lumber camps.

play his button accordian and sing songs. Fred said that his father sang many dirty songs. Fred said that he didn't learn a lot of material from his father.

Fred said that he was a member of the Runneburg lodge in Ashland. He used to play music for that lodge and another lodge called the "Vasa" lodge. He would play about once a month for these lodges. He said that there were other lodges as well but "they're all dead now". One of the lodges he belonged to was mostly Swede-Finns.

Fred told us a great story of a couple whose wedding he played for. It seems that he played music on a button accordian for this couple's wedding. 25 years later he played music on a piano accordian for their silver anniversary. 50 years later he played piano accordian at their golden anniversary. The "Daily Press" in Ashland had a write up about the 50th anniversary event that mentions Fred.

Fred claims that he is the only one out of 13 children that could play music. He was the fourth born. The others "used to try but couldn't get nothing out of it". His oldest brother played a little violin but I guess never well.

Fred told us a little about the "young people's parties", or "house parties" that they used to have every Sunday. They used to play games, dance and have some lunch.

Fred mentioned that for 50¢ you could buy a pint of whiskey and have a hell of a time.

Fred also mentioned that he could make good money playing for weddings from \$300.00 to \$400.00.

Throughout the interview Fred stressed that everybody used to play music around there. Harmonicas, accordians, and guitars were the most popular. Many played piano. "Sometimes 4 or 5 accordian players would be playing at the same time, Swedes and Norwegians."

The interview went well. It seems that Fred is too old to play anymore but he is a wealth of knowledge. Mrs. Swanson was excited when we told her that we wanted to re-record the recordings of Fred.

The interview was interrupted by some customers coming to the bar. We eventually said our goodbyes and I offered to return again.