

Informant: Ernest Aho
Silver Star Tavern
 $\frac{1}{2}$ mile east of 53 on Hwy. 13
Wentworth, Wisconsin

September 24, 1980

Collector: Jim Leary

On a tip from Gail Perry, I stopped at the Silver Star Tavern about 3 p.m. The place was a rambling, frame, one-story tavern and dance hall with living quarters in the rear. Scattered materials and unsided parts of the outer wall attested to fairly recent renovation. There were only three customers and the bartender present when I entered, lugging a camera and my knapsack full of notebooks. I ordered a Pabst as everyone stared; then I proceeded to scan the place. I was in a large barroom, with tables and a bar, to which was appended a dancing area of equal size (see attached layout). There were some obvious signs of old time music and Finnish ethnic pride. The shelf behind the bar displayed a Finnish flag and a humorous statuette of a frozen Laplander. Pasted to the wall by the door to the living quarters was a sign reading "Finnish Records For Sale." The jukebox, too, had, beyond a few country and western entries, mostly "old time" selections, including roughly 24 Finnish and Finnish-American dance records (I must make a list at a later date). Also visible was a mural of a log cabin by a lake; it occupied the wall space between the piano and the front door and was painted by a Finn. And there were advertisements elsewhere announcing live old time Finnish and ethnic music on Friday through Sunday nights.

Having taken in all this information, I introduced myself as Jim Leary, Fieldworker for Northland College's ethnic folk music project. Ernie Aho, who the bartender turned out to be, immediately launched into a differentiation between the light, moderately paced style of Finnish dance music and the more strident, "heavy" sounds of Slavic (Polish, Croatian, Bohemian) old time music. To illustrate, he played some Viola Turpenein and Arnie "Walt" Johnson on his jukebox.

Ernie had moved to the area three years before from Virginia, Minnesota on the Iron Range. He is a burly, slightly gruff man, probably in his early 40's, with a shock of curly hair. His wife is also a Finn from the Range and Ernie, who plays accordion, grew up in a musical family. (I must interview him in greater depth, with the tape running, later on.) He has subsequently taught his (4 ?) children to play, and they constitute the "Northernares." He and his wife join

the band on "special numbers." Apart from fostering music in his family, Ernie also hosted a Scandinavian-American Music Festival at his tavern on August 9 and 10, 1979. It included the area's Finnish Dancers (see subsequent notes on Ed Illola), and Arnie and Ailie Johnson (incidentally, Ernie had the Johnson's second album for sale as well as one by Johnny Kivela (?) and his Hotshots from Butte, Montana). The festival was written up in a polka trade journal, Entertainment Bits, which I've ordered for the project. Ernie suggested that I come by on the weekend when the band was playing.

I took some pictures of the place's interior and of Ernie with two of his customers. They were Phil Crane and Bill ? (he wouldn't give his last name). Both turned out to be good joke tellers, Bill especially. He told me two "Finnish jokes" which I will sketch:

- (1) Two Finns are walking down the street and they see a priest coming their way. Waino, who has never seen a priest, reckons "Who's that man with the dress on?" Toivo says, "That's a Catholic priest." Then they meet the priest and he asks them why he hasn't seen them in church. Toivo, who at least knows about priests, says that they're not Catholics. The pair notice that the priest has a broken arm and they ask him how it happened. Father answers, "I fell down in the bathtub." As the Finns walk away, Waino asks Toivo: "What's a bathtub?" "How should I know, I'm not Catholic."

The point is that Finns use the sauna, not the tub. The second joke was less ethnically specific. In fact, Bill admitted that he originally heard it as a "Polack joke."

- (2) A fella is catching huge amounts of fish and giving them away to his friends. The game warden discovers this and asks to go fishing with the man. When out in the boat, the fisherman throws a stick of dynamite overboard. Boom, the fish are dead. The game warden says, "You can't do that, that's illegal." The fisherman lights another stick, hands it to the warden and asks, "What do you want to do, fish or talk?"

Beyond their joking, Bill and Phil told me about a Finnish card game they often played with Ernie to see who would play the jukebox. I'll have to learn this game soon.

Shortly after the joking, a pair of Finnish brothers (with the Anglicized name of "Colby") came in and began talking about fishing the Brule. Noting my camera and notepad, Elmer Colby asked about my business. I told him about the project and we talked about music in the local Finnish community. It turned out that Arnie and Ailie Johnson had played for his wedding in 1939!

Soon afterwards, with a third Pabst under my belt, I hit the road. Ernie and his wife suggested I come back sometime in the daytime to interview them. I ought to write them a letter in advance explaining the project and including a rough sort of questionnaire to prepare them.