

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

March 26, 1981

Informants: Charles & Iria Mattson
Covington, Michigan

Matt Gallmann's attendance at the Aura Fiddler's Jamboree was certainly a boon for us on this trip. Beyond recording his Jamboree acquaintances Art Moilanen and Helmer Toyras, we also met up with Charles Mattson. Charles and his brother-in-law (Tauno Nurmela) played button accordion at the Aura event in the summer of 1980 and, although Tauno was in Florida, Charles responded enthusiastically to our request to come and record. After a morning of extra sleep, a good breakfast, and catching up on field notes, we left L'Anse for the Covington area and the Mattson's home.

The sky was grey and sleet was gently falling as we pulled into the Mattson's farm driveway about 12:45. Lugging the equipment, we strode for the house - a spacious, early 20th century "L" or "Lazy T" patterned abode of frame construction and painted white. The door to the porch was open and, as we waited for the door to open, I noticed a long bench filled with stove wood against one wall. Then Charles appeared and welcomed us in.

He was a stout, weathered looking man of seventy-one with a tawny face, bright blue eyes, dark hair streaked with grey, and a well-trimmed goutee that gave him a jaunty appearance. Like many old timers in the region, he was clad in boots, dark blue wool pants, held up by red suspenders, and a plaid wool shirt. Also in the first room we entered, a spacious kitchen, was Iria Mattson (nee Nurmela). Roughly the same age as her husband, she too was stout. She had a broad face, tawny skin and blue eyes like her husband, but, in contrast to his gregarious manner, she had what struck me as a withdrawn, almost morose manner made more severe by her grey hair which lay about her broad face in short, uneven strands. She wore a sack-like cotton dress of purple with white dots.

Almost immediately, Charles led us into the living room. It too was large and rendered cheery by two recently installed picture windows in the eastern and southern walls. Mattson had two and three row Hohmer button accordions laid out and we set up the equipment, then settled into stuffed chairs that circled the room. While we were setting up, Charles played through a tune. But, rather than have him play immediately, I followed my usual format of an interview followed by music. Perhaps this was a mistake. After talking, Mattson's playing was marked by frequent slips and he had trouble recalling tunes. Would his performances have been better and longer had I preceded in reverse fashion? Probably.

Nonetheless, we got plenty that was worthwhile from the man both during the interview and in conversations that followed later in the day. Mattson was born in 1910 in Iron Mountain, Michigan. His parents had both come from Finland and his dad was a miner, but, more importantly, he was also a musician who played both button accordion and violin. Charles' dad, originally named Kalle Pirainen, was also the son of a fiddler and fiddle maker in the old country. At an early age Charles began fooling around with his father's instruments, and, soon, he learned to play. Unlike his brother Gus, an "expert piano accordionist," Charles didn't play for dances (although he attended many).

In 1929, late in his teens, Charles moved to Milwaukee where he found a factory job and planned to take music lessons. He figured to take violin lessons and to practice on the boarding house's piano. Soon after that, however, the depression hit and Charles lost his job and was forced to return to the U. P. He worked in a logging camp cutting second growth hard wood for pitiful pay. The bunks were filled with lice and the men often were fed horse meat. "But you were lucky to get any job in those days." Later on in the thirties, he found work with Roosevelt's Citizen's Conservation Corps. But, in the late 30's, feeling that war was near and the economy would pick up, he returned to Milwaukee and found a job. During the war, and I'm not sure how this came about, Mattson worked in Defense Department Lead mines in Utah. I'm guessing that he returned to the Upper Peninsula in the post war era and it was then that he married Iria Nurmela and settled on her family's farmstead. Once back in Michigan, his livelihood was carpentry.

For long spells during his life, he didn't play music, but his playing seems to have been fairly steady since he's been in the Covington area. Beyond Iria's brother, Tauno, who also plays button accordion, Charles mentioned several other neighbors who sometimes play together: Alvar Ahola on guitar, Wilfred Fanti and Herman Kinnunen on piano accordion.

Charles' repertoire, although he played little more than a dozen tunes, seems varied. He knows old Finnish tunes from his father and neighbors, hot dance pieces recorded by Viola Turpeinen, and more recent Finnish numbers by Veikko Ahvenainen. Mattson also plays harmonica and, in addition to a Finnish dance piece, he gave us a train imitation and "The Wreck of the Old 97."

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Beyond playing music, Charles has an interest in instruments. He has picked up several, all of which are in disrepair, at rummage sales: a three row Hohmer button accordion and three fiddles. One of the fiddles may be a very valuable acquisition since it's inscribed with the name of Ole Bull, the famed Norwegian violinist who toured extensively in the U. S. in the 19th century. Also present in the Mattson household was an old wooden pump organ in excellent condition. Apparently neither of the two played the instrument and it had come to them from some relative of Iria. Charles, however, mentioned that, while growing up, his family had such an organ. Although they sometimes attended the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church (Suomi Synod), Charles and his brother were inclined to try out polkas and not hymns on the organ. A song book accompanied the present pump organ: Sionin Kanteleen Savelisto (Helsinki: Suomen Lutherilainen Evankeliumy H distys, 1921).

After conversing with Charles and listening to his playing, Matt offered a few tunes on the button accordion. After they were finished Iria appeared and told him how fine his playing had been. It was only her second appearance while we'd been interviewing Charles (she'd come out once to declare, with slight exasperation, that he'd been making a lot of mistakes while playing). The chief reason for her absence soon became evident, however, as she called us to a sumptuous lunch.

The kitchen table, which faced out onto the orchard where birds were feeding, was spread with a plate of egg salad sandwiches, sliced cheese, a jar of herring, chocolate cake, and coffee poured in fancy glass cups. Matt, Charles, and I sat down to feast while, curiously, Iria sat apart from us on a chair in a corner of the kitchen. Occasionally Charles would summon her to fill our coffee cups or to slice more cheese. I'm not sure of the explanation for this behavior: was it an extension of old world sex roles? Was it a manifestation of the couple's own unique relationship? Or was Iria assuming that, since we'd come primarily to see her husband, she ought not to be in the way?

Troubled by the separation, both Matt and I tried to draw her into the conversation by complimenting her on her fine food. We also asked if there was much Finnish cooking done in the area. Both she and Charles told us of neighbors who made Finnish oven cheese, then I asked about Finnish yogurt or "vilia." No sooner had I spoken than Iria drew a homemade bowl of the stuff from the refrigerator, along with a bowl of sliced apples from their orchard. The combination was delicious.

Matt and I had also noticed that hand made rag rugs of vivid color and variety were strewn across the floors of nearly every room. We asked Iria if she'd made them and, of course, she had. Apparently she 'makes up' the color and designs, often drawing on patterns learned from her mother. Her rugs have been sold through Finnish-American craft shops in Detroit and elsewhere.

Following the meal Matt and I felt mightily stuffed, especially since the Mattsons were that hospitable sort of couple who are insulted if their guests are less than gluttons. I suggested a walk about the farmstead with Charles as our guide. He complied and we set out on a methodical expedition. (In the paragraphs which follow I will refer to structures numbered on the diagram appended to these notes.) First stop was the artesian well (4) from which water runs steadily throughout the year. The water flowed through a sunken concrete box, used as a spring house for butter and cream, then down into a fish pond (5) stocked with trout and flanked by pine and cedar.

The sauna (6) was next and it featured three compartments: a changing room, a wood shed, and the sauna chamber itself. Built some thirty-five years ago, the sauna was in excellent shape and is used frequently by the Mattsons - especially in the summer time when various friends and relatives come to visit. While by the pond Charles had cut aromatic cedar switches used to swat oneself in the sauna, thereby opening pores to get the dirt out. This bit of lore prompted a story. A couple had gotten married and had gone off honeymooning to a place with a sauna. They'd gotten a little carried away with the switching and had developed a skin rash from the cedar. Said the new husband when asked how his honeymoon had been: "We had an itching good time."

Number (7) was the "Aita" or Loom House which Charles had built to store his wife's rug loom. He had also built her the loom, in 1952, a real tribute to his carpentry skills. Beyond the loom itself, the building held boxes of colored cloth strips - the materials for future rugs.

The garage (8) had been built to house the Nurmela's model-T Ford as well as a horse drawn sleigh or cutter which was still there and in fine shape. Lodged on rafter poles were various pairs of old, homemade cross country skiis. The nearby out house (9) was a two-seater - so that "my wife and I can use it at the same time," Charles quipped.

Number (10) was largely an equipment shed housing a couple of tractors, a chain saw, equipment for hog butchering, and other bulky machinery. The east end of the building held an oat bin and a small mill. In it, too, were some old milk cans, one of which bore the name and address of Iria's father, Matt. Apparently, he used to take milk to a nearby railroad depot from whence it would be taken to Duluth. The artifact triggered Mattson's memory of an old Finn in the neighborhood who used to cart a fifty pound can four miles on his back to the train station. When he received his two dollar check in payment, the old man invariably remarked: "I make two dollar chust like nothing."

The next building (11) was, for the most part, a dairy barn - with lower stalls for cattle and a hay mow above - of the sort that were built throughout the upper midwest from the 1920's on. The southern third on the first level was, however, made up of an older log structure. Memories of milk cows set Charles to thinking of the well known joke about the farm woman who wins the advertising jingle contest by coming up with "No tits to pull, no shit to haul/Carnation milk is the best of all." His version was particularly well told, having to do with a Finnish couple from Pelkie, Michigan and a regional Finnish newspaper that regularly printed verses from its subscribers.

The woodshed was next (12). It housed Charles' firewood logs, a mechanized splitter, various axes, and a cant hook. Behind the woodshed was a log cattle barn (13) with the logs hewn on all four sides and joined by half dovetail notches.

The most interesting building, from an antiquarian standpoint, was the saunas (14). This was an earlier form of the sauna which used an open fire and no chimney. Built of logs and sided over with tar paper, the building had later been converted into a small cattle barn. The sight of this archaic structure prompted me to ask if any old timers in the area had used the Finnish practice of blood letting with cow horns. Charles had vivid memories of seeing this done when he was a boy and he reckoned that their neighbor, the late Mrs. Seppanen, had kept to the art until the early 1960's.

Shortly after the tour, during which I took numerous pictures, Iria set forth another remarkable feast: baked ham, potatoes, peas, beets, pickles, homemade rye bread, butter, pears, chocolate cake, coffee, and milk. Matt and I did our best to eat heartily but we hadn't burned up enough energy to do justice to the feed. Meanwhile, Charles had fired up the sauna and, hoping to at least sweat out some of the

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accumulated calories, Matt and I entered the Mattson's bathhouse for a good, long steam. When we emerged, feeling wonderfully clean and a little lighter, Charles had a couple of cold Budweisers waiting for us. As we sipped the, he went outside to stoke up the sauna as he and Iria could use it later on.

With our beers drained, Matt and I decided it was time to shove off. The Mattsons kindly offered to put us up for the night but, after five days on the road, we were eager to get back to familiar surroundings and the company of our wives. Thanking the couple for their exemplary hospitality, and promising to visit if we ever passed by again, we began the trek home.