

ETHNIC HERITAGE
SOUND ARCHIVE & RESOURCE CENTER
NORTHLAND COLLEGE, ASHLAND, WI

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

February 26, 1981

Informant: Matt Radosevich
Benoit, WI

The Thursday afternoon session at Matt Radosevich's place was a memorable and long awaited one. Last year, during the project's first phase, Matt had been ill and unwilling to perform. For much of this year, he was equally elusive. In the Fall he was busy and reluctant to play because "I've given all that up." This Spring, he was busy or ill. Fortunately, I'd been able to see him perform on a couple of occasions. He'd come out of the crowd to play, with a Croatian friend Tom Hhosni, at the Thanksgiving Hunter's Dance in Moquah; in December, he'd also played a few tunes at one of our community meetings. Both times I'd been impressed by his animated, ornamented playing on his three-row Holmer button accordion. Consequently Matt Gallmann and I were excited as we approached Matt's farm southwest of Benoit.

The afternoon sun had turned the snow mushy and I drove carefully along Radosevich's soggy driveway to park in front of a pole barn and equipment shed. In the distance, we could see Hereford beef cattle lounging amidst bare trees. Matt was waiting for us and we entered through a back porch into a large, neat kitchen and thence to a sunny, spacious living room. Although the house had been built in the 1920's, it looked quite "modern" - a testament to Matt's remodeling skills and his wife's taste. We settled on comfortable stuffed chairs in the living room.

Matt knew why we'd come, but I reiterated again that I wanted to interview him for "background information" and then record some music. As he had on previous occasions, Matt spoke self-deprecatingly that he had little to say, that his playing wasn't so hot, and that a cold had made his voice hoarse so he couldn't talk for long anyway. With all this in mind, I plunged into my questions. I couldn't have asked for a better response. As the tape log indicates, Matt spoke at length concerning his parents, their early settlement in Benoit, music in the community, and his own involvement with Croatian music. He was a natural storyteller, presenting what he knew in a detailed, well-structured, and circumspect manner. What emerged was a fairly typical story. Like many another self-taught musician, he learned to play by surreptitiously fooling around with his older brother's accordion. Soon he was playing button accordion and harmonica for local dances. From them and from some Missouri relatives, he learned old Croatian tunes. In his early twenties he

left the area to spend twelve years in Milwaukee (1936-1948). There he played with piano accordionist Tom Hosni in taverns and for Croatian picnics. In 1948 he returned and purchased the old family farm. Back home, he played with Tom Marincel in "Tom's Trio" from the late 1940's til the sixties. For awhile he had a family band with his son Skip, but since the mid-1970's a heart attack and feelings of age have stopped him from playing.

As Matt told all this, he paused periodically to wheeze and his voice rasped a bit, but it was clear that he enjoyed reminiscing. After an hour of talk we changed reels on the tape recorder and Matt took up his button accordion. He played fifteen or so Croatian numbers, pausing occasionally to tell about where he learned the tune, or to give a translation. Some of the songs were early numbers he had learned from family and relatives, while the last few Croatian numbers were prominent in his Milwaukee days. (Matt sometimes jogged his memory by consulting a Croatian songbook from Milwaukee.) The last six numbers - a medley of military marches, pop tunes, and college songs - were American numbers and ones that Matt often strung together in public performances to get people to dance themselves out toward the end of a set.

Matt's style was quite remarkable. A short, stocky man, with thinning grayish hair, impish eyes, and a round belly, Radosevich's playing bristle with energy and imagination. Every tune was highly ornamented and spritely as Matt's right hand flashed over three rows. He coaxed the bellows in and out with flair and timing, meanwhile alternately bending his head with closed eyes and raising his face to beam at his audience. And not only were his head and hands in motion; Matt's feet tapped rhythmically and sometimes he fairly danced to his own tune. It was pretty clear that he was the most falshy, crowd pleasing performer we'd seen.

To our delight, Matt also sang. Before he began to play, I asked if he was a singer too. He replied that, while he used to sing alot, his voice was hoarse and he really didn't want to try. Despite this, once he started to play, Matt seemed moved to sing. Matt also let me take his picture. He'd said the week before that I might come over if the camera was left behind. Consequently, I held off for awhile in bringing the Nikomat out and was really delighted when Matt said I might shoot some slides.

After about twenty numbers, Matt figured he'd done enough. Thankful that he played for us at all, and thrilled by what he'd given us, Matt Gallmann and I didn't

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complain. We shut off the machine and I began packing up our stuff. Meantime Gallman pulled out his two row Holmer button accordion and, predictably, the two began to play. Matt G. ran through his Finnish and Scandinavian repertoire with Matt R. chiming in once he had picked up the tune; and they soon ran through a handful of popular numbers. Matt R. remarked that he'd forgotten more tunes than he remembered; he also recalled that he'd often played requests which were simply hummed to him by people in the audience. It was pretty clear from this interlude that Radosevich was a deft performer who learned quickly and had a broad working repertoire.

With the accordions put away, we adjourned to the kitchen and Matt pulled out a bottle of brandy and some Seven-Up for mix or a chaser. As we wet our whistles, Matt talked about his busy life. Beyond raising beef cattle, he was also active in the local farmer's union and was involved in the State's Citizens Utility Board. As the latter organization was meeting that night and Matt had chores and dinner left to attend to (his wife would be home late from work and a hair-dressing appointment), we took off. It had been a good thorough session.