

ETHNIC HERITAGE  
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Collector: Jim Leary

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Informant: Felix "Fel" Milanowski

I arrived at Felix's around 1:10, a few minutes later than our agreed upon 1:00 meeting. Felix was all set to go and, fearing that I might've forgotten, was on the verge of calling Northland College. As I unloaded my equipment, Felix suggested that we record in the living room. Figuring that the room's softness would offer better acoustics than the kitchen, I agreed and we set things up. Beyond my tape recorder, Felix had his own ready to record the proceedings. As we had agreed the previous Friday, we were about to record Felix's entire repertoire - at least to the extent that he could recall it - in a formal fashion. He would make an announcement of a song's title, or of the significance of a genre (May songs, Dance Pieces, etc.), play the tune, and then I would turn the machine off. During this break, we would decide what tune should be played next, and what Felix would say in his introduction. He also took some time to briefly rehearse his playing.

So as to structure the recording session, I made use of several song lists. One was a list that Felix had made for the session when Matt Gallman recorded him in 1979, the other came from my index of a tape Felix had made himself. We also managed to add one new piece. During our conversation the previous Friday, Fel mentioned that "broom dances" used to be popular at house parties. It turned out that there was a special tune, requiring occasional hand claps, that accompanied the broom dance. I made my musical debut as the hand clapper for this tune.



In all, the recording session lasted two hours, during which we recorded roughly forty tunes and an hour's worth of tape. Excepting a few tunes, where the lack of a third row on the button accordion made it tough to hit all the necessary notes, Felix's playing was quite smooth. I felt it had a lot of feeling in it too. While playing, Felix would gaze off into space, caught up in the tune. He added plenty of color to his playing by pumping more or less air through the instrument. Unfortunately, I couldn't get the man to sing as he figured it was enough to concentrate on playing the piece "just right."

We finished the session a little before 4:00 and Felix brought out two beers in celebration. I was a little surprised that Felix was drinking a beer since, when I'd first met him in February of 1979, he'd said he didn't drink. Perhaps he was being overly formal and on his good behavior in the presence of two researchers "from the college," or maybe he felt that the completion of the tape was the kind of special occasion demanding a drink.

Recalling the "mushroom story" Felix had told during the previous session, I mentioned my interest in jokes and asked Felix if he knew any more. He told me a number in quick succession, inspired partially by jokes that I told each time in response. As a joke teller, Felix was very animated; he would rock his body back and forth, use gestures when appropriate, mimic dialects, and laugh at the punch lines til his face turned bright red. As was the custom with old time Polish joke tellers I'd encountered in Portage County, Felix invariably repeated the punchline and even the latter half of



the joke to savor and emphasize it once more. Furthermore, Felix's jokes were usually highly embellished with description and local details. Briefly summarized, they were:

1. A man is always putting down the "Polacks." Finally someone asks him if he can talk Polish. "No." "Then you're dumber than the Polacks."
2. This joke was first heard by Felix in connection with the sleigh rides they used to take in the wintertime. A bald fella named John was on the sleigh and he wore a wig to cover his head. Somehow, he lost the wig and, in burrowing around to find it in the hay, his hands strayed between a young woman's legs. "That's it! That's it, John," she exclaimed. "That ain't it at all," he replied. "Mine was new; this one's old: it's got a hole in it."
3. Ole and Lena and John and Eleanor go walking out to the taverns. On the way home the two men go behind a billboard to relieve themselves while the two women sneak a look. Later, Lena exclaims: "Was I ever proud when Ole pulled ours out." Of course, Felix performed this with a Swedish lilt when appropriate.
4. This is another Ole and Lena joke, but I'm not quite sure how it goes. The humor derives from Lena being asked "Have you got a little Swede in you?" Instead of thinking about ancestry, she takes the question sexually.
5. Lena gets a job as a maid. When asking how she does making beds, she replies that she doesn't know, but she's a "humdinger in the grass."
6. A man goes to the priest to confess stealing a ham and hiding it. The priest questions the man who tells him that the ham is under a bridge; the priest then informs the man to leave the ham there and say certain prayers as penance. Later on, the man comes to the priest to confess adultery, and Father asks who the woman is. Recalling that the ham had mysteriously disappeared, the man refuses to tell.
7. A man swallows a glass eye and becomes constipated. He goes to the doctor who looks up his behind. The doc draws back in amazement: "I looked at a lot of assholes in my time, but this is the first time one's been lookin' back at me."



8. Sambo and Liza are caught having sex in the graveyard and are summoned before the judge who asks them what they were doing there. Rastus reckons he was "burying a stiff" and Liza allows that she "was the under taker."

Beyond telling these jokes, Felix recalled other good storytellers. One was a German named Bill Schmaltz, now deceased, who used to tell stories to Felix and others on the job. So good a raconteur was Schmaltz that occasionally his fellow workers would tell him to sit down and entertain them with stories while they worked.

Other noteworthy tale tellers, according to Felix are Sophie Mika who does cleaning at Northland College, and Don Belske's wife's mother (Felix couldn't recall her name). She is a Swedish woman and, after a few drinks, can tell wonderful Ole and Lena jokes with the Swedish accent. Hopefully, I'll have some time, apart from the music, to track down these joke tellers. Clearly, the tradition of old time ethnic joke telling remains strong in this region.

At about 4:15, I took my leave. Felix had to get cleaned up for a Rod and Gun Club meeting and I wanted to stop by Verner Sandstrom's and return his Runeberg History on my way home. As I started to get in the car, Felix came bursting out of the house calling my name. He had just thought of another joke and wanted to tell it. He performed it for me (I can't quite remember it) and I told him one in return. Then he went back into the house and I drove away.