

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary  
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Anton "Speedy" Beringer  
1100 Liberty  
Poy Sippi, WI

"Speedy" read about the project in the newspaper and wrote a letter stating his ability to play chromatic button accordion, his recent work at supper clubs in the Berlin/Poy Sippi area, and his tenure years ago with WTMJ's "Heinie and His Grenadiers." When I called to set up an appointment, I discovered that "Speedy" was still in demand and it took a little while to settle on a Friday afternoon meeting. I arrived at the Beringer's duplex at 2:30. The door was open and S's wife Joanne, 82, was perched on the sofa puffing a cigarette and watching General Hospital on the tube. Two Karpek chromatic button accordions rested on the floor nearby and S was seated at the kitchen table amidst a stack of folders and cassette tapes. Nearly 73, he's a short vigorous man, talkative, enthusiastic, outgoing, and charming. He had assembled various clippings and photographs concerning his musical career, but he told me that his son, with whom he didn't get along, had plenty of materials too--apparently S and his wife had sold or distributed most of their possessions when he reached 55 and had traveled around the country.

Among the photographs were four that I borrowed to have copied. Documentation is as follows;

1. Portrait of Speedy with his chromatic, 1929.
2. Speedy and His Polka Dots, a band that he put together in the Milwaukee area when he ran a West Allis tavern in the late 1940s. L-R George Kramer, piano accordion; Speedy; Arnie Polzin on bandoneon; ? on B flat saxophone; "Frenchy" Bullieux on C melody sax; ? (who was part Mexican) on 4 string "tipler" guitar; Jack ? on string bass. Ca 1949, 8900 Greenfield Avenue, West Allis--"Speedy's 8900 Bar."

3. L-R Jerry Klux on guitar; Cyd Sippin (of Cyd Sippin and his Hawaiians) on Hawaiian guitar; and Speedy, ca 1953 at a bar in Milwaukee.

4. L-R Speedy on bass; ? on drums; Ray Leidy on piano; Jack Norman on banjo. Early 1960s, Tichigan Lake, Waterford, WI, "Speedy's Flamingo Resort." Besides these pictures, Speedy had a few showing him playing in Florida in the late 60s as well as clipped advertizements from his jobs in the Poy Sippi/Berlin area. No shots of Heinie and his Grenadiers, however.

While showing me these pictures, Speedy launched into a personal history. It was impossible to set up the tape recorder quite yet inasmuch as General Hospital would show until 3:00, so S & I gabbed over a cup of coffee until the soap was finished. Then I set the tape rolling and, in addition to repeating anecdotes already told, Speedy offered much more. The tape index will reveal that S, born into a musical family and surrounded by gypsy musicians in his mother's Milwaukee boarding house, was receiving musical training from the time he could talk. Indeed he could read notes before he could read the alphabet.

While not yet in his teens, he was heading an orchestra that played in burlesque shows and supplied sound for silent movies. In addition to being a musical nteur. He filled two reels of tape with

nary a pause, and revealed a remarkable career that included stints as a semi-pro baseball player, a marathon dancer, and a seven day bicycle racer. His musical experiences included heading a big band in New York City, playing with Yankovic in Cleveland before Frank became famous, teaming up with then unknown Red Skelton as the straightman in a comedy duo, running a polka band in the Milwaukee area, owning assorted taverns and resorts where musical figures like Lawrence Welk and Myron Floren could sometimes be found, and organizing a "grandpas band" in Florida out of Guy Lombardo veterans and other big band musicians. There was plenty that I didn't get on tape too. Unfortunately I had

only brought three reels with me--an oversight, although this quantity has been more than enough for everyone except Ed Peirick. But, as Speedy reckoned, when you come to visit me it's an all day thing. I stopped the interview portion of the session when two reels were full. Prior to playing, however,, Speedy wanted me to listen to several of his cassettes made in Florida with the senior citizens' big band. Although the recordings were noisy and rough, made with the condenser mike of a cheap cassette player, it was clear that the band was a fine one with a cross between Slovenian (accordion, banjo, string bass, no drums) and big band (trombone, sax, guitar) instrumentation.

Finally S settled down to play his accordion. Since many of the performances on the tape featured his singing, including one German vocal, I asked S to perform his German repertoire including numbers he'd done with Heinie and his Grenadiers. What followed was a real treat. A consummate professional, Beringer offered introductions to more than a dozen German songs; indeed he spliced each number together by filling in the space between songs with little accordion runs over which he commented on what was upcoming. Besides selections from the repertoire of Heinie and his Grenadiers, there were family songs that he had learned from his father and his godfather, both of whom had been infantry soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian army and, as a result, had traveled widely throughout the empire, thereby coming in contact with numerous songs. The tape ran out just as Speedy was launching into "Trink Bruderlein, Trink." I kicked myself for not having brought more tape, but took consolation in the fact that S would probably be coming to Middleton for Rudy Burkhalter's Accordion Jamboree. Once the tape was off Speedy continued to play, but this time it was blues and jazz: "Birth of the Blues," "12th Street Rag," and others. Again he showed real mastery and versatility. While playing he typically closed his eyes and rocked back and forth, working out runs, fills, and rhythm patterns as he went along.

Later he commented on his penchant for improvisation in connection with remarks about Wisconsin polka bands. Apparently when he jams with other polka bands in rural Wisconsin, he finds that most accordionists are "musicians," not "artists." S distinguishes the former from the latter by suggesting that musicians will play tunes straight--either strictly from notes or from memory--whereas artists will interject their own feelings and will often play a tune through straight once and then change keys or add runs on the second and subsequent times through. He characterized the music of Wisconsin's Dutchmen bands as clumsy, clunky, plodding--"farmer's music." And by way of illustration, he told of several occasions when he'd taken solos while sitting in with such bands; the result was always the same: the musicians shook their heads in wonder and queried the artist, "how'd you do that?"

One final comment. Although a true professional in terms of his skill, performance style, and past experience, S made his living by means other than music from the mid-1940s until retirement. Married and the father of eight children, he rejected the road and the often uncertain life of a full time musician to stay with his family, run a business, and play only locally. a