

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
February 28, 1985

Kenneth Platz
105 Clark St.
Watertown, WI

Like several other Watertown area contacts, Platz was recommended through the local Senior Citizens drop-in center where he plays periodically for dances. I had written to him and then called to set up a meeting. At first he reckoned he didn't really know the old time stuff I was after; his tunes were mostly picked up through Vitak-Elsnic books. But inasmuch as musicians in this territory frequented relied on notation to figure out tunes they'd heard many times, I figured he was worth a session.

I arrived at 7:30 PM at the Platz residence, a ranch house in a post WWII development on the southeast side of Watertown. K.'s bulk milk truck was parked outside as he has a job hauling farm milk to the dairy. Mrs. Platz let me into the living room and K. soon emerged. He's a round and hefty fellow of 55 with a jocular manner, although he's not locquacious. The piano accordion was encased on the living room floor and so I set up the recorder immediately while K. pulled out his piano accordion and drew up a straight-backed chair.

I begun with my usual run of biographical questions followed by musicological queries. K.'s answers were straightforward but terse; he wasn't one too offer too many anecdotes. Whether this was his normal manner or not eludes me, but midway through the interview a couple arrived and was invited in. They certainly did not intrude on the interviewing process, nor was Mrs. Platz inclined to break in (she even recorded the early part of our conversation while smiling and nodding in the background), but I did feel as though a leisurely approach to questioning and answering wasn't appropriate this evening. After perhaps fifteen to twenty minutes of talk, K. brought out his accordion and played six numbers.

He sang the first three. His vocal on "The Jolly Coppersmith" took me by surprise since none of my other informants had sung while playing. I didn't have the microphones set up properly to get the best recording, but the situation was remedied for subsequent vocals.

As the Index will show, K.'s mother and grandmother, and his grandmother's brothers were all singers and musicians. K.'s vocals for #'s 2&3 were patterned after his grandmother; however the numbers she sang were not rare in the region, rather they were the standards which every German-American knew. Ditto for the "Society Dances" that Platz played. After six numbers reel one expired. I asked if I might put on another, but K. reckoned that the rest of the tunes he knew were "standards" like Lindenau and Marichken--ones everybody played. Under different circumstances, I might've pressed to get these anyway, but with guests in the background, and realizing that Platz had to get up to drive his milk truck in the morning, I figured I'd best be satisfied.

As I was packing up the gear, K. told me that Betty Schekert (sp?), widow of the former president of the musician's union, had many old pictures of local musicians. Mrs. Platz tried to find her in the phone book without success; perhaps I can locate her through the Senior Center? K. also showed me his sheet music and I took a few pictures of what he had. Of particular interest was a Vitak-Elsnic book from 1935 which showed how to work out arrangements for a multi-horned old time band centered around a piano accordionist.

In addition, K. recommended that I try Art Altenberger's concertina bar when I get to Milwaukee inasmuch as Art knows all the musicians, German and otherwise, in that territory. K. also spoke of driving to Milwaukee to see German bands at the Bavarian Inn and the Schwaben Haus, and he knew Rudy Burkhalter and reckoned, once I told him the date, that he would probably take in R.B.'s "Accordion Jamboree" at the Chalet St. Moritz in Middleton this April 14.