

Informants: Vivian Brevak  
Netty Harvey  
Route 1, Washburn

June 22, 1981

Collector: Jim Leary

I met Vivian Brevak back in February when Phil Martin came up from Madison to show his slide/tape program on Norwegian fiddlers and house parties. Vivian's maiden name was Eckholm and her father was a fiddling Swede who'd settled in Bayfield, then later in Barksdale, so she was excited by Martin's presentation. She remarked that she'd played "second fiddle" some too, but mostly accordion and I promised to interview her in the summer. When the time came, I called and we decided to include Vivian's neighbor, Netty Harvey, in the session since she'd played piano, tenor banjo, and a little Hawaiian guitar at house parties.

Vivian lives on the west side of Ondossagon Road, one block south of the Topside Tavern. She came out of the house as soon as I arrived and we headed for Netty's. Along the way Vivian told me that, unfortunately, I wouldn't get any music today. She didn't like to play without accompaniment and her guitar playing son was out of town. Netty, meantime, didn't have a piano anymore. Vivian also complained that back spasms pained her periodically so that sometimes she didn't feel like playing. At seventy-two, she is big-boned, strong looking woman with fair skin reddened by the elements. She had on a neat beige pant suit and her manner was open and friendly. As we drove north along Ondossagon Road, she pointed out the farm where she'd grown up with ten brothers and sisters (the first place on the left to the north of the Topside). She also remarked that it's been almost a year since her husband Albert died.

At Long Lake Road, we turned west and drove as far as the Long Lake School. The building was unpainted, with its windows knocked out, and surrounded by weeds. Vivian told me she had played there many times. We turned north and drove a hundred yards to Netty Harvey's.

Netty (nee Day) was born in 1910, the eldest of seven children. Her father was a lumberjack of English extraction who hailed from Prince Edward Isle, while her mother was German and came from Davenport, Iowa. Netty was a short, stout woman. She wore a sack like house dress and her hair was in curlers. The next morning she would ride the bus to Appleton for the wedding of one of her grandchildren. Anyway, Netty met us at the door of her trailer which lay at the end of a long driveway and nearby the old homestead which a son now occupied.



We settled into the living room. I explained my purpose in coming, set up the machine, and the session got underway. So as to have a manageable interview, I began by focussing on Vivian. As the log reveals, her Dad Carl (known locally as "Charlie") learned to play violin in Sweden where he had formal lessons. Over here his lessons stopped and he played mostly dance tunes by ear. All the Eckholm children fooled with instruments and sang. In an anecdote I didn't get on tape, Vivian told about sitting with her brothers and sisters on the floor of their living room while her mother sewed by the light of the only lamp in the house. There was little furniture in the room because they were poor, but they had a guitar and a mandolin ("potato bug") to pick with.

During World War I a Finnish lumberjack, Frank Holmes, boarded with the family. He played accordion and Vivian learned many of her tunes by ear from the playing of her Dad and Frank. Later Vivian, her Dad, and her guitar playing mother played for dances throughout the area.

Details of Vivian's musical career can, of course, be found in the tape index, but it's worth pointing out a few highlights. 1) Carl "Charlie" Eckholm's Scandinavian tunes were seldom recalled by an official name. Consequently, Vivian gives the tunes associative titles like "Leonard's Waltz." 2) The people around Barksdale were an ethnically mixed bag: English, Irish, Swedes, Norwegian, Germans, Finns, and even Hungarians (like Vivian's husband Albert Brevak). Consequently, the house parties in these parts involved people of many nationalities and the "American" square dance was very popular. 3) The house parties in the area had a powerful affect on the people. They were truly community events, involving everyone regardless of age or nationality. And because there were children present, drinking went on outdoors or not at all; nobody got "sloppy," and there was no trouble.

Netty's part of the interview session was briefer, although she had chimed in with some interesting observations during our discussion of the house parties. Some of the brevity of Netty's part resulted from my weariness with the role of the interviewer, but another reason was that her story seemed less complex and her reminiscent style wasn't as detailed as Vivian's. Netty learned to chord on an organ that her parents had. She enjoyed backing fiddle players and her husband Clarence Harvey was a fiddler. They married in 1928. Twenty years later a fire destroyed their home and their musical instruments. But in the 20's and 30's Netty had often plenty of fun out of playing at house parties. Even now she wishes for a piano to plunk out tunes on by ear.



After about an hour and a half of interviewing, we adjourned for coffee and cookies. While gathered at the table, the pair came out with some interesting reminiscences. Vivian's dad, with eleven kids to think about in depression times, had been a moonshiner. And Vivian, who often did a man's work on the farm during her teens, learned how "to cook and test moon." She even hauled gallons of the stuff into Washburn in a box her dad had built onto their wagon. Apparently many of the neighbors were also moonshiners. Occasionally, the sheriff would make a raid, but Carl's fellow workers at Barksdale would always tip him off. Interestingly, Vivian doesn't drink, even though she gets a kick about being "a moonshiner's daughter." She told one humorous anecdote about some young boys who wanted to buy booze from a local moonshiner during a local dance. The man promised them a dime's worth. They paid their dime. He took them outside, let them smell the cork, told them "that's your dime's worth. Come back when you're old enough for a drink."

Vivian also remembered plenty about the Swedish Christmas custom of "Yule Bok." Apparently the kids would dress up on Christmas Eve or thereabouts and go off as ghosts or a bride and groom or in some other get-up to visit the Swedish neighbors. Ideally they would "tell a poem" or "harmonize a song." Then the householder would have to guess their identities or "divvy up" with coffee and a treat. Sometimes the entertainment part was forgotten. Vivian especially recalled going to visit a blind man neighbor who kept a very neat house and was good to the children.

In connection with Christmas, winter, and big snows both women remembered how the roads wouldn't be plowed in winter and kids would ski over the highways. Sometimes, they'd take the wheels off of old buggies and use them for sleds.

Holiday and seasonal sport led to a discussion of Halloween and the two women recalled plenty of pranks that the kids used to pull: hitching a calf to a buggy and letting it loose, putting a wagon atop the barn, tipping an outhouse into a ravine or wedging its door against the woodpile. Vivian recalled how some kids had pranked Mrs. Moland by pulling all the farm machinery from the barn to line it up along the road. She was a fat Swedish woman and, when she discovered what was happening, she went out onto the porch with her body and voice shaking. Vivian imitated the Scandinavian lilt: "You kids yust wait til Lut'er gets here."

By this time it was nearly four and, since I had to meet with other people in the evening, I figured it was time to go. The ladies, however, would probably



have been content to talk on endlessly. They really seemed to enjoy their reminiscences, even though life had been hard for them - growing up poor and in big families.

I said goodbye to Netty and drove Vivian home. She reckoned that she wanted to get together with her son within the year to record her whole Swedish repertoire. I gave her information on how to borrow the project's tape recorder so we could have a copy of her playing.

The next day, Vivian called me again. At first I thought her son had returned and that we might tape her music after all. Instead she wanted to tell me about some of the Swedish food they ate at home: coffee bread or Swedish rye for everyday; fattigman, krum kake, sanbakkels, and spritz at Christmas. Her father also insisted on having meat on the table. He hunted deer and they would often can ground venison mixed with prok. They butchered hogs at holiday times and made head cheese, pickled pig's feet, "silta" (sp.), and "pulsa" (sp.?). Vivian hadn't been able to sleep until two the night after our talk and it came to her that she'd neglected these important details of her experience. I really felt gratified that she'd taken the trouble to call me and offer the information. With luck she'll make that tape with her son one day soon.