

Chapter 12

The Minnesota Dutchmen

Program 12 Performances

1. "Whoopie John" Wilfahrt, "Country Road Schottische."
2. Six Fat Dutchmen, "Bohemian Polka."
3. Ivan Kahle, "Blacksmith Waltz."
4. Elmer Scheid, "Hoolerie Waltz."
5. Erwin Suess and the Hoolerie Dutchmen, "Stillwater Ländler."
6. Ernie Coopman and the Stagemen, "Cuckoo Waltz."
7. Deutschmeisters, "Du, du liegst mir im Herzen."
8. Whoopie Norm Edlebeck and His Dairyland Dutchmen, "More Beer Polka."

Goosetown

In the late 1860s German speakers from southwestern Bohemia along the Bavarian border began settling in rural Brown County, Minnesota, south and west of New Ulm, some eventually—by the 1880s—occupying New Ulm's *gansviertel* or Goosetown district. Coming as they did from a region noted for squeezebox players and brass bands, it was hardly surprising that these German Bohemians included such veteran musicians as Joseph Hofmeister and John Lindmeier, who soon organized bands to play for community dances, weddings, and even funeral processions (Rippley 1985).

Among their listeners was John Anthony Wilfahrt, "Whoopie John" (1893–1961). Born on a farm southwest of New Ulm, Wilfahrt was inspired by local brass bands and at age twelve taught himself to play concertina. By 1909 he was entertaining at weddings with his brother, Eddie, on clarinet, and a cousin, Edward Kretsch, on cornet. By the 1920s, with a bigger band, Wilfahrt was making records, broadcasting over the radio, and barnstorming to dance jobs every night of the week (Lornell 1985[1989]; Rippley 1992).

Initially combining the concertina/accordion sound of informal house parties with the brass and reed boom of village bands, Wilfahrt later added the piano and drums of popular American dance combos. His repertoire—grounded in German and Czech polkas, waltzes, schottisches, and ländlers—gradually extended to Scandinavian tunes and American pop. Besides producing an eclectic regional sound, Wilfahrt also charmed audiences by donning a peaked alpine hat and *lederhosen*, tossing his concertina in the air, and punctuating performances with whooping yodels.

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Wilfahrt's professional success eased the way for other southern Minnesota bands, which spread the German-Bohemian sound throughout the Upper Midwest. Vaguely termed old-time, Whoopee John music, the New Ulm or Minnesota sound, this music also became known as oompah and Dutchman, chiefly through the efforts of Harold Loeffelmacher (1905–1988). Loeffelmacher grew up in New Ulm, where he played tuba with the 205th Infantry Band before forming a dance band in 1932. The group was called the Broadway Band, then the Continental Band, but such urban, cosmopolitan tags did not move rural, regional audiences, and it was not until Loeffelmacher tried Six Fat Dutchmen that his career accelerated. Scores of subsequent bands have incorporated "Dutchmen"—a Yankee rendering of *Deutsch* (German)—into their names (Leary and March 1991).

Loeffelmacher's exuberant tuba playing likewise extended the work of earlier stalwarts like John "Boom Boom" Bauer. No longer just a stately "bottom," a source of solid if sedate rhythm, the tuba began to romp, to improvise, to take an occasional solo, to "oompah."

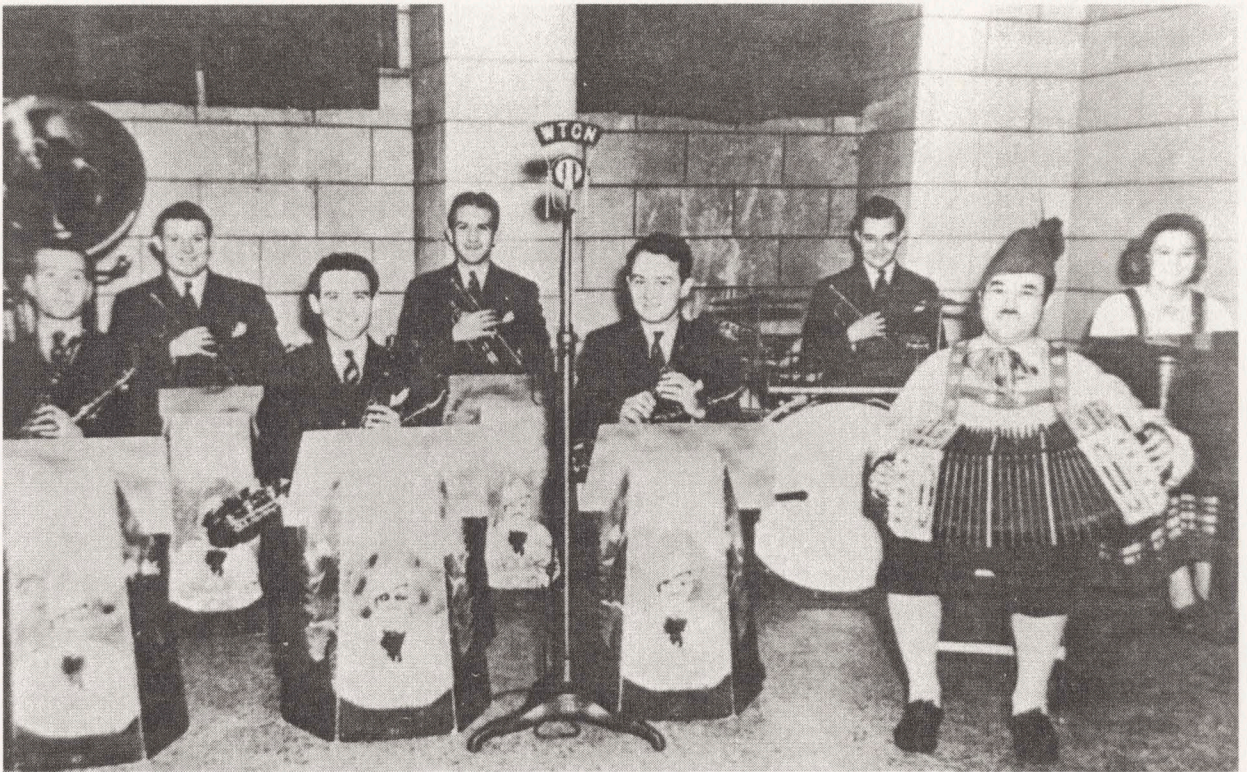
From the late 1920s through the 1950s, the bands of Wilfahrt and Loeffelmacher established a genre and spread it through the Upper Midwest via weekly radio broadcasts, scores of phonograph records, and dance jobs in rural ballrooms nearly every night of the week. Their music became one of America's great regional styles, played not only by those of German heritage but by members of every other ethnic group in the Upper Midwest.

Concertina Oompah

The Dutchman sound they pioneered did not, however, remain static. Indeed most groups playing in the 1990s look to a second generation of innovators that includes Elmer Scheid in its forefront. Scheid played concertina with the Babe Wagner Band before starting his own group in the late 1940s. He introduced the oft-imitated "hoolerie" sound, a concertina/clarinet combination played in high registers, appropriate to the *ländlers* of Bavaria and Austria, and onomatopoeically named for *das hoolerie und das foolerie* of alpine festivals. Whereas Wilfahrt and Loeffelmacher generally favored a "full" and "blended" sound with trumpets and saxophones dominating throughout a tune, Scheid leaned toward distinct solos, especially on his chosen instrument, the concertina. Bandleader Ernie Coopman remembers that Scheid "didn't play anything so terrible fancy, but you don't have to. . . . He played it so pretty and clean. Boy! And that was what I wanted to do" (Coopman 1990 I).

Ever since Scheid, the concertina player has been the central figure in Minnesota's German polka bands. Indeed, in the past several decades "concertina oompah"—concertina, tuba, and drums—has come to be regarded as the genre's essential sound. Wilfahrt and Loeffelmacher led bands of up to a dozen players, those of Scheid's generation numbered seven or eight, but by the 1980s economic factors often limited bands to five, four, even three players. As band sizes have shrunk, the concertina player not only has had to carry the melodic load but also has provided the harmonic fill of absent brass and reeds.

Sylvester Liebl showed the way. Now retired from his Jolly Swiss Boys (a name that replaced Jolly Germans during World War II), Liebl was born in the New Ulm area but moved to west-central Wisconsin in the 1930s. By the 1960s he—and other players like Jerry Schuft and Johnny Gag—began to shift from Scheid's sustained notes and flowing style to "just really working over the keyboard" with sixteenth notes, triplets, and trills or "warbles" created by rapid finger movement on two notes. Musician Ivan Kahle remembers Liebl's concertina:



"Whoopee John" Wilfahrt, in Bavarian garb, leading his band on live radio, Minneapolis, late 1930s Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection

That music just kind of fell out of it. He was playing once at the Gibbon Polka Festival, even Elmer Scheid was watching him play. Syl said, "Get your fanny out on the floor, this is a dance not a show." (Kahle 1990 I)

Today Liebl's youthful disciples—Karl (Hartwich) and the Country Dutchmen, Brian (Brueggen) and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen, Gary (Brueggen) and the Ridgeland Dutchmen, and Kevin Liss of the New Jolly Swiss Boys—dazzle their followers by embellishing tunes with chromatic runs. They are the Dutchmen and women of the future.