

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

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Informants: Helmer Toyras
Aura, MichiganETHNIC HERITAGE
SOUND ARCHIVE & RESOURCE CENTER
NORTHLAND COLLEGE, ASHLAND, WI

For the past two years Matt Gallmann has been attending the Aura Fiddler's Jamboree. The summer event is held in the Aura Community Center, an old rambling frame hall in a wooded setting. There younger musicians have rubbed shoulders with old-timers, among them Finns like Art Moilanen and Helmer Toyras. The latter was the man we sought out today.

Matt had alerted Helmer of our impending trip and he suggested that we arrive either around nine in the morning or after midnight since he works the 3-11 shift for the Soiltex Corporation in nearby L'Anse. We opted for the earlier choice and, having rolled out of bed in Houghton at 6:30, we got to Helmer's right around nine. He, his wife, and stepdaughter live in a trailor on the old Toyras farmstead, just outside Aura and looking out onto Keweenau Bay. The driveway to the house was long, muddy, and rutted so we parked on the main road and, hefting our equipment, hiked the 100 yards or so to the front steps. In the background we could see the abandoned wood shingled frame house where Helmer grew up and, beyond, a few decrepit outbuildings and a hay barn in disrepair. Clearly the place hadn't been farmed in years.

As we entered the trailor we heard the strains of "Mocking Bird Hill." Helmer's stepdaughter was playing the organ while he sawed out the melody on fiddle. They laid aside their instruments and, along with Helmer's wife, welcomed us into the house. The place was cluttered and we learned later that the Toyrases had only lived in the trailor for two years. Clearly, they were accustomed to a larger dwelling. For example, the kitchen counters were piled high with paper plates and napkins, a set of pots and pans, and a store of detergent containers. The living room was equally stuffed with furniture - ranging from old wooden bureaus to chintzy trailor couches - and mementos of all kinds.

Pushing aside a few chairs in the kitchen area, we set the equipment up. The ladies adjourned to the living room as I explained to Helmer that we wanted to interview him first and then record his playing. Seated around the kitchen table, I began to ask Helmer about his life. Fifty-four years old, Helmer is of medium height and a bit stout, with greying hair and a small moustache. He was dressed in a green union suit and black billed cap in anticipation of departing for work in the early afternoon.

As it turned out, he had grown up with Finnish parents in the predominantly Finnish community of Aura. And, although his folks weren't musicians, Helmer had several

neighbors who played Finnish tunes on the fiddle for house parties and dances in nearby halls. Helmer took up the instrument while in high school. There he learned to read notes a little and got a taste for light classical pieces which he plays along with old Finnish numbers. In the 1950's he played "polka music" (after Frankie Yankovic) in a band called "The Highlighters" along with a piano accordionist and guitarist. Later on, he played mostly "for himself," but in the 60's through the mid-70's he and his wife ran a tavern in Kenton, Michigan. There he often performed tunes for customers and frequently musicians would stop in the place and jam with him. Helmer also played informally with the three Haupola brothers (fiddle, tenor banjo, and guitar) who lived just to the west in Bruce Crossing.

In 1976, through the efforts of folklorist Jens Lund, Helmer played at the Smithsonian Institution's Bicentennial Folklife Festival in Washington, D. C. There he picked up several old country tunes from visiting Finnish musicians.

While relating his background, Helmer revealed himself as a shy man of few words. He seldom gave more than the bare facts and, after a few attempts to coax vivid details from him, I decided that the man simply wasn't a talker and we'd best get on to the tunes. Helmer later corroborated by observation by saying that he's often lacked confidence in his playing and that he knew at an early age that he'd never make it as a professional musician because he didn't have the verbal gifts that characterize "an entertainer."

Fortunately, Matt's presence gave Helmer plenty of courage to perform. Having heard the man play several times, Matt commented on Helmer's melodic, ornamented style which was envied by many younger players. Helmer responded with fifteen or so Finnish numbers: polkas, waltzes, and schottisches. They ranged from tunes learned from older fiddlers, to numbers from Finnish 78's, to recent acquisitions from Finnish performers. During the recording session a man arrived to discuss business with Helmer's wife and stepdaughter. Their conversation is likely to be minimally present on parts of the tape.

Helmer's selection of Finnish numbers was prompted by a list he had compiled in advance. It included song titles and keys. After the Finnish tunes, I asked if Helmer had composed any numbers. He responded with a grin of quiet delight and launched into "Big Foot." Setting forth the melody on fiddle, Helmer ceased playing to sing out verses concerning a friendly extra-terrestrial monster. He also gave us a couple of sentimental love songs hearkening back to early 20th century parlor ditties.

Apparently Helmer composed these songs in the last three or four years and has sent tapes of them off to "songwriters' Contest" based in California.

Through fiddle books, an interest in country music, and contact with younger musicians with "old time" and "bluegrass" repertoires, Helmer has also added southern hoe down tunes like "Mississippi Sawyers," "Soldier's Joy," "Boil Them Cabbage Dow," and "Bill Cheatham" to his store. He rendered a few of these and then laid down his instrument. As has been our custom, I began to pack away the equipment and Matt pulled out his fiddle to entertain Helmer for awhile.

Soon the two were sharing different versions of the same tunes, observations on technique, and comments on the tone of each other's fiddle. They performed some hoe down duets and Helmer treated us to some light classical numbers as well as swing pieces like "Sweet Georgia Brown" and "Dark Town Strutters' Ball." He also recalled some Finnish tunes not on his list, among them: "Tiskarin Polka" and "Njulan Talkoo Polka." He clearly enjoyed the opportunity to have another fiddler with whom he could trade licks.

Probably this musical exchange would've continued til around two when Helmer had to leave for work. But Matt and I were tired out from our previous late night and early rising. About one o'clock, we decided to shove off. But not before sharing coffee, egg salad sandwiches, and cake with Helmer. We also promised to send him tapes of the session as well as a cassette of Matt's band. With addresses and thank yous exchanged, we headed off to photograph local landmarks before checking into a L'Anse motel for some well-earned rest.