

Informant: Jerry & Irene Novak  
Moquah, WI

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I left Northland about 12:30 for my one o'clock appointment with Jerry Novak. It was a gorgeous day: 77°, sunny, with a slight breeze. I turned from Highway 2 onto G and recalled Jerry's directions: take the second paved road to the left, then look for the first mailbox on the right. Approaching Moquah, I noticed some significant landmarks: a cemetery with the graves of earlier settlers, a few barn foundations and outbuildings deftly fashioned with fieldstone, and roads named for local Bohemian and Slavic families (Pagac, Johanik, etc.). In Moquah itself the neatly kept Community Center stood out. It is here that Moquah "Pioneer Days" take place in late July, here were community dances are held. Close by was the rectory and church building for Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic parish. A few miles out of Moquah I took the second paved road off G, but was unable to find Jerry. After some confused backtracking, as my car began to overheat in the unseasonable weather, I asked directions and located Jerry's place. To find it, proceed on G through Moquah to old U.S. 2 (almost at the point where G rejoins Highway 2), turn left and it's the first place on the right.

Jerry was in the driveway dressed in overalls and a brimmed hat. He had just been to fetch the mail and, as was the case in the summer of 1979 when I first visited him, he was sprightly for a man in his mid-eighties. As I got out of the car, Jerry informed me that he had inadvertantly given me bad directions and that he'd tried, without success, to call me and remedy the situation. I told him not to worry and that I'd gotten a better look at the countryside anyway. (A fieldworker has to have this sort of attitude or else face frequent frustration.)

I dragged my camera, tape recorder, tapes, notebooks, microphone, and assorted paraphenalia from the car and we marched through the backdoor onto a little porch which held the freezer, then from that area through the kitchen to a dining area. (See the appended floor plan.) As I passed only briefly through the kitchen I noticed quite a few jars newly filled with sauerkraut. We settled in the dining room, at the round table, as we had the previous summer. Once again I noticed the hutches filled with China dishes (a) shot glasses and other glassware (b), and mugs for coffee and beer (c). In hutch A I noticed some brightly painted crockery which may have been of central European design and origin, but I forgot to inquire. Hutch C held a couple of beer steins painted in central European style with pictures of

medieval peasant revelers. Mrs. Novak (nee Irene Lunda) was lying on the living room couch resting a sore hip. I never got into that room to take a look, but later on Mrs. Novak came out and joined us around the table.

As was the case the previous summer, Jerry was ready for action. He had made a list of 44 old Bohemian and Slovak songs that he recalled. The list contained titles in both Bohemian and English, with no words. Jerry also had an old harmonica on which to play the tunes for the songs. (I intended to photograph the harmonica and write down information concerning its manufacture toward the end of the interview, but, foolishly, I forgot.) The interview began a bit awkwardly. I suggested that Jerry give me the title in English and Bohemian, play the tune, recite or sing the words in Bohemian (if any), then give me a translation. Through the first dozen or so songs, I got only part of this information, interspersed with Jerry's answers to my questions about the sources, background, and contexts of the songs. Later on, however, we seemed to settle into a routine and Jerry gave me exactly what I needed.

As in the summer of 1979, Jerry's approach was to study and stare at the song list as he tried to recall the tune, original verses, and translations. Invariably he would lean forward, rustle the sheet, ponder and mutter a bit to himself, then lean back in his chair to play, sing, or speak. Occasionally he would chuckle at a humorous song, or his still piercing blue eyes would light up over a love song.

I might here say a few words about the technical aspects of tape recording Jerry. I kept the machine's level control at manual so as to best capture the highs and lows of Jerry's singing. However, he sometimes confused me by leaning forward or backward or turning his head sideways. Initially, I began the interview seated across from Jerry at the place in the diagram where Irene (IN) is shown. While in this position, I aimed one microphone at Jerry and the other at myself. After a while, though, I figured it was better to record Jerry with both microphones, while my queries could be picked up if I moved to the "JPL" spot on the diagram. Still later on, when Jerry had finished the songs on his list, Irene joined us to talk about the Moquah Dancers and her role in fashioning their costumes. For this phase of the session, I turned one of the microphones toward Irene.

The specific content of the interview, which covered songs primarily, but also touched on local foodways and custom - can best be discovered by consulting the tape log. But I would like to include in these notes references to two song books Jerry possessed. One was once the property of Frank Kromolis of Moquah: Cesko Americk! Zpevník. The page containing the copyright date appears to be torn out, but the volume was printed by August Geringer, 541 West 12th Street, Chicago, Illinois, 304 pp. Included are the words, with no tunes, for 291 songs. A handful (Hail

Columbia, My Country 'Tis of Thee, O Columbia! the Gem of the Ocean, and The Star Spangled Banner) are American patriotic tunes. The rest are in Czech. Jerry said some of the songs that he sang are also in this book, although he did not refer to the book while singing. I will try to indicate in my long which songs in Jerry's repertoire appear in this volume.

The other songbook was Harriet Pawlowska's Merrily We Sing, 105 Polish Folk-songs. Jerry's daughter had bought the book, and old library copy, at a sale in Oshkosh. I have Zeroxed both books for the Northland archives. It is worth noting that Jerry found many similarities between songs he knew and those in the Polish book. The themes of most of Jerry's pieces deal with the hard lot of the peasants, the hard lot of young men who were drafted into the Austro-Hungarian Army, and the plight of lovers.

Throughout the session - which lasted from roughly 1:30 until 4:00 - Jerry sang and talked without pause. I was really amazed by his tireless energy and his patience.

I parted about 4, with nearly 2-1/2 hours of tape and hopes of meeting the Novaks again soon.