

TAPE INDEX

DOWN HOME DAIRYLAND RADIO PROJECT

Francis McMahon
Madison, Wisconsin
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Recorded by J.P. Leary & R. March
Ampex 632 tape
Nagra 4-L recorder

1. Announcement.
2. Born 1932, youngest of 11, on farm, Hollandale, WI. Mother died 5/10/33. Dad not able to keep all kids together. At 19 months, F brought to current home on Dayton Street in Madison, raised by Aunt and Uncle who had one child. Aunt and Uncle considerably older. [Called these folks his mother and dad.]
3. Aunt and Uncle loved old time music, took F to dances as early as age four. One of the best halls was the original Turner Hall. It burned, present hall on same site, built 1941. In middle 1930s one of the most popular bands was Tony Salerno, Italian, violin player, fine band, played 4-6 nights a week, traveled to area towns by train. Known as "Gentleman Tony."
4. Likewise popular: Carl [Karl] Davidson Orchestra. Davidson built a pool hall in the 100 block of E. Main.
5. Original Eagles Ballroom another popular spot, on Doty Street where current county building stands. Huge ballroom. VFW Hall, current Esquire Theatre, was used by Leo Kale (sp?) and his School of the Dance. Family still has dance studio on Mifflin. VFW bought out Kale. Hall had an excellent wood floor, beautiful lighting. On University Avenue, Club Chateau, building stands just west of the current bagle bakery. Managed in the 1930s by a man named Mays who also managed Edwards Park, now Park Ponderosa, in McFarland. Coconut Grove also in Middleton. Dance floor lower than area with tables. Also a hall between Madison and Sun Prairie, Club List, now torn down.
6. Grew to love old time music. Would sit and watch the band play. Very fond of the violin. Watched a man named Hewitt who had a trio that played in bars in Madison. Also Grover Kingsley, father of Norm Kingsley (a fine trumpeter who played with Horace Heidt and his Musical Knights, also ran his own band in Madison). Hewitt trio: H on fiddle, brother on guitar and wife on guitar.
7. Hewitt always played standing up, would rub his hindend against the wall and wear out his pants. Grover Kingsley played for years at Mike Griffin's Bar, in present Shamrock Bar. Kingsley's daughter a fine piano player, another man on guitar and vocals. These little bands played dance music: waltzes, two steps in 6/8 time, polkas. Hewitts also played on W. Main in Chris Readon's (sp?) Tavern.
8. F fond of fiddle. Mother, dad's sister, taught him to jig at four. F would jig at dances and would pick up coins from the audience. Public dances, not necessarily Irish affairs. Always jigged to "Turkey in the Straw."
8. At 5, in 1937, begged to take violin lessons. Parents didn't take him seriously, but did get a fiddle from their daughter, Josephine (now 75), that Christmas. In 5th grade was able to learn from Leroy Kloese (sp?) who

instituted a string teaching program.

9. Got together first group at age 12, 1944. F had 5 brothers in the military. A neighbor, Mr. Tony (Thoeny?), had a record cutting machine and recorded F on piano, Leroy Gilbertson on guitar and steel guitar, and another boy on trumpet. F never mailed the record, still has it. Includes "Home Sweet Home."

Serge's
brother

10. Began piano lessons from Miss Lavin, took for four years. F reckons he didn't practice like he should have. Had a piano recital in the old YWCA building on State Street. Got too nervous and forgot the piece. That ended his formal piano experience.

11. Formed a group while in Central High School, The Terrible Four. Charlie Johnson on guitar, Dennis Crabtree on harmony fiddle, F on lead fiddle, Keith Stitch on accordion. Group lasted several years. Rehearsed at F's home. Was inspired by his sister in Dodgeville who was teaching and lured them there for a talent show. Group took 3rd. Continued, got a booker, 1948 booked at Wausau Hotel in Wausau to play for seven midwestern governors and their wives. Came out dressed like hillbillies, bare feet, smoldering corn cobs in big jugs to simulate powerful moonshine. Played hillbilly music and told corny jokes. F was Zeke, the other fiddler was Clem. F was 16. Booker late in picking group up in Madison, drove them to Wausau like a maniac. Farmer came toward them with a load of hay, near collision, needle buried all the way. F vowed to quit if he got out of the trip alive, and he did. Another musician, string bass, replaced F. Soon after Horace Heidt came to Madison with his talent show, auditions held prior and Terrible Four chosen as participants. They took second place. F disappointed. Heidt's "Tampa City Four," a hillbilly group that traveled with Heidt, given a run by the Four.

12. F decided to start a six piece band, The Shamrock Band. Used Vitak-Elsnic arrangements purchased for 75 cents through Ward Brodt Music. Weren't especially good arrangements. F's group had piano, drum, bass, trumpet, sax, and accordion. Arranged to practice at Atwood Community Building, in the hallway on the second floor. Rehearsed every Monday.

[Tape One Ends]

13. Church group began holding services in the big hall below. Minister leading services beneath the rehearsals. Got along okay, but one night minister reckoned they were interfering with the services. F's group had been there several months prior, told the minister their music probably as pleasing to god as his preaching. No problems thereafter.

14. Group got polished, joined the union, booked a job at Simon's Hall on Springfield Corners. A successful first gig, started to get more work. Late 1940s. Played several jobs in a new barn in Darlington. Farmer got such a big crowd that he kept up with weekly dances. Never put in stanchions, cows, or hay, but restrooms and a sandwich bar. Ran dances for several years. Man eventually hung himself on a beam over the stage where the band would play. F's group played there regularly up until then. Got Clarence Saheena (sp?) and his Barnstormers, from Dubuque?, and The Grenadiers (too late for Heinie, F thinks group out of Iowa).

15. Began to do live half hour every Saturday night on WIBU, then in Madison on the Square. On from 7-7:30, Emceed by George Slocum who did the "Old Timers Jamboree" on WIBU for many years.

16. Graduated from high school in 1951. Broke up the band anticipating being drafted. Went to Chippewa Falls to play fiddle in the Chippewa Valley Barn Dance Show with Scotty Swan (still a resident of Chippewa Falls). Played ca. 3 months with them. Met Lash Larue, The Bullwhip King then. Larue had a musical trio with a female string bass player and her violinist husband, also a guitar player. The couple had given Larue their notice. A bass player from Rice Lake, a steel guitar player from Ennis, Texas, and F were asked to join Larue. The other two did, but F went home to see his mother, his sweetheart, and to await induction two months later.

17. In military 1952-1954. 1954 reorganized the Shamrock Band. F feels he got good musicians to play with him. Rates himself as a 2 on a scale of 10 musician, but felt he had ability to organize. Was 22. Got Walter "Wally" Splettstoesser [4706 Judy Lane, Madison, 249-0817], formerly accordionist with the Lawrence Duchow Band, to play for him. Wally a Madison native, tired of road life after 2 1/2 years with Duchow. F asked him to join his band, W skeptical, wanted to know who else F had. F recruited other fine musicians to entice W. Got Joe Niemann, a fine old time sax man and arranger. Got Gene Allen of McFarland on bass horn, banjo, and trombone. Got a good trumpeter, a drummer, and F plunking chords. Had Grover Kingsley move a piano into the basement, began rehearsing their. "Farmer's Wedding Waltz" the first arrangement Niemann wrote for them. F called this number 5-6 times during their first job at Turner Hall. Arrangement from Six Fat Dutchmen.

18. Billed as "Wisconsin's Most Versatile Old Time Band." Six musicians who could play 12-13 instruments. Niemann wrote six piece arrangements based on Loeffelmacher, Wilfahrt, Yankovic, and Pecon.

* 19. Battle of music with Six Fat at Waunakee on a bitter cold night very memorable. Loeffelmacher listened intently. After Shamrock set, told F "you blankety-blank, you're playing all my music and you're playing it better than we play it." Harold tried to hire their bass horn player, Ronald Meitner of Waterloo, WI. A 300 pounder and a great player. [Eventually killed himself.] Meitner worked at the Post Office in Waterloo. Played 12-13 years with Don Peachey after F broke up his band.

20. Also thrilling to play battle of music at Watertown Turner Hall, horrible sleeting night, with Frankie Yankovic. Frankie arrived late from Duluth. Band set up in 15 minutes. Huge crowd. Also played a Watertown battle of music with Bernie Roberts.

* 21. Lawrence Duchow would come to Madison Turner Hall every Thursday night, including Thanksgiving. Drew 500-700 people. Very crowded. Late 1940s, early 1950s. Fezz Fritsche would come to Turner Hall too. Like Loeffelmacher, from New Ulm, "Oompah City," as depicted in Life magazine in the late 1940s.

22. Loefflemacher would come to Turner Hall twice a year, in the spring and fall. F would come early to see them unload. Vern Bottenfield's organ dropped in its wooden case from the back of the bus by rambunctious fellow musicians.

Vern not pleased, but the organ worked.

23. F had to quit the band for health reasons in 1958. Had a great band then: Earl Smith on sax and clarinet (Smith then went with Doc DeHaven); Jack Olstead on trumpet; and others. A few months later approached by a promoter, Marion Balusek (sp?) of Verona about restarting the band to go on TV. Reorganized the band, with some new musicians. Went on Channel 3, on Sundays, 12:15-12:45, right before the Packers came on. Played for three years until it got too much for F. Did 113 shows. Did a live show and taped one every other Sunday. Could watch themselves on the off week.

24. Lots of hard work to be on the tube. Would arrive 9:30 AM, wouldn't leave until 4:45, without a break. Three days prior had to give producer a song list, measure by measure, with list of instruments featured, so that camera crew would be ready. Had to be careful not to repeat songs too often. Had to get permission to perform some songs. Had to rehearse entire show before doing it so the camera men would be ready.

25. Had a fine vocalist, Miss Lois, who sounded like Peggy Lee and "could sing harmony with anything." Did quite a few duets. Had a section called "Philosophy Time" which had a religious element. Some sponsors didn't like the idea of talking about Christ and then going into "Old Lady Polka" or "Schneider Polka." F had no problem with this and continued.

26. Rudy Burkhalter played one year with the band. F glad to have him since he was a fine musician and well known.

[Tape Two ends]

27. Got lots of work for wedding dances at Smitty's Hall in Waunakee. Lots of people got married during the week, had dances on weeknight. Bass man, Ron Meitner, would have to drive back to Platteville for 7:30 AM classes. F also had to get up at 6 AM. Band would get home at 2:45 from an average job. Job finished at 1AM, didn't get packed until 1:45, generally home an hour later.

28. Once caught in a furious blizzard in Monroe. Decided to head back anyway. F drove in low gear from Monroe to Paoli. Met a plow going down the long hill to New Glarus. Plow didn't see them, F had a trailer on the back, nearly didn't make it. Drove many times in fog and heavy rain.

29. TV show called "Co-op Family Show," put on by Central Co-op Exchange. Publicized show on their jobs, publicized jobs on the show. Had very good Nielsen ratings. Good announcer: Jerry Dean, the Dean of Madison Television.

4 30. Sammy Eggum and his band was on during and after the period F was on TV. Also popular: Dick Sherwood. F's band strictly old time, Dick "more in the western vein." Sherwood a fine fiddler.

31. Bobby Rice Family also on Channel 3. They would come in as F's band left.

32. Joey Tantillo also very popular, excellent accordionist. Grew up in the Bush, later years lived on west side.

33. Other bands: Zimbrick's Music Makers, Armond Husbau (sp?), Uncle Julius.
34. Uncle Julius (Ross Gordon) from New York State, worked at WKOW as an announcer. Spun old time records in the morning for Doughboy Feeds. He didn't like old time music, got boring spinning disks, so he began to talk to the record like it was a band he was leading. Used German dialect. People thought he had a band, began writing in asking his band to play jobs. An opportunity for a band, so Gordon got some good players. Joe Niemann wrote arrangements. Oudie (sp?) Ives, from central WI, also joined the band as an arranger. Their book was a difficult one, requiring excellent musicians--Uncle Julius drew from several good bands. The Uncle Julius Band took off. Traveled in a limousine, with a panel truck to carry the instruments, got bookings 4-5 nights a week. Doughboy Feeds began to put free tickets to a Julius dance in their flour. Record show then came on at noon hour instead of early in the morning: opportunities to push the band; also made fine recordings. Ca. 1949-1954. Reminiscent of Heinie and His Grenadiers.
35. Although a young man, ca. 35, Julius would grey his hair and wear a fake moustache, projected himself as a man in his 70s. Went to German classes at vocational school and listened to German people trying to learn to speak English. Did an excellent job picking up dialect.
36. Tantillo's band strictly old time, tight 6 piece band. Band included Sam Dana who played trumpet with Tantillo, trombone later with F, had played with Bunny Berigan.
37. F got to know Tony Salerno well. One of F's older brothers worked at a cook for Salerno at a sandwich shop on University Avenue. F asked brother to ask Tony to give F's band some pointers. He did this several times, coming out to jobs at the East Side Businessman's Club. F doesn't know if he made recordings, doesn't think so. Rudy Burkhalter played with Salerno.
38. Rudy Burkhalter first started playing with the Moser Brothers of Switzerland. Traveled throughout Europe. Came to USA for 1938 World's Fair in Chicago. R decided to settle in Madison, become US citizen. Began his popular accordion school. Played with various bands. F can remember him from age 14. F had Rodney Malm as accordionist in one of his first bands, one of Rudy's better students.
39. Sammy Eggum's band played mostly by ear, F thinks. Band stemmed from Emil Simpson and His Nighthawks, a band F used to see play at the VFW Hall when he was 14. Went there to dance, along with Leroy Gilbertson. Emil played the fiddle very well. Sammy Eggum young then, played rhythm guitar for Emil. When Emil quit, Sammy formed his own band. Their TV show very popular because people could go out and dance on it, "The Dairyland Jubilee."
40. F never knew John Schermerhorn personally, saw him on Sammy Eggum Show.
41. F always proud that he came from Irish heritage. F's biological dad likewise proud to be Irish. St. Patrick's Day always a big deal for F. Wore a shamrock, later wore green clothes, green tie, shamrock, and a derby. Called in by Miss Smith, the strict junior high principal. F a little worried, but she complimented him for his dress. Followed this custom thereafter. When he

started his band, wanted something Irish and liked the sound of "McMahon and his Shamrock Band." His German, Italian, Swiss, and occasional Norwegian musicians didn't seem to mind.

42. As an Irish-American, F doesn't mind playing essentially Czech-German music. Always has loved old time music and feels it has never gotten the recognition it deserves.

43. F always strived to have his band be as good as it possibly could be, no matter the size of the audience. One bad job will do more harm than 99 good ones.

44. F felt he wasn't the easiest man to play for. Serious, fussy about the music, the conduct of the musicians, how the stage looked. Reckoned Lawrence Welk similar, never a great accordionist but had the ability to put together a tremendous orchestra. F known likewise as a tough man who demanded the best from his musicians and from himself.

[The interview ends.]