
Chapter 7

Wisconsin's Ethnic Country Music

Program 7 Performances

1. Ray Calkins, "The River in the Pines."
2. Leonard Finseth, "Indian War Whoop."
3. Leonard Finseth, "Swamper's Revenge on the Windfall."
4. Cousin Fuzzy, "Hillbilly Leprechaun."
5. Rodney Ristow and the Swiss Girls, "Out behind the Barn."
6. Pee Wee King, "Tennessee Polka."
7. Otto Blihovde, "Gamel'ost (Old Cheese) Song."
8. Norm Dombrowski and the Happy Notes, "Great Musicians Polka."
9. Ray Rubenzer's Guys and Gals, "Yoo-Hoo Valley Waltz."
10. Andy Justmann, "Wabash Cannonball."

Lumber Camps, Schools, and House Parties

American folklorists, and country music enthusiasts generally, have long been interested in the complex relationship between southern and western traditional rural music and its commercially recorded and broadcast offshoots: hillbilly, western swing, bluegrass, rockabilly, honky tonk, and country. Meanwhile a small but significant body of writings has focused upon the rural traditions of northern musicians in the Canadian maritimes, New York State, and Minnesota (Barfuss 1983; Bronner 1987; Roberts 1978; Taft 1975). Praiseworthy inasmuch as they document the unmistakable existence of "northern country music," these studies are overwhelmingly limited to monolingual performers of Anglo-Celtic origin. Yet the multilingual progeny of European immigrants to the western Great Lakes region likewise strum guitars and don cowboy hats to play a hybrid repertoire of polkas and hoedowns on accordions and guitars.

How did European "ethnic" and Anglo-Celtic "country" music come together in America's Upper Midwest? Evidence gathered in Wisconsin shows the process at work in the late nineteenth century, especially in the lumber camps. Logging provided immigrants with winter employment and crews were often ethnically diverse. While Finnish accordion tunes or German drinking songs might resound in some bunkhouses, the ubiquitous Irish jacks, many of them veterans of Canadian camps, had the greatest impact.

Carl Gunderson, a Swede and lumber-camp cook, worked with Irishmen on the Flambeau River north of Ladysmith. Beyond vivid memories of breaking a rival cook's arm with a rolling pin, Gunderson came away with "Paul Bunyan's Ox," a version of the hyperbolic "Derby Ram," from the singing of an Irish jack (Gunderson 1973 I). Emery DeNoyer, the blind French-Canadian singer from Rhinelander, entertained loggers with a cappella ballads rendered squarely in

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the Irish “woods” style (Leary 1987b:21–22). Bill Hendrickson, a Finn from Herbster, learned the broadside ballad “Willie Taylor”—concerning a bold woman who follows her lover to sea—from an Irish singer, Dennis Dailey (Hendrickson 1981 I). In 1914, meanwhile, Bohemian-born Jerry Novak signed on with a crew of Slavs to log on the Bad River in Ashland County. Their bosses, Yankees and Irish-Canadians, knew plenty of bawdy songs. Perhaps because he had a houseful of sisters at home, Novak retained only a “clean” version of “The Shantyboy’s Alphabet.”

“A” is for axes, as all of us know,
And “B” is for the boys who can use them also. . . .

(Novak 1979 I)

Before entering the camps, Novak had already acquired a string of what he called “school songs” in the one-room country school he attended with Czech, Finnish, Polish, and Slovak children. Uniformly in English, these songs included patriotic anthems, popular hits of the day, rural favorites like “Put on Your Old Gray Bonnet” and “The Old Gray Mare,” and blackface minstrel songs like Henry Clay Work’s “In de Year ob Jubilo.” A young Jenny Viitala had a similar experience amidst the homesteading Finns of Toivola, Michigan, on the shores of Lake Superior.

After the bell rang and we sat down, the teacher read the roll call. Then we had fifteen or twenty minutes of singing. How we loved to sing! Picture fifty or more kids of every size, age, and shape singing Irish ballads and Scottish folk songs with a broad Finnish accent! (Vachon 1973:2)

Certainly these English language verses were part of an assimilationist scheme (Viitala was also punished for speaking Finnish in the schoolyard), but the songs carried their own appeal.

Beyond acquiring an Anglo-Celtic repertoire in lumber camps and schools, the Upper Midwest’s European immigrants encountered dance tunes amidst the give-and-take of “doings” in the homes, halls, and outdoor boweries of rural neighborhoods and small towns. Vivian Eckholm Brevak grew up in Bayfield County, Wisconsin, amidst Swedes, Finns, Hungarians, and English Canadians. Her father, Carl, was a Swedish-born fiddler with his store of old country tunes, but her most vivid musical memories centered on gatherings of “all kinds of people” in the homes of the McCutcheons, the Days, or the Cooks. In keeping with the crowd’s varied composition there were “lotta square dances. Schottisches though, too, and old-time waltzes and polkas. Not modern stuff, though.” Her longtime neighbor and friend, Netty Day Harvey, chimed in, “And two-steps too . . . and the broom dance, and the circle two-step” (Brevak and Harvey 1981 I).

Pappy Eatmore’s Barn Dance Jubilee

By the early twentieth century, the Upper Midwest’s European immigrants had not only absorbed the basic elements of what would evolve into country music (Anglo-Celtic ballads, sentimental and parlor songs, blackface minstrelsy, fiddle tunes), but they had also begun to synthesize old- and new-world musical elements in events ranging from informal house parties to organized public programs.

In 1904, for example, Ashland was a bustling mill town, railhead, and port on Lake Superior where Germans, Italians, Scandinavians, and Slavs jostled with English, Scots, and Irish. Editions of the *Ashland Daily Press* touted their musical activities, while likewise covering the appearance of such touring companies as the Great Barlow’s Minstrels. When St. Agnes’s Catholic Church offered a



Ray Calkins playing the lumberjack's psalmodikon, the "Viking Cello," Chetek, 1988 Photo: Jim Leary

"Home Talent Minstrel Night" for one thousand onlookers, the results were predictably eclectic. Besides the obligatory "tambo and bones" blackface performers of "coon songs" and the recitation of a "Negro piece" by Hilda Bloomquist, the evening included Archie McDougall's execution of the highland fling to bagpipe accompaniment, as well as a comic "Italian and Bear Act" by John Allo and Will Garnich in which "Dago maka de beara clima the pole to the telegraph." Garnich, a Croatian, was also locally renowned for singing Irish songs, while Ms. Bloomquist was celebrated for comic renderings of Scandinavian-American dialect.

Thirty years later and thirty miles to the east, Pappy Eatmore's Barn Dance Jubilee upheld the region's mixed tradition. Clearly inspired by the "National Barn Dance"—established with mostly rural southern entertainers on Chicago's radio station WLS in 1924—the Ironwood, Michigan, jubilee featured northern "polkabilly" bands, with cowboy hats and accordions, like "Curly Bradley and His Hard Cider Boys" (a Slovak, three Finns, and two Italians). While the "Boys" dispensed a mixture of hoedowns and polkas, a pair of stereotypical comics—mustachioed "Tony" the Italian workman and stalwart "Ole" the Scandinavian bumpkin—lent ethnic accents to rustic foolery.

Nor has the ethnic-country interweaving diminished in ensuing decades. Not only have northern ethnics valued both their old-world heritage and the "new" music of Anglo-Celtic Americans, but their sociocultural experiences have closely paralleled those of the rural southerners who created country music. When Alabama's Hank Williams sang, "I left my home down on the old rural route," he was speaking to plenty in the Upper Midwest who left the land for work in industrial centers like Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Chicago, and Detroit. When Bobby Bare sang about homesick southerners on auto assembly lines in "Detroit City," he was singing to countless northerners who shared the same sentiment. Country music's "hillbilly" preoccupations with mobility, home, rural life, labor, exuberant sociability, loneliness, and religion have always been shared by the Upper Midwest's "jackpine savages."

Thirty years later and thirty miles to the east, Poppy Lattimer's new dance jubilee upheld the region's mixed tradition. Clearly inspired by the "national" radio station WLS in 1934—the broadwood, Michigan jubilee featured northern "polka-like" banter with cowboy hats and accoutrements, like "Crazy Banjo" and "The First Lady Love" (a sleazy, three-time and two-takes). While the "love" dispersed a mixture of banter and folk, a part of stereotypical contact—mischievous "Tony" the Italian workman and fellow "OK" the Scandinavian bouncer—last ethnic accents to trace back.