

Collector: Jim Leary

December 10, 1980

Subject: Ethnic Music in the Ironwood/Hurley Area

I traveled with Greta Swenson to the Ironwood/Hurley area in an attempt to track down information on old time ethnic music in an area where I knew Finns, Italians, Bohemians, and Poles to be numerous. Our first stop was at the work place of Phil Kucera, Pine Tree Studios on Aurora Street. Kucera heads the North Country Folk Festival in Ironwood. While largely a folk-song revival enterprise, Kucera's festival also involves local ethnic music. Moreover, he is a native of the area and knows it well.

Kucera recommended several people whom I have added to my contact list:

Al Czerniak, a Bohemian. He used to own a roadhouse and now plays a chordovox. Previously, he had played with Ray "Cowboy" Anderson who once headed the area's Finnish Festival chorus;

and

John Chovan of French ancestry. This man plays guitar, fiddle, and clarinet and his repertoire is varied, including numbers like Red Foley's sentimental "Old Shep";

and

Wally Johnson (a Swede?). He played in numerous city bands which were very vigorous in the early 20th century;

and

Dominic Pitrone, an Italian. Pitrone is an active member of Bessemer's "Paisano Club," an ethnic organization holding periodic celebrations involving singing and music.

Having gained these leads from Kucera, we visited the Ironwood museum, one block away from his place on McLeod Street.

Numerous artifacts testified to the importance of ethnic music in the area. Among them were a zither of the sort used by Swedish sacred "string bands." There were pictures of an Italian Brass Band of 1908 posing at Bonnie Location of Ironwood, and of John Showbitz, "last street car conductor," posing in 1910 with a piano accordion manufactured by the Overini Company. There was a 78 record by Viola Turpeinen and John Rosendahl: "Kaustisen Polkka" and "Ihana Maa Masurkka" on Victor (V-4034). There were also several tickets advertising dances: a social at the Scandinavian Hall in Ironwood, Sept. 22, 1917; and a Saturday night dance sponsored by the "Worker's Alliance" and featuring the "Rhythm Makers" on December 11, 1937. Finally, several posters advertised dances, especially those given by Sylvia Polso on accordion and Charles Ritala on violin.

Subject: Ethnic Music in the Ironwood/Hurley Area

December 10, 1980

From the museum, we traveled to the Aurora Athletic Club. Bob Mathiowetz of Ashland had played here with his old time band and I hoped to learn about old time musicians who held forth in the place. The bartender appeared to be ignorant, but referred me to Jim Strand of Hurley who works in the shoe department of Penney's in Ironwood. Strand books bands for the Club, but it was his day off when I inquired at Penney's.

Next stop was Johnson's Music in Ironwood. Here, I hoped to gauge the local demand for commercial ethnic music. The records in stock showed a wide range of ethnic diversity, including: The Gogebic Range Tamburitians, Johnny's Hot Shots (Johnny and Einar Kivela), Walter Johnson, Yankovic, John Pecon, Whoopee John Wilfahrt, old country records from Scandinavia and Yugoslavia, and "Balkan" label records from Berwyn, Illinois. There were also numerous song and tune books including six volumes of Yankovic books dating from the 1940's and more recent collections from Zagreb.

From Johnson's Music, we moved to Bill Trolla's market and butcher shop on Silver Street in Hurley. Trolla, an Italian, makes and stocks Italian sausage. He also carries various ethnic cheeses. I inquired about old time Italian musicians and Bill came up with several names.

Sam Valenti, a piano accordion player. He used to play for weddings and once had a thriving accordion school;

and

Zenda DeRubis, a piano accordion player now hampered by a heart attack;

and

Florence Liberata, a member of the Paisano Club.

It was only a short distance from Trolla's to the Iron County Historical Society's museum, so that was our next stop.

The museum encased an old button accordion of Italian manufacture, but the place's greatest worth lay in its photography collection. A gallery on the second floor had a section on area bands. On display were: the Garibaldi Society of Pence with their instruments; the "Iron Belt Band" with John Rosendahl (Viola Turpeinen's husband?); the "Pine Lake Ice House Entertainers" of 1940 (guitar and button accordion); the "Hurley Concert Orchestra of 1908 with drums, trumpet, clarinet, and concertina; and unidentified (probably Italian) band with concertina, piano accordion and guitar; several town bands and coronet bands; and a huge

picture of Valenti's Accordion School, class of 1944, showing 60 or so piano accordion players of various ages.

The community meeting for Greta's Ethnic Heritage Training Program also took place at the museum and, from those gathered, I gained more information:

Helen Jolonen of Ironwood told me she had numerous Finnish 78's which I could record in the spring;
and

Anselm Polso of Kimball. His sister Sylvia, now living in Colorado, was a big-time local accordion player who performed with Viola Turpeinen;
and

Frances Hadwick, and Olivia and Elizabeth Holemo of Ironwood. Their father was a big wheel in local city bands, and taught music at Hurley High;
and

Johnny Lombardo of Ironwood, Italian. His wife told me that he played guitar and sang Italian songs at weddings with a "beautiful voice." Moreover, "he knows all the musicians on the Range."

Veikko Jarvi, a Finnish born member of the Finnish Festival Chorus (he's their vice president) told me about his Club's performances of song and dance for Christmas, Mother's Day, and Midsummer (complete with a bonfire). He wintered amongst Finns in Florida where he and his wife were known as good hambo dancers. Veikko named several area Finnish musicians.

Elsie Nevala, who runs the Charm Beauty Salon in Ironwood and directs the Finnish Festival Chorus, also plays old dance tunes on the piano accordion;
and

Bill Koskola of Ironwood used to play piano accordions at weddings.

Whew! Clearly, I've got my work cut out for me in the Ironwood/Hurley area.