

Ray Polarski

Most of the pertinent information regarding Polarski is in the JMKAC report from February 1986, but there are a few updates.

Although Polarski general utilizes only local woods for his fiddles--generally maple or walnut bodies and some cedar tops--he also orders straight-grained Sitka spruce for some of his tops. Polarski has made a number of special tools for the delicate and exacting purfling or inlay work around the edges of his fiddles.

Since the 1986 report, Polarski's second wife died and he now only has one residence and a different phone number:

[REDACTED]  
Three Lakes, WI 54562  
[REDACTED]

Supplementary materials: 1) taped interview and index; 2) color slides and B&W photos.

Availability of instruments: Polarski is very willing, in fact he would have lent us a fiddle to take away on the spot. He has made wooden carrying cases for his fiddles and will ship one whenever he gets the word.

Special considerations: Nothing in particular, but it's good to note that Polarski sold two fiddles as a result of being contacted by people who had seen the JMKAC exhibit.

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JMKAC--WFAS

ARTIST: POLARSKI, Ray

(Last Name in Caps)

SKILL: violin maker, bird carver, wood worker

DOCUMENTATION: Photo Nos.:

Slide Nos.: 27/30-27/38, 28/1-28/19

Tape Nos.:

INTERVIEW DATA: Contact Dates: February 7, 1986

Interviewer: James P. Leary

Artist's Address: [REDACTED] (winter residence) Phone: [REDACTED]

Three Lakes 54562

County: Oneida

[REDACTED], Three Lakes, summer residence]

Biographical Information:

Date and Place of Birth: 1915 at [REDACTED] farm, Three Lakes

Training: Always "handy with a jack knife." Carved cedar fans, whistles, and a wooden fiddle as a young kid. Saw various lumberjacks, Finns especially, carve chains, balls in cages, and canes with dice in the handle. Started repairing violins at 13. Repaired the instrument of an old French Canadian in return for a lesson in how to play "Little Brown Jug" on the fiddle.

Occupation(s): Farmer and carpenter.

Group Affiliations (Ethnic, Religious, Social): Considers himself Austrian-American, despite the fact that his last name is Polish and that he grew up speaking Polish as a second language. There are many Poles in Three Lakes.

Other Pertinent Data and Comments from Field Experience:

Ray's father, Joe, was a good button accordion and concertina player who entertained at dances, weddings, and house parties. In addition to repairing violins, Ray himself plays in a "hoe down" style with his fiddle tucked to his lower rib cage.

Description of Skill: (Objects produced/activities practiced, quality of work, audience for work; how/when acquired skill, how often practiced, how expresses group/community values)

As the slides will show, Ray makes violins and carves various animals. He has

been repairing fiddles since 1928 and making them since the late 1930s, chiefly as a hobby. Altogether he's made about 50 violins. He has four or five on hand, others have been given to siblings and children, and he's sold some. He uses local woods for the bodies of his instruments, but buys imported woods for bridge, pegs, and other parts. Made from maple, walnut, and other woods, and well varnished, his fiddles are a lovely sight. What's more they are light, have good action, and a fine tone. Ray reckons he got \$1200 for one from a Nashville professional musician. There is little market for his work in northern Wisconsin, however. And because Ray treats his violin-making as a hobby rather than a business, his reputation is limited to a community of family and local seniors with a taste for old time music.

This fall Ray decided to take six once-a-week sessions devoted to the rudiments of bird carving--partly as therapy for a broken wrist, and partly as an extension of his lifelong involvement with woodworking. In the past few months he has carved numerous loons, owls, gulls, eagles, woodpeckers, and beavers.

Ray has also made wooden weather indicators or arrows for years, as well as wooden multi-colored whirligigs from bars of wood--the kind that spiral around dissolving one color into another.

Description of Work: (Types of work, titles, functions, years created, media and techniques, sizes, condition, suitability for exhibition and availability for loan)

Much of this information has already been covered and there is little point in describing Ray's violin-making since it follows the standard methods of the craft.

Polarski's loons are standard decoy size. He roughs them out on a bandsaw in his woodshop, then does the finish work with a jack knife, and his daughter does the painting. Ditto with his other carved birds and animals, excepting the owl which Ray has decorated with woodburning. The birds and animals measure from 8" to 1'.

While Polarski's bird carvings are well <sup>done</sup>, we should probably look for other work for the exhibit since other carvers have been at this particular practice longer and without benefit of a carving class. The man's violins, however, are very fine indeed and, should we include other handmade musical instruments, Polarski's work would fit with the best. He would be willing to loan a violin.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for  
Cedarburg Cultural Center  
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): October 31, 1989  
Interviewee: Ray Polarski  
Address: [REDACTED]  
Three Lakes, Wisconsin 54562

Phone: [REDACTED]

Equipment Used: Nagra Mono  
Stereo: no                      Dolby: no  
Tape Brand/Length: Ampex 632  
Amount Used: Side 1: half  
General Subject: musical instrument  
making  
Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary,  
Lewis Koch

Recording Location: Polarski home  
Other People Present: two neighbors

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

I had interviewed Polarski previously in 1985 in connection with the survey of Wisconsin Folk Art done for the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, so I did not tape full interview with Polarski; rather I interviewed him a little about his fiddle making, but more about his playing and the sources of his tunes. I also recorded several tunes.

The recording was made in Polarski's kitchen. He had just been posing with the fiddle and playing a bit while Lewis Koch took some pictures, so the time was appropriate for taping. I made the recording on a Nagra open reel recorder and later dubbed it onto cassette.

## TAPE INDEX

### Tape 1, Side 1

1. Announcement.
2. Ray describes his favorite fiddle. Air dried hard maple sides, neck, and scroll. Top is a high grade Sitka spruce, but Ray has also used local pine, balsam, and cedar with good results. A professional thought R's non-spruce tops had a great sound.
3. Got started at about 12. Listened to a French-Canadian neighbor, Wesley Warden, who played violin with an accordionist. R liked the music, wanted to learn to play. Repaired a fiddle for Warden and learned a tune, "Little Brown Jug" from him in return. Then determined to make one himself. Pretty rough at first, like a cigar box fiddle, but he was on his way. "So, that's how I got started." [Good for DHD.]
4. Dad from Austria, Germany. Uncle was a great violin maker in Austria. Dad was a good musician.
5. Wants to pass on instrument making skills to his children, "but they have no desire." A man in Three Lakes, Scott Brewster, is learning from Ray. R has made a violin for each of his children. Means to keep on making as long as he can. "The good Lord has blessed me with a steady hand." Steadiness is essential for inlaying the purfling (sp?).
6. Buys purfling, strings, and chinrest from International Violin Company in Wilmington, North Carolina. Makes tailpiece, bridges, fingerboard, keys, and of course the body. Buys E-string adjuster.
7. Makes his key welds a little heavier than average because it holds the pegs better. Always keeps his violins tuned tight so they won't go dead. They vibrate when there's a loud noise. When they're tuned you can always pick them up and play them.
- Ray begins to play a few tunes.
8. "Siwy Kon," the Grey Horse Polka. Learned from his dad. [Might be good for Polish fiddling or fiddling DHD program.]
9. Red Wing. [goofs up in one spot]
10. Irish Washerwoman [an idiosyncratic version, slightly scratchy, might work for DHD fiddling], with a nice outro, "That's an old tune that Wesley Warden played and I like that very much."
11. "Dad used to play the old schottische." Schottische. [Perhaps better for DHD than 10.]
12. I ask for a laendler, Ray searches for one, but mostly fiddles phrases from "Great Speckled Bird" and its relatives, ala Roy Acuff.
13. "Here's a comical one, 'How Much is the Mutt in the Window.'"

14. "I'll play you one that they like at dances quite a bit. They like 'Home on the Range.'" [a slow and faltering version]

End of Session