

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

March 18, 1981

Informants: Tom and Ann Johanik
 Elmer Johanik
 Joe and Helen Johanik
 George and Rose Galik
 Stanley and Kate Augustine
 Moquah, Wisconsin

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For months I'd been trying to set up a recording session with Tom Johanik, always with little success. His dad Phil, now deceased, had been the noted button accordionist in the Moquah area and Tom knew many of his tunes and still had his old instruments. The trouble was that Tom was very busy. Apart from his job at Ashland High in Industrial Arts, he was also affiliated with the vocational school. Both jobs required attendance at evening meetings beyond daytime work. And then Tom was busy with cutting wood, gardening, hunting, fishing, helping his children build their homes, Moquah Men's Club activities, and gigs with his band, "The Polkateers." When I finally pinned him down to the March 18 recording date, it required that we go over his calendar several weeks in advance so as to find a free night.

As the date approached, Tom suggested that he get some others in the community together to join him in singing. That plan sounded fine to me and we arranged to gather at Tom's place at 7:30. Matt Gallmann and I had no trouble finding the house. It's the first place on the left on the Ski Hill Road off County G in Moquah. We were the first to arrive and Tom's wife Ann ushered us in to their rambling ranch house. Lugging equipment, we passed through the kitchen and into the living room where Tom was seated in a big armchair making out a list of tunes from his father's repertoire. I reproduce it here.

Songs

1. Badi Bi Vas
2. Hore Vahom
3. Richtarova Cera
4. Pod Tym Nasim Okieneckom
5. Cervene Satacek (Red Handkerchief)
6. Nene Lepsje Jako Zjara
7. Baruska
8. Zulida
9. Ciganka (Gypsy Polka)
10. Visela Beda
11. Cervena Venko (Red Wine)
12. Noc Mjova (Night in May)
13. Modra Oce (Blue Eyes)
14. Boleras, Boleras
15. Pod Crwanom
16. Moja Mila Zadremala Ja

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17. Som Spal (Cardas)
18. Luka Zelena
19. Sirotek (Slovak version of "Ja Sam Sirota")
20. Zezen
21. Dratar Isel Dratar Poletitse
22. Sla Naminka Do Zali (Annie in The Cabbage Patch)

I recognized some of these numbers as being in Jerry Novak's repertoire (4, 6, 13, 14, 18), while others were well known to Ashland's Bohemians (4, 7, 18, 22); and then there was the "Orphan Boy" song (19) so popular among the Croatians.

At Tom's elbow were two of his dad's old accordions, both from Czechoslovakia. There was a small one row button accordion, and a fancy two row instrument with leather bellows. The latter was in its original case along with the original bill of sale, a song book, a catalogue of the company's instruments, and a song list in Phil's handwriting (it contained both Slovak and "English" numbers like "Golden Slippers" and "Indian Maid" for "Red Wing."

In the background we could hear a button accordion band's playing. Tom had a table set up with a stereo and tape player. There were country western artists like Charley Pride and Jim Reeves in evidence and, predictably, plenty of polka bands. We were listening to a Czech band from Nebraska on the "Ray" label.

While we were talking to Tom, we also met his teenage son Phil, who is confined to a wheel chair. The couple have two other sons and a daughter. Although I neglected to ask his age, I'd guess Tom to be in his early 50's while his wife is a bit younger. Shortly thereafter, Elmer Johanik, Tom's older brother (early 60's ?) arrived. And, upon his heels, came the others: Joe and Helen Johanik, the Galiks, and the Augustines. All these people grew up together in Moquah and they range in age from early 50's to mid 60's. Their parents were the first generation of Moquah pioneers and all were children when the first group of Moquah Dancers were formed.

Since the group was large, I decided against trying to do a life history of each person gathered. Instead, I asked questions about local house parties, seasonal festivities, weddings, communal labor, singing, dancing, noted musicians, and the like. Joe and Tom Johanik dominated the talk, both were good storytellers with sharp memories. But others contributed their part. Helen Johanik had some good stories to tell about Easter Monday pranks; Elmer Johanik recalled the words to songs sung to the bride at

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weddings; and so on. As the tape index shows, the participants were detailed and enthusiastic in their responses. After about an hour and a half, we took a break to prepare for the music and song. Conversation might've gone on longer, but Elmer had to leave for night watchman work by 10:30 and the others had work to do in the morning.

For the singing and playing, we decided to arrange the singers in a half circle flanking Tom on his Dad's two row button accordion. The bunch used to sing together plenty in their youth and, as Stanley Augustine put it, "whenever they had a belly full" of strong drink. Now days house party singing is mostly confined to Saturday night during the annual Moquah Pioneer Days festivity. Once positioned, Tom struck up his tune and the others joined in with enthusiasm. They went through fourteen numbers, some of which weren't on the list that Tom had drawn up. Occasionally, the songs featured an occasional verse in English to go along with the Slovak works ("Ja Sam Sirota," "Hore Vahom"). One tune, "Muzikanty," featured pantomiming. It's a formula song wherein various musicians introduce themselves. They then pretend to play the fiddle, the clarinet, and other instruments. Another highlight of the singing was "Ked Sa Setik Ozenili" which changed into a raunchy Slovak parody of "The Old Grey Mare." There was plenty of laughter, wry face-making and eyeball rolling during this number.

Unfortunately, during this wonderful performance, the batteries on the Nagra began wearing and they made a disconcerting machine noise which interfered with the tape. We made the rest of the recordings on cassette only. Whilst mentioning this snafu, I might as well confess another bonehead move. Doing fieldwork at a mad pace has many consequences: some delightful, some dreadful. I had lent out the camera I normally use and, upon receiving it again, I thought it had film in it. Stupidly, however, the camera was empty and my supposed great shots are void. This blunder was especially regrettable as the evening wore on.

After fourteen songs it was roughly 10:30 and Elmer had to leave for work. Accordingly, the rest figured it was time to cease their performance. Besides, they were eager to hear a Finnish tune from Matt on his button accordion. As Matt was playing, I put the equipment away. But, after a few tunes by Gallmann, more music followed. Tom was inspired to bring out his three row button accordion and, at his urging, some began to dance. As I write I chastise myself for not having the camera loaded.

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George Galik, Ann Johanik, and Helen Johanik did the "Handkerchief Dance" with its interweaving of dancers. Then Helen and her husband Joe performed the Cardas and "Annie in The Cabbage Patch." After considerable coaxing, Stan ("Stash") Augustine and Tom attempted the showy Russian "Shepherd's Dance." Tom did a few calisthenics first to "loosen up." Then they tried. The dance is the one where men crouch on their haunches and then thrust their legs out. Tom and Stan joined right hands, crouched facing each other, then tried to thrust out alternate legs so they could maintain their balance. They succeeded mostly in landing on their behinds and laughing.

The "Shepherd's Dance" was sort of the "grand finale" of the evening's entertainment. After it was finished Ann brought out a "lunch" of coffee, sausage, cheddar and hot pepper cheese from the Moquah Cheese Factory, crackers, and chocolate chip bars. A few people declined (probably because it was lent), but most enjoyed the goodies. I might add that "refreshments" were prevalent throughout the evening. Matt and I had brought a twelve pack of Grain Belt; it was later supplemented with Miller Lite and "bumps" poured by Tom from his store of Canadian Club.

Even during this break, performances did not abate. Ann dug out a humorous English/Slovak letter from a young woman to her grandmother. The subject was the girl's bungling experience as a babysitter. But most of the humor derived from adding Slovak case endings to English words and otherwise jumping from one language to another. Tom read the manuscript with wonderful inflection and timing. Tears from laughter streamed down his cheeks and the others, too, were convulsed.

Shortly after the reading the Galiks and Joe and Helen departed. The Augustines, with Tom and Ann, set to reminiscing. Close in age, the couples were tight in other ways. Apparently they had once been in business together manufacturing cement blocks. Both were working full time jobs at the time, keeping a few cattle, and handling gardening and logging chores. They also found time to socialize plenty together and their thoughts, as midnight neared, were on the times they'd shared. Both, too, reflected on the songs, dances, and tunes they knew and on the importance of preserving and, perhaps, continuing their traditions. Naturally, Matt and I concurred with these sentiments. Then we took off, our heads swimming with the evening's rich experience.