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FIELD NOTES

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My first day in Watertown I had noticed "Jolly Cholly's Consignment Shop" (unfortunately out of business) on the Main Street of Watertown. In the window there was a poster advertising the Jolly Cholly Band: a cartoon showed a merry mustachioed drummer and a printed come on announced the group's hottest tunes-- "Eeyiyo Polka" and "Laughing Polka." Several weeks later Elmer Krueger informed me that Charles Kittel, aka Jolly Cholly, was a good button accordionist worth seeing in connection with this project. I gave Kittel a call and discovered that German tunes did not form a big part of his repertoire. His band did play a medley of German melodies, however, that were popular at anniversary dances. He suggested that I come and record his band at work an hour before their scheduled St. Patrick's Day dance at Phyl and Clancy's Bar on Watertown's Main Street. Why not.

Phil Stack and I drove over on the appointed day and found Kittel and band awaiting us. "Cholly"--born 3/12/28--was a short burly man with a weathered face and a warm manner. He was wearing a blue T-shirt with his name and the band's emblazoned on the back. A few seasonal touches were added by an Irish paper cap and a green garter that an admirer had slung about his neck. We set up the equipment on a nearby table and gabbed with the band in anticipation of recording.

Besides Cholly on drums and occasional button accordion, Norman Lorenz played tenor banjo and saxophone, while Gary Guetzlaff handled cordovox. These sidemen were considerably younger than their leader; they were born in Watertown in 1953 and 1952 respectively. Kittel had been playing with his own band on and off for the past thirty-five years and had apparently cut some records on Sauk City's Cuca label, but Gary and Norman had been with him since only 1980. The present Jolly Cholly Band still maintained the old ones' "sound" inasmuch as Gary

asserted that they play the old repertoire, that new tunes are introduced only if Charlie approves, and that old recordings by the band inspire present performances. The band's sound is not strictly ethnic; in fact they're what might be called an "American Old Time Bar Band": waltzes, marches, novelty C&W numbers, square dance tunes, a little soft rock and roll, polkas. I described their instrumentation to Richard March and they reminded him of "The Moms and Dads." According to Charlie, his dad was born in Germany and emigrated in 1901. He was a button accordionist who played "all German tunes," sometimes while standing out in the cornfield. The younger Kittel learned to play the instrument by ear and now has a Hohner three row, but it wasn't the old German oompah numbers that moved him--"Golden Slippers" was more to his liking.

Be that as it may, the band started out with their German medley for my benefit. Elmer L. Kuehl--born in 1909 in Watertown--sang with microphone in hand. He's a tall man, well over six feet, and was neatly attired in a suit. He'd sung with the band before during tavern sessions and he was eager for his deep voice to boom "Mein Hut Der Hat Drei Ecken" and other favorites. There were two takes of that number, neither were perfect but both were engaging. "Lorelei" came second in the band's medley and Elmer didn't know the words to it, to boot he sometimes got confused about which tune was being presented and about just when to come in. The crowd loved it just the same.

As the band went through these first two numbers, people started to throng into the narrow bar. There was no real set up for a band, nor was there a dance floor--just a space between the bar and the wall. People danced just the same. With the German medley over, the band went into its Jolly Cholly repertoire, evident from the Index, and people danced and whooped enthusiastically. There were occasional pauses as we played back a tune. Kittel was the most attentive and appreciative listener, especially with the headphones clamped on tightly.

After eight numbers it was time to go back to Madison where I had a St. Patrick's Day feast of my own to prepare. On our way out we were thanked by Charlie who enticed the crowd to give a warm round of applause to "Mr. Jim Leary, recording artist with the WISCONSIN FOLKLIFE CENTER!!"