

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary  
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Charlie Zimmerman Home  
Rural Juneau, WI

Bob and Becky Werner-Rehl had met Charlie Zimmerman while doing a residency in Dodge County Schools. Zimmerman's daughter plays violin in a middle school orchestra while taking fiddle lessons from an older jazz and old time fiddler, Glen Wood. According to the Werner-Rehls Charlie played accordion and knew one particularly nice old tune--one that his mother used to sing while carrying him around--with the words "Today is the day they give babies away/With every pound of tea." Accordingly I called C and set up a meeting. He was friendly but self-deprecating over the phone: I don't know any of the real old time stuff, I just pick up tunes from here and there--not necessarily German, I play by ear and am not a professional, I get nervous when tape recorders are going, I'd be wasting your time. Nonetheless his mention of German-American uncles who played at house parties in the thirties, and of a singing mother and grandmother spurred me to insist. Luckily I didn't give out my phone number inasmuch as C told me, when we finally met, that he would probably have called to cancel the session.

I arrived at 7:30 p.m. at the Zimmerman farm, the first place east of the Blew Inn on highways 16/60 near highway 26 in Dodge County. It was an older farm: remodeled farmhouse and barn alongside newer machine sheds. The Zimmermans have owned the place since 1968 and have been strictly cash grain farmers for most of that time. C was looking out the window as I pulled up and came out onto the porch to greet me. He's a boyish 46, around 5'7" and solidly built, and was dressed in a plaid shirt, jeans, and boots. We entered a large, warm kitchen heated by a wood stove. We pulled up chairs and I said hello to Charlie's wife (Lynn, I think). There we talked for an hour. C was in no rush to record, partly because of his aforementioned reluctance, partly because he wanted to

know about the project and about me. From there we ranged to the current farm crises, world politics, and personal philosophies. Throughout Charlie proved himself to be a thoughtful, inquisitive fellow. It was a real delight to exchange views and to converse with someone who had a genuine understanding and appreciation of the Folklife Center's Project.

We finally adjourned to the less noisy living room where I set up the tape recorder while C pulled out his piano accordion--an Italian Scandelli. With the machine whirling, C told me that he was born in the Waukesha area, a third generation German-American, and that he'd moved to Dodge county with his parents in the early 1950s. His repertoire includes a few tunes from his extended family (there are, he reckoned, more if he could only remember them) and a good many polka tunes picked up off the radio or learned from records. The family frequent listens to WTKM FM from 6 until midnight when Scott Lopas has his polka show, indeed that show was on when I arrived. They also purchase records by musicians who are popular on WTKM: Justy's Keybenders, Gentleman Jim, Tony Rademacher, and others. (Tape Two includes a discussion of polka bands that the Zimmermans enjoy.) In addition, they're faithful watchers of HeeHaw on Saturday nights along with "Classic Country," replays of 1950s Grand Ole Opry programs, on public television.

C's playing had plenty of feeling. He talked at one point about being able to play some nights and unable on others. Like many old time musicians I've seen, he plays with his head cocked over to the right, above the keyboard, while his body sways. Occasionally though, he twists his head about and beams in recognition of his listeners. Throughout C's playing, Lynn listened intently, tapping her feet and offering approval when each performance closed. Apparently he plays sometimes when the family is washing the dishes, and his wife and kids frequently request that he learn certain tunes that move them. Indeed C's music

is a family affair. When not playing the accordion, he provides rhythm guitar for his daughter's fiddling.

After playing and talking for an hour while the recorder was on, we adjourned for some herbal tea and apple crisp around the kitchen table. The Zimmermans gave me the name and address of John Greenwood, an independent insurance agent in Beaver Dam, who has organized a club for closet accordion players. Older folks who have played for a long time, but who are shy about public performances. Since Beaver Dam is a heavily German area, there're bound to be contacts made through Greenwood. Beyond this exchange of information, we talked a little more about the truths of life and the nature of our respective work: farming and folkloring. The Zimmermans reiterated their delight that someone was doing this German-American music project, especially since most schools and certainly most Ph.D. holders (of which they know several) are not the least bit interested in old time music. We parted amicably about 11:30 and I assured them that the Center would be back in touch with them about any "products" and public presentations that emerged from the project.