

Field Notes

Wednesday, July 25, 1979

Informant: George Nousiannen, Finnish
FiddleField Workers: Matt Gallmann
Sara Poynter

We (MH and SP) had arranged to meet with GN at around 10 or 11 a.m. but got off later than expected and didn't arrive in Copper Harbor until around 1:00 p.m. As we arrived at the N's Standard Gas Station, GN, Jr., was just leaving on a moped and GN and SN were outside. Apparently they'd prepared to see us in the morning - GN Jr., would have tended the station - but GN had to do something in the afternoon so GN and SN couldn't leave the station. We talked outside for a while, GN asked about our work in the U.P. He told us about Jingo Vachon - told us she played a rare instrument called the "swinette". GN asked if we'd heard of one before - we both said no - so he explained that a swinette consisted of three strings attached to a pig's tail and then you pull or pluck them. The laugh was on us!

Then we all went inside the station and sat down on whatever was available. GN had recently received a tape from Jingo and so he played it for us. Apparently the two, GN and Jingo, are old friends and send these cassette tape "letters" to each other - complete with songs. As we listened to the tape GN and SN would be in and out of the station tending to business (pumping gas).

GN explained that he hadn't played any music since we'd left the previous week, but he had written up a list of songs, some by titles and some by 1st lines of songs (words). GN played his harmonica a little - then a car load - 1 male, 3 females came to the station and were all Finlanders. The young man came into the station wanting to buy some film - so Mrs. N. spoke with him in Fimish - he didn't know English. Meanwhile GN was outside at the car talking with the 3 ladies. He had his song list and showed it to them and played songs for them on the harmonica. Then MG and I walked out to the car and GN explained to the group our project. They smiled and asked if we were Finnish and remarked that we looked Finnish. They were amused with GN's entertainment. They'd laugh at the songs GN had said were dirty and sometimes they hum or sing along to others. Then they asked GN for a place in town to go for coffee and left. Then we all went back inside.

- Unchronological order of events.

A young couple and their child came for a visit with GN and SN and were there for nearly 2/3's of our visit. This made for close quarters in the station. After a while GN got his fiddle out and played some tunes. He was mainly interested in catching Matt's (the young couple's child's) attention. However, he was distracted by customers so GN handed the fiddle to MG and MG played a few tunes. After a while MG went to the car and got his own fiddle. GN began to teach MG a few tunes and the two of them played for a while. Customers would stop and listen for a few minutes. Apparently it was nothing unusual to many of the regular customers to find GN playing the music at the station - something he did frequently. After a while GN Jr., came back, but it was still too busy for GN to leave and record music for us someplace quieter - however, he did want to. They explained that the station down the road was out of gas - the reason why they were so busy.

Mrs. N. brought out some "oven cheese" or "cheese bread" for everyone. She explained that it was the ethnic food she'd promised us last time. It was good - kind of like cheesecurds but with more bread-like texture.

Eventually GN asked if we wanted to record some songs in spite of the noise and distractions so we went and got the equipment and set up. We ended up taping only a few songs and then giving up - realizing it was kind of a useless attempt. We decided instead just to hold off with the recording and wait until we came back up in September. MG and GN played some more just for fun. MG went to the car and got his B.A. and played some songs on it. SP bought some film for an instamatic camera and took 3 pictures. When GN first began to play he switched hats from a plain black French style beret to a Penthouse beanie.

We all finally realized that we weren't going to get what we came for. It was an enjoyable visit for everyone and both GN and SN want us to come back so we can do some good recording. We told them we'd try to catch them in early September before they leave for Florida. As MG and I left, GN gave us each an ice cream for the road . . .