

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary  
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Ed Piller  
322 Scott Ave.  
Waukesha, WI

Ed Piller had seen the Wisconsin Folklife Center's press release and had written a letter saying that he knew some German music and might be of use. I called him several times to set up an appointment. The first attempt didn't work since Ed had scheduled a brake job for that day. Although retired and nearly seventy, he does a lot of back yard mechanical work on cars and trucks. When I arrived, after agreeing on a Monday afternoon session, Ed was in the backyard with a truck jacked up while he replaced a U-joint; another machine was parked nearby awaiting a tune up. Nonetheless Piller pulled off his gloves, reckoned we'd best get to recording, washed his hands, and led me into his basement.

It wasn't the suburban family room finished basement, but a storage area, laundry, and workshop. Ed kept his concertina, a small stand, and a few stacks of sheet music--with most entries dogeared and falling apart--in a kind of open closet where only one person could sit. I set up the equipment just outside the door, stringing a cord from a light fixture and setting the recorder atop a momentarily unused cast iron incinerator. It was quite a scene, but Ed--a gruff, strightforward sort of fellow dressed in workman's coveralls and sporting a thinning crew cut--seemed quite at home in it. He began playing right away and so I decided to let the tunes precede the interview. Indeed the interview part of the session was kept fairly brief since Ed had to get back to his work. As the Index will reveal, Ed grew up in Medford as a third generation German-American. He took up button accordion at nine and wore out several instruments before settling on a concertina. He has had little "schooling" on that instrument and is chiefly an at home, house party, around the tavern sort of

player and he makes no bones about it. He mentioned several times that he wasn't the best player in the world, but he was matter of fact rather than apologetic. He reckoned he played "for the heck of it," and some tunes come to him and some didn't. The Index will show a rough balance between the German tunes I was looking for and others that were favorites. After fourteen tunes, Ed was ready to smoke and reminisce. Like many musicians from the northern part of the state, his life has been one of mobility, hard work, struggle, and adversity in sparsely populated, inclement territory.

With luck I'll be able to return to get some family photographs taken when Ed ran a country tavern, from 1954-1966, where music was played every weekend. Mrs. Piller said she'd dig them out and set them aside for me.