

FIELDWORK NOTES

Interviewer: Philip Martin;
also present, Lewis Koch

December 13, 1984
German-American Project

Informant: Albert Kolberg
Howards Grove, WI

We were referred to Albert Kolberg by Arwin Herzog, a younger accordion player who lives several houses down on the same street; Albert is Arwin's grandfather's brother, ie. his great-uncle. We first stopped by Arwin's, and he was the one who called up Albert to arrange the interview.

Mr. Kolberg was known in the area as a yodeling singer/guitar player who hosted a regular noon-time musical radio program some decades ago. He has a small scrapbook with clippings and misc. letters from fans, all include the same photo of him, with guitar, in a cowboy shirt and hat, smiling. He said that he was especially fond of the music and songs of Jimmie Rogers, the early country singer; Albert said he particularly liked the guitar-style, with its little runs up to the alternating-bass. Albert was an entertainer for a number of years, until he got married, at which time he more or less dropped out of playing until recently (except for sitting in now and then with a polka/old-time band. With retirement he has taken up more playing to pass the time.

He had seen the clipping about our German-American music project in the Sheboygan Press, and had intended to write but had not gotten around to it. He seemed very pleased to see us and was a congenial host, making Lewis and me feel right at home immediately. We sat down around the kitchen table first and talked a little about the music that he liked, his career, and looked through his scrapbook. After a little while, he got out his guitar and began to sing a few songs, referring now and then to a little spiral-bound notebook in which he had written down verses to favorite songs (the verses in alternating red and blue ink). In response to our questioning, he admitted that he knew some German songs handed down from his mother; he mentioned that the family would sit around the kitchen, he was one of six boys, around the kitchen stove, with the door open--they would sit with their feet up around it to keep warm, and their mother would sing songs, along with the boys. He sang one, and at that point I convinced him that it was time to set up the tape recorder, which I did, using one mike pointed at his guitar, one for his voice, while he sat at the kitchen table, referring occasionally to his songbook. He had a very rich voice, with a bit of a country-influenced twang to it. His guitar style was classic Jimmie Rogers, and he seemed to feel at ease with a simplified yodel (also Jimmie Rogers style) which was also a part of the German songs. An accomplished performer, he had a nice controlled phrasing to his singing, with an occasional guitar riff inbetween verses, but never seemed pretentious or stagey about it.

Some of the songs, to my limited German, seemed a little risqué(?), I think in a mild-mannered way, about husbands and wives and domestic strife and its solutions. We also recorded a few English-language, country numbers. He then got out a harmonica and played two dance numbers, German-sounding, that he said I should pay attention to because they would work on my button accordion (he was a little disappointed I had not brought it along).

(continued)

After the recording, Lewis went out to the car and brought in his cameras, and took some black & white shots on 35mm., also some color slides, of Mr. Kolberg singing at the kitchen table, with recording equipment still set up (not recording), also of the kitchen table paraphernalia--songbook, beer bottles & glasses, scrapbook.

After another pair of beers for Lewis & I we began to wrap up the session, me putting away the equipment. Mr. Kolberg invited us to return next time we were up that way, and suggested getting together with Julius Henschel, button accordion player from near Elkhart Lake (see earlier interview w/JH). This looks like it good be a good idea for a group session; both are friendly and could produce some good music together.

He mentioned, as putting away his guitar, again how much he liked those old country songs and singers, such as Red Foley and Gene Autrey as well as Jimmie Rogers.

Other comments: in talking before the recording, he mentioned that much of the music for local dances when he was young was provided by the popular Romy Gauz band, a Bohemian brass band from up near Manitowoc. He seemed to think that the Germans really liked their music & they played frequently.

He also mentioned that while the speech of the Germans in the Sheboygan Co. area varied from place to place in dialects of German, that the music did not really vary that much. According to him, you could not tell where a player was from by the way he played.

Another person was present in the house, I believe his wife, but did not appear or participate; it is possible she had turned in earlier and was upstairs, or was just staying out of our way to allow us to interview.

We ended by talking about stopping in again, and thanked him for his hospitality and music. Both Lewis and I enjoyed the visit immensely. By the way, on a return trip we should make a copy of the publicity photo of him as a young cowboy singer.

The recording, I believe, went well, with some numbers perhaps clearer as he would turn more directly towards the microphones; otherwise, when seated at the table using the songbook it was a little difficult to place the mikes as close as I would have liked.