

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

February 23, 1981

Informant: Bruno Synkula
Ashland, WI

**ETHNIC HERITAGE
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Bruno Synkula had played button accordion at the Holy Family Church Polish Conversation Class' December Christmas party. I asked him then if I might record him at a later date, so this was a follow up session. Bruno is 62, of medium build, with greying hair and a shy, quiet, and kindly manner. He works in some capacity at the Ashland County Court House and is active in the local American Legion Hall. He also practices marksmanship with pistol and rifle, and enjoys using his metal detector as a hobby. At one time in his life he must've been a heavy drinker, but now he never touches the stuff.

Matt and I arrived at Bruno's place at roughly seven p.m. He and his wife occupy an old, but well maintained frame house on East 22nd Street - land by the Louisiana Pacific Pulp Mill. Bruno met us at the door, quieting his small yappy dog, and we entered a cozy, neat kitchen. A combination electric and wood burning kitchen stove provided warmth and we settled around the kitchen table. Apparently, Bruno's wife had been tired and was asleep - so there were just the three of us.

As Matt and I unpacked our equipment, I reiterated to Bruno the purpose of our coming and told him about the recorders we were using. I've found that demystifying the machinery makes for a more relaxed session. Once set up, the interview began. As the tape index indicates, Bruno was born in 1919. Although inclined toward parties, dance, and Polish song, his parents didn't play an instrument. Bruno picked up his playing knowledge from an Italian invalid who'd been brought up among Poles. In the mid-1930's he learned "La Paloma" and "El Rancho Grande" from this man (whom, for reasons of his own, Bruno declined to identify). Other important tunes for Bruno were Polish comic songs, dance tunes, and hymns that his mother used to sing or hum around the house. Additionally, Bruno picked up - by ear - other polkas and waltzes. He especially mentioned listening to Norwegian Ole Lear at Fritz Swanson's Indian Lake Tavern where he'd travel for turkey shoots. Ole, reportedly, learned to play while a P.O.W. in Germany, and he played many German tunes. Bruno still plays Ole's "Kulkurin Valssi" - a Swedish version of a Finnish tune. It gave me a kick to realize that Bruno was a Pole who learned to play from an Italian and among his tunes is the Swedish version of a Finnish song learned from a Norwegian who took up playing in Germany!

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With regard to Bruno's playing, he is not a great master of the instrument. He uses only one right hand row of his two row Holmer accordion to pick out the melody, while his left hand chords - sometimes a little stiffly. Unlike many of the players we've encountered, Bruno played only at home. In fact, his appearance at the Polish Conversation Class's Christmas affair was the first time he'd ever played outside the family circle. His time spent with the button accordion has been sporadic at best over the past few decades. Occasionally, he has been inspired to pick out a tune while watching the Chmielecki Brothers program on Duluth television or when his children come home for a visit.

Throughout the session, Bruno answered our questions with care and patience. Frequently he would lean back, close his eyes, key on some fond memory, then provide us with a fine description of some bygone event, and close with some formula like "people enjoyed themselves in those days." His playing involved the same amount of deliberate and quiet inspection. He would think of a tune, go over it in his mind, flex his fingers over the appropriate buttons, then try it out. Occasionally he used the technique common to other accordionists, of punching the buttons until combinations reminded him of a tune.

After an hour and a half or so of playing and talk, it appeared that Bruno was scraping the bottom of the well. We ended the session and, as I started to pack up the gear, Matt entertained Bruno by playing some Finnish and Swedish numbers on button accordion. Matt's flurry inspired Bruno to play a snatch of "Nikolina;" it also jogged him into thinking about Birch Lake and Indian Lake country. The Verville Clan, likened to Appalachian hillbillies by many in the area, were the subject of many Birch Lake stories and Bruno knew a few. One that I hadn't heard before told of six Verville's pulling into a gas station and store in Sanborn and ordering one gallon of gas and six gallons of wine. Apparently, they drove off as far as the gallon of gas would take them, and then each swallowed their gallon of wine.

By this time, with the equipment packed up and the evening growing late, we were ready for the evening to end. And so it did.