

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
August 13, 1985

Syl Groeschl
Calumetville, WI

I had learned of Syl Groeschl by reading the backs of Cuca Record jackets and noting that Groeschl had recorded a number of records with "German Songs" in their titles. Subsequently I had heard from various Dodge County sources that Groeschl was from the Fond du Lac area and often played in Dodge County; and I also noted play dates for Groeschl (at Iron Ridge, Huilsburg, Watertown, Lebanon) printed in the Wisconsin Polka Boosters newsletter. As an active, overtly "German" musician who had been in circulation for some time, I figured Groeschl was a good person to interview.

Accordingly, Janet, Bella, and I attended the Lebanon Volunteer Firefighters Picnic in Lebanon, Dodge County, on Sunday, August 4. The picnic is an annual affair and involves the county's rural and small town volunteer fire departments in parades and competitions. In addition, there are carnival rides, short order and sit down meals, kegs of beer, and various musical performances. Kenneth Platz, old time piano accordionist held forth with an earlier afternoon concert, followed by Syl Groeschl, followed by the Lebanon Town Band. As we approached the picnic ground, we heard Syl's band play as their music was being broadcast on Hartford's WTKM with Scott Lopas as MC. "German" instrumentation was evident over the airwaves: tuba, drums, concertina, with Syl and Roger Gerner trading off on alto and tenor saxes and clarinets. Groeschl was clearly an animated performer, chiming in with lively commentary between songs, reminding the crowd "Enjoy yourselves, it's later than you think," and whooping "Ach Ja" ala a Dutch Bob Wills. Groeschl also worked in an occasionally Woody Woodpecker laugh and blew a whistle now and then.

When we arrived at the picnic ground, I was able to see the man in the flesh. He's rotund and stocky, perhaps 5'6", with a grey moustache and goatee, and was attired in lederhosen and a baseball cap. "Ach Ja" and "Whoopee" were printed on his speakers and, resting on one of them, was an assortment of self-promoting items: business cards, mini-posters, pencils, and matches all bearing the Syl Groeschl name (several are appended to these notes).

At a break I talked with Syl, explained the Folklife Center's Project, promised to write soon, and made rough plans for an interview the following week. Syl had undergone open heart surgery six weeks prior and would be home until after Labor Day.

On Tuesday, August 13, I drove up the eastern shore of Lake Winnebago north of Fond du Lac. Since I was early, I decided to push past Calumetville so as to track down Jerry Schneider's Kloten Inn near Chilton. Schneider is a German bandleader who has recorded several albums and I hoped to talk with him about his music and about the "Dutchman" sound. I soon learned, however, that the Inn, roughly four miles west of Chilton on county F, had been sold to Tony Groeschl, Syl's nephew. The place wasn't open, but I learned from Tony that Jerry Schneider had retired to a place south of Chilton. Tony also reckoned that Schneider had played, or at least "helped out" with the band led by Syl's father, Tony Groeschl. Unfortunately, I forgot to ask Syl about this subsequently.

That errand completed, I traveled to Syl and Mary Groeschl's place on HHH east of Calumetville. The couple owns four acres--including a remodeled farm house, barn, and large garden space--on a plateau affording a fine view of Lake Winnebago. Indeed Syl later told me that he could look out in the winter with his binoculars and keep track of his ice shanty. The Groeschl mailbox was adorned with a cast iron representation of a fiddle crossed with a saxophone, and I soon noticed that the various Groeschl car and motorcycle license plates were imprinted with "Ach Ja," "Ach Ya," and "Ach Ya 1."

Syl met me at the rear kitchen door and ushered me into a spacious kitchen where we sat down on barrel chairs around a large round kitchen table. We gabbed a little about the drive I'd made, the weather, and the Folklife Center's project, before I set up the tape recorder and began the interview. Syl talked willingly and in fine detail (as the Index reveals) for nearly an hour and a half. Toward the end of the session, we examined the six LPs Syl had cut for Cuca, along with photographs and a scrapbook devoted to the Groeschl musical career.

Most of the LPs contain some reference to German songs, although the actual number of German songs on each varies considerably. Since none of these records remains in print, I list here the six titles together with mention of the overtly German songs.

1. Syl Groeschl Sings 'Old German Songs, Cuca K-2015.

"We Left Our Fraus At Home" [Actually a Germanized version of Romy Gosz's parody of the Czech song "Svestkova Alej"--"We Left Our Wives at Home."]

"Dorf Muzik Spiel"

"Mein Hut Der Hat Drei Ecken"

"Huhnen (Chicken) Polka," instrumental

"Immer Noch Ein Tropfen"

"Um Lauterbach Waltz"

2. More Old German Songs, Cuca k-2021.

"Eina Nacht Im Mai"

"Lindenau"

3. Tony Groeschl Memorial Album, Cuca K-2031.

"Im Boehmer Waltz"

"Meina Magdalena"

"Hat Ver Doch Lieber Das Gelt Fergarben"

"Komm In Meina Rosen Garten"

4. Old Time German Songs, Cuca k-2041.

"Wer Doch Liebe Das Hattan Geld Furgaben"

5. Ve Get So Soon Oldt, Cuca K- 2074

"Ve Get So Soon Oldt"

"Anna Lisa"

6. Syl Groeschl's Old Time Dance Album, Cuca KS-2149.

"Schwitzerboo"

"Over Three Hills"

"Edelweiss"

With regard to pictures, there were shots of Groeschl musicians spanning four generations. With luck arrangements can be made to copy these, particularly the following:

--great-grandfather with "family band" of two brothers and two sisters on concertina, violin, clarinet, and guitar.

--grandfather with violin, tuba, and two concertinas.

--Tony Groeschl with cowboy band, Tony Groeschl with polka band, TG with concertina in one of the bars he ran.

--Numerous shots of Syl with his bands, including varied business cards and posters.