

Collectors: Jim Leary & Matthew Gallmann

February 20, 1981

Informants: Verna & Elmer Bloomquist
 Marian & Louis Cuty
 Lud (Ludwig) Trammel
 Washburn, Wisconsin

ETHNIC HERITAGE
 SOUND ARCHIVE & RESOURCE CENTER
 NORTHLAND COLLEGE, ASHLAND, WI

During the project's first year Marina Herman had recorded Verna Bloomquist singing a few Norwegian and Swedish songs, along with her brother, at a Bayfield festival. No full attempt was made to discover her life history and assess her repertoire, so I decided to set up a session with the Nagra. Over the phone, Verna was very friendly, talkative, and cooperative. She mentioned that her older sister Marian might help her sing and, accordingly, we arranged a Friday afternoon session.

Matt and I arrived at the Bloomquist residence on East Third Street in Washburn, at roughly 2:00. It's a well kept, older home with a big kitchen at the back of the house and an even larger living room space. Verna and Elmer ushered us into the latter. Of Norwegian stock, Verna is in her mid-sixties. Tall and lean, with dark brown hair ringing a full and slightly weathered face, she wore a fashionable dark green pant suit and was full of cheery talk. Elmer, dressed in a wool plaid shirt and work pants, looked a few years older. He was a "Swede Finn" and much quieter. In readiness for our coming, verna had set out various family heirlooms and ethnic artifacts: a spelling book and journal kept by her grandmother, an old button shoe belonging to that lady, a few Norwegian books, and a family history written by her late brother. I also noticed several Norwegian songbooks on the piano. Verna showed me everything she had set out, then Matt and I began to set up the equipment.

While we were engaged in that talk, Verna's older sister Marian Cuty (77) arrived with her Hungarian husband, Louis, a man of about eighty. Like her sister, Marian was well dressed in a red pant suit and her gray hair showed the mark of regular visits to the beauty parlor. Louis, like Elmer, wore the costume of dark work pants and a plaid shirt. Lud Trammel, eighty and a retired county clerk, also soon arrived on foot from his nearby home. Verna had wanted him to recite the Lord's Prayer in Norwegian.

With this assemblage seated in the living room and Matt manning the equipment, I explained the project to those gathered. After making a "Collector's Announcement," Lud, who would soon prove himself a humorist, gave Marian a "Norwegian

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Mother's Letter to Her Son" to read. It was a humorous epistle, meant to be read in an appropriate "Norske" accent. In fact, I have read it in Polish and Italian versions. After this beginning, Verna began with her family's history. She was born a Swanson, and her mother was an Olson. Her father died in 1921, however, and she spent her early life on her grandmother's farm on Maple Hill (sometimes called "Hungary Hill") off County C west of Washburn. Accordingly, her family history emphasized the Norwegian Olsons. The tape index gives a good indication of what followed, but it's worth hitting the highlights.

Apparently, the Lutheran Olsons were a singing family. The grandfather built a salmodikon (still in the family) to aid the early Norwegian Lutheran community in singing. His daughter (Verna + Marian's mother) played the family's pump organ. She was conversant with the church's liturgy and made sure that the family sang appropriate hymns at seasonal junctures. She also sang while she worked and there was plenty of music in the household. Interestingly, she also played secular and American tunes: the place was a gathering spot for neighborhood children who would sing "school songs" around the organ. Such "English" pop songs were also sung at house parties in the area. Also of note is the fact that Verna's mother could read music. Verna, who plays piano and guitar, also reads music. As a result, in her singing and playing, she commonly uses a songbook. One song book - Norges Melodier (Oslo: Norsk Musik-Forlag, 1922) - had both words and notes. Another had words only: N-A-L (Minneapolis: Norwegian-American Line, n.d.). Verna, however, did prove well able to perform several songs without either notes or words.

Verna's report on family history, with occasional assistance from Marian, fired up a few of the others to talk about their background. Louis Cuty, born in Western Pennsylvania, came to this area with his parents in 1912. The Cuty family, with the Brevak's formed the core of a small group of Hungarian families who occupied land south of Long Lake in Bayfield County. Apparently, there was a fair bit of singing in Hungarian by members of these families. Louis offered a snatch of song and reported that the Brevak girls also sing Hungarian songs.

Lud got into the act briefly, too. Verna recited an evening prayer and a poetic grace in Norwegian, and Lud chimed in with a parody grace. Apparently, he used to sing Norwegian songs in church choirs for years, but now his hearing is bad and his voice hoarse. Despite Verna's prompting, he wouldn't sing.

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At this point, I suggested that we get round to some singing. Verna and her sister Marian moved to the piano, while the others remained seated. The two performed some duets for awhile, but Marian had trouble reading lyrics when the song-books rested on the piano. Accordingly, the two held the book in better light and sang unaccompanied. Marian, reckoning her voice didn't sound so hot, soon sat down and Verna held forth alone with songs in Swedish and Norwegian alike. While she was performing, the men were mostly silent and listening. They did, however, talk a bit among themselves and Matt told me that Lud told a joke or two. Lud also mentioned Tony Strom of Washburn as a good raconteur.

After Verna had performed an array of songs - Christmas songs, sentimental pioneer or "lonesome" songs, humorous numbers - she stopped for the afternoon. Verna prompted Lud to recite the Lord's Prayer in Norwegian, and that ended the recording session. As we packed up, Verna reckoned we ought to come back when her singing and guitar playing brother is in town.