

Contact: Arnie Johnson  
 Address: Oulu, Wisconsin  
 Ethnic Group: Finnish  
 Fieldworkers: Jim Leary  
 Janet Gilmore  
 Matthew Gallmann  
 Date: February 13, 1979

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

When 10:00 rolled around on this day of February 13, 1979, I headed for the Sigurd Olson Institute to meet with Jim Leary and his wife Janet Gilmore. We headed out from the Institute at about 10:30. Our destination was Oulu, Wisconsin where Finnish and Scandinavian people reside. We were looking for ethnic folk music in the rural tradition.

We drove west on Rt. 2 and then north on County A. The only informant we had when we left Ashland was a man named Ed Pudas. Margie McClellan had given me Ed's name when I was in Madison last week. Jim also knew Ed through mutual friends at Old World Wisconsin. We headed west on County B road and came to a crossroads of Oulu where we stopped at "Howard's Variety Store" which was also a Standard gas station. Jim took a picture of a poster advertising a winter golf tournament. He asked the woman behind the counter in the store about the golf tournament after saying hello. We then worked around to asking about Ed Pudas. A woman that just walked in the store announced that Ed Pudas had died last summer. She was his daughter-in-law. She was very helpful and after we explained we were from Northland College looking for "old-time music" she told us about Arnie "Walt" Johnson. She had his record for sale in her store. She didn't have any then but she checked around her house and found us a record that had been returned because of a scratch. This woman entrusted me with the record because she recognized me from the Natural Foods Co-op Pancake Feed and Hoedown of 1978.

We made phone calls to the Johnson house and found nobody at home. The

woman behind the counter called around and found out that they were in the woods by his son's house cutting wood. These women also told us about a pavilion that existed in Oulu years ago where people went to dance or iceskate. Further, they told us about a band called the "Hot-Shots". They are apparently a band of young people that play accordian music and were taught by their parents. We also found a booklet on the history of the area. Members of the Hot-Shots band are in Florida. The women gave us directions to the Johnson's place and we thanked them.

We ate lunch as we drove out to the Johnson's place. We passed many mailboxes with Finnish names on them. We found nobody at what we thought was Arnie Johnson's son's home. Thus we drove to Arnie Johnson's house and just as we pulled up to his driveway he pulled up to his mailbox. Jim hopped out of the car and introduced himself and explained that we were looking for "oldtime music". (We discovered that Arnie liked to be called Walt so I will continue to refer to him as Walt). Walt said that "the wife isn't home. She knows more than I do about this stuff." Jim mentioned here that he heard Arnie wasn't such a bad talker himself. He laughed and said "talk is cheaper than whiskey". Jim asked Walt if he had any albums inside and Walt's response was to ask us into his house to pick up an album. We entered his house and he told me he was only home to get hydraulic fluid for their "Cat" which is a log hauler. We were all standing in the kitchen. The women at the store said that "Arnie Johnson will talk your ear off" and they were right. We found that Arnie is quite a storyteller.

Walt told us about his family history in Oulu. It seems that his parents were both born in Bessemer. I assume his grandparents migrated to America and found employment mining. His father came to Oulu with two friends and homesteaded four 40 acre plots of land. The original house was where Pioneer Road now exists. He told us a story about a man hiking back through the woods to his claim with a big stove on his back. It seems like another super-human

strength story. He told us that he was carried to Oulu in a gunny sack.

Walt speaks both English and Finnish. He is a jovial man. His house seemed to be full of things. The walls had many decorations. Above the sink was a sign that read: I'm Happy to Be in Oulu Town (or something to that effect).

Walt insisted that we should talk to his wife who "really knew the music". He referred to himself as "only self-taught by ear". But his wife could read and write music.

His wife learned accordian from a man named Timothy Hoeft at the local school. He plays drums himself. We asked him how he got into music and he replied by saying that he had been singing around for a longtime and used to sing with his wife. Then at some club hall he found a beat up set of drums and started to use them. Then he eventually got himself a new set of drums. He and his wife have been playing music since the 1930's. He claims that they used to play all over northern Wisconsin and into Michigan. (What specific towns did they play in and for who?) Walt told us a story of his experience playing at a Hayward wedding in one of the tough logging towns. The man that was getting married was 56 and the girl was 23. Walt mentioned this and then said, "you know why she was marrying, she was in it for something". (Implying that she married for money). He continued on by saying that it was a tough place and there was lots of booze flowing. Wine, beer, whiskey and food was free all night. "Some guys were eating chicken off the floor so you can imagine what the dancing was like". Apparently Walt and his wife played at many weddings and parties and dances. "There was a time when we'd play seven nights a week". We asked him how he acquired these jobs and Walt said they just kept coming by word of mouth and that he and his wife never went looking for the jobs.

Walt told a little story about how his wife's brother first started to play the accordian. Then his wife started taking lessons. Her brother had to

carry the accordian 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  miles to school twice a week for her.

When asked about repertoire Walt talked about how certain songs affected people. He said that when a popular song was on the radio and well known he would play it and know how the song affected people. He used some body motions of people dancing, making eyes and smiling. He said they played some popular and some oldtime Finnish music.

Walt said he likes the Oldtime stuff. He doesn't like songs that take a half an hour to figure out. He likes the "simple, plain, oldtime music. Something that relates to everyday life'.

Jim asked Walt about the social music scene of the past. Walt said that there were mouth organ players, accordian players, button accordian players, and fiddlers. They would play together and the young people would get together and dance. Polkas, waltzes, and schottisches were mostly what were played. "We didn't play fox trots or tangos," he said. He mentioned that there was a man who made one room in his house a little larger so that the young people could dance there. He added the fact that this man liked to have the young people around him.

Walt is a plain living man. He calls himself that and has an interesting view of life today. When Janet asked if we were taking too much of his time he replied by saying that "people don't visit anymore like they used to. Everybody is in a rush these days. Things used to be slower and people used to visit more."

Walt likes to talk about his work. He has cut and peeled pulpwood and he has been a truckdriver as well as a backhoe operator. He had one of his nicknames "Digger" written on his gloves. Somebody gave him these gloves. When I told him that I was a plumber he said, "you have to remember that cold goes on the right, hot goes on the left and poop don't flow uphill."

He talked about how hard things were but how comparatively easy he had it compared to his father as far as work and subsistance. His father and his

father's contemporaries used to dig ditches across deer runs in order to trap the deer. There weren't many guns around in those days and so they had to trap the deer. Besides that, there weren't many deer in the Oulu area at that time because it was still stands of timber. He then said that they would kill the deer with a knife after they trapped it.

He said that they didn't play as much music after they had four children. He also said that it's hard for him and his wife to play a whole night's gig now.

He happily gave some background on the music they chose for the album. One song is about a man who had chickens that wouldn't lay any eggs. The man finally got fed up and as a last resort tried playing his fiddle for the chickens to make them lay. Well it seems that this worked and before you knew it this guy had the most productive chickens around. All the neighbors wondered what his secret was. His wife asked him to play the song for her one day and he replied, "oh, no, I don't want you to get fertile like those chickens or else we'll have kids all over the place." He also mentioned a song about home life.

"Talk is free and cheaper than whiskey" is a favorite saying of his because he mentioned it a few times.

Walt claims that his father was a cobbler and made Finnish shoe packs. They are leather moccasin type shoes with a distinctive pointed toe. Walt had a pair of these for a long time. Now he wears sorrells.

Walt couldn't understand why people don't get close when they dance modern dances. "In the old days at least you could get belly to belly. Nowadays the guy stands in one corner and the gal stands in the other corner."

Jim snapped a picture of Walt as we left the house. Walt stood at the back door holding his record and smiling.

Jim also asked Walt if he would mind being recorded next time I came around to see him. Walt was not at all skeptical of me bringing a recorder along. Walt and I exchanged addresses and planned to see each other again.

We drove to the local Midland food co-op which was further west on County road B. We went into the store and were greeted by a friendly man who obviously had a Finnish accent. Janet asked him where the bathroom was and his reply was, "walk out the back door and when you're in the snow drift look around." We all laughed and I then inquired whether he was going to be at the hoedown this Saturday. Later when Janet came in she mentioned that she was thirsty. The man in the store said, "well, why don't you drink a quart of chocolate milk!" This man in the store is seemingly typical of the spirit of Oulu. Walt and the man in the store are jovial, joking men with a very witty spirit. They have standard jokes and savings and always a smile on their faces.

We left the store and took an unidentified road to Rt. 2 and then drove into Iron River. We stopped at the Corner Dairy King to drink a cup of coffee and reflect on our work. It was about 2:00 and after our coffee we decided to see if the Neighborhood Food Co-op was open to see if we could make any contacts there. The Food co-op was closed but we found a variety store where there were books about the history of Iron River. Jim bought these 3 soft cover books and asked the woman about old-time music. She said that perhaps Mrs. Brown, who is the sister of Lund, the writer of these books, would know about this since she was up on the local history. Well, we didn't feel that this was the best contact we could make right now.

We decided to go into Ino and see what we could find there. The tavern on Rt. 2 in Ino was closed but there was a sign pointing down county line road that indicated there was a tavern down this road. We never found this particular tavern but eventually ended up in Mason. We walked into a tavern called Woody's. Disco music was playing and nobody in the bar was over 25. I asked the lady behind the bar if there was a tavern where the "old-timers" hung out. She indicated that "Sam and Alma's" bar was probably the place to be. We went into the bar and bought some beer. There were all men in the bar except Janet. The names on the mailboxes (Johnson, Anderson, Peterson) and the Lu-

theran church indicated a Scandinavian community. We had an idea of this from the population census already. When we bought the second round of beer Jim asked the bartender about old-time music and he told us about Duane Olby. I had heard of Duane Olby because he played at a benefit concert for the Stop Sanguine-ELF committee. [REDACTED]

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