

## Chapter 21

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# Old-Time Music in Stevens Point

### *Program 21 Performances*

1. Polka Stars, "Pytala sie panie." 2. Sosnowski Trio, "Wesoly goral mazur." 3. Polka Stars, "Stevens Point Polka." 4. Ray Konkol, "Varsuviennne." 5. Jolly Chaps, "Blackbird Waltz." 6. Norm Dombrowski and the Happy Notes, "Wonderful Life Polka." 7. Kaszuba Aces, "Tam pod Krakowem." 8. Polish Pride, "Sat on a Cow Polka." 9. Norm Dombrowski and the Happy Notes, "Swiss Boy."

### **Sawing Rhythm**

**P**oles from Prussian-dominated Poznan and Kashubia began immigrating to central Wisconsin's Portage County in the late 1850s, settling on farms and in the city of Stevens Point. Their numbers increased in the early twentieth century as Polish workers fled the dangers of mines in southern Illinois and the congestion of Chicago and Milwaukee (Rosholt 1959:122, 128). At least some of these newcomers were originally from the mountainous Galician region of southern Poland.

The historical record is sparse regarding old-time Polish music in Portage County, but certainly it abounded—especially at weddings. Historian Malcolm Rosholt reports that early weddings

were often held in the barn in spring before new hay was brought in and [*sic*] which made it possible to dance on a temporary platform, or upstairs in the hayloft. One of the last of the Polish barn dances in Sharon occurred shortly after World War II. (Rosholt 1959:137)

Greg Zurawski (1927–1994), whose Polish-born grandfather played violin, recalled violin and concertina combinations at Polish weddings in the 1930s (Zurawski 1988 I).

In 1941 Robert Draves, a sound engineer working for the University of Wisconsin, made field recordings in Stevens Point of John Cieczczak, a fifty-six-year-old fiddler from mountainous southern Poland. Cieczczak had been active in old-country fiddle ensembles characterized by improvisatory lead and second violins, a bowed cello, and a syncopated "sawing" rhythm. His repertoire included tunes associated with Sabala, a renowned mountain guide, storyteller, and fiddler from the village of Zakopane who was documented and celebrated by Polish folklorists in the late nineteenth century (Spottswood 1977; 1982).

By the time Draves interviewed Cieczczak, however, his active days as a dance musician were over—not because he could no longer play, but because there was little interest in his old-world village sound. Perhaps he was bitter. Robert



Draves indicated as much when he wrote Helene Stratman-Thomas, his supervisor at the University of Wisconsin's School of Music, that locals had advised him Cieczczak would be unlikely to open up:

I visited him in the morning and found him unwilling, saying that he couldn't sing any more, that he was too busy anyhow. But after a while he was telling me I had better record him 'cause I wouldn't find anything like it anywhere else. . . . After he got going, he was so enthusiastic there was no stopping him. (Leary 1987b:42)

While Cieczczak's Polish fiddle tunes were captured on wax and shipped off to the Library of Congress, other ethnic dance music dominated Portage County weddings.

## Dutchman Disciples

In the 1930s German-Bohemian bands from southern Minnesota (Whoopie John, Six Fat Dutchmen) and Bohemian bands from eastern Wisconsin (Romy Gosz, Lawrence Duchow) established staunch regional followings through radio broadcasts, recordings, and incessant touring. Eventually they even spawned imitators in Polish strongholds like Portage County.

Dominic Slusarski, for example, was born on a farm west of Stevens Point in 1914. There were Polish-style concertina players around and Dominic took up the instrument. When he opened his Ritz Tavern in Stevens Point in 1941, however, the only Polish records available for the jukebox were by bands from far-off New York and Pennsylvania. The Upper Midwest's German and Bohemian sounds were more familiar. In 1947 Slusarski formed his own band, the Jolly Seven, that performed for dances and weddings until 1964. Their sound was very much in the vein of Minnesota's Whoopie John (Slusarski 1983 I).

Other Portage County polka bands of that era, although largely made up of ethnic Poles, likewise played German and Bohemian music. Malcolm Rosholt noted accordingly:

Polish wedding customs in Portage County have changed in the last several decades. . . . About 11:30 a.m. dancing begins with an orchestra specializing in Bohemian polkas and waltzes, interspersed with Rock 'n' Roll. (Rosholt 1959:135)

From the 1940s through the early 1960s, such bands included Benny Gagas and the Downbeats, Louie and the Old Timers, Johnny Laszewski, the Melody Makers, and others. From the 1960s through the present, still more Portage County Poles have followed a German-Bohemian lead, shifting their styles slightly from that of older Minnesota bands toward the contemporary Dutchman sound. They include the Jolly Chaps, the Jolly Polka Masters, the Polka Stars, and the Ray Konkol Band.

## Li'l Wally's Renaissance

Despite their stylistic allegiance to German-Bohemian bands, these Portage County aggregations have always performed a few overtly Polish numbers at dance jobs. Meanwhile, just at the moment Malcolm Rosholt noted the proliferation of Bohemian music at Polish weddings, Polish music began a resurgence led by Chicago's Walter "Li'l Wally" Jagiello.

Improvising concertina players, village or *wiejska* style fiddle bands, and old folk songs persisted in the densely populated neighborhoods of Chicago's working-class Poles. By the late 1940s the teenage Li'l Wally was combining his loose, rol-





Gene Shulfer singing with the Polka Stars at the Red Barn Polka Festival, Evansville, 1988 **Photo: Jim Leary**



Norm Dombrowski and the Happy Notes, Stevens Point, 1985 **Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection**



licking concertina with heartfelt vocals at Windy City taverns. While high-toned critics regarded these performances as artless, even bad, older Polish-Americans hailed Jagiello's revitalization of the songs they had grown up with. Li'l Wally's rise also coincided with the larger American success of country, rock, and folk musics—all of them "natural" forms that challenged the arranged and mannered performances of popsters. Not surprisingly, younger Poles, like Portage County's Norm Dombrowski, saw parallels between Li'l Wally and rock's Little Richard, between Polish and Presley.

Born in 1937 in rural Portage County, Norm Dombrowski found the German-Bohemian bands that dominated the dance scene boring, but he was smitten by Li'l Wally in the late 1950s. He listened to records and traveled to Chicago, where he saw other Polish bands play, like Marion Lush, the Naturals, and the High Tones. Taking up the drums and lead vocals, Dombrowski formed the Happy Notes in 1960 with Jerry Halkowski, Ron Gruna, and Marv Stencil. More than thirty years later, the Happy Notes consist of Norm and his grown children (Dombrowski 1988 I). Their continued popularity and the subsequent emergence of other bands—the Kaszuba Aces, the Cavaliers, the Polish Edition, the Nutrels, the Dynasounds—have reinstated Polish music as the requisite sound for Portage County weddings in the late twentieth century.

