

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary
February 15, 1985

Irving DeWitz
Nursing Home
Hustisford, WI

Both Ed Peirick and Fred Kaulitz had learned the concertina from DeWitz and the latter had showed me pictures of DeW playing; to boot I'd read about Irving in Music and Dance News, had seen his picture there, learned he'd taught more than 500 to play concertina, and discovered he was in the recently established Concertina Hall of Fame. Clearly this was an important man to visit.

I arrived at the nursing home, on highway 60 roughly a block before the village's main street, at 1:15 and soon learned that Irving was in room one: a tiny place with a bed, a dresser, a few chairs, and, of course, music stand and concertina. The walls were simply decorated with two dimensional carvings of geese and ducks and a small wooden sign reading "Home Sweet Home" (were these I's work?); there was also a bronzed plate with a German beer drinking scene. Irving was sitting in a chair reading Reader's Digest. Sunlight was streaming onto the page and I recalled that I. was slowly losing his eyesight. I soon learned that he was also slightly hard of hearing (evidence of this will surface on the index and is certainly apparent when the tape is played). Beyond that, DeWitz was alert, sharpminded, and congenial. I explained what I was interested in and we set in to taping as soon as I had the machine ready.

The index will give the gist of our conversation, but let me offer some larger points. DeWitz is less a German musician than his pupils. Indeed from the tunes he played and my peek at his sheet music, he was a man enamored of the concertina's sound and of pop music. Sure he could play German tunes and did, especially when a crowd favored a few such numbers, but they are not the heart of his repertoire. The son of a farmer and of an "ear" musician, he was significant inasmuch as he converted those locals with musical talent to reading

Recall Niewenschwander's
anecdote about 28
I. carrying
his concertina a mile one way
each evening to learn
concertina from a farmer.

notation and to playing concertina. In this way he operated as an agent of cultural change much in the way that Pietro Deiro and Sam Valenti made piano accordion all the rage half a century ago in Duluth, Minnesota and Ironwood, Michigan. At the same time, DeWitz's chosen instrument was of German manufacture and his source of music, Henry Silberhorn [whose biography appears along with pictures in Music and Dance News], was a German immigrant, the agent of a German instrument company, and an arranger of 3,000 plus tunes for concertina, many of which became available to players, like Peirick and Kaulitz, inclined toward a more German repertoire.

DeWitz was not only a teacher, but he was also a promoter. He put on shows, decorated halls, advertized, made certain that parents could see their kids clearly when they performed on stage. By his own admission, and that of Ed and Fred, he was a taskmaster--kindly and encouraging yet strict. He made the concertina exciting for the surrounding community and, in the way a dynamic athletic coach can make some town a hotbed for a given sport, so DeWitz attracted eager pupils.

Irving wasn't quick with dates and he informed me that his son Bob possessed clippings, photographs, and other historical memorabilia. Meanwhile Herbert Neunschwander of the local historical society has a concertina, supposedly the original model brought by Silberhorn from Germany, that Silberhorn willed to DeWitz. It'll be worth contacting H.N. regarding the Hustisford museum's holdings relative to music and to German-American culture since the man authored a Pictorial History of Hustisford, Wisconsin.

I can't close these notes without mention of DeWitz's playing. It's quite wonderful, and not just for a man of ninety. Irving plays with a real suppleness and feel. While he squinted at his music for a few tunes, the first and last handful of numbers were played from memory. During these especially,

DeWitz assumed a pose I'd seen so often with old time accordionists: body bent slightly forward, head cocked to the instruments right side just above the reeds that produce the melody, and eyes shut tightly. A man immersed in his tune. At least two were Irving's own--ones he'd evolved from years of playing. He took pleasure in all the tunes he played for me, often ending them with a grin and a whimsical laugh, but he seemed to enjoy these in particular.

I had to leave too soon, but departed with a promise to return again with Louis

Koch to take more pictures, chat, and listen.