

grooves into it. "There must be an easier way to grind feed," he told his dad-in-law. So the stones were replaced with a Bowers Brothers grist mill.

One stone is now a front step to Mr. Lidtke's house, the other embedded in the side of his house with a brass plate in its center stating. "This stone installed in Gov. Larrabee Mill, 1855, Clermont, Iowa." The stones remain a monument to an earlier era in milling, and to the millers who used them.

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Fond Memories of a Fiddler

by Luis Torres

I FIRST MET JOHANNES SOLLIEN through my research on the Bekken School in Winneshiek County's Highland Township. He attended this one-room school in the first decade of the century, and I wanted to hear what he had to say about that experience. During the course of our conversation, I discovered that he is a fiddler who knows hundreds of old time dance tunes, and since then we have gotten together several times with a group of his friends from Mabel and Spring Grove, Minnesota—most of whom are over 70—for some fantastic old time music "jam sessions," making music so danceable that I am hard put to choose whether I would rather play with them or dance to their music.

Johannes Sollien can trace his ancestors in Norway back to 1766, even though he has never been to the old homeland himself and has only family tradition to go by. His grandfather was part of the large wave of Norwegian immigrants who settled the area in northeast Iowa and southeastern Minnesota which centers around the towns of Decorah, Iowa and Spring Grove, Minnesota. Norway has a rich and varied tradition of folk music and dance, and the Norwegian immigrants brought significant portions of that cultural tradition along with their rose-maled chests, ale bowls, chip-carved boxes and Hardanger embroidery.

The kind of music Johannes and his friends play falls in the category called "gamaldans," or old time dance, by the Norwegians nowadays. It is the kind of dancing that was done "free-



Courtesy of Johannes Sollien

Johannes (right) and a fellow student in their dorm room in 1916.

style” on whatever dance floor was available when people gathered and there was a musician around, and aside from the slight regional variations which develop even in “free-style” dancing, it has none of the set patterns to the dance which are typical of true “folk dances.”

This musical tradition was, and is, carried on by untrained musicians who play(ed) primarily by ear. Tunes are learned after hearing another play them, although inexpensive cassette tape recorders now make it unnecessary to have continued direct contact with the person who is the source of the tune. Very few of the tunes carry names. They are usually identified by a musician’s name: Orlando Benson’s two-step in F, Bill Sherburne’s old time polka, Selmer Ryan’s waltz, meaning *not* that that person composed the tune necessarily, but that he is the one one *learned* it from. This, of course, can lead to some confusion when the musician steps outside the group of players he is accustomed to making music with, but these difficulties are usually overcome by playing a couple of bars of the melody or humming a snatch of it.

When I contacted Johannes Sollien about an interview all the directions I got from him were “It’s the little pink house on South Oak Street.” With that I was supposed to get to his home. As it turned out, there are two small pink houses on South Oak Street in Mabel, Minnesota, and they are almost next to each other. He lives in the smaller one of the two, and he heats only half of the house, since he lives by himself.

Johannes is a spry 78. Born in 1897, in a community so thoroughly Norwegian that children first learned English when they started school, he has lived in this area all his life. His brother, Syver, took over the family farm, so Johannes took up house-painting when he got married in 1921, and he worked at that trade for forty-seven years. Up to his retirement he was up on the ladders, painting houses and barns, wallpapering, putting up sheet rock, but when he got to be 70, he "started to slow down" on orders from his doctor.

The enforced inactivity is hard on a man who was on the go all of his life, and it is not easy to make ends meet with Social Security payments being what they are. After his wife passed away in 1961 it was also tough to be alone, and it was then that he returned to his music. He had played until his marriage, but then, he says, "I had to earn a living, and I thought 'the heck with fiddle playing, that's no good, I've got to make money.' You didn't get much for playing the fiddle, I tell you, in them days. Oh, you probably got a dollar (for an evening), and that's nothing. The best I ever got . . . I played all night for three dollars."

After almost forty years of not playing, it was his brother-in-law who suggested that he go back to his music. "I says: 'I haven't got a violin. Haven't had one for a long time.' (So he said,) 'I'll get you a violin.' And he brought a violin for me when he come back again; next time he come back he brought a violin and I got started playing. And now I'm right in it again. It's a lot of fun. It helps to pass the time away, you know. I just wish I was as limber and nimble . . . I can't handle the bow like I should." That is, of course, just a case of Norwegian understatement. I can vouch for the fact that he can handle the bow pretty well. He also complains that it is not as easy to pick up and memorize a tune as it used to be, but he has at least a couple hundred of them in his mind already. I asked him how he remembers his tunes: "I (just) remember them. If I get them written down, I just pick them up from notes. But, you know, I got so many tunes that I've forgot . . . (but if someone just starts them), they come right back to me. It's funny, I haven't heard (some of them) for years and years."

I asked Johannes how he learned to play the fiddle. He says that it all began when he finished the eighth grade at the Bekken School and came to Decorah to enroll in the Luther College prep school section. That was in 1913. "I had a fiddle and I brought



Courtesy of Martina Stoen

A combined picnic of the Bekken Country School in Highland Township (Winneshiek County) and the Waterloo Ridge School (Allamakee County) around 1910.

that along. I didn't know how to play it, but I picked up a little bit at Luther, and then I took a few lessons there from Arthur Helgeson . . . he was a really good fiddler. I took six lessons, I think . . . six or seven, and I learned everything!! (Laughs.)"

Helgeson was an upperclassman in the prep section. Johannes, as a first year student, was in the *octava*; Helgeson was in the *sexta* or *quinta*, for Luther College in those days still used the Latin designation for the classes which were typical of the Norwegian *gymnas* or secondary school. I asked Johannes how Helgeson went about teaching him: "He knew how to play by notes. Oh, you bet he could play by notes. And then he had music there, he left music with me to learn then, you see? And then he'd play first, and I'd play second . . . from the notes, you know. Just simple notes . . . it was a lot of fun. And then, you know, I don't remember how much he charged for a lesson. I think it was . . . whether it was twenty-five cents or fifty cents, I don't remember, but it wasn't for half an hour. No, no it was for a full hour, probably an hour and a half! It was a lot for your money, compared to what it is now. Now you go down there and take violin lessons, and you pay five dollars for a half hour!"

What did you do after your sixth lesson?

"Practice by myself. Yah, that's what I did. . . . Oh, I had a lot of music I bought. I learned so I could play it by notes, you know. But after I quit playing the fiddle, I don't know what become of my music. Scattered here and there, I suppose. I just got one little book left. I showed you that one." That one little book is the one in which he copied the first tunes he ever got from Arthur Helgeson, some of which I recognized as very old Norwegian folkdance tunes.

Johannes only stayed at Luther three and a half years, and although he had enough credits then to enter the regular college course, he decided to go home and farm for a while. It was during those years that he started playing for "country dances."

What do you call a country dance?

"On a farm place . . . in a barn or a shed, or in the house, or wherever they had it. That's what we called a country dance."

Was this for some kind of celebration?

"No, no, it was just a farm gathering . . . where they'd come together. You drove quite a ways to get there . . . you drove about ten miles, see?"

Did these country dances take place pretty often?

"No, no, it wasn't too often. Probably once a month, or something like that. Not steady, though. Probably it'd be different . . . many months between sometimes, and sometimes you'd probably have quite a few in a little while, I guess. In the summer-time, especially, they had quite a few dances . . . In the spring of the year, you know, about . . . well, before June, a lot of people had their barns empty. Then they'd have a barn dance. I played at quite a few of them. That was a lot of fun, they had a lot of fun in them shindigs."

Did you just invite all the neighbors, or did you advertise?

"Sure! They'd advertise it around, from neighbor to neighbor . . . on such and such a date, they're going to have a dance."

Who paid the music at a barn dance like that?

"Took up a collection, passed the hat. Some were cheapskates. They ducked away . . ."

And then the musicians divided up whatever they got?

". . . and then we got what had come in in the hat."

What did they do for food, and so forth?

“Oh, they brought their own lunches . . . and they served lunch at midnight.”

It was during these midnight lunches that a young musician got his experience at playing for dancing: “Sure! Sometimes, you know, if you were the fiddler, and you had the one who played piano with you, or the organ with you, supposin’ there were three of you, well, when midnight lunchtime come, somebody else that could play, you put them up to play in your place, and you went and had lunch. I played for others when they had lunch, and they



Photographed by Al Zarling

Johannes Sollien, a spry 78, gets together with a group of musician friends for an old-time music session at his home in Mabel.

did that for me when I ate." Johannes still remembers the first time he played for a dance. He was at a barn dance with a fellow Luther student, Joachinus Bussness, and the fiddler, Louis Morken, who was a neighbor of the Solliens, asked him and Bussness to take over during lunch. Bussness was supposed to play the fiddle while Johannes chorded on the piano, but then: "Got up there, and, boy, he couldn't think of anything to play! He used to play by notes, you know, and he couldn't think of anything, (so) he says: 'You take over and play, and I'll chord.' 'OK,' I says, so we turned around, and I played and he chorded. That's the first time I played (for) Morken."

After that, he was called upon to play more often. But it was not easy for a young fellow with a strict Norwegian father to meet his musical commitments: ". . . At a dance down in Quandahl in an old barn there, (Morken) was bound to have me along playing there. And I says: 'OK, I'll play, but my dad told me I had to be home by midnight. I can't stay any longer than that.' 'That's all right,' he says. I played until midnight, and 'twelve o'clock I said: 'Now I'm going home,' and I packed up my fiddle. And he said: 'No sir, you ain't goin' home yet. You're going to wait until we get collected up and you get your half of the playing.' I says, 'You take the whole business, I'm going home.' "

How old were you then?

"I think that must have been 1918."

1918? And you were born when?

"1897 . . . So I'd be twenty-one."

And you were still coming home by midnight?

"Yep. My dad told me: 'You be home by midnight,' and I came home. (Laughs.) I was a good boy, you know. Yah, I was."

The father was clearly the undisputed authority in the rural second and third generation Norwegian-American families of which the Solliens were typical. Talking about their father, Styrk Sollien, Johannes' sister Martina has said that he was "strict, but never mean." Somehow the adjective "strict" is always part of Johannes' description of his father, but that strictness also appears to be always modified or softened in a variety of ways. There is in Scandinavia a folk tradition that holds the fiddle to be an instrument of the devil and depicts fiddlers as often in league with evil powers. This tradition has also come over to America, and there are still some among the older Norwegian-Americans in the area

who consider it unseemly to allow fiddle playing in a church building, even if it is only in the recreation room or parish hall. This prompted me to ask Johannes how his father felt about his son's fiddling. "Oh, he didn't say nothing, he didn't say nothing about it. . . . No, he bought an organ for us children when we were young, so we had an organ at home, you know, when I got the fiddle. And later on he got hold of a piano for us, so he was reasonable good to us. But he wanted us to behave. And we did. We tried to behave, anyway. He was pretty strict, though. You've seen his picture, didn't you?"

Yes, with the beard. He looks pretty impressive.

"He looks sharp."

Was he a "rod-type" parent? Did he take a stick to you?

"You bet your life! More than once. You bet. We all knew what that meant. That wasn't "maybe" there, boy. My dad was pretty reasonable, though. If you behaved, it was OK."

According to Johannes, the most common combination of instruments for country dance evenings was one or two fiddles and a piano or pump organ for chording. Some musicians had a "folding organ" which they carried with them from place to place.

Folding organ?

"Sure! You never heard about that? Yessir, they could carry it and put it in a buggy, and away you went to the next place, and take it off and play again."

Was this a pump organ?

"Yah, a little pump organ. It was about . . . oh, about three feet long, I suppose, and about three feet high, and about twelve, fourteen inches wide . . . You folded it up and carried it away."

The musicians at a country dance were usually members of the community, and they knew very well what the dancers wanted.

What kind of tunes would you play for a country dance evening?

"It was mostly waltzes. And then they had the polka and hop-waltz."

What's a hop-waltz?

"Hop-waltz and polka are about the same thing. And then, oh schottische. I mean. You know what a schottische is? Schottische and the polka and the hop-waltz. Polka and the hop-waltz are about the same. Some call it polka and some call it hop-waltz. I call it polka."

All these were couple dances?

"Oh yah. Sometimes they had, oh, what you call . . . Circle Two-step. You know what that is? The ladies form a ring and the men form another on the outside, and they go opposite ways. And then, they have a caller, and he'll tell them: 'ladies forward, gents turn back,' and then you grab your partners, and then they dance two-step part a while. Then, (he) says: 'form a ring again . . .'"

Oh, so you change partners?

"Change partners, yah."

Did you ever have any quadrilles or anything like that?

"Oh yah, a lot of them. We played in Spring Grove here, I think it was last fall. We played at the Sons of Norway out there. They had a caller out there, and they had the Circle Two-step, and boy, that was a good one. Must have kept it up for 'bout half an hour. I got pretty tired from playing. You keep playing the same tune for about half an hour, twenty minutes."

What about these quadrilles? What were they like?

"Oh, they were quick. Fast tunes, you know. Like The Devil's Dream, you know. You've heard about that? That's a quadrille. Turkey in the Straw."

How did they dance those?

"Well, you had a caller there, you know. I've danced it a few times, but I wasn't good at it; I didn't understand the calls, you know. I got mixed up. But I suppose you could have learnt it, if you kept it up. I didn't keep it up. I had to play, you know. What I liked mostly was if I could get out there and dance a good hop-waltz or polka . . . if you got a good partner. Boy, I liked that! You get one that you could balance pretty good with her, and boy, you could go 'round the circle, I'll tell ya . . . that was a lot of fun."

Wasn't it kind of hard dancing on a barn floor?

"They had a lot of wax, you know. Put a lot of wax on the floor."

Wax on the barn floor? Barn floors are pretty rough, aren't they?

"No, no. Not too bad. And once you start dancing on them, after a while . . . you press a lot of wax in there, then you'd slide around . . . yah, that was pretty good." I asked Johannes what other kinds of gatherings he played for. "Well, wedding receptions . . . played for them once in a while. Not very often. Just for neighborly get-togethers. No rough stuff. It was always pretty decent. Yes it was. It was all the time pretty nice. I wouldn't have

stood for that rough stuff. I would've packed the violin and gone home."

Rough stuff like what?

"Fighting."

Did that happen pretty often?

"No, not where I was. But I heard about it."

Fighting at barn dances?

"Oh, sure. They got'em too much to drink, you know. They don't know what's good for themselves."

Well, apparently the open consumption of alcohol was not condoned at barn dances, but on occasion there was a bit of unexpected excitement. Such was the case with "the Hutchinson Devil." "The Hutchinson Devil, didn't ya hear about him? Oh, that must have been around 1920, somewhere between 1920 and 30. Up at Hutchinson, Minnesota. They had a celebration up there, and somebody dressed up in a red suit . . ."

A Union Suit?

"A Union Suit, and had a red tail on it, and he come in there with a spear in his hand, and he, oh he scattered the whole crowd. They all run for the exit. You heard about that, didn't you? And I'll tell'ya, they all scattered, you know. And they were going to have a dance there again later on, and that nut, he thought he was going to scare them again, but that time he got fooled . . . they caught'im . . . and they found out it wasn't the devil. You ask some of the old timers if they remember the Hutchinson Devil."

I have not asked any other old timers about the Hutchinson Devil yet, but I intend to!

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