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## “That’s still a good one”: Herman Fox and his concertina

Paul Tyler

If at some time in the last 70 years you have lived in the Fort Wayne area, you might have encountered Herman Fox. It’s possible that some of the vegetables you bought at your local grocery were grown by him on his seventeen-acre farm near Franke Park. Or you might have seen him and his wife, Clara, selling flowers which he had grown and has had arranged at the Barr Street Farmers’ Market downtown. Or perhaps you encountered him more directly at a dance or music program where he was a member of the band. Herman has been at many such events, over the years, with his concertina -- a large, square squeeze-box that produces musical notes from buttons that, unlike those on an accordian, are located on the sides of the instrument.

Herman Fox was born in 1897 and raised on a farm southwest of Fort Wayne. He began taking piano lessons at the age of twelve, but was never very fond of the piano. When he was fourteen he set his heart on playing the concertina. His family would sometimes stop at a roadside saloon near Sandpoint where the five boys could get a bowl of soup and something to drink for five cents apiece. Herman’s attention, however, was riveted on Bill Gephart, the owner’s son, who sat in the corner entertaining the patrons on

his concertina. As Herman recalls the scene, “I fell in love with that concertina he had. I had to have it, but he wouldn’t sell it to me.”

By 1912, when he was fifteen years old, Herman was able to buy his own concertina. He also bought sheet music over the next few years in order to learn current popular songs like “Beautiful Kate.” But sheet music, he complained, was written in the “high keys,” the keys with one or more flats; and if you wanted to “play with violins or guitars, you got to get down in the common keys,” that is in the sharp keys of G, D and A. Herman learned much of his repertoire by ear from other musicians with whom he played for local dances. A large part of his repertoire is dance tunes he learned in the years around World War I, including fiddle tunes, popular song melodies played for quadrilles or square dances, waltzes and special melodies used for couple dances like the “Rye Waltz” and the “Varsouvienne.” He also picked up

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# Who are we?

## Herman Fox, continued

a number of German melodies that he heard at home. His grandparents had been born in Germany, and his parents spoke German at home. They would often have card parties at which German songs were always sung.

During the War years, Herman bought a fancy new concertina for \$700 from a music store in Chicago. This mail-order purchase brought him a 104-key (note) Pearl Queen concertina with much intricate, mother-of-pearl inlay. At the end of the war, Herman was called into the army. He remembers that he didn't know if he'd be coming back, so he was talked into swapping off his fancy Pearl Queen. Out of the trade he got \$75, 60 bushels of oats and a less fancy, 96-key Pearl Queen concertina. This is the instrument he has continued to play ever since.

There has probably never been a time in the last 70 years when Herman hasn't played regularly. In the 1920s and '30s he played for house dances with one or another dance band. Each ensemble was usually led by a fiddler. Two fiddlers he worked with, Bill Weaver and Lou Palmer, are memorialized today in the tunes that Herman remembers them playing and has named for them, "Weaver's Waltz" and "Palmer's Waltz." Lou Palmer's band also included a guitarist named Hibbard, and Hibbard's son, who played the four-string banjo. People who held dances in their barns or homes would usually charge 15 cents for admission, and the musicians would each get three to four dollars for playing four to six hours at a dance. Herman claims that that was "good money in those days," although after a rain storm had kept the crowd away from a barn dance, Herman agreed to take a small pig in payment.

Herman continued to play for square dances through the 1950s and '60s, even after rock and roll music had become popular. At times he would work with a band, such as that led by a fiddler named Rousseau from Fort Wayne; at other times he would call the figures for the square dances while playing the concertina and a harmonica held in a rack around his neck. Square dancing has continued to be popular in the Fort Wayne area. In Herman's view, "they don't dance them so severe as they used to."

Herman doesn't play for dancers anymore. Most of the performing he does is for musical programs given at senior citizens' centers or nursing homes. There is a great demand for the old-time music that he plays. He often has three or four engagements a week in Fort Wayne and surrounding towns with one of the several ensembles he plays with. He's been a member of the senior citizens' band organized by the Fort Wayne Park Board. He currently plays with several informal ensembles made up of musicians like fiddler Hugh Sowers, mandolinist Will Olnick, and guitarists Charlie Fudge, Orvil Gonzer and Bob Giant. Recently, he has been playing on Saturday nights at the Alpine, a local restaurant. Herman has also traveled with his concertina to perform at the Indiana Fiddlers' Gathering at Battle Ground, for the Folk Arts Program held in 1981 at the Oubache State Recreation Area near Bluffton.

The Hoosier Folklore Society is dedicated to the documentation, preservation, and celebration of folklore and folklife in Indiana and surrounding Midwestern states. As an organization, we are interested in all aspects of Hoosier traditional culture--arts and crafts, local history and historic preservation, place names, ethnic traditions, foodways.

Our newsletter is intended to reflect this diversity, containing features on various folklore and folklife activities around the state, including festivals, research projects, educational programs, and traditional artists. Let us know what you're up to!

In addition to the newsletter, Society activities include an annual meeting (see the announcement on page 3), a consulting service, and sponsorship of folklore/folklife programs and projects. We invite you to join us. Membership includes a subscription to the Newsletter and a reduced registration fee at the annual meeting. Just fill out the membership form on page 4, make your check payable to THE HOOSIER FOLKLORE SOCIETY, and send it to us at the address shown.

## Folklore & Folklife in the Classroom

Using local resources in language arts and social studies classes can make literature, history, and art come alive for students. What kind of success have you had in introducing folklore and traditional arts into your classroom? Write and let us know.

If you're looking for suggestions on teaching folklore, you might start with two special issues of journals published in Indiana:

- **Indiana English Journal**, volume 11, no. 1 (1977)
- **Folklore Forum**, Bibliographic and Special Series #2 (1969), available from the Folklore Institute at IU

In addition, three books that contain a wealth of Hoosier folk materials may be of potential help:

- **Hoosier Folk Legends** by Ronald Baker (Indiana University Press, 1982) - a collection of oral narratives from around the state
- **Indiana Folklore: A Reader** edited by Linda Degh (Indiana University Press, 1979) - a collection of articles from **Indiana Folklore**
- **Land of the Millrats: Folklore from Indiana's Calumet Region** by Richard M. Dorson (Harvard University Press, 1981) - a study of the industrial northwest section of the state, focusing on the lore of the steel mills, ethnic traditions, the urban experience



# The Metamora Oral History and Folklife Research Project

## Jens Lund

Metamora is a unique community situated on the banks of the Whitewater Canal. It has gone through five distinct periods in its historical development--the canal era, the railroad era, the hydraulic power era, the period of decline and abandonment, and the most recent period of tourism and crafts-oriented restoration. The canal properties constitute the Whitewater Canal State Memorial and they include a singular structure--the only wooden aqueduct in North America. The old town buildings are all privately owned and many of them house craft shops, artists' studios, and antique dealers. Once a year, the Canal Days and Traders' Rendezvous turn the entire town into a gigantic flea market, with evening entertainment provided by a fiddle-and-banjo-contest.

Since the summer of 1981, the Metamora Shop Keepers' Association in the Old Metamora section of town has been conducting a project in oral history and folklife research. Association members were concerned about the increasing commercialization of local events and hoped to use historical and folklife research to help with the development of restored properties and the generation of events and exhibits illustrative of the heritage of the area.

The oral history and folklife research project began when Association members Maxine Bridgeford and Marilyn Crankshaw attended the "Sharing Our Lives" conference in Bloomington. This meeting launched the Indiana Communities Project, a two-year program sponsored by the Folklore Institute and the Oral History Research Project of Indiana University to introduce nonprofessionals to the use of interview techniques for historical and cultural research. Since the onset of the project, researchers Sue Booth, Maxine Bridgeford, and Ethel Gates have conducted more than twenty detailed interviews of Metamora-area residents. These have been transcribed and indexed by project director Paul Baudendistel, a gifted local historian and restoration expert. Baudendistel is currently completing a research report on the village school, based on the material in the interviews--the first of several such reports. All the reports, along with the tapes and transcripts, are deposited in the Brookville Public Library.

Among the people interviewed during the project is Jim

Smith, a fiddler and storyteller, who has supplied considerable information about churches and lodges and their role in the musical culture of early twentieth-century Metamora. Information about local blacksmithing has come from Mary Williams, daughter of the last Metamora blacksmith. Transitions in occupations are explored in an interview with Charles Curry, whose family owned a livery stable and horsedrawn schoolbus, enterprises that gradually evolved into an automotive garage and filling station and a trucking business.

The Metamora project is an excellent illustration of the value of "grass roots" historical and folkloristic research. As the project continues, both Metamora residents and interested outsiders will have the opportunity to learn much about this unique community.

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## ANNUAL MEETING

- Date: May 1, 1983
- Place: Spring Mill State Park
- Time: 9:30-11:30 a.m.

*In conjunction with the Indiana Historical Association's Spring Workshop*

### PROGRAM:

- Barbara Allen - "Folklore and Family History"
- Jens Lund - "Pearl Fishing in the Midwest"
- Betty Belanus - "Folk Arts in Indiana"
- Ervin Beck - "Musical Instruments of Joe Wright, Goshen, Ind."

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## MEMBERS' FORUM

Where do your interests lie? Folklore? Local history? Traditional arts?

Are you a teacher? an historian? a librarian? an artist? Let us know

what you'd like to see in upcoming issues of the Newsletter -- and send us your own contributions.

Interests

Research projects

Upcoming festivals, programs, performances in your area



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Become a member of the Hoosier Folklore Society. Help support a growing effort to serve those interested in the folklife of Indiana and the Midwest.

1983 DUES SCHEDULE

- Regular Membership . . . . . \$3.00
- Institutional Membership . . . . . \$5.00
- Patron of the Society . . . . . \$25.00  
(may be an organization or an individual)

Please check the appropriate box above, complete the form below, and return with your check or money order to: The Secretary-Treasurer, Hoosier Folklore Society, 504 N. Fess, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47405.

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