

Indiana Hoedown IH048-049
Traditional Music from the Hoosier State

116 Pelham Drive South
Kettering, Ohio 45429
October 18, 1979

Dear Mr. Tyler,

In answer to your letter, I can give you the following information about the Blackhawk Valley Boys.

The Blackhawk Valley Boys group was organized in 1935, and broke up in 1948. It would be a very long history to complete in detail. However, I will give you a sketch, and can give you additional details if you want them.

The BVB's were formed in 1935 by Walter "Sleepy" Schultz and myself, in Rockford, Illinois. The group began formally after winning a talent broadcast on WROK. The first membership and instrumentation was as follows: Sleepy Schultz, guitar; Bob Haime, harmonica; Jerry _____, harmonica, and Don Lake, guitar. Bob and Jerry soon lost interest, and James "Red" Bicknell was asked to join the BVB's. "Red" was a guitar player. We all sang solos and had a singing trio at this time. We broadcast weekly on WROK for several months on sustaining programs. The instrumentation was changed when Pete Fall, lead guitar player joined the group in the fall of 1935. Pete played lead guitar, Red played rythm guitar, Sleepy bought a three-string bass and played it, and I got an accordion and played it.

The BVB's got a sponsor and were hired as a staff band at WROK. The sponsor was Texas Crystals (laxative crystals), and broadcast several times a week for this sponsor. The first tavern job we had was before Red or Pete joined the group. We played in a little tavern in New Milford, just south of Rockford. I had just gotten my first accordion, and the only song we (Sleepy and I) could play at all was "Springtime in the Rockies". After Red and Pete joined the group, we improved quite a bit musically and began playing taverns, dances, etc. We played in Rockford and surrounding states until 1939. I believe we played in every tavern of any size in Rockford, at the large and small dance halls, on street corner broadcasts, on a train, at all of the lodges, and at the Big Foot Country Club and The Lake Geneva Yacht Club, at Lake Geneva, Wisc. many times.

In 1935, WROK sponsored broadcasts of the "Rock River Barn Dance - at first a sustaining show broadcast from the studios. Brandt Bloomquist, a WROK announcer arranged for the broadcast to originate at the Palace Theatre in Rockford, where we played to full houses for a run of many months. The show had a cast of around 20 performers, and a square dance performing group.

In the summer of 1938, the BVB's quit WROK to take a road show job with a WLS unit. We didn't like the travel/pay at that time, so we left the road show and took a night club job in

Corpus Christi, Texas - playing under the stars for an intimate group of wealthy oilmen and business men. It was the best club in that area, and very exclusive. We played soft dance and incidental music for listening, and strolled through the tables playing requests. We were too expensive for the club, however, and after our originally contracted month ran out, they let us go.

We started back north to Rockford. (I want to insert a fact at this point, which I neglected at the beginning of this narrative. The group name "Blackhawk Valley Boys" was chosen because Rockford, Illinois - where the group was formed - was in what was called the "Blackhawk Valley", in honor of the Indian Chief Blackhawk, who ^{HAP}operated in the area. My Aunt Edith Lake took the credit for proposing the group name when we first began practicing our music.).

On our way north from Corpus Christi, we stopped at St. Louis. We had auditioned at a brand new - about-to-go-on-the-air Star Times Radio Station KXOK, when we had gone south to Corpus Christi. When we stopped there on the way back North, they hired us with a St. Louis company sponsor - Central Royal Beer. The sponsor liked us. The Musicians Union would only let us play country and western music without a local card. However, the sponsor liked our pop music during the audition and demanded that we play pop music. We did, but the union pressured the radio station to let us go, and they did.

We came back to Rockford, then got a booking agent in Chicago. He got us a job at Radio Stations WGL - WOWO in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Westinghouse owned both stations at the time. We started work in Ft. Wayne in March 1939, I believe. Our music was well received in the WOWO area (10,000 watts then, 50,000 since about 1946 or 1947). Prior to the war (WW II) we played dances and shows in the WOWO listening area, ~~xxxxxxx~~ ^{originated WGL on} ~~xxxxxxx~~ NBC RED, and were part of the WOWO NBC Blue originated "Hoosier Hop" which was first broadcast from the studios of the Westinghouse WOWO-WGL studios. We cut ~~two~~ series of transcriptions for Allied Mills Wayne Feeds, which ran 52 weeks in most of the midwest states. We had two slick covered Blackhawk Valley Boys songbooks published by Bell Music, which included ~~xxxx~~ many of our own original songs. Up to ~~this-time~~ 1942 our personnel still consisted of Pete, Red, Sleepy, and myself. In about 1942, Sleepy decided to move to ~~Rockford~~, and left the group. We hired Dean Maxedon, a guitar flogger and lead singer (later to be known on WLW as Dean Richards). In 1942 Red Bicknell went to the US Army, and I left for the US Navy.

During the war, Dean Maxedon left to go to KMOX, St. Louis, and George Arthur joined the group. The BVB's hired Glenn "Andy" Anderson from Rockford, Illinois as accordionist to replace me. (I can tell you he was much better - I knew him long before he joined the BVB's). Sometime around 1944, the BVB's went to WLS in Chicago, where they were very well received. They were there until after the war, when Red Bicknell and I came back from the military service. At that time, it was decided that the group would go back to WOWO in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, which we did.

Program

When we came back to WOWO, Glenn Anderson left to give me my old spot back with the group, and Dean Maxedon got a job as a single on WOWO, opening up Red Bicknell's spot with the group.

Not long after we came back to WOWO, we were again appearing on the "Hoosier Hop", which began showing outside of the station studios, first at the National Guard Armory, and then at the Shrine (Masonic) Theatre in Ft. Wayne. The show was broadcast - I believe every Saturday night. We had large crowds. The stage facilities at the Shrine Theatre were superlative. All of the WOWO talent showed there, including: Happy Herb Hayworth, Bob Shreve, Norm Widenhofer (Norm and Bob Shreve), Judy and Jen, The Downhomers (who came to WOWO while I was in service), Howard Ropa, Don and Helen Bush, Karl Connor (WOWO staff violinist), Dean Maxedon, Penny West, and others whom I don't remember just now.

In 1947, the AFM Local called all of the WOWO/WGL talent (16 persons at least) to a meeting at Union Hall and informed us that WOWO/WGL would not accede to the union demands for a year-long contract. The parent company, Westinghouse Radio Stations, Inc. would not allow the union to dictate to them in this matter, so we were told by the union that we were on strike. Westinghouse Radio Stations promptly released all sixteen of us - all talent, and started playing records.

The Blackhawk Valley Boys played a local nightclub for a few months, then got a contract with International Harvester Co. to do a series of around 24 shows in the states of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Ohio. Playing one night stands at dealership sponsored shows (usually local high school auditoriums and gymnasiums, the BVB's travelled extensively throughout all 3 states. We played this series of shows for three seasons, and dances, clubs, lodges, etc., between times.

In 1949, I left the group and started attending college in Ft. Wayne. Pete and Red started a used car lot. George Arthur got a job as an announcer/singer I believe at a radio station in or around Marion, Indiana.

This ends a historical sketch which I am sure is quite incomplete, and perhaps not chronologically correct. It is the best I can do with the memories/I have available at this time. I do have more info. *and* information

As for your question in regard to the type of material which the BVB's presented, I can say that we started out in the early years with folk and western music and songs, went on to sing most of the Sons of the Pioneers material - we liked their western songs best, then in addition played most of the old standards and pop tunes of the day - throughout the years - and played German, Italian, Polish, and Swedish polkas, waltzes, mazurkas etc., in the dance halls and ethnic clubs in Rockford. We even played some light classical music at country club functions etc., and of course, most of the American folk songs.

Concerning existing recorded music performed by the Blackhawk Valley Boys, I have some. I have two reel-to-reel tapes of The Hoosier Hop performances at the Shrine Theatre, recorded off-the-air by a WOWO engineer. They were made in about 1946, before plastic backed tapes were in general use. They are Brush Co. paper backed, black oxide tapes. However, the music is acceptable for listening, and the recordings medium was state-of-the-art for that day. The technical equipment was WOWO standard broadcast mics, line amps, recording equalizers, etc. The tapes have been spliced in several places, but much of the tape is splice free. The balance of the recorded Blackhawk Valley Boys performances which I have consists of 16 inch acetate transcriptions performed in the Emboyd (or Embassy) Theatre on W. Jefferson St. in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. These transcriptions were made by Med Maxwell Productions of Ft. Wayne, for a series of transcribed programs for Ford Tractor Co. The talent consisted of The Blackhawk Valley Boys, Jeanne Brown (who played the theatre organ on the recordings), and Karl Connor, WOWO staff violinist. The Ford Co. became involved in litigation with Ferguson or Massey and the whole promotion fell through. The transcriptions originated in the theatre, which has exceptionally good acoustics (nationally recognized for this). A professional audio engineer from Chicago made the mic setups, checked telephone line equalization, provided all the recording equipment, and personally made all of the transcriptions. As I recall, the microphones were Western Electric dynamic. I do not know the technical details of the line amplifier, the recording amplifiers, and the recording turntable and cutting head, although I am fairly sure that it was RCA equipment (probably RCA 73B transcription equipment). Med Maxwell later gave me these acetate transcriptions. I think I have about 60 of them (recorded on one side only). I have moved them through my residences in four states since 1946, and I have not treated them chemically or environmentally in any special way to preserve them. As a result, of the two types of transcription disks (Audio Disk, and Soundcraft), some have deteriorated completely (the Audio Disk manufacturers product). The Soundcraft transcriptions still look playable.

I was employed as a broadcast engineer (I still have my Radiotelephone First Class license) for several years, at WGL and WANE in Ft. Wayne, Indiana; and in Defiance, Ohio at WONW. While I worked at WGL, I dubbed the transcriptions described above to 7" reel-to-reel tapes. The WGL equipment was all RCA, RCA turntables and pickup heads, RCA speech input mixer, and RCA line amplifiers (broadcast quality, and Magnacorder tape recorders. Since I did it for my own use, I didn't purchase new blank tapes, so these tapes have a few splices and are a bit fragile. They are the first copy from the originals, however, so sound pretty good.

I also have one commercial 16" pressed transcription from a series of 26 programs made for Allied Mills Wayne Feeds. The Blackhawk Valley Boys music appears several places on this double-sided transcription (along with the announcer Eldon Campbell - later to be a Westinghouse Radio Stations, Inc. executive, Happy Herb Haworth, and Bob Shreve as "Cousin Elmer.

These transcriptions were recorded in Studio "A" at WOWO in 1941, with the transcription pressings made by Sound Studios of New York, Inc. The Louis Wade Agency in Ft. Wayne sold the show. I've kept this transcription in the envelope for these 38 years, but it looks like it might have a few scratches on it. I believe that "Sleepy" Schultz, a former BVB also has at least one of this series of transcriptions.

As to the availability of the material which I have, I must say that I cannot let it out of my sight. I wouldn't trust any radio station engineer to play these recordings, unless I was looking over his shoulder to make sure no harm comes to them, since no one but myself has the greatest personal interest in them. The music is irreplaceable, and inadvertant mutilation of the soundtracks would mean that that music would be lost forever. I do not have technical facilities for dubbing this music. I hope to have facilities some time in the future. S copy of the tapes would be a copy of a copy. The best dubbings would come from the original acetate transcriptions, if it could be done without harming the tracks, and if the recorded material is still usable.

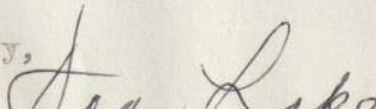
The transcriptions made for Med Maxwell Productions (the 60 16" disks) were made under a written contract by the performers and Med Maxwell Productions. The performers, The Blackhawk Valley Boys, Jeanne Brown, and Karl Connor, formed a corporation, Associated Artists, Inc., to safeguard individual interests among themselves and with Med Maxwell, Ind. I do not believe that any legal problem would arise with the Med Maxwell contract, since no money exchanged hands between the talent and the agency. However, an opinion on the existing validity of the Associated Artists Corp. might be needed to obtain release of the transcribed performances of the above listed talent. Maybe no releases from anyone would be required because of the contract or the incorporation (AA) documents. This could be determined. At the present time, the actual transcriptions - the only ones to my knowledge - are under my control, and have been since around 1948, when Med Maxwell gave them to me. Therefore, I feel that I have a strong position in whatever use might be made of them.

To a person not intimately connected with the Blackhawk Valley Boys, much of the foregoing may be of little interest. You can probably understand my particular feelings about the BVB's and this material because I helped form the group and was with it throughout most of its esistance.

I would want to have this material made available for use, and preserved, if possible. It would be a good thing for all of the BVB personnel who made the music. Alternatives for dubbing these performances could be explored, and a way found to do this to the satisfaction of all concerned. I am interested in obtaining an indication of the degree of your interest in dubbing the material, and your suggestions on how it might be accomplished.

Hearing from you has been of great interest to me. Old memories of what the BVB's did, where, and with whom have been pleasantly revived in my thoughts. I thank you again for your interest.

Sincerely,



116 Pelham Drive South
Kettering, Ohio 45429
December 3, 1979

Dear Mr. Tyler -

In answer to the questions included in your last letter:

1. Although I am sure that the BVBs came to Ft. Wayne and WOWO in March 1939, I haven't been able to find any documentation per se. However, I do have a Contract Blank of the Rockford (Illinois) Local No. 240 AFM completed on December 12, 1938 for a job on New Years Eve 1938. I remember the job. I would say that this is better documentation than the "Radio Personalities, WOWO, Ft. Wayne, Indiana" publication (of which I have several copies). So I believe that you can state without concern for refutation that the BVBs did arrive in Ft. Wayne in 1939. (what a ham that writer was).
2. The Blackhawk Valley Boys really only used one name in a formal way, in their radio broadcasting programs. However, it was easy to say "The Blackhawks", which is what was often done by others and by ourselves. As an aside, we once (for a very short time when we first began playing, and before we began broadcasting on WROK) used the Name "The Lone Star Ranch Boys". In about 1937 when we played the Big Foot Country Club and the Lake Geneva Yacht Club, at Lake Geneva, Ill., we used the name "The Radio City Four". In Ft. Wayne, after Sleepy Schultz left the group, we played the "116 Club" (1948~~xxx~~) and used the name "The Radio City Four". In cases where we used this name, we played only pop music, and dressed in semi-formal clothes (tux coats etc.).
3. We performed, as I previously indicated, in every sort of situation one can imagine, and for a great variety of types of audiences, for a period of around fifteen years, so we had much material in our repertoire of instrumental and vocal music, bits, gags, etc. I'd have to do some thinking to come up with this sort of information, but might do it when you are writing the history and have a specific need for it. I say this, because my time to spend on the project is limited just now. If and when you are actually in the project, try to develop a list of all the information which you need, and I can make a one-time search of my records and other information to provide answers. This approach will expedite getting information to you. I do have a fairly extensive amount of material (published) on activities of the BVBs, which will provide specifics, all documented.
4. If we can make a formal agreement with the University of Indiana on the preservation and public use of the acetate transcriptions which I have, I would be very interested in accomplishing this project.

- continued -

5. Concerning the two tapes I have of "The Hoosier Hop" network broadcasts from the Shrine Auditorium. I bought a used AMPEX Model 1160 reel-to-reel tape recorder (1960s vintage) about two weeks ago. I have also another reel-to-reel recorder which needs one new pressure roller. I ordered the part last week, and should have it in about a month. I am sure that I could dub the Hop tapes, if you are interested in this. Let me know what you think, and when I get the system set up and operating, I'll inform you.
6. I believe that you are working on a very worthwhile project. If you can accomplish your proposed actions with IU, you will have done a public service for present and future generations, in this particular area of interest. Therefore, I commend you and wish you prospects for a successful conclusion of your efforts.

I will assist you on BVB information and data as much as is possible in the time and with the resources which I have available.

Sincerely yours,

Donald E. Lake
Donald E. Lake

Dear Mr. Tyler -

October 25, 1979

Since I sent my reply to your letter, I have found several clippings which establish the dates of the Blackhawk Valley Boop's first broadcasts on W.R.O.K., Rockford, Ill., and the original personnel, as follows:

- Our first broadcast - January 29, 1934

- Jerry Carroll was the name for whom I left a blank in my letter.

I have several other newspaper clippings etc. (over)

I have discovered that I didn't mention the several seasons (1946-1947) that the BVB's were the house band at Beech Lake Ranch in northern Indiana - a very well known district from WLS, WSM, WLW and California stations played Beech Lake. I also have found some 8X10 glossy prints of the BVB's at Beech Lake Ranch and for Allied Miller Wagon Feed Shows, etc. I probably have glossy photos of Jan Lake
these newspaper pics
Rockford