



THE HAPPY NORWEGIANS, who perform over 30 times a year, are pictured playing a polka during the 10th anniversary open house of the Area IV Senior Nutrition here last week. From left are Olof Syhre, Watertown (formerly Pierpont) who is 94 and plays the banjo and fiddle; accordionists Ray

Kaasa and Ken Larson, both Watertown; Ed Valberg, Henry, fiddle; and Esther Bjerke, Bradley, MC. Pianist is Leona Fichtner, Bradley, who coordinates the musical group's activities.

Happy Norwegians bring fun to 'party'

by Larry Ingalls

The Happy Norwegians won't reach the top of the pop charts, and they haven't made the "big bucks" yet, but there probably isn't a musical group in this area that enjoys entertaining more than they do.

They got their start 10 years ago when Leona Fichtner and Esther Bjerke dreamed up the idea. Neither knows how many miles they have traveled or how many performances they have given, but they will cause a lot of smiles and laughs this year while performing over 30 times.

"We don't like to play during the winter because of the roads, and we prefer daytime programs, but we'll still give over 30 shows this year and there have been times when we've done more than that," said Bjerke.

Do other "gigs" too

The Happy Norwegians entertain at a lot of nursing homes in this part of the state, but do "gigs" for other organizations too, such as the 10th anniversary open house of Area IV Senior Nutrition here last week. With Bjerke handing out wisecracks and jokes as the MC, and the five musicians providing the music ranging from polkas to waltzes and fun tunes, it took only a few minutes for the faces in the packed house to begin smiling and laughing. And... there were some ladies who wanted to dance but they couldn't find a gentleman in the place who would get up and strut his stuff with them, even though the Happy Norwegians

entertained for an hour!

The original group included Fichtner on piano, Bjerke and Rasmus Warne of Clark, an oldtime fiddler. Clarence Burke of Watertown playing the fiddle then made it a foursome. Both men are now deceased, but the group has grown to six entertainers: Olof Syhre of Watertown, formerly of Pierpont and 94 years old, plays banjo and fiddle; accordionists Ray Kaasa and Ken Larson of Watertown; fiddler Ed Valberg of Henry; and the two women. And for good measure, fiddler Ralph Saathoff of Estelline sometimes plays when they play closer to Estelline.

They do it for the fun!

"We don't charge anything when we play for nursing homes," Bjerke explained, "because just seeing the residents smile or laugh is enough payment. We do charge gas money to go other places, because it gets expensive traveling these days."

Bjerke noted, "It is especially fun to entertain a group like today (Senior Nutrition) because they responded so well to us. I don't think I told a joke today that didn't get a laugh, and they really enjoyed the music. How much more fun can we have than this?"

She tells a lot of Norwegian jokes and also fits her material to go along with the seasons, such as spring at this time of year, one of the songs being "Springtime in South Dakota" instead of the usual "Springtime in the Rockies." They also do religious



LEONA FICHTNER, who started the Happy Norwegians with Esther Bjerke 10 years ago, enjoys tickling the ivory and entertaining groups around this part of the state.

programs.

Bjerke said Fichtner coordinates the performances and they get together from time to time to come up with new ideas and material. They also keep track of what the group does at each place where they entertain so they can use new material if they are asked to come back later.

There are jokes aplenty

Bjerke keeps things rolling with stories about themselves, and Ole and Lena Jokes, and the musicians genuinely laugh right along with the crowd.

A sampling?

A senior citizen group was on a bus tour and before the tourists retired for the night, the tour guide

told the women to be sure and wear slacks or jeans the next day because they would be going to a windy site the next morning.

An 85 year old gal didn't hear him and showed up in a dress. When they arrived at their destination, and she stepped off the bus, the wind caught her dress. But... she had a new hat on and held it tightly on her head with both hands. When other tourists began giving her a bad time, she explained, "This hat is brand new, but what you are looking at is 85 years old!"

Jokes, music and laughing at themselves. That is what the Happy Norwegians bring to every "party" they go to.