

ALICE DROITCOURT AHR

MEMOIR

Alsatian Customs and Traditions

B26

PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by the Castroville Public Library Oral History Program Project B. Deanna Hoffman transcribed the tape and Connie Rihn was the interviewer and editor of this transcript. The interview took place in the home of Alice Ahr's nephew, William T. Tschirhart.

Alice Droitcourt Ahr was born in 1904 in LaCoste to Joseph Droitcourt and Annie Monier. Joseph came from a musical family and he played the violin. All of his children learned to play a musical instrument, but Alice excelled with the piano. She played for all school and church functions for many years in LaCoste, and she has been performing with dance bands all of her adult life. The first band she played with was her father's, called Droitcourt Band, then later with various other groups in this area. Today she still plays with several other musicians for senior citizen groups in the San Antonio area.

On this tape Alice plays many of the old-time pieces she learned from her father--many are untitled, and other music that was popular in the early 1900's. Alice plays all types of music, but specializes in old-time style.

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Tape # B26
1 hr. 15 min.
transcribed

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Today is Friday, April the 3rd, 1981. This is Connie Rihn interviewing Alice Ahr at the William Terry Tschirhart home in Castroville. I'm interviewing for the Castroville Public Library Oral History Project B. Alice Ahr is my mother's sister so I will be addressing her as Aunt Alice at this interview.

Q Aunt Alice, when and where were you born?

A When?

Q What's your birthday?

A 1904, June the 18th.

Q Okay. And where were you born?

A At LaCoste.

Q Who were your parents?

A Annie Monier and Joe Droitcourt.

Q Okay. And how many children were in Joe and Annie's family?

A Four of us, three girls and one boy.

Q And you're the oldest?

A Oldest.

Q Okay. Who's after you?

A Uncle Alvin.

Q Alvin.

A Then Mama.

Q That's Annetta.

A And then Myrtle.

Q Okay. So you all were three girls and one boy. And then you married who?

A Julius Ahr.

Q Do you know the date of your marriage?

A It was in November, but the year I don't know, let's see.

Q How old were you when you married?

A November the 22nd, 1904. I was 18 when I got married.

Q Was it '22 then? 1922?

A I'll be 76 this year.

Q Okay, so you married in 1922 to Julius Ahr.

A I'll be 77.

Q 77?

A 1904

Q Yeah, you'll be 77 in June.

A 77.

Q Okay. How many children do you have?

A Four.

Q Okay. Do you want to name them?

A Two girls and two boys.

Q Okay.

A Quintin in La Coste. C. J. in Del Rio. And Sharmane and Mary Ann in San Antonio.

Q Okay. Now you have been -- I mean Music seems to be your whole life. We know that and everyone around here knows you for your music.

A It's just like taking a bottle of pills, give me my music.

Q Give you your music.

A I can go dancing, I don't need any medicine.

Q So you've always loved dancing and music. When did you first get interested in music or how did you get interested in it?

A Oh, we just started playing the organ in church. We had a piano at home. I was maybe around eight. I was ten years old when I played, pushed the organ with the feet. The pedals, they had no electric organs. I push- with my feet.

Q So you played the pump organ?

A I played the benediction and little hymns. I got in further and further.

Q Okay. Well, how did you learn to play that music? Did you learn by yourself or from your daddy? Or did you take lessons?

A I took lessons but I had a lot of music myself.

Q Okay, who did you take lessons from? The nuns?

A The nuns.

Q Can you remember the names of your teachers?

A Ask mother, she knows the sister.

Q Okay, at La Coste?

A There was a sister at LaCoste I took a little while, not too long and I had a lady from San Antonio. What was her name now? Miss Johnson.

Q But about how many years did you --

A Sister Jodoca in Castroville.

Q Sister Jodoca, oh, yeah she's, everybody talks about Sister Jodoca being the choir director.

A Oh, she's wonderful. I loved her and the sisters are the best teachers.

Q Okay. Why do you think that?

A Because she would not let you play unless you'd count and that figure went if you didn't you had to play it over till you got it with counting.

Q In other words she wanted the correct time of the music.

A Yeah. And she couldn't hear.

Q Yeah, she was deaf.

A She's deaf, yes.

Q But she still had good tone, she could hear if you hit a false note?

A She knew with the actions. And then I got into classical. You know when you take lessons you get classicals. I didn't care much for classicals. I loved to play duets, we had duets where two would play the piano.

Q Uh-huh.

A I loved to do that.

Q Okay. How many years of lessons did you take say altogether then?

A Well, say, I didn't even get to the fourth grade or anything in music. Just a little of the fourth grade, that's about all.

Q You had three years then?

A Well, off and on, yeah.

Q Okay. You said you didn't care for the classical music. While you were taking these lessons did you also play at home a different type of music?

A Well, not too much till later on.

Q Okay. But why do you think you were interested in music? Was it because your family was always musically inclined?

A Oh, yes, my daddy played the violin also.

Q What about his family? Was his family --

A His family, everyone played the piano by ear.

Q By ear. Without formal training.

A And on the black keys. The sharps and flats.

Q So the Droitcourt family was considered a musical family. So also Annetta took piano lessons?

A Yes, she took, and she played real good.

Q And Alvin?

A Myrtle took the violin, she played the violin a little while.

Q Oh, I didn't know that.

A Uh-huh. How long I don't know.

Q I was going to ask you why did Myrtle not get musical?

A How long I don't know and Uncle Alvin played, he played the sax a little while, too. And he played the drums, then we had a band you know, an old time band.

Q Okay. When did you first get into a band?

A With my daddy.

Q Your daddy and you. Anybody else?

A My brother.

Q Alvin.

A And, let's see, we had another guy played the flute, now which one was it? Charlie Groff I guess.

Q Okay. So what did you call this band? Did you have a name for 'em?

A Just the Droitcourt band.

Q The Droitcourt band. Okay. What kind of places or what kind of occasions did you play for this band? What would this band play for? Was it weddings? Or dances or what?

A Mostly anything, if they had the weddings and receptions in the halls or so and we had mostly dances.

Q Public dances you mean?

A Yeah, uh-huh.

Q Okay. Can you remember the first time you played? The band? How old were you when you first played?

A That I don't know either.

Q I mean about what age? Were you 16 or older?

A I was up to 17 or 18 I guess.

Q Before you married?

A I think I played a while before I married. Just how old I was I don't remember.

Q But you all would go out to dances.

A I guess I was around 17 or 18 because I know I won a gold five-dollar piece when I was starting.

Q For what?

A I wasn't married yet.

Q And what did you win it for?

A For dancing.

Q For dancing?

A Uh-huh, and I won a little, we had a little party down at the lower part of Castroville in a little dance hall.

Q Do you remember the name of that? The Empire?

A Yeah. And it was my cousin's birthday and they had music. They gave a prize for the best dancers and we won the first prize for the waltz. We won the waltz contest.

Q Uh-huh.

A Sure did. I was seven years old.

Q How old?

A Seven years old.

Q You were only seven?

A Yes, ma'am.

Q Oh, that's far back.

A Between seven and eight.

Q Well, when you first started playing in this band with your daddy, what kind of music did you all play?

A Old-time music.

Q Now when you say old-time music, this is music that the

people around here played on their fiddles and stuff from early, early days? Is that what you mean?

A Well, not everybody. There wasn't too many of them. There was a couple at Macdona, the Nentwicks. Now if she'd be here, she played the accordion a long time. You was wondering if the accordion was going along.

Q But were fiddle players the more common musicians. I mean were there more fiddle players than piano players?

A No, there wasn't too many fiddle players playing those old-time pieces.

Q Oh, really.

A This was Theo Artz where we got the music from.

Q Oh.

A In San Antonio.

Q You kind of followed his style?

A My daddy just hear his music and said I'm going to play his music.

Q Really?

A Yeah, sure did. Oh yes, it's not the old-time music they play around here now. There's nobody that I find that can play that music.

Q But Theo Artz played the old-time music?

A Yes, he used to come over the radio.

Q Oh really?

A Oh yeah.

Q I didn't know that. Okay. You want to play on the

piano some of this old-time music that you all played?

A Sure.

Q Okay.

A I'll sit down. I won't get up any more.

Q So Alice is going to play now some of this old-time music that she and her dad played with their first band.

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Now that was a two-step, right? And that was the piece that you started the dance off with?

A Most of the time.

Q Okay. So now you're going to play a waltz. Okay.

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Okay. That was a waltz. Do you know the name of that one?

A No, sure don't. I don't know the name for any of them. Maybe they have some but I don't know them.

Q You don't know the names of any of these songs. Okay. Is there any other piece that you played a lot that you can think of?

A Do you want me to play two or three together?

Q Yeah, just a little bit of two or three maybe. Sweet Bunch of Daisies and what else? Maybe go into an old-fashioned schottische or something like that. You can play a little bit of that.

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Okay. That was a medley of a schottische, Put Your

Little Foot and the last one was Herr Schmidt. Can you play a seven step?

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Okay. Now, are there any other old, old songs? Would you sing that song for me again? It's an old German song, right?

A (Mrs. Ahr sings).

Q Okay. Now, can you roughly translate what those words are about? You don't have to say it exactly. It's about losing.

A I lost my stocking over at the place and I won't go home without my stocking. Then I'll go back to the place and get me my stocking.

Q Now that was a song you played for dancing also?

A Oh, yeah. Every dance we played, we played that.

Q Okay. You want to play that on the piano?

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Okay. You're going to play an old-time schottische.

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Now this last piece is called, "Do, Do lieb mir in Hiertzen." What does that mean? "You live in my heart."

- End of Side 1 -

Q We are continuing our talking about and playing some old-time music and the next piece you are playing is what? "Oh, der lieber Augustine."

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Okay. I was wondering can you remember any of the songs that were romantic in your young days? What did sweet-hearts sing to each other. What were some of the songs you played for -- you can't think of any? Like Let Me Call You Sweetheart, would that have been an old one or not?

A That was one of them.

Q Okay. All of the pieces we've been playing this morning are pieces that you played with your dad's band when you all had the Droitcourt Band.

A Uh-huh.

Q Okay. Who else played with you?

A We also had Gene Artz, where the original music comes from, his daddy.

Q His dad was Theo Artz.

A His daddy, yes. And he played wonderful. My daddy picked it up from him. No lessons or nothing, just hearing it.

Q Uh-huh.

A He just played it by picking it up.

Q And Theo Artz was the band that came out from San Antonio that played for many, many years here in Castroville.

A No, they didn't play here. Yeah, they played at Wernette's.

Q And Wernette's Hall. Both of them.

A Oh yeah, they played at the lower hall, I remember now. They sure did. And his son played with us about three

dances.

Q Uh-huh. Well, more people remember Artz' band than any of the other bands?

A Well, his son played the flute. That was his son playing the flute.

Q And what did Theo, the old man, play?

A The violin. Oh, the violin.

Q What other --

A Beautiful violin.

Q And then they had another player that played what? That other player, they had a third player.

A The bass.

Q The bass fiddle?

A The bass fiddle. They had a bass fiddle.

Q Did they have a harp?

A No, I don't think so. You thought they had a harp but they had a bass fiddle.

Q Bass fiddle.

A Uh-huh. But who played it I don't remember.

Q Okay.

A Just three people, that's all they had. They didn't have no drums.

Q And no piano?

A Let's see.

Q It was a string band in other words? Do you have some pieces that he played that you haven't played that you

want to play, that Artz played?

A Oh, I know several yet. Several.

Q Okay. You want to play one more like My Little Girl and --

A I'll try some of his. "My Little Girl" didn't come from him I don't think because -- (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Now, what is the name of that piece? What do they call it?

A Schittler.

Q That means a shaker.

A Yeah.

Q Okay, it's an Alsatian word?

A Schittler, yeah. I guess is what it is.

Q Okay. Come over here. Okay.

A "After the Ball is Over," let's put that in there.

Q Okay. That was the ending song?

A No.

Q Okay. You played in this band but when you were little did you play in recitals that kind of started you out performing.

A Oh, yeah, uh-huh. I sure did. Played duets and we had recitals at the school, you know. I used to play for Christmas little plays and Easter plays and at the end of school.

Q Graduation?

A For the Catholic school?

Q For the Catholic school?

A And the public school graduations, Baccalaureate Service, plays, anything that went on. I had the whole works. I was the only one.

Q You were always the pianist?

A I was the only one out there that could put music out. Before they had bands and everything else.

Q And then you also were the organist at St. Mary's Church?

A For how long?

Q For years and years.

A Years and years and years.

Q And also then did you direct the choir?

A Directed the choir. Sometimes went up for two masses, twice to play all day long. Three high masses on a Christmas sometimes. My daddy kept the books.

Q Your daddy kept the books for what?

A School books.

Q Oh?

A Oh, yes, he kept the school books. No charge and nothing.

Q He just did that for the school.

A And I got a little money sometimes. A dollar for a requiem, two dollars for a wedding.

Q Uh-huh.

A The requiems, I used to sing in Macdona without the organ. I went with Father Gerbermann. He had the organ and I sang.

- Q So you sang a lot of Latin then in those days.
- A Oh, I love the Latin. Oh, I love the Latin. I love to sing that, "Magnificat" they used to sing here in church beautiful.
- Q Well, did you ever play for tabloids. You remember tabloids? Mother mentioned having tabloids.
- A Well, yes, I accompanied on the piano, yeah. Sure. At school we used to have those. If we could have talked it over then maybe I could have. She knows maybe one that I don't know.
- Q Yes. But exactly what was a tabloid?
- A I can't remember now.
- Q They would have what?
- A They would have something in the front in a pan or something.
- Q Burning?
- A Burning and makes a light or something. I just don't know any more for sure or something.
- Q And then what would be on the stage?
- A Well, we'd be like mama says I guess. Little angels and different things or how no more I just don't know. Oh, the Sisters used to have beautiful plays. It takes a Sister. An old-time Sister not these dumb Sisters they got now . . .
- Q Okay. Now, we're going to get back to your playing as a piano player in bands. You played with your dad first,

then you had this band. And then after he got too old and he didn't play any more, what did you do then? And you were married.

A And don't forget about Gene playing with us one time.

Q Yeah, you said that already. You said Gene played with you. But then after your daddy got too old and he didn't play with you --

A Well, I got with Bill Spivey. See he played with us.

Q You had a band? With him?

A Uh-huh.

Q And you played the piano?

A I played with him. He hired me. Then I played with Kilpatrick in Devine, the studio man and so we played at different places and then I played with Joe Hartmann from New Braunfels, Fredericksburg, two years.

Q Where was he from?

A Fredericksburg. Joe Hartmann. We played at Devine every two weeks for the Spanish people and we had nice dances.

Q Okay. What type of music did you play with him?

A Jazz, modern, and all that stuff.

Q In other words, popular music of the time.

A (Hums) what's the name of that again? I can't remember. All those things we played.

Q Okay. You played with some other people from around here you told me earlier.

- A Oh, there's so many. Then we played with a Hartmann from Hondo and the two Gerdes boys from Quihi and we played everywhere.
- Q Was that an old-time band?
- A No, no, that was a modern band.
- Q Okay. When did you play with the Schotts?
- A Well, all in between time.
- Q Did they have a band or what?
- A Yes, they had their own band.
- Q What were they called?
- A The boys, there was three boys wasn't it. Joe and August and Willie.
- Q Uh-huh, and they were from Devine.
- A Bill Spivey was with them and I, we was five of us.
- Q Oh, well, what was that band called?
- A I don't know any more, I just don't know.
- Q Well, what kind of music did you play with them then?
- A The piano.
- Q No, but I mean, what style of music?
- A Modern.
- Q Modern music?
- A Oh, yeah, modern waltzes and Let Me Call You Sweetheart.
- Q Okay, where did you play --
- A Put Your Little Foot.
- Q At what places around here did you play with that band?
- A Like for public dances?

A Yes.

Q And like Jagge and Hans and them. Did you play for them?

A I don't know if we played up there or not. I think we did. Not too often though. We played at Biry and --

Q Who had Biry then?

A Devine and down at Pearsall. Cotulla, we went down that way.

Q Oh.

A I know we played at D'Hanis I guess and went way out to, oh, we went on the other side of San Antonio to play sometimes. Hartmann from Hondo. Buddy Hartmann was his name. We played at Helotes and played at Lubbock.

Q Okay. After you were married do you remember dancing at Tragesser's? Did you come to Tragesser's to dance?

A Oh, yes. Sure did.

Q Now which band do you remember playing there, the main one?

A We played there too I remember. The modern bands played there, except we played there also. The old-time band, my daddy, played.

Q At Tragesser's?

A Uh-huh.

Q Oh, I thought they had more modern.

A No, he played that time when I lost my wristwatch.

Q Oh, yeah. Okay, but when Tragesser's was in existence from the middle twenties to the middle thirties when it burned down. And at that time there was kind of a new era of music coming into the country that was getting popular. They called it the Big Band Era. Do you remember any bands that played that? Not Jimmy Klein?

A He was out here. He might have been at the Wernette's Garden already.

Q No, he played at Tragesser's.

A Oh, did he?

Q Buddy Hancock. What kind of music do you remember him playing?

A All modern.

Q Modern. Do you remember what was popular --

A "Don't be Angry," (humming), things like that. All those songs.

Q Okay. Do you remember the Charleston in the 20's? Did you all dance that?

A I didn't dance it too much but we danced everything I guess. We didn't dance the Charleston, we just one-stepped to it or kicked your feet out like mama says.

Q Yeah. Okay. Was there a time here in Castroville where old-time music might have went out of style for awhile? Where the modern music was coming in?

A Yeah. It finally drifted away. Mr. Artz died, you know,

and of course when we drifted out well then Nentwich from Macdona they kept playing yet. They were playing. They had their own little band, too.

Q Uh-huh.

A Him and his wife played. She played the accordion.

Q Do you remember their first names?

A Henry, I think.

Q Henry Nentwich?

A He died. That's the lady that --

Q Well, do you think the old-time music died out because the people who knew it the best were the generations that were dying off?

A Yes. They didn't have too many --

Q That knew it.

A Uh-huh, yeah. Just like now. I don't know there's one man at D'Hanis and I'm going to find out if he's still there but he wouldn't come over here I don't think. What is his name? It was in my mind last night. There was two brothers and they played the kind of music --

Q That you played.

A Uh-huh.

Q Okay. Aunt Alice, since you've been playing music all your life, did any of your four children inherit your musical ability?

A Well, C. J. did, he played the sax. Quintin didn't. He had a guitar at one time but he didn't -- his son

does now. C. J. played the sax and he sang beautiful. He was Bing Crosby number two in singing.

Q Yeah, I remember that. But he and his wife --

A And he was on the stage and I was on the stage. See I was a "nigger" mammy three times. I've been in five plays.

Q Like a minstrel?

A Yeah. This one lady says, she laughed and she told everybody, "uh-huh all she needed was the face, she had the figure already."

Q Oh, but C. J. and his wife --

A But that's better than she sitting around not doing anything.

Q C. J. and his wife are good dancers, aren't they?

A They belong to a square dancing, they're light as a feather. So is Quintin, oh, he dances something like Joe Rihn.

Q Oh, really?

A Oh, yeah.

Q He's a real good dancer?

A Uh-huh, Mary Ann and Sharmane, they're both good dancers.

Q Yeah, I knew they were. Okay. Now, you also have a grandson that --

A Grandson now. He was 17 in December and man is he going to town.

Q And he picked up this music how?

A It comes from, no, he's taking lessons. He took piano lessons, a few, not too many. He knows the notes but now he plays this rock and roll or this rock. But he can play the violin and he can play the piano, he can play the harmonica and the guitar.

Q Oh, he's good at all these --

A Oh, he's good. The piano, you ought to hear him play the piano, you ought to hear him play the Beer Barrel Polka. I've got to play that Beer Barrel Polka.

Q Well, does he play by ear at all?

A Yeah, he picks it up, sure. He's got music. This Haby, what's his name, from Dunlay told Quintin, man he sure is good, where does he get his music from. I says, you tell him next time, from Grandma Ahr.

Q Okay, well, you play Beer Barrel Polka for us now. Okay?

A About Lonnie, I learned him two of my daddy's pieces on the violin he could play nice and he picked that violin, you know, like I love to hear, like the Top Hands used to play. With the fingers. I just love that. And Jesse Polka, I'd like to play that.

Q What is that?

A Jesse Polka.

Q Okay.

A And Polka.

Q Are you going to play the Beer Barrel Polka too?

A Yeah.

Q Okay. And then when you're through with the polkas we're going to play "After the Ball Is Over." Okay?

A I want to finish with Lonnie. But anyway I taught him, and he picked it up on the piano a little bit himself more and so I showed him In The Mood, we played together real nice. Showed him In The Mood with the right hand so he wanted me to show him with the left hand and I said we'll wait till next time. So when I came out next time about two or three weeks later, Quintin says, "Well, mama, Lonnie go play that song for Grandma. Mama you ought to hear how he picked up that song you was teaching him" He sat down and had the left hand, put it all in there himself. I didn't have to show him.

Q The bass?

A The bass, he put the bass together and played that "In The Mood" and that's not an easy piece to play. And he plays "Beer Barrel Polka." I didn't hear him play that, but Myrtle says he plays it.

Q Well, why don't you play "Beer Barrel Polka" for us and then after that play the - what was the one polka you said?

A Wait a minute, let me think.

Q You just said you were going to play it.

A Another thing I want to tell you about the girls. I took them tap dancing. They do some tap dance a little

bit. I made them some suits and we went to D'Hanis and we put on a show over there and we went way down to Corpus to the Navy. Resort when they had the Navy there and put on a dance down there. We never got any further with it.

Q Now this is Mary Ann and Sharmane?

A Mary Ann and Sharmane, yeah, they were real talented too, but never got nothing out of it.

Q Okay. Well, play a couple of polkas for us now.

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Okay. You said another old-time piece.

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

- End of Side 2 -

This is Side 3 of Alice Ahr's interview April 3, 1981.
This is Connie Rihn.

Q Okay. Aunt Alice, you were playing an old-time waltz on the end of the other side. You want to start over again because we didn't get much of that.

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Okay. You said this is one of your dad's favorite waltzes.

A Yeah, that's it. One of those.

Q Okay. Let me ask you this. How did you end the dance. What was your piece to end the dance?

A Oh, "Home Sweet Home."

Q "Home Sweet Home."

A Or sometime "After the Ball."

Q You want to play a little bit of "After the Ball" and that'll be kind of an ending to our interview then.

A Is that all the room that you got on there. You got it on.

Q You seem to know a lot of waltzes. Were waltzes the most popular dance?

A Yes, they were beautiful. Everybody always said. We'd play a waltz every third or fourth piece. We played "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" and all those waltzes too. But the main ones were the waltzes.

Q The ones you've been playing here today.

A Yeah. He just heard them by ear and just played them just like he did. He was a wonderful violin player, my daddy, that's your grandpa.

Q Yeah.

A It's a shame we don't have no record that you could hear it.

Q Yeah. Besides the waltz, what were some of the most popular, what were the things people requested you to play the most?

A The two-steps.

Q Which was a fast piece.

A No, no, no.

Q Not fast?

- A The two-steps, they're not like polkas.
- Q Okay. The polka --
- A A two-step is a two-step and a polka is a polka.
- Q And polka's a little faster.
- A Some bands they think they're playing a two-step but they're playing a polka.
- Q Okay.
- A They're playing a polka.
- Q Well, polkas have become popular now.
- A "My Little Girl" was a popular one and "Sweet Bunch of Daisies."
- Q Well, go ahead and play "My Little Girl," that's a kind of a two-step?
- A Yeah. (Mrs. Ahr plays).
- Q Okay. Play a couple of pieces that you ended the dance with like "After the Ball was Over."
- A (Mrs. Ahr plays Red Wing).
- Q Okay. What era is this "Put Your Arms Around Me" from? I mean that's not old-time music is it though?
- A Yeah, it's pretty old.
- Q It is pretty old? Okay.
- A (Mrs. Ahr plays).
- Q Okay. The next piece you're playing is "Moonlight Bay?" And this is kind of a romantic song? A romantic song from the early 1900's? Okay.

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Three O'clock in the Morning. They kind of played that when the dance was getting close to an end, kind of get you in the mood for going home.

A (Mrs. Ahr plays).

Q Now as we're getting ready to end the dance and the interview, we're playing the traditional song "Home Sweet Home," the end of all the dances.

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