
Chapter 5

Wendy Whitford: The Soul of Wisconsin's Country Music

Program 5 Performances

All selections except 3 and 8 are by the Goose Island Ramblers.

1. "Wendy's Schottische." 2. "Barney McCoy." 3. Robert Walker, "Milwaukee Fire." 4. "Milwaukee Fire." 5. "Brother." 6. "Reierson's Two Step." 7. "Auction pa Strømmen's." 8. Prairie Ramblers, "Shady Grove." 9. "I Worked for a Farmer." 10. "My Blue Eyes Are Gone."

Grandpa's Legacy

Kenneth Wendell "Wendy" Whitford was born on a farm in Albion, Wisconsin, February 25, 1913, the fourth of six boys. Old-time music pervades his earliest memories. His grandfather, Charles Square Smith (1849–1936), was a farmer from Albany, New York, who migrated to the Upper Midwest after the Civil War. Albion had been founded by New Yorkers in 1843, and Wendy's grandmother, an accomplished singer, belonged to one of its oldest families, the Blivins.

Soon Charles Smith was farming and fiddling for dances with his brother-in-law, Silas Blivin. Smith would take the lead part, while Silas played second fiddle and called for dancers. Charles Smith was also a fife player. As Samuel P. Bayard observed, with regard to the Middle Atlantic states:

Fifes used to be played a great deal, and many of our traditional tunes are marches for this instrument. In rural communities of former times there were numerous fife and drum corps called "martial bands." (Bayard 1944:xiii; see also Bronner 1987:8)

When not fiddling or blowing the fife, Smith hummed and sang—often as he worked. His repertoire ranged from Stephen Foster's southern songs to comic ballads like "Barney McCoy."

Young Wendy Whitford regularly stayed with his grandparents who, in their later years, were "always singing around the house. Grandmother would sing 'My Pretty Quadroon' over the cookstove" (Whitford 1990 I). Not surprisingly, the couple's only child, Gertrude Bell Smith (b. 1880), loved old-time music. In 1894 she wrote the words of favorite songs in a notebook. Some were Victorian sentimental parlor songs like "Wait Till the Moon Falls on the Water" and "Will You Love Me When I'm Old." Others, like "The Picture That Is Turned to the Wall," concerning a family's rejection of their pregnant daughter, revealed the dark consequences of stiff-necked nineteenth-century morality. "The Burning of

the Granite Mills" and "The Milwaukee Fire" were classic disaster ballads, vivid word-pictures of tragedy from an era prior to the immediacy of television. At least sixty-four people perished when Milwaukee's Newhall House burned in 1883, and the ballad circulated in Wisconsin's oral tradition for decades.

Wendy Whitford's father, also named Kenneth, played tuba in a community band. When Wendy was born, his parents had his photograph taken resting in the horn's bell. And he can still picture his mother singing to him while she rocked his cradle. From the time he could walk Wendy tagged after his grandfather. They would fish in the afternoon, have supper, and "then came the great time of the day, the twilight hour," when Grandpa Smith would get out his fiddle (*ibid.*). Wendy was fiddling and singing old songs before he was ten.

The Lure of the Barn Dance

Perhaps his parents dreamed he would go beyond his folk roots to become a "serious" musician. But in 1929 sixteen-year-old Whitford was injured in a car accident en route to his first piano lesson. That summer he recuperated at home. It was hot, the windows were open, and the people next door had tuned in the "National Barn Dance" over Chicago's WLS radio. The "Barn Dance," begun in 1924, was a down-home musical review that rivaled Nashville's "Grand Ole Opry" in popularity. Its performers included southern string bands, Swiss yodelers, a Little German Band, rural comedians, barbershop quartets, singing cowboys, and mountain balladeers.

Bradley Kincaid, "the Kentucky Mountain Boy," particularly inspired Whitford.

You-all can have your orchestras, 'n jazz in minor key,
But Brad Kincaid's Houn' Dawg Guitar's Grand Opera for me.

(Evans 1969:221)

A native of eastern Kentucky, Kincaid debuted on WLS in 1928 while attending Young Men's Christian Association College in Chicago. He played an old guitar his father had gotten in trade for a foxhound. And his songs, like the old ballads "The House Carpenter" and "Sweet Kitty Wells," were ones that he had grown up with in the mountains (Wilgus 1975). Wendy Whitford wanted to play and sing like Bradley Kincaid. His mother brought a neglected guitar from the attic, strung and tuned it, and taught him his first chord. "After that I just seemed to absorb songs naturally" (Whitford 1990 I).

The Albion Town Hall was the site for musical gatherings and soon Wendy Whitford was part of the entertainment. There he met Clarence Reierson, a fiddler whose Norwegian dance tunes were as alluring and exotic to Whitford as the Kentucky Mountain Boy's venerable ballads. Dubbed "Fiddlesticks," Reierson was a Dane County farmer who led a popular four-piece band that favored Norwegian waltzes and hoppwaltzes. Wendy played with them a few times at Sons of Norway lodges and, with Reierson's coaxing, even tried to sing "Kan du glemme gamle norge." Although he lacked "the real Norwegian expression" as a vocalist, he found it as a fiddler (*ibid.*).

The 1930s saw Whitford performing in community halls and taverns, at fairs, in theaters, and over the radio with a wide range of regional musicians. He was part of the Lonesome Cowboys, the Muleskinners, Mickey's Ranchhands, and a number of nameless duets. In 1938, Whitford heard Vern Minor, "the Lakedge Crooner," conjure Bradley Kincaid's voice and guitar at a root beer stand in Sun Prairie. The two teamed up and were soon joined by a pair of Stoughton musicians: Alvin Hougan on bass fiddle and jug and Howard Stuvatraa on mandolin. When the group won a WLS-sponsored talent show, they needed a name and



K. Wendell "Wendy" Whitford fiddling at his home in Cottage Grove, 1979 Photo: Lewis Koch/Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection

the Goose Island Ramblers were born.

The first Goose Island Ramblers lasted until 1944. The Goose Island Ramblers' second coming was in 1962. In between, Wendy Whitford performed with the Balladeers, the Montana Cowboys, and the Hoedowners. Through it all, his music remained essentially unchanged. Before he was twenty Wendy Whitford had already accumulated the repertoire that would serve him for the next sixty years. It was, moreover, a repertoire that epitomizes the musical experiences of several generations of Yankees and Yorkers who began to settle in the Upper Midwest in the mid-nineteenth century: Anglo-Celtic fife and fiddle tunes, sentimental Victorian parlor songs, ballads of love and tragedy, the mountain and cowboy songs of radio performers, and the dance tunes of Norwegian neighbors.