

## Chapter 4

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# Couderay Jig in the Buckhorn

### *Program 4 Performances*

1. Otto Rindlisbacher, "Hounds in the Woods." 2. Thorstein Skarning, "Maj ball." 3. Otto Rindlisbacher and Karl Hoppe, "Auf dem schoenen Zurichsee." 4. Otto Rindlisbacher, "Swiss Polka." 5. Otto Rindlisbacher, "Pig Schottische." 6. Wisconsin Lumberjacks, "The Passing Away of the Lumberjack." 7. Iva Kundert Rindlisbacher, "The Pinery Boy." 8. Otto Rindlisbacher, "Halling." 9. Leonard Finseth, "Rindlisbacher's Mazurka." 10. Otto Rindlisbacher, "Couderay Jig."

### **Backwoodsman for All Seasons**

Otto Rindlisbacher, perhaps more than anyone else, epitomized the color and ferment of regional culture in northern Wisconsin. He played Swiss tunes, toured with a Norwegian troupe, organized fiddlers' contests, and formed a lumberjack band. He made and repaired a wide array of stringed instruments. He was, by turn, a cheese maker, lumberjack, sawmill hand, cafe and tavern operator, and taxidermist. He was also an expert hunter and fisherman. Finally, he was a writer and scholar who published articles in national music magazines and assisted with the first comprehensive documentation of lumber-camp musicians.

Rindlisbacher was born in Athens, Wisconsin, in 1895. His parents were both Swiss-German immigrants who arrived first in Monroe, Wisconsin, a "port of entry" for young Swiss cheese makers come to the dairy state. The family moved to Rice Lake in 1907. Otto's mother's family were musicians in Switzerland and he began experimenting with the fiddle and the button accordion at an early age. He began with Swiss tunes, but by the time he was sixteen Rindlisbacher had acquired enough Norwegian numbers to tour with "Professor" and Mrs. Thorstein Skarning from roughly 1911 to 1921.

Skarning was one of many Scandinavian vaudeville performers who barnstormed the midwest from a Minneapolis base. He was especially well known in such Wisconsin Norwegian strongholds as Blair, Eau Claire, and Rice Lake. Handbills from the period depict an elegantly dressed "company" which put on a formal program of musical selections and skits, followed by a dance. Leonard Finseth of Mondovi recalled that Otto, "dressed up like a good Norwegian," would "carry the load" for the dances (Finseth 1988 I). By the 1920s Otto had married Iva Kundert, likewise a musician of Swiss descent, and the pair performed sporadically with Skarning throughout the decade, billed on his promotional posters as "the Rindlisbachers, Famous Swiss-Italian Alp Players."

The early 1920s also marked Otto Rindlisbacher's first recordings, on piano accordion, as he combined with violinist Karl Hoppe on four Swiss tunes for the



Helvetia label (Leary 1991b). Hoppe was a local violin teacher and bandleader who subsequently directed community bands in Chippewa Falls. The duo made their recordings in New York City and played for dances at stops along the way.

Otto Rindlisbacher's enthusiasm for Swiss and Norwegian traditional music persisted throughout his life. He was a regular performer at the Cheese Days festival in that Wisconsin stronghold, Monroe; he welcomed touring yodelers to concert dates in Rice Lake; and he composed Swiss *ländler*s—couple dances in 3/4 time—on the button accordion. He likewise made Norwegian nine-stringed *hardanger* fiddles, collected *psalmodikons*—plucked monochords—used in Scandinavian hymnody, and played an array of archaic Norwegian *halling* and *springar* dance tunes. In February 1929, he published "The Alphorn: The Story of a Unique Swiss Instrument Now Rarely Seen" in the music educator's magazine, the *Etude*. "The Hardanger Violin" followed in June 1938. And in 1940 and 1946, Rindlisbacher recorded Swiss and Norwegian tunes for the Library of Congress.

### The Buckhorn Tavern

In the 1920s, however, Otto Rindlisbacher began drawing upon the tradition of lumber-camp fiddling encountered in his youthful logging and sawmill days. He had opened a cafe and billiard parlor, the Buckhorn, with his brothers John and Louis in 1920. Given Otto's reputation as a musician, and his custom of playing, making, and repairing instruments on site, the Buckhorn soon became a hangout for old-time musicians.

Franz Rickaby, who provides our first rich glimpse of lumber-camp folk songs, found his way to the Buckhorn in the early 1920s. Rindlisbacher informed him of the area's rich Anglo-Celtic and French-Indian fiddling, and Rickaby acknowledges Otto in *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty Boy* (1926). Nineteen twenty-six was also the year when Henry Ford inspired a national wave of old-time fiddlers' contests, and Otto Rindlisbacher sponsored two in 1926 and 1927. Not content with merely promoting such events, Rindlisbacher, who by now had taught himself to read music, set down the unnamed tunes of contestants like Freeman Ritter and William Manor in what the *Rice Lake Chronotype* termed "a booklet of peppy musical selections entitled *Twenty Original Reels, Jigs, and Hornpipes*" (Rindlisbacher 1931).

Rindlisbacher's involvement with lumber-camp music brought him eventually to the attention of Charles Brown, who directed not only the Wisconsin State Historical Society Museum but also the folklore division of the Federal Writer's Project in Wisconsin. In 1937 Sarah Gertrude Knott, director of the National Folk Festival (America's longest-running multicultural festival), asked Brown to suggest some musicians who could represent Wisconsin's northwoods. Brown immediately recommended Otto Rindlisbacher.

Rindlisbacher proposed an ambitious program to Knott in a letter on April 9, 1937. In addition to "lumberjack fiddlers and old style jiggers," he mentioned the "one-stringed 'Viking Cello' which Mrs. Rindlisbacher plays beautifully" (a derivative of the Scandinavian psalmodikon) and the narrative prowess of Paul Fournier.

We have an expert right here on Paul Bunyan tales. In fact, he is known as Paul Bunyan: has a resort by that name . . . He has formerly been active in Wisconsin Outdoor Expositions held in Chicago and has been a lumberjack and log roller. (Rindlisbacher 1937)

Between 1937 and 1940 the Rindlisbachers' "Wisconsin Lumberjacks" performed "An Evening in the Bunkhouse"—featuring fiddle tunes on cigar-box instru-





*Promotional postcard for Otto Rindlisbacher's Buckhorn Tavern, Rice Lake, ca. 1940*  
**Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection**

ments, Norwegian dance numbers, jigs, the Viking Cello, and balladry—for the National Folk Festival in Chicago and in Washington, D.C.

After 1940 the Rindlisbachers tired of the folk festival experience, although the Wisconsin Lumberjacks persisted under the leadership of Ray Calkins, an original member. Otto Rindlisbacher, however, let the world come to him. For the next thirty-five years, the Buckhorn continued to be a mecca for old-time fiddlers. Hunters, fishers, and tourists likewise flocked to the tavern as Otto's taxidermic and yarn-spinning skills rivaled his musical prowess.

The walls of the Buckhorn were festooned with stuffed animals, some of them legendary. In the 1960s the *Milwaukee Journal's* regional writer, Bill Stokes, inquired about the snow snake, the fur fish, the owl-eyed ripple skipper, and the dingbat.

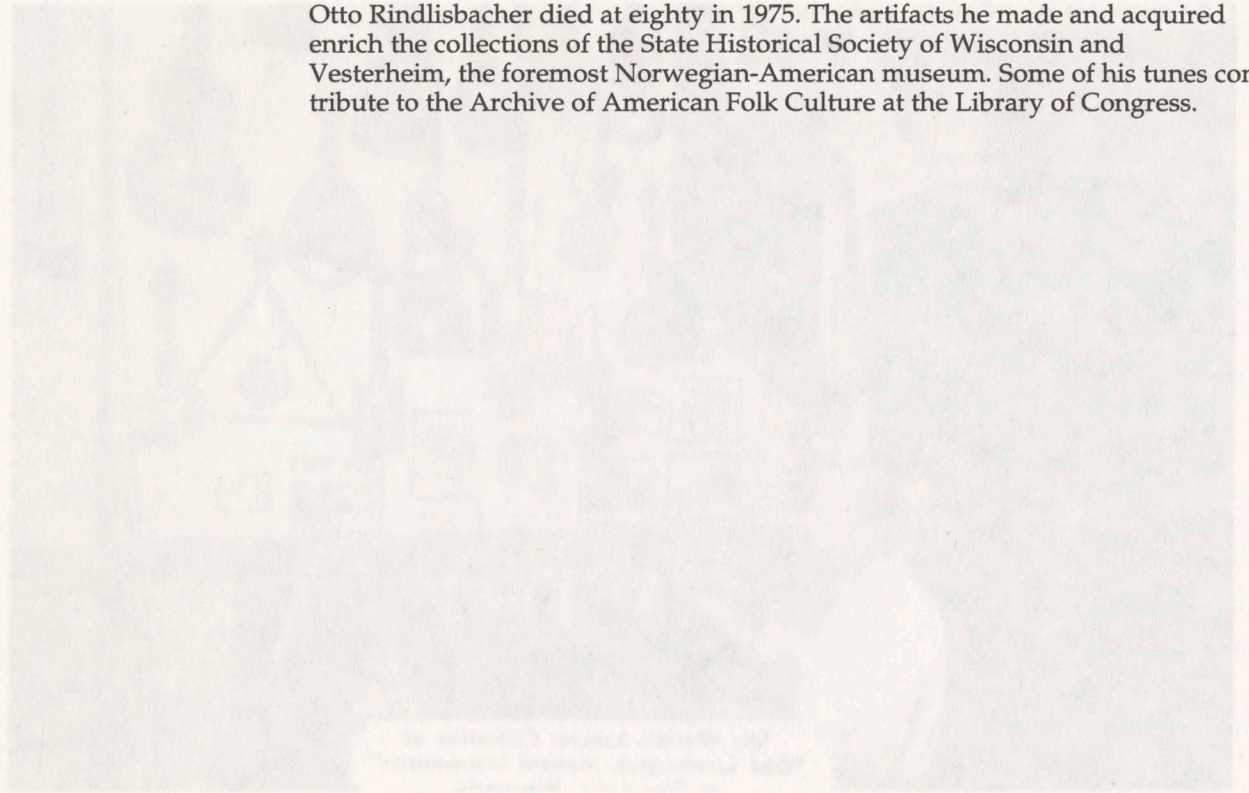
Now Otto, about some of these things on the wall? The dingbat?

"Shows up mostly during the deer season. Drinks gasoline from hunters' cars and leaps in the air from hideouts and snatches bullets in midair as the hunters fire at deer." (Stokes n.d.)

The other beasts, all of them artful Rindlisbacher constructions, were described with similar sly elegance.



Otto Rindlisbacher died at eighty in 1975. The artifacts he made and acquired enrich the collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Vesterheim, the foremost Norwegian-American museum. Some of his tunes contribute to the Archive of American Folk Culture at the Library of Congress.



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