

Chapter 3

The Tunes of Strings and Bow

Program 3 Performances

1. Helmer Toyras, "Finnish Medley."
2. Bernard Johnson, "Cindy."
3. George Meuret, "Cripple Creek."
4. Harv Cox, "Mule's Dream."
5. George Meuret, "Barbara Polka."
6. Bernard Johnson, "Stepladder Waltz."
7. Goose Island Ramblers, "Ryerson's [sic] Waltz."
8. Leonard Finseth, "Randi Severson's Waltz."
9. Sarajevo, "Stara vlahina."
10. Al and the Family, "Polka."

Square Dance Messiah

In 1926 a series of Old Time Fiddlers contests swept the nation, under the sponsorship of automobile magnate Henry Ford. A cranky social philosopher, Ford not only pioneered the moving assembly line but also engaged in cultural engineering. Like other conservative and sometimes racist Wasps of his era, Henry Ford feared the "corrupting" influences of non-English-speaking "foreigners" and African Americans on life in the United States. His antidote was the promotion of old-time fiddle music and square dancing as quintessentially "American" activities.

Perhaps Ford was moved by the structural similarities of assembly-line methods, fiddle tunes, and square dances. Folklorist Louie Atterbury has argued that all three "demonstrate a distinctly American concern for process in the manipulation of a series of simple and infinitely repeatable units" (Atterbury 1979:328). Ford's dream of a narrow American folk musical range is partially realized in modern-day fiddle contests which have come to favor an increasingly uniform national fiddle style over the quirks of region. Meanwhile square dance aficionados tirelessly petition state and federal legislators to recognize their form as the official American folk dance. Yet the southern blacks and European ethnics who labored in Ford's Detroit plants never got on the folk musical assembly line. And even those who participated in the Upper Midwest's Old Time Fiddlers contests of the 1920s were far more multicultural than their sponsor.

To be sure, a plurality of entrants were Anglo-Celtic fiddlers. Some were transplanted New England and New York State Yankees, others were upland southerners from the Ohio River Valley, and still more were Irish and Scots immigrants. The January 1926 contest sponsored by the *Milwaukee Sentinel* stressed patriotism by reserving seats for "old settlers, pioneers, and old soldiers" (Meade 1987). And the parade of contestants included a string of Irish and English names: Pat Kelly, John Mathias O'Rourke, Hugh Hickey, Walter Boyd, Curtis Allen, and M. A. Hays. Some were celebrated musicians. Thomas Croal, a Sauk Countian come to Milwaukee, won the city's contest and was still playing in 1944 when Fred Holmes observed:

OLD TIME FIDDLERS' CONTEST

COMING TO
THE MAJESTIC THEATRE
MARCH 17th and 18th
THIRTY DOLLARS IN PRIZES

That's the inducement held out to the old time fiddlers to try their luck at the Majestic Theatre on Wednesday and Thursday, March 17 and 18. There are only two rules. One is that the contestants must be over 50 years of age and the second is that they must play by ear only. The use of music in this contest not allowed. The contest will be held both nights and competent judges will award the prizes. An entrance blank is printed below. Fill out now and mail at once. Get in on the money.

ENTRANCE BLANK
OLD TIME FIDDLERS' CONTEST

Name

Address

Phone No..... Age.....

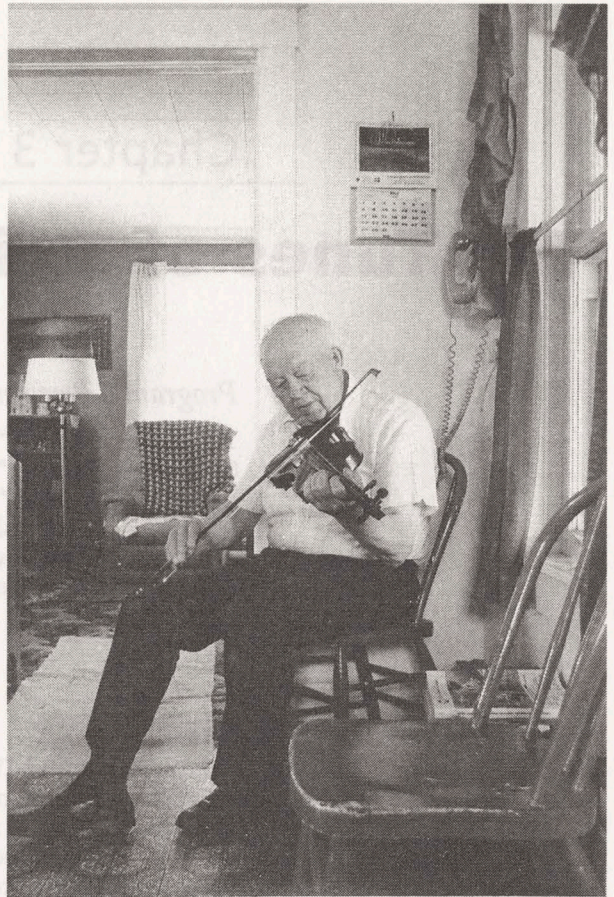
Below list the titles of the three numbers to be played in the contest.

1.

2.

3.

Mail this blank to
Old Time Fiddlers' Contest
MAJESTIC THEATRE
Rice Lake, Wis.



Fiddlers' contest entry blank, Rice Lake, 1926
Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection

Leonard Finseth, Mondovi, 1988 **Photo: Jim Leary**

Scarcely is there an Irish community in the state that does not have a typical fiddler, who plays his music by ear and keeps time with the stomp of his heel. Tom Croal, who lives near Hill Point in Sauk County, is generally accorded the honor of being the last of the Irish bards living in Wisconsin. (Holmes 1944:187)

Charles Mitchell, seventy-five in 1926 and also of Sauk County, was touted as a man "who has traveled from coast-to-coast and never taken his hat off to any fiddler" (Meade 1987).

Germans, Slavs, and Scandinavians

While Croal, Mitchell, and their Anglo-Celtic cohorts charmed the crowd with such standards as "Miss McCleod's Reel" and "Fisher's Hornpipe," John Hensiak, John Imp, and Walter Rudniak, a trio of Slavic immigrants who had each been playing the fiddle for more than thirty-five years, lent variety to the program with dance tunes from the German- and Russian-held regions of Poland. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* exclaimed, "Foreign Born Can Fiddle, Too," and printed a photograph of the "Fiddling Imps," fifty-six year old John and his grandson.

Elsewhere in the region, other "foreigners" entered the fiddling fray. James Wolfe of Whitewater offered "an old German waltz" at the Janesville contest. A

headline from Kenosha announced, "John Malmstrom Plays Swedish Tunes for Prize." The left-handed Malmstrom's selections reflected the cultural give-and-take common in the pluralistic Upper Midwest as he balanced an "old-fashioned Swedish polka" and a "Swedish barn dance tune" with the "Irish Washerwoman." Karl "King Tut" Schwanenberg, a German who won championships throughout Minnesota and in northwestern Wisconsin, invariably dazzled the crowd with an eclectic medley of German, southern American, and pop tunes: "Dixie," "Ach, du lieber Augustine," "Arkansas Traveler," "Where, Oh, Where Has My Little Dog Gone" (derived from the German folk song "Zum Lauterbach hab ich mein Strumpf gelorn"), and "Sweet Bunch of Daisies."

In some areas of the Upper Midwest, contestants for Ford's prizes were almost entirely Norwegian. In Fergus Falls, Minnesota, the top three performers were August Skalman, Oscar Tollefson, and Sigvald Johnson, with Earl Askeroth, Peter Peterson, Anton Stensrud, and Ole Gyldenvand putting in appearances. The St. Cloud paper proclaimed, "Norwegian Dance Tunes to Be One Feature of Old Time Fiddling Bee." In Albert Lea enthusiastic applause greeted Botolf Bridley's floral celebration of two Norwegian districts: "Lily of Sogn" and "Lily of Valdres." Fiddle Ole had a solid following in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, while the Madison contest included such Norskies as Barneveld's E. Pederson, Brooklyn's Ben Gulhaug, Hollandale's Olaf Larson, and Madison's Knute Ellestad.

Contrary to Henry Ford's desire to see Wasp hegemony and a narrow strain of all-American amalgamation prevail, the Old Time Fiddlers contests of 1926 provided a forum for fiddlers of all sorts to perform in. The jigs, reels, and breakdowns of Ireland and Britain coexisted with the polkas, waltzes, and schottisches of northern and central Europe. And the most successful fiddlers—following tactics that worked best when folks of many nationalities mingled at community gatherings—mixed their repertoires and gained the endorsement of the crowd.

Although the fiddle had already begun to diminish as the dance musician's instrument of choice when the Ford contests were held in 1926, there are still many old-time fiddlers in the Upper Midwest and their tunes still speak powerfully of pioneer life. Their musical speech, however, is not monolingual American; it is the polyglot regional dialect of Anglo-Celts, French Indians, Germans, Slavs, and Scandinavians.