
Chapter 6

The Goose Island Ramblers

Program 6 Performances

All selections are by the Goose Island Ramblers.

1. "Oscar's Cannonball." 2. "On the Beach at Waunakee." 3. "Swiss Yodel Waltz." 4. "Going Back to the Hills." 5. "Norwegian War Chant." 6. "Mountain Dew." 7. "Milwaukee Waltz." 8. "Break Song." 9. "Hurley Hop." 10. "Francuszka Polka."

Wendy, George, and Bruce

The Ramblers—K. Wendell Whitford, George Gilbertsen, and Bruce Bollerud—never rambled far. Their heyday, from 1962 through 1975, was inextricably linked with extended stints as the "house band" for a pair of Madison taverns: first Glen and Ann's, then Johnny's Packer Inn. Yet more than any barnstorming band, their music whirls across the cultural landscape of the Upper Midwest.

Wendy (aka "Uncle Windy") Whitford was born in 1913 in Albion, Wisconsin, and is now retired from work at Oscar Mayer's meat-packing plant in Madison. He learned to fiddle as a kid from his grandfather, Charles Square Smith. As he is fond of declaring, "my music teacher was born in 1849" (Whitford 1990 I). Whitford's mother sang old-time songs around the house, and both the rural community and nearby Stoughton abounded with traditional musicians like the Norwegian-American fiddler Clarence Reiersen. The "National Barn Dance" over Chicago's WLS radio brought southern mountain and cowboy songs to Whitford in the late 1920s. He was soon strumming a guitar, donning western togs, and emulating early country or "hillbilly" stars like Bradley Kincaid. From the early 1930s through the 1950s, Whitford performed in dance halls, theaters, and over the radio with a variety of string bands, including, in the late 1930s, the original Goose Island Ramblers.

Goose island, an English corruption of the Norwegian *godt land* (good land), had been applied by immigrant farmers to the fertile acreage surrounding a tamarack swamp near Whitford's southwestern Dane County home. *Ramblers*, meanwhile, was a popular nickname for hillbilly and cowboy bands like the noted Prairie Ramblers, who starred on WLS. Indeed it was when Whitford, Vern Minor, Howard Stuvatraa, and Alvin "Salty" Hougan needed a band name after winning a WLS talent show that the Goose Island Ramblers first emerged. When Whitford, Gilbertsen, and Bollerud joined forces in 1962, they considered calling themselves the Rumpus Ridgerunners before rambling down to Goose Island.

Taken with some changes from J. P. Leary's notes to the Goose Island Ramblers' cassette, Midwest Ramblin' (Wisconsin Folk Museum 9001). With permission.

"Smokey George" Gilbertsen was born in 1925 on the outskirts of Madison. An older brother had a neglected five-dollar guitar and a stack of western song-books. Gilbertsen was picking tunes and blowing a harmonica at seven, playing for house parties at nine, and working tavern jobs for pay at fourteen. While in his teens he picked up mandolin, Hawaiian guitar, and fiddle—mastering the latter well enough to win the Wisconsin Centennial Fiddlers Contest in 1948. Like Whitford, Gilbertsen assumed a western look and entertained with such groups as the Fox River Valley Boys, the Bearcat Mountain Boys, the Badger Ramblers, the Midwesterners, the Midwest Drovers, the Rhythm Rascals, the Dakota Roundup, and the WIBA Rangers. He is a retired repairman for the city of Madison.

Bruce Bollerud, a highly regarded special education teacher in the Madison school system, was introduced on stage as "Loose Bruce the Goose, the Hollandale Wildcat, the Scourge of Iowa County." He was born in Hollandale, Wisconsin, in 1935. His Norwegian grandfather, Ben Venden, was an old-time fiddler, while his mother, Selma, chorded on the piano. Bruce would watch and listen at house parties. He acquired a bandoneon (a squeezebox resembling the German concertina) as a ten year old, but switched to piano accordion by his late teens. After forming a duo with fiddler Herman Erickson, Bollerud went on to play German and Norwegian dance music with Gilbert Prestbroten's Rhythm Rascals, Emil Simpson's Nighthawks, and bands led by current polka stalwarts Roger Bright and Verne Meisner. The late 1950s found Bollerud playing country music with Dick Sherwood. Then a rockabilly gig with the Johnson Brothers led to Glen and Ann's tavern, where the new Goose Island Ramblers soon emerged.

Norsky Polkabillicies

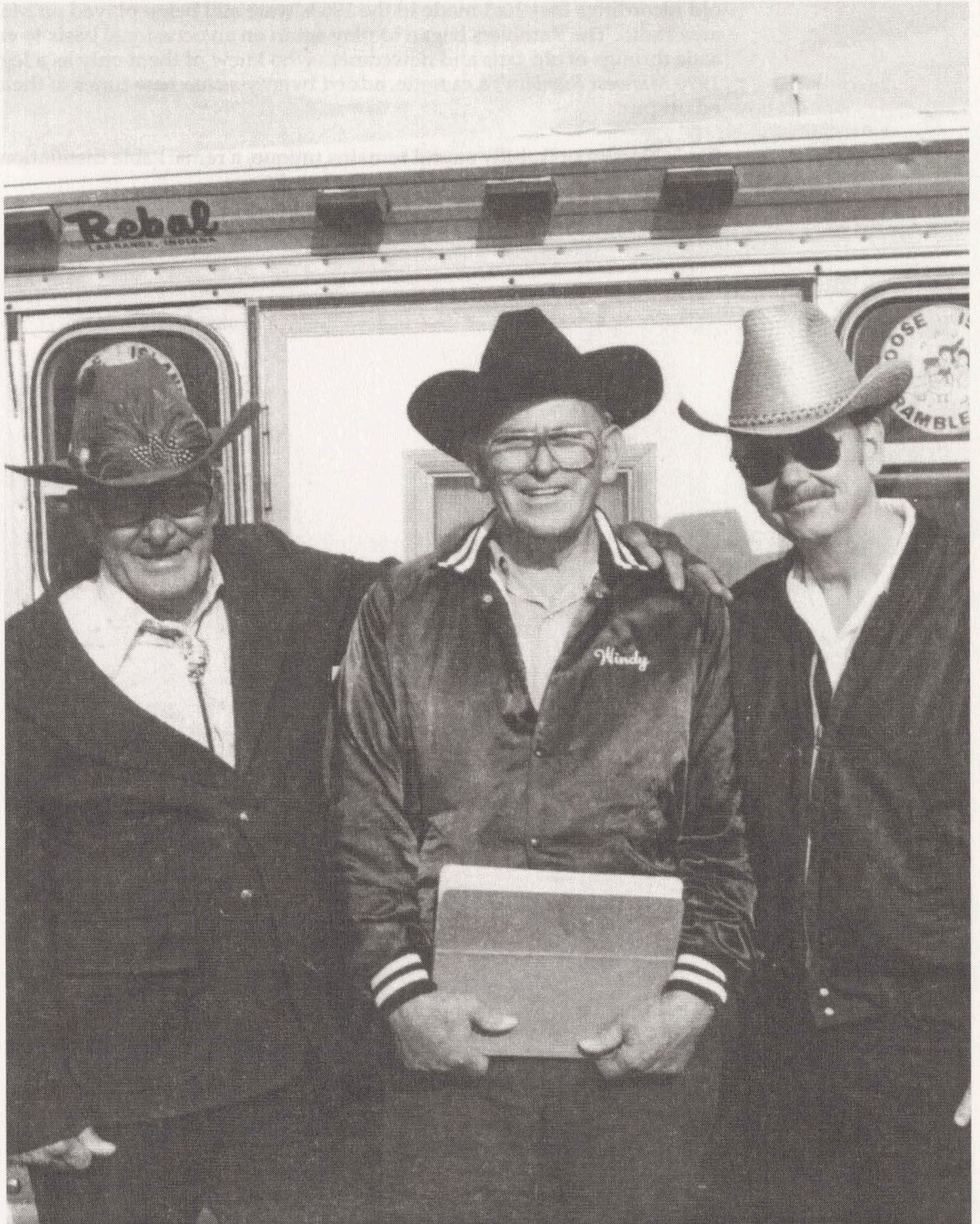
The Ramblers' repertoire drew on the diversity of its members' midwestern backgrounds, with a strong dose of southern hillbilly music and the western cowboy sound. Wendy Whitford contributed fiddle tunes and ballads from his English forebearers, round dance melodies from Norwegian neighbors, and the western and mountain songs of radio barn dances. George Gilbertsen brought a multi-instrumentalist's penchant for fancy picking and exotic tunes (Hawaiian marches, Italian mazurkas, Russian waltzes). A natural clown, he also favored trick fiddling and novelty tunes. Bruce Bollerud offered a skein of Norwegian dialect songs, Swiss yodels, and German-Czech polka standards. And all three composed new songs in a regional vein.

Their live tavern performances were boisterous events. Bantering with the audience, punctuating tunes with bells and goose calls, donning funny hats, the Ramblers fostered a house party atmosphere and frequently invited musicians from the audience to sit in. Longtime fan Dix Bruce recalls the era:

Smokey George, the fiddler, would ring his cow bell after most tunes, an acknowledgement of audience applause and cheers. Wendy Whitford, the guitarist and singer and sometimes fiddler, sang classic country ballads like "Soldier's Last Letter" and many that he himself had written while on the job at Oscar Mayer's packing plant. Loose Bruce Bollerud, the accordion man who also played a mean jug (Smokey George would warn the audience, "Cover your drinks, folks!"), donned a different hat for each type of song: cowboy, railroad, etc. (Bruce 1991:37)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, their eclectic repertoire attracted both Madison's ethnic working class and its college set, a remarkable achievement in an era of polarization.

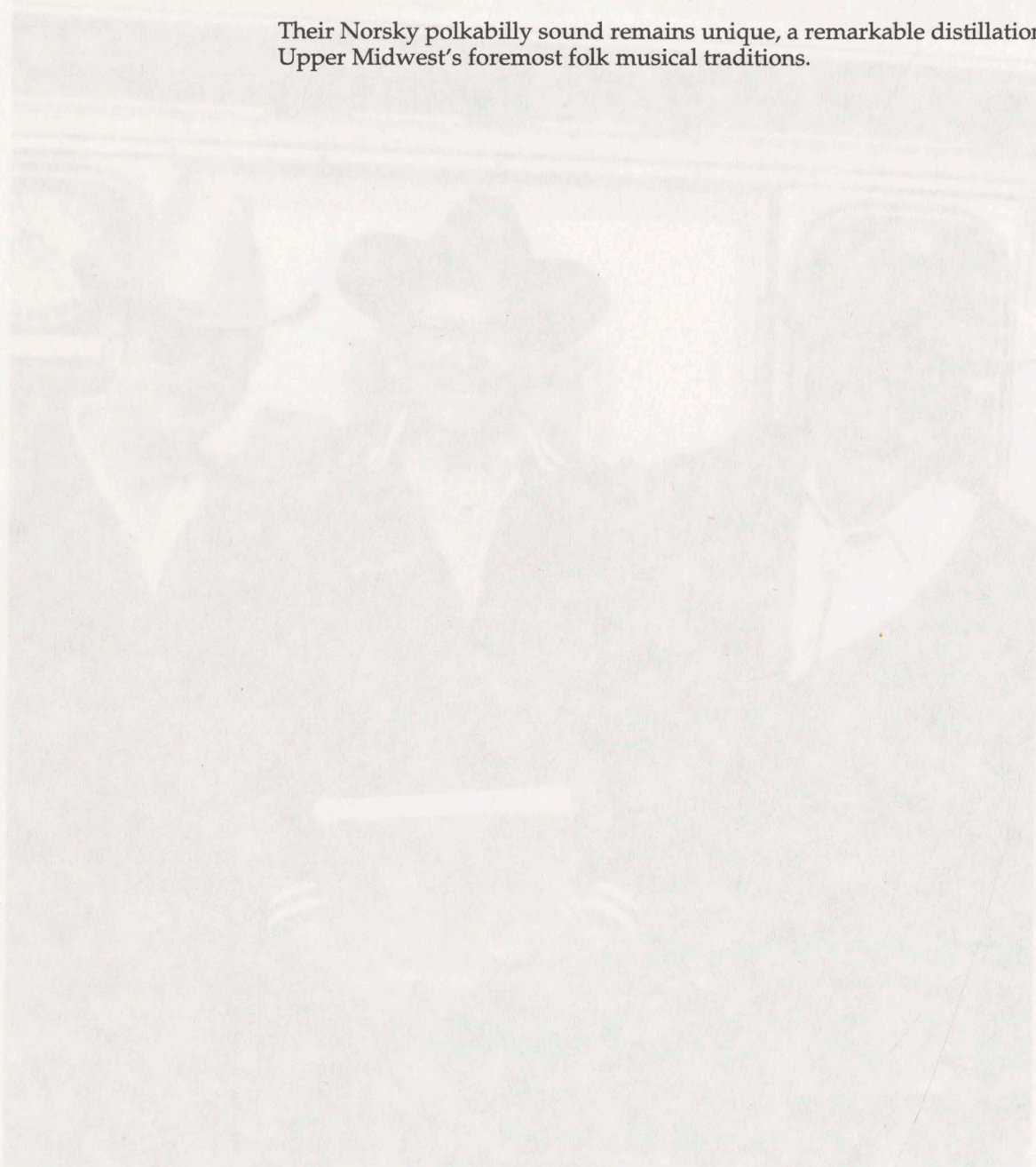
Although the Ramblers disbanded in the mid-1970s, their popularity did not diminish. They were called out of retirement periodically. By the late 1980s the



The Goose Island Ramblers—(L-R) George Gilbertsen, Wendy Whitford, and Bruce Bollerud—at a job in Mount Horeb, 1990 Photo: Jim Leary

old recordings they had made in the 1960s were still being played on Madison area radio. The Ramblers began to play again on an occasional basis to enthusiastic throngs of old fans and newcomers who knew of them only as a legend. In 1990 *Midwest Ramblin'*, a cassette, added twenty-seven new tunes to their recorded output.

Their Norsky polkabilly sound remains unique, a remarkable distillation of the Upper Midwest's foremost folk musical traditions.



The Goose Island Ramblers—(l-r) George Gilbertson, Wendy Whitford, and Bruce Boland—on a job in Mount Hope, 1990 Photo: The Library