

Ray Calkins

Calkins was born in Barron County, Wisconsin, in 1894, east of Chetek. His grandfather and father worked in lumber camps and were carpenters. Ray likewise worked in lumber camps, beginning at age 11 as a cookee and later a swamper in camps where his dad worked. He also followed the carpenter's trade.

Ray started playing drums when in school. He also played the pump organ, chording for dances. In addition he has played violin, banjo, bass fiddle, mandolin, piano and button accordion. He played music in lumber camps and recalls many fine fiddlers there.

In 1937 Otto Rindlisbacher was contacted by the National Folk Festival and invited to bring a lumberjack band to the Festival at Chicago. Ray had played for dances with the Rindlisbachers in Rice Lake and was invited by Otto to join the band. It included Otto and Iva Rindlisbacher, Ray, Frank Uchytel from Haugen, and Buck Plante from Ladysmith. The group "went over like a top" in Chicago, and later played in Washington D.C. Thereafter Rindlisbacher didn't want to be involved anymore and Calkins took over the group, playing for the Nation Folk Festival into the 1960s.

The group, "The Wisconsin Lumberjacks," dressed in wool pants, wool shirts, and felt or stocking caps. They played various homemade instruments: cigar box fiddles, cigar box guitars (Paul Bunyan harps), the Viking Cello (a one stringed instrument made from a pitchfork and patterned after the Scandinavian "psalmodikon"), and a garbage can bass (the "bangola"). Originally Rindlisbacher made these instruments, but Calkins began to make the whole range himself.

Nowadays Calkins has moved from his Chetek residence to the home of his son, Donald Calkins: [REDACTED]

Milwaukee, Wisconsin
[REDACTED]

Supplementary materials: 1) tape index (tape at Mills Music Library); 2) copies of correspondence regarding Calkins for Chippewa Valley Museum; 3) photocopy of Louisville Courier-Journal cover with Wisconsin Lumberjacks from 1963; and 4) color slides and B&W prints taken for Chippewa Valley Museum and Down Home Dairyland.

Availability of Materials: Calkins has donated his instruments (cigar box fiddle and guitars, Viking cello, bangola) to the Rusk County Museum in Ladysmith. Since they are an important part of the collection when the museum is open in the summer, they may not be available for loan. But perhaps one could be borrowed. Contact person is Betty Silvernail, [REDACTED]. Another possibility is to borrow instruments by Otto Rindlisbacher [see separate report] from the SHSW and to supplement them with photographs of Calkins, the Courier-Journal article (with color picture) and perhaps some of Calkins' other lumber camp wood crafts (these objects--a pliers carved from a block of wood, a hand-carved replica of an ax--and the article are probably in Calkins' possession).

Special Considerations: Calkins is 95 years old and moved in with his son because he broke a hip in June. The articles of his mentioned above may be still at his home in Chetek. Reportedly Calkins remains very sharp.