

## Otto Rindlisbacher

Otto Rindlisbacher (1895-1975) was born in Athens, Wisconsin, of Swiss-German heritage and came to Rice Lake with his family as a young man. He opened a billiard parlor and cafe, The Buckhorn, which became a tavern after prohibition, operating the place until shortly before his death. A gifted taxidermist and woodworker, Rindlisbacher is perhaps the foremost figure in the history of traditional music in Wisconsin.

Besides playing laendlers and assorted Swiss dance tunes on button and piano accordion, Rindlisbacher toured as a teen with Thorstein Skarning, a Minneapolis-based Norwegian bandleader who barnstormed throughout northwestern Wisconsin. Rindlisbacher made 78s of Swiss music with Karl Hoppe about 1920, played with his wife Iva in a Hawaiian band over the radio in the early 1920s, and organized old time fiddlers' contests in 1926 and 1927. When the ballad scholar, Franz Rickaby, came through northern Wisconsin in search of lumberjack ballads, he sought out Rindlisbacher's help and mentions Otto in the preface of Ballads and Songs of the Shanty Boy. Perhaps it was through his contact with Rickaby that Rindlisbacher came to the attention of the National Folk Festival. [See my report on Ray Calkins.] Otto formed a Wisconsin Lumberjack group that played for the NFF in Chicago and Washington, D.C. in the late 1930s. In both 1940 and 1946, Otto Rindlisbacher was recorded by Helene Stratman-Thomas for the Library of Congress. Some of his lumberjack tunes were issued on a Library of Congress disc, while some of his other tunes (Swiss laendlers and the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle) were later issued on the Wisconsin Patchwork series of radio programs and cassettes. Nearly 15 years after his death Rindlisbacher remains revered by traditional musicians in northwestern Wisconsin.

Beyond his prowess as a musician, Rindlisbacher was renowned as an instrument-maker. He made conventional or "flat" fiddles and the elaborate Norwegian Hardanger fiddles. He also made miniature fiddles, some of them tiny enough to fit onto a ring. Besides fiddles, Rindlisbacher made an array of lumberjack instruments: cigar box fiddles, cigar box guitars (Paul Bunyan harps), Viking cellos (psalmodikons fashioned from pitchforks), and gut bucket bass or "bull" fiddles.

It might make sense to include some information about Rindlisbacher alongside Ray Calkins (or even Ron Poast) to establish historical continuity--and in light of the excellence and availability of his instruments.

Supplementary materials: 1) Inventory of Rindlisbacher artifacts at the SHSW; 2) copies of cards on relevant instruments at SHSW (cigar box fiddle, Viking Cello, Irish Bull Fiddle); 3) photo ordering information form the SHSW's Iconographic Collection and photocopies of Rindlisbacher images

Availability of Instruments: The three instruments mentioned above are available from the SHSW. Rindlisbacher's Hardanger fiddle and his miniature fiddles are at the Vesterheim Museum in Decorah, Iowa, in storage. I have a postcard, showing off the miniature fiddles, that was produced by and sold at the Buckhorn. The SHSW also has some of Otto's lumbercamp style carvings.

Special Considerations: Obviously Otto is no longer living, but his legacy is, he was an extraordinary artist, and his stuff is available. What I'd like to see are a few of Otto's instruments, perhaps one of Ray Calkins', and some of Ray's and Otto's lumbercamp woodworking juxtaposed.