



54. Fiddler L. D. Daniel of Klamath Falls waits his turn to play at an informal jam session in a William, Oregon fruit stand.

# Fiddling

by Linda Danielson

"Soldier's Joy," "Turkey in the Straw," "The Girl I Left Behind Me," "Git Outa the Way Federals," "The Last of Callahan," "Redwing," "Peek-a-Boo Waltz" — these and countless other old tunes still pour from the fingers and bows of Oregon Fiddlers. Some of the tunes were popular on the radio in the 1920's and 30's; others can be traced back to the fiddlers' ancestors of civil war days; and still others must have come over with colonists as far back as the 1700's.

The fiddlers are quick to tell you that their music is *not* violin music — make no mistake, it is fiddle music. (One fiddler says that you can tell which is which because a violin is carried in a case, and a fiddle in a gunny sack. He's kidding now, but a generation ago it was often true.) It depends on how you play the instrument. Violin music is played according to a written score, with a firm conception of details dictated by that score. In other words, there is a right way to play the tune. Fiddle music is generally learned by ear, played by memory and improvisation, and tunes vary quite a lot from one fiddler to another. You could listen to a whole group of fiddlers play off their versions of "Ragtime Annie," and you'd hear that they were playing the same tune, yet each fiddler would have his own way with the tune — his own set of details: there are many right ways to fiddle the tune.

On almost any Sunday afternoon fiddlers gather to play old tunes at public jam sessions somewhere in the State of Oregon. When summer starts you can find them at county fairs, ready to provide an afternoon's entertainment or at occasional fiddling contests in such places as Forest Grove, Pendleton, Canyonville, and Drain. Fiddling is still a lively art here in Oregon. True, there aren't as many fiddlers as

From Oregon Folklore, Suzy Jones. (Univ. of Oregon & the Oregon Arts Commission, Eugene, Oregon, 1977.)



there once were, and the average age of fiddlers goes up all the time. But there are some younger people becoming interested and learning the old art. An educated guess is that there are four hundred fiddlers scattered around the state. So fiddling certainly hasn't died out here — in fact, besides the South Atlantic States and the Ozarks, Texas and the Pacific Northwest are probably the hottest spots in the country for fiddling.

It's hard to tell why this should be so, but maybe the reasons go something like this: most of the people who play the fiddle and live in Oregon came here from somewhere else (a quick spot check among area fiddlers shows the score running about twenty-six non-natives to four native Oregonians). When people emigrate, the culture and the memory of the old home sometimes becomes extra-important — and maybe that's why some people cling to the old ways. Then, too, in lots of places fiddling was until very recently the only available dance music — just as it was for past generations. It really hasn't been that long since Oregon was frontier, and in the 1960's at least fiddlers were still playing square dances in school houses and grange halls in isolated parts of Eastern Oregon. Besides, fiddling is just plain good music — it's fun to play, to hear, and to dance to.

There was a time when it seemed like fiddling was about to be forgotten, though, right after World War II. Then in about 1960 people began to notice fiddling again — contests brought fiddlers together; many an ex-fiddler went home after going to a contest "just to listen" and hauled out the old fiddle case. Bows were reaired, broken strings replaced, and the ex-fiddlers started playing again.

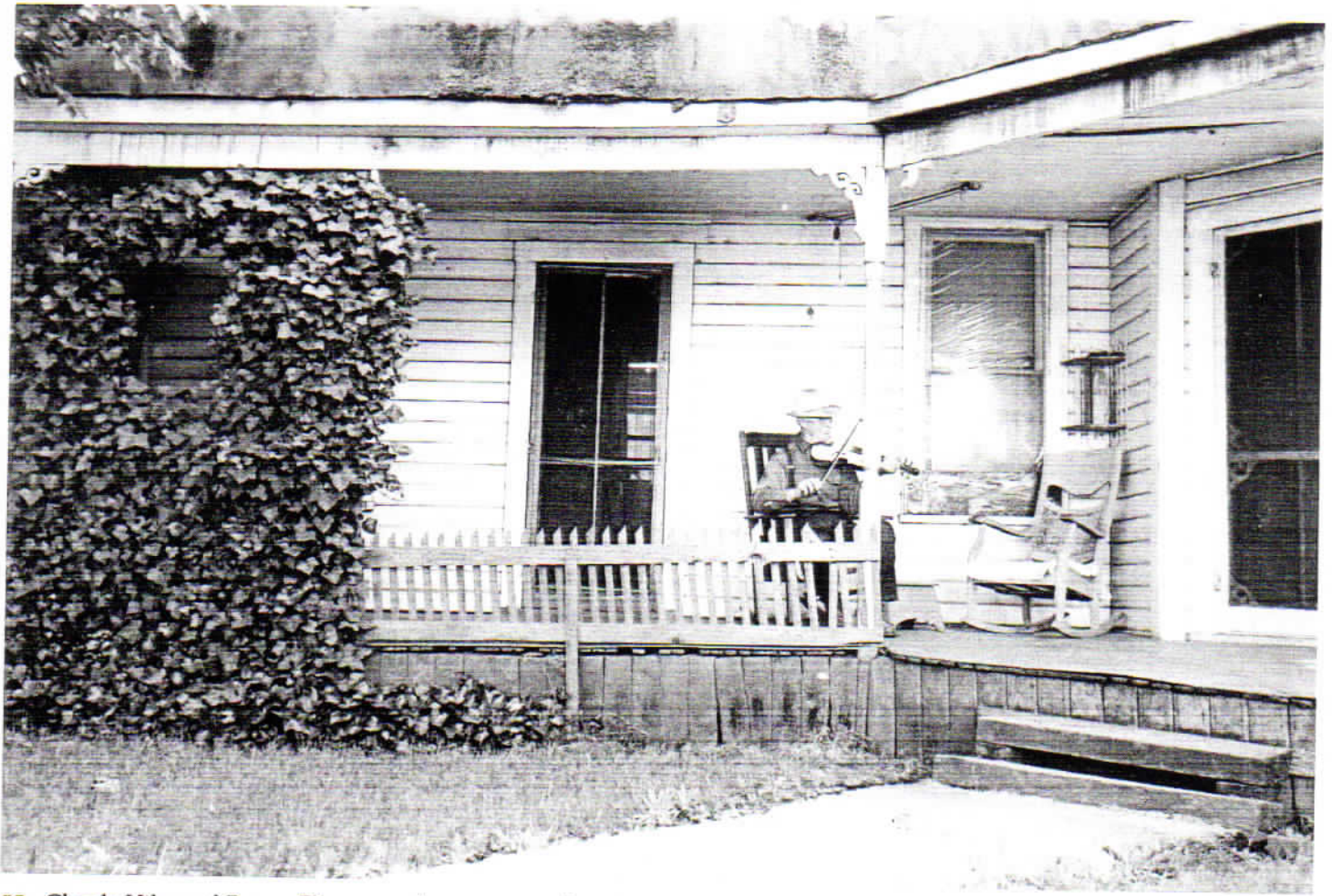
In 1962 the Oregon Old-Time Fiddlers Association was founded by a dozen people on a Sunday afternoon in Waldport, and it's been growing ever since. Oregon fiddling has been changing too. It used to be that fiddlers played mostly for dancing — now, more often the fiddler's audience is there to listen. At the old-time dances fiddlers had to play hard and loud to be heard, with no amplification — so sometimes the sound was harsh. Now fiddlers strive for a sweeter sound since they have the help of amplification to make themselves heard. In times and places when many folks lived on land their parents or grandparents had farmed, each region had its distinctive fiddling style and characteristic stock of tunes. Now, most Oregon fiddlers actually started playing somewhere else and then moved here. Too, fiddlers travel to distant contests, tape record each other's playing, and buy records of fiddlers from the other end of the country. Their playing becomes technically better, more sophisticated, more cosmopolitan.

In fact, many young people who are taking up fiddling don't even learn from the local old-timers anymore — many of them prefer to learn the style of their favorite fiddler from some other part of the country. These days that is often Texas. Texas has produced a particularly elaborate and sophisticated, sweet, bluesy style of fiddling that is currently a good bet for winning the regional and national contests. So there is a kind of generation gap among the fiddlers. On one side are the older fiddlers who learned from grandfathers, mothers, or neighbors, then never passed the art on to their children (who were listening to Glenn Miller, and later to Elvis Presley). On the other are the crop of new young fiddlers, mostly under thirty, who learn their fiddling from a variety of sources and regions. They are generating new, homogenized blends of fiddling that have ties to Texas fancy contest style, western swing, jazz, bluegrass, and Canadian prime-time television show-style fiddling.

Because most older fiddlers are emigrants to Oregon it appears that we don't really have an Oregon style of fiddling. That's true, but we do have a characteristic cluster of styles, brought from homes in other states by those older fiddlers. Probably the greatest number of Oregon fiddlers come from the upper plains states: North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska. Another group comes from Missouri and Oklahoma. Still others come from Canada and from nearby states — Washington and Idaho. Most of the tunes are from the British Isles — English, Scottish, or Irish. But the North Plains give us a stock of tunes from Scandinavia, Bohemia, and Germany. The fiddlers of British background often prefer to play hoedowns — the fast moving square dance tunes, with lots of action and rhythm from the bow. By contrast, the European-descended fiddlers play a smoother, sweeter style, and prefer the polkas, waltzes, and schottisches. These ethnic, regional, and individual styles never completely blend, but the movers and travelers who are now Oregon fiddlers do grow to appreciate each other's diversity, and pick up a tune here and there from each other.

The old way of fiddling is changing — some old tunes, the old style, the memories of old-time dances are fading. Because of this, Lane County Pioneer Museum, Douglas County Museum, and Jacksonville Museum are sponsoring a project to collect the music and the reminiscences of fiddlers in their counties. The project has received backing from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Oregon Arts Commission, American Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission, Library of Congress, and the Oregon Old-Time Fiddlers Association. From the tape recordings and





55. Claude Hilger of Rogue River spends a summer afternoon playing a fiddle he built.



photographs in the collection will come a touring photographic exhibit accompanied by tapes of the music, radio programs, an Oregon Fiddling collection for the Library of Congress, and tape collections in the sponsoring museums. The collecting project has turned up a lot of interesting people, tunes, and stories:

*Hugh Samples of Central Point remembers getting together with friends to broadcast Sunday afternoons of fiddling over a home shortwave set in Eastern Oregon back in the 1920's — the broadcast had a range of about ten miles.*



56. Hugh Samples.

*Arlie (Buckskin Slim) Schaefer of Roseburg was adopted as a teenager into the Ottawa Indian tribe. He learned much of his fiddling from Indian fiddlers, and remembered playing for mixed white-Indian square dances. The Indians, he said, would do square dance maneuvers with war dance footwork.*



57. Arlie Schaefer.

*Stan Gonshorowski of Eugene carried a fiddle all over the Pacific during World War II. Into the back he incised a map of all the places he had been. He and his wife Addie, a pianist, make up new, old-sounding tunes based on remembered fragments of two-steps and waltzes played by his Polish father back in North Dakota.*



58. Stan Gonshorowski.

*Earl Willis of Springfield traces some of his tunes back to his Missouri ancestors who were descendants of Daniel Boone's brother George. Earl learned these tunes from his mother, who learned some of them from her great-uncles — tunes rarely or never heard elsewhere — "Git Out of the Way Federals," "The Old Kitchen Floor," "Face the Wall."*



59. Earl Willis.

*John Hoester, a fiddle maker as well as player, built himself a five-stringed fiddle back in the 1930's. It was designed more by guess and memory than by formal plan. Nowadays he builds fine instruments on the Stradivarius model. He also builds copies of the one-stringed cigar box fiddle he made himself at age 6, and has demonstrated this craft at the Smithsonian National Folklife Festival.*



60. John Hoester.

*Poco Boyd of Eugene remembers taking turns with her father playing for dances up the McKenzie River when she was about twelve years old.*



61. Poco Boyd.





*Estille Bingham brings from Kentucky a stock of his father's old tunes:*

*One I never have heard played nowhere only around amongst a few old fiddlers there. It was called "Callahan." My dad played it, and they's a story goes with it. You want me to tell it?*

*Well, they had this man Callahan up to be hung. And he had his casket made and brought there to the scaffold where they was aimin' to hang him, and they asked him if he wanted any request, any last request — and he was a fiddler so he said he'd like to play one more tune. So they give him his fiddle and he set on the end of his casket and played that tune. And he said, "If they's anybody can play that tune any better 'n I can, I'll give 'em my fiddle." The story goes that nobody tried, and he busted his fiddle over the end of his casket.*

2. Estille Bingham.



3. Paul Lakey of Drain teaches his grandson, Paul Lakey, a new tune.



### You'd think he was born with a fiddle in his hand

Like most Oregon fiddlers, Wally Bloom and his family came here from out of state: they moved to Crow, Oregon, from northern Saskatchewan in 1944. Wally, his sister, Lavina Bloom Overby, and his parents, Willard and Bertha Bloom are a musical family. Their history is in some ways typical: they played for school house dances and for house parties. The children grew up learning music as a matter of course, learning tunes from neighbors, friends, and relatives. In other ways they are exceptional: they played as an all-family band for a good number of years, including the Depression, when music brought in what cash money there was, and there is a kind of supportiveness and solid family feeling that persists to this day when they play music together.

Wally and Lavina started playing at school house dances from the time they were only seven and nine. Their home was always full of the music of Willard's fiddle, Bertha's guitar and voice, and the fiddles, accordions, banjos, and guitars of assorted relatives. At age five, Lavina was learning to play guitar, Hawaiian lap-style, with a steel slide because her fingers were too short to form chords. Reminiscing about her son Wally, Bertha says: "You'd think he was born with a fiddle in his hand. He used to crawl back of that old cook stove we had up on the homestead — up on the logs, whenever he got tired when he was a little fellow, and he'd lie there with the ash shovel and stove poker, pretending to fiddle." He still plays the tunes he learned from his father and his Uncle Alfred in those early years.

Wally describes their life in Saskatchewan in the 1930's: "Once the folks got us playing so we were presentable to the public, we got a little band going, and it was Lavina here and myself and Mother's brother Henry and another fella who played drum." Some winters they had to drive eight miles behind an ox team through northern Canada's snowdrifts to play for a dance: "Uncle Henry had a team of oxen and we had a four foot by four foot little house, or *caboose* we called it, built on the front of the bobsled, and we carried food in the back end, and wood, and there was a little stove — I believe Dad built it — with its stove pipe going up, so we were nice and warm in there. And the lines came through the *caboose*, and we drove in behind these oxen. It took us three hours, if I remember right. And we made a dollar and half each. No amplification of any kind, just the fiddle, and Lavina played Hawaiian guitar — she used a steel and just played chords on it, and Uncle Henry played Spanish guitar, and Fred on drums. We would have been what — I was eleven, Lavina thirteen probably."

In 1944 Willard and Bertha Bloom moved from Canada to Oregon and built a Union 76 filling station at Crow. In the mid-1960's, Wally moved down to Oregon to take over the filling station when Willard retired. For a time the elder Blooms had furnished the music for square dances at the Crow Grange; Willard would call when there was someone else there to fiddle. Wally had quit playing while he was still up in Canada; like so many fiddlers, he was too busy surviving to pursue what had to be a hobby. After his move to Oregon, he happened onto a fiddle contest at Cottage Grove, "just to listen." That got him started. He revived the old-time traditional and popular tunes of his early days; he started learning tunes from recordings of fiddlers currently popular in Canada; and he developed a long-simmering interest in jazz fiddling. Nowadays he plays with friends on Saturday evenings, sits in with a Eugene-based country swing band, enters an occasional contest, and goes to Oregon Old-Time Fiddlers Association jam sessions.

Fiddling, Wally says, now has a top place in his life: "If anyone wants to be part of me now, they gotta accept my fiddle with me." This is apparent when one enters his apartment behind the filling station to find stacks of records, and the fiddle — never in the case. "No, it's no good to me in the case, 'cause I might think of a phrase that I've been trying to learn, and by the time I get the fiddle out of the case, you know, that phrase is gone. . . . Dad walks in here every once in awhile, and he'll be thinking of something, and he'll pick the fiddle up. Quite often I'll hear him come up with something. 'We used to play that, didn't we?' he'll say."

The elder Blooms and Lavina don't play much anymore, but when they do, the music is still there. The family group decided to participate in the Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project, and they were able to recreate some of the traditional tunes they had played during the Depression years of the early 1930's. Willard's old stock of Anglo-American tunes and square dance calls, Bertha's Norwegian family tunes, her brother Alfred's fancy Canadian tunes like the "Harvest Home Reel" — clearly, the old music was still there. Wally has extended his musical horizons to encompass elements of local Oregon fiddling, the highly developed contemporary Canadian style, jazz, swing, and backup playing. This combination of styles and influences almost epitomizes what is happening to fiddling in Oregon these days as it brings along the old and adds the new, and combines the traditional with the commercial, drawing from many different strains of tradition. If word ever gets out that Wally Bloom is performing nearby, don't miss him.





64. Mandolin player Tex Looer backs fiddler Alta Bance of Medford on a tune at a local Fourth of July celebration. (Left)

65. Warming up for the Canyonville Contests, summer 1976. (Lower left)

66. Wally Bloom, his father Willard, sister Lavinia Bloom Overby, and mother Bertha recreate tunes they played during the Depression. (Below)

