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Oregon Fiddling: The Missouri Connection

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In these days of tape recorders, motor homes, and the fiddle contest circuit, it is possible for the fiddling of almost anyplace to influence the fiddling of any other part of the country. Young, ambitious fiddlers all over the United States learn the Texas-derived progressive style that wins contests. Fiddlers buy recordings of musicians from many parts of the country. Retired people from northern states go south for the winter or travel from one contest to another taking their fiddles and tape recorders. In response to these influences, fiddlers are gradually becoming a more cosmopolitan and less regional lot.

In addition to these more or less nation-wide influences, homogenization of fiddling traditions also occurs when people from different regions settle in one area and begin to hear each other's music.¹ Oregon is such a place, where waves of new settlers arrived in response to either the economic hard times of the Depression or the prosperity of the World War II years. Regional patterns are evident in these recent migrations. For example, in Lane County, Oregon, there are exceptional numbers of Ukrainians from a certain area of North Dakota. Southwestern Washington counts a high population of natives from the Appalachian states, while Oregon attracted very few.

A major source of new population in Oregon during these recent times was the southern Midwest, a region well represented in the replies if one asks Oregon fiddlers where they were born or raised.² Of course the fiddling of Missouri and its neighboring states has been part of Oregon's musical development since pioneer days, when Missouri was a major point of embarkation for the Oregon Trail immigrants, many of whom had already pioneered once on Missouri or Illinois frontiers.³ A list of attendees at an 1876 meeting of the Oregon Pioneer Association gives us a profile of the sources of the area's pioneer settlers: Missouri—164, Illinois—163, Iowa—48, Ohio—30, Indiana—29, England—3, Scotland—2, Ireland—1, Canada—1, and Russia—1.⁴

Oregon's fiddling is still in a state of flux in response to the more recent in-migrations; McQueen's numbers, with the addition of a contingent from the northern Midwest states, closely paralleled a discernible pattern in the Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project interviews—the fieldwork upon which this essay is based.⁵

What is emerging in Oregon at this point is a sort of common-denominator fiddling, partly because of a strong state fiddlers' organization, partly as a result of increased interest since the 1960s in traditional music of all types, and simply because increasing numbers of currently active fiddlers have learned to play here rather than elsewhere. But during the twenty years from 1960 to 1980, the community of Oregon fiddlers was characterized by

the stylistic and geographic diversity of its participants, many of whom brought developed styles from other places. It is upon this period that the present discussion centers.

In the fifteen years since the interviews were conducted for the Project, the most distinctive elements of other places' styles have tended to weather away, as many of the fiddlers who came here with developed styles and lifelong continuity to their playing have become inactive or have died. Many unique tunes have disappeared. Ornamentation and bowing complexity have tended to drop away. Perhaps because more northern plains fiddlers have stayed active longer, the simpler bowing styles of the northern Anglo- and Euro-Americans appear to dominate Oregon's old-time fiddling. The commonly performed solo repertory seems to have shrunk, with a clear preference shown for couple dance tunes rather than hoedowns. Not that there are no good fiddlers or unique tunes anymore, but public performance exhibits this homogeneity increasingly over the last ten years or so.

As people have adopted, adapted, and appreciated or at least tolerated each other's differences, there is not yet, perhaps, an Oregon style, though a possibly more generalized Northwestern style may be emerging.⁶ The fiddlers in the region seem to be at a point of finding common ground through a common core repertory and increasingly similar approaches to the playing of the tunes—though the details remain individual, as an essentially oral-traditional art would be expected to do. Other common factors include a body of stories on themes that seem to recur almost no matter what the fiddler's geographic or ethnic background, and a developing degree of agreement about a basic difference between "old-time" and "contest" or "progressive" fiddling—though one can still hear arguments on that subject.

The fieldwork for the Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project was conducted by the author in 1976. Fiddlers from Lane, Jackson, and Douglas Counties were interviewed and their music recorded. The thirty fiddlers interviewed in the project represented a majority of the active fiddlers in the three counties, most of whom were members of the Oregon Oldtime Fiddlers' Association. The group included six Oregon natives, seven southern Midwesterners, as many from Anglo-American or Euro-American settlements of the northern Midwest, a scattering from neighboring states, and several from more distant points: two from Canada, one from Kentucky, and one from Scotland.

The fieldwork suggested that four main cultural and style regions have contributed to Oregon's fiddling community; the author's observations throughout the rest of the state seem to confirm this. From the northern plains states came Scandinavians, Germans, Poles, and Ukrainians whose home communities and fiddling repertoires in the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin had often overlapped. Thus a Ukrainian fiddler might bring to Oregon a waltz or schottische once popular in urban Sweden, later drifting into the folk-repertory of Scandinavian-Americans, and finally learned by

the Ukrainian fiddler from an accordion player in a nearby Swedish neighborhood in North Dakota. From Nebraska, Anglo-American descendants of New England contra dance fiddlers brought a simple bowing style (tending to single note-per-bow and simple slurring patterns that parallel the rhythmic divisions), and plain-spoken versions of Celtic-based tunes. A third major thread of tradition has been the presence of a few Canadian fiddlers and the accessibility of Canadian fiddling shows on radio and television in the nation's northern states. The Canadian influence encourages a fairly free use of vibrato and almost no droning or double stopping; to some degree other northern fiddlers share these characteristics.

The fourth major source was, of course, the southern Midwest of Missouri and its surrounding states which, depending on historical moment and individual case, brought to Oregon complex bowings (in contrast with those of the Yankee-descended fiddlers) to produce a quick and driving hoedown rhythm involving anticipations of the down-beat, midstroke accents, a pattern based on arpeggiation of a chord which one former Missourian called a "Missouri whipped bow" (private conversation with the author, c. April, 1976), and a tendency to slur across rhythmic groupings in such a way as to imitate the rolling sound of the banjo—one such common pattern of eight sixteenth-notes might involve bowing three separately, slurring the next three, and bowing the last two separately with some fairly subtle accenting better experienced than described. These fiddlers brought with them or sometimes only faintly recalled tunes not heard in other regions, and some fiddlers' playing incorporated the bluesy sound of western swing, or perhaps the more direct influence of the Black fiddlers that some spoke of hearing in their youth. Though western swing was commercial entertainment, its roots were in the traditions of the southern Midwest, and according to the author's observation, the Oregon fiddlers who have most enthusiastically adopted western swing into their playing are the ones from that region. When asked who had been the audience for a western swing and country band he had played bass for in the late 1940s near Ashland, Oregon—fiddles having given way to pedal steels—Jim Hoots said, "They were people that had come from Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Texas back in there. There were very few native Oregonians".⁷

It should be remembered that these characteristics do not define a regional style; rather, for present purposes, taken together they help to distinguish the playing of southern Midwesterners from that of the other large areas of geographic influence defined above.⁸ They do, in addition, overlap the characteristics of several southern American stylistic regions as defined by Linda Burman-Hall,⁹ which is hardly surprising in view of Joyce Cauthen's comment that by the early Nineteenth Century there was already a good bit of cross-fertilization among fiddlers moving to the Alabama frontier, where they [adopted] "what they liked in the fiddling of others they came into contact with, whether African, French, Scandinavian, or British.

By the time they reached Alabama, they were playing southern American music, which they carried across the length and breadth of the new land."¹⁰

With all their geographic diversity, much of the stock of tunes is shared among Oregon's fiddlers. The Anglo-Americans, no matter what their regional background, shared a common stock of tunes, to some degree also shared by other Euro-American fiddlers. Tunes like "Buffalo Gals" from the blackface minstrelsy, or "Soldier's Joy" and "Durang's Hornpipe" from the Scots-Irish folk and English dancing masters' repertoires, or the apparently American-originated tunes like "Mississippi Sawyer" have been played wherever oldtime fiddlers have gathered. Moreover, certain early twentieth century popular tunes, when they dropped out of currency, began to be retained and varied in oral tradition. Transfigured from Tin Pan Alley to reflect the style and manner of fiddle music, these have also acquired universal popularity: "Redwing," "Golden Slippers," "Darktown Strutters' Ball," or "Red River Valley" too will be heard wherever there are fiddlers. What this common stock of tunes suggests is that for all its diversity, American fiddling is a fairly unified tradition.

Yet fiddlers here have been conscious of their differentness, and during the period when a number of active fiddlers retained widely varied regional and personal styles, they developed strategies within the community of musicians for dealing with their diversity. It is these strategies which currently seem to account for much of the social style and to some degree the approach to the music of Oregon's fiddlers.

The arena in which many of Oregon's assorted fiddlers began to find common ground was the Oregon Oldtime Fiddlers Association, founded in 1965, which has encouraged interaction among fiddlers from diverse backgrounds and made their art available to a larger public. It is here that Anglo-Americans from Missouri met Scandinavians from Minnesota and descendants of New England Yankee fiddlers to begin forging a fiddling tradition in which for about twenty years diversity was actually a defining characteristic. For the vitality of the art as well as for study and documentation of the materials from which may arise a Northwest style, this period was a kind of golden age. The fiddlers heard a wide variety of other fiddlers native to different places and in the process became more aware of their own playing. This awareness sometimes provoked a revival of tunes or associated with other places; at the same time it encouraged accommodation. At that time, Oregon fiddling was a kind of sampler of Canadian, western European, Yankee and Southern styles in their midwestern reincarnations.

The principal activity of the Association itself has turned out to be a major strategy for accommodating diversity: the monthly "jam session." In fact the "jam sessions," which may happen once a month in each of ten districts in Oregon, are informal open-mike public shows, in which fiddlers sign up on a first-come, first serve basis to play two or three tunes for an audience of Association members and whatever local people may have

arrived in response to very minimal media publicity. This setting has provided an equal opportunity for fiddlers of all styles, ages, and levels of advancement to perform, hear each other, and play together.

In addition to serving as the major arena within which exponents of particular styles encountered each other, the fiddlers' associations all across the country have had another important effect: they have changed the focus of the community within which the fiddler operates. Once this community was the town or neighborhood in need of a dance musician, who often performed alone or with a few other musicians. With the decline of fiddling for dances as a community social function, and the advent of fiddlers' associations, mostly during the nineteen-sixties, most fiddlers began playing as much if not more for an audience of their peers, the other musicians. Cauthen describes the development of such a musicians' community among Alabama fiddlers:

All these fiddlers differ from their predecessors in one way. Their music is not rooted in their geographical communities; they do not play with and at the insistence of their families and neighbors. They now form musical communities, travelling great distances to conventions and festivals, where they can play with those who share their musical styles and preferences. In between such gatherings, record albums and cassette recordings maintain various communities.¹¹

It is notable, though, that here in Oregon, especially from 1960 to 1980, such a community was made up of people who did not always share the same styles and tastes, but were in the process of finding common denominators and mutual acceptance.

One strategy that Oregon fiddlers have developed, without apparent consciousness of this function, is group playing of a small core repertory of tunes. Oregon Oldtime Fiddlers Association members who have come here from different parts of the country become a well-practiced ensemble as they play these tunes together month after month. In fact, throughout the Pacific Northwest, whenever fiddlers gather for a public performance, the program is likely to begin with group playing of three to a dozen tunes that everybody knows. That this might be a defining characteristic of the region's fiddling became dramatically obvious when a group of Washington and Oregon fiddlers went to Washington, D.C., in 1976 to participate in the Smithsonian Institution's National Folklife Festival. When they opened their performance with group playing, just as they did at home, the east coast folklorists dashed for their tape recorders to record the group's renditions of "Ragtime Annie," "Snow Deer," "Redwing," and "Over the Waves." Ralph Rinzler, at that time the Smithsonian Institution's director of Folklife Programs, commented to the author that he had not heard that sort of playing anywhere else in the United States (private conversation, July 29, 1976).

Oregon Fiddling

Another strategy for dealing with diversity may lie in attitudes toward variety and individuality. Musicians here consistently value individual and regional difference, within certain tacitly understood limits that reflect a sense of how fiddling in general differs from formal music. One Springfield, Oregon, fiddler, Earl Willis, born in Mineola, Montgomery County, Missouri, expressed the matter thus:

That's what makes fiddlin' good. We don't all see it alike, and no two people play alike. If you go someplace for entertainment or a contest, you and I and everybody play just alike, we'd just listen to one of us and go home. Be no use stayin' there listenin' to the rest of 'em.¹²

Earl's comments, typical enough of Oregon fiddlers, contrast with Edna Meadows's description of the musical tastes of Shannon County, Missouri, where she lived until the mid-nineteen-twenties:

Their music—they didn't want some "furriner" coming in and mixing in with their style of music. They may be polite enough to listen just the way someone else played it but they never changed. And I think they kept theirs pretty pure. I got back there to visit and I have a nephew back there now that has what he calls the "Current River Opry" He owns it and all of our relatives play there still. And the old tunes are still going on that way.¹³

It is difficult if not impossible to isolate and identify unique regional style qualities or to discover definitively unique tunes from the southern Midwest—or any other area—when one listens to most of the Oregon fiddlers who have learned to play here, either as young people or as retirement-age beginners. But during the time from 1960 to 1980, of lively interchange and regional eclecticism, one could find evidence of what southern Midwest fiddlers had brought to Oregon's fiddling community. Since that time, these contributions have simply been stirred into the blend as more of the older practitioners became inactive.

Earl Willis, the Missouri native who so well expressed an appreciation of variation among fiddlers, maintained several unique tunes that he identified with the music he learned as a young person, a clearly regional style, and a rich oral history. At ninety-one he no longer plays, but he was very active in local fiddling events in 1976 when he was interviewed. Earl's mother's people were descended from Daniel Boone's brother George, and the family produced a remarkable number of fiddlers, including Earl's mother and several uncles from whom he learned tunes.

Among Earl's tunes were "Cherokee Strip," "Walk Along John," "Brickyard Joe," and the "Crystal Stream Waltz," all fairly popular in Missouri during Earl's youth but not played by other Oregon fiddlers. In

addition, "Face the Wall," "Git Outa the Way Federals," to which his mother sang lyrics, and "The Old Kitchen Floor" appear to be less widely known, but apparently common in Earl's youth. Incidentally, to complicate our notions of regionality, "The Old Kitchen Floor" may be one mentioned by Simon Bronner, a broadside sung by New York's rural oldtime musicians.¹⁴

To the best of the author's knowledge, no Oregon fiddlers of Earl's own generation ever learned any of these tunes, but a few younger fiddlers did. Earl described one young fiddler trying to learn not only a tune but also bow licks from him—apparently the sort of complex bowing usually not found among either Anglo-American or Euro-American fiddlers from farther north: "Well, I was playin' 'Durang's Hornpipe'—you go over to the low string—'course I'd shake my bow, you know. Steve'd shake his head, directly he would try it, see. He was doin' a pretty good job at it too."¹⁵ It is not clear exactly what sort of technique this shake of the bow may have referred to, but it probably was what Earl referred to above as a "whipped bow."

Earl specifically mentions the influence of Black fiddlers in his playing, an element that has entered Oregon fiddling primarily through the playing of people from the southern Midwest. By Earl's time, this influence had been well-absorbed into fiddling in the southern United States. Joyce Cauthen's comments about the influence of Black musicians in Alabama seem to apply equally well to the rest of the American South:

It was in the slave quarters, during Saturday night frolics, weddings, and Christmas dances, that southern fiddling gained much of its characteristic drive, the "hoedown" quality that differentiates it from the fiddle styles of New England and the British Isles. Accustomed to more complex and varied rhythms than those heard in British music, the African fiddler may have found the new music "childishly simple." He played sedate tunes for his master's cotillions, then added bow shuffles and syncopations to the same tunes to power the rhythmic, emotional, leaping, handclapping dances of the slaves.¹⁶ (1989:4).

The influence of Black musicians has been so thoroughly absorbed into American fiddling that it is virtually unrecognized, as in the case of most decorative slides (the obvious exception being in Irish-American fiddling) which could probably be credited ultimately to Black influence, suggested Alan Jabbour, Director of the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, in informal discussion following a presentation at the University of Oregon in April, 1987.

One Black fiddler Earl recalled was Bill Caton, who used to play over radio station WOS, Jefferson City. In fact Earl remembered his mother's "Old Kitchen Floor" tune as having also been played by Caton. Several tunes identified as Caton's may be found in R. P. Christeson's *The Old-Time*

Fiddler's Repertory, including one listed as "Black Sally Goodin," in the key of G, in contrast to the more usual key of A.¹⁷ We cannot tell much about the specifics of Caton's renditions, because all we have are Christeson's transcripts, which do not suggest much about the style. But Earl's memory, as well as Christeson's discussion of Caton and Bill Driver, another Black fiddler represented in the collection, attest to the regard in which they were held.¹⁸ No matter how diluted, this influence from Black musicians has been added into Oregon's fiddling. Phyl Simmons, a native of Mena, Arkansas, also attributed much of his hoedown fiddling at second hand to a Black fiddler who lived on the Arkansas plantation where Phyl's father learned to play the fiddle.¹⁹ (1976: Tape 1, Side A, transcript p. 1). The fact that he remarks on his father's learning experience suggests his sense of its importance.

Earl describes his conversation with Black fiddler Bill Burdick of Jefferson City, whom he heard playing "Sally Goodin" in G, as in the Caton version, concluding with a comment on how he induced Burdick to try the tune in what was thought of as the "white" key, and how he learned from Burdick a tune he thought of as "strictly" part of Black culture:

He had another colored man that played guitar with him and we'd get 'em, us farmers'd get 'em to come down to play for our barbecue. We had barbecues and fox hunts for two or three days, you know. He'd play a day and a night. And one time he was playin' "Sally Goodin" in G. 'Course we always played it in A, see. I asked him if he ever played it in A, and he said, "No," he said, "I never did." He said, "Do you play it in A?" I said, "Yeah, I do, Bill." And he said, "Well, play it for me." And I played it for him, and I don't think I've ever heard a human play it better than he could. After, he went to play it in A . . . I learned the "Jefferson City Blues" from him. But it's strictly a colored man's tune, you know.²⁰

Often, owing to the accidents of people's lives, what came to Oregon fiddling from the southern Midwest was memories of tunes—sometimes of the melody line, sometimes only of the tunes' existence—reconstructed after a lapse of years, rather than tunes in an active repertory. Alta Bance, of Medford, Oregon, was born in Houstonia, Missouri. In her sixties she began to play the mandolin, an instrument she had "fooled around with" as a girl; then when she was over seventy she began to play the fiddle as a result of her involvement in the Oregon Oldtime Fiddlers Association. Her father had been a fiddler, and she was hearing familiar tunes among the Oregon fiddlers:

Of course he played all these, "Turkey in the Straw" and "Arkansas Traveller" and "Sally Goodin" and "Spanish Cavalier" was one that wasn't especially a fiddle tune, but he played

that, and I can't even remember the waltzes. It's all buried up here [indicating her head], but I can't bring it out. I heard it—he'd come home from work and take off his boots, and he'd go in and have his dinner, and then he would build up a big fire in the old King heater stove and sit down with his fiddle, and he would play from eight o'clock until two or three in the morning, and I remember waking up and hearing him—these tunes. That's why they're recorded up here, but I can't bring 'em out.²¹

But something of her father's music probably influenced Alta's playing, and perhaps caused her to define *old-time* rather strictly—for instance, she commented that her father never played the popular tunes that fiddlers have been increasingly willing to identify as "old-time" during this century; Alta herself exhibited a marked preference for the hoedown tunes, which she tended to play faster than the northern Midwest or contest-influenced fiddlers. The hoedowns, heart and soul of the Missouri fiddling she heard in her youth, are played less and less frequently these days by fiddlers in Oregon, who are once again playing for Grange hall dances, but almost exclusively couple dance tunes.

Another Missouri fiddler who brought to Oregon primarily a store of memories and a particular conception of fiddle music which probably shaped her playing was Edna Meadows, now of Jacksonville, Oregon. Edna had recently resurrected her fiddling skill at the time she was interviewed. However, she had actually begun fiddling as a young girl in the nineteen-twenties in Shannon County, Missouri. The learning process she describes closely resembles that of kids anywhere in the country being lured by the forbidden fiddle:

When I was just a child, as far as playing, the old fiddle hung up above the piano on a string on the wall, and when no one was around, I would sneak in and get it and squeak and squawk and try to do the tunes . . . Well, finally I told Dad. I was very close to Dad, and he was the one that was interested in fiddling, so when I could finally make "Red Wing" sound a little bit like "Red Wing," I said to Dad, "See what I can do?" And then of course from then on he whistled the tunes and sort of showed me. But unfortunately we left there when I was ten years old and we were a large family, and it took the old truck and an old Model-T Ford to get us out here and we left the fiddle there.²²

Edna, like Earl Willis, recalled such tunes as "Possum Jaw" and "Suke Pied," which she felt are exclusive to the region where she grew up, though she herself did not play them. "Suke," she explained, was a traditional call to a cow, and "Pied" was a traditional name for a spotted cow; during her interview Edna chanted a fragment of the tune involving this

phrase. She also recalled tunes more common throughout the eastern half of the country but not common in Oregon, such as "Green Corn," or the title "Hop Light Ladies" for "McLeod's Reel." Though it is not possible to identify specifically Missouri sounds in her fiddling, which she had recently taken up again in Oregon, it is possible to speculate that she may have brought some element of approach and feeling to the group of musicians—including two other fiddlers, neither of them from the southern Midwest—with whom she played regularly, and with whom she recorded the music in her interview for the Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project.

In addition to tunes from the common stock, some personally or regionally unique tunes, a few notable stylistic characteristics, and overall effects, identifiable when heard but not simply the sum of a number of isolatable characteristics, it is these stories of oldtime music-making in other times and places that Oregon's immigrant fiddlers from other regions bring to the state's developing tradition. Oregon fiddlers' oral histories contain the history of other regions. But exchanging these parallel stories, different in detail though similar in themes and values, may represent a third strategy to unify Oregon's diverse fiddling community in their common experience as fiddlers and in valuation of the agrarian past. These stories about the learning process, the lure of the forbidden fiddle belonging to a parent, or efforts to get a fiddle of one's own have been exchanged casually at events in which the musicians were not primarily operating for the community's benefit, but for the pleasure of the company of their musical colleagues.²³ Such exchanges tended to take place during potlucks at the Oregon Old-Time Fiddlers Association's monthly district jam sessions, or in private gatherings in homes or in RVs at contests or at fairs where groups of OOTFA members might be providing entertainment.

Another among the common themes was playing for dances. Guy Kinman of Roseburg, Oregon, grew up in Wichita County, Texas, just south of the Oklahoma border. He recalls playing for dances in the late twenties and early thirties:

I remember my brother and me, we'd take that old banjo and play for dances, and it would get damp and we'd hold it over a lamp to dry it out so it would be louder, and a lot of times only way we had of getting to the dance was—it was so sandy, we lived out in the country . . . so you couldn't hardly get out in the car. So we put a tongue in an old two-wheeled trailer with rubber tires and we hooked a team of mules to it, and, man, we'd go all over the country in the Sandy Hills with those mules. Playing for those country dances. 'Bout all we played for, we didn't get no money, all we played for was the drinks and for the bootleggers to sell their booze. Lots of bootleggers. That went on until I was probably fifteen, sixteen.²⁴

Years later, as a result of religious conversion, Guy stopped drinking, but the customary association between liquor and oldtime dancing was strong. Guy describes a scene from the 1920's:²⁵

I remember people, they'd just storm my mother. They'd come over and just say, "We're going to have a dance here tonight . . . My mother would flip her lid. But they'd just start moving furniture out. They would always pick our house 'cause we didn't have very much furniture to move out. So they'd move it out and they'd dance and when the dance was over they'd put it back in there. We used to kind of watch. I was only about eight, but we would watch those guys and they'd go outside. And we just had a barbed wire fence around the house to keep the cows and things out. They'd put their jugs down; if the moon was shining they'd put their jugs down in the shadow of these fence posts. Well, us kids decided we'd sample that stuff. Boy, that was really white lightning!²⁶

These themes of heroic efforts required to get to the dance, difficult performance conditions, youthful introduction to liquor, and the clearing out of a house for a community dance are repeated by Oregon fiddlers from all regions. But particular variants on certain motifs might characterize the stories of one region or another, emphasizing the diversity upon which the developing unity rests.

For example, stories of rowdiness and grudge-settling at dances seemed in the author's experience to have been more commonly told among southern Midwest fiddlers than among fiddlers from farther north. However, from the Dakotas, in areas where ethnic communities overlapped, have come stories about how the Swedes might fight with the Poles for the honor of the race. Alta Bance described old-time public dances in the Houstonia, Missouri, area about 1910, in which a certain amount of rowdiness was presupposed; she distinguishes these public dances from apparently more private, sheltered, socially approved play-party gatherings:

We didn't have dance halls. Everytime you gave a [house] party or a dance, it was for the public, and it got pretty rough because all elements came As people moved and cleared out of the house, they'd give a dance party at this house. Or say they were moving into a house, they'd give a party before they moved in because it was empty, and people did a lot of drinking, and it was all kind of people, and we were not allowed to go to square dances, although we could have [play] party games. Dancing the same steps and singing, and that wasn't wrong, but to go to a square dance where there was [instrumental] music and all these people was considered very wrong by

mostly church going people. And I can remember when I was about thirteen of going to a dance; 'cause my father [a fiddler] was there and he furnished the music, I was able to go to the square dance which I enjoyed very much Your best people, so speaking, wouldn't attend those places. But if you had a house party at home, you know, and no [instrumental] music, they would all come and that was just great.

It was all a matter of personal opinion—or I'd say neighborhood opinion, that would govern which was right People would bring their guns and their jug of whiskey [to public dances] and they'd get drunk and they'd have brawls and they'd have shootings It was similar to going to war I'll tell you, they settled grudges there—that's where they'd go to settle their grudges.²⁷

These stories of public and community activities in the past, with all their regional variation, may have helped to shape contemporary Oregon fiddlers' activities. The specifics of the events may be different from earlier counterparts, but especially such events as the Oregon Old-Time Fiddlers Association's recent revival of Grange hall dances seem specifically connected to the memories preserved in these kinds of stories, and to the commonality of their motifs. Whereas once fiddlers would play for weddings, now the rite of passage more likely to involve them is the funeral or wake. (This does not of course apply to the younger revivalist fiddlers who are likely enough to play for weddings, but to the generally older, OOTFA-connected fiddlers.) They also play for numerous nursing homes, whose residents would share some of the same fund of memories of community-made music in earlier times. They still play at fairs and local festivals. Now they may play for the opening of a small-town shopping center, whereas in the mid-nineteen twenties fiddlers in many parts of the country might have played at fiddlers' contests sponsored by Henry Ford to mark the introduction of the year's new models of Ford cars.²⁸

As an example of the interaction between memory and current event, a few days before he was interviewed, Earl Willis and several other Oregon fiddlers including the author had played at the grand opening of a Springfield, Oregon, restaurant owned by a singer and guitar player who was a member of the Oregon Oldtime Fiddlers Association. This event reminded Earl of the time he played for a Chevrolet dealership, perhaps following the lead of Ford's promotional success. The story seemingly validated the traditionality and the "rightness" of playing for the restaurant opening, serving to connect the present with another time and place:

The first Chevrolet six, the first six-cylinder car that Chevrolet ever built, was in nineteen and twenty-nine, and I played for

the unveiling of that In this county [probably Callaway County, Missouri, town not named], not in Detroit. And it was always a big crowd, and they had a German all-accordion band there, and they'd play while we was on intermission. Most beautiful music you ever heard in your life, all accordions The mayor of the town owned this—he had the Chevrolet dealership there and I was raised up with him And 'course, when he got ready to have this big deal to unveil this new car, he wanted me to play for it. Which I was happy to do; got paid for it, whatever pay was then.²⁹

Nationwide, the influence of contests over the last more or less thirty years has fostered a homogeneous fiddling superculture in which listening replaces dancing as the main purpose of the music, and, despite the scoring category of "danceability" on certified contest judges' scoring sheets, tone quality, smoothness, technical complexity, and variation seem in fact to be the primary aesthetic values. This shift in values overwhelmingly favors the "progressive" style of Texas fiddling. Jim Hoots describes the differences between contest fiddling and the old-time fiddling he heard in his youth in Illinois and eastern Missouri:

Well, it was jerky. And it was snappy. The timing was good, but I'm saying that's different from the way they've changed the tunes and put different parts in and all. Just taking one part, for instance, they most of these guys play more notes, twice as many notes, in that part as any of them fellers did back then. They played just as simple as they could, it seemed like to me.³⁰

On the one hand, the major contests have led standardization of style and the ascendancy of an elite corp of fine young musicians who espouse a virtuosic, ornate, listener-focused derivative from a style of Texas fiddling exemplified by Benny Thomason, Major Franklin, or Vernon Solomon, further influenced by both western swing and jazz. Meanwhile, contests have had a somewhat different effect among Oregon's older, less competition-oriented fiddlers. In fact, they seem to have been another route through which the self-identified old-time fiddlers of Oregon have found common ground, by contrasting themselves with progressive fiddlers.

Oregon newspapers record a few fiddle contests from earlier times, but contests have become much more numerous since the founding of the Oregon Oldtime Fiddlers Association, in the wake of the nationwide revival of interest in traditional music starting in the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties. For fiddlers in the Northwest, this renewal of interest could be somewhat arbitrarily dated from 1953, when a fiddle contest was held during the intermissions of a square dance festival in Weiser, Idaho. Weiser's present National Oldtime Fiddlers' Contest was inaugurated in 1963.³¹

The judging and rules of most contemporary contests closely follow those of the National Oldtime Fiddlers' Contest. Five judges, expert musicians themselves, listen from an isolation room to the tunes broadcast from the stage. Time limits are strictly enforced, and fiddlers may be penalized for playing over that limit. Three tunes are to be played in a specific order: hoedown, waltz, and tune of choice (a tune which is neither a hoedown or waltz—for example a polka or a rag).

The contemporary contest scene has produced some double messages with regard to the aesthetics and values of fiddling. In addition to "Danceability," the other judging categories most widely used in the last few years have been "Old-time Style," "Tone," and "Rhythm and Time." The fact is that only rarely does other than a progressive-style fiddler place well in a major contest. Winners increasingly are young progressive fiddlers with some formal training, and the carriers of the folk tradition, the old-time stylists, receive less and less acknowledgment in the contest setting. Around a contest one can hear much discussion, resistance to and rationalization of this fact: "It's *not* old-time." "But it's good fiddlin'." "Yeah. But it says right here on the score sheet—*old-time style*." "But you have to give the prizes to the best fiddlers." The issue is not settled. Some contests have tried to solve the problem by creating separate championship divisions in old-time and progressive styles, but this has usually seemed only to stimulate the refinement of discussion, settling very little to anyone's satisfaction.

During the Oregon Old-time Fiddling Project interviews, subjects often told stories of less formal, less seriously competitive contests. These contest stories, from various geographic origins, often parallel each other in themes and implied values. They seemed to function in two ways in the search for common ground. First, they served to distinguish *all* old-time fiddling from *all* progressive fiddling, often simply referred to as "contest" fiddling, and old-time contests in general (which might include some rare ones held up into the nineteen-fifties) from modern contests. In general the distinction is approximately between contests as a small part of a dance fiddler's musical life and contests as a prime locus of a musician's efforts.

Second, while differences in detail of rules or aesthetic values testify to the diversity of background among the community of tellers, the parallels among these stories assert common ground by reinforcing similar social themes and values across regions: competition in fun, sportsmanship, rural sociability, modest practical value of prizes, and the practical value of music in providing community entertainment.

During a discussion of the differences between contests of the nineteen-seventies and those of forty to fifty years earlier, Earl Willis told this story about contest prizes:

My garden needed fencing, and the farmers put on a big picnic and put on a contest, and I went down and won my wire to

fence my garden with . . . I had to buy some more, but I won the biggest part of it anyway at this farmers' contest. I sure was glad of that, 'cause I really needed it, Depression time and no money or anything.³²

Such stories will often be told specifically to contrast with the ways of contemporary contesting, sometimes as a negative comment on the loss of older values, and sometimes with simple, head-shaking wonder at the changing times.

Jim Hoots, who in 1981 won the Men's Division National Champion title at Weiser, held that the traditional values of friendliness and sporting cooperation in contest playing tended to disappear as contests got larger and the prize money rose. He asked the author, "The several times you have been over to Weiser, did you notice that the contestants are, you might say, very rude and standoffish? A lot of them don't even like to talk to anybody . . . And they snap at you. And they are different people altogether."³³

Jim, along with Guy Kinman and Alta Bance, recalled contests judged by audience applause. Guy told how someone would hold a hat over the head of each contestant in turn, and the audience would applaud to indicate approval of the contestant's playing. The contestant who received the loudest applause won. Jim commented that "A local person generally won those kind of contests because he would have a bigger following than some out-of-town fella."³⁴ The prize for one such contest was "ten dollars and a bill of groceries."³⁵ In a modern rarity, Alta told in the interview of a small contest in Yreka, California, 1976, in which she won second place on audience applause.³⁶ This contest, during a Fourth of July celebration, seemed to have been run as a nostalgic evocation of the past.

On the one hand, contemporary contests encourage the continuation of fiddling, drawing young people to the old traditional art. On the other, contests have become agents of both change and nearly nation-wide conformity with a single favored style. New developments bring the old art of fiddling into the modern world and renew it. But the ascendancy of progressive fiddling has decreased the interest with which regional styles and older fiddlers may be regarded. However, during the period of particular interest for this essay, during which exponents of distinctive regional styles were meeting each other in Oregon, this very fact served to draw together the fiddlers who had come here from diverse backgrounds, but who began to see themselves as having commonalities in contrast to progressive fiddlers.

Perhaps all this simply means that Oregon is developing a kind of two-caste system of fiddling styles, the progressive fiddling highly distilled from a particular version of Texas fiddling, and an old-time style which is the homogenization of the various regional styles brought here by immigrants of the nineteen-thirties and forties. Those who are themselves immersed in the process of change probably do not think much about just

which lick or nuance came from where. Once a style characteristic has been incorporated into one's playing, it often seems like a law of nature. And, after all, personal invention is also part of the simmering brew. But as last autumn's leaves become part of the soil and help to generate a new season's growth, so the various regions and individuals have contributed to fiddling in Oregon, perhaps in ways that may never be specifically identified. But there is something of Missouri and a good many other midwestern states in the fiddling of Oregon.

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Notes

¹Actually, what has happened in Oregon in recent years is simply a speeded-up contemporary version of how immigration and resettlement patterns on American frontiers have affected fiddling, as described, for example, by Joyce H. Cauthen, *With Fiddle and Well-Rosined Bow: Old-Time Fiddling in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), pp. 4-5, and Robert D. Bethke, "Old-Time Fiddling and Social Dance in Central St. Lawrence County," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 30 (3), pp. 65-166.

²My use of the term *southern Midwest* is based on my observations of similar playing styles, tune preferences, and affinity expressed among a small number of Oregon fiddlers from the southern part of the Midwest. My purpose is not to establish universally accepted boundaries for a cultural region, but to delineate a grouping that makes sense for the dynamics I have observed in Oregon's fiddling. However, my grouping of fiddlers from Missouri, Arkansas, the Texas-Oklahoma border, and southern Illinois, seems to reflect a sense of regionality implied in the selection of works for inclusion in Vance Randolph and Gordon McCann, *Ozark Folklore: An Annotated Bibliography*, Vol. 2 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1987).

³William G. Loy, Stuart Allan, Clyde Patton, and Robert D. Plank, *Atlas of Oregon* (Eugene: University of Oregon, 1976), p. 24.

⁴Joseph McQueen, "Pioneer Music of the Oregon Country," in *SERA Manuscript Project*, Part 3, ed. Alfred Powers (Portland: Portland Center

General Extension Division, Oregon State System of Higher Education, 1935), pp. 1-25.

⁵Fieldwork for this article was supported with grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission, the Oregon Oldtime Fiddlers Association; further support was provided by the Library of Congress Music Division, and Visual Arts Resources, Museum of Art, University of Oregon; it was sponsored by the Lane County Pioneer Museum, Eugene, Oregon; the Douglas County Museum, Roseburg, Oregon; and the Jacksonville Museum, Jacksonville, Oregon. The Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project interviews were conducted by Linda Danielson, project director. The collection of tapes and transcripts, along with photos by John Bauguess, is housed at the Lane County Historical Museum (formerly the Lane County Pioneer Museum); thanks to the Museum for allowing the use of these documents in this article.

⁶For all the ambiguity of the reference, Bert Feintuch seems to imply the emergence of such a style designation in a review of fiddle recordings by regional groupings as he perceives them. Speaking of Grant Lamb and Joe Pancerczewski, he comments, "Both fiddlers play in a style vaguely defined as 'northwestern' or 'Western Canadian'." See Burt Feintuch, "The Fiddle in North America: Recent Recordings," *Journal of American Folklore* 95 (1982), p. 498.

⁷James B. Hoots. Interview with author, Oct. 9, 1976. Interview #20, Oregon OldTime Fiddling Project. Tape recording and transcript, Lane County Historical Museum, Eugene, Oregon. Tape 1, Side B, transcript, p. 21.

⁸That these characteristics do not necessarily define a regional style is further attested to by Feintuch's citation of Vance Randolph's comments on the bowing of "the best Ozark fiddler he ever heard"—Art Galbraith, who plays with short single bows, in Feintuch, p. 497. Moreover, Alan Jabbour identifies the bowing pattern of three-separate-threeslurred-two-separate in the playing of a Vermont-Quebec fiddler, as well as in the playing of a Galax, Virginia, fiddler, in both cases ascribing such bowing patterns to Irish sources. See Alan Jabbour, "American Fiddle Tunes from the Archive of Folk Song," Notes to sound recording, Folk Music of the United States, L62. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1971, pp. 12, 19. In this essay I have identified this same pattern in the bowing styles of the southern Midwest. All this suggests that the total effect and the intangibles are often more important than specific characteristics in recognizing styles or style commonalities.

⁹Linda Burman-Hall, "Southern American Folk Fiddle Styles," *Ethnomusicology* 19 (1975), pp. 56-62.

¹⁰Cauthen, p. 5.

¹¹Cauthen, p. 40.

¹²Earl Willis, interview with author, June 14, 1976. Interview #1, Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project. Tape recording and transcript, Lane County Historical Museum, Eugene, Oregon. Tape 1, Side A, transcript, p. 23.

¹³Edna Meadows, John Brannon, and Gene Lowe, interview with author, October 9, 1976. Interview #22, Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project. Tape recording and transcript, Lane County Historical Museum, Eugene, Oregon. Tape 1, Side B, transcript, p. 21.

¹⁴Simon Bronner, *Old-Time Music Makers of New York State* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), p. 126.

¹⁵Earl Willis, interview with author, June 14, 1976. Interview #1, Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project. Tape recording and transcript, Lane County Historical Museum, Eugene, Oregon. Tape 1, Side A, transcript p. 15.

¹⁶Cauthen, p. 4.

¹⁷R. P. Christeson, ed., *The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973, p. 95.

¹⁸Christeson, p. xi-xii.

¹⁹Phyl Simmons, interview with author. August 9, 1976. Interview #12, Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project. Tape recording and transcript, Lane County Historical Museum, Eugene, Oregon. Tape 1, Side A, transcript, p. 1.

²⁰Willis interview, Tape 1, Side A, transcript, p. 6.

²¹Alta Bance, e. al., interview with author, November 6, 1976. Interview #24, Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project. Tape recording and transcript, Lane County Historical Museum, Eugene, Oregon. Tape 1, Side A, transcript, pp. 14-15.

²²Edna Meadows, John Branon, and Gene Lowe, interview with author, October 9, 1976. Interview #22, Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project. Tape recording and transcript, Lane County Historical Museum, Eugene, Oregon. Tape 1, Side A, transcript, p. 7.

²³Cauthen finds a very similar collection of themes in the oral history of Alabama fiddlers, pp. 45-73.

²⁴Guy Kinman, interview with author, October 9, 1976. Interview #21, Oregon Old-Time Fiddling Project. Tape recording and transcript, Lane County Historical Museum, Eugene, Oregon. Tape 1, Side A, transcript, pp. 4-5.

²⁵Guy's description in fact shares the features of the emptied-out house and the well-hidden jug with an account of a dance found in George E. Cole's *Early Oregon: Jottings of Personal Recollections of a Pioneer of 1850* (Spokane: Shaw and Borden Co., c. 1905) as well as with many contemporary fiddlers' stories:

After the dinner was over, dancing commenced in the double cabin, the furniture having been removed. Two sets, one in each cabin, were able to form; and, as my fame had preceded me on my trip down the valley, I was put in requisition at once to call off the cotillions, which were formed, one in each room, on the puncheon floor.

Old "Doc" provided himself with two cases of whiskey, which he had packed from Brownsville, a distance of twenty-odd miles

When the positions were taken ready for the dance, Old "Doc" came around with a bucket of water on one arm, in which there was a gourd, and a bottle of whiskey in his hand, and after taking a drink from the bottle and water from the gourd he passed around to all the dancers, boys and girls indiscriminately, and when all had been served he sang out to me, "All ready, go ahead."

After several hours' dancing, the whiskey having given out apparently, he lay down in the corner of the cabin near the fire, putting his legs over an improvised bench . . . his feet near the fire, and was soon snoring. But the dance went on. After a while he woke up, and, bidding me let the dance go on without me for a while, took me to a large fir tree some distance from the cabin, and, pointing to an elevation in the mountains of the Coast Range, he asked, "Do you see that p'int in the mountains? Now fifteen steps from here I hid a bottle." Stepping off

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that distance in wet grass, he felt around with his feet, but was unable to find it. He went back to the tree again, and said, pointing to another elevation, "I reckon I made a mistake. I reckon it was that p'int." He repeated his former performance, with the same result, which greatly surprised him. He was equal to the emergency, however, and said, "I'll roll for it," which he did and found the prize. Taking it to the tree, he knocked off the neck of the bottle as squarely as if cut with a diamond. I said to him, "Why didn't you put that bottle at the foot of the tree?" He answered, "I'm too old for that; the boys would have found it long ago, and you and I would have gone dry" (pp. 25-27).

²⁶Kinman interview, Tape 1, Side A, transcript, pp. 2-3.

²⁷Bance interview, Tape 1, Side A, transcript pp. 7 and 10.

²⁸Ford, who viewed "modern" dancing as promiscuous, wished not only to revive but to "standardize" old-time music ("Fiddling to Henry Ford," *Literary Digest* 88 [January, 1926], pp. 33-34). For further discussions of Henry Ford's enthusiastic sponsorship of oldtime dance and music, see Bronner, pp. 33-38 and Cauthen, pp. 33-34, 100.

²⁹Willis interview, Tape 4, Side A, transcript, pp. 88-89.

³⁰Hoots interview, Tape 2, Side A, transcript, pp. 25-26.

³¹Weiser Idaho Chamber of Commerce, "Old-Time Fiddlin'!" Souvenir Program, National Oldtime Fiddlers' Contest, 1982, p. 3.

³²Willis interview, Tape 2, Side A, transcript, pp. 26-27.

³³Hoots interview, Tape 2, Side A, transcript, p. 25.

³⁴Hoots interview, Tape 1, Side B, transcript, p. 19.

³⁵Hoots interview, Tape 1, Side B, transcript, p. 21.

³⁶Bance interview, Tape 1, Side B, transcript, p. 21.