

A Special Series of Music Concerts devoted to **THE MASTERS OF HEARTLAND TRADITIONS**

Friday, February 3

Missouri Fiddle Champion

TAYLOR McBAINE

with Cathy Barton & Dave Para

Friday, March 3

Slovenian and Armenian Music

CHICAGO SLOVENE BUTTON BOX CLUB

TAKSIM WEST

Saturday, March 18

Irish Music Masters

JOE SHANNON & JOHNNY McGREEVY

KEVIN CARROLL & LIZ CARROLL

Friday, April 7

Illinois & Indiana Ballads & Fiddle Tunes

LOTUS DICKEY

REVEREND JIM HOWIE

Friday, May 5

Scandinavian American Music

K. WENDELL WHITFORD

with Bob & Becky Wernerehl



Friday, June 2

Country & Urban Blues Masters

DAVID "Honeyboy" EDWARDS

ALBERT LUANDREW aka. "Sunnyland Slim"

All concerts will take place at 8:00 P.M. at the Libertyville High School Studio Theatre, 708 W. Park (Route 176), Libertyville, IL. For tickets or other information call: The David Adler Cultural Center at 367-0707.

This series is sponsored in part by funds from the Libertyville Rotary Club, The National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

**DAVID ADLER
CULTURAL CENTER**

1700 N. Milwaukee Ave. • Libertyville, IL 60048

OLD-TIME MUSIC FROM THE GOOD LAND:

K. WENDELL WHITFORD

K. Wendell Whitford, better known as Wendy, was born in Albion, Wisconsin in 1913. His father's farm was located near a tamarack swamp-- fertile land that the Norwegian settlers referred to as "god land" or "good land." To the ears of their English-speaking neighbors, it sounded as if the Norwegians called the area "goo lan." By the next generation, it was known locally as "Goose Land" or "Goose Island." Then during the Depression, when Wendy needed a name for a band, he remembered his father's farm and called his trio the Goose Island Ramblers.

Not only the language, but also the music of the Norwegian settlers in rural Wisconsin left a mark on Wendy Whitford, who is of English descent. As a young fiddler he learned a number of Norwegian waltzes, polkas, and other tunes from Clarence Rierson, a farmer from Goose Island. Then in the 1960s, the Goose Island Ramblers were reincarnated when Wendy joined up with concertinist Bruce Bollerud, a school teacher from Madison whose training in old-time music had come from a number of Norwegian musicians in central Wisconsin.

But with a grandfather who played the fiddle and liked to sing, Wendy Whitford's first introduction to old-time music came at home. Charles Smith, his maternal grandfather, was born in Albany, New York in 1849, came to Wisconsin, married and moved back East to Massachusetts-- where Wendy's mother was born-- before returning to Wisconsin. Wendy's mother inherited a love for old songs that led her to compile a scrapbook of song lyrics during her schooldays in the 1890s. She left Wendy this hand-written collection from which he learned such pieces as "Will You Love Me When I'm Old," and a song that tells the story of a Milwaukee fire in 1861. He likes these old songs for their flowery language and the songwriters' "knack of using descriptive adjectives that they don't have today."

Besides being a important part of family life at home, old-time music was also a vital element of the communal life of the neighborhood. Wendy remembers hearing stories of a neighbor who was a drummer in the Union Army during the Civil War. And, of course, there were fiddlers like Clarence Rierson who provided dance music for house parties. As automobiles became more common, the boundaries of people's lives expanded accordingly; yet old-time music retained its importance in the rural Midwesterner's social life. At the age of eighteen, Wendy began to attend the annual fiddle contest at nearby Stoughton. In the thirties this was a large event that attracted upwards of forty contestants.

Also at this time, the National Barn Dance on WLS in Chicago was the most listened to radio show in the Midwest (and perhaps in all of rural America). Personal appearances by the WLS stars in the small towns were big affairs that were often accompanied by "Home Talent Shows." The local performers who won these contests were awarded a trip to WLS to perform on a time slot just before the Saturday night live broadcast of the Barn Dance from the Eighth Street Theatre. In 1938, Wendy's trio with guitarist Vern Meiner and bass player Salty Halgan were accorded this opportunity. They chose the name Goose Island Ramblers to give them an air of rural professionalism for their appearance in the big time.

Though the Ramblers achieved a degree of prominence in central Wisconsin, they did not consider themselves professional musicians; all held steady jobs-- Wendy worked for the Oscar Mayer company for forty years-- and played music for fun. In Wendy's words: "We did not have an elaborate output of music, but we had that old country sound." Their sound was popular, enabling them to remain active for nearly thirty years, through two name changes. In 1944, they auditioned for radio station WIBA in Madison and were given a daily program with the stipulation that they pick a less rustic name. For the next few years they performed as The Balladeers. Then after the war came a boom of popularity for square dancing, and the band countrified its name to The Hoedowners and became primarily a dance band once again.

In 1963, the band broke up and Wendy Whitford thought he was retired from playing music in public. But Bruce Bollerud had other plans, and soon talked Wendy out of his reluctance to start playing out again: "He told me, 'When it comes to music, we're all the same age, Wendy.'" The two of them teamed up with Smoky George Gilbertson-- a fiddler, mandolinist, and dobro player-- to form a second incarnation of the Goose Island Ramblers that continued until 1975. This group recorded three albums for a now defunct label from Sauk City, Wisconsin.

Included on their first record was "Oscar's Cannonball," one of Wendy Whitford's original songs, a take-off on "The Wabash Cannonball." The song grew out of Wendy's forty years of work for the Oscar Mayer company. Just recently the song has gotten some notice from unlikely sources. First, a record producer from San Francisco contacted Wendy and asked permission to reissue the Ramblers rendition of the song on an anthology of labor songs. Then, Wendy was asked to perform the song at a retirement party of an Oscar Mayer company employee. He's proud of the song, but surprised at the fresh interest in it: "We played that for years and never got a weiner from Oscar Mayer."

Though both his bands eventually broke up, and though he once considered himself retired from music, Wendy Whitford is still active in music in his 76th year. When the Stoughton fiddle contest was revived recently, Wendy returned to perform but not compete.

Aptly enough, though, his grandson entered and won the contest. The old-time music that sprouted on the good land of central Wisconsin continues to grow through another generation.

Bob and Becky Wernerehl are two younger Wisconsin-born musicians who frequently accompany Wendy Whitford. Though they're both of German descent, they primarily perform traditional Norwegian, Swedish, and Scandinavian-American music. Their introduction to old-time music came in the 1970s when they became involved with the dancing and music at Folklore Village Farm in Dodgeville, Wisconsin.

Their performances feature a number of European and American folk instruments: fiddle, accordion, button accordion, zither, guitar, a variety of flutes, the Norwegian hardanger fiddle, and the Swedish nyckelharpe or keyed fiddle (related to the hurdy-gurdy). They are also active in the old-time dance scene in central Wisconsin, a reawakening of the house party tradition of the earlier Norwegian and Yankee settlers.

--by Paul L. Tyler

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