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Hillbilly Music Re-imagined: Folk and Country Music in the Midwest

Beginning in the 1960s, country music scholarship focused on the hillbilly image to advance a sectional claim to represent the history of the genre. In fact, the earlier institutionalization of country music, particularly in radio broadcasts, emerged from a wider swath of regional and ethnic folk music. Here the hillbilly is re-imagined to encompass a larger pool of folk musicians whose practices resided beyond the control of the musical establishment of the 1920s.

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SECTIONALISM HAS WORKED ALL MANNER of mischief in American history and culture, exposing the difficulty of making one out of many. Nearly a century ago, just after Europe's armies fought each other in the Great War, Frederick Jackson Turner opined that "our sections constitute the American analogue of European nations" (Turner 1926:85). Sectionalized barriers to unity became apparent in the Early Republic with the clash between the plebian backwoodsmen of the West and hegemonic elites of the East, which led in part to such conflicts as the Whiskey Rebellion. Turner asserted that this very antagonism dominated the entire frontier phase of US history: "From Bacon's Rebellion to the La Follette revolt, there are almost continuous manifestations of the sectional contests of East and West, of the frontier and the older areas" (Turner 1926:85). And, of course, the great sectional clash over slavery that led to Civil War between the North and the South left deep scars in our national psyche and lasting discomfort in our cultural discourse. As was pointed out on the World Wide Web after the 2004 presidential election, America's contemporary culture wars between Red States and Blue States yield regional maps that echo the old sectional divide of slaveholding versus free soil territories (Arrona 2004).

While not an arena of political or social strife, folklore scholarship has also been visited by sectionalist mischief, particularly with regard to the study of the benign art form of American country music, once widely referred to as "hillbilly music." In one

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key point, the conventional narrative of the emergence, growth, and persistence of commercial country music has misappropriated preponderant regional characteristics of the music and its institutions in the service of sectional pride: that country music is primarily and, in some way, intrinsically, southern. There can be no doubt that much of the participatory demographics and institutional apparatus of country music is rooted on southern soil. But there is more to the story. In his introduction to the special "Hillbilly Issue" of the *Journal of American Folklore*, D. K. Wilgus, who pioneered efforts to bring commercial country music into the purview of his discipline, asserted that "early hillbilly performers came not only from the lowland and upland South, but from the Great Plains and the Midwest." His wisdom, that the music's "essence was of rural America," was ignored (Wilgus 1965:196). Most country music historians equated the term "hillbilly" first with musicians from the upland South, and quickly expanded that symbolism to reflect on other regional styles contained in the section of the United States identified as the South. I contend that alternative readings of the hillbilly symbol disclose similarities between the southern mountains and other socially and culturally distinctive places occupied by non-southern rural Americans. There are other rural music scenes and musicians whose stories should be considered in writing the full history of American country music.

The aim of this paper is to gather materials from the American Midwest in order to show how the southern thesis in country music historiography is a reductionist exercise that has obscured the broader sweep of country music's history. My critique of the southern thesis is meant to point out how geographic facts of regional phenomena have become confused with a sectional agenda. Historian Nicole Etchison has outlined an important distinction. A region is an area that is defined as much by the accidents of history and cultural values as by geographic features, but a "section carries the added meaning of excessive devotion, so that sectionalism implies deeper loyalties to a place and prejudices against its neighbors" (Etchison 1996:xi–xii).

The southern thesis derives much of its rhetorical authority from the considerable achievements of Bill C. Malone, who authored the seminal *Country Music U.S.A: A Fifty-Year History*, first published in 1968 for the American Folklore Society. Revised editions, which of necessity dropped the *Fifty-Year History* subtitle, appeared in 1985, 2002, and 2010. In these books, as well as others that followed, Malone's narratives were impressively factual and wide-ranging; his analyses were penetrating. He was right on nearly everything, on everything except his persistent assertion that there is an essential "southernness" to country music. This attribution of a sectional essence, be it stylistic or sociological, limited what he considered country music, and thus bedimmed our ability to accurately understand the full range of vernacular music-making that emerged from and thrived in rural and small-town America.

A reconsideration of the southern thesis will not only pave the way for a more comprehensive historical narrative, but will also allow us to discern more keenly the relationships and connections between different genres of rural music, including the interplay between commercial and folkloric practices. This last point could potentially explode the southern thesis because recent technologies, dominated by personal computers and microchip powered digital recorders, have severely decentralized and democratized music production, greatly blurring the line between folkloric and

commercial practices. With the entire corporate music business in serious decline, the production of mass-mediated country music can no longer be dominated by an industrial capital, such as Nashville, located in the South (if, in fact, that were ever completely the case). The linear narrative that Malone first advanced in 1968, that hillbilly music "developed out of the reservoir of folksongs and ballads brought to North America by the Anglo-Celtic immigrants" (Malone 1968:3) into a viable commercial art form that thrived in an urban and industrial society needs to be replaced with a multi-branched history with narrative loops that show how in many places, the twentieth-century country music business swept up folk music practices, only to see the folk regain a large measure of control in the twenty-first century.

To be fair, over the course of 40 years, Malone has repeatedly spliced and diced his definition of country music with pleasant and persuasive stipulations. He retrospectively revealed that the objective of his 1968 edition of *Country Music U.S.A.* was intended to win a place for commercial country music within the compass of academic folklore by showing that country music grew out of southern folk culture. In subsequent editions and writings, he broadened the base of cultural products and forms that fed the country music stream:

> An understanding of southern rural music was hampered by the reluctance of both folk scholars and high-art exponents to see it as it really was: that is, a thoroughly hybrid form of music which shared Old World and American traits, and which revealed itself as both a commercial and a folk expression. More important, it was difficult for such observers to see southern rural culture as it really existed: a culture that was neither static nor pure. (Malone 1985:27)

> Southern white folk music possessed no single defining ingredient. Some listeners think they hear the sound of a Celtic bagpipe in the strains of a country fiddle; others think that the African admixture gave country music its spark and vitality and therefore made it intriguing; a few believe that the styles of blackface minstrelsy contributed much to country music's early character; others are convinced that southern Protestantism gave the music its basic style and tone; while still others are positive that its long history of isolation in the southern backwoods gave rural music a tangy flavor and distinctiveness that set it apart from other forms of music. All of these influences, and more, were present in the music of the rural South, but none exclusively defined its essence. (Malone 1993:9–10)

In *Don't Get above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*, Malone further focused his characterization of country music as "an art form made and sustained by working people" (2002:vii), explicitly, southern working people. Yet, after nearly four decades, he still maintains that "when commercial country music emerged in the early 1920s bearing a variety of labels such as Old Familiar Music and Hillbilly it had a decidedly southern sound and complexion" (2006:16) Through it all, Malone sought to answer the questions he posed rhetorically in 1968: "Why then did the music of the South develop in a radically different fashion from that of the North? And why did the southern culture produce such a congeries of regional styles—both Negro and white—that have coalesced into viable commercial forms in the

modern period?" (1968:3–4). Malone found his answers in southern history, specifically in the persistent culture of the "plain folk" who hailed from "that broad arc of territory extending southwest from Virginia to Texas" (2006:16; cf. Peterson and Davis 1975:19–20).

My criticism of the southern thesis will focus on three points. First, relying on fieldwork begun in late 1970s and continuing through three decades, I will present a demographic analysis of midwestern performers of country music and the communities that supported their activities. Second, I will consider the "viable commercial forms" of midwestern rural music with regard to particular aesthetic and stylistic aspects of the music. This will lead to the third, and perhaps most telling, focal point, a consideration of the institutional apparatus of midwestern country music, the ways in which it was commercially viable from the early 1900s through the 1980s.

In 1968, Malone evinced little understanding of the culture of the plain folk of the North and Midwest when he effectively marginalized the importance for country music history of the National Barn Dance on WLS-Chicago, on the grounds that it featured a high proportion of sentimental pop tunes and heart songs along with country and folk music. For Malone, this seminal radio show's "inclusion of old-fashioned pop music was natural in that, to most midwesterners, such songs as 'Down by the Old Mill Stream' were the closest approximations of folk music that they knew" (Malone 1968:68–9; cf. Tyler 2008). In 1979, when I began a fieldwork project to prove to the listeners of my radio show, *Indiana Hoedown* on WIPU-Fort Wayne, that the state of Indiana had rich native traditions of folk song and instrumental music, I immediately discovered scores of local instrumentalists and singers who performed traditional dance tunes, ballads, lyric songs, and hymns as well as pop and country songs encountered through the full range of mass media: sheet music, songbooks, newspaper columns, radio, recordings, television. My first surprise was how many of these musicians had performed live on local radio in 1940s and 1950s, while an even larger portion had intermittently worked with bands that played dance halls and reception halls scattered plentifully throughout the cities, towns, and rural districts of Indiana and other states of the Old Northwest. The nature of the music they performed will be further discussed later in this paper. Yet clearly, midwesterners were not strangers to folk and country music.

Thirty years of contracted and personal fieldwork, mostly in Indiana and Illinois, along with occasional engagements with folk and country musicians in Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, provide the basis for the following demographic generalizations.[1] From my field notes, I collated data on a pool of 80 folk and country musicians born between 1900 and 1940 (the vast majority were born before 1930), including only those whose music was arguably not ethnic. Fiddlers are heavily represented, totaling 60. Fourteen of the fiddlers also played one of the other instruments found in the pool: accordion, banjo, mandolin, guitar, harmonica, concertina, tenor banjo, autoharp, steel guitar, and piano. A telling portrait emerges. All but one were male, and nearly all hailed from small farms and towns in the Old Northwest. A dozen were born outside of the Old Northwest territory, with one each from Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Ontario, and eight from Kentucky. The majority were native-born midwesterners. At the time I visited, interviewed, or recorded these musicians, half of the 80 lived in county seats or other market towns. Twenty-five lived in towns

with a population under 2,000 (though two of those towns have since been swallowed up by urban sprawl). Only 15 were living in cities with populations greater than 50,000, and at least 11 of these were transplants from small towns or the countryside. One musician, concertinist Herman Fox, settled with his young family on a truck farm north of Fort Wayne and was still living and growing produce on that farm in his eighties, when his land was incorporated into the city.

Like Herman Fox, most of this pool of 80 musicians grew up on small midwestern farms. Francis Geels, of Decatur, Indiana, told an interviewer in 2006 how during the Great Depression, the family farm provided most of the foodstuffs that the Geels family consumed. Cash to purchase other items was obtained by members of the family who took on wage-labor (Parry 2006). But most of these 69 farm boy musicians were raised on farms that produced a mixture of subsistence and cash crops. In this pool, only Les Raber, of Hastings, Michigan, was a dairy farmer. Robert Valentine, of Monticello, Illinois, kept an apple orchard that supplemented his income. But for many, increasing family responsibilities and the growing dominance of a national cash economy led them to find jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors. The glass and automotive factories around Muncie and Anderson, Indiana, attracted most of the southern migrants in our pool. William Bernard Lee left Carroll County, Mississippi, for a job manufacturing television sets in Bloomington, Indiana, where he worked alongside Bill Hardy, a local native and longtime music partner. Up in Wisconsin, fiddler and songster K. Wendell "Wendy" Whitford took a job at the Oscar Mayer plant in Madison, less than 30 miles from his boyhood farm home in Albion. Fort Wayne was a foundry city with thriving automotive and electronic plants that provided jobs for many farm boys who came to town. Bandleader Joe Taylor, of Portsmouth, Ohio, ended up in Fort Wayne for just this reason, where he met Canadian Jay Dickerson, who served a long tenure as fiddler for Joe Taylor & the Indiana Redbirds. Many of their musical associates on the burgeoning country radio scene in Fort Wayne at mid-century—who are not included in our pool of 80—were natives of smaller towns in the greater Tri-State region of Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan. For instance, Leo Zimmerman of Convoy, Ohio (I interviewed his brother Harold, a fiddler) played in a series of country bands that, up until about 1960, were each able to get a program on one or another Fort Wayne radio station. On the whole, this sample of midwestern country and folk musicians were all rural in origin and blue-collar, working-class in status.

No more than a handful of these 80 musicians had any college education; a minority wore a white collar to work. Nor was formal music training a hallmark of these instrumentalists. Only a few had taken lessons in their youth on violin, piano, or accordion. Most of them were raised in families with strong traditions of musical performance. And in the few cases where the immediate family boasted no active players, there were strong musical role models in the local community. Well over three-quarters of these musicians were publicly known as musicians in their communities and beyond. For about 15, this public assumption of the role of musician came in their later years as they became involved in fiddlers' associations and public jam sessions. This small segment were folk musicians who viewed music as an avocation, though most were seriously invested in their favorite leisure time pursuit. For a half to two-thirds, music was at one time or another a semi-professional endeavor.

For many, that time came when they were young and had not taken on the responsibilities of raising a family. Some lay their fiddles down when children came along, and started up again as they neared retirement. Others continued to augment their incomes through their adult years by playing in dance bands. It is important to note that throughout much of the Old Northwest, old-time square dancing was continuously popular, though many public dances were a mix of round and square dances (Tyler 1995). By the 1970s and 1980s, when I met most of these musicians, their glory days of broadcasting country music live on the radio were several decades in the past.

In many ways, this picture of Northern plain folk, at least a midwestern regional variant, resembles Malone's generalized characterization of southern plain folk as working-class Americans who

> did not constitute a homogeneous body. They were diverse in residence, religion, occupation, ethnicity, and even in politics. They were neither Anglo-Saxon nor Celtic; in fact, they weren't all white (and a substantial number were not Protestants). Their culture and their music were remarkable blendings of ethnic, racial, traditional, and modern traits. Kentucky coal miners, North Carolina textile workers, and East Texas oil drillers worked and lived in dramatically different settings, but they nevertheless shared a rural context and social history that linked them in various ways. (Malone 2002:viii)

If, as Malone asserted, the culture of southern plain folk was a hybrid, why can he not extend his notion of a "shared rural context" to northern and midwestern plain folk? My argument is that the hillbilly symbol is not so far removed from the image of the hick or hayseed that is often attached to rural midwesterners. Farm boys turned factory workers, whether they were southern migrants or northern natives, all had the experience of being outside the boundaries of sophisticated urban culture, of not being modern, of being "hillbilly," that is, country.

Yet it must be acknowledged that the hybrid folk culture of the North and Midwest differs from the southern hybrid in one key aspect: ethnic diversity. Proponents of the southern thesis have been admirably inclusive with regard to one musical subgroup outside the bounds of Anglo-American folk tradition, the Cajun French of Louisiana. (Curiously, the Czech and Polish music played in parts of rural Texas have not received equivalent consideration.) A theoretical nod toward the Hispanic music of the Southwest has also been advanced but has never resulted in the history of Tejano music or Spanish colonial music being integrated into a historical narrative of country music. Similarly, country music historians make formulary overtures in the direction of African American plain folk. Yet within the histories of country music, African American music is limited to the role of influence, one of many, without space being given to the practices of actual black country musicians, except for a few noteworthy exceptions, chiefly DeFord Bailey and Charley Pride. The problem here is definitional. Country music, according to the conventional narrative, has been essentially defined as one half of a racial dichotomy: white rural music was the hillbilly music that became country, while black rural music was race music that became rhythm and blues. This false dichotomy obscures the breadth of musical practices on both sides.

The ethnic elements of these hybrid folk cultures vary by region. The African American presence in the rural Midwest was, compared to the South, practicably negligible in the early twentieth century. The legacy of French settlements in all the states of the Old Northwest has survived, but only a few scattered musicians continued to perform the old French songs and tunes. A case could be made, however, that a parallel exists between German American folk culture in some portions of the Midwest and the Cajun French culture of Louisiana. Since both of these ethnic communities nourished thriving music traditions that blended native language songs with English songs, and ethnic melodies with Anglo-American tunes, why is the music of the latter excluded from the canon of American country music? It has been ignored by most country music scholars only because German American music from, for example, the Tri-State area around Fort Wayne, where English square dancing has long been included in performances, is not demonstrably southern (cf. Tyler 1992). Here we encounter another false dichotomy that has wrongfully limited our ability to comprehend the full sweep of country music's history. Other ethnic music traditions I have encountered in my midwestern fieldwork suggest additional hybrid ethnic hillbilly forms that deserve further study for their connections and common ground with Anglo-American country music: the music of Polish and Danish fiddlers in rural Michigan, Finnish bands in the Upper Peninsula, Scandinavian old-time bands in Wisconsin and Illinois, and the music of American Indian communities in the Upper Midwest. Another candidate for consideration, of later provenance, is the music of the one-time migrant Tejano and Mexican farm workers who made permanent settlements in market towns and smaller cities in all the states of the Old Northwest.

At this point, my argument transitions to my second point of criticism of the southern thesis: How do we account for the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of the country music from diverse regions? While this topic deserves a thorough investigation, I will here limit it to a general exploration of instrumentation and particular regional genres. Let me begin with a discussion of the term "old-time music," a term that can simply denote any and all music representative of an earlier time. Yet, beginning in the late twentieth century, many folk revivalists, with scholarly support from some country music historians (though not from Dr. Malone), aggressively appropriated the term "old-time" to privilege the music of a particular place, the Southern uplands, and a particular stylistic configuration of instruments, the fiddle and banjo-led string band. *The Old-Time Herald*, a popular magazine that began publishing in 1987, at one time named itself the *Journal of Southern Appalachian string band music*.[2] This particular viewpoint may be schematized as follows: old-time music was a regional folk tradition, mountain music, that spawned a commercial subgenre, hillbilly music. Further, the string band style subsequently outlived its commercial counterpart to continue as a folk music "still practiced" in "some areas of the southern Appalachians, particularly North Carolina and Virginia" (Country Music Foundation 1988:20–1).

An earlier journal titled *Old-Time Music* was published by British discographer and journalist Tony Russell through an influential run of 45 issues between 1971 and 1989. In a recent book that recapitulates and expands the contributions of his journal, Russell clarified his understanding of old-time music as "country music in its sunlit

morning years." An admittedly personal choice, his country music journalism focused heavily on the stylistic varieties of country music performed by southern whites in the years before 1942. Russell's choices were purely aesthetic: "I have chosen the subjects that interested me most." Fortunately, he did not apply his personal aesthetics in compiling his monumental *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921–1942*, a work that will figure later in this essay (Russell 2007:xii–xv, 2004).

The fact of these two journals illustrates an observation made by Archie Green in JAF's original Hillbilly Issue, that the symbol or term "*Hillbilly* can cover all available (recorded and published) white commercial country music"—exemplified by Russell—or "it can be equated simply with one limited type or recent period." For Green, in 1995, that limited sense suggested bluegrass (Green 1965:205). By the 1970s, in discourse framed by the folk revival, "old-time" meant pre-bluegrass string-band styles, and "hillbilly music" was replaced by the more polite "mountain music." In these realms, non-southern styles of rural music were excluded from consideration by editorial principles shaped by personal aesthetic choice.

To allow other precincts to be heard, folklorist James P. Leary published two articles in 1984 that first brought to attention a geographically distinct form, called "old-time music" by the locals, that was stylistically divergent but functionally similar to the old-time music of the Southern Appalachians. He characterized this Upper Midwest style as a multi-ethnic European-American musical hybrid:

> The accordion is the primary melodic instrument. Vocals tend to be relaxed, open-throated, and conversational. Performances are dominated by waltzes, polkas, and an occasional schottische; and these dance tunes are drawn largely from non-English-speaking ethnic sources. Even so, a significant number of "country" songs penetrate the contemporary old-time repertoire. (Leary 2004:272–3)

Leary outlined the basic instrumentation of such groups as were working around Ashland, Wisconsin, in the 1980s: duos of either accordion and drum or accordion and guitar, as well as larger units that included all three or double accordions. In other areas, dominated by Czech, German, or Polish Americans, brass and reed instruments might be added to the mix. In addition, from stories told by contemporary musicians, it can be gleaned that in the past, other instruments—chiefly the fiddle—had been found in such bands. Leary also made it clear that in the old-time music of the Midwest, the accordion could appear in any of its manifestations: two- or three-row button boxes, piano accordions, or modern electronically enhanced or synthesized instruments (Leary 1984:80).

In later writings, Leary expanded his coverage of Upper Midwestern old-time to include a variety of ethnic and inter-ethnic musical traditions. One early strain of these musicians played for dances and weddings in their own communities, featuring old-country tunes mixed with American folk and pop songs, along with one or more favorites from a neighboring ethnic community. Leary and Richard March discussed such examples as the Polish musicians of Posen, Michigan (clarinet and fiddles), the long-running Bohemian brass band of Yuba, Wisconsin, that was recorded by Helene Stratman-Thomas in 1946 (originally, in 1868, two horns, clarinet, and violin), and

Herman's Accordion Orchestra, a German band from Cashton, Wisconsin (button box, fiddle, and clarinet). The period from the 1920s through the 1950s brought to prominence another group of ethnic and multi-ethnic bands that entertained diverse audiences in the Upper Midwest and beyond through tours, radio broadcasts, and recordings. These ranged from the ethnically specific duo of Finnish accordionist Viola Turpeinen and fiddler John Rosendahl, to Scandihoovian performers like Swedish comic and songster Hjalmar Peterson (Olle i Skratthult), and the Iverson Brothers, who combined Nordic and American country songs in an act billed as Slim Jim and the Vagabond Kid. Mention must also be made of such wildly popular rural polka bands from the Upper Midwest as the band led by Czech trumpeter Romy Gosz in Manitowoc on the shores of Lake Michigan, and the rollicking Dutchmen (aka German) hoolerie sound of Whoopee John Wilfhart and the Six Fat Dutchmen from New Ulm, Minnesota. And no account of old-time music in Wisconsin would be complete without a nod toward the completely hybrid blend of music offered up by the Goose Island Ramblers, who played around Madison from 1938 through 1944, and then enjoyed a revitalized run from 1962 through the mid-1970s (Leary and March 2004:48–9, 55–8, 72, 83–5; Leary 2006:24). All of these influential sounds have inspired continuing traditions of ethnic and multi-ethnic old-time music in the Upper Midwest. I submit that the careers of these musicians deserve to be considered as part of the broad sweep of country music's historical development.

As noted earlier, the ethnic elements of hybrid folk cultures vary by region, and my fieldwork experience leads me to conclude that, culturally and musically, the Lower Midwest is distinctively different from the Upper Midwest. The states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois boast many fewer European enclaves than do the Upper Midwest states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The Swiss furniture makers of Berne, Indiana, created what is arguably an ethnic enclave, with its own music. But other immigrant groups, such as Italian and Slavic coal-miners in the Wabash Valley, do not seem to have made an ethnically distinctive mark on public music traditions in these areas.

Still, there is one prominent ethnic tradition from the Lower Midwest that closely parallels the multi-ethnic old-time music described by Leary: that is the music of rural German communities. A dozen of the 80 musicians who made up the demographic pool discussed above were of German heritage from one of two strongly German districts in Indiana: Dubois County in the southwest, and the area around Fort Wayne in the northeast. All 12 of these musicians played American folk and country music. In addition, all but one also played a few old German tunes and actively performed with other German American musicians in ethnic contexts. The German music of Dubois County exemplifies the culture of an ethnic enclave. The eight musicians on my list from that region all performed at local public events, mostly dances. They seldom ventured beyond the bounds of their enclave.

The German district around Fort Wayne was much more extensive. It stretched from the heavily German Lutheran open-country communities south of Fort Wayne, included small German Catholic enclaves closer to the city and the large German presence within the city, and reached up northeast through the Maumee River Valley nearly two-thirds of the way to Toledo, taking in scattered but sizeable pockets of

German Catholics and Lutherans in Ohio. The area south of Fort Wayne (where I was raised) had a strong tradition of old-time dance music early in the twentieth century, featuring bands that paired a fiddle with an accordion or German (or Chemnitzer) concertina, or perhaps a harmonica. Later on, these bands added such instruments as mandolin, guitar, banjo (probably of the four-string variety), and piano. By the 1930s, some of these bands turned away from old-time square dancing in favor of modern couple dances such as the two-step and foxtrot. The saxophone made its presence felt. But by the end of World War II, square dancing was surging in popularity once again (a popularity that would last for decades), but the old-time button box accordions, including the German concertinas, were on the way out in favor of the piano accordion. By the 1960s, the fiddle had all but disappeared from local dance bands. Francis Geels of Decatur continued to play his fiddle in a variety of bands, but most of his work was in fraternal lodges and dance halls outside the German belt.

It should be noted that in the 1940s and 1950s, many of the musicians who played in the dance bands that worked events in the German communities, also played in one or more of the country bands that broadcast live on Fort Wayne radio. The inverse was also true. Amos Kline, who ran a popular postwar square dance hall in the hamlet of Zulu east of Fort Wayne, told me that the biggest portion of his audience came from the Germans around Hoagland and Decatur, small towns south of Fort Wayne. The most popular band he hired was the Blackhawk Valley Boys, stars on the WOWO *Hoosier Hop*, and later, members of the WLS *National Barn Dance*.

Square dancing was also popular in the German communities along the Maumee River in northwestern Ohio. But the musicians of this rural area also cultivated relationships with the German polka scene centered around the small town of Frankenmuth, Michigan. By the 1970s, modern polka music was featured prominently at Oktoberfests and polka fests in small German communities like Hamler and Deshler southwest of Toledo. By the end of the decade, the polka fest movement had spread to Hoagland, Indiana, where the annual Oktoberfest always included square dancing. The polka promoters in these small towns usually hired urban German polka bands from Detroit and Toledo, along with the occasional Polish band. But no polka fest here would have been complete without one of the local Ohio bands who could play polkas and waltzes aplenty, a touch of rock or swing, and several sets of square dances each night. Many a time, I have danced to Marty Dickmander's Maumee Valley Polka Band from Napoleon, Ohio, and could always count on hearing Ernest Tubb's "Waltz Across Texas" and Little Jimmie Dickens "Out Behind the Barn." He also regularly included a polka version of "Orange Blossom Special," and several unnamed instrumental polkas that were likely adapted from tunes played by local fiddlers that Mr. Dickmander heard in his youth (Tyler 1992). Some of the German old-time music from this section of Indiana and Ohio can rightfully be classified as belonging to the genre of polka. The rest, at the very least, has every right to be called country music.

The ground where rural old-time music meets the polka tradition presents a definitional challenge. In his recent book titled *Polkabilly*, Leary advanced this neologism to delineate what he describes as a distinct musical genre that has been around for a long time, though unnamed and "hidden in plain hearing." The genre is a blending

of European folk musics, transformed and rooted in American soil, and mixed further with Anglo-American country music of the southern variety. Further, Leary argued this newly delineated old-time music, which had long hidden "along the western and eastern flanks of country music's southern core," is ubiquitous in the Midwest. Thus, a new genre label is called for in order to recognize that the old-time music of the Upper Midwest has achieved its own degree of commercial viability (Leary 2006:31–7). I applaud Leary's thorough documentation and thoughtful interpretation of the distinctive character of what he calls not just a hybrid, but a creolized genre, a dynamic and innovative blend of several older folk and ethnic traditions. However, I would caution that our scholarship is not well served by setting up another false dichotomy that divides the music we study into discrete and severable categories. Rather, I gladly accept that polkabilly, a sub-genre of country music, is a potent example of real-life connections between diverse traditions. The efficacy of polkabilly as a generic label is not in the convenience and efficiency it brings to academic discourse, but that it draws attention to the lived experienced of the musicians, dancers, audiences, and institutional agents, whose coalesced musical and social practices belong to both the country music field and the polka scene.

I would urge scholars to be as inclusive as folk musicians, most of whom play what they want to play with little concern for genre boundaries. Of course, for folk musicians to become commercially viable musicians, they must also be concerned with what prospective audiences want to hear. Yet, this essay also demonstrates that, in many communities of rural America, audience tastes are not limited by strict generic definitions.

Most of the music performed in commercial contexts by rural musicians from the Lower Midwest is not ethnically tinged. Much of it has always been straight-ahead Anglo-American music, a mix of folk, Tin Pan Alley, modern pop, and mass-mediated country music. The fiddle was as ubiquitous in the rural Midwest as in the South. Before the bluegrass explosion of the 1970s, the five-string banjo was much less prominent, while four-string varieties were much more prevalent in the Midwest than in the South. By the middle of the twentieth century, piano accordions were nearly as ubiquitous as fiddles. For example, three important bands of the 1940s that played on WOWO's *Hoosier Hop* featured accordionists. The Hoosier Cornhuskers paired accordionist Al Petit with old-time fiddler Clay "Pete" Smith, a native of Logansport, Indiana. Nancy Lee & the Hilltoppers, who came to Fort Wayne from the Chicago area, featured Sam DeVincent on accordion and violinist Jack Carmen, both born and raised in Chicago. The Blackhawk Valley Boys, who hailed from Rockford, Illinois, featured Don Lake on accordion, but no fiddler. Their second lead instrument was the lead guitar or tenor banjo played by Pete Fall, a native of South Bend, Indiana. None of these instrumental lineups was normative. One thing that might be said about folk and country music repertoires and styles in the Midwest is that musicians played the repertoire and the styles favored by themselves and their audiences.

At this point, I would suggest that a consideration of the variability accepted in midwestern country music may help free conventional views of southern country music from the blinders inflicted by attempts to establish a normative definition of hillbilly music. One such attempt is an oft-repeated and highly romanticized narrative

of the development of an authentic old-time style of mountain music. Kevin Donleavy, for example, prefaced an intensive study of musicians from a small area in Virginia and North Carolina, a region regarded by many as the hearth of old-time or mountain music, with this account: "[T]he Blue Ridge tradition passed from solo fiddle, to the fiddle-and-banjo pairing, to a slightly larger ensemble" (Donleavy 2004:10). Bob Carlin expanded on this origin myth by applying it to a region outside the Appalachian Mountains:

> The fiddle and banjo styles of the Piedmont have their roots in the melodies of Europe and the rhythms of Africa. Europeans brought the violin and their dance tunes to North Carolina's Piedmont and Africans brought the ancestors of the American banjo, along with its playing style and rhythmic patterns. . . . Although the guitar had been in the Piedmont since the 1850s, it didn't enter the picture as a part of the string bands until early in the twentieth century. With the guitar's addition, the archetypal old time North Carolina Piedmont sound was completed: long bow fiddling combined with cascading banjo runs and strong guitar bass lines used in support of popular songs and dance tunes. (Carlin 2004:8–9)

Charlie Seeman generalized this symbolic narrative to cover the whole of country music with an encyclopedic sound bite: "The first stringbands consisted of fiddle and banjo duets" (Seeman 1998:514).

Romanticized symbols, however, do not always square with the facts. Much has been made of statements by a few southern Appalachian folk musicians, such as Hobart Smith of Saltville, Virginia, that guitars were unknown in their districts until the first decades of the twentieth century. Thus, it has been assumed that the oldest and most authentic form of the string band is that which was common in isolated mountain communities supposed to sustain the oldest surviving cultural practices. This origin myth of country music has too often been reduced to a linear evolution from an authentic antique core to which other presumably modern instruments were added as they became more readily available (cf. Carlin 2004:9). However, a case can be made that the pairing of the fiddle and guitar had just as long a pedigree in tradition as the archetypal pairing of fiddle and banjo. Bill Malone noted that "*Scribner's Monthly*, for example, carried an engraving in 1873 of a fiddler and a guitarist playing for a boisterous dance in Denison, Texas" (Malone 1985:24). Diarist Daniel Storer, a twenty-one-year-old from Maine, who came to the Midwest in 1849 to work on the new Illinois & Michigan Canal before moving on to Minnesota, recorded that on July 16, 1850, he "[w]ent to Nile's Store today and had a great time fiddling with him. He plays the Guitar first rate" (Storer 1850:28). And a correspondent in Detroit in 1845 reported on "a dancing party—there are three negroes here, who will play two violins and a guitar & make very nice music" (Rowland 1845).

There is evidence aplenty to show that folk and country musicians in both the South and the North were willing to work with what instruments were at hand. In *Southern Exposure: The Story of Southern Music in Pictures and Words*, Bob and Richard Carlin provide a selection of photographs dated between the 1880s and the 1910s. An 1880s photograph of a white string band shows three fiddlers, a guitarist, a harmonica player, and a young man bowing a three-string bass, while a picture of a black family string

band in Louisiana from the same period shows a fiddler, guitarist, and cellist. A later picture of North Carolina musicians includes a male fiddler with three female musicians, a mandolinist and two guitarists. Another rustic group from the same time period includes a woman playing a banjo and a man with two-row button accordion (Carlin and Carlin 2000:18–23, 28–9). Though the Carlins suggest that all groupings pictured are southern string bands, the geographical provenance of the first and last is not identified. Nevertheless, the visual record does not square with what many old-time music enthusiasts, and some country music historians, have told us were normative practices.[3] Likewise, it seems that choices made by folk and country musicians in the Midwest, and elsewhere, were not limited by strict notions of stylistic authenticity.

Finally, I will move on to my third point of criticism of the southern thesis, an assessment of the institutional practices that brought commercial viability to country music in the Midwest. My position is that, from the very beginning, midwestern folk musicians helped shape the institutions that became commercial country music. In most country music histories, primacy is given to specific activities relating to the record industry. Eck Robertson's trip to the Victor offices in 1922, along with Fiddlin' John Carson's managed encounter with Ralph Peer in 1923, have, since Archie Green's seminal article in the original Hillbilly Issue, been the usual place markers. But, as Dr. Malone noted in a 1971 article in *Western Folklore*, "commercialization did not begin with, nor was it a creature of, the phonograph and recording industries." Personal appearances and radio broadcasting were equally crucial modes of production that contributed to the emergence of country music as a distinct entity (Malone 1971:215, 1985:32). Here I will explore each of these modes of production in the Lower Midwest up through the middle of the twentieth century. The stories of select individuals and ensembles, typical country musicians representative of the region, will carry the narrative.

Personal appearances are, of course, the oldest of these institutional practices. The importance of community dances for establishing at least a semi-professional status for some musicians has already been sufficiently introduced. Another important and early type of personal appearance that emerged in the Midwest, as well as in the South, was the fiddle contest or convention. At this point, I have one last particular nit to pick with Dr. Malone, and with most other country music historians, including Dr. Leary. A monumental upsurge of old fiddlers' contests occurred in the mid-1920s, peaking in the first months of 1926. No country music historian seems to be able to talk about the northern manifestations of this cultural phenomenon without invoking the name of Henry Ford. As recently as 2006, Malone wrote that the automobile magnate "sponsored widespread fiddle contests." I have two problems with this romanticized evocation of Ford's celebrity. First, to characterize northern fiddle contests as "Ford-sponsored" marginalizes, perhaps unintentionally, the whole contest fiddle movement that occurred in the North and the Midwest in the 1920s, which resulted from the activities of numerous promoters and institutions. Second, the usual accounts of Ford's big final contest in Dearborn, Michigan, are, to put it kindly, based more on publicity than on truth.

A recent article by Paul M. Gifford, a local history librarian at the University of Michigan-Flint, thoroughly deflates the outsized role regularly ascribed to Ford. An earlier post by Gifford made to an Internet forum provides a concise summary:

> I've done research on the old-time dance music boom from 1924 to 1927 inspired by Henry Ford, mostly at the Ford Archives and in newspapers. . . . looking at the fiddle contests in the various states which popped up around then. None were sponsored by Ford himself. In Kentucky, Ford dealers sponsored them, but elsewhere various organizations, including vaudeville chains, fraternal orders, and radio stations, sponsored them, sometimes with Ford's official blessing, but usually only vaguely inspired by the publicity he engendered. (Gifford 1996)

Much of the weight behind the mistaken assertion of a national contest sponsored by the automobile magnate is derived from reports that Ford dealers in Tennessee, Kentucky, and southern Indiana did sponsor a small series of contests. Gifford shows that, in fact, these contests were hurriedly organized in place of a campaign by Ford Motor Company to coordinate a national radio broadcast of the Henry Ford Dance Orchestra on an early Friday in January 1926. The company asked dealers to bring loudspeakers into their showrooms and invite prospective customers in for an old-time dance featuring quadrilles, also known as square dances (a move that mirrored the goals of the management at WLS in Chicago in starting the *National Barn Dance* in 1924). Gifford surmises that an alternate plan may have been necessary for the dealers in the Tri-State area around Cincinnati because the local network station did not broadcast on Fridays (Gifford 1996, 2010:326–30).

Regional contests were held soon after in Kentucky and Tennessee, and in a final round in Louisville, first place was awarded to W. H. Elmore, a barber from West Baden, Indiana, who had earlier won the Kentucky state contest. Second place went to Tennessee's champion, Uncle Bunt Stephens of Lynchburg, Tennessee (Meade 1982:39–40). According to a mythic account generally accepted as fact, these two men (plus a third, Marshall Claiborne, a one-armed fiddler from Hartsville, Tennessee) "had now earned the right to represent the South in the championship contest in Detroit, Michigan" (Roberson 1972:5). Here publicity takes over. Bunt Stephens came away from his meeting with Henry Ford with gifts, not a prize. Nevertheless, he accepted a promoter's claim that Ford had crowned him the "world's champion old-time fiddler." No country music historian whose gaze is frozen on the South ever bothered to inquire as to who were the other regional or state champions that competed with these three before Mr. Ford. Gifford found the answer: none.

> [Elmore] told his local newspaper that he was there on 9 and 10 February, accompanied by the local Ford dealer. In company with several other dealers and old fiddlers, he received a tour of a Ford plant and attended a banquet the second day at the Book-Cadillac Hotel. Following his introduction to Ford, Elmore asked if there was to be a contest. Ford then laughed and said, No, no contest. You have won enough. Each fiddler played different selections, and Elmore was allowed to play Ford's Stradivarius. (Gifford 2010:331)

In the early twentieth century, fiddle contests were pervasive throughout the Midwest. Gifford has pieced together a history of the contest movement that suggests it grew up at the turn of the last century around three concentrated areas of activity: Illinois and Indiana, Oklahoma and Texas, and Virginia and Tennessee. At one con-

test near Terre Haute, Indiana—on the banks of the Wabash River—every contestant was required to play the tune "Hell on the Wabash" (personal communication 2007). Some of the earliest midwestern contests were held in 1899 in Mattoon and Charleston, Illinois, with 122 entrants at the latter ("Old Fiddlers' Contest" 1899; "They Are Here" 1899). In 1909, 24 old-timers competed for prizes in Indianapolis at a contest organized by the local Republican Party ("Joseph F. Lawson" 1909). In 1922, Robert Braine reported to *Etude* magazine on a contest in a "Western City," possibly Columbus, Ohio, focusing on the amazing agility of a number of elderly contestants who were Civil War veterans. Yet the winner of the Ohio State contest in Columbus in 1922 was John Baltzell, who was born the year that Abraham Lincoln was first elected president (Braine 1922:132; Sacks 1985:22).

Fiddle contests increased in frequency in the mid-1920s, no doubt inspired in part by the publicity surrounding Henry Ford's efforts to promote old-time dancing. Newspapers eagerly reported the old-time musicians that Ford, an amateur fiddler himself, brought as guests to his Dearborn home, including Jasper "Jep" Bisbee, an octogenarian fiddle from Paris, Michigan; hammer dulcimer player Jesse Martin from Frewsburg, New York; and snowshoe maker and fiddler Mellie Dunham, from Norway, Maine. The latter's visit touched off a bona fide media frenzy ("Fiddling to Henry Ford" 1926; cf. Gifford 2004–2005; Wells 1976). But other promoters were also responsible for the mid-decade fiddle boom. The WLS *National Barn Dance* sponsored an on-air fiddle contest through the summer of 1924, the program's first year in a run that lasted until 1960. Fiddle teams were entered to represent their hometowns in the WLS listening area. Listeners voted for their favorites by mail and telegraph. At least 20 teams from five midwestern states competed, with the winner being crowned at the Illinois State Fair in September: the team of Eugene Murdock and George Adamson from Kenosha, Wisconsin ("Fiddlers of Past" 1924; "Kenosha Fiddlers" 1924; cf. Tyler 2008:43–4). One of the *National Barn Dance*'s early house fiddlers, Tommy Dandurand, a native of Kankakee, Illinois, took a Saturday night off in early 1925 to compete at a contest in his hometown, sponsored by the Illinois Poultry Show. Dandurand took third place, behind Mrs. Ida Tatro, and the winner, Jerry Brule, a local radio star who may have helped Dandurand get into broadcasting ("Fiddlers at Poultry Show" 1925). A "Midwest Old-Time Fiddlers Championship" that attracted 127 entrants from five states (the four that border Lake Michigan, plus Iowa) was sponsored by the *Chicago Herald and Examiner* in early 1926, at the height of the fiddle contest boom. Only fiddlers above the age of 50 were eligible to enter this Chicago contest. It was won by Leizime Brusoe, a French-Canadian fiddler from Rhinelander, Wisconsin (Gunn 1926; Old-Timer 1926). In 1928, after the boom subsided, a four-state contest held in Fort Wayne was still able to attract 127 entries (Carlin 1995:35–6).

Not all fiddlers' conventions involved competition. In the Tri-State area around Fort Wayne, the annual Payne Fiddlers' Reunion was staged in Warner Ryel's woods, outside the small town of Payne just across the Ohio state line. I heard family stories of the reunion from my uncles, who had regularly attended as spectators. I located annual announcements for the event in the *Payne Reflector and Press-Review* covering the years 1937 through 1940. Yet, according to the first fiddler I met who performed there, Harold Zimmerman of Convoy, Ohio, the event began much earlier.

In 1931, when Harold was 15, he remembered being one of the fiddlers "run out" on stage in the afternoon, where he was accompanied by his brother Leo on Hawaiian guitar and his sister Helen on piano. In part because of their youth, they were one of the acts brought back for the evening program. Zimmerman's maternal grandfather, George Nittle from Pleasant Mills on the Indiana side of the state line, was an accomplished and avid fiddler who had regularly performed at the Reunion through the 1920s (personal interview, June 29, 1997).

George Nittle was fond of entering fiddle contests. Harold remembered that his grandfather and fiddling buddies would each carry a rifle and a fiddle on board a train bound for some such destination as Minnesota, where they would combine a musical competition with a hunting trip. Over the next five decades, Harold himself logged thousands of miles in his automobile, driving to contests throughout the entire eastern half of the United States. His first contest win was in my hometown of Hoagland, Indiana, then with a population of three hundred. When I finally tracked him down in 1980 in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, he had just returned from the Grand Master Fiddler Championship in Nashville. Harold's brother Leo stayed closer to their Ohio home and found work in the industrial city of Fort Wayne, Indiana (personal interview, January 28, 1980).

From this cursory treatment of fiddle contests in the early twentieth century, I draw two important conclusions that bear on the subject at hand, the commercialization of country music. The 1920s fiddle contest movement was primarily an exercise in nostalgia for a simpler past, entwined with a veneration of an elderly master generation that had survived several wars and the upheavals of the industrial revolution. Unlike fiddle contests of today, those of the 1920s were focused on—or even limited to—what is now called the "senior division." They were public appearances of those whose musical talents represented rural American values, which many then feared were passing from the scene in the face of rapid urbanization and modernization. If a retired snowshoe maker (Mellie Dunham) or railroad boilermaker (John Baltzell) could be rewarded with a vaudeville tour and a recording contract, it was a retirement gift after a life of manual labor. These elder statesmen of the bow could hardly be considered professional country musicians. That was left to the younger generations to define.

A second key observation is that the fiddle contest movement was made possible by the growth of an efficient and extensive transportation infrastructure. Early twentieth-century contests brought together in one location people from a multitude of local communities. Where nostalgia recalled the earlier days when a fiddler was a local character, valued for his participation at neighborhood events like barn raisings and husking bees, these twentieth-century events attracted performers and audience members who did not know one other face-to-face. Improved transportation also greatly expanded the realm of public venues accessible to aspiring young professional musicians from the countryside and from small towns. As performance opportunities opened up for rural musicians, the tight control of the music business by the urban establishment—a coterie of publishers, the recording industry, and musicians unions—was loosened.

The younger generation, including musicians and dancers, took full advantage of these expanded opportunities. The automobile gave young people access to dance

venues outside their local communities, while also stretching the boundaries of their social worlds beyond that known by their parents. Increased mobility also opened musical doors, and young rural musicians were exposed to genres of dance music beyond the tastes and practices of their parents' generation. In the 1920s, as the elder-centric fiddle contest movement was hitting its peak, the midwestern social dance scene was fast becoming a blend of older square and newer round dances. The former were traditional dances for four or more couples arranged in set formations, while the latter were dances in which a couple held each other in close embrace—scandalously close in the eyes of many in their parents' generation (cf. Tyler 1995). The Jazz Age had some impact in the rural Midwest, introducing the Charleston and jitterbug to a dance repertoire already modernized by the two-step and the foxtrot.

Fiddler and pianist Ervin Williams, born in 1905 on a farm in Benton County, Indiana, spent the 1920s and early 1930s leading two dance bands that played all over northwestern Indiana. His earliest band was the five-piece Golden Aces, led by a horn section and heavily influenced by the sounds of ragtime and jazz. After a foray playing round and square dances in Missouri, Williams returned to Indiana and formed a new group with the Trueblood brothers, a banjo and guitar team from Kokomo. At their public appearances, Williams played fiddle for the square sets and sat down at the piano for the round dances (a pattern I witnessed in 1986 in Raleigh, Indiana, where Mefford Scott alternated between drum set and fiddle). The Williams and Trueblood ensemble had a short stint on WOWO in Fort Wayne as the Indiana Hillclimbers (personal interview with Ervin Williams, July 26, 1982).

During the same period, fiddler Robert Hilbert, who was born in 1916 in the small southwestern Ohio town of Williamsdale, played in Wingo's Nighthawks, led by multi-instrumentalist Russell Wing. The younger Hilbert joined the Nighthawks for the regular Saturday night round and square dances in the community hall built by the Williamsdale Improvement Association. The group also played dances in the nearby cities of Hamilton and Middleton. Hilbert recalled that many of the dances in Hamilton were for a community of migrants from Kentucky, who had a distinctive style and a pronounced fondness for square dancing. In contrast, at some venues in Middleton, the dancers preferred the more modern round dances. But in most places, as in his hometown, most dancers wanted a mix of rounds and squares, the new and the old.

When Hilbert graduated from high school in 1934, he immediately embarked on a barnstorming tour of Indiana set up by a booking agent for Russell Wing. They spent the summer performing their mix of popular songs and instrumental music at a series of movie theaters throughout central Indiana, with intermittent appearances on a radio station in Richmond. At the end of the summer, they made their way to the Gennett recording studios at the Starr Piano Company in Richmond, where they waxed four instrumental square dance tunes released under the name of Wing's Rocky Mountain Ramblers. The strain of the road and being away from families led to the breakup of the band shortly thereafter (personal interview with Robert Hilbert, June 18, 2005).

The musical histories of Ervin Williams and Robert Hilbert match those of numerous midwestern musicians. Trying to categorize their bands as "country" or "pop," using conventional definitions, is a fruitless endeavor. They added to their repertoire

any song they liked or, more to the point, any song they thought would be appreciated by the folks who paid their way into the dance or personal appearance. Two facts stand out. First, it was primarily younger musicians who tried to make a living playing for the paying public. Secondly, the repertoires of working dance musicians began to include a larger portion of vocal numbers. Along with the declining importance of pure instrumentals, the line began to blur between playing for dancers and performing for a listening audience. Movie theaters, taverns, and school-houses became regular small town and countryside venues for these non-establishment musicians. The best description is that these were folk musicians who worked to professionalize their practices. In most cases, they were able to succeed for a period of their youth before the pressures of family and security became too great. Ervin Williams was a professional musician until he was close to 30 years old. Robert Hilbert was through with music before he turned 20.

Fiddler Clay "Pete" Smith, on the other hand, was able to keep his musical career going for the better part of three decades. His first band, the Hoosier Cornhuskers, quickly crossed the line from being a dance orchestra to being a show band. Born in 1906 in Logansport, Indiana, Smith and his friends formed a dance band around 1930. A local undertaker with an interest in vaudeville took the young band under his wing and got them their first costumes and their first booking at the Logan Theatre in their hometown. They occasionally went off on barnstorming tours but always returned to Logansport.

The Hoosier Cornhuskers began looking for a radio opening, and in about 1938, landed their first job at WRAK in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Small market radio stations, in fact most radio stations, did not pay salaries to country or folk artists. But a hardworking band could make a living by booking personal appearances in the listening area—mostly theaters, schools, roller rinks, and dance halls—using their daily radio show to promote their appearances. A band's take at the gate was typically supplemented by sales of souvenir photos and songbooks. It might seem surprising today, but I have found no instances of a pre-war barnstorming midwestern band selling recordings at their personal appearances. Clay Smith's account of his career made it clear that in his day, recordings offered little advantage to a working country band. In fact, Robert Hilbert had never even owned a copy of the two discs he recorded with Wing's Rocky Mountain Ramblers in 1934, and first heard all four of his recorded sides over 70 years later when I was able to acquire for him digital copies from a collector.

For many bands, playing dance music was not sufficient. They also had to bring to their audiences a variety show. Comedy was essential. Though quite young and baby-faced, Clay Smith took on the comic role of "Grandpap." He and fellow Cornhusker accordionist Al Petit would swap their primary instruments for mandolins and perform duets as "Pic and Pucker." The band augmented its lineup with, to use their dated phrase, a "girl-singer." At first it was Patsy Jo Kelley, and then Penny West from Wabash, Indiana, who went on to a long radio career of her own. Cornhusker bass player Fred Oliver also had a long solo career as a singer, emcee, and comedian, the "Old Man from the Mountain."

A barnstorming radio band like the Hoosier Cornhuskers would play out an area in a few short years. So, as was the case for countless midwestern country artists, they would move to a new station and a new territory and start over. In 1939, the Hoosier

Cornhuskers returned to Indiana for a spot on WIBC in Indianapolis. From there, they moved on to WOWO and the Hoosier Hop in Fort Wayne. Along the way, they made a stop in Kokomo and for a time joined the Hoosier Jubilee Barn Dance on WJOB in Hammond. In 1946, they were on WFIN in Findlay, Ohio.

After ten years of radio-supported personal appearances, the Hoosier Cornhuskers disbanded. Some members went back to regular lives. But Clay Smith was not through with his country music career, which was now firmly grounded in broadcasting. He followed Fred Oliver to Jacksonville, Illinois, where by 1948 or 1950, he (and his character "Grandpap") joined the Prairie Pioneers on WLDS. That band stayed at least a half-dozen years in Jacksonville, but by 1954, Smith was back in Fort Wayne, where he played with Barbara Price and the Golden River Boys on either WOWO or its former sister station WGL. In 1958, Smith returned to Jacksonville and joined the Ozark Varieties, a reconfiguration of Fred Oliver's Prairie Pioneers that expanded into television.

I was not able to determine exactly when Smith's career as a professional musician ended. When I met him in 1979, he was long retired from music and more recently from other jobs. But he still played the fiddle, with an interesting repertoire of unnamed tunes learned from Charlie Dunn, an older fiddler in his hometown of Logansport. Smith had often played these old tunes when he broadcast, but the station programmers required that they be given names. One, of course, he called "Dunn's Reel." From the recorded evidence I have of his career, much of their broadcast repertoire was of a hillbilly flavor, but it also included pop standards, comic novelties, and polkas that would usually be regarded as more midwestern and less southern. Such distinctions were of little importance to Clay Smith. In his view, the Hoosier Cornhuskers, the Prairie Pioneers, and his other bands all played country music, or as subtitled for the songbook they hawked during their stay in Findlay, Ohio, they played "American Folk Music" (personal interview with Clay Smith, November 27, 1979).

By the 1930s, barnstorming musicians in the rural Midwest and elsewhere enjoyed a huge advantage that was not available to earlier itinerants: that is, the phenomenal growth in radio. Not only did the number of commercially licensed radio stations mushroom to over six hundred in 1926, but the next decade also brought increasing professionalization, as regularly scheduled programs came to fill an ever greater portion of daytime, nighttime, and weekend hours. In 1926, one year after it first signed on the air, Fort Wayne's WOWO had a broadcast day of just six hours: a locally produced noon hour program and five hours of chain or linkup programs in the evening. By 1939, its daily schedule began at 7:00 a.m. and ended at 11:00 p.m.[4] Increased hours on the air meant more talent was needed.

From its beginnings in the 1920s, the broadcast industry relied on musical programs for over half of its content, and from the start, stations called on both professional musicians and local amateurs (cf. Randle 1967). A long and contentious series of negotiations between various branches of the music business—broadcasters, publishers, record companies, and the musicians union—played out over the next 30-plus years and changed the shape of radio music from live or transcribed musical performances to disc jockey programs that used the phonograph records produced by the one-time rival recording industry. Yet 1940s broadcasting textbooks still recommended that smaller stations could find it fiscally practical to engage local hillbilly

artists—that is, non-union musicians—to help fill their broadcast days with sufficient talent.

According to Carl Vandagriff, long-time station manager at WOWO, larger established stations were at one point forced by the musicians union to keep a quota of "legitimate" or union musicians on their staff. In the 1940s, WOWO's quota of six was filled by Norman Carroll (piano and vibraphone), Guy Fitzsimmons (saxophone and clarinet), Dick Galbeath (guitar), Tommy Longsworth (bass viol and tuba), Jeanne Brown Bostleman (piano, organ, and accordion), and Karl F. "Pappy" Conner (violin and music director). The latter two also at times made appearances with some of WOWO's "hillbilly" artists, such as the Blackhawk Valley Boys, who could not be counted toward the station's quota (personal interview with Carl Vandagriff, July 1982).

Of the three modes of institutional practices most crucial to the development of commercial country music, radio broadcasting has received the least critical attention. This may be accounted for in part by the ephemeral and non-material nature of the early products of the radio industry before the development of magnetic recording tape. The record industry, on the other hand, produced tangible and preservable artifacts: musical performances inscribed on shellac and vinyl discs, accompanied by written documentation printed on labels, sleeves, and liner notes. Yet few country music scholars have taken the full measure of radio's importance. Diane Pecknold has, arguing that "[h]illbilly music was above all a creature of radio. . . . [I]t was broadcasting rather than publishing or recording that provided the lasting foundation for the country music industry" (Pecknold 2007:15). The more usual approach was to regard radio work as a mere adjunct to the careers of recording artists. Even when Norm Cohen admitted "that many of the most popular musicians on radio or in personal appearances recorded few if any discs," he still fell back on the conventional wisdom that gave primacy to commercial recordings: "But we suffer no loss by giving most of our attention to recordings, because we can chart the history of country music through this medium alone with reasonable success" (Cohen 1975:3).

Pecknold succinctly sums up a hard reality that has not been carefully considered or adequately investigated:

> From the mid-1920s through the end of the Depression, radio remained the cornerstone of the hillbilly economy. Few performers survived on the wages they earned from the stations, and fewer still from the royalties generated by publishing or record sales, but a radio show served as a means of advertising the products that did support artists: the live shows that were the mainstay of every hillbilly musician's livelihood, the photographs and self-published song folios that they sold by direct inquiry, and less importantly, the recordings marketed by the music industry. (Pecknold 2007:15)

It has already been noted, and will be made more apparent in the following pages, that commercial recordings were not important to many midwestern country musicians who made a living from barnstorming. Some never even received wages from sponsors or from the stations on which they broadcast daily morning or noon hour programs. For most barnstorming musicians, money was made at personal appearances. The crucial importance of radio broadcasting was in making it possible for an

artist or group to establish an audience and publicize personal appearances. It was a hard reality that made many young men give it up after a few years, as family responsibilities increased. Nevertheless, we know that a sufficient number found viable careers as hillbilly artists, for their music was broadcast on hundreds of stations large and small into the fifties. We know of them only through the trail they left of radio station hitches. Some artists, like Clay "Pete" Smith or Don Lake, had long and successful careers built on viable commercial forms that had little to do with selling records.

To better understand the foundational role of radio, it would be useful to consider the range of career situations enjoyed by midwestern country musicians. Before World War II, the pinnacle, in the Midwest and arguably in the nation, was the *National Barn Dance*, the flagship program of WLS and a large and very successful country music enterprise based in the nation's second largest city. Being part of the Barn Dance was prestigious, and it was a paying gig. In the 1930s, a musician who appeared only on a segment of the Barn Dance on Saturday night got union scale, about $20, while a WLS staff musician, who played weekday shows as well, received about $60. Also, the immense popularity of the Barn Dance could assure large audiences for any public appearance by cast members, and WLS maintained an Artist Bureau to book touring shows, at which the artists could sell photographs, songbooks, and other souvenirs. Many Barn Dance stars had song folios with their names and pictures on the cover. Most were under the imprint of M. M. Cole. Finally, because Chicago was one of the top two or three centers in the country for the phonograph record industry, Barn Dance artists enjoyed enhanced opportunities to make records, which many did, recording well over two thousand sides between 1924 and 1942, approximately 8 per cent of all country songs recorded before 1942 (Tyler 2008:40–2, 28–9).[5]

In a previous article, I covered the country music performed on the *National Barn Dance* before World War II in some depth. Many of the key artists discussed were southerners who came to Chicago to further their careers (cf. Tyler 2008). In support of the current argument criticizing the southern thesis, allow me to survey a portion of the native midwesterners who were part of the "Hayloft Gang." The Barn Dance began in 1924 as a program of barn dance fiddlers, and in the first years, at least 20 midwestern country fiddlers played before the WLS microphone. Several fiddlers sustained careers of several years length on the program, including Tommy Dandurand of Kankakee, Illinois, leader of the house fiddle band up to about 1930; Rube Tronson from Wisconsin, who led the house band, the Texas Cowboys, in the early 1930s; Homer "Slim" Miller of Lizton, Indiana, who appeared with the Cumberland Ridge Runners from about 1931 to 1937; and Buddy McDowell of Van Wert, Ohio, who played with the Ridge Runners when they returned to WLS in 1941. Only Dandurand and Miller made commercial recordings.

I have recently discovered, thanks to the continuing research of Tony Russell, that one of the earliest folk song artists on the Barn Dance, Frederick "Chubby" Parker, was raised in Lafayette, Indiana. Pie Plant Pete, whose given name was Claude Moye, grew up on a farm in Gallatin County in southern Illinois. Both Parker and Moye were on the Barn Dance for several years beginning in the 1920s. Several sister groups from the 1930s could be aptly described as "modern folk song artists," a term used

by George Biggar, a WLS program director: Milly and Dolly Good, the Girls of the Gold West, from Mt. Carmel and East St. Louis, Illinois; the Overstake Sisters of Decatur, Illinois, who performed as the Three Little Maids; the Dezurik Sisters, Caroline and Mary Jane, of Royalton, Minnesota; and the Flannery Sisters, Alene and Violet, from Gladstone, Michigan. All of these artists recorded commercially before 1942. As Sunshine Sue, Mary Arlene Higdon Workman from Iowa led the Rock Creek Rangers in a stop in 1937 at WLS during her long career. She apparently did not record commercially until after the war. Singer Louise Rautenberg from Wisconsin, known on the air as Sally Foster, also had a stint on WLS in 1937, a year after she recorded a dozen country songs accompanied by The Travelers, an ensemble of WLS staff musicians.

Some of the most popular groups on the *National Barn Dance* were a variety of novelty acts. All were solid musicians who leavened their presentations with comedy. Perhaps the best known are the Hoosier Hot Shots, a long-running act that was prolific in the recording studio. The core of the band originated in Arcadia, Indiana. Another band in the same vein, but one that apparently never recorded on its own was the Novelodeons led by Ted "Otto" Morse, a native of Topeka, Kansas. Morse, a comedian as well as a trumpeter, also led the ethnically flavored Otto and the Tune Twisters, a novelty polka band. The Maple City Four, a comic vocal quartet from La Porte, Indiana, had a long run on WLS. Other male vocal groups, who may have also shown a comic edge, were the Three Neighbor Boys, from Marshall County, Illinois, and the Four Hired Hands, a group of Italian boys from Gary, Indiana. Female vocal groups, probably not charged with being comic, ranged from the Three Milkmaids in the early 1930s to the Prairie Sweethearts at the end of that decade. Early on, the Barn Dance featured several instrumentalists who strummed the guitar while simultaneously blowing a harmonica mounted in a wire rack. Walter Peterson, the Kentucky Wonderbean, was one of the earliest WLS country musicians. His "double-barreled shotgun" act was followed by Dynamite Jim, Harry Campbell, a Hoosier, whose instrumental outfit was dubbed a "cap and fuse." Peterson, whose nativity is unknown, made some of the earliest recordings by a *National Barn Dance* artist. Dynamite Jim never recorded, nor did the Hoosier Sod Busters, the harmonic and guitar team of Reggie Cross and Howard Black.

The alliance the *National Barn Dance* enjoyed with particular record labels was singular. In general, the broadcast and recordings industries regarded each other as competitors. An extreme instance can be found at another midwestern powerhouse station that played a large role in the development of country music. WLW-Cincinnati had a non-contractual but explicit understanding with its artists that prohibited them from making commercial phonograph recordings. In the 1940s, Homer and Jethro were fired from that station's *Boone County Jamboree* after station managers became aware the duo had recorded for King Records. Even earlier, in 1939, one of WLW's most popular hillbilly acts, the Brown County Revelers, was let go just months after they signed with the Vocalion label and recorded in Chicago (Coffey 2003).

The case of the Brown County Revelers exemplifies how gaping the holes are in the sectionalist country music histories that have largely ignored the Midwest. The earliest treatment in print I have located (other than an old photo clipped from some

newsprint publication that I saw in one fan's scrapbook) was this description from the 1992 CD re-issue box set *Roots n' Blues: The Retrospective, 1925–1950*:

> Described in the files as "Old Time Singing and Playing," they were actually a western swing oriented aggregation capable of humorous, appealing performances. Originally from Kentucky, it is known that they broadcast regularly (c. 1937–1938) over the mighty 500,000 watt station from Cincinnati, WLW. (Cohn 1992:34)

Though brief, this sketch raises three questions of crucial importance to the current exploration: where exactly were the Revelers from? What exactly did they play? And what was the scope of their career? Kevin Coffey answered these questions, but only in part, in liner notes to two twenty-first-century CD re-issues. The Brown County Revelers, he wrote, were a "family band, originally from Kentucky," though he also acknowledged they began performing in central Indiana in the mid-1920s. Led by hot fiddling and single-string guitar work, it is evident that Coffey's frequent use of such descriptives as "hard-driving, exciting," "frantic, swinging" and "bluesy" are called-for. Yet there are other sonic touches and historic angles that suggest the Brown County Revelers career may have paralleled that of their regional peers, the Prairie Ramblers of *National Barn Dance* fame, who contemporaneously brought the swing style into old-time midwestern country music. In 1934, when the Revelers left an Indianapolis radio station for Cincinnati, they may have been a straight old-time band. By 1938, when they made their first recordings, their sound featured the hot instrumental breaks and bluesy vocals that characterize swing. All of Coffey's answers are helpful, but incomplete in tracing the full arc of the Revelers career (Coffey 2006).

In the 1980s, as I was visiting old-time fiddle players throughout Indiana, I kept hearing the name of the Brown County Revelers, but library research at the time yielded nothing of substance about the band. Fiddler Millard Barger of Paragon, Indiana, claimed that he played with the Revelers in the 1920s when they were a loose-knit group led by the Baker brothers, Don and Wade, of Indianapolis. The group did some barnstorming in those early days, making radio appearances in Indianapolis, Anderson, and Kendallville, Indiana. Eventually they had their own show on WOWO in Fort Wayne. Barger didn't travel up north with the band because "it didn't pay nothing. Back then it was mostly just for fun" (personal interview July 17, 1981).

But the Brown County Revelers stuck it out and made a living in music for the next several decades. After stints in Fort Wayne and Indianapolis, they had a long stay on WLW in Cincinnati, followed by more radio work in Kentucky. (The Renfro Valley Barn Dance in Kentucky was mentioned, but Coffey learned that Wade "Pee Wee" Baker was the only one of the three brothers who performed there in the postwar years). Several of my informants named a sequence of fiddlers who worked with the Baker Brothers. According to Charles Keele of Westville, Illinois, Ray Gulley was the best old-time fiddler of the bunch. (However, Coffey's liner notes claim that Ray Gulley played banjo.) James Atkinson of Indianapolis gave that credit to Monte Rivers, who later fiddled for Hugh Cross on WLW. Both Keele and Atkinson agreed that the best swing fiddler in the Brown County Revelers was Tommy Pritchett who, like Atkinson, hailed from Lebanon, Indiana (personal interviews with Keele, July 1983; and

Atkinson, July 23, 1981). Coffey tells us that Carl Cotner, an Indianapolis native—and a "hot" player influenced by jazz and swing—played with the Revelers at some point. Charlie Linville, a swing fiddler from Kentucky was with the Revelers in their later days in Cincinnati and is heard on the sides recorded in Chicago in 1938. There is no surviving aural evidence to tell us what the band sounded like with Monte Rivers or Tommy Pritchett on fiddle, or what the Revelers sounded like back in the 1920s when Eldon Baker or Millard Barger took care of the fiddle chores (Coffey 2006).

A focal point of the Revelers' story is that their popularity led them to, as well as resulted from, their participation on a major station's generic barn dance show—that is, a weekly variety show broadcast live, often before a theater audience, with a multi-member cast. The name and character of the genre is derived from the much-copied *National Barn Dance* on WLS-Chicago. The website *Hillbilly-Music.com* maintains a list of 102 such radio programs performed live between the 1920s and the 1960s. The list is neither comprehensive nor a scientific random sample, but is heavily weighted toward the information provided by fan magazines published in the 1940s and 1950s such as *Country Song Roundup*, *National Hillbilly News*, and *Mountain Broadcast and Prairie Recorder* (http://www.hillbilly-music.com/). Still, analysis of the list provides further justification for criticism of the southern thesis. Nearly half of the programs listed, 47, originated in the 15 southern states along the arc from the Eastern Seaboard west to Texas. Yet an equivalent portion, 26 programs, was broadcast by stations in the seven midwestern states covered in this article. The rest of the list comprises 10 programs from the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, 13 from the West (including six in California), and a half-dozen from Canadian stations. Further clarifying the validity of this analysis is Patricia Averill's observation that, according to a listing in *Billboard*, of the 15 most important hillbilly radio programs in 1945, 10 originated on midwestern stations (Averill 1975:101–2). It is also telling that nearly a quarter of the programs in this list used the term "Barn Dance" in their titles, while another 14 used "Hayloft" or "Hayride," again attesting to the influence of the Hayloft Gang on WLS. It must be noted that an even greater portion, nearly half, chose the term "Jamboree." Only three programs, however, used the name "Opry," including the original Grand Ole Opry and two much later programs.[6]

Of the many midwestern radio jamborees, the *Boone County Jamboree* on WLW was one of the few that rivaled the *National Barn Dance* in size and influence. But it was begun relatively late, 1938. Another early and long-running, though smaller jamboree was the *Iowa Barn Dance Frolic* on WHO-Des Moines, which began in 1931 and lasted until the 1950s. Similar in scope—a full variety show—and longevity was WOWO's *Hoosier Hop*, which was begun in Fort Wayne in 1932. For the first half dozen years, it was a much smaller show, but in 1939, it gained enough size and momentum to gain some national prominence when it became a coast-to-coast broadcast on the NBC-Blue network. Clearly modeled after the *National Barn Dance*, the Hop cast contained pop singers like Helen and Don Bush ("the Sweethearts of Song") and Howard Ropa, hillbilly vocalists like Bill Stallard, Penny West, and Judy and Jen ("the Harmony Twins"), a spectacular yodeler, Kenny Roberts, comedians Skeets Cross and Shirley Wayne, and a sage, homespun master of ceremonies, Happy Herb Hayworth. Also, the Hop always featured at least one string band, often two, ranging from the Hoosier Cornhuskers before World War II to the Oregon Rangers (who

became Nancy Lee and the Hilltoppers) after the war. The stories of two important string bands will here be briefly sketched: the accordion-led Black Hawk Valley Boys and The Down Homers, a swing-oriented group dressed in cowboy shirts.

The Blackhawk Valley Boys got their start on radio in 1934 after winning a talent show in their hometown of Rockford, Illinois. Their early career saw them fill short stints on the Rock River Barn Dance broadcast on WROK from the Palace Theatre in Rockford, a low-paying job on a WLS road show, and a booking at a nightclub for oilmen in Corpus Christi, Texas. Their next stop was at KNOX in St. Louis. Accordionist Don Lake remembered the bad luck they encountered there:

> The Musicians' Union would only let us play country and western music without a local card. However, the sponsor liked our pop music during the audition and demanded that we play pop music. We did, but the Union pressured the radio station to let us go, and they did. (Lake 1979)

Back in Rockford, they found a booking agent who placed them at the Westinghouse stations in Fort Wayne, WGL, and WOWO. They arrived in Fort Wayne in March 1939, and except for a two-year period that found them on the *National Barn Dance*, they stayed in Fort Wayne until the band broke up in 1948. Aural evidence—all airchecks, no commercial recordings—reveals that the Blackhawk Valley Boys were a very pop-oriented group that featured a sweet sound backed by accordion and lead guitar. They were extremely popular in the Fort Wayne area and, as noted above, were equally capable of playing a square dance as a concert (Lake 1979; cf. Daniel 2008:77; Pecknold 2002:38–40).

The Down Homers were a country swing group led by fiddler and lead guitarist Guy Campbell, raised in Oklahoma, and steel guitarist Everett "Shorty" Cook, born in 1914 in Millersburg, Indiana. Cook started the band in 1934 in Salisbury, Maryland, with Robert Trewell, also known as Utah Slim. A few years later, Cook teamed up with Campbell, and at the start of World War II, they made their way to Keene, New Hampshire, where they added singer and yodeler Kenny Roberts. After three years in New England, they stopped in Waterloo, Iowa, and moved on to WLW-Cincinnati before coming to WOWO and the Hoosier Hop in 1944. During their two years in Fort Wayne, they were arguably the most popular act on the Hoosier Hop. When they got a better offer in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1946, Kenny Roberts decided he would rather stay in Fort Wayne. The band advertised in *Billboard* for a replacement, and within a week, Bill Haley showed up in Fort Wayne and joined the Down Homers for their return to the Northeast.

After Cook's performing career ended in the 1950s—like many country musicians, he attributed the decline to the rise of rock and roll—he returned to Fort Wayne and started a music store. Cook liked to stress that he was doing swing-style country music long before anyone heard of Bob Wills. In his 1980 account, he adapted to hillbilly or old-time music because of its financial advantages.

> The best you could make back then was two dollars a night playing swing. So a guy come along said, "You want to back me up playing a little square dance and country music, I'll give you four dollars a night." That's when I converted over . . . and went

> into country and western. Course we always mixed the swing in with it. (personal interview with Cook, March 15, 1980)

A member of ASCAP, Cook also performed as a baggy-pants comedian, "Cecil Blossomnose," with high eyebrows, a coonskin cap, a series of safety pins in his pants, and other "kinds of little gimmicks so we'd be different." He learned many of his comedy bits from working medicine shows back East in the early 1930s. This was "the greatest education you could ever get" (personal interview with Cook, March 15, 1980).

While barn dance shows were the most prominent manifestations of country music in the Midwest in the decades surrounding World War II, radio stations made use of young hillbilly artists in many other programs. Morning and noon hour programs oriented to farmers often paired market reports, friendly chatter, and hillbilly music. For example, McCormick's Old-Time Fiddlers appeared on WLW's popular *Top O' the Morning* show, hosted by the genial Pa and Ma (Clarence and Alice) McCormick in the early 1930s. Beginning in 1945, Nancy Lee and the Hilltoppers and others appeared on WOWO's long-running *Little Red Barn* show, hosted by Bob Sievers into the 1970s. Countless stations large and small gave barnstorming soloists and ensembles sustaining daily programs of their own, often only 15 minutes in length. Many barnstorming entertainers received no direct financial compensation from the radio stations. Some were fortunate enough to have sponsored programs that provided a stipend. A lucky minority were paid wages, but it is difficult to calculate the financial dimensions of country radio from this period.

Tiny Tuscola, Illinois, once boasted of having the third radio broadcasting facility ever built in the United States. WDZ went on the air in 1921 to provide grain market reports. In 1927, it was granted a license and began daytime broadcasts as "The Buckle of the Corn Belt." It relied heavily on local talent such as Lester "Smiley" Burnette of Summum, Illinois (who went on to team up with Gene Autry) and Ken Houchins of Champaign, Illinois, who reportedly had worked on 14 midwestern stations including WDZ by the time he joined the *National Barn Dance* in 1936 (Brewer and Landeck 2007:214–7; Russell 2008). Other downstate Illinois artists got their start on radio in Tuscola before heading off to greater fame in Chicago, such as the Overstake Sisters of Decatur who became the Three Little Maids on WLS, and Pepper Hawthorne of Ramsey, Illinois. After the sister act broke up in 1934, each of the Overstakes had a solo career that continued into the 1940s. Hawthorne, on the other hand, did not achieve viable commercial success after her brief stint on WLS. WDZ also featured southern hillbilly artists such as the Carver Boys and Finley "Red" Belcher from Kentucky. In the 1930s, the latter appeared on WDZ as part of the Kentucky Coon Skinners, a string band that also included his brother Levy and old-time fiddler Jim Bowles from Tompkinsville, Kentucky. Belcher also made his mark in Tuscola as a singer, establishing a successful career that lasted until his untimely death in 1952 (Chadbourne 2013).

The full scope of live hillbilly radio in the Midwest is difficult to measure, and this paper is just another small contribution to a larger project. Allow me to trace the stops in radio careers of one southern and three midwestern artists, all guitar-strumming singers who appeared on WDZ but whose careers are at best scarcely mentioned in the standard country music history sources. Red Belcher began playing old-time string

band music in south central Kentucky, but his first radio gig may have been in Tuscola in 1935. He continued as a solo artist with stops in Peoria, Illinois, and Chicago (WJJD), Kokomo and Gary, Indiana, and by 1943 was at KWTO in Springfield, Missouri. At various points along the way, he also played at stations in Harrisburg, Virginia, and Huntington and Fairmont, West Virginia, before ending up on the prestigious and powerful WWVA Jamboree in Wheeling, West Virginia. By the end of his career, he was playing bluegrass. Ken Houchins's career matched Belcher's in longevity but surpassed it in the number of stations—Houchins claimed it was "26 individual stations" located in such cities as Chicago (WLS); Hammond, Indiana; Gary, Indiana; and Detroit. He was a regular on WHO's *Iowa Barn Dance Frolic* in the 1940s and ended up performing on television in the Quad Cities area of Illinois and Iowa (http://www.hillbilly-music.com/; Russell 2008).

Two other WDZ artists present interesting comparisons. "Blue Grass Roy" Freeman of Pesotum, Illinois, the better known of the two, began his radio career in the South, in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, in 1931. By 1933, he was employed by Hamlin Wizard Oil, leading him to long-term bookings over the next eight years in Dallas; Wheeling; Hartford, Connecticut; Chicago (WJJD); Minneapolis; Charlotte; and Kansas City. In 1941, he quit working for Hamlin and began a six-year tenure on WDZ in Tuscola. After a break of a few years, he finished his performing career with an eight-year stint in Carbondale, Illinois. Another artist from Eastern Illinois, Paul Grove of Jasper County, had a much shorter career (from 1938 to the early 1950s), stayed much closer to home, and garnered much less fame. Grove started on WDZ in 1938, where he served as emcee of the WDZ Barn Dance. After two years, he moved on to pay increases at stations in Peoria, Gary, and Chicago (WJJD). After a few years, he returned to Tuscola, and in 1949—around the time WDZ was sold and moved to Decatur, Illinois—he was back on the family farm in Jasper County, where he and his young daughters had a daily show for a few years on local station WKZI (Nemec 1977; Layman 2007). Of these four WDZ artists, only Houchins made commercial phonograph recordings before 1942, and only Belcher did after that date. Yet all four achieved viable commercial success sustained over several decades.

As has been made sufficiently clear, phonograph records contributed little to the commercially viable careers of many of the country artists who helped shape the emergent genre in the years before World War II. The radio and barnstorming careers covered in this investigation remonstrate against Cohen's assertion that tracing country music history through commercial recordings alone should produce "reasonable success." Preliminary analysis of the massive discographic data Tony Russell assembled for *Country Music Recordings* yields some interesting points upon which to compare the importance of broadcasting versus recording. By my count, Russell's discography covers 5,937 recording sessions by 1,588 artists. Nearly three-quarters of these artists made only one or two trips to a recording studio (the numbers are 914 and 253, respectively). Compared to the case studies of midwestern radio artists who became some of country music's first professionals, many of the artists who made phonograph records on only one or two occasions showed a much lower personal investment in music as a career. Many of them were, to put it bluntly, mere amateurs.

To state the kernel of my criticism of the southern thesis: southern-oriented, disco-centric narratives of the emergence and growth of country music focus on a body of

work that is aesthetically interesting, but part of which is arguably irrelevant to the development of viable commercial forms. Hillbilly radio, which was equally at home in the Midwest as in the South through the 1950s, must be given full and equal consideration in accounting the history of country music. The sectionalist orthodoxy that has ruled country music has led to the complacent assumption that a close study of the radio careers of country stars will simply reinforce what is already known from recordings. The role of radio has been unfairly ignored and devalued. The intent behind my strong assertion is not to set up another false dichotomy between recordings and radio, or between folk amateurs and commercial professionals, but to argue forcefully for a complete and critical expansion of the field, for the inclusion of a wide range of non-normative cases and diverse stories. The connections that can be traced within institutional arrangements and artistic practices are many and complex, and they are spread across geographic regions.

Let me close with one more parting shot. The non-southern strain of early country music has been ill-served by the postwar recording industry. Most of what people know today about the sounds of early country music is from 78 rpm phonograph records re-issued in the modern formats of LP and CD. These projects have had a decidedly southern bias. I have been fortunate to hear the sounds of hundreds of 78 rpm recordings of midwestern artists that have not been re-issued, and thus are not widely accessible to modern fans or scholars. To fully understand the scope and range of country music in the first half of the twentieth century, it is necessary to take a larger sample than was offered by Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (SFW 40090) or by County Records 500 series of LPs. The many titles in Yazoo's re-issue series on CD, subtitled *Early American Rural Music: Classic Recordings from the 1920s and 1930s*, have provided only a few hints at what has been overlooked by other editors.

Even a partial list of overlooked midwestern artists is inviting and intriguing. There are elderly fiddlers who recorded in the early 1920s such as Jasper "Jep" Bisbee of Paris, Michigan, the earliest born (1843) of all the American fiddlers who ever made a commercial record. Close behind him in age were fellow Michiganders Col. John Pattee of Monroe and George Pariseau of Bad Axe, who had interesting careers in the ballroom and the vaudeville stage. Few old-time fiddling enthusiasts beyond the circle of 78 collectors are familiar with the distinctive sounds of John Baltzell of Mt. Vernon, Ohio; of another railroad worker, B. E. Scott of Mattoon, Illinois; or of retired street car conductor Tommy Dandurand of Kankakee (Gifford 2004–2005; Tyler 2008).

Bill Malone pointed out that when the early recording scouts went out in search of rural talent, they "did not go to Maine, Wisconsin, Nebraska, or California, but to Virginia, Georgia, Texas, and other southern states instead" (Malone 2006:16). However, field trips to the Midwest and Northeast were not so necessary, for a few northern cities, primarily New York and Chicago, were the centers that produced the overwhelming majority of sound recordings of any type. A third center was located at the Starr Piano Company in Richmond, Indiana. Gennett Records was like a magnet for rural musicians from both the South and the Midwest.

A number of string bands and singing guitarists from Indiana made recordings in Richmond between 1927 and 1934: the Draper Walter family, Kentucky natives who had been in Richmond for over 20 years; Clyde Martin and the Hoosier Rangers, led by Cecil Wright of LaFountaine; multi-instrumentalist Homer Lovell of Winchester,

who played on WOWO-Fort Wayne in the 1930s; and Richard Cox and his National Fiddlers, who performed on WIND in Gary. Unidentified and unheard, at least by me, are a few groups probably from Indiana: the Happy Hoosiers, the Hoosier Hawaiians, and the Hartford City Trio, most likely from the Hartford City, the seat of Blackford County. From Ohio came the aforementioned Wing's Rocky Mountain Ramblers; Dan Workman, probably from South Solon, with the Gibson String Trio; and Ed Showalter of Preble County with the Richmond Melody Boys (whose records were logged as by the Kentucky Woodchoppers and released as by the Texas Cowboy Trio). To the unidentified category belong the Buckeye Boys and Brown's Happy Four, with fiddler Charles Payne of Ironton (cf. Russell 2004; Meade 2002).

One final story to lightheartedly demonstrate the potential that may still be mined by digging in ground that has long been overlooked: During my 1980s fieldwork in southern Indiana, several musicians, most notably fiddler Ken Smelser of Paoli, played for me a lovely and distinctive tune called the "Muscatatuck Waltz," named after a local river. These musicians all swore that it was a tune played and possibly recorded by the Brown County Revelers. A long search yielded nothing until the posthumous publication in 2002 of Guthrie T. Meade, Jr.'s *Country Music Sources*. In that massive bibliodiscography (which organizationally complements Russell's), I found that the "Muskatatuck [*sic*] Waltz" was one of eight pieces recorded in Richmond in 1930 by Will Nicholson's Players. On the label of one of the four issues of that recording—Superior 2639—the band was identified as the Goose Creek Gully Jumpers. There is no Goose Creek in Washington County, Indiana, the home of Will Nicholson and fiddler Tilford Floyd of Salem. The Muscatatuck River, however, forms the northern boundary of Washington County, about 130 miles south of Richmond (Meade 2002: 842).

Midwestern country music proved itself to be quite commercially viable in the first half of the twentieth century. The more stories and sounds we can recover of the personal appearances, radio broadcasts, and commercial recordings of these early midwestern artists, the better we can understand the interplay between diverse regional styles and distinctive performance contexts, and the more we can fully appreciate the achievements of the rural American artists who created country music.

Notes

1. The data was collated from the following contracted fieldwork projects: Traditional Music in Indiana, for WIPU-FM, 1979–80; fieldwork assistant for Ohio-Indiana Folklife, 1981; Fieldwork Survey of Folk Arts of Central and Southern Illinois, for Eastern Illinois University School of Fine Arts, 1983 and 1991–92; Folk and Ethnic Arts Survey of Waukegan and Zion, Illinois, for the David Adler Cultural Center, 1987 and 1991; Project Folklorist for "In the Tradition" concert series for the David Adler Cultural Center, 1989–94; Producer of *Folk Songs of Illinois #2: Fiddlers*, for the Illinois Humanities Council, 2002–06; and an oral history project for the Starr Gennett Foundation, 2006.

The category of personal fieldwork comprises pre-graduate school interviews, 1976–78; the summer fieldwork seminar in Dubois County, Indiana, 1981; research for my dissertation for the Indiana University Folklore Institute, 1976–88; and long-term and occasional relationships with midwestern musicians I have met in a variety of contexts.

2. Over the last decade, the magazine has redefined its mission, as printed on its masthead: "*The Old-Time Herald* celebrates the love of old-time music grassroots or home-grown music and dance. Old-time music shares origins, influences and musical characteristics with roots musics across America. Our magazine casts a wide net, highlighting the Southeastern tradition while opening its pages to kindred

and comparable traditions and new directions" (*The Old-Time Herald* 2013:1). It is not clear to what extent it has encouraged readers to regard non-southeastern grassroots music as genuinely "old-time," or merely as "kindred."

3. The photographic record scattered throughout the first three chapters of Leary's *Polkabilly*, covering the 1910s through the 1940s, shows that old-time bands in the Upper Midwest drew on an incredible variety of string and wind instruments (Leary 2006; cf. Leary and March 2004).

4. WOWO grew out of an amateur broadcasting experiment held in a home on the south side of Fort Wayne in late 1924 or early 1925. Some forty years later, K. D. Ross wrote down his memories of that event:

> I got the idea that we might put on a broadcast program just to see what would happen. Arrangements were made with Mr. Blosser to broadcast from his living room. We had bought a Kellogg microphone for the occasion and after several false starts finally were ready for the broadcast. My memory as to who was on the program is a bit hazy, but we had a prominent singer from Bluffton, Indiana and also Mr. J. Herman Bueter who at one time was Treasurer of Allen County. He played some old time fiddle and there were other artists. We had an evening filled with fun and enjoyment little knowing the stir would be created. The next day reports started coming in, and in a few days we realized that the program had been a hit. (Ross 1981)

The success of this experiment led the business Mr. Ross worked for, Main Auto Supply Company, to establish WOWO as a licensed broadcast station (Ross 1981).

5. Because it was well-equipped with recording facilities, and because M. M. Cole Publishing was located there, Chicago was presumably the location where many transcribed programs were recorded. Transcription services like M. M. Cole recorded musical performances and introductions transcribed onto 16-inch discs that were sold, perhaps by subscription, to broadcasting outlets, but not to the public. A number of midwestern country artists transcribed programs for M. M. Cole, SESAC, and others. The Down Homers, for example, recorded at least a half dozen transcription discs, with eight to ten items on each disc. By contrast, I know of only two commercial sides recorded by the band. This is an important topic that has been woefully ignored.

6. It is equally interesting to note that in the 1980s, many rural performance venues across the Midwest described themselves as an "Opry" or "Little Opry." By that time, the term "barn dance" had reverted to its original meaning of an actual community dance.

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