

# THE AMERICAN MIDWEST

An Interpretive Encyclopedia



Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher, and Andrew Cayton, *editors*

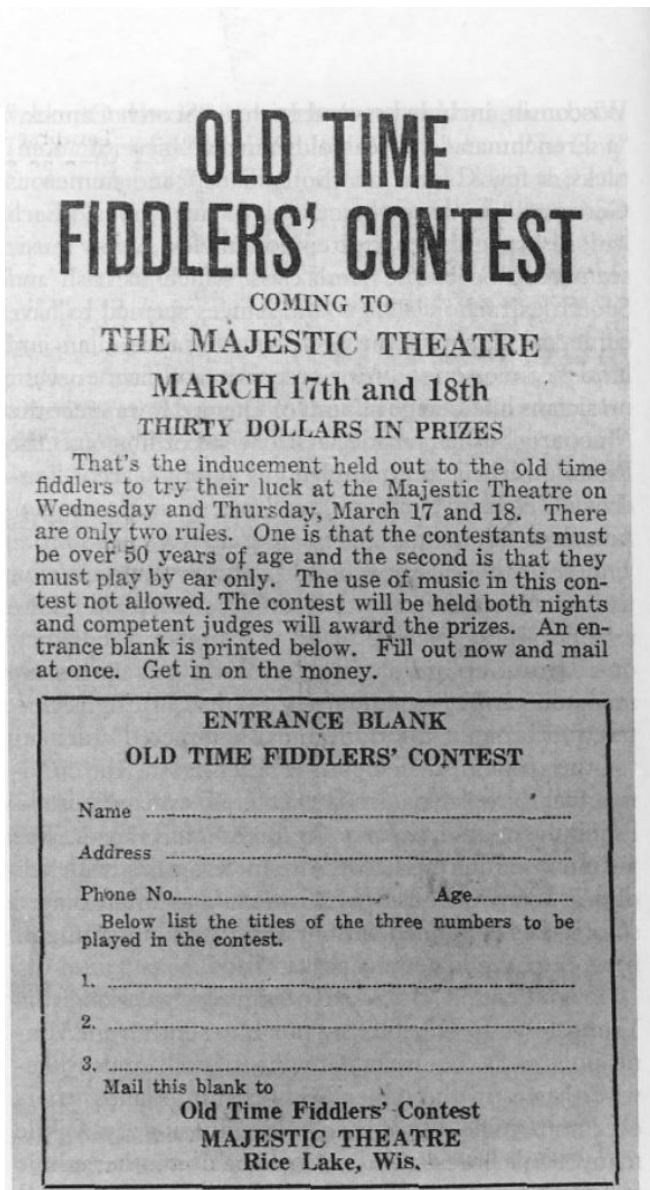
**The American Midwest:  
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Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher &  
Andrew Cayton, Editors  
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Part II: Society and Culture  
Section 2: Folklore. James P. Leary, Editor  
Folk Music and Dance  
Fiddling. Paul L. Tyler, pp. 384-86

**Fiddling**

On an April Saturday night in Chicago in 1924, an old-time fiddler inaugurated the WLS "National Barn Dance," the dominant country music radio show prior to World War II. In the following weeks, the unknown



Fiddling contest in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, 1926. Courtesy Rice Lake Chronotype.

fiddler was identified in Chicago papers only as "Timothy Cornrow" from "Ioway," a pseudonym. Later historians claimed he was Tommy Dandurand, a streetcar operator from a French-Canadian settlement in nearby Kankakee County. However, Timothy Cornrow could have been one of twenty other fiddlers from four midwestern states who appeared on the show during its first months. In 1927 Tommy Dandurand and his WLS Barn Dance Gang recorded thirteen old-time tunes in an archaic regional style with a lead fiddler playing the melody to the accompaniment of a chording second fiddler and a square-dance caller. No other fiddling of this type can be heard on commercial recordings. Historical documents and the memories of folk fiddlers born early in the twentieth century, like Les Raber of Hastings, Michigan, attest to the onetime strength of this midwestern tradition.

The sounds of the Midwest's traditional fiddlers have frequently been drowned out by newer styles of fiddling popularized through mass media. Nonetheless, half of the first country fiddlers to make commercial records in 1922 and 1923 were midwesterners, including Illinois native William B. Houchens of Dayton and John Baltzell of Mt. Vernon, Ohio. Especially noteworthy is Jasper "Jep" Bisbee of Paris, Michigan, who was born in 1843, making him the earliest-born fiddler on phonograph records.

Besides finding outlets in the new mass media, old-time fiddlers attracted attention in the 1920s through a wave, peaking in 1926, of highly publicized fiddle contests. John Baltzell was named "Champion of Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky," while Missourian W.H. Elmore of West Baden, Indiana, was crowned "Champion of Dixie" (actually, southern Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee). Tom Croal, an Irish fiddler from Sauk County, Wisconsin, took first in a Milwaukee contest a month before Leizime Brusoe, a French-Canadian émigré to Rhinelander, Wisconsin, won the Midwest Championship in a field of more than one hundred fiddlers in Chicago. Concurrent contests were held in Michigan, Missouri, Iowa, and the Dakotas.

Fiddling was ubiquitous in North America, and local traditions, especially those connected with social dancing, were strong in the Midwest in the early twentieth century. But as old-time fiddling's place in the spotlight faded, and as mass-mediated country music became more professionalized, the public face of fiddling acquired a southern hue. In eastern and central portions of the Midwest, most professional and semiprofessional fiddlers embraced such new commercial styles as bluegrass and western swing. Only western radio stations continued to broadcast the older traditional tunes—breakdowns, hornpipes, and quadrilles for square dancing; waltzes and schottisches for round dancing. Happy Jack O'Malley was a long-time favorite on WNAX in Yankton, South Dakota, while Casey Jones could be heard for twenty years on KFNF in Shenandoah, Iowa, and Bob Walter held forth on KMMJ in Grand Island, Nebraska, into the mid-1950s.

Midwestern fiddlers with roots deep in local and family traditions did most of their playing for community dances, for informal musical gatherings, or simply for personal pleasure. In the 1930s, Library of Congress fieldworkers made few forays to the Midwest but still recorded such local masters as Patrick Bonner of Beaver Island, Michigan; Otto Rindlisbacher of Rice Lake, Wisconsin; and Mr. Mitchell and Indian Tom in Mitchell, South Dakota. The urban folk music revival of the 1960s and 1970s stimulated another batch of field recordings. Young aficionados discovered gifted old-timers like Ward Jarvis of Athens, Ohio; Bill Big-

ford of Portland, Michigan; Stella Elam of Greenfield, Illinois; and Lotus Dickey of Paoli, Indiana. Only a few post-World War II midwestern fiddlers saw their artistry and tunes disseminated through commercially issued albums. Two titles from Rounder Records epitomize this rare achievement: *Indiana Fiddler*, a 1984 LP featuring John W. Summers of Marion, Indiana, and *Joseph Won a Many-Coated Fiddle*, a 1999 CD by Dwight Lamb of Onawa, Iowa.

Midwestern fiddlers have always produced a wide array of sounds reflecting the cultural diversity of the region. Fiddles first arrived with the *habitants* of New France. Dancing master M.B. Brouillette, born in 1810, the grandson of a pioneer, fiddled in Wabash Valley towns. French traditions lived on in twentieth-century Missouri in the playing of Joe Politte of Old Mines and Lloyd Lalumondiere of St. Genevieve. The fiddle early became a favorite in American Indian and métis communities. A founder of Davenport, Iowa, Antoine LeClair, born in 1797 to a Canadian father and Potawatomi mother, played a three-string fiddle. Big Chief Henry Hall of Wichita, Kansas, recorded commercially in Dallas in 1929, while Joe Cloud of Odanah, Wisconsin, recorded for the Library of Congress in 1938. In the 1980s, on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation, Fred Allery and Mike Page were recorded for the North Dakota Arts Council.

African Americans were also some of the earliest fiddlers in the region. In the 1830s, Nelson Perry played for public dances in Chicago, and William Taylor, a barber in St. Paul, headed a popular dance orchestra in the Minnesota Territory in the 1840s. A published list of twenty-four contestants at an Indianapolis contest in 1909 noted that Edward Cambron and Clay Brown were "colored." Bill Katon, an influential black fiddler in Missouri, played on WOS in Jefferson City, Missouri, in the 1920s. Howard Armstrong made some of the earliest recordings of black string-band music when he arrived in Chicago from Tennessee in 1933.

Other immigrant and ethnic communities have maintained strong fiddle traditions as they settled into new homes in the region. Leonard Finseth of Mondovi played many Norwegian tunes at dances in western Wisconsin, while Thea Arndt Clark and Jorgen "Alfred" Blagen are among the Norwegian fiddlers from rural Iowa whose tunes have been revived by Beth Hoven Rotto of Decorah. In 1924, Edwin Johnson immigrated to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he played music at house parties in the growing Swedish community. His grandson, Paul Dahlin, now leads a large, fiddle-dominated *Spelmanslag* (Musicians Club) at the American-Swedish Institute in Minneapolis.

Perhaps the most prominent style of traditional fiddling in the Midwest today is Irish fiddling. Chicago persists as a vital destination for Irish immigrants, including many fiddlers, and is the birthplace of two internationally celebrated Irish fiddlers. John McGreevy became a master of the distinctive style from County Sligo, and touring artist Liz Carroll is recognized for an expressive virtuosity that remains firmly centered in the sound of traditional Irish fiddling.

At the start of the twenty-first century, there are probably more active fiddlers in the Midwest than at any time in the past. Most are attracted to repertoires and styles that are not distinctively regional, but widely disseminated through mass media. A few unheralded contemporary fiddlers are shepherding older tunes and forgotten regional traditions into the new century. A number of thriving ethnic music traditions rely on fiddlers to conserve older sounds and create new styles that bridge the gap between Old and New Worlds. This short survey, regrettably, has not brought deserved attention to the Polish, Finnish, Scottish, Romany, South Slavic, South Indian, and Hispanic fiddlers who continue to play throughout the Midwest.

**Sources and Further Reading:** Nicholas Carolan, *A Harvest Saved* (1997); R.P. Christeson, ed., *The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory*, 2 vols. (musical score; 1973, 1984); James Leary, ed., *Medicine Fiddle: A Humanities Discussion Guide* (1992); Michael Loukinen, prod. and dir., *Medicine Fiddle* (video, 1991); Philip Martin, *Farmhouse Fiddlers* (1994); Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks, *Way up North in Dixie* (1993); *Traditional Irish Music in America: Chicago* (CD, 2001); Paul L. Tyler, "The True Story of 'Dickey's Discovery': Thoughts on Lotus Dickey's Fiddling," in Nancy C. McEntire, Grey Larsen, and Janne Henshaw, eds., *The Lotus Dickey Songbook* (1995).

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