

Indiana Hoedown IH038
Traditional Music from the Hoosier State

INTERVIEW: with Roy Litton of Lebanon
Jan 1980 About his father-in-law, Frank Wisehart, a fiddler.

He played for dances when he was a barefooted boy and he didn't know one note from the other, but he could tell you what key it was in, and he had to set with his heels up on the rungs of the chair because he couldn't reach the floor. And he started from there and just grew on and played on and on for years. Played at, oh, dozens of concerts and uh contests. And dances and uh if anybody was off key he wouldn't say anything until after they finished, he'd say, 'I think somebody's a little bit out of tune.' But he wouldn't mention any names. He was very careful about being courteous to them. And uh, you just, oh, in later years you could ask him for almost any tune, you could think of. 'I don't know if I can play that or not, I'll see.' He'd saw a little bit and pretty soon take off. And uh he never missed a note and you, he didn't know how many tunes he could play. They asked for one, & forgot^{but} what it was now, it was one of those old, old timers. And he, he was uh said 'I don't know whether I could can do that or not, & haven't played that for years.' Sounded a little bit, took off. Just as smooth as could be. And he liked to play, and he set right over there where that T.V. is now, and played within 3 weeks of passing away. Never got the least bit jiggly. Never

got off key. Just perfect. And uh, many times ^{the} ~~an~~ evening, when we were all here. My wife and he and I were here. He'd want to play and just go off in the kitchen, n' close the door, n' set out there and maybe play for an hour, all by myself. Anybody. We had lots of fiddle parties here. At this, at this place. We've had this place packed. And we've even had Judge Dan White from Indianapolis was a fan of his. And he would come out here, and he'd bring a friend with him. And there was, uh, oh, ^{some} relatives of his, uh, oh I can't think of it right now. But they would come over and play and he went to any number of contests. In earlier years, he never, he never failed to bring home ~~something~~, something from the contest. And uh, 19 and 28 he played at the Indianapolis Fair,...

PT "State Fair?"

RL "Yeh, in a contest. And he got that, the buckle. His knees got to bucklin on him and he had to sit down. So he couldn't get 1st. But he got 2nd. And the man that got 1st couldn't even come close to him. But it was a shame. And it just broke his heart cause he had to but he said my knees ^{just} got to be, bouncing together' and said 'I just had to set down.'

And he was 80, what was he, 89 years old fore he passed away."

PT "89. and he fiddled up to within 3 weeks of passing away?"

RL "Yeh, well, yes, set right over there and played. Just as smooth as could be. I'm telling you it was amazing. Old Judge Dan White, if he was living today, he'd tell you. Said 'I want you to get a recording of that, he said, 'don't want to let that get away. But I don't know whether I can get much out on this thing here, it's not working very good.'"

PT "Mr. Witchart was your father-in-law, right?"

RL "That's right. My father-in-law."

PT "Did his father play the fiddle too, is that where he learned?"

RL "Uh no, no. He just picked it up I guess, I don't know. I can't tell you too much about that earlier part. But uh, I know that he played for dances when he was a barefooted boy, he had to set his heels on the rung of the chair. But he couldn't tell you what, uh, what uh, about the tune only thing. He could tell you what key he was going to play it in."

PT "He played entirely by ear?"

RL "Mm?"

~~PT~~ PT "He played by ear?"

RL "Yeh, yeh. Absolutely by ear. And he had a daughter. My sister-in-law. She played the violin. And uh, the organ, the pipe organ, and the piano. And she was an artist, a painter besides that."

PT "What was her name?"

RL "Her married name was, uh, Singleton. And they,

She and her husband are both gone now. They moved from here to Dover, Ohio... And there's one, hanging in the stairway that my wife painted. She wasn't 1, 2, 3 with her sister, but she did a pretty good job."

PT "What was your wife's name?"

RL "Ethel."

PT "Ethel, And her sister's first name?"

RL "That was her first name, Ethel Li."

PT "How about your sister-in-law, what was her 1st name?"

RL "Edith."

PT "Edith."

RL "Edith, yeh."

PT. "And was it Edith that played along with Mr. Wisheart on these records on the piano?"

RL "well, my wife played with him too."

PT "Oh, she did too."

RL "Oh yes."

PT "piano."

RL "Yes. this uh, They made a record over at Wabash College. A professor from here went with 'em over there. And they, they played a record for this college over there."

White River Bottoms

RL "You know something. He could play leather britches like nobody else that I ever heard. There was only one other man that come close to him, that I ever heard. Did you ever hear of Dick Summers?"

PT "Yeh."

RL "Well Dick Summers was a good pal a his. And he played Leather Britches the nearest to what Pop played, of anybody. But he still didn't come up with Pop. Oh that old feller, stretch out his legs there and get started and, well, he could play all evening long and not run out of tunes. It's, It's a shame that you didn't get to be around and listen to him."

PT "I wish I could have."

RL "And Dick Summers, too. Dick Summers was a splendid fiddler, but golly. I've heard em. They used to play on WCLW Chicago. They'd call the numbers out. ~~They'd~~ Call out Leather Britches. Heck, if they hadn't called it out you'd never know what it was ^{laughs}. There's just a few around that played pretty well but. And there was one fellow. He was a pretty good fiddler but ask him to play a tune and 'Oh no. That's Mr. Wisehart's. I wouldn't attempt it."

PT "Who were some of the other fiddlers around."

RL "Oh, there used to be one. Oh what was his name. Been a long time. 'Cause I can't think of his name now. I can just see the people... I can tell you what happened 80 years ago and I can't tell you what happend yesterday. Well ~~theres~~ this George Costallin, ~~this~~ college professor at Wabash College

played a lot with him. It was a Frankfort man and that's where my father-in-law originally came from Frankfort."

PT "Mr. Wischhart came from Frankfort."

RL "Yeh, He was, lived out east of there, one of those smaller towns. My wife was born out there. They lived in Frankfort for a long time. They left there and moved out east of Noblesville and then after his wife died he came to live with us. So oh, I knew a few of those. Kieselings and uh can't think of the other names. Nearly all of them were musicians of some kind. Played some kind of instrument. My daddy played a banjo. And I got his old banjo wrapped up in cellophane upstairs where nobody can get to it."

PT "Do you play anything?"

RL "Used to play the French harp. After I got plates, they don't work so good..."

PT "When did Mr. Wischhart pass away?"

RL "Oh, several years back. I don't just recall how many I expect 12 years or more."

PT "And this professor from Wabash College is the one that got him over to make the records?"

RL "No, This professor didn't, he didn't play. He

just liked music. But he knew this professor at W.C. He was a what was his name. When my wife and I was 1st married we lived right across the street from him here in Lebanon. His school teacher was Carstallen, professor. And this other one was, uh. I just can't see it. Now I see his daughter at church quite often."

PT "What's her name?"

RL "Maybe it'll come to me. I'm just getting so I don't have any memory at all. I forget everything nearly."

PT "Do you know when it was they made these records?"

RL "I don't know the date. I don't know the date."

PT "All these aluminum records were made over at W.C.?"

RL "Yeh, mm-mm."

PT "Are these the only recordings that..."

RL "That's the only recordings that we had. ~~to~~ There, and they was the ones he played on... This gals name is Hegby now, she's married to a Hegby. Now if I can just think of her maiden name."

PT "You ^{say} see her at church?"

RL "See her at church occasionally."

PT "What church?"

RL "Christian. Right down the street. At the end of the street. Corner of East Main [?] ~~East~~ + Mark St.

And I can just see these people as plain as can be in my mind's eye."

He was as kind as could be, but he had a temper. [Musicians] As we used to say, they're 'sot' in their ways. Pop ~~W~~ Wisheart was the best damn fiddler in the State of Indiana.

Summary of first conversation

Roy Litton

I can remember things that happened 80 years ago, but I can't ~~remem~~ tell you what happened ~~last a week~~ ago (a year ago)

I can see it just as plain as can be.

I was born in a log cabin in the foothills of the Ozarks in Missouri. It was a ^{one room} log cabin, Abe Lincoln style. We kids slept on one side and our parents on the other. One morning I was awake and all of a sudden on the other side I heard a 'wah!' ~~And~~ ~~I~~ ~~thought,~~ ~~what~~ ~~is~~ ~~the~~ ~~world~~ ~~is~~ ~~the~~

I'm the only person still living who heard my one sister make her entry into this world.

~~I~~ I've never known anything but work. My father made clapboard. And at 5 years old my job was to stack them. Two this way and two that, so the stack didn't lean over or fall.

I'm glad that I learned to work.

I got the job of driving a mule around ^{around} a hay baler for 25¢ a day. My mother ^{and} I picked tomatoes for 3¢ a basket.

I left Missouri at age 10. The first years were in the log cabin in the Ozarks. In Texas County. The last 3 or 4 years were in a house in westline, 40 miles (west) of Kansas City.

There came a drought. Everything dried up. The fields burned up, the corn shrivelled, the water dried. There was a big farmer that didn't want to lose his cattle. So he put them on a train and had them sent to Indiana. My father got the

job of going with them. Grandfather Litton lived west of Litton. Litton. That's where my father took the cattle. He got a buggy to drive us up. When we got to Indiana, I looked out and on the side of the road, the grass was green and the corn was grown, and I said, "Mommy, is this Paradise."

We got our water [in Missouri] out of a pond behind the house, it was green with slime. We boiled it and put it down in a cistern to cool, and that's what we drank.

Sixty-four years in the public. I worked in a dry goods store on the southside of the square. I started at age 17 by sweeping us and by the time I left I was in charge of the store. The owner was moving to Indianapolis and he called me in and said Roy, 'I'm going to put you in charge, you ~~have~~^{show} are more interest in the store than I do. Be honest. Don't let the girls talk back to you. If one of ~~of~~ them doesn't want to do what you say, tell her to go to the office to pick up her check and hire someone else.'

That's all he told me. He was square with the public. He'd rather give a lady a 5 dollar bill than let her think he'd gotten a dollar more ~~the~~ from her than he had coming to him. He was square. He was a Quaker. That's the way it should be.

[In Missouri] we had snakes of all kinds down there - copperheads, rattlesnakes, king snakes, black snakes, house snakes, chicken snakes. Once as a kid, I had a basket of hazelnuts. Mom didn't want my sister to ~~to~~ get into them. She sent me back to the shed. I went out there. Set my basket down, set my hammer down. Then I sat down and went to crack the nuts. I reached for my hammer and what do you think I got - a handful of snake. Of course it wouldn't hurt me, but I let out a blood curdling scream. My mom ran out with a garden hoe. She got that snake while he was trying to get away.

Once my mother was walking down the path. A copperhead struck out at her leg. He missed. My father was on the front porch. I'd never seen him move so fast. He got that snake before he could get off the path.

I thank God three times a time when I say grace. For all my friends and for all my blessings. I like people. I need to be around, after 64 in the public. I've got friends to pick me, take me places, and bring me back home. I'm glad for all my friends, and for the memories of those early days back in the Ozarks. I can see them in my mind, just as plain.

We went to the fair and went into the tent to see a movie. After we had all the pink lemonade we could drink, for a nickle. We saw a movie. It was the first ~~of~~ movie of anything besides a moving train or running water. It was the fight between _____ and Fitzsimmons. I could see them up there on that flickering screen, and I said 'Poppy, I can see 'em but I can't hear 'em.' They were really going at it. With bare fists.

And once in a restaurant in town, I saw a man sitting at a table with something in his hands. He would talk and then he would be quiet and then he would say something again. I said 'Mommy, is that man crazy.' Later on I saw a ~~the~~ saw the same thing again, but this time they had built a little booth around. And I knew I had seen one of the firsts telephones.

I can remember what happened ~~2~~ years ago, but last week, I couldn't tell you. The changes I've seen. But I've had a good life.