

Old Time Music in Central Pennsylvania

By

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Old time music is generally thought of as music played on acoustic stringed instruments, particularly fiddle¹, banjo and guitar, which were most often used by string bands in the Appalachian region. In addition to those three



Jim and Jane and the Western Vagabonds. Rawhide (seated) and Tumbleweed (standing) 2nd from the left, 1938. (author's collection)

main instruments various bands used the mandolin, upright bass, washtub bass, ukulele, harmonica, autoharp, mountain dulcimer (an American invention), jug, pump organ and anything else that might contribute useful sounds. *The Old-Time Herald*, a quality magazine published in Durham, North Carolina since 1988, focuses on music with roots in Appalachia, including Afro-American and

¹ The word fiddle is used universally to refer to the violin by old time and bluegrass musicians and also by some musicians in all genres.

Cherokee musicians, but also expands its coverage to include regional styles such as Cajun, Norteño, Norwegian-American Hardanger fiddle players from the Upper Midwest, early cowboy singers and others. The concertina or accordion are used in at least two of these regional styles.

The fiddle has been in America almost from the time of the earliest European settlements, brought here mostly by Irish or Scottish immigrants to the United States and by the French to Canada. Often called the devil's box, it was used primarily to provide music for dancing. The modern banjo is an American adaptation of gourd instruments played by African slaves. It first became popular among Whites in the 1830s. Although C. F. Martin began producing guitars in 1833 the guitar did not become a popular instrument among traditional musicians until several decades later and the mandolin was seldom used until still later. The harmonica, concertina and accordion were introduced by German immigrants.

Although there is no documented evidence there can be little doubt that there were fiddle players in Central Pennsylvania before 1800. As mentioned above, the fiddle was used primarily to provide music for dancing. The earliest dances were held in people's homes. Furniture was moved out of the way and rugs were rolled up in one or more rooms to provide space for the dancers, generally close friends and neighbors of the host family. Apart from a meal the fiddlers were not paid except on rare occasions when a hat was passed around. As is still true today, the non-professional musicians were enjoying the occasion as much as the dancers.

In the late 1800s dances began to be held in Grange Halls and still later in fire halls and other public places that could accommodate larger numbers of people. Some dances were held outdoors. Charles M. Snyder mentions dances on a platform at the Sugar Camp in the 1870s and 1880s.² I recall a square dance in the parking lot of the church in Vicksburg around 1950.

² Snyder, Charles M., *Union County, Pennsylvania: a Celebration of History*, p. 167.

The fiddler who played for the dances at the Sugar Camp³ was Charles Hummel who lived at White Springs. Another fiddler from the same period was George Englehart (1853-1932) who lived in the vicinity of Forest Hill. R. Raymond Allen⁴ mentions Englehart, his grandson Lester Englehart (1908-1997), Archie Miller (1893-1996) and other Union County fiddlers but with only surnames, as well as Snyder County fiddlers Renaldo Gemberling, Ralph Kratzer (1893-1975), Isaac Sprenkle (1871-1954) and Ben Herman. He also refers to



Marty D'Addario



Harry D'Addario

The sons of Italian immigrants, Harry and Marty were long time fixtures on the old time music scene in Central Pennsylvania. Photos from album liner, "Oh Mother It Hurts Me So," UCHS, used with permission

brothers Marty (1905-1992) and Harry D'Addario (1908-1992) who learned from Calvin Walters, Earl Bingaman and Clyde Kline. Jacob Zimmerman (1853-1940), a native of White Deer Valley and who died in Clinton County, was much in demand as a fiddler and singer of old ballads.⁵

It is curious that almost all of the fiddlers named by Allen were of German extraction, since there is very little evidence of the fiddle being used in German

³ The Sugar Camp was located on an island in Penns Creek about two miles east of the bridge below Millmont. It was so named because of the little cabins and the sugar maple trees that were on the island.

⁴ Allen, R. Raymond, "The Fiddle Tradition in Central Pennsylvania," in *Pennsylvania Folklife*, Winter 1981-82, pp. 50-55.

⁵ Newspaper clipping dated in pencil 6/7/39, unknown newspaper. A photo of Zimmerman with his fiddle can be found on Find a Grave memorial #16797737.

folk music. However, he quotes Pennsylvania German scholar Don Yoder⁶ who refers to “the popularity of fiddling among the German population of Berks and Schuylkill Counties” in the 19th Century. Clearly the German immigrants enjoyed the music of their Anglo neighbors and some learned to play it. What is also curious about the names of the fiddlers referred to by Allen is the almost total absence of surnames that could be associated with the British Isles from whence the fiddle was brought to Pennsylvania. I would suggest that the English-speaking immigrants who populated Central Pennsylvania eventually began to think of their fiddle tradition as being old fashioned and rejected it in favor of more modern styles of music. This happened among other cultural groups, for example Cajun and Métis, but in most cases a few diehards have kept their traditions alive.

The invention of methods to reproduce sound on cylinders or discs and the development of commercial radio helped to bring about a change in the way people viewed traditional music. In addition to being something used almost exclusively to accompany dancing it became something to just sit and listen to. Old songs, some dating back to pre-Civil War times, were now being sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. String bands began to flourish. One of the earliest was the Mifflinburg String Band. A photograph of this aggregation of about twenty men, probably taken about 1915, shows five holding fiddles or bows, five with guitars, two with five-string banjos, one with a bowl-back mandolin, a drum, and the rest probably vocalists.⁷ However, this group does not fit the profile of an old time string band and it is impossible to know what kind of music they played. Most likely they were inspired by the mandolin orchestras that were in vogue at the time.

The first known old time string band in Union County was Jack’s Mountaineers which was probably formed in the late 1920s and disbanded in the mid-1930s. At one time or another this group included Jacob Barnett (1901-1988), Harry D’Addario (1908-1992), Archie Miller (1893-1996), Earl Miller, Pete

⁶ Yoder, Don, “Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Dancing,” in *Pennsylvania Dutchman*, 2,5: p. 1. The reference is Allen’s, not the author’s.

⁷ Snyder, Charles McCool, *Mifflinburg. A Bicentennial History*. p. 31.

given the name Rawhide and Clark was dubbed Tumbleweed. Both men could sing lead and tenor and their close harmonies quickly made them immensely popular. They had an extensive repertoire of old sentimental songs and hymns and they drew large crowds at festivals, carnivals and other venues.

A year later they left Jim and Jane to join up with Radio Dot (1916-1972) and Smokey (Swan, 1907-1980) on the same station. With this aggregation they went south for a while to broadcast on radio WSPA in Spartanburg, South Carolina. (Moving from one station to another was common practice among professional old time bands in those days and this practice continued well into the 1940s.) It is worth noting that Dot and Smokey went on to play on the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport and in 1946 they became cast members of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, giving them national exposure.

After returning from South Carolina late in 1939 Rawhide and Tumbleweed left Dot and Smokey but continued to broadcast on WRAK, performing as a duo but sometimes with a full band called the Western Rangers. They attempted to expand their territory by leaving WRAK to broadcast on stations in Wilkes-Barre and then Easton, but their style of music was not as popular in those markets. Discouraged, they returned to their home base and on April 1, 1940, Milburn committed suicide while staying with a family near Muncy, thus ending a career that might have been far more successful had they made the right moves. Shaken by his close friend's tragic end Clark gave up his musical aspirations.

Developments in the electrification of stringed instruments in the 1930s were destined to bring dramatic changes to many genres of music. The electric guitar, invented in 1931, was first used in Western Swing recordings in 1935 and introduced into mainstream country music by Ernest Tubb in 1941. The electric bass and lap steel guitar were both invented in the mid-1930s and the lap steel was mostly replaced by the electric pedal steel guitar in the 1940s. Pickups were invented to connect acoustic instruments including fiddles to amplifiers; mandolins began to fall out of favor. By 1950 Grandpa Jones and David "Stringbean" Akeman were the only nationally known old time banjo pickers who were still recording and their popularity was based at least as much on their

comedic performances as their music. Old time fiddlers and old time string bands were no longer being recorded.

Another seminal event was the formation of Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys in 1938 after he and his brother Charlie went their separate ways following a successful career as a mandolin-guitar duo. Although it was not immediately evident this new band signaled a divergence of country music into two separate paths, mainstream and bluegrass. While other country musicians gravitated to electrified instruments in the 1940s Monroe remained fiercely loyal to the acoustic sound. His first recordings in 1946 with Earl Scruggs picking the five-string banjo created a sensation. Scruggs played incredibly rapid three-finger rolls on the banjo that were completely different from the techniques used by old time banjo players. As a result, hundreds of young musicians learned this new technique and "bluegrass" bands proliferated rapidly.

None of these developments went unnoticed in the Central Susquehanna Valley. New country music bands playing electrified instruments emerged and by the early 1950s every radio station in Sunbury, Milton, Williamsport and Bloomsburg broadcast live country music played by these local bands on Saturday mornings. This development almost destroyed the old time music tradition in the region. The old timers still played for square dances but the dances were held less frequently and attendance declined, especially among the younger people. One of the few bands that continued to use only acoustic instruments was the Tumbleweed Troubadors (sic) although the accompanying photograph (next page) clearly shows leader George Reimensnyder (1931-2012) with a pickup cord attached to his guitar. Most of the band members were from the vicinity of Milton but Hank Miller from Kelly Point who joined the band after the photograph was taken told me that while he played with them they continued to use acoustic instruments, but that their repertoire was mostly a reflection of the then current mainstream country music songs.

Bluegrass music also made inroads in the region. For a time the Bob and Dean McNett band employed bluegrass banjo picker Sonny Bower from southern



The Tumbleweed Troubadors, ca. 1952 (author's collection)

Lycoming County. In the early 1950s Union Countian Bill Bingaman (1908-1963) purchased bluegrass instruments for family members.¹⁰ After much practice they formed the Black Mountain Ramblers with Bill playing bass, son Lamar (1931-2001) guitar, son Clarence banjo and occasionally guitar or mandolin when needed and son-in-law David Bell (1930-2009) played fiddle. In later years they were sometimes joined by musicians from east of the Susquehanna River including Zane Laubach (1947-2013) and Weldon Fausey who founded their own band, the Eagle Mountain Boys. The Ramblers later changed the name to The Bingaman Brothers and the Blue Grass Valley Boys. They recorded singles and cassette tapes, some of which included songs written by Lamar. They broadcast on Mifflinburg's FM radio station and made personal appearances at various festivals.

¹⁰ Telephone interview with Clarence Bingaman, Dec. 11, 2016.



“So Lonesome and Blue” Bingaman Brothers,
45 rpm single. Del Marr Sound, Lewisburg PA

In spite of these developments the old time musicians did not abandon their music. Archie Miller continued to play his fiddle and sing the old songs, if only for his friends or for his own pleasure and he participated in at least one fiddling contest, sponsored by the New Berlin Heritage Association. Brothers Marty “Hi-Ho” and Harry D’Addario also continued to play and in the summer of 1984 they were given exposure to a wide audience when Mike Stevens featured them on his “On the Pennsylvania Road” segment which was broadcast on WNEP-TV. Harry was seen playing fiddle and mandolin while Marty played fiddle, guitar and harmonica.

Harry was particularly active in various musical groups playing a variety of musical styles including John Throssel’s Orchestra, the Wagonaires, the Buffalo Creek Bogtrotters and the Union County String Band, the latter two of which played in the old style. In the latter group he was joined with his long time friend and neighbor Pete Miller with whom he had played in Jack’s Mountaineers many years earlier.

Pete and Harry had both worked at Rosedale Dairy and after Harry retired he took a custodial position at Bucknell University where he began holding late night music sessions in the Vaughn Literature Building. Among others these sessions included Bucknell professor Bob Taylor and later Mike Moynihan.

Bob Taylor is a great-grandson of James Taylor whose younger brothers Alfred and Robert were both fiddlers who served as governors of Tennessee, once running against each other and both playing the fiddle to draw crowds to their campaign rallies. A fiddler himself Bob is also the author of two novels in which music plays a prominent part.¹¹ He lived in Mifflinburg and after retiring he moved to Grayson County, Virginia¹² where he plays fiddle in the Buck Mountain Band. Two tunes on their “Moon behind the Hill” CD were inspired by Harry’s versions.

Mike Moynihan, a native of Vermont who moved to Union County in 1972, became interested in old time music during the “folk boom” of the 1960s. An excellent guitar player, he joined Pete Miller and Harry D’Addario in the Union County String Band which played annually at New Berlin Heritage Day until Pete succumbed to a heart attack after their performance in 1987.

If any documented proof was needed that old time music was still alive in Central Pennsylvania it came in 1980 with the release of “Oh Mother It Hurts Me



LP album cover for "Oh Mother It Hurts Me So", issued in 1980. The cover photo shows Mooresburg potter Daniel Ack and John Curry, ca. 1907. Used with permission from the Union County Historical Society.

¹¹ *Fiddle and Bow*, 1985 and *Blind Singer Joe's Blues*, 2006.

¹² The region of Grayson and Carroll Counties is and always has been a hotbed of old time music.

So,” an LP (see footnote 8) featuring seventeen tunes and songs played and sung by Union and Snyder Countians. The artists were Marty (fiddle and harmonica) and Harry D’Addario (fiddle), Pete Miller (4-string banjo), Archie Miller (vocals), Ellsworth Snook (square dance calls), and Mike Moynihan (guitar). The selections included traditional fiddle tunes, old sentimental songs, polkas and two tunes that Marty learned from his father. Most of the tunes were recorded in a studio but some were recorded in homes by Ray Allen who provided guitar accompaniment. The excellent liner notes and booklet give considerable details regarding the fiddle tradition among Pennsylvania Germans, the techniques of the musicians, their bibliographies and the origins of the tunes and songs, all of which are beyond the scope of this article.

The music played by Marty D’Addario¹³ is particularly interesting. For many years Marty lived alone without a radio, record player or television set. Thus his music was unaffected by the sounds of either bluegrass or electrified country music. All of his tunes were learned from either his father who played the accordion or from fiddlers who learned in the late 1800s. Marty often played on the sidewalk outside of the Copper Kettle restaurant and also played for square dances in the vicinity of Middleburg.

Since the release of the LP mentioned above all of the local old time musicians mentioned have passed on. I have questioned several people who are over 80 years old and who have been familiar with the country music scene in Union, Snyder and Lycoming Counties for decades. Although they were familiar with the musicians named in this article none of them could name a single surviving old time musician.

Nevertheless, there is still one old time fiddle player living in the region. Blaine Shover, nearing his 91st birthday, is a native of Juniata County who now lives in Snyder County. Blaine is still actively playing music and as recently as August he was appearing every Wednesday night as part of the back-up band for the country and bluegrass music open mic at the Middleburg VFW where he would occasionally play on old time fiddle tune. It is clear from a homemade CD

¹³ The information about Marty D’Addario was provided by Kay Poeth.

that he gave me he is equally proficient at playing old time, bluegrass, modern country, pop, and Western Swing music. On this CD his brother-in-law, the late Paul Miller, played excellent back up on guitar on the seventeen old fiddle tunes. Blaine has played in various local bluegrass and country bands and has played informally with bluegrass luminaries such as Del McCoury and Mac Wiseman.

Old time music still thrives in many regions across the nation. Every year there are several dozen festivals or fiddlers conventions, as well as numerous workshops where aspiring players can learn from masters of their instruments. Unfortunately, it is almost certain that old time music is destined to disappear from the Central Pennsylvania music scene.

For those who are unfamiliar with old time music but might be inclined to get a taste of it I recommend the following in addition to the LP issued by the Union County Historical Society (see footnote 8) which is almost impossible to find. Recordings which are known to be available on CD are indicated by *. There may be others. Vinyl copies are often available from Amazon.com and other dealers on the internet.

Another source is County Sales, a retail distributor of old time and bluegrass recordings and a division of County Records which produced many of the recommended LPs on the list below. You can find out what is still available by clicking on the "Contact" button on the main page of their web site.

Background to this Article

The editor of ACCOUNTS has suggested that I include some brief comments on my own long-standing interest in the old time and other forms of traditional music of our region. I first heard old time music on 78 rpm records played on a wind-up Victrola when I was a child. My interest and knowledge grew exponentially from attending the Brandywine Mountain Music Convention near Fair Hill, Maryland from the late 1970s through the 1980s. Sponsored by the Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music the three-day event almost always featured musicians who began playing before the 1920s and many who recorded professionally in the 1920s and 1930s.

As indicated in the text and footnotes, I am indebted to many people who have contributed to my understanding of traditional music and those who shaped and played it. Although the following list is necessarily incomplete, I would like to single out Harry D'Addario who I visited on several occasions, the late Lou Denemoustier (Delaware), Judge Carl Goldstein (Delaware), Judi H. Marti (Adams County, PA) who presented a workshop/concert at the Elias Center for the Performing Arts, and Blaine Shover. Twenty-five years of reading *The Old-Time Herald* was invaluable, as were the following books - *Fiddling Way Out Yonder: The Life and Music of Melvin Wine* by Drew Beisswenger, *The Stars of Country Music* (first six chapters), edited by Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh, *A Banjo Pickin' Girl: The Life and Music of Ola Belle Campbell Reed* by Judy H. Marti, *The Stonemans* by Ivan M. Tribe and *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone: The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* by Marl Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg. I would also like to thank Laura (Bingaman) Bell, Clarence Bingaman, Jim Brouse, Jack Crain, Hank Miller, Kay Poeth and Tony Shively for providing other useful information.

A Basic List of Recordings of Old Time Music¹⁴

The "sound" of old time fiddling is affected by bow strokes, fingering and tuning and it varies considerably from one region to another. In cases where it is not stated in the album title I have indicated in parenthesis the state where the fiddler(s) lived.

Old Time Fiddling

Various bands: Hell Broke Loose in Georgia, Georgia Fiddle Bands, 1927-1934 – County LP 514

Clyde Davenport: Clydoscope, Rare and Beautiful Tunes from the Cumberland Plateau – County 788 (Kentucky)

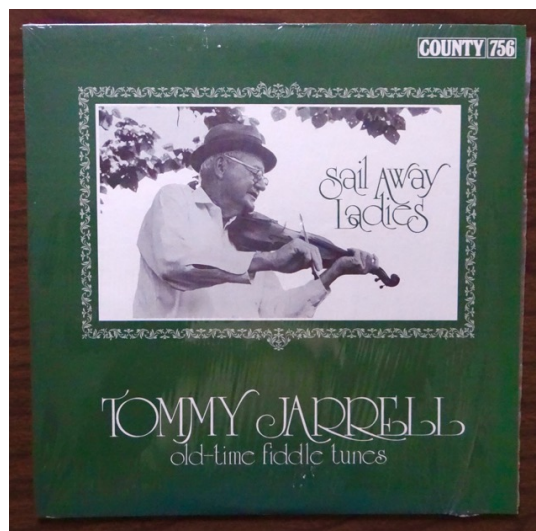
Various bands: Traditional Fiddle Music of Mississippi, Vol. 1 and 2 – County LP 528 & 529

¹⁴ Recordings preceded by * are believed to be available in CD format.



Art Galbraith: James River Fiddler “Dixie Blossoms” – Rounder LP 1033 (Missouri)

* Tommy Jarrell: Sail Away Ladies – County LP 756 (North Carolina)



Jehile Kirkhuff: Autumn Breeze – no label JK LP 1 (Pennsylvania)

Roan Mountain Hilltoppers: Cloudlands LP 001 (Tennessee)

John Ashby: Old Virginia Fiddling – County LP 727

Melvin Wine: Cold Frosty Moring – Poplar LP 1 (West Virginia)

Old Time Banjo

Old time banjo players almost invariable used one of two methods of playing, either clawhammer (aka drop-thumb) or two finger. All of the following played in the clawhammer style.

*Dock Boggs: His Folkway Years, 1963-1968 – two CD set from Smithsonian Folkways

*Tommy Jarrell: Come and Go with Me. County LP 748

*Uncle Dave Macon: Keep my Skillet Good and Greasy – Old Homestead LP 148

*Various artists: Clawhammer Banjo – County LP 701

Old Time String Bands

The Blue Ridge Highballers: 1926 Recordings – County LP 407



*Buck Mountain Band: Moon behind the Hills – no label, no # (Bob Taylor's band)

*Carolina Chocolate Drops: Genuine Negro Jig – Nonesuch 516995 (Grammy Award winning African-American band)

The Georgia Yellow Hammers: The Moonshine Hollow Band – Rounder LP 1032

The Leake County Revelers: Saturday Night Breakdown, 1927-1930 Recordings – County LP 532

Martin, Bogan and the Armstrongs: That Old Gang of Mine – Flying Fish LP 056 (older African-American band)

Charlie Poole & the North Carolina Ramblers, Vol. 2: Old Time Songs Recorded from 1925 to 1930 – County LP 509 (Poole was by far the best two-finger style banjo player and singer)

*Various bands: Echoes of the Ozarks, Vol 1, Arkansas String Bands, 1927-1930 – County LP 518

*Various bands: Nashville, the Early String Bands, Vol. 1 – County LP 541



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ACCOUNTS Vol. 7, No. 2, 2017
Union County Historical Society