

FIDDLE CONTESTS AND CONVENTIONS

by
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Little has been written about the fiddle contest or convention, one of America's oldest folk institutions. Such events, varying in magnitude, have been held throughout the United States and Canada — in small hamlet and large city alike—for at least the greater part of a century. Usually, but not always, the fiddlers convention features a tournament, or tournaments, in which prizes and awards for various events are awarded to those judged to be the best of their type. Many of these assemblies have enjoyed a long history, providing for the annual selection of a local, state, or regional champion. Contests have also been staged for benefits, fund raisings, and simply for purposes of advertising. They have been held in schools, barns, street corners, assembly halls, at fairs, picnics, reunions, and even over radio stations. Some of these affairs are very short, lasting for the space of an hour or less; others may continue for a week or more. The rules of entry for each contest vary extensively. Some tournaments impose minimum age requirements on the entrants, while others allow only tunes of great antiquity to be played. Still others will not permit the playing of novelty or 'show-

*Dewey Shepherd plays a homemade gourd fiddle while son, O. C. taps rhythm with hickory fiddlesticks.
Photo: Robert Yellin.*





off' pieces by the contestants, or allow additional quips or antics by the contestants which might influence the audience. There are instances of contests that have identified the fiddlers only by a number in order to eliminate recognition of local favorites.

The origin of the fiddle contest is shrouded in obscurity, as early scholars and journalists did not document this American phenomenon. The annual Atlanta, Georgia, Old Fiddlers Convention presumably began in the 1880s. In 1909, Louise Rand Bascom noted the existence of fiddler conventions in North Carolina, and police captain Francis O'Neill, in his noted work, *Irish Music & Musicians* published in 1913, mentions the annual Old Fiddlers contest in Indiana. From these widespread references, it can be predicated that the tradition of fiddling tournaments was of some antiquity at the turn of the century.

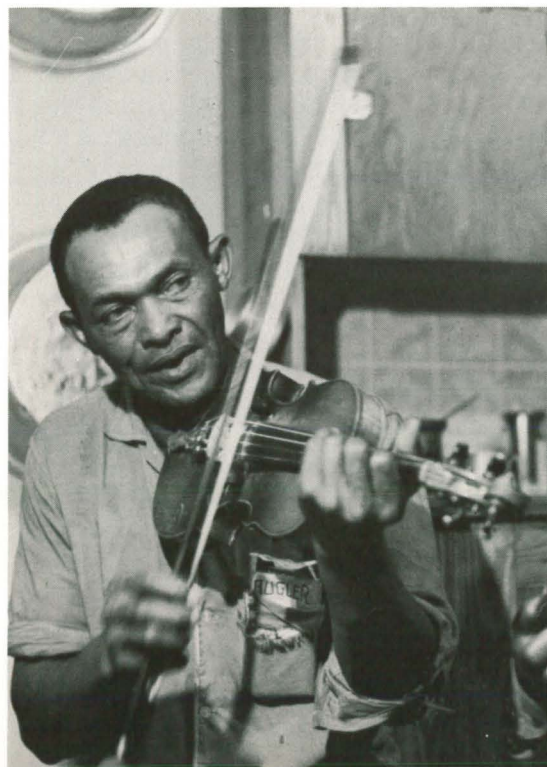
The year 1926 marked two of the largest and most memorable fiddling contests which had ever taken place. In mid-January of that year, the Ford Motor Company's regional office in Louisville, Kentucky, staged a regional fiddlers contest where playoffs were held within 111 counties in Kentucky, Tennessee, and south-

ern Indiana. The winners of each respective state then competed in the finals at Louisville. It is estimated that a total of over 1,800 fiddlers participated in this contest. In April, 1926, a World-wide Fiddlers Contest was held at Lewiston, Maine, featuring 68 fiddlers from eight states and three Canadian provinces plus two guest fiddlers from Bantry, Cork, Ireland, and Aberdeen, Scotland. Another fiddling phenomena worthy of mention occurred on New Year's Eve, 1925, over radio station WOS in Jefferson City, Missouri. On this evening 81 fiddlers were scheduled to compete in the radio contest, although only 53 actually appeared at the station. The contest began at 8 o'clock and lasted until the early hours of the morning. Each fiddler was introduced by number, and the radio audience selected the best fiddler by voting for the number of their choice.

Today fiddle conventions still abound, although usually in a more expanded format than those of earlier years. In addition to the fiddling tournaments, similar contests are held for banjo, guitar, folk singing, and string bands of various types. The oldest convention is at Union Grove, North Carolina, which began in 1924.

Fiddlers Conventions being held in 1968 are:

National Old Time Fiddlers Contest	Weiser, Idaho	June 19-22
Mid-Way U.S.A. Fiddlers, Pickers and Singers Convention	Salina, Kansas	September 29
Old-fashioned Fiddling Contest	Slade, Ky.	July 13
Old Time Fiddlers Contest	Kansas City, Mo.	August
International American Old Time Fiddlers Contest	Lincoln, Neb.	August
Old Time Fiddlers Convention	Advance, N. C.	April 15
North Carolina State Fiddlers Championship	Cleveland, N. C.	November 23
Old Time Fiddlers Convention	Elkin, N. C.	July 6
Fiddlers Convention	Union Grove, N. C.	April 11-13
Fiddle Contest	Cottage Grove, Ore.	July
Sunset Park Fiddlers Picnic	Between Oxford and West Grove, Pa.	September 2
Fiddlers Picnic	Lenape, Pa.	August 3
Old Fiddlers Reunion	Athens, Texas	May
Old Fiddlers Contest	Burnett, Texas	August
Fiddlers Festival	Ft. Worth, Texas	August 15-17
All-American Country Fiddlers Contest	Hale Center, Tex.	July
Northeast Fiddlers Convention	Middlebury, Vt.	August
Galax Old Fiddlers Convention	Galax, Va.	August 8-10
Old Time Fiddlers Convention	Pulaski, Va.	August
Old Time Fiddlers Association Picnic	North Bend, Wash.	July
International Old Time Fiddlers Contest	Pembroke, Ontario, Canada	May
Canadian National Fiddling Contest	Shelburne, Ontario, Canada	August



Canray Fontenot, Evangeline Parrish, Louisiana. Photo: Ralph Rinzier.