

Fiddlin' Toe-tappin', knee-slappin' at fairgrounds

By DAN WEBSTER

They came from all over the state. From Grant's Pass, Sweet Home, Klamath Falls, Medford, Portland, Philomath, Seal Rock — even Eugene/Springfield. And they came to fiddle.

The occasion was the Oregon Oldtime Fiddler's Association's 11th Annual Oldtime Fiddling and Variety show that was held last Friday at the Lane County Fairgrounds. A sell-out crowd of 1100 whistled, cheered and slapped their knees to the waltzes, jigs and hoedowns of some of the finest fiddlers of the Pacific Northwest.

Although the \$2.50 per head public show began at 7:45 p.m., there was music to be heard all day long as the fiddlers, guitarists, mandolin, guitar, banjo and bass players congregated to play, free of charge, for one another. And if you had been wandering around the fairground's Pioneer Building you would have seen men, dressed in string ties and cowboy hats, and women, dressed in plain print dresses, playing, singing, or simply listening to music that doesn't seem to have changed appreciably in the last 100 years.

In one corner you would have seen

two fiddlers, several guitarists and a bass player joining together in a spirited rendition of "Turkey in the Straw." At the same time, across the room, another group would have been gently breaking into the "Polish Wedding Waltz," while a few steps away, still another would have been picking up the furious strains of the "Red Apple Rag."

And this, more than the public show, was what it was all about: a group of musicians taking the opportunity to gather and play their kind of music for their own enjoyment. This was why the association was originally founded.

It was in 1964 that Cliff Buker, then a young 71, and a few of his friends decided to start a club that would bring together anyone interested in playing, or simply appreciating, oldtime fiddle music.

"We figured Idaho and Washington had one, so why couldn't we," Buker said loudly over the picking of a lightning-fast banjo man. "They told us it couldn't be done, but we tried and this is the result."

The result Buker is talking about is an organization of over 1,000, only 100 of whom are fiddlers. Nearly 50 others play some kind of musical instrument, while the remainder have simply joined to listen, and enjoy. The association has grown so large that it is now split into

eight districts, each of which puts on its own shows announced beforehand in a monthly newsletter available to members.

Eugenean Wayne Holmes, 58 (who has played the fiddle for over 50 years), has been a member of the association since 1969. A mail clerk at the Eugene main post office for the last 25 years, Holmes has confined his fiddling to his spare time. And he welcomes the opportunities to play for an appreciative audience that the expanding association provides.

"Oregon is a big state," Holmes says, "so you don't want to have to go from Medford to Roseburg and back on a Saturday. So we now have districts, each with its own chairman who sets up meetings so that sooner or later one will be held wherever you may live."

The association also arranges annual state-wide meetings, like the Variety Show. And there is a state contest that is held in Bend every May. It is at these full association get-togethers that the finest music can be heard.

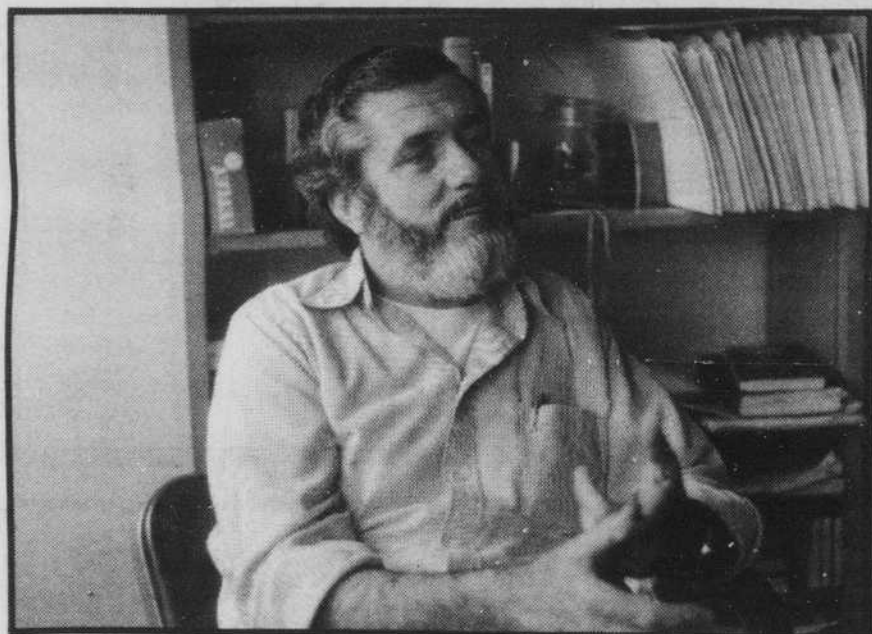
Friday night's variety show saw over 20 fiddlers, aged eight to 85, play an incredible variety of music from square dance hoedowns to hymns. Some of the

highlights included:

- Buker, with his still-nimble 85-year old fingers fiddling "My Pretty Quadroon" and "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee."
- Current State Champion Carol Wheeler (the first woman champion in the association's history) in an extremely professional set. She began with a three-part composition that "Attempts to paint a picture," and ended with a piece called "Papa Haydn's Surprise Symphony" (a classical sounding prelude that eventually breaks into "Turkey in the Straw") that brought down the house.
- The Sims Family (who had records for sale, on display) with young daughter Lisa singing "Snowbird," and the whole family performing one of their hit songs, "You-You-You Stole My Heart Away."
- Wheeler, Leroy Sims (of the Sims Family) and current association President John Melnichuk playing together in a race-horse version of the "Orange Blossom Special" to close out the show.

Above all else, what was most impressive about the show was the interaction between the crowd and the musicians. These were people who loved what they were doing, and hearing, and it showed. If you were there, you know what I mean. If you weren't, then make sure you go next year. You won't regret it.

Singin' Prof combines folklorist, musician roles



Barre Toelken

By ERIC MALONEY

Barre Toelken wears two hats. With one, he teaches courses at the University in American and Native American folklore. With the other, he tours the Northwest as a folk musician.

Toelken's dual role embodies a major controversy in folk. Folklorists have a narrow definition of what folk music is, including only those songs passed along orally and subjected to constant alterations and reinterpretations. Critics argue that this is much too restricting, since it virtually eliminates anything recorded, or identified with a specific artist.

So Toelken the folk musician performs some material that Toelken the folklorist would not con-

sider to be folk.

But true folk singing, he says, is hard to find these days.

"There's lots of singing going on, but kids are learning from each other or from records. It's a different form of music."

"A person who learns from a record tends to sing the song the same way. But folk songs are like jokes — you don't try to memorize the exact words, you pick up what it's about. It's a little different each time, even if you go back to the same source."

Most contemporary "folk" music, including such people as The Weavers, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, and Joan Baez could not be called folk by the folklorist. Such artists, says Toelken, use music

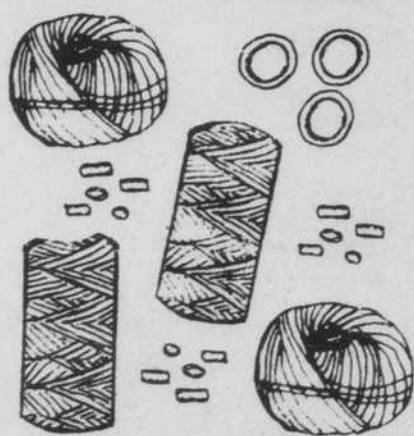
more as a vehicle for contemporary poetry.

Also, they are often more critical of society, searching for alternatives, more thoughtful and questioning. Folk songs, on the other hand, are transformed to represent the community, embodying the community's beliefs.

"I sometimes get defensive because people call me a purist," says Toelken. "But in the academic world, you have to narrow things down to what is being discussed. This is where the University differs from the real world. Our question is not 'What is a folk song?' but 'Here's the kind of phenomena we're talking about; what seems to fit?'"

Toelken does not make value judgments when discussing what is strictly folk music. Some folk songs, he says, "are just cruddy." In his own performances, he sings contemporary songs that he happens to like.

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