

Old time fiddling old time fiddling old time

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KATIE MELNICHUK, accompanied by her father John, plays "Arkansas Traveler." Katie, age six, was the youngest player at the jam. John Melnichuk was last

year's state champion and will compete this weekend at the state championship in Lebanon.



OLD TIME FIDDLERS Dee Johnson of Rock Creek plays "Plucker's Mill" on her fiddle.

By J. Dana Haynes
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The Community Center, which has come under attack recently because of allegedly too-loud rock music, played host to a different kind of music last weekend.

The local chapter of the Old Time Fiddlers held a jam in the Center on Sunday, May 8, Mother's Day. Approximately 25 fiddle players from throughout the metropolitan area participated in the event. This is the fifth one to be held at the College.

The day's activities started around noon, as musicians began to wander into the Mall in groups of two and three. By 12:30 p.m., nearly two dozen players were standing in groups, rosining bows and practicing old favorites such as "The Tennessee Waltz."

No sheet music was presented. Most of the fiddler's repertoire has been passed from generation to generation, and everyone seemingly knows every number. Two fiddlers, John Melnichuk and Jason Ewing, sat in a corner of the Fireside Lounge and practiced codas of old, American folk ballads.

Ewing is an accomplished fiddler, belying the fact he is 11 years old, a 6th grader from Uplands Elementary School.

"I went to church one day and Grant Wheeler was playing the fiddle," Ewing remembered. "Everyone went nuts, and I thought 'Hey, I could do that!' So I started."

That was two years ago.

Today, Ewing plays the fiddle, mandolin and will begin studying the banjo soon.

He admits the mandolin is an unusual instrument. His fiddle teacher suggested he take up a second instrument, and a mandolin is commonly used to back up some fiddle music, including Irish, Appalachian, Canadian and Texan varieties. Ewing is now taking mandolin lessons from Bob Misley, music instructor at the College.

Unlike many young musicians, Ewing said no other member of his immediate family plays an instrument, except his late grandfather. "My grandpa played classical violin when he was young," Ewing said. "Before he died, he heard me playing the fiddle and liked it a lot."

One of Ewing's fellow fiddlers, John Melnichuk, was last year's state champion. He has played with the District 7 group, which encompasses the Portland metro area, for 11 years.

Melnichuk pointed out that most everyone present at the jam was an amateur, himself included. Few, if any, ever fiddled for a profession. "We have these public jams nearly every weekend somewhere in Oregon," Melnichuk said. "We have one in the Portland area about once a month."

This jam was a warm-up session for the state competition, to be held in Lebanon on Saturday, May 14. "There will be 100 or more contestants there," Melnichuk predicted. Competition will be held in the Pee Wee, Junior, Senior and Championship division. The

winners of each group will go on to the Nationals in Wheezer, Idaho in June.

At about 1 p.m., the group's emcee got up on stage and called for the 23 fiddlers, five guitarists, one bass player and pianist to gather on the risers. When everyone was ready, the emcee stood before the mic and said, "Here we go. Who's gonna lead off and what are you gonna play?"

The entire jam had that same feeling of spontaneity. Malnichuk, one of the respected regulars of the group, shrugged and suggested a tune called "Boys of Cabbage Downs."

Once the number was selected, all the musicians chimed in, everyone seeming to know the number by heart. When it was over, and the audience of about 100 applauded, someone else from the back of the risers shouted out "Over the Waves," better known to non-musicians as "Those Daring Young Men on the Flying Trapeze." Once again, everyone played along.

The jam lasted till about 5 p.m., when the group began to disperse. Not everyone left immediately. Many people hung back, reminiscing with old friends and looking forward to the next session or the state competition.

It is a basically unassuming group of people, much like the music they play. They are gregarious but private, calmly gathering for a weekend to keep a traditional form of entertainment alive.

Photos by Duane Hiersche