

Heppner fiddler, Tim Collins, to perform with Old Time Fiddlers

By Peg Willis

Morrow County is home to a former, self-awarded "closet fiddler." One of the truly great old-time fiddlers still around, Tim Collins of Heppner is reluctant to toot his own horn. Or perhaps "to bow his own fiddle" would be more appropriate.

Soft-spoken and unassuming, Tim will admit to playing the instrument, but says he's not very good at it. He isn't interested in promoting himself or his abilities and has reached championship status only because of his natural desire to help out a friend.

Collins, born in Wallowa County and now working for the U.S. Forest Service in Heppner, came from a musical family. Both his parents, two brothers and a sister all played guitar growing up. And Mom played accordion and piano. Tim, the youngest in the family, started on a small guitar of his mother's at age six. The family members still get together for family jams whenever possible.

Tim's dad owned a fiddle and one time decided to learn how to play it. "He tuned it up the way he thought it should be and learned to play a few tunes. My brother would back him up on guitar. Then some guy showed up that knew how to play the fiddle a little bit, and HE tuned the fiddle - and then my dad couldn't play it any more. He didn't have the right tuning on it." That was the end of Dad's fiddling career, but young Tim was beginning to get interested in this strange instrument.

A couple of aunts "took my grandpa to Weiser (the National Old-Time Fiddle Contest) one year and they made tape recordings of some of the music." When Collins heard the fiddle music he thought, "Wow. That sounds pretty good." So he got his dad's old fiddle out, listened to the tapes, and "just kind of squawked around on it." By this time, he was a sophomore in high school.

"I did figure out how to tune it right," says Collins laughing.

One of the people who most helped Tim in the early days was his second cousin, Charlie Trump in Wallowa County. Charlie had been playing nearly all his life, having learned from his mother and her brothers. The style he played was what had been common in Raleigh County, West Virginia, his mother's place of birth. So Tim began picking up the same tunes and style.

"Tim's got real good timing. He's good," says Charlie Trump. This is high praise coming from the man who was declared grand champion 16 times at the Blue Mountain Old-Time Fiddle Contest.

Quite often Tim would record Charlie's playing and take it home to learn. "I used to play just about every tune that Charlie played. I still play a lot of them. I think I mimicked him to the point where, when I played, people couldn't tell us apart."

In Tim's late teen years he worked at a ranch where in the winter, there wasn't much to do in the evenings but sit and learn to play. "I would just sit by the fire and play fiddle."

In the beginning, the instrument was difficult to



Tim Collins

learn. "I didn't really figure out how to work the bow for a long time."

"I've kind of changed my style a little the last couple of years," says Tim. "The way I'm holding my bow now, I've got a lot more speed to it. I was using too much arm and not enough wrist."

Watching the bow glide gracefully across the strings and hearing the intricate subtleties of Tim's playing makes it seem almost effortless.

Not so, says Tim. "Learning is a struggle for me. I work at it hard. I don't know that I've got a lot of talent, but I've worked at it hard. And what I do now, I've worked to learn."

Tim first played in public for a high school talent show. Once the word was out that he could play, he was invited to use his ability in a number of venues

- dances, fund raisers, get-togethers of various kinds. Contests were something Tim was definitely not interested in.

The first fiddle contest Tim was talked into entering was in Baker City. He was so nervous he played his hoedown in about half the time it would normally take. He was glad he didn't make the cut to the second round. "I felt pretty good about that, because I really didn't want to get up in front of those people again."

But in more recent years, Tim has entered the Blue Mountain Old Time Fiddlers Contest in Enterprise. He goes at the beckoning of his former mentor, Charlie Trump, now 88 years young. "Charlie always calls and says 'we need all the fiddlers we can get over here.' So I go to help out. He's got so much to do to get it ready."

Tim's children, Maggie and Patrick, also enjoy the contest. They like playing for an audience.

"Right now I'm going to fiddle contests because my kids like to go," says Tim. "I try not to be nervous around them - try not to let them see me sweat. They seem to have a great time doing it."

Tim's wife Jeannie is the glue that holds it all together. She pays the entry fees, and yearly dues, makes sure that they are signed up

to play and have all of their "stuff." She notes that toddler, Roy, can't wait to become a part of the family band. "Every time I try to play with them on my gut bucket, Roy gets in there and hollers 'Let me do it.' and he plunks along."

Tim won the championship division in the 2005 contest. He's very happy about the quality of his playing - but not overly proud. Perhaps the humble appreciation of his abilities is as important as the ability itself. More than just learning and playing notes, Tim Collins exhibits the spirit of old-time music. It's not about being better than someone else; it's not about drawing attention to yourself; it's not about money or fame or keeping score. It's about the music and the culture that has spawned it. It's about valuing people and the music that binds us to them.

And it's a very personal thing. "I notice that when Tim is frustrated about something, he gets out his fiddle or guitar and plays," says Jeannie. "And he strives for that invisible definition of perfection that only he can see."

We're very glad Collins came is now willing to share his music with those who like to listen. Tim Collins is a piece of the past, dressed up in modern clothes, and fiddling his way into the hearts of all who hear his sweet music. This world could use a few more

people like him.

Elementary School in Heppner will perform with the Blue Mountain Old Time Fiddlers on Friday, Celebration March 17, at Heppner

Church youth group helps with 2006 MS Walk



2005 church youth group with other MS Walk participants

The All Saint's Episcopal & Hope Lutheran Church Youth Group put out brochures in various businesses last week for the 2006 MS Walk to be held on Saturday, April 8, at 9 a.m..

The walk in Heppner, presented by MS Lifelines, has participants walking 3.1 miles (wheel chair accessible) or 6.2 miles with the goal of raising \$12,000 to fund research, treatment and programs. "We raised \$10,000 last year so we are hopeful that we will be able to meet our goal", says chairman Merilee McDowell.

This is the Oregon Chapter of National Multiple Sclerosis Society's largest fundraiser event. The NMSS is the largest private funder of MS research in the world, and provides life changing services, education and advocacy to Americans with MS and their families, says McDowell.

"National Team Week" is scheduled for March 13-17. Teams are eligible for special recognition and the team captains receive ongoing support in the creation and development of their teams. "Recruit your family, friends and co-workers and have fun, while helping to fight MS, by walking or sponsoring a walker," says McDowell. "Pick up a brochure or register online at www.mswalkoregon.com. You can also register by phone at 1 (800) FIGHT MS."

For more information you may also contact McDowell at 676-5238.

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