

POTPOURRI...

One by one they are passing—the colorful men and women who lived through the interesting and exciting times which made early-day history for Jackson county and the rest of southern Oregon. One of these was Charles Francis Skeeters, who died not long ago at the age of 85.

Charles Skeeters was known far and wide in the county in earlier days as one of the best of the county's fiddlers. With Mrs. Skeeters, (the former Julia Scranton) who accompanied her husband with either the organ or piano, the two played for the parties and dances which were one of the main diversions of county folk, and at such festive occasions as the annual Fourth of July celebration.

Marjorie Skeeters Hopkins, Mr. Skeeters' daughter and only child, cautions that such players as her father was should not be referred to as "violinists." They were the old-time "fiddlers," she says. "They knew not a note of music, and played only by ear, holding the instrument low and loosely and using the very short bow movement. Always they tapped a foot to keep time."

Mrs. Skeeters, who "chorded" on the organ and piano for her husband, also played "by ear," a familiar expression of that time little heard in these days, but could follow easily the music of the fiddlers, learning by natural musical instinct the various major and minor chords required.

So together the two provided the lively music for dances, mostly square dances which the grandchildren of the pioneers have now revived with such enthusiasm. They played the Lancers, the French minuet, the Tuxedo, La Mode, the polkas and schottisches and all the other gay dances for the enjoyment of their friends and neighbors. Of course, Mr. Skeeters also often served as caller, as did most of the old-time fiddlers.

Mrs. Hopkins, who all her life has both performed and studied the square dances, says that years ago the movements were slower and more stately, and that the dances as now revived are performed at a much faster tempo.

In addition to playing in lodge and Grange halls, the Skeeters in the early 1900's played in the large community hall which was known as the Angel Opera house in Medford. This hall, now used as a storage room by Burk's, was often the scene of community dances, Mrs. Hopkins recalls.

"That was before the days of the new two-step," she remembers. "Of course, the waltz was always a part of every evening of dancing, as well as the square dances."

After a time Mr. Skeeters became interested in making fiddles, as well as playing them.

During the years he served as superintendent of a placer mine on Forest creek, he experimented in using the different Oregon woods. The backs of the instruments must always be of hardwood, such as oak, local walnut or manzanita, and the soft woods were used for the remainder of the violin.

Mr. Skeeters even wondered what changing the shape of the violin would do to the tone of the instrument, and so he made a square violin. This he decided had nothing to do with the tone, since the square one sounded much like the others.

The square violin, by the way, is now in the Henry Ford collection. Mr. Skeeters gave it to the late Henry Amidon, father of E. C. Amidon of Medford, who came out from Michigan on a visit, and the visitor took it back for the Ford collection.

Still playing for dances and entering contests (he at one time held the title of county champion fiddler) Mr. Skeeters made dozens of violins in his spare time which he mostly gave away. He also repaired instruments for other musicians, and worked at re-hairing bows.

Almost half a century went by and Charles Skeeters and his wife were still generously providing music for programs and dances, usually without pay, and it has not been more than five or six years since they last played in public. Of course, the two could no longer play for an entire evening, since it is exhausting work.

Charles Francis Skeeters was a native of Jackson county, having been born August 11, 1866, in a home near what is now the 401 ranch, near Medford. In his boyhood days he must have heard many exciting tales of gold rush days and pioneer adventures, for he was the son of Isaac Skeeters, a sort of "Daniel Boone" character who had come west by wagon train to see what the new Oregon territory offered. His mother was the former Grace Simpson, whose family settled in Portland in the early days. Simpson descendants are still living in that area.

One of the stories which young Charles often heard was the tale of how Crater Lake was discovered, for his father had been a member of that historic party. Isaac Skeeters, because of his wide knowledge of the country and his skill as a woodsman, was asked to guide a party of gold hunters into the hills in June of 1853.

One of the pack mules wandered away one day, it is said, and a member of the party went in search of the animal. While hunting for the lost mule, the miner suddenly came upon a body of water, a lake so beautiful

Final Potluck Dinner Planned in Shady Cove; To Hold Dance Series

Shady Cove—Plans for the final potluck dinner of the school year for the Shady Cove Parent-Teacher association were made at a meeting April 1. Shady Cove Grange has donated \$27 to the group for new chairs.

A pre-school clinic will be held April 21.

Mrs. Delbert Spain, the incoming president of the group, will attend the state PTA convention to be held soon in Pendleton.

A series of square dancing sessions in the school gymnasium for children of the school begins soon. Mrs. Al Peele, Mrs. Ralph Lane, and Mrs. Jerry Hicks will be chaperones. Parents must arrange transportation home for their children after the dances, those in charge explained.

Mrs. Conway's room at the school won a prize for having the most parents in attendance at the April 1 meeting.

ful and with such blue water so far below the lake rim that the discoverer was amazed. When the gold seekers, later called by historians "the John Hillman party" returned to the valley, they talked far and wide of their discovery. Later the beautiful blue lake was named "Crater Lake."

Charles must also have heard many stories of gold rush days in the Sterling district, for his mother's parents had operated a hotel at Sterling at a time when it was said some 10,000 miners, their families and camp followers swarmed in that territory in search of the precious metal.

Charles was one of 12 children, but like so many pioneer families, some of the 12 died as infants or young children. Mrs. Hopkins remembers that whooping cough was said to have caused many deaths in those early days, and was a dreaded disease.

Of the original 12, but one now survives. Mrs. Leo Martin of Waldport. Mrs. Martin has carried on a lively war with map makers who insist on changing the name "Skeeters" to "Mosquito," perhaps thinking that the old timers didn't know how to spell. As a matter of fact, the name "Skeeters" is said to be a corruption of the French word for mosquito, and the Skeeters family was originally of French descent.

Because of his pioneer background, and because he had been a part of the early-day picture in Jackson county, Mr. Skeeters' family asked at the time of his death that friends make contributions to the Southern Oregon Pioneer society rather than sending flowers for the funeral. Mrs. Hopkins and her mother also hope to present one of Mr. Skeeters hand-made violins to the Jacksonville Museum where it will be a reminder of the days now gone.—O. S.

Sunday, April 6, 1932

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