

*across  
the fields*

*FIDDLE TUNES AND  
BUTTON ACCORDION MELODIES*



*TRADITIONAL NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN MUSIC FROM WISCONSIN*

*Traditional Norwegian-American Music From Wisconsin*

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*FIDDLE TUNES AND BUTTON ACCORDION MELODIES*

TEXT

Phil Martin

PHOTOGRAPHS

Lewis Koch

and from historical collections

MUSIC TRANSCRIPTIONS

Bob Wernerehl

WISCONSIN OLD-TIME MUSIC PROJECT • FOLKLORE VILLAGE FARM • DODGEVILLE, WISCONSIN • 1982

**THIS BOOKLET IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF ARNOLD OLSON, 1912-1982**. A farmer and fiddler from Blair, Wisconsin, he was a man of quiet strength—a thoughtful steward of his land, a devoted family man, and a lover of traditional music. He knew that the heart of old-time music lies not in performance but in friendships born of music, and he shared that personal delight gladly with those he met.

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## INTRODUCTION



*Saloonkeepers' League Fourth of July picnic at Andrew Scheldrup's cottage, Lake Kegonsa, near Stoughton, ca. 1900. The men are predominantly Norwegian-American, along with a few of Irish background. Note not only the fiddle, flags and Uncle Sam's hat but also the hammered dulcimer—an instrument rare in Scandanavia but popular in the Upper Midwest. [photographer unknown/Stoughton Historical Society collection]*

This documentary effort is the result of a growing interest by many individuals, young and old alike, in the traditional music of Wisconsin. As a fiddler and oral history interviewer, I joined with documentary photographer Lewis Koch in 1979 to form the Wisconsin Old-Time Music Project, with the goal of beginning to uncover the history of old-time music in rural communities. Together we traveled down many backroads and knocked on many doors—tape recorder, notebooks and cameras in hand—to interview traditional fiddlers, button accordion players and family dance bands in their homes. Especially in the hillbound “coulee country” of west-central Wisconsin (bordered roughly by La Crosse, Black River Falls and Eau Claire), many interviews were held with Norwegian-Americans—dairy farmers, tobacco cultivators and folk musicians of long-standing tradition. Seated at kitchen tables and on living room sofas, we were served cup after cup of strong black coffee (an everflowing occupational hazard), ate plates of open-faced sandwiches and *sandbakkel* cookies, and went through reels of tape and rolls of film, as Norwegian-accented farmers told of playing careers that spanned a half century or

more. As illustration they drew forth well-worn instruments and played tune after tune from seemingly inexhaustible repertoires.

The initial product of the interviews was a 45-minute slide/tape program entitled *A Kingdom of Fiddlers* (see page 48). It became apparent, however, that there were few recordings of these traditional melodies available to the general public, and it seemed worthwhile to make a documentary recording to present this high-spirited, homemade music to a wider audience. The result was the *Across the Fields* LP record (FVF 201) and this companion tune booklet.

The tunes give a sample of Norwegian-American *house party* music used at rural dance parties in farmhouses, barns, granaries, tobacco sheds, schoolhouses and town halls throughout Wisconsin in the early part of this century. Those tunes credited to older musicians often date to an earlier era, in some cases well into the 19th century. Most of this music has never previously been written down or recorded but existed only in an aural tradition, passed on from fiddler to fiddler “by ear” and handed down through generations to the present day.

It is the hope of the Wisconsin Old-Time Music Project that this booklet and record will serve not only to document a slice of the folkways of a past era, but also to challenge and encourage other musicians, folklorists, local historians, school teachers and librarians to actively seek out the many elder traditional artists in our midst. In their minds lives a rich heritage that, with prompt and sincere attention, may still be ours.

### From Norway to the Upper Midwest

Probably the most fascinating aspect of this collection of Norwegian-American ethnic music is the extent to which it has departed from the original Old World traditions of the Norwegian settlers who first came to Wisconsin in the years from 1838-1910. Certainly there is a Norwegian accent to this music. Yet in many ways it has become Americanized, or at least modified to fit the unique environment of Norwegians in the Upper Midwest.

In the Old World of the 19th century, Norwegian farm families tended to live in clustered settlements. They preferred not to move far from their place of birth, nor did they stray far from the traditional folk-





*Pioneer Wisconsin farmstead, Bear Creek, near Lone Rock, ca. 1875. [photographer unknown/SHSW collection]*

ways that patterned their lives. Over the course of generations, each small village or hamlet developed its own dialect of speech, its own variants of music and dance, its own local customs of seasonal celebration. While the differences were perhaps slight from one village to the next, they were recognizable. From region to region the differences were often so great as to be mutually unintelligible. A dancer from the province of Valdres would have had a hard time dancing a *springdans* to the music of a fiddler from the neighboring province of Telemark.

However, upon emigration to America these folk patterns, formed by long years of population stability and geographic isolation, began to break down quickly. Early homesteaders did not settle in concentrated villages but spread themselves across the frontier, seeking out the best tracts of potential farmland with wood and water. These first dwellings could be miles from the nearest neighbors and perhaps 30 or 40 miles from the nearest town.

As more and more immigrants arrived to settle neighboring homesteads, it became beneficial for nearby families to band themselves into larger units for mutual help and support. These became the

rural neighborhoods, informal but closely-knit associations of a dozen or so families living within a few miles of each other. Sometimes these neighborhoods followed settlements along ridges or down valleys. Other times they simply centered around a crossroads, church or country schoolhouse.

The *work exchange ring* was the main summertime activity of the rural neighborhood. Neighbors pitched in to help each other with chores that required an extra hand, ranging from quilting, butchering, and fence-mending to barn-raising and the neighborhood tour of the threshing crew in the fall.

The wintertime counterpart of the work exchange ring was the series of weekly dance parties held throughout the neighborhood. Beginning in late October and continuing until spring planting time, these house parties brought and kept together the same circle of farm families, now in an atmosphere of homemade merriment. The dancing usually took place in farmhouse parlors and kitchens cleared of furniture. Even the heavy cast-iron cookstove might be disconnected and carried out into the yard to make room for an extra square dance set. Music was provided



*Crossing snow-covered fields by sleigh and skis, Eagle River, ca. 1930. [photo: M.E. Diemer/State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) collection, Madison]*

by neighborhood talent, from grizzled grandfathers sawing away on fiddles to ma-and-pa family bands, to the hired hand who happened to have brought along an old battered accordion with his personal gear. The festivities went long into the night, with only occasional pauses for food, drink and rest breaks, and often continued until the first rays of the rising sun struck the farmhouse windowpanes, signalling that it was time to roust up the sleeping children and return home to do morning chores.

### From Springar to "Skverdans"

In this transition from Old World village culture to the open settlement patterns of the rural Midwest, exposure to the presence of other ethnic groups was common. Neighborhoods might consist predominantly of Norwegians from one particular area or even from the same village in Norway. Yet there were often outsiders present as well, Norwegians from other villages or valleys and even occasional members of other nationalities—German, Swiss, Polish or Bohemian families whose customs differed greatly from that of the core group of original settlers.



*Mess hall interior with cooks and fiddlers, August Mason's lumbering camp, vicinity of Brill, Barron County, ca. 1895.  
[photographer unknown/SHSW collection]*

Over the years the immigrant neighbors learned to interact, in part through the necessity of shared labor, in part through the pleasure of dance parties held in the neighborhood.

Besides the sometimes random mixing of neighborhoods, another arena for early cross-cultural contact was the lumberjack camp of the Wisconsin North Woods. Many immigrant Norwegian farmers spent their first winters in America working as loggers to earn the cash needed to buy land, implements and livestock for their homesteads. In bunkhouse quarters they were thrown together with men of many different nationalities—French-Canadians, Finns and Swedes, Irish and Germans—and while the work was hard, there was occasionally time for recreation and entertainment. Sundays especially were spent playing cards, trading tales, singing ballads, and holding impromptu quadrille dances with a fiddler and caller. Half the men donned red handkerchieves on their sleeves to signify their role as "women" in the set, and off they went! The camp fiddlers might trade off on a resident violin—in some cases no more than a cigar-box strung with baling wire, yet which served to fill the bunkhouse with



the infectious buzzing of a French-Canadian reel or Irish jig.

In addition to the logging camps there were other opportunities for seasonal labor, including working as hired hands for established farmers or storekeepers, picking crops such as cranberries and hops, or traveling to the Dakotas to work on the wheat harvest. From such contacts the Norwegian men brought back a wide variety of tunes and dances to their own settlements.

The Norwegian-Americans, hard-working and eager to succeed, were not slow to imitate Yankee ways of doing business, farming and politicking. They followed popular styles of dress, quickly discarding the homespun clothes that marked them as immigrants. Likewise, they were eager to improve their homes and cultural environment. They purchased pianos and pump organs, and later, wind-up phonographs and radios, bringing the popular music of the day into their parlors.

Though they came from tradition-bound villages, the Norwegians on the frontier were generally willing to try new things that might prove useful or enjoyable. It should be noted that those who

immigrated were most often young adults in the prime of life. They were not joined in this country by their elders who, left at home, were the guardians of traditional values, skilled practitioners of the folk arts and generally most resistant to change. Those young people who traveled to America were willing by choice or by necessity to face change. Their very decision to leave "the old country" marked them as individuals willing to take risks and abandon old ways for new opportunities.

In the realm of music and dance, first to fall by the wayside in the New World were those village variants most narrowly specific to one particular geographical area in Norway. Dances like *springdans*, *gangar*, *halling* and *pols* were too complex and over-specialized to fit well into the open, mixed ethnic environment of the Midwest. Similarly affected was the Hardanger violin, a Norwegian folk fiddle with eight strings and a highly ornamented body (with painted designs on the body, mother-of-pearl inlay on the fingerboard and a scroll carved to resemble a lion's head). Its intricacies required long periods of training to master; its repertoire was tied to those dances men-

tioned above. While Hardanger fiddlers and instruments came to this country in abundance, seldom was the tradition passed on to second or third generations, and the music and dances faded into oblivion.

More adaptable to the Midwest were those types of musical rhythm more widely known—the waltz, schottische and polka. These melodies continued to be passed on from fiddler to fiddler, and within Norwegian-American communities retained their distinctive patterns of bowing and rhythmic swing that marked their country of origin.

Yet even these tunes underwent certain changes. Norwegian waltzes and schottisches in this country became heavier and more pronounced in rhythm, while polkas grew to sound more like old-time American square dances and hoedowns. The instrumentation in particular became distinctly American, with parlor piano accompaniment and the addition of the banjo to house party ensembles. Only in a few places did a more Norwegian sound persist in musical groups of two or three fiddlers—one playing melody, the others playing a chording accompaniment.

The period of immigration from the



mid-1800s to the early 1900s also corresponded with the rising popularity of the one- and two-row button accordion in rural Norway. Many immigrants brought the instrument with them to this country, and the Norwegian-American repertoire soon became infused with numerous tunes that reflected the limited key and chord choices of the little "push-pull" squeezebox.

The diversity of music and dance that came with the settlers from remote and isolated regions of Norway continued to exist in memory and occasional use on the frontier through the end of the 1800s, but in the first part of this century was almost completely replaced by a wealth of schottische, waltz and polka tunes that grew to dominate dance repertoires. Some were standards such as *Livet i Finnskogen*, *Lördagsvalsen* and *Johann på Snippen*, while

*Norwegian-American family portrait, Madison environs, ca. 1875. Note the one-row button accordion displayed with other valued possessions. [photo: Andrew Dahl/SHSW collection]*

others less well-known were passed down in local tradition, unnamed and unwritten, to the present.

### **Norwegian-American Music Today**

To a modern-day native of Norway who is familiar with that country's rich regional folk music traditions, the Norwegian-American music found here must sound thoroughly American. The percussive banjos and pianos plunk and pound away, the rhythms are straightforward, the tunes seemingly simple, showing none of the complex ornamentation or near-classical virtuosity currently favored in Norwegian folk music circles.

Paradoxically, to an American this music sounds Norwegian. The tunes are mostly unknown and have Norwegian names. The waltzes have a lightness unlike the swing of an American old-time waltz. Polkas have an unaccustomed bounciness. And so on.

This music is in fact something in between. Its hybrid nature reflects the history, values and special needs of a particular group of people: Norwegian-Americans in the Upper Midwest.

For these people, this music is just the right blend. It allows them to be Norwe-

gian, in the sense of recognizing through the sound and associations of the music that they still belong in some way to a Scandinavian culture both ancestral and contemporary. Yet other elements embodied in the traditions of the music allow them to be American, too, with little sense of conflict or separateness.

In a way that only folk music can, these tunes touch the hearts of those who remember the house party days. They unleash a flood of reminiscence—of snow-covered fields outside warm parlors and kitchens, the sights and sounds of families dancing and socializing, the smells of pies baking and coffee brewing. They invoke the wholesome atmosphere of Wisconsin rural life in the early part of this century. It was a life hard with work and troubles but tempered, we should pause to remember, with the joys of friendship, family activities and homemade pleasures.

Though times have changed, these values live on. For some they live on in the continuation of simple melodies handed down from grandparents and childhood neighbors. The musicians featured here

are the bearers of tradition. As they once served as pupils of past generations, so we now hope they will serve as teachers to future ones.

### **—Phil Martin**

*Project Director  
Wisconsin Old-Time Music Project  
Madison, Wisconsin, 1982*



*Norwegian-American wedding party (bridal couple in front left corner), Madison environs, ca. 1875. [photo: Andrew Dahl/SHSW collection]*

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### A Note to Musicians

Please be aware that the annotations of tunes on the following pages are merely skeletal remains of more complicated flesh-and-blood renditions. Only the basic outline of melody is provided here, omitting many nuances of rhythm (the trick of "anticipating" the beat is one good example). Also missing are many details of bowing or bellows attack, enunciation of notes and ornamentations. These elements of traditional style, along with a pinch of personality, though omitted are essential to a "correct" (or at least danceable) performance of old-time music.

One suggestion is to listen carefully to the record from which these tunes were taken. Better yet, go out of your way to meet, listen to and *watch* some of these musicians in action. Learning "by ear" is still the most sophisticated, traditional and effective way to grasp the swing of dance tunes. It is the difference between a textbook course and a native speaker's command of a language. As soon as possible, put away the book, take to the field and learn to hear the tunes in your head.



## THE MUSICIANS AND THEIR TUNES

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*The Young brothers and friends on a Sunday in 1928, Thomas Young farm, near Stebensville (south of Stoughton). [photo: Bert Benson/courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Bert Benson, Stoughton]*

## RUDY JACKSON

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*Rudy Jackson in recording studio, Cross Plains, 1982 [photo: Lewis Koch/  
Wisconsin Old-Time Music Project (WOTMP) collection, Madison]*

Rudy Jackson was born January 14, 1902, in Irvin's Coulee near Square Bluff, Whitehall. It was from his father, Henry (Hans) Jackson, who came at age 6 to this country from Gudbrandsdalen, Norway, that Rudy learned his earliest dance tunes on the two-row button accordion. He later learned to master the larger chromatic four-row button accordion as well, which he played for many house parties in the area. He also plays cello and fiddle. As a young man, Rudy left the Whitehall/Blair region for a number of years to work in a Michigan automobile factory, but later returned to settle down again in his home area. During the 1930s he played for dances with local musicians, including Isaac Nelson and Benny Ringstad. Rudy now lives in a one-room schoolhouse and is an avid fan of old-time music which he tapes from the radio and from friends. Playing frequently for his own enjoyment, he continues to remember long-forgotten tunes that his father once played for him as a child.

*Waltz after Henry Jackson (#1)*



—Along with the two following melodies by Rudy Jackson, this tune comes from Rudy's father. Rudy plays them on the two-row button accordion, a "push-pull" instrument that, like a concertina, gives two different notes per button, depending on whether the bellows are drawn apart or squeezed together. Unlike a concertina, the button accordion has bass/chord buttons on the left-hand side. Two rows of melody buttons line the right-hand side. The push-pull button accordions (including one-, two- and three-row versions) were favorite Wisconsin "house party" instruments, since they had a considerable amount of volume, a steady bass/chord beat to guide the dancers, and a delightful melodic syncopation as the bellows wheezed in and out. Many old-time Wisconsin melodies are "perfect" button accordion tunes, fitting with ease on the confines of the little instrument. This waltz is one of those tunes.

### Waltz after Henry Jackson (#2)



—as played by Rudy Jackson

—This tune was probably originally a *masurka* or *springdans*—both are, like a waltz, in 3/4 rhythms, although more syncopated. The *masurka* was popular in the Gudbrandsdal region from which Rudy's father and grandparents came, and was danced in this country into the 1910s at house parties and weddings. After that time, however, it became danced less frequently, especially by younger dancers, and Norwegian-American musicians began to convert the *masurka* tunes into waltz melodies to insure their continued use. This particular waltz still has many characteristics of a *masurka*—the rhythm in certain measures is unmistakable. Other measures, however, have been smoothed out, making this in many ways neither a pure waltz nor *masurka* but a sort of transitional form (a missing link?) somewhere in between.

## Isaac Nelson, Traveling Salesman and Fiddler



*Isaac Nelson (on right) and Rudy Jackson at a dance party, Whitehall area, 1932. [photographer unknown/courtesy of Rudy Jackson, Blair]*

Isaac Nelson (ca. 1890–1953) was, in the words of one, “a good old scout.” A traveling salesman, he peddled his liniments, salves and oil extracts door-to-door in the Blair area, and many recall his friendly personality, and how he used to like to sit and visit for hours without worrying about making a sale. He carried his fiddle about with him on his rounds, and it was reported that he often would leave his sales kit neglected on the porch and bring in only his fiddle instead. He also was known to give fiddle lessons to youngsters on his route. Over the years he played for countless community dances at rural schoolhouses and halls in the vicinity, and a number of tunes known in the area are credited to his name, including *Isaac Nelson’s Hoppwaltz* [see page 36 for a rendition by the Blom Family].



### *Polka after Henry Jackson*



—as played by Rudy Jackson

—Rudy remembers dances in his youth being held in granaries on farmsteads in the neighborhood. Party-goers would gather, take up a collection and send someone to town with a horse and buggy to get food and drink for the evening. They would then dance all night long. He recalls seeing the *halling* danced at these parties. *Halling* is a man's solo dance where the dancer tries to show his athletic prowess by turning a flip and attempting to kick a hat off a broomstick held higher than his head. As Rudy said, "Some of them came down like a sack of feathers, and some came down like a sack of bricks."

## Old-Time House Parties

We were just kids when we started going to dances with our parents. That night, when you got home, you couldn't sleep. You'd still be hearing those tunes going 'round and 'round.

Mabel's brother, Alvin, played the fiddle. He was the only one I've ever heard who could play so it raised goosebumps all over your skin. He started out when he was just a kid—with a fiddle made out of a cigar box. His father played fiddle, too—he played in the old Norwegian style, hard and jerky. Alvin, though, played smooth, with a smooth turn to his wrist. Like I said—goosebumps, so you shivered all over.

We had house parties all around here back in the '20s and '30s. There was one neighborhood up on the ridge, and another one down here in the valley. Us kids would go and dance when we were just five, maybe six years old. The adults would dance with us, or maybe we'd just dance by ourselves on the outside of the circle. Then, when we got a little older, we got more bashful. When we were 14 or 15, then it seemed like we wouldn't dance at all, just stand at the doors and windows and look in.

Sometimes we went to dances in another neighborhood, but not too often. We'd [the boys would] be bashful and the girls would giggle at us and that was about the extent of it.

At a house party, when the little kids got tired they'd just flop 'em down on a bed some-

where. All the beds in the house would be filled with kids, maybe a half a dozen on each bed.

Then there was always a few who drank a little. Mostly the neighborhood bachelors— young ones and old ones. They'd bring fruit jars of bootleg brandy. That was straight alcohol more or less, and they'd mix it with a little sugar and water. You didn't need more than one or two glasses of that!

The old folks, they just sat around and watched and talked. Sometimes they'd dance, especially if they played a masurka or springdances. Then they'd get up and show the young folks a thing or two. I never could get the hang of it.

Usually there was just one fiddler, or maybe two. Nowadays it takes four or five musicians to make music—back then it only took one. That's a musician in my book—a guy who can make music by himself.

There was another fiddler around here—nobody could hold a candle to him but he was a happy-go-lucky sort, you know. Fond of the bottle. At the house party he was sort of unreliable. One minute he'd be going great guns and the next thing they'd be looking for him out in the bushes somewhere, passed out. Liquor and music don't mix when you have to play all night long.

In the old days you had neighbors. Three or

four miles, that was about it. You knew everybody around and they knew you. There weren't any strangers. Of course, at a dance, even friends would get in a fight now and then. But if they had a fist fight or a wrestling match—that was that. Next time they'd have a drink together and forget about it.

At wedding dances, sometimes the minister would come around. They didn't exactly frown on dancing, but they didn't stick around too long, either. Because of their image. They realized they sort of put a damper on things. When they were around people didn't loosen up. How can you have a good time and act like the devil with the preacher there? So he'd stick around for a while after the meal, and then leave. And then the dancing would start.

Us kid'd go to the dances and then come home in the morning and have to go out and do chores. And we'd still have those tunes going in our heads. We'd sing them while we were milking—"Do you remember this one, Alvin?" I'd say. And then that evening after chores we'd sit down in the parlor and play them, Alvin on the violin and me on the piano.

—Gene and Mabel Volden  
Timber Coulee, Westby, 1980



*Leonard Finseth at home, near Mondovi, 1979. [photo (from color transparency): Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]*

Leonard Finseth was born in 1911 on the family dairy farm north of Mondovi where he still lives. He got his first fiddle at age 17 from a mail-order catalogue, and soon began an active career playing for dances in the area. As a young man he learned many tunes from Yankee and Scandinavian fiddlers living nearby, including his uncle Ed Quall and Ingvald Syverson, grandson to one of Norway's top fiddlers of the late 1800s. He also picked up tunes from Otto Rindlisbacher, a Swiss tavern owner in Rice Lake, whom Leonard visited frequently for fiddling sessions in the back room of the tavern. Throughout his career Leonard has eagerly absorbed tunes from many sources across the Upper Midwest and Norway. He has appeared at many regional festivals, as well as twice, in 1974 and 1976, at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C.

### *Discography.*

*Scandinavian Old Time: Folk Fiddler from Wisconsin—Leonard Finseth* [BR-1834/1979]. Banjar Records, Inc., Box 32164, 7440 University Avenue NE, Minneapolis, MN 55432. *The Hills of Old Wisconsin—Leonard Finseth* [102/1982] Leonard Finseth, Route 1, Box 214, Mondovi, WI 54755.

## Polka in G



—A Norwegian-style polka or *hoppwaltz* has a characteristic bouncy melody but an overall smoothness, like a quick-running stream tumbling down over rocks in its path. The melody dances about but the flow is constant. This tune comes from one of Leonard's neighbors, fiddler Ingvald Syverson, born ca. 1898.

## Randie Severson's Waltz



—as played by Leonard Finseth

—A simple but pretty waltz, this tune was learned from fiddler Randie Severson [see opposite page], sister to Colonel and Pete Easterson, also fiddlers. Women fiddlers were uncommon but not unheard of, especially in families with a number of musical siblings. [Please note the spelling of Randie Severson and the Easterson family name, corrected from the *Across the Fields* record jacket with the help of Randie's daughters Onie Kelley and Florence Chandler of Eau Claire.]



## Randie Severson, Woman Fiddler

Randie Easterson Severson was born 1877 in a log cabin in Pleasant Valley Township near Eleva to parents Ole and Christina, immigrants from the Hardanger area of Norway. She grew up learning to play fiddle along with her two younger brothers, "Colonel" (Cornell) and "Pete" (Peder). The three of them often played for dances in the area, with Colonel generally playing the lead and Pete and Randie playing accompaniment.



Randie Severson (center, with violin), Emil Voss (playing homemade bass fiddle), and unidentified friend (with accordion), Eau Claire, 1948. [photographer unknown/courtesy of Onie S. Kelley, Eau Claire]

On occasion, however, Randie played alone for house parties, with only a piano or pump organ backup.

As a young girl she was exceptionally skilled not only with a bow and instrument but also with a needle and thread. At age 12 she was the neighborhood seamstress, and would go from farm to farm sewing everything from men's suits to wedding dresses, for which she received 50¢ a day. When she had saved up

enough money she bought herself a "wheel" (a bicycle with a tall front wheel) which she then rode about on her rounds.

In her twenties, she traveled out to North Dakota with her brother Pete to work with the threshing crews, he as a separator man and she as a cook. It was there that she met 6'3" Sam Severson from Fergus Falls, Minnesota, the engineer for the crew. It was a "cook-car romance" and they were married that year, 1903. They returned to Eau Claire to settle down and raise a family.

Randie continued her long playing career in Eau Claire, fiddling for house parties and dances. Her repertoire broadened to include not only Norwegian waltzes, schottisches, *masurkas* and *hoppwaltzes* but also multi-ethnic Wisconsin favorites such as the circle two-step, the *Flying Dutchman*, *Herr Schmidt*, *Coming thru' the Rye* and square dances.

At age 65 she could still ride a bicycle around the block and dance *springdans*, and was playing regularly for senior citizens club dances. At 75 she played violin for her own golden wedding anniversary party. She died six years later, at age 82, in 1959.

## ED STENDALEN

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*Ed Stendalen at home, Westby, 1981. [photo: Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]*

Ed Stendalen was born November 20, 1915, near Chaseburg. He learned to play the two-row button accordion at age 12, picking up tunes from local musicians, including some handed down from his grandfather Anton Tomten, one of the premier fiddlers in Westby at the turn of the century. Ed's musical career has consisted mostly of playing for neighborhood house parties, along with a stint in an area dance band, *The Wildcats*, in the late 1930s. After farming for 40 years in Coon Township near Westby, Ed has just recently retired and moved into a newly built house on the edge of town. He now plays primarily at home for his own enjoyment, and for that of his grandchildren, who are frequent visitors and avid young dancers. He occasionally gets together with his sister Manda Mortenson, a piano player from nearby Viroqua, and friend Selmer Torger, a fiddler and banjo player, to play for community events in the area.

### Anton Tomten's Waltz

3 —as played by Ed Stendalen

—Ed is not sure of the exact source of this and the following tune, whether he learned them directly from his grandfather, fiddler Anton Tomten (who died when Ed was only 11), or if he picked them up at a later date from his uncles Gilbert and Ingvald or Aunt Anna, three of Anton's children who played violin as well. In any case these tunes are some of those that Anton played. [For more on Anton Tomten, see page 27.]

*Please note:* On the *Across the Fields* LP this and the following tune by Ed Stendalen are played in the key of F#, the base key of his three-row button accordion. Both tunes have been transcribed in this booklet into the key of G, for the ease of musicians unaccustomed to playing in F#—a rather difficult key for some instruments.

Anton Tomten's Masurka



—A Norwegian-American wedding in the Westby area (ca. 1915) usually took place in the afternoon in the church or parsonage. Afterwards the wedding party went to the bride's home, where they had dinner, highlighted by *lefse*, meatballs, and a roast from a large animal butchered for the occasion. While the women prepared the food the men often engaged in various contests—"boxing hats," tugs-of-war and the like. After the meal (and after waiting for the preacher to leave if he had come for the dinner), the dancing started. The festivities were held outside on a special platform—a bowery—consisting of a wooden dance floor, posts supporting a canvas roof, and decorations of greenery. It was illuminated by lamps and lanterns. The first dance was a march, led by the bridal couple and attendants. Then came a waltz, just for the bridal party and family. Then followed a waltz for everyone, and the evening was underway!

## "Spelemann" Tomten of Westby

Anton Tomten was born in Biri, Norway, in 1855 and came to Wisconsin in 1868 at age thirteen with his parents to settle in the Westby area. He was married in 1883 and had nine children. Known locally as "Spelemann" ("Fiddler") Tomten, he was in great demand to play for dances and wedding celebrations all over the area. On occasion he would walk as far as 20 miles in one day to play for an evening dance, returning home the following day.

Many of his children were musical. The two boys, Ingvald and Gilbert, played violin and often accompanied their father at dances, with Ingvald assisting with the melody and Gilbert playing a chording accompaniment or simple harmony. Most of his seven daughters played either piano or guitar, and one daughter, Anna, played violin as well, so there was no lack of music around the hillside farmhouse. Since they often played outside in the summer evenings, Anton converted a small outbuilding into an ingenious musical instrument by nailing 2x4s on each end and stringing heavy wire across one side. When tuned it could be plucked like an enormous bass fiddle.



*Wedding party musicians, Westby area, ca. 1915. Anton Tomten (far right, with violin), Sibjorn Jackson (second from right, also with violin), Mathinus Oium (with cello), and "Klur-Per" (standing, second from left). [photographer unknown/courtesy of Manda Mortenson, Viroqua]*

Manda Mortenson of Viroqua, one of Anton's granddaughters, recalls hearing the following story that sheds light on the amicable relationship between Anton and the local preacher, Halvor Halvorson. "There was a wedding over by Westby and Grandpa Tomten was on his way there to play for the wedding dance. And

he was walking down the street with his fiddle under his arm and he met the minister coming back from the ceremony. And when he saw my grandpa with his fiddle, Reverend Halvorson said, 'Well, I've done my part. Now you've got left to do yours.' "



## THE BERGERSON FAMILY



*The Bergerson family at home, Hixton area, 1980. From left to right: Russell (kneeling), Renee, Norma and Ove. [photo (from color transparency): Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]*

Ove Bergerson was born May 29, 1925, in Whitehall, spent his childhood years in Blair, and at age 14 moved with his parents to the Hixton area farm where he now raises his own family. He got his first fiddle at age 9 as a child sick in bed with the German measles. He learned tunes from old-timers in the Blair and Hixton areas, as well as some from his father and grandfather. In 1956, he married Norma Nelson, who lived on a neighboring farm and played drums in his old-time dance band. They now include two of their four children as members of their family band, *Notes of Norway*, which features son Russell (b. 1965) on fiddle, bass and banjo, daughter Renee (b. 1967) on banjo, with Ove on fiddle, and Norma on piano. They play several times a month for family reunion picnics, Sons of Norway meetings, area festivals, county fairs and nursing homes. Ove works as a cruiser for a timber company and farms part-time.

*Pete Peterson's Schottische*



—as played by Ove Bergerson

—Ove's style of fiddling is characterized by a sharp attack of the bow and the slurring of certain notes to accent the syncopation of the Norwegian-American schottische. Norma's piano back-up (on the LP) complements this perfectly, with a few extra touches in the B music to give the tune a real flair. The melody comes from a neighbor of Ove's in the Hixton area.

## Roger's Polka

D A7 D A7 II. D

D A E A A A7 D

A7 D G A D

—as played by Ove Bergerson

—Again, this is a *hopptwltz*/polka tune marked by a quick melody and flowing rhythm. Its name illustrates an alternative custom to naming a tune after the musician from whom it was learned. It can be named after a dancer who likes the tune and requests it frequently—in this case, Norma's brother Roger.

*Julebukker, we called it. That's Norwegian style. In Blair they used to go over to the neighbors, dressed up in masks and everything. It was a masquerade. Somebody had a team [of horses] with a wagon box on, and a bunch of people, about a dozen, would sit up in there. You could hear [them] on the hill in the evening—the dogs started to bark up above—and then [you knew] the gang was coming. You could hear the bells on the horses when they come.*

—Omar Austad  
Blair, 1980

When they came to a farmhouse, the masqueraders entered directly and began to clown around, disguising their voices if they spoke or remaining silent, while members of the household tried to guess who they were. Since the men usually wore women's clothing and vice versa, with wigs, masks, old coats, oversized boots and gloves to cover the body, it was not so easy to identify even well-known neighbors.

*I remember once the julebukklers came by to surprise me and my husband. They started clowning around, and I was trying to guess who they all were. And there was one who was*

*acting really fresh, and I just couldn't figure out who he was. And finally I got his gloves off him—and it was my husband! I recognized his hands right away. When the julebukklers came in he had snuck upstairs and put on some old clothes and come down and joined the gang!*

—unidentified woman  
Five Points, 1979

The custom was called *julebukking*, in Wisconsin variously translated as "Christmas fooling," "Christmas ghosting," or "ragamuffing". A direct translation from the Norwegian would be "Christmas goat" or "Christmas ram", a lingering reference to older rites of pagan animal worship connected with the winter solstice. In more recent tradition in Norway the *julebukklers* were masked neighborhood youths who collected food and drink as they processed from house to house, which they then used to hold their own Christmas party off in a small cabin somewhere. In Wisconsin the visitors more often partook of refreshments on the spot, and, if they happened to have a fiddler along, might stay to dance.

*We went julebukking and when we got in there the missus, she went out to the back*

## *Julebukking and "Yankee Dances"*

*kitchen and locked the door so we couldn't get out—and there we were! She wanted us to stay for a while, I guess. So we had the violin and guitar along, and they rolled up the rugs in the front room and pushed the furniture around, and they all starting dancing and we had a real good party that night.*

—Bert Benson  
Stoughton, 1980

When the *julebukklers* took off their masks and stayed to dance, they frequently urged the fiddler to play not only their Norwegian favorites, but American ones as well.

*. . . waltzes and two-steps and skegga loppa—that's something similar to a hoppswaltz. And then they had a square dance every so often—some farmer got up and hol-lered, you know—Arkansas Traveler and some of them. And they'd line up and [go] back and forth across the room. "Yankee dances"—that's what the Norwegians called them! Square dances—all that was "Yankee dances."*

—Omar Austad  
Blair, 1980



Bruce Bollerud playing Bandonion, at Eagles Club, Madison, 1982. [photo: Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]

Bruce Bollerud was born in 1934 on a farm two miles east of Hollandale. His first contact with old-time music came from Herman Erickson, a local fiddler who played for house parties and tavern dances. Erickson's band included violin, banjo, cornet and Bandonion (a large-sized German concertina). Bruce learned to play the Bandonion when he was 10 years old from Blanchardville music store owner Henry "Step-and-a-Half" Hanson. Since joining the musicians' union at age 16, Bruce has played his Bandonion and piano accordion for a number of area dance bands, including *Gilbert Prestybroten's Orchestra*, *Emil Simpson and the Night-hawks*, and the *Goose Island Ramblers*. Currently Bruce works as a special education teacher and lives in Madison, where he continues to play music with his own three-piece dance band, *The Good Time Band*.

### *Discography.*

*From Bluegrass to Russian Gypsy*—The Goose Island Ramblers [K-1110/1963]. *A Session with the Goose Island Ramblers* [K-1111/1964]. *Doing the Hurley Hop*—The Goose Island Ramblers [K-1112/1964]. *Sounds of Syttende Mai*—The Goose Island Ramblers and others [K-2010/1964].—all out-of-print, Cuca Record Corporation, Sauk City, WI.

### *Stegen Vals ("Stepladder Waltz")*



—as played by Bruce Bollrud

—This waltz, showing a standard melodic pattern intrinsic to many Norwegian-style waltzes, is played by Bruce on the Bandonion (named after its inventor, Heinrich Band of Germany). This is a concertina-like instrument, only much larger, with 34 buttons on the left side and 37 on the right. Though it is a push-pull instrument, with two notes per button, it has enough notes to offer a fully chromatic scale covering five octaves. The instrument apparently had a local Wisconsin renaissance in the Blanchardville area, perhaps due to the nearby Swiss influence in New Glarus. Elsewhere in the state it was uncommon among Norwegian-Americans, who tended to prefer the two- and three-row button accordions.

## THE BLOM FAMILY



*The Blom family on stage, Cashton Centennial fiddle contest, Cashton, 1979. Left to right: LeRoy, Mark, Kevin and Lisa. [photo: Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]*

LeRoy Blom was born November 13, 1924, and grew up on a farm near Blair. He started his musical career at age five on the harmonica. At age 14 he took up the mandolin, and shortly thereafter taught himself to play fiddle by "watching a neighbor a lot." He has drawn his extensive repertoire of old-time dance tunes from elder area musicians, including Iver Johnstad, Oscar Nyen, Isaac Nelson and Reinhard Thurston. He married his wife Marie in 1963, and their children now form the core of their family band, *The Scandinavians*, which features son Mark (b. 1963) on fiddle, Lisa (b. 1967) on piano and fiddle, Kevin (b. 1969) on fiddle and banjo, and youngest daughter Kari, who at age 9 sings a variety of songs from Norwegian ballads to cowboy yodels. *The Scandinavians* play several times a month for wedding and anniversary dances, showers, ice cream socials, nursing homes, supper clubs, and occasional fiddlers' get-togethers around the region.



### *Iver Johnstad's Schottische*



—as played by Mark Blom

—Iver Johnstad was a barber from Pigeon Falls and leader of an old-time dance band that played actively in the Blair area during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Blair, as much and perhaps more so than other locales in the state, has always been a center of fiddling. One 80-year old fiddler from Blair, Selmer Halvorson, once sat down to list all the fiddlers he had known over the course of his career that lived within a five-to-ten mile radius of his home—and came up with 86 names. Four of the eight musical performers or groups featured in this booklet/recording live in, near, or have close connections to that small town of 1,036 residents.

*Isaac Nelson's Hoppwaltz*

The musical score for "Isaac Nelson's Hoppwaltz" is written for a single melodic line in D major. It consists of five staves of music. The time signatures are 2/4, 3/4, 2/4, 3/4, and 2/4. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and beams. Chord markings (D, A, G) are placed above the staff to indicate the harmonic structure. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat signs.

Chord markings: D, A, D, A, D, G, D, A, D, D.

—as played by Mark Blom

# Iver Johnstad's Hoppwaltz



—as played by Mark Blom

—I teach my kids the tunes the way I learned them. I remember Mark [LeRoy's oldest son] saying he didn't see why he had to be so fussy to get the tune just right—note for note, you know. "Well," I said, "that's the way I learned them and that's the way you're going to learn them." Because otherwise—you know, he changes a note here and a note there, and the next guy does the same thing—and pretty soon it isn't going to be the same tune at all. In years to come it'll change the tune entirely. And I wanted to keep the old-fashioned tunes—I like them the way I learned them, and that's the way I like to keep them!

—LeRoy Blom  
Blair, 1979

## Evergreen Waltz

D G Em A7

1. 2. D

Em A7 1. 2. D

—as played by Mark Blom

—The tune was given this name by a friend and occasional accompanist at living room jam-sessions, Jerry Gilbertson of West Salem, in order to identify the tune among the dozens of other old-time, and unnamed, tunes in LeRoy's repertoire. This waltz has the typical swing of a Norwegian-American waltz, combining the flowing melody of a Norwegian waltz with a touch of the deliberateness of an American one.

*Evergreen Waltz (Harmony)*

The musical score is written for a single melodic line in treble clef, 3/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piece consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains measures 1 through 8, with harmonic markings D, G, Em, A7, and D above the staff. The second staff contains measures 9 through 14, with harmonic markings D, D, G, and Em above the staff. The third staff contains measures 15 through 22, with harmonic markings A7, D, D, D, and D above the staff. The final measure of the third staff is marked "last time only". The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing triplets or beamed sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

—as played by LeRoy Blom

## BERTEL BERNTSEN

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*Bertel Berntsen at home, Stoughton, 1981. [photo: Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]*

Bertel Berntsen was born in 1891 near the town of Flekkefjord in southern Norway. He began his musical career playing harmonica for his schoolmates at recess, when they would disappear to a nearby barn to dance on rainy days. Unfortunately their teacher eventually found out about the matter and being “of the sort that was against dancing” for religious reasons put an immediate end to the activity. However, Bertel continued his music and learned to play button accordion as well, to the extent that when he emigrated to America in 1912, both his instruments were “just about worn out!” In Stoughton, Bertel worked 22 years for the Mandt wagon factory until it closed its doors in the mid-1920s, and then worked as a municipal employee for another 22 years until his retirement. He has continued his musical interests throughout his life and currently plays actively with a senior citizens band that tours local and area schools.

### *Bertel's Schottische*



—as played by Bertel Berntsen

—This, Bertel said, was one of his “earliest numbers,” a tune he learned as a child growing up near the town of Flekkefjord in southern Norway. For a beginning musician, the harmonica is more portable and much cheaper than the button accordion, to which it has many similarities. In the hands of an experienced player like Bertel, now age 91, it can provide exceptionally good dance music, with the dance rhythm controlled by the surge of the breath, which not only plays the melody line but also marks each count of the beat.



## ARNOLD AND EVELYN OLSON

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*Arnold and Evelyn Olson in recording studio, Cross Plains, 1982. [photo: Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]*

Arnold Olson and Evelyn Hanevold Olson were born in 1912 and 1915, respectively, and grew up as near neighbors in the Fly Creek valley near Blair. Arnold had three older brothers who played violin, and it was from them that he learned to play at age 15. He picked up additional tunes by attending rural house parties in the area and dances in Blair, which sometimes featured traveling bands such as *Thorstein Skarning's Orchestra*. Married in 1936, the Olsons formed a much-loved local musical duo, he on violin and she on piano or accordion. They played frequently for community events, Sons of Norway lodge meetings, and for the nursing home where Evelyn is activities director. Arnold Olson died of a sudden heart attack on May 1, 1982, just days before the *Across the Fields* LP was released. This booklet is dedicated to his memory.

## Olga Blom's Waltz

The musical score for "Olga Blom's Waltz" is written on four staves in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. The melody is composed of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing beamed sixteenth notes. Chords are indicated by letters above the staves: C, F, (Dm), G, C, F, (Dm), G, C, F, Dm, G, C, F, Dm, G, C. The piece concludes with a final measure containing a whole note chord.

—as played by Arnold Olson

—I've always lived here [in the farmhouse on Fly Creek]. I was born here, and it was 13 of us in the family, and then we took in one of my mother's sister's boys, so it was 14 all together. I had three brothers that played the fiddle. And my oldest brother, he played cello. We used to have some pretty good sessions here. I used to go to dances and hear a tune—I had a pretty good memory in them days, so I would come home and try it out on the fiddle. Sometimes I wouldn't get it just right, so then I went again and when they played the same tune, then I'd correct it—what I did wrong.

We had one guy—Nels Quam, he had a style all of his own. He put the fiddle down below his ribs, here. And there was a tall, lanky guy from Montana Ridge. He had a two-row button accordion. No big instrument, but it

[continued]

*Olga Blom's Waltz (Harmony)*



—composed by Robert Wernerehl

*made music for us to dance by, and that was the important thing. Oh, yah, we had house parties galore. With the hard times we couldn't afford to go far, you know, so we had house parties quite often. And the fiddlers would fiddle away, and we'd dance 'til all hours of the morning. And it was hot in them houses in the wintertime. You'd open the door and the steam just oozed out of the house. But that didn't bother us—we'd go out and cool off and come in again and dance just the same. We sure had a lot of enjoyment out of the music!*

—Arnold Olson  
*Fly Creek, Blair, 1979*



*Wisconsin farmstead in winter, east of Stoughton, 1980. [photo (from color transparency): Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]*

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*Fiddle and musical momentos, Orville Rundhaug farm, near Daleyville, 1980.* [photo (from color transparency): Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]





*Bill Birkrem (center), Deerfield fiddler, as a young boy with his mother and cousin, near Deerfield, ca. 1915.*  
[photographer unknown/courtesy Bill Birkrem, Deerfield]

## Folklore Village Farm

Folklore Village Farm is a unique rural folk-arts center located in the rolling hills of southwestern Wisconsin between Ridgeway and Dodgeville. Originally a one-room schoolhouse and an adjacent family farm, it is now the site of ethnic festivals, workshops of folk crafts, dance and music, community potlucks and dance parties, and a variety of other activities. Participants at festivals learn to weave old-fashioned harvest wreaths, raise garlanded May and Midsommer poles, design traditional paper-cuts, make corn-husk dolls, play old-time fiddle music, dance folk dances from around the world, and learn about many other folk crafts, customs and celebrations. Folklore Vil-

lage Farm has also sponsored a number of special events, including performances and residencies by touring international folk dance and music groups, an annual story-telling festival, and, in 1979, the creation of the Wisconsin Old-Time Music Project for documentary research. *For more information on the schedule of annual festivals, workshops and events, please write: Folklore Village Farm, Route 3, Dodgeville, Wisconsin 53533, or telephone (608) 924-3725.*

### *A Kingdom of Fiddlers Program*

*A Kingdom of Fiddlers* is a 45-minute slide/tape program that explores the history of old-time dance music in Wisconsin from pioneer days to the present. It shows

the roots of this music in immigrant traditions, and highlights the "house party" days of the 1920s and 1930s, when farm families gathered in neighborhood parlors and kitchens to dance to the music of fiddle and accordion.

The program was researched through numerous interviews with traditional Wisconsin musicians. Recorded excerpts from these interviews are featured in the program, along with color slides by documentary photographer Lewis Koch and a wealth of historical images from collections around the state. The sound track also includes a narrative combined with field and studio recordings of old-time music.

*A Kingdom of Fiddlers* was produced by the Wisconsin Old-Time Music Project, with funding assistance from the Wisconsin Humanities Committee. Since its premiere at the State Historical Society, Madison, in January, 1981, it has received excellent reviews from audiences around the state. *A Kingdom of Fiddlers* is both a historical document and a celebration of our state's rich folk music heritage.

*For additional information contact Lewis Koch, c/o Wisconsin Old-Time Music Project, 214 Shepard Terrace, Madison, WI 53705, or telephone (608) 244-3214.*



*Folklore Village Farm, from the north, on County Highway BB, 1980. [photo (from color transparency): Lewis Koch/WOTMP collection]*



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