**Origins of Old Time Fiddling & Fiddle Contests in America**

Old Time fiddling represents a nostalgic link with our country's past — a tradition rooted in the simple, honest, hardworking lives of the first rural farmers.  
  
When British settlers began arriving in the mid 1700's and colonizing the Blue Ridge Mountains and Southern Appalachian states of Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky and Tennessee, they brought their instruments with them.

The big tasks of rural life — barn raising, planting crops, raising animals — were communal affairs where all the neighbors would help out. The day's work being done was invariably capped with drinking, dancing, and music, for which the local fiddler was essential. He was greatly prized by the community and at the same time, condemned by the churchman who saw only idleness and liquor associated with "The Devil's Box". Early fiddlers could name among their ranks such diverse luminaries as the pioneer, Davy Crocket, and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was an accomplished player and practiced every day. He is said to have been so fond of his fiddle that when he heard that his family home had been destroyed by a fire he first asked, "Are all the books destroyed?" and was told, "Yes, but we saved the fiddle!”

Of course, the fiddle was not the only instrument available. Banjo, guitar, harmonica, autoharp, dulcimer, and mandolin were also common. Due to fiddle contests, however, fiddles remained pre-eminent, and fiddlers were becoming celebrities beyond their own communities.

Fiddle contests became hugely popular events with skilled practitioners stalking the land like gunfighters in search of prize money. The earliest recorded American fiddle contest was in 1736, held in Hannover County, Virginia. The prize offered was “a fine Cremona fiddle to be played for, by any number of country fiddlers”. It was not uncommon for contests to be fixed. A traveling showman would arrive, propose a challenge, and then watch his “unknown associate” ride into town and win the prize.

Fiddling was such a valued skill: competition was friendly but fierce between fiddlers and fans who wanted their local hero to be seen as the best.

In such a competitive atmosphere, showmanship was at a premium. Fiddlers would develop a stage show, and trick fiddling started to evolve.  This involved finding ever more bizarre ways to play the instrument such as tossing the fiddle in the air, playing behind the head, playing with one arm under one leg, fiddling upside down, and playing with the bow held between the knees and the fiddle held with both hands. Certain tunes became associated with trick fiddling; using “Pop Goes the Weasel”*,* a fiddler would play each section of the tune in a different contorted position. Expert trick fiddlers could do all these antics while playing accurately and in time.  Less athletic tricks developed along more conventional lines; the double shuffle or “hokum bowing” is a flashy pattern popularized by jazz fiddler Joe Venuti in the late 1920’s that was incorporated into contest tunes like “The Beaumont Rag”*,* and reached its fame in the tune “Orange Blossom Special”*.*

Henry Ford sponsored a series of contests at his car dealerships in the mid 1920's which he described as, “a search for The King of the Fiddlers". He saw this as a way of promoting old fashioned American values and staving off the twin evils of jazz and communism. So keen was he on fostering the good old days that he built Greenfield Village, an idealized frontier town where he hosted barn dances and invited executives from his company to attend dance classes.

Fiddle contests and fiddle conventions were hugely popular all across the United States. Most were small, local affairs in schoolhouses or courthouses, but many were huge, attracting dozens of fiddlers and thousands of eager fans. A fiddle contest in Joplin, Missouri in 1926 is reported to have attracted 4000 listeners. It was possible for a fiddler who was able to travel, to attend three or four contests a week. Earning cash prizes or produce of some kind would have been particularly welcome during the gloomy years of The Great Depression which was when the conventions reached their peak.

In the early days, flashy tricks were one sure fire way to walk off with the prize. It was a case of almost anything goes; whether it was trilling like a mockingbird, braying like a mule, hollering, joking, or dressing as a rooster to play theChicken Reel“*.* Practically the only thing not allowed was a player who had formal training. The old timers saw a big difference between themselves and the purveyors of more highfalutin’ classical music, and they wanted to maintain that difference. If a player “trembled his fingers” (i.e. used vibrato), he would be viewed with deep suspicion.

The contests were always highly entertaining. The larger ones may have been combined with other attractions such as hog calling, cracker eating, husband calling, buck dancing, lying contests, ugliest fiddler contests, and so on. More recently, as contests have become more formalized, trick fiddling, cross tuning, and hokum bowing and the tunes most associated with them, are banned in most competitions. Typically, a contest will be divided into age groups, and in each round three tunes are played; a breakdown, a waltz, and a tune of choice such as a rag, or polka. There is also a time limit of around five minutes. The judges are normally professional musicians, and they will be looking for overall feel, intonation, rhythm and creativity. After a considerable lull in postwar years, fiddle contests have once more become very popular, and hundreds of them attract large audiences across the United States and Canada. The National Old Time Fiddlers Contest at Weiser, Idaho has been held annually since 1953.

In his book *Fiddler's Dream*, Howard Wight Marshall described how contests meant different things to different competitors:

*“For some fiddlers, the process of competing is a passion, a Darwinian drive for supremacy and dominance. For many others, a fiddler’s contest is a chance to bring home some much needed grocery money. Some love trophies; Some focus on the chance to be around like-minded musicians and have no emotional investment in “winning” or “losing”.*

Chris Haigh, “The Fiddle Handbook”, *Fiddling Around,* http://www.fiddlingaround.co.uk