

THE ISLAND FIDDLER



Jack Webster and daughter Georgina at home in the early 50s.

Newsletter of the Prince Edward Island Fiddlers' Society
No. 5, March 1981

Fiddlers Notes



The record on the right has sold some 1500 units since it was released in late November. 'The Prince Edward Island Fiddlers' is available from a number of Island outlets, including Sam the Record Man, Trainor's Grocery (Charlottetown), Eptek Centre (Summerside), Montague Tire and Chaisson's Restaurant down in Souris. The same picture appeared with a notice in the current ArtsAtlantic magazine, and will be reviewed in the next issue of The Island Magazine. At present a cassette edition of this music is available at a price of \$8; the record is \$7. . . . Last year's Rollo Bay Scottish Fiddling Festival was the subject of a television documentary broadcast last month by the CBC; the local station aired it both at noon and in the evening. . . . Which reminds us to send along our best wishes to the 'star' of that show, Joe Chaisson, who has been undergoing treatment this winter. . . . Another old-time fiddler, Parnell Cosgrove, celebrated his 100th birthday last January 18. Parnell is living at Summerset Manor, Summerside, and is the father of Mark, a well-known piano player of that town. . . . Allister McGillivray is said to be completing his book on Cape Breton fiddlers and fiddling, which is being eagerly anticipated in these parts. . . . Fiddlers from most areas of the province were on hand February 23 for a social afternoon with music and lunch at St. Pius X parish hall in Parkdale. . . . This winter seems to have been an active one for all branches of the Society. The Montague fiddlers are meeting at the Legion Tuesdays at 8, while the Souris fiddlers gather at Chaisson's Restaurant Sundays at 2. Up west there has been a class alternating in Kensington and Summerside; Roy Johnstone has taken over from Jim Hornby as instructor. Also in Kensington, Alvin Bernard had a successful fiddle class as part of the Community School program; there was also one in Tracadie where Sr. Cecilia and Bernadette Power shared the duties. . . . The Prince Edward Island Council of the Arts recently gave The Island Fiddler a grant to aid in publishing. . . . Unrelated to this is the enclosed questionnaire, which we ask you to fill out. The Arts Council is surveying Island musicians as part of a general arts inventory and the few minutes it will take to complete and mail will help establish the numerical importance of fiddling in this survey. . . . We encourage those who have not yet paid their '81 dues to do it soon. This will be the last mailing to those not on our current membership list. Send your \$5 (still pre-inflation prices) to Cecil Trainor, 9 Centennial Drive, Parkdale, before you forget. . . . Happy fiddling.

SOCIAL NOTES: We are still collecting information on the vital stats of members, so please excuse any omissions. It looks as though spring was a good season for the arrival of fiddlers, as we extend birthday greetings to Lem Chaisson (April 3), Carl Webster (April 5) and Wilfred Bernard (April 18); in May, to Jim Hornby (10th) and Kevin Chaisson (12th); in June, to Ernie Poole (8th), Joe Chaisson (12th) and Peter Chaisson, Sr. (30th).

The big news in anniversaries is that Charlie and Maggie Sheehan celebrate their 56th wedding anniversary on June 10th. Congratulations on this happy day. From all of the above, it looks like the house-party season will get off to an early start in Kings County.

Just before we published, Mr. and Mrs. Roland Jay of Mt. Stewart celebrated their 50th anniversary. Our congratulations to them. (S.H.)

Tunes to Try

My Two Sons - Jig

by REUBEN SMITH

Musical notation for "My Two Sons - Jig" in G major, 6/8 time. The piece consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains the first line of the melody with chords G, D, and G. The second staff contains the second line of the melody with chords D, G, Am, and D. The third staff contains the third line of the melody with chords G, Am, D, and G. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

KIMMY'S JIG

by REUBEN SMITH

Musical notation for "Kimmy's Jig" in G major, 6/8 time. The piece consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains the first line of the melody with chords G, Am, and D. The second staff contains the first line of the first ending, marked "1ST", with chords A and D, and the second line of the first ending, marked "2ND", with chord G. The third staff contains the first line of the second ending, marked "1ST", with chords D, A, and D, and the second line of the second ending, marked "2ND", with chord G. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

KENNEDY'S REEL

By SANDY CAMPBELL

Musical notation for "Kennedy's Reel" in G major, 2/4 time. The piece consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains the first line of the melody with chords G and D. The second staff contains the second line of the melody with chords G, D, and G. The third staff contains the third line of the melody with chords D, G, and D. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

The two jigs are recent compositions of the Blooming Point fiddler Reuben Smith. The reel was made by Sandy Campbell of Fairfield before 1900; it was called "Kennedy's Reel" but various Chaisson fiddlers passed it around & it was known to Jack Webster and others as "Chaisson's Reel." Thanks to Bill MacDonald for notation, and Bernadette Power for accompaniment chords.

Memories of Jack Webster

Jack Webster (1899-1974) was probably the most active fiddler of his time. His popularity as a dance fiddler was unparalleled, and he was described by Angus Chisholm (just a few years ago) as "my idea of a good Scotch player." Jack and his wife Ellen (Birt) had four children-- Georgina, Carl, Jackie and Stan--all musicians.

The Island Fiddler recently asked Jackie & Stan to reminisce about Jack and his music.



STAN WEBSTER: My father first became interested in the violin when he was about six years old. His grandfather, who played violin, carved out a shingle in the shape of a fiddle and made him a bow out of horse hair. After that, he got his first real fiddle when he was about 10 years old. He had no formal instruction, and more or less picked it up on his own.

JACKIE WEBSTER: He first played in public when he was 12 years old. The fiddler at a local house-party became drunk and couldn't play any more. Our father, as young as he was, finished out the set. He noted with only three fingers. When he was young he hurt his first finger, and taught himself to play with the other three. Even after he got flexibility back in that finger he never used it again.

STAN WEBSTER: This of course meant that he couldn't play in B-flat. Any tunes in B-flat he switched to C. He used the high bass tuning (AEAE) for many of the tunes in A and this acted as another finger for him on the back strings. He used the high bass tuning for 'Big John McNeil' and his version of that tune became kind of his trademark.

He played for dances six nights a week during the summer. He had regular dances all over Queens and Kings counties in places like Vernon River, Montague, Lower Montague, Fortune, Morell, Dunstaffnage, St. Peter's, Cherry Valley, Lorne Valley, Southport, Souris and other places. He also played a lot in Boston with all the well-known former Maritime fiddlers who lived in the area. At most of his dances he had just guitar accompaniment. However, for two summers he had a full band, with accordion, piano, guitar and trap drums.

JACKIE WEBSTER: He never made money from his music. For a living he delivered mail and did some farming. At one time one of the Kenny family from Peakes who was a promoter in Montreal, offered him a full-time job playing fiddle at various clubs in Montreal. He almost went, but decided to turn it down.

STAN WEBSTER: Besides the dances, he took part in many concerts. One of his favorite places to play was the Dundas Exhibition, especially for the dances. He was extremely popular because of his great dance beat. Dances during that time in this area mainly consisted of the Souris set and the lancers. Some areas danced the plain quadrille, and when he was very young, the eight-hand reel was still danced.





JACKIE WEBSTER: At the dances he played most of the well-known tunes like 'Paddy on the Turnpike,' 'Lord MacDonald's Reel,' 'Ottawa Reel,' 'Caber Feidh,' and lesser-known reels locally called 'Duffy the Dancer,' 'Chaisson's Reel' [see p. 3 for the music], 'Jay's Reel' and numerous tunes that never did get a name. You know, at those times they just played the one tune over and over until the set was done. He would some times switch to another, but it was hardly ever done during those times.

STAN WEBSTER: He had a huge repertoire of tunes. Most he never knew the names of, and I guess there would be very few fiddlers around today who can remember them. You just don't hear those tunes any more.

He was quick to learn a tune, and when radio came in, he learned many tunes from fiddlers who played over the Antigonish and Sydney radio stations. Fiddlers like Colin Boyd, Hugh A. MacDonald, and Tena Campbell, and in later years, Angus Chisholm. He also liked pipe tunes, and learned a lot of pipe marches from local piper George Martin. We always had lots of company, people coming to hear him play. He loved to play for anyone. He couldn't play much the last 10 years of his life because of ill health.

JACKIE WEBSTER: If he were alive today, he would really love what's happening to the music: with the Fiddlers' Society, the big outdoor concerts like Rollo Bay, and all the new tunes on the go. He would just thrive.

(J.W.)

[CAPTIONS: Pictures on the opposite page are from the early '60s; Stan Burke is the Hawaiian guitar player. Pictures above are from the early '50s; Stan Webster is on guitar (also on piano where Jack is being taped).]

The Fiddle is His Bride

by "FIDDLIN' BOB" TAYLOR, Governor of Tennessee, 1896-98.

When I grew large enough to cast sheep's eyes at the girls, when love began to tickle my heart and the blood of the violets got into my veins, I began to draw the bow across the vibrant strings of the fiddle to give vent to my feelings, and I poured my spirit out through my fingers by the bucketful. I swapped spirit for smiles at the ratio of sixteen to one; I exchanged clogs for compliments, and jigs for sighs and sentimental exclamations. No ordinary mortal ever felt the raptures of a fiddler; the fiddle is his bride, and the honeymoon lasts forever.

I fiddled and I fiddled and I fiddled, until youth blossomed into manhood; and still I fiddled and I fiddled. Politicians sneered at me as a fiddler; but the girls said it was no harm, and the boys voted while I fiddled, and the fiddle won. There is always some old sour and tuneless hypocrite abusing and denouncing "us fiddlers." I have heard them say that they never saw a fiddler who was "any account," and I have known good men who sincerely believed that fiddlers were dangerous to communities. There never was a greater error of opinion.

There is no more harm in wiggling the fingers than there is in wagging the tongue, and there is a great deal more religion in a good, law-abiding fiddle than there is in some folks who outlaw that divine instrument. There is infinitely more music in it than there is in some hymns I have heard sung by old dyspeptics who denounce it. Music is music, whether it be the laughter and song of the fiddle or the melodies of the human voice; music is the hallelujah of the soul, whether it comes through fiddlestrings or vocal cords. Happy is the home in which fiddles and fiddlers dwell, and nearest to heaven is the church where fiddlers and singers blend their music in hymns of praise to Almighty God. (J.H.)

ANNUAL MEETING REPORT

A large group representing all three counties attended the 3rd annual meeting of the Island Fiddlers' Society last November 2nd. It was again hosted by the Eastern Kings fiddlers and held at St. Margaret's Hall. . . . Reports were read from each area: by Roddie Chaisson, Souris; Buddy Dunn, Montague; Neil MacCannell, Charlotte-town; and Libby Hubley, Summerside. . . . The Souris and Charlotte-town groups each offered \$100 to support the newsletter, which seems to be well received. . . . Discussion was held concerning lessons, a committee being formed to look into furthering this activity--consisting of Peter Chaisson, Kevin Chaisson, Neil MacCannell, Cecil Trainor, John Weyman, Libby Hubley and Alvin Bernard. . . . Concerns were raised about decisions on music, and its distribution, before major concerts. Ernie Poole moved that each group have its own music committee. Carried. . . . Executive: Ernie Poole (President), Libby Hubley & Roddie Chaisson (Vice-Presidents), Cecil Trainor (Treasurer), Shirley Barrett (Secretary). . . . Alvin Bernard invited the membership to Summerside for next year's annual meeting. After adjournment all enjoyed lots of music and an excellent meal put on by the Women's Institute. Thanks to all. (S.B.)

SCOTTISH MUSIC

by Watson Forbes [in The Strad]

Folksong and folk dance are very intimately the property of the country of origin; ethnic characteristics pervade the music and give it a character wholly at one with the environment and life style of the people who have produced it. It is essentially the music of the community, and while someone must have had the initial inspiration for the folksong or the dance tune, it was gradually refined and adapted for general use. Practically all folk music has been associated with song or dance--sometimes both--and, in its origin, was never thought of as worthy of consideration as music on its own. Performing this music on an instrument for pleasure only was a later refinement. It was the music of the people at play and work, especially of those close to the soil and sea.

During the last hundred years, people have tended to leave the country and migrate to the towns. There they have enjoyed a more sophisticated life, especially in the arts. Fortunately, just before it became too late, several far-seeing folk realized the treasures they had abandoned in the country. Folksong societies were formed, and archives now house this music for posterity. People living in towns once again became familiar with this music, and it became a vital force in their lives just at a time when they were in danger of forgetting their roots. Recording machines were a boon for those who went out collecting this music, being far more accurate than trying to fit the melodies into our staff notation and bar lines, and generally civilizing the tunes. Every child at school should be taught, not only his native language, but also his native music.



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Fiddling is still pursued in Scotland, some of it for sheer pleasure of the music. For dances the piano accordion has generally supplanted the violin, but amateurs and semi-professional fiddlers are active in keeping alive the traditions, and maintaining the differing features of style in the Western Isles and in Shetland. By far the most popular style is that found in Aberdeen, Perth and Banchory where competitions are frequent. Style is important in realizing the character of the music. It is best acquired through imitation, since too close attention to the written notation will quickly kill the spirit. Every form of instrumental music has developed out of the dances of the people, and it is good to be reminded of this from time to time. It is there not only for our enjoyment but to refresh our basic ideas.

Music available

The Skye Collection \$14.95
William Marshall Collection \$6.00
Marr & Co. Royal Collection \$2.00
Kerr's [various] \$2-\$3 ea.
Allan's Reels & Strathspeys \$2.00
Shetland tunes [Ronnie Cooper] 5 books \$2.50 ea.
The Scottish Violinist [Skinner] \$2.50
Ron Gonella I & II \$5.00 ea.
The Strathspey Tutor [Honeyman] \$1.50
Orkney tunes \$4.90
MacQuarrie's Cape Breton Collection \$5.00
The MacEachern Collection \$5.00
Elmer Briand's \$[contribution]
Joey's Beaton's \$2.95

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