

The Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Conventions Revisited

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One-hundred years ago, during the first week of April 1913, a group of fifty Georgia fiddlers were in Atlanta to attend a fiddlers' contest. The first-place winner of the contest would return home bearing the title of Georgia's 1913 Old-Time Fiddle Champion. The championship would be decided by three judges.

It was also during this first week in April of 1913 that the fiddlers decided to create an organization to plan and manage future annual events that, each year, would name Georgia's fiddle champion. And that's how the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Association was born. For the next 23 years – until 1935 -- the annual event, called the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention, took place as planned.

A noted country music historian has named the Georgia fiddlers' conventions one the places where country music had its beginning.

Like the convention held in 1913, all future Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Conventions were held in the Atlanta City Auditorium. The building, with a seating capacity of more than 5,000, was completed in 1909.

By 1979 the Atlanta City Auditorium had become surrounded by Atlanta's urban institution of higher learning, Georgia State University. The building was soon acquired by the University, and shortly thereafter the auditorium part of the building was demolished to make room for a parking deck. The front part, containing offices, lobby, and a large assembly hall, remain intact and currently houses the offices of the University's president.

Over the years the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Conventions received copious coverage by Atlanta's then three daily newspapers. From the numerous stories written about the conventions by reporters from these newspapers we're now able to obtain information pertaining to these events.

Each of the annual Fiddlers' Conventions lasted from two to four days and nights. They drew large audiences, often filling the auditorium to near capacity. In addition to the fiddling contest that took place on the final night, there were evening exhibition performances and often daily matinees. Audiences, over the years, were entertained by a variety of performers -- comedians, dancers, string bands, chanters, singers, child prodigies, vaudeville artists, orators, classical violinists, and performers on all manner of musical instruments, both store bought and homemade.

Where did the entertainers and their audiences come from? Thanks to the diligent newspaper reporters, we know where a lot of the entertainers came from. If, on a Georgia map, we highlight the counties from which the entertainers were reported to have come from, we get the following picture.

The map suggests that most of the entertainers came from north Georgia. If this is true, what is the explanation? Were there more fiddlers in north Georgia than in the rest of the state? Or was it easier to get to Atlanta for residents of north Georgia? The Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Conventions took place during a time when there were far fewer automobiles per capita in Georgia than there are today. There were also fewer paved roads then than now.

One wonders, then, how the entertainers and the attendees got to Atlanta. Newspaper reports often note the arrival of fiddlers by train. The fiddlers frequently brought with them

family members and neighbors. Streetcars are sometimes mentioned by reporters as the mode of transportation to the conventions by local attendees.

When not performing at the City Auditorium, the fiddlers were often putting on programs at various places around the city – the Federal Prison, schools, women’s clubs, and alleys and side streets where impromptu jam sessions frequently materialized. An Atlanta newspaper estimated that during the 1915 convention the fiddlers reached a total of 30, 000 persons.

Meanwhile, back at the City Auditorium for the evening programs, there was a need for a master of ceremonies who could manage the show and keep law and order among the musicians -- musicians whose talents were equal only to their enthusiasms for demonstrating their musical gifts. Over the years, the emcee bill was filled by several people. The most picturesque and the most frequent of these emcees was a man known to the musicians and audiences as Alec Smart. He held the job during at least 14 of the 23 Conventions. It is suspected that Alec Smart was an alias. Switch the first and last names around and you’ll see why. Efforts of several investigators have failed to learn his real name with one-hundred percent certainty. We may not know Alec Smart’s real name, but we do know a lot about the man -- thanks to newspaper reporters who could smell a good human-interest story all the way across town.

They tell us that Alec Smart came from The Cove which was just behind Woodbury in Meriwether County, approximately 60 miles south of Atlanta. It was from this home base that he traveled around the state -- conducting singing schools, giving lessons in elocution, and organizing county branches of the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers’ Association.

He was described as a quaint character with long hair and a long neck and who wore a tall silk hat, a frock coat from another era, and gold-rimmed spectacles. He played an instrument called a melodeon. As emcee, it was Smart’s job to see that every fiddle was tuned properly

before the owner struck the first note. He had to keep order on the big stage where the fiddlers' jealousies frequently gave rise to trouble. To help carry out his mission Alec Smart relied on a cow bell and a megaphone.

In 1925, after trying unsuccessfully to describe a fiddlers' convention, an Atlanta Constitution reporter wrote that "the only way to grasp [one] is to see it." He and his colleagues frequently focused on behind-the-scenes aspects of the conventions. In their search for dramatic copy they kept their eyes and ears alert for out-of-the-ordinary performers, controversial issues, and contentious events.

One way a fiddler can express individualism is to construct his or her own instrument. Some who do this are dubbed luthiers, others are called piddlers. It was a piddler who captured the attention of a reporter in 1918. This piddler's instrument was called a broomaphone. It consisted of one broomstick, one string attached to the broomstick, and one cigar box. The piddler could coax a tune from the broomaphone by rubbing the cigar box up and down the string. His convention performance included "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." He was rewarded with roars of approval.

The first Convention in 1913, like many that followed, came with its bone of contention. This time it had to do with the issue of straw beating. Should straw beating be allowed in the contest, or should it be banned? The speaker for a delegation from Rabun Gap stated that he was "raised up to believe that straw beatin' was the most principal part of fiddlin'. Up his way," he said, "the first thing they learn a youngster is fiddlin' and the next is straw beatin'."

The folks from Habersham County held a different opinion. It was their conviction that straw beating was "a mere side issue, not to be confounded with fiddling." The outcome of the

argument was an agreement that straw beating would be allowed with the exhibition numbers, but not with the tunes played in the competition.

Perhaps the most quarrelsome dispute among the old-time fiddlers occurred at the 1917 convention. The controversy erupted when a fiddler from Union County allowed that he would be playing a tune from a copy of sheet music that he had brought to the convention. According to a newspaper report, “two dozen fiddlers were on their feet in a moment, vigorously protesting against the introduction of any tune which ever had been printed and the admission of any fiddler who pretended to be able to look at a lot of black spots on a ladder and play them on a fiddle.” There arose considerable debate between two groups -- those against the use of printed music and those who were brave enough to admit that they could convert to meaningful sound such erudite symbols as key signatures, flats, sharps, eighth notes, quarter notes, and whole notes. Alec Smart intervened with a compromise. Printed music could be used for exhibition purposes, but would not be allowed in the auditorium during the contest.

While the old-time fiddlers had their differences on many issues, they were of one accord on one matter -- the difference between a violin. Regardless of the pedigree of their chosen instrument, it was always referred to as a fiddle – not a violin. Likewise, one who played a fiddle was called a fiddler – not a violinist. A contestant named Tump Jackson from north Georgia’s Townes County regaled reporters with his account of a previous experience with an early twentieth-century songcatcher.

“I had the pleasure of hearing one of these fancy violinists last year,” said Mr. Jackson. “He came a pesterin’ around through the mountains on the trail of what he called folk music. He got three or four of us fiddlers together and prevailed on us to play for him, and he put down little crooked notes in a black book. Every time I’d get good started on a tune, he’d stop me

while he caught up, and then tell me to start over. When he got through I asked him to play us a tune and he took my fiddle and [tinkered] with it a little bit and then sawed the bow up and down and seemed to be huntin' around for something he never could find, and then he quit. Uncle Jim Watson asked him why he didn't go ahead and play something.

“Why, I've just played it,” this fellow said. But I don't know but what he was joking. If he played any tune whatsoever, I clean missed it.”

The Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers Conventions proved to be fertile ground for future radio stations and future recording companies that would soon become interested in capitalizing on the instrumental sounds and the vocal styles that the Convention performers had to offer. The music heard at the conventions came to be known as hillbilly music. Notable among the Convention performers who later became famous radio and recording artists were Fiddlin' John Carson, Gid Tanner, Clayton McMichen, and Riley Puckett. Over a ten-year period these Georgia artists took advantage of the Conventions to perfect their styles. They were unaware that they were priming their talents for future radio and recording careers.

In 1913, Fiddlin' John Carson was present at the first Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention. I suspect that almost everyone here has heard Carson's records many times, but in honor of one of the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Conventions most famous performers, I beg your indulgence as we play one of the tunes that made him famous.

Carson appeared early at the City Auditorium to announce his intention to enter the contest to name the 1913 state fiddling champion. To the delight of those present, he removed his fiddle from its case and demonstrated his musical skills with enthusiastic renditions of “Soldier's Joy,” “Arkansas Traveler,” and “The Mockingbird.” Carson became a regular contender at the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers Conventions. He sometimes served as emcee, and

newspaper reports and other sources show that he won the state championship several times and placed in the top five in other years. His popularity among fellow performers and the Convention audiences was phenomenal. His showmanship was outstanding. The newspaper reporters loved him. He never failed to provide them with colorful quips or comical antics to liven up their stories. Carson was always one of the star attractions. Reports of his on-stage demeanor at the 1913 Convention reveal what future Convention attendees came to expect from him. One reporter wrote as follows: “From the time [he] first unlimbered his awkward six feet of height on the platform, the crowd could not get enough of him ... he just naturally played with his mind, soul and every inch of his body to the tips of his eyebrows. He and his fiddle and the entire audience were one.”

Off-stage as well as on-stage Carson managed to position himself at the center of attention. His arrival at the City Auditorium for the 1914 Convention was typical. He had his fiddle under his arm, and in his hand was a plow line. The other end of the plow line was attached to Old Trail. A reporter described Old Trail as “the sorriest looking hound dog that ever bayed at the moon.”

When the crowd around him had grown in size to Carson’s satisfaction, he uncased his fiddle and proceeded to deliver his usually moving rendition of “The Mockingbird.” While Carson played, the dog “raised his voice in song, and as the duet progressed “his master’s playing became gradually a mere obligato to [Old Trail’s] solo.” Addressing the crowd he had attracted, Carson predicted that “If Old Trail will jes’ sing that-a-way ... when the fiddlers’ convention opens, I’ve done got the prize won. But I don’t know, he’s kinder shy of strangers, and I look for a crowd, but anyway I’ll bring him along.” It is not known if Old Trail

accompanied his master on stage during the contest, but we do know that Carson won first place that year.

In 1922 the South's first radio station, WSB, went on the air in Atlanta. A week later Fiddlin' John Carson made his debut on the station. His broadcast stardom was instantaneous, not only locally, but all across the country. In those days when the airwaves were less crowded, radio stations of modest power could be heard for thousands of miles. Carson appeared regularly on WSB into the early 1930s, and made intermittent guest appearances into the 1940s.

In 1923 Carson added recording artist to his list of entertainment credentials. His debut recording of "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" and "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow" has been considered by eminent scholars as the first real country music record produced explicitly for a rural-oriented audience.

Another star and first-place winner of the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers Conventions was Gid Tanner. Like Fiddlin' John Carson, Gid Tanner was a consummate showman – he was a comedian, a singer, a fiddler, and the leader of "The Skillet Lickers," one of the most popular and influential string bands of the 1920s. Again, in honor of an Old-Time Fiddlers Convention celebrity, let's listen to a Skillet Lickers tune.

The local press reported Tanner's presence at 18 of the 23 annual Conventions. His first was in 1914. His performance that year was one not to be forgotten. It established him as a crowd pleaser that audiences of future Conventions looked forward to seeing. According to a 1914 report, Tanner was "perhaps the greatest novelty of the evening." He was described as a husky youth with tan face and shoes, roan hair, a mouth as flexible as [a certain minstrel show performer], and a voice that ranged from a high falsetto to a rumbling bass." He fiddled and sang "Everybody Works But Father." A highlight of his turn consisted of a series of parodies in

which he emulated a well-known public official and other local characters that the audience readily recognized. Tanner was so enthusiastically received, wrote a reporter, that “it was with difficulty the performance was permitted to proceed.” In other words, he brought down the house.

Reporters covering the 1915 Convention devoted a considerable amount of ink to what they touted as a professional rivalry between Carson and Tanner. These two showmen no doubt, received the news with great delight, as it provided them a chance to show off, an art in which they both were highly skilled. The 1915 Convention was a four evening affair. The morning after the first evening’s program, newspaper readers were told that it was hard to tell who was more popular, Carson or Tanner. On Saturday afternoon before the evening’s final program that would choose the state champion, readers learned that betting was about even for the two. They had been running a close race for popularity all week, and it seemed certain that one of them would win first place. Apparently, the judges felt that there was more to winning first place than sheer popularity. In the end neither Carson nor Tanner won first place. Sunday’s papers reported that the judges had a tough time deciding third and fourth places between Carson and Tanner. After an hour and half of deliberation, the two were brought back to the stage for a second try-out. At last the judges agreed to award Carson third place and Tanner fourth. By the time the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers Conventions came to an end, Gid Tanner, like John Carson was a highly acclaimed country music recording artist.

While Carson and Tanner basked in the limelight of favorite convention performers and media stardom, the fiddler that the local newspapers mentioned most often as the first place winner at the Conventions was otherwise almost totally ignored by the local press. His name was Ahaz Augusta Gray, referred to as A. A. Gray by newspaper reporters. He was from

Tallapoosa, Georgia, located due west of Atlanta in Haralson County just this side of the Alabama state line.

In 1934, following a rare interview, a journalist reported that Gray had won the state championship eight or nine times. Gray told the reporter that he thought it was nine times. Unlike Fiddlin' John Carson and Gid Tanner, A. A. Gray was not a flamboyant showman and center of attention. He is seldom mentioned by the press except in published lists of contest winners. During the 1934 interview, Gray also told the reporter that "the tune [a contestant] plays has a lot to do with winning prizes." One of his winning tunes was "Bucking Mule. "It's a hard piece," he said, "but it's snappy, and you do a lot of fancy work behind the bridge that makes the fiddle bray like a mule. I won so many prizes [with that tune] that the other fellows got to calling me 'Mule' Gray." Like Carson and Tanner, Gray was fortunate enough to have his fiddling captured on commercial records. Gray, however, did not aggressively pursue a recording career. As a result his recorded legacy is a modest one compared to those of Carson and Tanner. But, as this sample of his records shows, Gray's fiddling was not of modest quality.

For the most part, men dominated the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers Conventions. Females occasionally appeared on stage as singers, dancers, and banjo pickers, but few had the nerve to enter the fiddling contests. When, in 1929, a woman made known her desire to enter the competition, the male fiddlers were up in arms. Impresario Alec Smart voiced his opinion of the matter. H's quoted as saying that "Personally, I have no objection. Looks like the women are running the men out of every kind of job, from driving cars to flying. But up in the mountain regions where most of our fiddlers come from they have always figured that the place for a woman is in the cabin, doing the cooking and looking after the children, with some plowing and

hoeing in season. And they certainly are not used to women fiddlers. I reckon we'll have to take a vote on it."

The only woman to win the state championship was Anita Sorrells Wheeler who had grown up in Cobb County. Outside of family members, only a few latter day old-time music enthusiasts have had the good fortune to know personally any of the Georgia old-time fiddlers who attended the Conventions. Toward the end of Ms. Wheeler's life my friend Barbara Panter, herself an accomplished fiddler, became acquainted with her. Barbara has graciously accepted our invitation to talk about that experience. So, I now turn the program over to Barbara.

I met Anita Sorrells (Wheeler) Mathis in 1995 when she was 90 years old. A friend gave me a Snellville, GA, newsletter article about senior citizens who play music. The title read something like:

"Ms. Anita would like to fiddle around if she just had somebody to fiddle with..." and I thought "Well here I am"!

I thought I recognized her name from Wayne Daniel's wonderful book, *Picking on Peachtree*, and sure enough, her picture was right there on the cover.

This slide shows Ms. Anita with Wayne's son, John Daniel on guitar, on a visit with Anita when Wayne interviewed her.

I called the assisted living home to ask if Ms. Anita was able to receive visitors, and the attendant said, "She has a phone in her room, I'll put you through." I introduced myself and explained that she didn't know me, but I play fiddle and would like to visit her if that's ok. She said, "OK. Now WHO are you?", and I said, "Ma'am, you don't know me, but I live not too far away and I'm a fiddler and I'd like to meet you ". She said, "Well, you sound like a nice girl".

When I visited her the following Saturday, we had an immediate connection. She was in a wheelchair, had suffered a stroke, but with physical therapy, she was able to get around slowly, but reasonably well. She said her son had gotten her fiddle fixed up, "it's over there behind the sofa, if you want to get it out". The fiddle was beautiful and in fine shape, with new strings, nice bow, and fine tuners. It had the date "1884" carved on the back. She said her grandfather made it and had given it to her when she was 8 years old. I told her my grandfather had given me his fiddle when I was 8 years old.

I rosined up her bow and handed her the fiddle and bow and she said, "Lord honey, I don't know whe're I can play at all or even remember how anything goes, but there's my list". In the bottom of her fiddle case was a list entitled, "The Tried and True Forty-Two"

I saw "Golden Slippers" on the first line, which I suggested, and she said "Well honey, you'll have to get me started." So I fiddled a bit of the tune and she picked it up on about the 4th note and was off playing almost faster than I could keep up. I could tell that she sure had been a hot fiddler! When we got to the end, she said, "Lord, I could play better'n that when I was five year old". I looked through the list and picked out "8th of January", and "Soldier's Joy" and each time she'd ask me to get her started and then she'd take off on the very next note; that is: she'd not have to start over from the first, but she'd pick up on the very next note and always faster than I normally played, - but also faster than she was able to play clearly. When she again said, "I could play better'n that when I was five", I suggested we might play a little slower, but when we tried, her fingers would just not go slower.

Over the next several weeks, her playing was getting stronger and clearer. She was less interested in talking and definitely more interested in playing. We'd select a tune and I'd fiddle the start of it to try to tease the tune out from way back in her memory and once she caught the thread she'd be off like lightning and I'd add a little harmony or maybe switch to a little guitar backup. Each time I left, she'd say, "Now don't give up on me, honey. You come back and play with me." I assured her I would be back - I was thrilled to be able to play with her. Occasionally, I'd bring a friend along as well. Pictured here with Anita and me is Mick Kinney, fiddler of the Georgia Crackers.

I would sometimes be able to get her to tell me about the old days. She said she grew up near Lost Mountain, about 25 miles NW of Atlanta. She told me her dad and uncles all fiddled or played guitar or banjo, and her brothers also fiddled and played, and her sister played mandolin.

She said everybody played, you just had to play an instrument or forget it, you just had to "Root Hog or Die". She said she played for dances and house parties and sometimes just out in a clearing in the woods. She said "We'd start up around dusk and not quit 'til the sun come up, and me not one bit tard 'til I went to put up my fiddle". I asked her about the Fiddlers Conventions in Atlanta and she said "oh yeah, they didn't think a girl should play in the contest". But when her brothers said "if she don't play, we don't play" and started to put their instruments up, the contest folks said, "well she's just a girl, I guess it won't hurt to let her play", and she won 2nd place that year. I asked if she knew Fiddlin' John Carson and what he was like. She said, "oh he was alright, I guess, but sometimes he was just a big bag o' wind". She said he was the one hollerin' more than any of 'em to not let her play.

One Saturday when I was there, I noticed the tune "Liberty" on her list, and I started to play it. She said, "No, I don't believe I know that one". And I thought a minute, and started to play "Liberty Off the Corn Lickers Still", and she picked it right up. She said, "We always just called it Liberty". I didn't really know the tune very well, and told her I'd heard it from a Skillet Lickers record. She said "oh yeah, I knew them". She said, "I learned that one and a lot of tunes from Clayton". "Clayton McMichen?" I asked. "Oh yeah", she said, "I spent many a Sunday afternoon on the porch playin' tunes with Clayton. He was my first love, in fact, we were

engaged to be married”.

Now I was dumbstruck. I'd been going to see her over a month and all this time we'd not talked about The Skillet Lickers or Clayton McMichen. I didn't want to be too forward, but I couldn't help myself. “Well what happened?”, I asked. She said, “Some old smark aleck talked me out of marrin' him and I regretted it every day for the rest of my life”.

So here's the tune, “Liberty”.

Ms. Anita said she had played lots of folks, from the Tennessee Firecrackers to the Oklahoma Cowgirls, an all-girl band.

She said, “We were called The Oklahoma Cowgirls and we didn't even know where Oklahoma was!” She said they even played on a cruise ship to Hawaii. I said, “Oh, I bet ya'll had such a good time,” and she said “oh yes, we always had a good time.”

Other folks who lived at the assisted living home would wander into Ms. Anita's room whenever we'd play and want to hear more, and a nurse asked if we would play for the other folks in the activity room, so the next Saturday we set up and played some tunes. I said, “Now y'all may not know it, but living right her among you is a champion fiddler from the Old Time Fiddler's Contest that was held every year down in Atlanta; and she was the only woman to win the championship, not once, but twice!” And Ms. Anita said, “Yeah, and I'm still here to worry everybody about it!”. She stood up right there from her wheelchair to play. She sat down between songs, but it was great to see that she had such fire and dignity and determination!

A few months later, when I was talking with Anita's son, John Wheeler, on the phone, he said his mother told him, “That girl took me somewhere and we had a good time, and directly they brought me back.” Well, no, we hadn't gone anywhere, but every time I played with her, I felt like I'd taken a wonderful trip back in time.

Thank you Barbara.

As the date for the 1934 annual convention approached, Professor Alec Smart was described as scouting the highways and byways of Georgia and neighboring states in search of fiddlers to participate in the upcoming contest.

According to Smart fiddling had been in a kind of eclipse for the last year or so.

The situation was even grimmer the following year, 1935. Smart blamed it on the encroachment of phonographs and radios among the mountain and back country communities. “The country

folks ain't satisfied with the simple old fiddle tunes no more," Smart told a reporter. "They want this jazz band music."

As far as can be determined the last fiddlers convention sponsored by the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers Association was the one held in 1935.