

FOLKWAYS RECORD FA 2434

EDITED BY MIKE SEEGER & JOHN COHEN

# the 37th OLD-TIME FIDDLERS CONVENTION

AT UNION GROVE, NORTH CAROLINA



DESIGN & PHOTO BY JOHN COHEN

SOME INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY H. P. VAN HOY

BLACKBERRY BLOSSOM-UNCLE CHARLIE HIGGINS

INSTRUMENTAL-THE OLD TIMERS

OLD RICHMOND-A. L. HALL BAND

RIVER STAY AWAY FROM MY DOOR-CHARLIE KNIGHT AND HIS COUNTRY  
MUSIC BOYS

LOST JOHN-RED PARHAM AND THE HAYWOOD COUNTY RAMBLERS

HITCHIKER'S BLUES-BRUSHY MOUNTAIN BOYS

WHOA MULE-YADKIN COUNTY RAMBLERS

MAY I SLEEP IN YOUR BARN TONIGHT, MISTER?-GRANDMA DAVIS  
FROM ROARING RIVER

I SHALL NOT BE MOVED-LAUREL RIVER BAND

SALLY ANN-THE OLD TIMERS

DANCE ALL NIGHT-KENNETH EDWARDS AND THE SUNNY MOUNTAIN BOYS

TWINKLE LITTLE STAR-MOUNTAIN RAMBLERS

RUBEN-BLUE GRASS MOUNTAIN BOYS

BILLY IN THE LOWGROUND-LONESOME STRANGERS

WHISKEY TOOK MY DADDY AWAY-LOUISE EDMONDS

TEARDROPS IN MY EYES-FRIENDLY CITY PLAYBOYS

GREY EAGLE-DELMER STARLING AND ESKER HUTCHINS, SURRY COUNTY  
RAMBLERS

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN-DIXIE RAMBLERS

BACK UP AND PUSH-FRIENDLY CITY PLAYBOYS

SALLY ANN-MOUNTAIN RAMBLERS

SOME CLOSING REMARKS BY H. P. VAN HOY

Library of Congress Catalogue Card No. R 62-527.

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FA2434

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# THE 37th OLD TIME FIDDLER'S CONVENTION AT UNION GROVE NORTH CAROLINA

*Recorded by Mike Seeger and Lisa Chiera*



The Oldtimers - waiting to play at Gymnasium

SIDE I

1. Some introductory Remarks by H.P. Van Hoy
2. Blackberry Blossom - Uncle Charlie Higgins
3. Instrumental - The Old Timers
4. Old Richmond - A.L. Hall Band
5. River Stay Away From My Door  
- Charlie Knight and His Country Music Boys
6. Lost John-Red Parham and the Haywood County Ramblers
7. Hitchiker's Blues - Brush Mountain Boys
8. Whoa Mule - Yadkin County Ramblers
9. May I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight, Mister?  
- Grandma Davis From Roaring River
10. I Shall Not Be Moved - Laurel River Band
11. Sally Ann - The Old Timers
12. Dance All Night - Kenneth Edwards and the Sunny Mountain Boys

SIDE II

1. Twinkle Little Star - Mountain Ramblers
2. Ruben - Blue Grass Mountain Boys
3. Billy in the Lowground-Lonesome Strangers
4. Whiskey Took My Daddy Away - Louise Edmonds
5. Teardrops in my Eyes - Friendly City Playboys
6. Grey Eagle-Delmer Starling and Esker Hutchins,  
Surry County Ramblers
7. Fire on the Mountain - Dixie Ramblers
8. Back Up and Push-Friendly City Playboys
9. Sally Ann - Mountain Ramblers
10. Some Closing Remarks by H.P. Van Hoy

Time: First side, 21:45  
Second side, 17:06

All photos by JOHN COHEN

## OLD-TIME FIDDLERS

### Hosts at Country-Music Get-Together Reward a Banjoist From the City

By ROBERT SHELTON

"THIS isn't really a town," a visitor was told here last week-end. "It's just a wide place in the road."

Union Grove, population 125, has some fine farm land, no railroad, two filling stations, a few churches, three stores, a roller mill for flour and feed, a lumber yard and a reputation throughout the Southern Highlands for putting on the oldest and one of the biggest country music festivals you ever saw.

Every Saturday before Easter the annual Old Time Fiddlers Convention convenes in the Union Grove School. For thirty-seven years the school has been benefiting from these conventions. Only four or five bands competed when things started in 1924. But this year sixty entered — that's more than 250 musicians. Ten times that many persons came to shout, stamp, shuffle around, drink soda pop, meet old friends and neighbors, watch buck dances and to hear a lot of fancy picking and bowing.

These country music get-togethers abound in the Southern hill country. The one at Galax, Va., is probably the best for genuine folk music and ballad singing, the one at Asheville is probably the widest known and the one at Warrenton, Va., is probably the loudest and most commercial. Union Grove's, embracing both traditional and modernized electrified bands and ranging in quality from an amateur show to a skilled professional concert, is considered the most representative of what's going on in the region's music.

A Northern visitor could not help but be impressed. There is a great diversity of talent tumbling out of the hills near here. Home-made music still plays an important part in rural life, despite the inroads of radio, television and juke boxes filled with popular music fabricated in Nashville and New York. Especially pleasing was the warmth of the reception given to New York musicians and fans, of whom there were nearly a dozen—a reception that culminated in the convention's naming as grand champion banjo player a boy from Greenwich Village!

#### Musical Circus

With warming-up sessions and performances lasting nearly twelve hours in the school gym, auditorium and two classroom buildings, the fiddlers convention had the flavor of a four-ring circus. Here were such people as stoop-shouldered Uncle Charlie Higgins, 84-year-old Virginian who says "I started to learn to fiddle seventy-five years ago and I ain't hardly learned yet," although anyone who heard his adept Irish-jig-like solos would disagree with him.

There was a trio of sisters in drum majorette costumes who earned wild whoops and whistles before they played a note. There was Grandma Pearly Davis, 70, who couldn't remember all her grandchildren's names right off but remembered her fiddle tunes just fine. And there were a couple of frenetic rock 'n' roll bands, although observers say that the number of this genre and the amplified instrument bands have diminished in recent years.

It is the "modern" bands, as the latter are called, that do best at making a living from music, playing at country clubs,

private parties and school dances. The non-amplified old-time and Bluegrass bands, of which there were many excellent examples, were mostly amateur or semi-professional. Members of one of the best Bluegrass bands, the Mountain Ramblers, are perhaps typical in their vocational status. Coming from the furniture-making town of Galax, two members of the band are upholsterers, one a furniture finisher, another is a student and the banjoist is out of work. They dream of making music their profession.

#### City and Country

The strongest contrast to be seen was between the country fiddler who won the fiddle competition and the city banjo-picker who got a purple ribbon, for the second time in two



**IN EARLY HANDEL —** Johannes Somary, above, the conductor, and Kenneth Smith, a soloist, appear in "Esther" on Wednesday.



years. "Lost John" Ray, the country fiddler, appeared with an exciting seven-member band called the Brushy Mountain Boys, from North Wilkesboro. "Lost John doesn't know enough to get out of the rain," a friend said, "but put a fiddle in his hand and off he tears." He is 44, sloe-eyed with an amiable, wide-toothed grin.

#### Sophisticate

The city banjoist, Bob Yellin, 24, is a member of the Greenbriar Boys, whose lack of acclaim in his home territory makes him something of a folk Van Cliburn. Lost John can't read a note, but Mr. Yellin studied piano, trumpet theory and music history at Music and Art High School, and City College, and went on to teach himself banjo in the style of Earl Seruggs.

Mr. Yellin's experiences at the festival are symbolic of how the cultural exchange between country and city currently thriving in American folk music reaps human and musical rewards.



Uncle Charlie Higgins (with hat) and another fiddler



A. L. Hall, fiddler



The Lonesome Strangers, John Herad, guitar; Buddy Pendleton, fiddle; Bob Yellin, 5-string banjo.

## Introduction

The old axiom, "Necessity Is The Mother Of Invention", certainly holds true in the case of the founding of the Old Time Fiddlers Convention. At this time, public education was in its early stages. Iredell County had only four State supported high schools, outside the cities of Iredell County. At this time, the only requirement for those in the teaching profession was to be able to pass a written examination given by the Superintendent of County Schools; while still later the requirements were raised to require one years credit from an accredited High School. Under the old requirements, the local people were able to qualify for those positions in the teaching profession. This new ruling, therefore, meant that the local Citizenry had one of two choices: build a High School of their own, or send their students away to one of the four boarding High Schools in the County. If Union Grove were to have a High School of their own, it meant that they had to bear all the expenses to support such a plan. It is important to point out here that at this time there was no State support for public education. So the question of finance was of paramount importance. It is natural that the question arose, "how will we pay for our buildings, teacher salaries, Library, Science equipment, and other necessary equipment for the successful operation of High School for Union Grove.

The community was fortunate to have on its faculty a young man with a vision, a man dedicated to the cause of better education, and a man who had a deep abiding love and understanding for country people. Because of these deep convictions for the likes and dislikes of country people, and his own love and appreciation for country music, the idea to stage an old time Fiddlers Convention was proposed by H. P. Van Hoy. It was his belief that if you could get the local musicians together in friendly competition, the local citizenry together to enjoy the good music and fellowship, the people would then be in the proper spirit to accept the community education improvement project, and at the same time make a little money to start the program off.

In the beginning, 1924, the first Old Time Fiddlers Convention was held on the Saturday night before Easter, and through the thirty-seven consecutive years of its history that has been the annual date. There were only six local bands participating in the first convention, playing to an audience of around two hundred people from the local community. As an indication of the success of the convention from a standpoint of acceptability both by the Musicians and the public, it is interesting to note that we had 52 bands from five different states and as far away as New York City to our North, and from as far west as Indiana. As for audience participation, last year we had all available seats filled and all standing room available taken up. The crowd was estimated at over 2500 people inside, we have literally outgrown any possibility of being able to take care of the public not to mention the musicians. In the opinion of the founder and lifelong manager, Mr. H. P. Van Hoy, the policy of dividing the proceeds from the net gate receipts equally with the Musicians and the School has been a big factor in insuring the convention with the finest Country music possible. Being a musicians himself, and the experience gained by participating in conventions, were invaluable assets which he freely gave and incorporated into



Mountain Ramblers



Fiddler - Brock Lawson



Bob Shelton, N. Y. Times

the successful organization and coordination of a convention unmatched and unequalled any where in the country.

- Harper A. Van Hoy

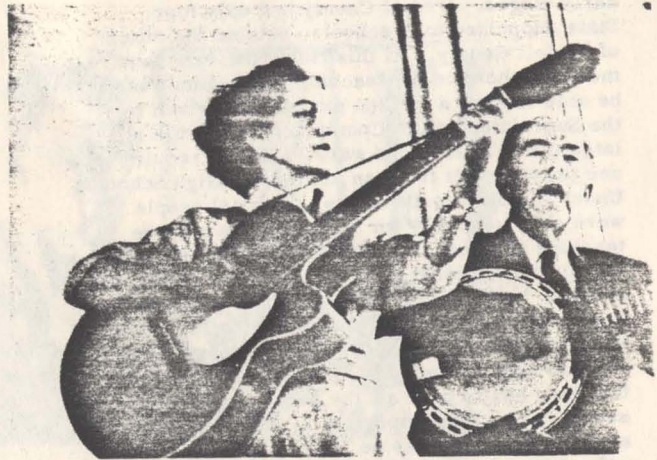
#### GENERAL BACKGROUND

Mike Seeger

The Fiddler's Contest, or Convention, is an old tradition in the South and is important to the status of amateur and professional country music today. It gives all country musicians a chance to get together, play, and compete, and as a yearly event, it is often anticipated by considerable preparation. For the audience, it is a chance to hear more different kinds of music and entertainment than anywhere else, as well as an opportunity to root for their special favorites and have a good time. Some onlookers prefer listening to musicians warming up in the field or, as at Union Grove, in the Classrooms, where some of the best music is played, away from the excitement of the stage.

There are a number of different ways of running these Conventions and the Union Grove Old Time Fiddlers' Convention is traditional in most respects. The leader of each band registers at a desk, giving his name, the name of the band, the number of pieces in the band, and their hometown. They are assigned a number and a classroom in which to warm up and when their time comes to perform (determined by the order in which they register), they go to the small auditorium seating about 300 people, are announced by the M.C., and play two songs. From there they go to the gymnasium and play again for a crowd of about two thousand. Then the musicians either watch the remainder of the show or return to their warm-up room to play. After the last band performs, at about midnight, the judges get together and compare their ratings of each band the performer. During this time some people go to the cafeteria, where good fried chicken and home-cooked pies and cakes are served all evening, and some wait in the auditorium where bands return to play, awaiting the judges' decision. Then all the musicians gather in the auditorium for a talk by H. P. Van Hoy and for the award of the prizes. It is at this point when all the contestants meet together, that this Convention is different from all others. In his talk Mr. Van Hoy discusses the running of the Convention and refers many issues to a vote by the participating musicians. Even more unusual is the practice of dividing half of the income from the Convention equally among the contestants so that all receive a share to help with their travel expenses.

There are probably as many other ways of running Contests as there are events. According to one account of an old Convention, the 75 contestants played Arkansas Traveller together at the beginning of the evening and were allowed to warm up on stage before playing the piece in which they wanted to be judged. According to Sam McGee, in some events the musician had a sheet or screen between him and the audience, so that only his music would be judged. This tended to minimize the popularity of performances by young children, characters, or local favorites whose appeal was occasionally other than musical. Even favorites whose appeal was occasionally other than musical. Even now some contests require entrants not to talk on stage, some require them to pull a number from a hat to determine the order in which they appear, and some allow each contestant to be in only one category (banjo, fiddle,



Laurel River Band



Brushy Mountain Boys - Fiddler: "Lost John"



Three of the Brushy Mountain Boys

etc.) other than band. At the Galax, Virginia, Old Fiddlers' Convention and at some others, categories have been added for vocalists, guitar pickers and miscellaneous. At some, entrants in the fiddle and banjo categories must play without accompaniment.

The problems of judging contest are often apparent and there will probably always be complaints by some contestants that they were judged unfairly, or that there was some "understanding" between judge and a given contestant. For this reason identity of judges is sometimes secret and sometimes a musician is penalized for trying to contact judges. One of the most familiar complaints is that contests are not judge by musicians. But on the whole the atmosphere is one of friendly competition.

In earlier days, many of the outstanding commercially recorded country musicians regularly competed in Conventions and were sometimes beaten by local musicians. Such old-timers as Uncle Dave Macon, Henry Whitter, Fiddling John Carson, and Samantha Bumgardner appeared at similar events around 30 years ago. Of course, this was before the days of the professional Country Musician. Nowadays it would usually be considered improper for him to enter such a contest. Ernest V. Stoneman tells of being hired, along with Charlie Poole to play contests set up by their employer. He paid them a salary and required them to turn over their winnings to him. Stoneman didn't stay with him very long. According to Earl Scruggs, such practices helped cause a decline in the popularity of Fiddlers' Conventions, but they are beginning to come back again, mostly at schools, fairs, and firehouses.

During the past three years, several country musicians who recorded commercially in the 20's and 30's have attended this Convention. In 1959 Doc Walsh of the original Carolina Tar Heels, played a song from one of his early Victor records, Charlie Bowman of the Buckle Busters attended in 1960, Bascom Lamar Lunsford who recorded some 30 years ago for Brunswick and Columbia, appeared this year and is on this disc, Tony Alderman, also of the old Buckle Busters band recorded the previous two conventions on his stereo machine, and Tom Ashley, who recorded on Columbia, Victor, Vocalion, and many other labels in the late twenties was discovered in 1960 by Ralph Rinzler. And no doubt many more early recording artists have been present along with the many fine old time musicians who have never gotten the chance to record.

There were many different types music at the Convention this year, including a one man band, an unaccompanied banjo picker, a solo fiddler, several oldtime string bands, many string bands with electric guitars, a Harmonicat-type group, a lone little girl playing piano, many Blue Grass - style bands, three groups with members from the folk music circles of the North, and a fair number of popular style country music groups, several of which were quite competent.

This record, however, features the oldtime music that was to be heard at the Union Grove Old Time Fiddlers' Convention in 1961.

#### Additional Background - John Cohen

According to Tony Alderman who was part of the original Al Hopkins Hillbillies Band, fiddler conventions played an important role in their travels in the early 1930's. They would do a few shows en route to New York from Virginia for recording sessions, then they would go down south and

"work" the fiddler conventions for several months. Evidently, there were enough of these conventions to keep them going for several months.

Roscoe Holcomb of Daisy, Kentucky, tells of a man who came through Hazard, and advertised a fiddlers contest with a job for the winners. This job consisted of a trip to California, in a covered wagon driven by oxen, (in 1930-40). The job would be to play music to attract people to sell them flour or medicine. Roscoe tells that he and a negro fiddler won the contest in Hazard, but that Roscoe declined the job. The fiddler went, and returned after a few weeks when the whole deal collapsed on the way.

According to an old man near Oak Ridge, North Carolina, fiddler's conventions were a place for all the home musicians to come out and hear what the others had been playing in their homes, during the year.

E. V. Stoneman told of two old guys who came out of the hills, and beat Charlie Poole at one fiddler's convention. According to Stoneman, these men played fiddle and banjo, and their music was so well worked out that every note played on the fiddle was also played on the banjo. He said that he never heard this done so perfectly as that time, and that those men must have played together a great deal.

According to one account of an old convention in the early part of this century, the 75 contestants played Arkansas Traveller together at the beginning of the evening. Although they were judged on one minute of playing, they were allowed to warm up on stage just prior to this. Some would fiddle into shape for as much as three minutes before the moment of judging commenced, and they would get so wound up that they could hardly be stopped once their time had elapsed.

#### Miscellaneous Notes

The music on this record was edited from about six hours of music recorded at the 1961 Convention. Selection was made on a basis of many elements, including:

documentary interest to people concerned with folk music

variety of music on this record

quality of performance

balance of instruments around microphone

A number of excellent bands and musicians do not appear on this record due to one flaw or another in the recording. None of the musicians came to the Convention knowing that it was to be recorded.

Side 1 includes earlier sounding country bands;  
Side 2 the more modern

Miscellaneous comments and introductions have been included where possible to illustrate the informal nature of the Convention.

All bands have kindly given permission for their music to appear on this record and all proceeds will go to the Union Grove School.

Cover photo is of Uncle Charlie Higgins, taken as he performed in the gymnasium during the evening competition.

Mike Seeger

Notes on the Contestants

Charlie Higgins of Galax, Virginia is 83 years old and often takes first prize as fiddler at the Galax Old Fiddlers' Convention. He plays regularly with Wade Ward and Dale Poe at the auction sales in the Galax area.

The Old Timers of Hillsville Virginia, like Charlie Higgins play excellent old time style and here the banjo and fiddle double most of the time and the guitar is in the background. Leader: Norman Edmonds

A. L. Hall Band, old sounding band from Trinity, North Carolina. The leader and fiddler, A.L. Hall, played a number of old reels and fiddle tunes, and there were a couple of young boys in their early teens in the band.

Charlie Knight and his Country Music Boys of Lenoir, North Carolina.

Red Parham and the Haywood County Ramblers of Leicester, North Carolina. Red Parham is one of the best mouth-harp players around and has been recorded by Riverside and other labels. On the record, Harper Van Hoy is referring to Mr. Parham's practise of playing the mouth-harp by putting one end of it in his mouth and playing it with his tongue and cheeks while accompanying himself on guitar.

Brushy Mountain Boys of North Wilkesboro, N. C., Wayne Johnson, leader. One of the wilder bands and the winner of this year's band contest at Union Grove. Wash-tub bass is played by Johnson's young son.

Yadkin County Ramblers, Yadkinville, North Carolina. Leonard Hicks, leader.

Grandma Davis from Roaring River, North Carolina, accompanied by her grand-daughter who also sings. Mrs. Davis was a fan of Fiddling John Carson and appeared at the White Top Festival in the Thirties. She now is in her 70's.

Laurel River Band - The leader of this band, Bascom Lamar Lunsford has one of the largest repertoires of folk songs in the country and is well known as a folk-singer throughout the country.

Kenneth Edwards and the Sunny Mountain Boys - Galax, Va.

Mountain Ramblers are from Galax, Virginia and are the winners of last years band contest. They are also well known for their music on the Atlantic album of Blue Ridge Mountain Music. Leader: James Lindsay.

Blue Grass Mountain Boys of Kannapolis, N. C. Two 5-string banjos, one playing harmony to the other. Leader: Dewey Farmer.

Lonesome Strangers of New York City, John Herald, Leader. This is one of the many bands formed on the spot at the Convention. John Herald and Bob Yellin met Buddy Pendleton, of Stuart, Va. for the first time here and Buddy later moved to New York for awhile and recorded an LP along with the other Greenbriar boy, Ralph Rinzler. Bob Yellin has been taking banjo prizes at Union Grove since he started there three years ago.

Louise Edmonds - Sang when the afternoon session was over and was not a contestant.

Friendly City Playboys are from Kernersville, N. C. When this band competed several years ago at the Galax Convention the singing was being done by three young girls in a trio style on songs such as Molly and Tenbrooks, and Sitting on Top of the World. Leader: Warren Pinnix.

Delmer Starling and Esker Hutchins - Surry County Ramblers - Mount Airy, N. C.

Dixie Ramblers - Mount Airy, North Carolina. Leader: Brock Lawson

INSTRUCTIONS TO CONTESTANTS - 36th ANNUAL OLD TIME FIDDLERS' CONVENTION

PLEASE READ CAREFULLY

We are, for the first time, having an afternoon performance. The contest will start at 2 p.m. We hope it will be convenient for you to appear on the afternoon program. Gate receipts and prize money for the afternoon performance will be pro-rated to the musicians on the same basis as the night performance, in keeping with our long-standing policy. We feel that the afternoon session will be a profitable one for you and the school, and at the same time give all the fans who want to see the program a chance to do so.

This event is known as the Old Time Fiddlers' Convention. Our aim is to preserve and promote the old time music. For the past several years, however, some groups have been playing western and popular music.

Broadly speaking, the bands will be divided into two categories-- Old Time and Modern. Judges will select 1st, 2nd, and 3rd best bands performing in each group. Cash prizes and ribbons will be awarded winners in each hall as follows: First Place Old Time Band, \$15; Second, \$10, third, \$5; First Place Modern Band, \$15, Second, \$10, third, \$5. Judges will pick first, second, and third best fiddle and banjo players performing. Leaders of bands are requested to feature fiddle and banjo players as band performers. Time will not permit single contests except in rare cases decided by the management. Ribbons will be awarded best individual performances.

Some of the points judges will be looking for in making their selections are: PAPER TUNING OF INSTRUMENTS, TIMING, QUICK STARTS AND STOPS, BAND BALANCE--PROPER DISTRIBUTION OF INSTRUMENTS, and NEATNESS AND APPEARANCE OF INDIVIDUALS.

Clothing, unnecessary comments, jokes, and introduction of other members in the band are discouraged in the interest of time.

Please return the enclosed postal card at your earliest convenience in order that we may complete our plans.

We look forward with pleasure to seeing you on April 16.

Sincerely yours,

H. P. VanHoy  
H. P. VanHoy  
Manager

THE NATION'S OLDEST FIDDLERS' CONVENTION\*\*\*THE SOUTH'S GREATEST COUNTRY MUSIC SHOW



Grandma Davis listening to tape made of her playing at her granddaughter's house