

Nile Wilson - Old Time Fiddler

This coming summer MSOTFA will release a compact disc and cassette recording featuring old-time fiddler Nile Wilson. The project is supported by a grant from the Community Folklife Project of the Lila-Wallace/Reader's Digest Fund. We thought our readers might enjoy knowing more about Nile so here goes.

Nile Wilson is an outstanding old-time square dance fiddler from north central Missouri. He plays with great drive and vigor. Nile was born in 1912 near New Boston to Dolph Wilson, a locally renowned square dance fiddler. His repertoire and technique are uniquely regional, consisting of many tunes which he learned from his father and other local players. Of particular interest are a number of pieces which he refers to as "tiehacker" tunes. These tunes were learned by his grandfather from itinerant tie-cutters, many from the Spoon River region of west central Illinois, who followed the expansion of the railroad across north Missouri around in the years right after the War Between the States.

Nile had considerable facility on the fiddle even in his teens. A farm machinery accident severely injured his left hand when he was about eighteen. Many thought he would never play again. With the encouragement of his family and his own determination remarkably he "relearned" the instrument even though he never fully recovered the



Nile in front of a portrait of his father

function of his hand. Nile relates with some degree of pride how he recovered from this injury. He recalls that it was a common practice for the local telephone exchange operator to open several lines simultaneously and permit Nile's father to perform fiddle tunes to anyone who wanted to listen in. On one occasion after the accident Nile's father snuck him up to phone to play without the knowledge of those listening. After the tune one neighbor commented that "Dolph did a great job playing that piece." The listener had thought it was Nile's father!

In addition to square dances, Nile has played in many contests in recent years. Although he doesn't consider himself a "contest-style" fiddler, he has enjoyed a measure of success, including a second place finish in the Senior division at a large contest in Duluth, Minnesota in 1987. He was included in the 1989 Grammy nominated recording, "Now That's A Good Tune." (Curators of the University of Missouri, 1989). Nile is retired from a long career as a heavy equipment operator. He was especially skilled as a "blademan" or road grader operator and contributed to the construction of many fine highways in the upper Midwest.

He now lives in Bucklin, Linn County, Missouri. He enjoys playing

the fiddle, running his hunting dog, and visits from friends. He has recently been a master in Missouri's master/apprentice program and a teacher at the annual Bethel, Missouri, fiddle camp. Nile is a frequent competitor in Missouri fiddle contests, and walks away each summer with more than his share of trophies. Despite, or perhaps because of his experience, he is always willing to help out up and coming fiddlers with a new lick, a new tune, or just a word of encouragement.

Charlie "Possum" Walden

Contest Results

◆ Nebraska City, NE, April 30

Open Div.: 1st, Jason Shaw; 2nd, John Shaw; 3rd, Dave Brinkman; Sen. Div.: 1st, Pete McMahan; 2nd, Clair Dickey; 3rd, Jim Patterson; Jun. Div.: 1st, Melissa Schultz; 2nd, Amy LeGrand; 3rd, Joshua Evans.

◆ Russellville, June 11

Open Div.: 1st, Andrew Fortner; 2nd, Mike Wells; 3rd, Lynn Wells; Sr. Div.: 1st, Paul Shikles; 2nd, Herschel West; 3rd, Warren Johnson; 4th, Buss Maddox; 5th, Jacob Lepper; 6th, Polly Burre; 7th, T.J. Connell; Jr. Div.: 1st, Katie Lahr.

◆ Lawrenceburg, June 11

1st, Gary Johnston; 2nd, Don Johnston; 3rd, Dean Johnston.

◆ Fulton, June 25

1st, Travis Inman; 2nd, Pete McMahan; 3rd, Jr. Marriott; 4th, Mike Fraser; 5th, Bill Shull; 6th, Priscilla Westgate; 7th, Howard Marshall.

◆ Farmington, June 26

1st, Matt Wyatt; 2nd, Bob King; 3rd, Charlie Burger; 4th, Carolyn Eschbach; 5th, John Simmons; 6th, Katie Jo Scott; 7th, Francis Schilli.

◆ Troy, June 26

Open Div.: 1st, Billy Lee; 2nd, Patty Chandler; 3rd, Lynn Wells; 4th, Jr. Marriott; 5th, Kevin Lilly; 6th, Everett Vestal; 7th, Lorie Harman; Jr. Div.: 1st, Priscilla Westgate; 2nd, John Williams; 3rd, Angie Carter.

◆ Tebbetts, July 2

1st, Pete McMahan; 2nd, Jr. Marriott; 3rd, Mike Wells; 4th, Lynn Wells; 5th, Paul Shikles.

◆ Hannibal, July 4

Open Div.: 1st, Jr. Marriott; 2nd, Charlie Walden; 3rd, Pete McMahan; 4th, Phil Fry; 5th, Nile Wilson; 6th, Mike Wells; 7th, Patty Chandler; 8th, Kenny Applebee; Jr. Div.: 1st, Priscilla Westgate; 2nd, John Williams; 3rd, Angie Carter.

◆ Paris, July 9

Open Div.: 1st, Jr. Marriott; 2nd, Pete McMahan; 3rd, Phil Fry; 4th, Leroy Canaday; 5th, John White; 6th, Nile Wilson; 7th, Lynn Wells. Jr. Div.: 1st, Matt Wyatt; 2nd, John Williams; 3rd, Cliff Thornhill.

◆ Fayette, July 16

1st, Jr. Marriott; 2nd, Pete McMahan; 3rd, Mike Wells; 4th, Matt Wyatt; 5th, John White.

◆ Marshall, July 22

1st, Lynn Wells; 2nd, Pete McMahan; 3rd, Jr. Marriott; 4th, Mike Wells; 5th, Kenny Applebee; 6th, Matt Wyatt; 7th, John White; 8th, Bill Eddy; 9th, Eugene Bauer;

◆ Warrensburg, July 23

Open Div.: 1st, Jr. Marriott; 2nd, Travis Inman; 3rd, Howard Marshall; 4th, Kenny Applebee; 5th, Andrew Fortner; 6th, Alvin Cooper; Jr. Div.: 1st, Amy Millstead.

◆ Lewistown, July 24

1st, Jr. Marriott; 2nd, Phil Fry; 3rd, Howard Marshall; 4th, Angie Carter; 5th, Mike Wells; 6th, Kenny Applebee; 7th, Elmer Munzlinger.

◆ Columbia, July 30

1st, Jr. Marriott; 2nd, Phil Fry; 3rd, Howard Marshall; 4th, Billie Lee; 5th, Dale Pauley; 6th, Mike Wells; 7th, John White.

◆ Fulton, August 2

1st, Jr. Marriott; 2nd, Pete McMahan; 3rd, Leroy Canaday; 4th, Matt Wyatt; 5th, Howard Marshall; 6th, John White; 7th, Lynn Wells.

◆ Palmyra, August 12

1st, Lynn Wells; 2nd, Howard Marshall; 3rd, Phil Fry; 4th, Leroy Canaday; 5th, Matt Wyatt; 6th, Richard Harness; 7th, Kenny Applebee; 8th, Todd Parish;

◆ Warrenton, August 13

1st, Stephanie Westgate; 2nd, Carolyn Eschbach; 3rd, Phil Fry; 4th, Mike Wells; 5th, John White.

◆ Farmington, August 13

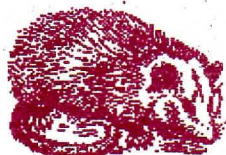
1st, Matt Wyatt; 2nd, Gary Watson; 3rd, Carolyn Eschbach; 4th, Kenny Applebee; 5th, Charlie Berger;

◆ Montgomery City, August 19

Open Div.: 1st, Jr. Marriott; 2nd, Matt Wyatt; 3rd, Howard Marshall; 4th, Phil Fry; 5th, Billy Lee; Jr. Div.: 1st, John Williams; 2nd, Allen Fraiser; 3rd, Adam Fraiser.

◆ Branson, August 20

Open Div.: 1st, Brandon Apple; 2nd, Alita Stoneking; 3rd, Travis Inman; Sr. Div.: 1st, Fred Stoneking; 2nd, Paul Andrews; 3rd, Lacy Hartje; Texas Style: 1st, Jr. Marriott; 2nd, Mike Yell; Jr. Div.: 1st, Katie Lahr; 2nd, Lucas Stoneking; 3rd, Jeane Kramer; 4th, Matt Wyatt; 4th, Stephanie Westgate; 5th, Priscilla Westgate; 5th, Justin Bow.



Possum Corner

Dear Friends,

Enclosed is your 1995 MSOTFA Contest Calendar. It lists contest and other fiddlin' events to be held in Missouri this year. I hope you continue to enjoy the Calendar and the various tape releases from MSOTFA. If you do, tell a friend about fiddling in Missouri and MSOTFA.

In the past year MSOTFA received two grants for production of recordings of Missouri fiddlers. The first was from the Fund for Folk Culture. It has allowed us to record Nile Wilson of Bucklin and will lead to release of a compact disc and cassette of his music this summer. The second is from the National Endowment for the Arts Folk and Traditional Arts Program. Under this program we will

record Bill Graves of Lebanon, Missouri. Bill is widely known as an authentic Ozarks dulcimer player and singer. What many people don't realize is that Bill is also a fiddler. He plays a very old-style of fiddle; many tunes are played in dischord. Look for a release of Bill's music in early 1996.

Let me share a few thoughts about old-time fiddling and our Missouri contests. Word has it that many more of the young fiddlers in the state are leaning toward the more progressive style of contest fiddling which has just about taken over contests in the rest of the country. Missouri had escaped this situation until recently. I want to make a case to these young players that there is value in

learning and playing the older style of Missouri fiddling which you can hear from most any of the "senior" players. Give it try. And to anyone judging contests this year I want to encourage you to listen carefully to all the contestants and award the top prizes to the best players, irrespective of style. Just because someone isn't playing slick contest-style fiddle doesn't mean they don't deserve to win a given competition.

Lastly, to anyone who uses e-mail I'd like to hear from you. Here's my address: 76252.255@compuserve.com.

Yours in Fiddling,
Charlie "Possum" Walden

The Annals of Fiddling: *Rattlesnake Buttons*



by
Howard Marshall

One of the first things I remember noticing about violins, once I began considering them as interesting entities of artisanship and beauty, is that many fiddles where I'm from contain the rattle ("button") from a rattlesnake. I do it, too, so people have noticed that there is something knocking around inside my violin and asked if something was wrong, something broken. Nope, it's just a rattlesnake button. The late violin maker Walter Boswell of Moberly (Randolph County) was adamant about putting a rattle inside the instruments as he completed them.

He didn't think a violin was ready to be played until the instrument had its rattle inside. On many occasions he recounted the importance of this custom in our patch of central Missouri.

The habit seems to be spread across much of the southeastern, southern, and midwestern U.S.A., and the custom is undoubtedly linked to the presence of venomous snake types. Rattles are somewhat hard to come by where I live, since the timber rattler (*Crotalus horridus*), eastern massasauga ("swamp rattler"), and pygmy rattler species are thinning out; they represent a threat to livestock and people in only a few areas of the state. I've noticed rattles in fiddles while visiting with fiddlers in numerous places in the above-mentioned regions but also way out in California. The whys and wherefores are probably lost in the mists of time. It's the sort of odd bit that perhaps only fiddle players or makers and repairmen would bother about. Mr. Boswell, who fondly remembered the country dances in the old Elliott schoolhouse in Randolph County where my grandfather played fiddle on Saturday evenings 75 years ago, made a point of passing on to me both of the "answers." The first answer is

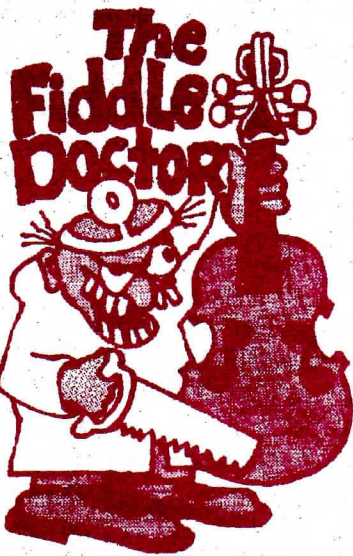
that the rattle works like a kind of dust sponge, rolling around and gathering up dust and thus somehow helping the instrument's well-being. The first answer is the one most people will easily accept, nodding up and down.

The second answer (and there are maybe more than just two answers) is, to me, more captivating, and one hesitates to give it easily. That answer is that the rattlesnake button may actually improve the sound of the violin. How ancient this belief is, I can't say, but it is a commonplace belief among many of the older generation of fiddlers of my acquaintance. And I must say I like that second explanation, because it admits the possibility of magic in an age pretending to be high-tech and pragmatic about everything.

What do you say, MSOTFA fiddling friends? Is the rattlesnake button familiar in your area, do you use one in your own violins, or is it some strange survival of no importance? We'd like to hear your ideas on this. And by the way, if there are readers in places where there are abundant rattles being tossed out (Texas and Oklahoma come to mind, and south Georgia), feel free to mail your extras to this appreciative fiddler in care of this journal.

Rattlesnake (from the playing of Bob Holt)

♩ = 144



on

Hairing a Bow

The Frog End of the Bow

Prepare the frog for hair much the same way you did the tip. First, slide off the ferrule, then remove the small wedge shaped plug from between the hair and the frog. This wedge of wood is called the spreader. Keep it for future reference as it can serve as a good pattern for making your new wedge. The bow slide should slide out of its groove toward the hair end of the frog. If it refuses to slide, you have got problems as someone has probably glued it in. The slide or even the frog may be destroyed in chiseling out a glued in slide.

Once the slide is out, remove the lug holding the knot in the frog as you did with the plug in the tip. Be careful not to damage the groove that the slide was in during removal. Fashion a new frog plug using the diagram as a guide. The frog plug is sometimes made of softer wood than the tip plug; spruce is often used. However, the old viola

or cello bridge material will work here as well. Make sure the frog plug is a good fit calculating a snug fit when it is pushed all the way into the frog later in the rehair process. You are almost ready to rehair.

At this point, or sometimes even earlier, bow repairmen place the bow in a jig that holds the bow while they rehair it. You don't need to worry about all this fancy stuff as all you need is a one inch spread plant hood and some rubber or medical tape. Wrap the tape around the hook part of the plant hood as cushioning for the bow and screw the plant hook about knee level into the wall or something solid. Do not screw this into your wife's furniture as you will need her cooperation very soon. Sit down in the chair some three feet from the hook and put the tip of the bow in the hook. The frog end of the bow should reach almost to your lap. Tie about three feet of your knot thread into the chair arm and presto, you have a bow rehair jig.

Thoroughly wet the hair in water, room temperature is fine and placing the tip into the plant hook, sit down and begin to comb the hair from the tip toward the frog with a medium to fine comb. You will have to keep some tension on the hair as you do this using two fingers to lightly "pinch" the hair following right behind the comb. When you get to the end of the hair, grab the hair with your other hand and keep the tension as you prepare to comb again. After some fooling around you will get the hairs all laying as straight and as flat as your patience will allow. Getting them to lay perfect is very difficult.

At this point, call for your wife to assist. Holding the hair tightly so some of them don't slip causing you to have to comb again, have your wife help you tie a knot identical to the one you did on the tip end of the bow. To determine where to tie the knot, push the frog all the way forward on the bow and line your

knot up with the end of the slot that holds the slide. This method of determining where to tie the knot will work most of the time, but not on all bows. To avoid ruining numerous hanks of hair by cutting them too short, the best rule of thumb is better a little long than too short.

Cut the hair off 1/8 inch beyond the knot and burn, rosin and/or glue the end just like the knot in the tip. Take your ferrule and slide it over the knot and down the hair. Beware, the ferrule will only fit onto the frog one way so make sure you've got the right end of the ferrule toward the end of the bow. Insert knot into frog plug hole and push in frog plug. Do not glue any of these plugs into their slots, if you follow the diagram you will discover that the cut of the plug will allow the force of the hair to hold itself in place. Put the slide back in the frog. Slide ferrule onto frog and fit a new spreader into ferrule between the hair and the frog. Spread and even out the hair as you push the spreader into the ferrule. It will take some practice to get it completely and tightly into the ferrule.

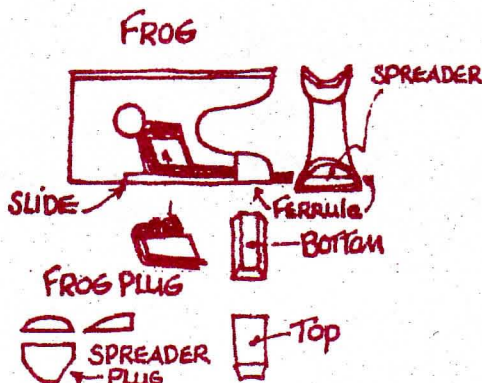
Using an alcohol lamp or open flame (some folks use an extremely hot hand held hair dryer) heat the hair by moving the bow back and forth over the heat source or vice versa. This will shrink up and even out loose hairs. Rosin the hair up and you are done.

Although you may ruin several hanks of hair before you get it right, this method will work and will produce results that are only limited by your patience and standards of quality.

For the majority of you that are saying to yourselves, "That sounds like a lot of trouble to save \$30 every year or so, why doesn't he tell us something interesting about fiddles?," be sure to ask Bill Shull, who wheedled me into this claiming there was tremendous reader interest, 'Hey Bill, rehired any bows lately'"

John Griffin

Editor's Note: John Griffin repairs and trades in violins and other acoustic instruments. He also stocks wood for instrument making. In addition, he generously volunteers repair and set-up services for the MSOTFA Junior Fiddling Program. You can reach him at 4925 County Rd. 351, Fulton, MO 65251, (314) 642-2590





Issues:

Tune Choice

For at least the last few decades, Missouri contests have required fiddlers to play "a hoedown, a waltz, and a tune of choice." Of course, "breakdowns," "hornpipes," "reels," and so on are all lumped into the first category. About any tune in 3/4 time is accepted as a "waltz." The "tune of choice," in theory, is any danceable tune, but usually we just hear something else from the "hoedown" category. Some fiddlers will play a second waltz; other fiddlers will call their tune of choice a "rag" or a "polka," but other than a little syncopation, it's often hard to musically distinguish these from a "hoedown". In short, contest fiddling in Missouri is basically limited to hoedowns and waltzes in standard tuning.

The historical purpose for requiring a separate "tune of choice" was both to preserve Missouri's rich and unique fiddle tradition, and to encourage diversity and breadth in the contest fiddler's repertory. However, today's contest rules and practices have had an exactly contrary effect.

First of all, Missouri fiddle music from the early 1900's until at least the 1940's was full of tunes in six-eighth rhythm. In fact, 22 out of 51 tunes in W.H. Morris' "Old Time Violin Melodies" (published in St. Joseph in 1927) were 6/8 "quadrilles."

Likewise, Missouri, particularly in the southern regions, has nurtured a fairly large

set of tunes in other than standard tuning. Yet, other than an infrequent instance of "Black Mountain Rag" being played in a novelty division, I've never heard a cross-tuned piece (AEAE, AEAC#) played on stage.

I would also guess that Missouri dancers have worn out many a rug with one-steps, two-steps, "true" polkas, and hornpipes and clogs in dotted rhythms (i.e., "chunk-ka-chunk-ka"). Yet none of the latter are currently heard on Missouri contest stages.

The upshot is, several major traditions of Missouri fiddle music are dying on the vine. Why? First, cross-tuned pieces are expressly outlawed. Nobody really knows why that's so, and you can't get an answer from anybody other than "Hey, that's *trick* fiddling!" Second, it's my experience that most contest judges, consciously or unconsciously, just won't give a winning score to anything in 6/8 time or in a dotted rhythm no matter how good the fiddling is.

Contest promoters and judges across the state need to wake up and re-examine their rules and guidelines while there are still fiddlers around to pass on the Missouri's traditional fiddling wealth.

(Note that the Missouri Traditional Fiddling Championships in Fulton, are a welcome exception to the practices criticized above.)

Mail Bag

[Responses to May 1994 "Annals of Fiddling]

In reference to the tune "Chinkapin" here are some other titles I've heard: "Sweet Sixteen," "Headin' Out for the Territories," and "Hair in the Butter." I personally find little or no resemblance between this tune and the Scottish "Farewell to Whiskey" that Bill Shull mentions.

Al Murphy, Iowa City, IA

[Murphy's right, Shull was wrong, Ed.]

I question Howard's origin of the 'Chinkapin' title as stemming from the "chinkapin oak" that is common in Missouri. In West Virginia, chinkapins are an entity in themselves and not tied to the oak species. They are a small shrub-like bush that produces "chinkapins" or small nuts, similar to American chestnuts, that are a delicacy to mountaineers. Thus, we have tunes like "Chinkapin," "Chinkapin Hunting," and lyrics like "Susie and the boys went chinkapin hunting" in tunes like "Black Eyed Susie."

Gerry Milnes, Elkins, WV

On a recent trip to Virginia I found a number of tapes produced by MSOTFA: Lyman Enloe, Cyril Stinnett, and Casey Jones. These brought real happiness to an old Missouri boy who is a long way from home.

Robert H. Clinton, Balsall Common, England

Hornpipe in D

This tune was taken off of a wire recording, circa 1955, from Bob Walters of Tekamah, Nebraska. It is typical of the notey, Canadian style of tune which Bob could play so well.



Audio Releases

(order from MSOTFA)

"Draggin' the Bow" by Charlie Walden

These 22 contest and dance cuts were recorded by Charlie when he was fresh from one of his hottest contest seasons at the end of 1985. The tunes include: Brenda's Reel, Draggin' the Bow, Hell Among the Yearlings, and Fiddler's Dream. MSOTFA 007, \$8.00

"Tie-Hacker Hoedown" by Nile Wilson

Traditional Missouri fiddle tunes played by Missouri master Nile Wilson. Tunes include Mississippi Snag, Yellow Boston, Hal Scott's Special, Oak Ridge Stomp, and Rocky Road to Kansas. MSOTFA 202-CS, \$8.00, MSOTFA 202-CD, \$14.00 (pre-May 31 price is \$7.00 for cassette, \$11.00 for CD)

NEWS

Taylor McBaine Passes

Taylor McBaine, one of the best-known fiddlers ever to grace dances and the contest stage in Missouri died on May 18, 1994. Taylor was born Feb. 11, 1910 in a log cabin in northern Boone Co., and learned to play fiddle as a child from his father. Taylor stopped fiddling for a couple of decades, but had been especially active in contests since the nineteen-sixties. He served as a instructor in the master-apprentice program, and also instructed many fiddlers on an informal basis.

ADS

BAND FOR HIRE. Will play for dances (square, contra), school programs, and special occasions. "DOC HOWARD AND FRIENDS". Columbia, MO. Telephone (314) 446-4863. Howard Marshall (fiddle, banjo), Kenny Applebee (guitar), John White (banjo, fiddle), Musial Wolfe (piano).

AUCTION LIST: Many 78rpm and LP fiddle albums for sale. Write for list. Old time Country Music Club of Canada, c/o Bob Fuller, 1421 Gohier St., St. Laurent, Quebec, Canada H4L 3K2

MEMBERSHIP DUES ARE DUE!

Please check the mailing label on your envelope. If the year is not "96" or greater, please remit your membership dues of \$10.00 prior to June 1, 1996. Supporting MSOTFA means that you are supporting fiddling across the state of Missouri !!

Audio Reviews

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Ed Carnes EFI Records EFI 1068901. 3200 Heatherton Place, Plano, TX 75023-1674, \$10.00 (Cassette)

Kentucky native Ed Carnes is known throughout the midwest and mid-south region as an outstanding contest fiddler. To his credit are five Kentucky state championships and runner-up status at the prestigious Grand Master competition in Nashville. Several fine contest tunes in this genre are presented here. Dusty Miller, Grey Eagle, Chief Sitting Bull, Herman's Rag, and General Longstreet's Reel are played with the ease, feeling and swing characteristic of Texas-style contest fiddling. His waltzes are also first-rate contest fare.

What is most remarkable though is the variety of styles and versatility Ed presents on this recording. His Kanawha March would make Clark Kessinger sit up and take notice. A tasteful guitar lead is provided by Robert Shafer on this cut. Suzy's Schottische is played with energy and bounce (I've added

this one to my own repertoire). He plays Grant Lamb's Breakdown, a Canadian piece, as if he had just come down from the north. Nice piano accompaniment by Dave Trost is provided on both these tunes. Ed is assisted by Troy Herdman on guitar and Dennie Prado on bass on selected cuts.

This is a very listenable recording and I highly recommend it. There is truly a little "Something for Everyone" here.

COMMON FIDDLE TUNES, FAST AND SLOW

Geoff Seitz, 4175 Loughborough Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63116, \$8.00 plus \$1.00 postage [Cassette]

Violinmaker and award-winning old-time fiddler Geoff Seitz has set down a tape of tunes which would prove highly useful to beginning fiddlers interested in playing Anglo-American fiddling in any style. As the title indicates Seitz plays these common fiddle tune fast and slow without accompa-

niment. Each tune is announced and then played through two times, once at a respectable dance tempo and then slowed down in slow jam fashion (not to be confused with slow gin fashion) so that the listener can play along and learn the melody by ear. The style of play is pretty middle-of-the-road and lacking in much stylistic content (which was the intent) so that the beginner will not be burdened with fancy licks and parlor tricks.

I recommend this tape to beginners without reservation. Learn all these tunes and you'll be well-equipped to begin jamming in the mid-western and eastern states or about anywhere in the country straight-ahead U. S. of A. fiddling is played and appreciated. There is a vast array of so-called "fiddling methods" in the marketplace, many quite expensive. While there will never be a substitute to sitting at the feet of an accomplished player and learning tunes directly, the simple straight ahead approach to learning that this tape represents is an effective and affordable alternative to other home-study means of learning to fiddle. Heck, my only regret is that I didn't think of it first.

Possum' Walden