

*"The Country Cousins" in 1972. Fiddler Ralph Aldous, with Jess and Barbara Day.
—photo by the author*

Old Time Fiddling and Social Dance in Central St. Lawrence County

by Robert D. Bethke

Within the past five years we have witnessed a great awareness and revival of interest in the fiddling tradition of the North Country. Hardly a week goes by without a fiddler's contest somewhere nearby and even an active North Country Fiddler's Association has formed with recordings already being made. Much of the credit for all this activity can go to Dr. Bob Bethke, whose original field research and this article, first published in 1974, focused our attention to this significant aspect of our heritage. Further, his work is very important for us to see the professional folklorist's serious and intensive efforts to find and analyze the tenuous, passing parts of our rich, traditional culture.

Author's Foreword

This essay originally appeared in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, 30 (1974), 163-182. It is reprinted here in slightly revised form. I suspect that many readers of *THE QUARTERLY* will find the treatment excessively "academic" in nature. At the time I wrote the piece very few discussions of the subject matter were available in folklore scholarship, my professional discipline. In fact, I was unable to find any previous studies which described the heritage (in the North Country or elsewhere) in terms of past and present community life or active performers. The situation hasn't changed much since then. Collections of fiddle tunes and affectionate biographies of individual folk musicians continue to far outnumber the kind of folk cultural approach I employed. While some readers may disagree with some of my findings

and interpretations, I hope that all will come away with a sense of the importance of folklore field studies. There is a need for more of them in St. Lawrence County, an area rich in "old-time traditions" of various types.

OLD-TIME FIDDLING AND SOCIAL DANCE IN CENTRAL ST. LAWRENCE COUNTY

The upsurge of public interest in old-time fiddlers' contests throughout the county may well foreshadow the "discovery" of the vital fiddling and social dance heritage in Northern New York. Significantly, the trend toward the formation of organizations dedicated to the preservation and promotion of traditional instrumental music appears to be moving westward across the Adirondacks. A case in point is the small and little-known local fiddlers' contest held annually in October

since 1971 at the Knox Memorial Central High School in Russell. To date, this south-central St. Lawrence County contest has attracted an enthusiastic group of entrants engrained in the old-time instrumental musical tradition of the surrounding rural communities. That heritage deserves to be better known among many natives and non-residents of the North Country.

Based on my field observations during the period 1970-1973, including a series of lengthy interviews with six male fiddlers ranging in age from 60 to 81, it would appear that the fiddling tradition in central St. Lawrence County has been perpetuated mainly among residents of mixed English, Scots, Scots-Irish and Lowland Irish backgrounds. My method has been to ask known fiddlers for leads to similar performers. I have used the same type of approach during informal

conversations with patrons in local bars and with residents at various public and private gatherings. Another procedure has been to attend round and square dances in taverns, Grange Halls, barns and other large capacity structures. To date, French-Canadian fiddlers have been conspicuously absent at the latter events. Direct inquiries about living fiddlers in the area have produced the names of a dozen local musicians whom I have yet to contact; few of the surnames, at surface view, hint at French-Canadian stock. This finding has been contrary to my initial expectations.

Given the clear-cut and substantial impact of French-Canadian fiddling tradition upon old-time music in northern New Hampshire, Vermont and the Champlain Valley, one would expect to find similar influences throughout St. Lawrence County. Indeed, if one is to go by the responses of local fiddlers to questions along these lines, and their reaction to recorded French-Canadian fiddling from Canada and elsewhere, it is clear that the Anglo-Scots-Irish musicians greatly admire their music-making counterparts. But these same Anglo-Scots-Irish fiddlers are also quick to point out the perceivable differences in tune repertoires, bowing techniques, rhythmic complexity and other performance characteristics (including marked and intricate foot-tapping) which often identify the fiddler working within the French-Canadian heritage. In short, the British-derived heritage seems to predominate overwhelmingly in central St. Lawrence County. Were one to document fiddling tradition more to the west near Ogdensburg, or to the north, say in and around Massena, or to the east in the vicinity of Tupper Lake, Franklin County, I suspect that the findings might be different. There might well be greater evidence of hybridization in musical repertoire and stylistic mannerism, as reported elsewhere in the Northeast. The fact is that I have not found it during preliminary investigations within the field site.

Fiddling and Social Dance: The Domestic Tradition

While radio and television have diminished the currency of household traditional singing over the past fifty years, television in particular has had just the opposite effect upon patterns of fiddling. Local fiddlers rarely miss an opportunity to watch weekly country music shows, many of which feature talented fiddlers performing traditional dance tunes. By far the most popular of these broadcasts has been the "Don Messer Show" transmitted on CKWS-TV from nearby Kingston, Ontario. Messer's recent death may thus prove to have significant long-range effects upon fiddling tradition in St. Lawrence County. His many years of personal appearances, radio and television broadcasts and phonograph recordings have had major impact upon Cana-

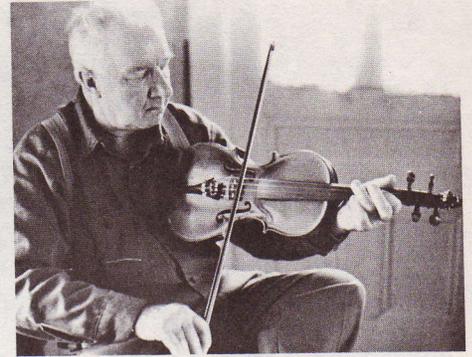
dian and Northeast fiddling style in general. Numerous local musicians continue to watch similar televised offerings, however, including "The Pig and Whistle," "Sing-a-long Jubilee" and "The Tommy Hunter Show."

Fiddlers will gather at the home of a fellow musician to watch these musical grab-bags and to "visit," the latter activity including expressive conversation which mixes gossip, news exchange and what amounts to talk for the sake of talk. Sprinkled throughout the discussions are comments about the technical virtuosity and performance manners of the television performer. For some local fiddlers like Dave Snow, a 60 year-old retired town highway department employee from Madrid, the broadcast programs and related get-togethers have contributed heavily to personal tune repertory and technique. At the conclusion of a televised segment, it is not at all uncommon to find such musicians turning to their instruments for the sake of solo or group performance within the household. In the case of small group gatherings, fiddlers will often retire to the kitchen to make their music. In the older homes, the kitchen is usually spacious, sparsely functional in furniture and decor, and warm. It is often symbolically — if not literally — the heart of the household, and a focal point for a sense of home, hearth and camaraderie.

The contemporary pattern of fiddling and friendship in local homes is one which has precedents in the rural "kitchen hops" (alternately, "kitchen dances," "house dances" or "house parties") of earlier years. The kitchen hop was a major social institution in central St. Lawrence County, for it served as a bridge between the domestic unit and people in the neighborhood. Men and women were drawn together in expressive communal activity within what was ordinarily a private setting. All of the elderly residents with whom I have spoken recall participating in such events; most have expressed regret at the tradition's demise by the end of the Second World War.

House parties were held throughout the year, but most frequently following the fall harvest and during the early summer. The consumption of large quantities of cider and food played an important part in such gatherings. Canton plumber Avery St. Louis, an active fiddler in his early 60s, recalled one memorable occasion: "When I was 20 years old or so, they used to have dances every week somewhere. House dance. Everybody'd bring a cake. I went to a dance one night and they had fourteen cakes there. Had a little piece of each one of them!"

To some extent, the typical house party provided a communal context for the distribution of surplus food commodities within the farming communities of



Dave Snow at his home in Madrid, 1971. The "unorthodox" way of holding the instrument enabled old-time fiddlers to play and call dances simultaneously.

—photo by author

the central Valley. In addition, the preparation of specialty dishes lent prestige to individuals and families, while the consumption itself afforded an opportunity to "visit" among local acquaintances. It was also an ideal setting for courtship. In all, the effect was to solidify a sense of neighborhood and neighborliness.

The highlight of every kitchen hop was the dancing among couples to the accompaniment of a fiddle or mouth organ. Adroit fiddlers with physical stamina who had an extensive repertory of tunes, whose instruments had "good loudness and tone," and who had a keen sense of "time" were widely favored. Nearly all of the elderly musicians with whom I have spoken have had experience playing at the occasions, although the frequency varied from player to player. "There's a lot of them can play square dances," accomplished fiddler Ralph Aldous of Canton once put it with a sense of pride, "but there's a lot of them can't get up and play a dance all the way through, all night, for 4 hours. Playing round dances, and waltzes, and everything. You've got to know how to play them for the dances." Claude Guthrie, retired baker and long-time fiddler also from Canton, described the kitchen dance of his youth:



Avery St. Louis swapping tunes at Claude Guthrie's home, Canton, 1971.

—photo by author

"As far back as I can remember," he told me, "we used to have kitchen hops. And they'd hire a fiddler. And of course they had cook stoves that burned wood in them days. And they'd generally set him in a chair up on there — but not fire in it! And they'd dance two sets there in the kitchen. He set up there and play, and do his own calling."

Kitchen hops placed heavy demands upon the local square dance fiddler. Most of the reward for performance was more in the way of prestige than monetary gain. Seventy-year-old Emmett Hurley from Hannawa Falls described his role at a typical gathering:

"I got to where I could play a little bit. And people began to kinda look up to it. And finally I got a job playing to square dances. I didn't want to, but I did. And I got by. And by Judas priest, for ten years I used to play about twice a week to kitchen hops . . . Then, everybody was poor. And they'd have it right in their own home. Invite their friends for birthdays, and anniversaries, and so on and so forth.



Claude Guthrie, Canton, in his kitchen, April, 1971.

—photo by author

. . . Boy, I'm going to tell ya, they were ambitious, too! They wanted a lot. We could play from 9 till 2 in the morning. Square dance after square dance. Ordinarily we used to play two changes, and then a breakdown . . . You take two changes and a breakdown right after it there, fast, and it'll take quite a lot of energy, I'm tellin' ya.

. . . They'd pass the hat around, you know. Get guys to throw in a dollar, quarter, (or) fifty cents, and then give it to me. Or whatever I wanted. I never took it all; they always said you could. Had everything you needed and wanted. Sometimes they'd come and get ya (and) bring ya home."

Such kitchen dances not only showcased the local musician, but they provided a forum for the public exercise of individual skill and interpersonal decorum. Solo stepdancing in the form of "clogging" and "jigging" was common-

place at one time, and one can occasionally observe elderly men or women performing such maneuvers at present-day round and square dances in the towns. In the past, as in the present, there has been a need for acceptable ways to assert one's individual identity and creative energies within these small North Country communities. Kitchen hops, in one sense, provided an opportunity for controlled exhibitionism within the limits of propriety.

North Country kitchen dances brought the community into the household; "barn dances," in effect, extended the household into the community. The two patterns of socio-musical activity were intimately related in earlier years, and they often overlapped. People congregated at a barn to engage in communal activities like husking corn would later shift their attentions to household music-making and dance after completion of the work. Avery St. Louis recalled playing at one such "huskin' bee" in the town of Lisbon, a community in the western portion of the county where he spent part of his youth: "Big barn there. Boy, they had a pile of corn. I don't know how many people were there. They husked the corn. They had ten 10-gallon cans of cider. And pumpkin pies were piled up there. I'm tellin' you, you never saw such a sight! And then they had a dance. That was an all-night session. They held it in the house."

Other field contacts described similar patterns of domestic-based but community-focused social dance. John Russell, an 81 year-old former square dance fiddler living in Parishville, told about a number of musical occasions at which he performed, and he described their settings:

"Down to Parishville Center, there's a place they call Parker Homestead . . . Well, in the back part of that house there, up over the garage and woodshed, a man put on a floor and built a little platform on one end. And he put in a fire escape. And he held dances there. I played there three years running, for all the summer. The dances would start along the last of April or the first of May, and they'd continue through until Hallowe'en. Every two weeks . . .

Floyd Fallon, on the other side of Colton, had a big barn that he cleaned all out. Cleared it in good shape. It was a hayloft. And he held three dances there. Last of May and June until haying time. I played for those three dances . . .

While I was doing that, I was working on the town roads, too. We'd work until six o'clock on the road. I'd get home, and wash up and change, shave, eat my supper, get in my car and go to the dances. They'd dance until three o'clock in the morning. Then I'd come home and get a few winks of sleep, and go to work. I couldn't afford not to work, and I couldn't afford not to take up the

dancing. So, that's the way that was."

Community dances after the Second World War began to change character, in that they became less tied to family and neighborhood. They were gradually assimilated into a coexisting pattern of intercommunity dances at town halls, Granges, taverns and other settings of essentially nondomestic identity. Ralph Aldous linked this transition to changing patterns of domestic food production in the central and eastern portions of St. Lawrence County: "(The community dance) kinda died out after people began not to raise gardens. Years ago, farm women raised their own stuff — pork, beef, potatoes and so forth. And they'd bring baked beans, scalloped potatoes, salad . . . just like a banquet! And then, after they quit raisin' them and go to buyin' them, they quit bringin' them. It'd cost too much."

In a broader sense, the demise of the community-based domestic dance tradition, apart from the more private music-making which continues within some private homes, is indicative of the general decline in rural settlement in numerous parts of the county. In recent years many people have abandoned homes in older neighborhoods in order to move closer to Potsdam, Canton and other centers of commerce in the central and western Valley. Many young people are looking beyond their immediate communities for economic opportunities. Increased automobile usage has extended neighborhood boundaries and enabled an elaboration of intercommunity networks of friendship. This is not to say that the role of the family in local social life has changed markedly. But it is the case that in the central portion of the county and nearby foothill towns, public forms of tradition-based musical entertainment have moved progressively away from the home. With the shift in milieu, one finds differences in the tenor of the socio-musical activities.

Fiddling and Social Dance: The Nondomestic Tradition

Contemporary nondomestic old-time fiddling and social dance in central St. Lawrence County represents a "continuity of tradition" which stretches back to the early years of settlement and ultimately to the British Isles. But the heritage has not remained static and insulated from patterns of social and musical change in North Country life. Instead, as true generally for systems of folk music, it has been more a matter of continuous evolution than "survival" in the narrow and antiquated sense of the latter concept. The signs of this socio-musical change against a backdrop of continuity are in evidence throughout the central Valley.

Old-time fiddlers are much less common today at organized round and square dances than they were as recently as the 1950s. Many of the older men who

customarily "played to dances" in a semiprofessional capacity are now deceased or have retired to warmer climates. Others have "put down the fiddle" for a variety of reasons including physical impairments to arms, hands and fingers otherwise critical to playing ability. In talking with elderly fiddlers, one also finds a growing reluctance to perform publicly out of deference to younger musicians playing amplified guitars and "up-to-date" Country-Western and rock music. Still, a small percentage elderly traditional fiddlers continue to perform at both private and public social functions in St. Lawrence County, and apparently with greater frequency than found in other parts of Northern New York.

The public visibility and constituent features of present-day nondomestic fiddling activities vary with context and event. Some fiddlers, for instance, continue to find sporadic one-night dance jobs at social functions sponsored by local fishing-and-game clubs and similar organizations of restricted membership. There is minimal publicity for most of these events, and those which are open to the public cater heavily to middle-aged and elderly couples from nearby communities. Ralph Aldous, for example, has recently played a mixture of reels, waltzes and polkas at round and square dances held in the lodge of the Raquette Valley Fish and Game Club in Colton, and at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Canton. An occasional participant at such events will request a nostalgic jig, two-step or quadrille, but the number of people who recall and can still perform the intricate dance movements accurately is usually quite small nowadays. The atmosphere at these get-togethers ranges from sedate to exuberant. As Ralph noted, "Sometimes you don't have to play but one round dance; they all want square dances. Well, it depends on the mood of the people, I guess."

Much more frequent and accessible than the club dances are the public round and square dances held in Grange, American Legion, VFW and firehall facilities. The dances appear to gain popularity as one moves eastward across central St. Lawrence County and into the foothills. This pattern seems to be due in part to the infrequency there of the theatres, drive-in movies and other commercial forms of nightly entertainment more typical of the larger western Valley communities. The attraction of the dances in towns like Norwood, West Stockholm and Crary Mills may also reflect a sense of "community" which has begun to erode elsewhere. There needs to be a great deal more inquiry, however, to test these speculative correlations.

Dances at Granges and similar locales occur throughout the year, although they are least common during the cold winter months. Advertisements for the occasions appear regularly in local news-

papers like the *Potsdam Courier & Freeman*. I have attended numerous dances of this sort during my field work, but the round and square dance held at Crary Mills Grange on December 26, 1970 seems especially indicative of one pattern of evolution taking place within the region's old-time music and social dance traditions.

A Potsdam radio commentator announced that weekly dances were being held at the Grange every Saturday night from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. Upon arrival, my wife and I discovered that the admission at the door was seventy-five cents. We entered the nineteenth-century wooden structure, ascended a narrow flight of stairs to the second floor, and found a large and noisy assemblage of participants. Most of them were young teenagers. About a dozen adult chaperones mingled with one another on either side of the wooden dance floor. There were light refreshments and no alcoholic beverages, although I observed a number of youths slip out a side door for a clandestine drink and smoke.

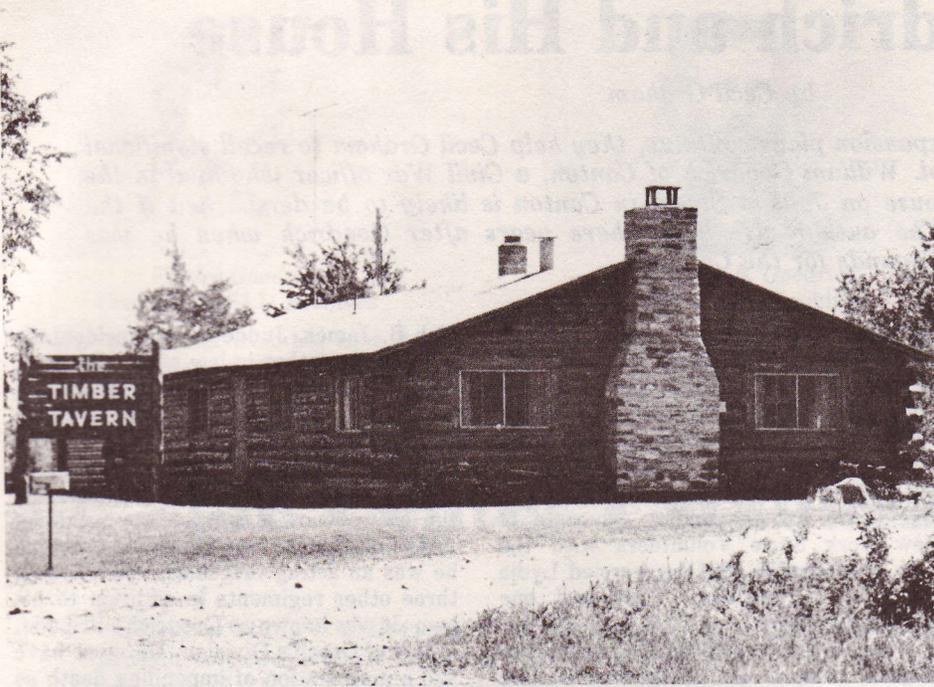
The "Grasse River Rangers" dance band consisted of two musicians with amplified guitars and a third man playing drums. We were disappointed not to find a fiddler. Subsequent inquiries and observations disclosed that fiddlers are now much less common at dances where there will be predictably high numbers of youths. Fiddlers simply do not adapt well to the mixture of Country-Western and rock which the young people insist upon at these functions. Accordingly, on this particular evening a set of three square dance pieces was played on the hour; the remainder of the time was devoted to round dances and rock. The square dances seemed to be aimed mostly at gratifying some of the adults, and momentarily at least to restore some of the decorum lost during the progress of the other dance activities. Indicative of the gradual changes in repertoire, instrumentation and musical preferences in general at these events, one of the square dance numbers performed by the lead guitarist was "Darling Nelly Gray," an ubiquitous late Victorian tune in traditional circulation which I had previously heard several old-time fiddlers play at public dances elsewhere in the county. Such changes throughout the Valley seem to make their way northward from Syracuse and Watertown, and eastward from Ogdensburg. By contrast, musical and social dance patterns in the eastern foothills remain somewhat more "tradition-bound" in comparison to other parts of the immediate region. Located about ten miles to the west of the foothill geographical demarcation line, the Crary Mills dance thus represented the front wave in one stage of change within the musical heritage.

The contemporary Firemen's Field Day round and square dance as yet represents

more of a stronghold of continuity in the inter-community nondomestic dance tradition typical of earlier years. These fund-raising dances in towns like Colton and Parishville are held within large, semi-enclosed permanent structures situated on former pasture land. Upwards of a hundred people will attend most of the dances, which are held from about early June to Labor Day. Usually no more than two dozen people occupy the plank dance floor at any one time. The acoustics of many of the structures encourage the use of amplified instruments among musicians. Fiddlers, however, appear to be the exception, at least in the communities with which I am familiar. To date, I have failed to observe any old-time fiddlers who rely upon amplified violins at dance jobs of any sort, although I certainly do not rule out the possibility that such usage exists in central St. Lawrence County.

It was at a typical Field Day round and square dance sponsored by the Parishville Volunteer Fire Company in the summer of 1970 that I made my first contact with Ralph Aldous. In addition to him, the dance combo included two guitarists with electrified instruments, a drummer, and an elderly caller. Teenagers and old adults mingled on the dance floor and enthusiastically responded to dance tunes like "Darling Nelly Gray," "Marching Through Georgia," "Turkey in the Straw," "The Spanish Cavalier," "Golden Slippers" and several venerable breakdowns and waltzes. Most striking was the qualitative difference between this type of public nondomestic dance and the reports of household dancing in years past. If one is to judge from oral reminiscences, the latter events must have been constrained and decorous affairs by comparison. A sense of social license prevails in the contemporary nondomestic dance setting; beer flows freely from nearby concessions, talk is free flowing and sometimes unmodulated, and various sorts of harmless shenanigans are commonplace on and off the dance floor. The same pattern holds for the popular Friday and Saturday evening dances at numerous taverns and hotel bar-rooms throughout the central Valley.

Present-day "beer hall dances," as I heard several fiddlers term them, offer the greatest opportunity to observe old-time fiddling and social dance in a public context. The dances occur throughout the year, with location and frequency largely dependent upon an establishment's facilities, the musical preferences of the management and clientele, and the economics involved in providing live entertainment. Obviously the feasibility of such dances depends heavily upon the availability of local musical talent. Guitarists and drummers are numerous, whereas accomplished round and square dance fiddlers are nowadays more difficult to locate and contract for evening engage-



The "Timber Tavern," Parishville. A contemporary setting for round and square dances in the western foothills.

—photo by author

ments which may stretch over several weeks or months. I have observed that many of the older fiddlers drift from job to job, as do square dance callers. Occasionally tavern owners are fortunate enough to locate a fiddler who does his own calling, thereby resulting in a monetary savings and reducing the chances of cancellation due to the absence of only one member of a four-member dance combo.

As of the fall of 1973, at least three bars in the vicinity of Parishville and Colton feature this type of weekend entertainment. The taverns may vary in outward physical appearance and inner decor, but the types of music-making and attendant social dances prove to be more or less consistent from one setting to the next. The most evident difference from locale to locale is not in the nature of the music but in the extra-dance social atmosphere.

The tavern at the 7-Springs Sport Center on the outskirts of Colton is the most isolated and restrained of the three representative establishments. The tavern owners make a point of ejecting "rowdy types," which appear infrequent. The tavern caters predominantly to local residents in the winter, spring and summer months. In the fall an occasional nonresident big-game hunter will stop for light food and a drink or two in the late afternoon or evening. The crowd is usually small (ten to twenty couples on a dance night is average), close-knit in terms of familiarity, and intent upon having a good time within the limits of

courtesy and good taste. Numerous organized combos and make-shift combinations of local instrumental musicians have performed at the tavern over the last several years. One evening, for instance, the band consisted of a guitarist (Jess Day of Canton), a female drummer (Barbara Day), a fiddler from West Potsdam (Ward Burdick) and an octogenarian caller (Mahlon Spring) from West Parishville. With exception of regular twenty-minute breaks, the group played continuously from 9:30 p.m. until 1:30 a.m. The scene was repeated a week later, during which time the band had added a rhythm guitarist. In both cases the music alternated from square dance numbers to waltzes and polkas. At the latter occasion several elderly men and middle-aged women attempted some traditional solo step-dancing and were greeted with shouts of approval.

Elsewhere in the vicinity of the western Adirondack foothills these tavern dances lend themselves to more unrestrained behavior. Two barrooms near Parishville, for example, attract large crowds of patrons ranging in age from their middle twenties to sixties and

seventies. At the "Timber Tavern" and "The Bucket" male clientele tend to outnumber the women. The dance floor is always crowded on a Friday or Saturday night. There seems to be relatively little concern for maintaining formal precision in the dance maneuvers; it is enough that a square dance set is executed smoothly enough to ensure its internal continuity. Men will exuberantly swing their partners nearly to the point of physical abuse. This manhandling is expected and various women appear to encourage it in subtle ways. Other women dance with their female counterparts during square dance breakdowns and polkas, in so doing often emulating the performance mannerisms of certain male participants. There is little effort to conceal intoxication. Typically one hears comments like, "Hell, I'm just having a good time." And indeed, this opportunity for relaxed fun and sanctioned public display in the barroom setting would seem to lie at the heart of this flourishing pattern of old-time music and social dance. Apart from the obvious enjoyment in the nature of the music and dance itself, patrons find the stimulus for a wide range of personal interaction. While this socializing is distinct from the heritage of music-making per se, it is nevertheless intimately part of the overall fiddling/social dance complex in local rural social life.

In sum, the heritage of old-time fiddling and social dance in central St. Lawrence County continues to serve and to satisfy social impulses as well as aesthetic ones. Informal fiddling and friendship among musicians in area homes functions to extend and reaffirm interpersonal relationships at the individual and household level. Although small in scale, these get-togethers in turn help to perpetuate the music and music-making tradition. Public nondomestic dances, similarly, serve to draw people together at the community level. Collective participation in old-time dances reinforces not only a sense of neighborhood and region, but through feedback enhances the likelihood of continuity in the musical heritage despite gradual and inevitable change. Whether or not these North Country communities will experience a revival of interest in some of the older streams of the musical and social dance traditions remains to be seen. Certainly the foundations for that kind of revival are already well-entrenched.

☆☆☆☆

About the Author

Dr. Robert D. Bethke is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Delaware, where he heads the Folklore Program and serves as Director, Folklore and Ethnic Art Center. A member of SLCHA, he recently produced the album *Ted Ashlaw: Adirondack Woods Singer* (Philo 1022). He is currently completing two books on folksong and storytelling traditions among woodsmen in and around St. Lawrence County. His in-laws, Mr. and Mrs. Edward McHugh, live in Potsdam.