

Llano Fiddle Fest: Fiddling with Perfection by Terry Schroth

"If you're gonna play in Texas, you gotta have a fiddle in the band." Safe to say that nine times out of ten, that fiddle player probably came from Llano. Yep. Llano has a fiddle history as long as the Llano river and twice as deep.

Originating in the "old country," front porch fiddle playing was a common form of evening entertainment in the German settlements taking root in the Texas Hill Country, a family tradition passed on from father to son.

Ode Light, born 1892 in the Six Mile Settlement just west of Llano, was one of those sons, becoming a champion fiddle player who set the stage for future fiddlers of Llano county. The Farr Brothers, Hugh and Karl, were two of Roy Roger's Sons of the Pioneers. Arthur Lee Simpson was among many talented fiddlers who played in the house band at the popular Ramblin' Rose Dance Hall in the 1960's. Backing up Ernest Tubb, Charlie Pride, Loretta Lynn, Hank Thompson and George Jones, they met and set the high standards that remain in place today.

Fast and furious fiddle playing became a must for every true country band, so every band had at least one fiddle player, if not two or three. Fiddle contests sprang up everywhere, every weekend. Players taking the stage on Saturday nights were just as competitive as the players on a Sunday afternoon gridiron. And that's saying something in Texas!

The first Llano Fiddle Contest was held in 1976 on the banks of the Llano at Robinson Park. After a few issues with weather it was moved to the American Legion Building where, thanks to a string of dedicated organizers, it found a home until 1991. Many well known fiddlers enjoyed the healthy competition and looked forward to the traditional toe-tappin', string snappin' jovial jam session that followed.

Times were changing, however; "Old style" fiddlin' was becoming "old fashioned" entertainment. The fiddle flame was flickering out. There were no competitions from 1992-1996, and although there was a brief resurgence from 1997-2009 led by Floyd Ratliff, Bud Otto, and Bill Tuckness, the contests were unable to attract youngsters. The players were simply aging out; the old style fiddler seemed a dying breed.

It was during these waning years that Fate stepped in to play a few bars of its own, for it was one of those heartfelt, toe-tappin', string snappin' fiddle contests into which wandered one lonely guitar player from Dripping Springs. Looking for some musicians to jam with, he found a whole new circle of friends, eager to share their love of music and utter joy in playing

the fiddle. John Caballero was hooked. It was his first exposure to a fiddle contest, and it changed his life. You could even say it changed the course of Llano Fiddle history.

John started attending the jam sessions. There they were, these amazing fiddlers, Jack Goff, Woody Thomas, Boot Simpson, Bill Tuckness.... Even when there weren't any contests, they circled up a few times a month, sawing away in the tradition of family fiddling. Taking turns 'round the circle, signing off with a nod to the next player, one picked up perfectly where the other left off. They played the old songs, passing the notes around the circle, passing the torch to those who were eager to learn, sharing this unique Texas style of "old time" fiddlin', and keeping the tradition alive.

They didn't play for money; they didn't compete. They played just because they loved to *PLAY*. From the depths of their hearts to the ends of their flying finger tips, you could not watch them without seeing this.... this love of fiddle, of harmony, of music... the way it seeps into your skin and whispers to your soul, the way it dances through your bloodstream, tickling your bones and urging your feet to do a little jig. John fell in love with fiddling.

But with no contest in 2010 a certain sadness weighed upon the fiddlers. Although the jam sessions continued, they missed the friendly competition and the yearly gathering of fellow fiddlers. They yearned to pass on their knowledge, their expertise, and their *passion* for this art to the next generation. They wanted to share this living cultural history, not see it lost to time, a brief mention in the music books. It tore at the heart strings....

So.... something had to be done: John found four other fiddle loving fools to climb aboard a fiddle train and reconstruct and then conduct a contest the likes of which Llano had never dreamed.

They filed for 501C3 status, rolled up their sleeves, and got down to business, no more fiddlin' around. Or, rather, way *more* fiddlin' around! The goal was to revamp the contest, spread the joy of playing, encourage youngsters to become involved and seniors to share their expertise. In 2011, with the blessing of the Texas Old Time Fiddlers Association, the Llano Fiddle Contest was reincarnated as the Llano Fiddle Festival and transformed into a three day extravaganza with a whole new "set" of traditions which continue today.

The festival kicks off Friday afternoons with the Air Fiddle Contest -- in which anyone who only *dreams* of playing fiddle can compete. What the contestants lack in fiddle skills they more than make up for in showmanship. Usually held at an outdoor venue, this contest has morphed into funny fiddle fashion costume-concert-contest family picnic that has the audience laughing,

clapping, and dancing in the dirt. Come early, bring a lawn chair, and enjoy the pre-show tailgating fiddle family reunion.

If that isn't enough to whet your whistle, anything goes in the Anything Goes competition which follows, although in this contest at least one person actually has to play a fiddle. It's a great way to break the ice and loosen everyone up for the Saturday competition at the Lantex.

And no venue could be more appropriate for an old time fiddle contest than Llano's vintage Lantex theatre, where the competitors always enjoy the enthusiastic applause of a full house. (There aren't many contests that can claim that!) The contestants can compete in *one* of three categories: Youth (ages 1-15), Open (any age), or Legends (over 60). In between the Open division semi-finals and finals there's the Accompanist Contest and the eagerly awaited Fiddle Faddle Toss Out. After the finals of the Open division and the awards are given, the audience is treated to a classical "violin" performance, gently reminding everyone how one instrument can warm the hearts of so many different people in so many different ways.

That evening, the pace slows a little as the Lantex fills yet again with the sounds of an old time country music concert, this year starring the internationally acclaimed Quebe Sisters. You can bet your bottom dollar there'll be some fancy fiddle work!

Survivors of the weekend rally one last time for the Sunday morning send-off at the Cowboy Church service hosted by the Llano Museum. Anyone who plays a fiddle is invited to join in the closing hymn, a truly soulful rendition of Amazing Grace,

It is an exciting and exhausting ride for everyone involved, one into which, like the contestants, the organizers have put heart and soul. Fiddle Fest train conductor John Caballero wouldn't trade the memories for the world, but last year, he was ready to hand over the baton. "I'm surrounded by fiddlers," he quips, "but I never really get to listen to the music."

Without missing a beat, a band of brave new fiddle fools stepped up to the podium. Conducted by Lauri Ramsey, Tony Guidroz, and an orchestra of volunteers second fiddle to none, we present Fiddle Fest 2021. Thank you John for your years of hard work. Sit back and enjoy. Let the music seep into your skin, whisper to your soul, tickling your bones, until you jump up with the rest of us and do a little jig.