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# Bringing Old-Time Fiddling into the Twenty-First Century

BY JACKIE HOBBS

The North American Fiddlers' Hall of Fame and Museum is located in the township of Osceola, New York, in the Tug Hill region of northern New York. The hall of fame and museum was born along with its sister, the New York State Old Tyme Fiddlers' Association, in 1976, although the organization didn't have a building to call home until the 1980s.

My grandmother, Alice Clemens—three times New York State ladies' fiddling champion—was a cofounder of the museum and association. She thought it was important to document not only the lives of the hall of fame inductees, but also the lives and music of other fiddlers. She also worried that

some of the older fiddlers might soon pass away without teaching anyone the tunes they played.

In 1984–5, the association received a grant to interview and record older fiddlers—to document old tunes and tell the history of fiddling during their lifetimes. The interviews were taped, but the recordings were very rarely heard because of their inaccessibility and deterioration of the tapes. My grandmother had started collecting biographies of fiddlers she met. She filed these biographies, and other curators of the museum have done the same. Many of these files include pictures, correspondence, biographies, and a table of contents for any recordings.

Fortunately, the association was given the opportunity to get many of the old recordings digitized and put on CDs. The New York Folklore Society was instrumental in getting the funding and doing the work. Several researchers have studied the North American Fiddlers' Hall of Fame and Museum's materials and used these recordings. Some of our examples of playing and biographies of fiddlers have been used on web sites such as [www.adirondackmusic.org](http://www.adirondackmusic.org). Families of recorded fiddlers have been able to hear their loved ones who have since died.

For my own part, I was able to hear my great-great-uncle Art Colvin play on one of the recordings. I had heard about his playing for my entire life, but never had the opportunity to hear him. When we collected many recordings to be transported to the New York Folklore Society, I discovered the tape recording of Art Colvin. We decided to play the tape on our way to give it to Ellen McHale. No one had listened to the recordings for a while, because they were not very accessible and the writing on the labels had faded, making them hard to read. When I phoned Ellen to give her an update on what time we would meet her, she told me to turn off the tape immediately as the ribbon inside the cassette tape might be brittle enough to break because of its age. We were without the recordings for several weeks as they were transferred to CD. When the recording of Art Colvin was finally ready, it was wonderful to hear tunes I thought only my grandmother played—played by him.

Some fiddlers have used these recordings to learn fiddle tunes, as well. They have been a wonderful resource for the last several years. One example of a tune that has been passed



The musical Clemens family in 1993: (front, left to right) Jackie Cheresnoski Hobbs, Alice Colvin Clemens, and Christopher Witzigman; (rear, left to right) Leona Clemens Cheresnoski, Sharon Clemens, and Crystal Witzigman. Sharon and Leona are Alice's daughters, and Jackie is Alice's granddaughter. Christopher and Crystal are Sharon's grandchildren. Photo: Martha Cooper, courtesy of TAUNY

down through my family is the “Barnes March.” We are the only family in New York State to play this song—anyone who knows this tune was taught by my grandmother or me. There is a tune in Pennsylvania that is very similar, however, and I have recordings of four generations of fiddlers playing that tune. That is a pretty rare occurrence, even in the fiddling world.

In an effort to bring the entire collection into the twenty-first century, the museum has also started digitizing the biography files. The museum has more than 250 files on individual fiddlers. My colleague Leona Cheresnoski and I, the collection’s curators, have been working on museum archives. We have a shared understanding of the purpose of these files and recordings and their importance, because we are daughter and granddaughter to Alice Clemens!

My mother and I inherited the love of fiddling from Alice Clemens, who died in 1999. I started playing at the age of five when my grandmother gave me a violin, and by the age of seven, I was helping at the New York State Old Tyme Fiddlers’ Association’s annual fiddlers’ picnic. It was my job to find fiddlers who needed to be on stage soon and get them to the stage. At a very young age, I could recognize most fiddlers.

I continued to help out at the museum and various association events. I first became a board member at the age of eighteen and have been a member of the board for most of the past twenty years. I have served as secretary, director, vice president, and president of the organization. My mother has also served in many capacities, including treasurer and director.

No longer a board member, I became curator several years ago and find that this function is what I love best. We are now scanning documents from the biographical files in order to make them accessible electronically. Some of the files hold one document, while some have close to forty documents. The new electronic files are saved under the name of the fiddler. Any member of the general public, with assistance from museum personnel, may access these files for research about individual fiddlers. We recently had a young fiddler find out more about his great-grandfather’s fiddling. His grandmother had told him a good deal about his grandfather’s life, but now he has a complete understanding of his fiddling, including several tunes that he wrote.

Eventually museum personnel hope to scan many more documents—such as tunes that appeared in the association’s monthly

newsletter, flyers from past events, and information about various fiddle associations across North America—so that the information will be available to the general public in the future. For now, individuals can request historical information about fiddlers, fiddle tunes, and fiddle events through our web site.

The New York State Old Tyme Fiddlers’ Association and North American Fiddlers’ Hall of Fame and Museum was established to promote, perpetuate, and preserve the art of old-time fiddling and the dances that pertain to this art. If you or your organization have information about fiddlers, events that featured old-time fiddlers, or recordings of old-time fiddlers, the museum would be very pleased to hear from you or to accept your materials. Contact information can be found on our web site at [www.nysotfa.com](http://www.nysotfa.com). ▼

Jackie Hobbs is a lifelong fiddler and a music teacher at Sandy Creek Central School in Sandy Creek, New York. She performs for concerts, festivals, and smaller gatherings, often with her group Clemens Tradition. She currently serves as curator of the North American Fiddlers’ Hall of Fame and Museum, located in Osceola, New York.



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