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# In Memoriam:

# Hilt Kelly:

## Catskills Fiddler and Caller

BY JIM KIMBALL

On March 3, 2015, New York State lost one of its best traditional fiddlers and square dance callers. Hilt Kelly passed away, at the age of 89, at Mountainside Residential Care Center in Margaretville.

Hilt and Stella Kelly and the Sidekicks were long central to Roxbury's annual Fiddlers! programs, which started in 1994. Not only during these years but long before, Hilt and his music were important to old-time square dancing and music throughout the Catskills region. "Square Dance King of the Catskills" was a headline in a piece the *Catskill Mountain News* did on Hilt in 1994 (Galusha 1994).

Hilt Kelly's great-great-grandfather first settled in the Roxbury area in the pioneer generation following service in the Revolutionary War. The first in the family that we know of who played the fiddle was Hilt's grandfather, Ward Kelly. According to Hilt, Ward bought his violin in 1882 off a second-hand dealer in Fleischmanns, NY; and this is the same instrument that Hilt played throughout the latter part of his career. Ward learned to play as a young man and then passed the art on to his son, Carson. This was an era, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the fiddle was central to rural entertainment. The old-fashioned house dances, barn dances, husking parties, and the like were often accompanied by dances, called and played by a local fiddler—and the Kellys filled this role in their neighborhood.

When Hilt was five years old, his parents presented him with a small tin fiddle for



Hilton's parents, Edith and Carson Kelly, about the time they were married in 1918. Courtesy of Linda Amour, from the Kelly family collection.

Christmas. He tuned it to his father's fiddle and practiced on it whenever he had a chance. Included in Hilt's repertoire were many of the old-time tunes passed on from his grandfather and father. A few years later, when Hilt was about 12, his great uncle, Durwood Kelly, gave him a 3/4-sized violin. With this instrument, Hilt and a cousin, Odell Kelly of Halcott Center, NY, started to play for teenage house dances. According to Hilt: "I would take the school bus up there on Fridays and stay at Odell's house. He was 15 or 16 and played the guitar. We'd have a dance at one house one night, and somebody else's the next. There were usually enough kids, from 12 to 17 years old, to make up a couple sets. We had a lot of fun" (Galusha 1994).

When Hilt was 15, in 1940, he bought himself a full-sized violin, and he was hired on as the regular fiddler for a local round and square dance band, the Melody Boys. This band played all over the region and sometimes several nights a week, attracting dancers from far and wide. As Hilt notes, there was no television in those days and the round and square dances were prime entertainment.

Hilt remembered: "They used to chase us all over the country. When we'd play in Westkill, people would come all the way from Shavertown and Shandaken and Millbrook. One time there were 23 sets dancing at once . . . We put 'em in three rows, with two more sets over by the refreshment stand" (Galusha 1994.) Except for a period of military service at the very end of World War II, Hilt continued to play and call dances with the Melody Boys up until 1953. He had started his own trucking business and had also been helping his widowed mother on the family farm; the late night dance gigs just got to be too much: "We'd play sometimes six or seven nights straight till 1 or 2 in the morning. By the time we packed up and drove home it was 2 or 3 a.m. I'd get a few hours sleep and then it was time to milk the cows; then I had the trucking route to do. It almost put me in the hospital" (Galusha 1994).

It was during one of those dances in 1947, at the Halcott Grange Hall, that Hilt asked Stella Mech for a dance. On October 30, 1948, Hilt and Stella were married. Stella had taken a few piano lessons in school but didn't get



Hilt calling a dance. Photo by Jim Kimball.

very far before her family moved the piano to the woodshed to make room for a table for summer boarders in the house. Now, Hilt and Stella were able to get their own piano, and

Hilt coached her on how to play rhythm and chords for dancing—which she did for all the remaining years of Hilt’s entertainments and dances.

the Sidekicks and their busy dance schedule. On October 9, 1994, the Roxbury Arts Group dedicated their hall to him. There were over 700 people that showed up for that dedication



Hilton and Stella Kelly on their wedding day, October 30, 1948. Courtesy of Linda Amour, from the Kelly family collection.

In the late 1970s, with Stella on the keyboard, Hilt started his own round and square dance band, the Sidekicks. In addition to Hilt and Stella, the group was comprised of Don Strausser, of Lexington, NY, on guitar and other instruments, and Don Irwin, of Prattsville, NY, who had been taught guitar by Hilt. Both Don Strausser and Don Irwin also doubled on vocals and calling square dances. Aside from her music and all the work of raising a family and keeping house, Stella also drove a rural mail route for more than 40 years—until just a few years ago. Hilt and Stella celebrated their 66th anniversary last year.

Hilt became active for a while with the statewide and local chapter of the New York State Old Tyme Fiddlers’ Association, but eventually had to devote most of his time to



Hilton and Stella at Roxbury Fiddler! 2006. Photo by Jim Kimball.



Hilt Kelly and the Sidekicks in Hilt Kelly Hall, 2007. *From left to right front:* Don Strausser, Stella Kelly, Hilt Kelly, and Don Irwin. Bob Cates is accompanying on string bass. Photo by Jim Kimball.

and to listen to both Hilt and the other fiddlers who were invited.

And with that dedication started the long tradition of Fiddlers! Celebrations, held each fall in Hilt Kelly Hall at the Roxbury Arts Center. Excellent fiddlers from many traditions were presented each year; but the place of honor always went to Hilt Kelly. Hilt was also generous in passing on his traditions to many aspiring musicians in the Catskill region, as well as teaching youngsters at the Manhattan Country School and Roxbury Central School. In 1997, Hilton was inducted into the North American Fiddlers Hall of Fame in Osceola, NY.

Although well known to the traditional fiddling community throughout New York State and northeastern Pennsylvania, it is the people of the Catskills that have known Hilt the best and over so many years. For all the joy that he and Stella and the Sidekicks have brought to audiences and dancers throughout the region, let us offer our heartfelt thanks.

To his family and many friends, to musicians and callers who have learned from Hilt, to the legions of dancers who so long followed his old time square dances, and to his tradition-loving fans of all ages, Hilt will be long remembered. ▼

### Notes:

This article was adapted from an appreciation of Hilt Kelly, first published in the program booklet for Fiddlers! 2010, produced by the Roxbury Arts Group. Also, earlier program notes from Fiddlers! series provided source material.

### Reference:

Galusha, Diane. 1994. "Red Kill's Hilton Kelly." *The Catskill Mountain News*, October 5, 1994.



Hilt with his "FIDDLE 1" license plate. Stella's plate read CDEFGABC, the basic scale on the piano. Photo by Jim Kimball.



Jim Kimball has taught music history, world music and folk music classes, and directed the Geneseo String Band in the Music Department at the State University at Geneseo since 1976. He plays several traditional instruments, calls square dances, and lectures on many musical traditions. Jim has collected tunes and stories from old-time musicians and callers, written articles, and presented at folk arts and museum venues. Photo by Lori Morsch.

## Fiddlers! 22 will be honoring Hilt Kelly this year:

### FIDDLERS! 22

An Autumn Tradition in the Catskills

Sunday, October 11, 2015

Noon – 7:00 p.m.

Roxbury Arts Center, Hilt Kelly Hall, 5025 Vega Mountain Road, Roxbury, NY 12474 • 607.326.7908

Advance Tickets: \$20 Adults, \$18 Student/Senior

All Tickets Day of Performance: \$25

Sponsored by Miller's Drug Store

The 22nd FIDDLERS! festival is dedicated to celebrating in memoriam Hilt Kelly, the renowned Catskill region's legendary fiddler and caller. Hilt "bowed and called" his way throughout the region, spreading joy and dancing wherever he went, and all the while mentoring young fiddlers for over 70 years. FIDDLERS! 22 will be packed with fun, featuring old and new friends of Hilt Kelly including the Tremperskill Boys, Brittany Haas & Nic Gareiss, Linsey Beckett, Laura Kortright & Steve Jacobi, and more—plus square dancing, a chili cook-off, and an All-Star Jam.

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