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OLD TIME FIDDLERS DEDICATED TO PRESERVING MUSIC HERITAGE

Uniontown, PA – When people think of old-time fiddle music, they often connect it with Texas bluegrass or the country music scene in Nashville. But old-time fiddle music is a genre that also has roots in Appalachia, including right here in Fayette County. The Old Time Fiddlers of Western Pennsylvania, a group of musicians based in Dunbar, is dedicated to preserving the history of that unique sound and keeping the music playing into the future.

For their commitment to their musical heritage, the Old Time Fiddlers have earned June's Fayette Faces and Places designation.

Fayette County's Old Time Fiddlers group came into existence more than five decades ago – appropriately enough, because of a party.

"On Nov. 13, 1971, a group of fiddlers met at the home of Frank Martin on Hardy Hill in Dunbar," Old Time Fiddlers secretary Alene Mancini said. "They had a birthday party for him, and the guests brought their fiddles."

A group of fiddlers decided such gatherings should be held more often, and one of them, Wendell McGinnis, took the sentiment to heart.

"He called every fiddler in the area he knew, and they started meeting at Strickler's Barn in Fayette City in April (1972)," Mancini said. "They had 32 fiddlers and about that many in the audience. By word of mouth and newspaper articles, that grew quickly."

Mancini said by December of that year, there were 350 people attending these fiddling sessions on a regular basis. "That was the music of the time, and it was very much alive in this area," Mancini said.

She said the group was invited to play at "nearly every civic organization you can imagine," including churches and social clubs. The group even traveled to West Virginia and Ohio to play, eventually needing to begin charging a small fee for their performances. Mancini said except possibly for a little money to pay for gas, most of what the fiddlers made was put back into the organization.

"In May 1974, they had their first Old Time Fiddlers State Championship fiddle contest," Mancini said. "You had to apply to be approved."

She said the contest was held for many years, drawing musicians from all over Pennsylvania, as well as Ohio, Maryland and West Virginia.

“(From) all the border states, people would come to enter this contest,” she said. “Even the regular Sunday jamborees that they would have once a month – that’s where people were coming.”

Mancini said the jamborees were the first of their kind in the area, and they drew quite a bit of recognition.

“There were several times that PBS did specials on the Old Time Fiddlers,” she said. “One of them was in 1975, and it was actually held at (founding member) Jim Bryner’s house.”

Mancini said the documentary showed a Sunday afternoon filled with dinner and music. She said another member, Harmon Morgan, taught many people in the area to play the fiddle.

By 1982, the Old Time Fiddlers organization had grown to more than 400 members playing fiddles, guitars and other instruments – not counting the dozens, if not hundreds, of people who turned out simply to listen to the music.

The group had outgrown Strickler’s Barn, so members began raising funds for a building of their own. With \$10,000 in hand, they met with the Fayette County Fair Board, which agreed to construct a building for the organization. The group still plays in the Fiddler’s Building on the Fayette County Fairgrounds in Dunbar Township.

“Every third Sunday of the month, they have met in that building since 1988,” Mancini said, noting members also donated money for the purchase of 500 chairs that are still in use.

The Old Time Fiddlers count some well-known musicians among their ranks, including the late Dan Kelly, who moved to Nashville to pursue music professionally, joining the Tennessee Mafia Jug Band and playing the fiddle for big-name country acts such as Roy Acuff, Faith Hill, Alan Jackson and Clint Black. Kelly, a Connellsville native, passed away of a heart attack in 2020.

“We recently celebrated our 50th anniversary, and as we were planning that, we built the whole program around a tribute to Dan Kelly,” Mancini said, describing Kelly as “a very humble person. He grew up in this area; he started his career on that fiddle stage.”

Mancini said a few years prior to his death, Kelly reconnected with the Old Time Fiddlers and even took his turn at jam sessions and on the stage, inviting his fellow members to play music alongside him.

When Kelly was getting his start, Mancini said, there were a number of talented local musicians with whom he shared the Old Time Fiddlers stage, including The Fisher Family, a Dawson-based group; and Michele Birkby-Vance of Greensburg, who played with the Allegheny Drifters.

Unfortunately, though, the monthly jamborees don’t draw as many people as they once did. Membership is down to about 200 musicians, Mancini said, with only about 65 attending jamborees regularly.

“Where we’re kind of struggling at this point in time is that all these old fiddlers have just died off,” she said, citing the COVID-19 pandemic as well as economic hardships in the local area. “In the Pittsburgh area, there are a lot of young musicians, but they moved out of this area for jobs.”

Mancini said the group, including current President Perry Russell, Vice President Chic Alghren and Treasurer Cindy Moag, has had to make a hard decision: let the group fold, or find new ways to bring in people. It opted to keep going, with members trying to come up with fresh methods of getting young musicians interested in joining the group.

"We are just in the midst of that transition," Mancini said.

She explained the Old Time Fiddlers are planning to update the formats of the group's monthly jamborees by inviting more guest bands to perform, though local musicians still will be encouraged to perform during the open mic segment of the afternoons.

"We are applying for some grants," she said, noting the Fayette Chamber of Commerce and Executive Director Muriel Nuttall have been helpful in that aspect. "We're talking about doing like a Super Jam – there would be entertainment on-stage from noon to 8 o'clock in the evening. The bands would just rotate.

"In May, we're talking about having a professional band. That's why we need the grant."

Mancini said the group hopes to book The Appalachian Roadshow. "The Appalachian Roadshow has been playing a long time, and they've played with the big guys," she said. "But they know the heritage of this music came from Appalachia."

Mancini said the band weaves stories of the music's history into its performance along with its songs. "We want to get some of the younger people involved, so we're talking about having workshops," she said.

Mancini said the organization would work with local school districts and would hire professional musicians to spend a Saturday teaching youngsters to play various instruments, and then the students would be invited to take the stage at the next day's jamboree. She noted adults also would be welcome to sign up for the workshops.

"We're trying to keep our heritage going," she said. "We always want to have some fiddlers, though they are truthfully few and far between."

Mancini said anyone who attends an Old Time Fiddlers jamboree will hear several types of music, including bluegrass, gospel and country.

"We're a live music venue. It's entertainment," she said. "I think that people just don't realize we're out here."

Interested musicians can join the Old Time Fiddlers for \$10 for a one-year membership. Mancini said memberships are accepted at any jamboree.

For more information, visit the organization's Facebook page by searching "Old Time Fiddlers of Western PA" or attend a jamboree.

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