

An Analysis of Michigan Fiddle Stylistics: The Technical Argument for Tradition.

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A technical analysis will help solidify the argument of the traditional basis of fiddling in Michigan. This will help bring some of Michigan's folk music history into better focus. Thanks to the OMFA, MFA, and other individuals there are an exceptional number of field recordings of a wide cross-section of Michigan fiddlers available for analysis. A more in-depth analysis of such a collection could encompass an entire work in and of itself. Below are examinations of just a few select fiddlers and their recordings, focusing on stylistics to determine the unity (or lack thereof) of Michigan fiddling.

The Huron Township Applefest is a small street festival that takes place in September in the little town of New Boston, Michigan. New Boston is a small town not far from Detroit but beyond the urbanization of the Motor City. Parking at the Baptist church was free in 2009 when I drove across the railroad tracks and into the little community. It was a cold morning with a chill, spitting, on-and-off rain and a cold breeze. I kept my hands in my coat pockets as I walked down main street, past tents and food vendors. At the end of an alley-like side-street I saw a band shell with small bleachers set up nearby. Huddled in coats, hoods, gloves and hats sat a small crowd of cold people waiting for the 24th Annual Michigan Old-Time Fiddle Championship. The folks with fiddles and cases, mostly kids, waited around in temperatures far too cold for comfortable out-door fiddling.

The Michigan Old-Time Fiddle Championship represents a uniquely Michigan contest. This can be seen in its unusual requirements of tune-type; the rules read "each contestant must play a waltz, a schottische, a jig, and a reel *in that order*" (italics present in original).¹ The playing of a schottische –

¹ "Fiddlers Contest," Huron Township Applefest, <http://www.huronapplefest.com/fiddlerscontest.php> (accessed December 13, 2010).

also called a clog in Ontario² – is rare among fiddlers these days, even in Michigan and Ontario in my experience. Further, the playing of jigs is also relatively rare in the South among fiddlers of Southern old-time traditions. Most fiddlers tend towards the playing of reels, breakdowns, hoedowns, or the like – tunes of 4/4 meter. Southern Michigan fiddler Les Raber once told a story to express his opinion about fiddlers who could not play in 6/8 time: "There was a fellow from down at the Grand Old Opry supposed to be a real fiddler. One of the guys in our outfit said, 'I want you to make me a tape of some jigs.' He says, 'I've got a friend down in Nashville that's a real fiddler.' So, we taped him off five or six jigs and the guy never could play them. Never could."³ When Varsal Fales, another Southern Michigan fiddler, added that "Some of the fiddle players I know can't play jigs," Les replied, "He was supposed to have been a good fiddler, but he couldn't play a jig."⁴ It is worth noting that Les and Varsal both said just afterwards that "not too many" other "traditional Michigan fiddlers"⁵ played jigs, but jigs have a significant presence in collections, field recordings, and historical accounts throughout Michigan.

If the Michigan Old-Time Fiddle Championship represents a continuation of Michigan traditions such as the playing of the schottische and jig, there has been unfortunately little work done to examine what constitutes the tradition stylistically. Only a few scholars have addressed what place the tradition had in Michigan society and culture. But through an examination of the historical record, both through musical recording and written document, a greater understanding can be attempted regarding what constituted the tradition. It may be fairly natural for people to look at regions in terms of political boundaries, but through this examination of fiddling it becomes evident that fiddling in Michigan cannot be adequately examined without recognizing the inadequacy of state and international boundaries to delineate culture and regional influence. It may be easy to look at a map and see the expansive Great Lakes as barriers, but this proves simplistic when the sailing tradition is brought into

2 According to champion Ontario fiddler Shane Cook at the Goderich Celtic College, Goderich Ontario, August 2010.

3 Emphasis in original; *Come Dance With Me: Original Fiddle Compositions and Favorite Tunes of Les Raber*, ed. Judy Raber Burns and Jim McKinney, 4th ed. (Judy Raber Burns and Jim McKinney, 2008), 30.

4 *Ibid.*, 30.

5 *Ibid.*, 31.

play. Cultural Region, in terms of fiddling traditions, looks less like a map of Michigan and the Great Lakes with its political and natural boundaries and more like the confluences of migrations of people drawn by resources, land, and labor opportunities and a cycle of industrial shipping on the dangerous and cold waters of the lakes. These regions cross state and international boundaries as well as linguistic and ethnic ones.

On that cold day in September Michigan, the fiddlers' hands could hardly be expected to work to their usual standard. The fingers stiffen when cold and do not operate with precision or speed. A similar condition could result from overworking them and tiring them out – fatigued muscles in the fingers and hands would lead to poorer playing. It brings to mind U.P. Hedrick's account; fiddlers at logging bees were not expected to work like others, but instead enjoyed the atmosphere of the recreation that followed, providing the music.⁶

New Boston, Michigan would probably be unknown to many, but the little town has a history and a claim not only for Michigan fiddling but for the fiddling history of North America. Though in my memory, no mention of him was made at the Applefest, nor is there mention on the contest website, New Boston, originally named Catville – after which the tune "The Old Catville Quadrille" is named – was the "hometown" of Colonel John A. Pattee.⁷ Colonel John A. Pattee was possibly the third earliest born fiddler to ever record commercially. Born in 1844⁸, he lost out to another Michigander recording artist and fiddler, Jasper "Jep" Bisbee, who was born in 1843,⁹ and to Scott Skinner, famous Scottish fiddler born just after Bisbee in 1843. Their recordings should have an important place in understanding the history of fiddling in general. Unfortunately in Country Music scholarship, little or nothing is ever mentioned of these old-time recording artists, sometimes replaced in the dialogue by

6 Hedrick, 72-73.

7 Andrew Kuntz, "The Fiddler's Companion," search result for "Catville," Hosted by Ceolas, Ceolas.org, <http://www.ceolas.org/tunes/fc/> (accessed December 13, 2010).

8 Patti Greenman and Glenn Hendrix, *Michigan Jamboree: Fiddle Tunes for Round and Square Dances*, volume 1, 2nd ed., (Big Rapids and East Grand Rapids, MI: Patti Greenman and Glenn Hendrix, 2008), 11.

9 Paul Gifford, "Jasper E. 'Jep' Bisbee: Old-Time Michigan Dance Fiddler," *The Old Time Herald* 9 no. 6, http://www.oldtimeherald.org/archive/back_issues/volume-9/9-6/jasper-bisbee.html (accessed November 9, 2010).

such Southern fiddlers as Uncle Am Stuart, as has already been seen in Charles Wolfe's work.

In an attempt to understand the musical traits that constitute Michigan fiddling tradition or traditions, an analysis will be made of a number of recordings from Michigan fiddlers. The fiddlers who will be analyzed are Jasper "Jep" Bisbee, Colonel John A. Pattee, Helen Gross, Patrick Bonner, Coleman Trudeau. These fiddlers have been chosen in part because of the availability of the recordings, in part because of deemed historical significance, and in part because of geographical location within Michigan. Many notable figures are left out of this analysis not due to their lack of worth but simply the constraints of the project.

It is unfortunate that most of the recordings of fiddlers available were made in the later years of their lives and consequently, none of these recordings reflect the fiddling of players in their prime. But, stylistics remain in evidence even in old age. First, it will be worth clarifying the terminology for the following analysis of recordings. The term "style" here indicates the way a person fiddles. "Stylistics" refers to those traits or elements of fiddling which help comprise style and can be analyzed individually. The use of "tradition" refers to commonalties that indicate a shared heritage and practice or to that common musical inflection which acts as a sort of "fiddling accent."

Any analysis of a musical recording from a tradition or time period outside one's own must take into account the awareness that aesthetic tastes and perceptions change over time and are at least largely culturally derived. Consequently, descriptive statements about historical recordings such as the 1923 recording of Jasper "Jep" Bisbee playing "Money Musk"¹⁰ may reflect more the nature of this writer's anachronistic aesthetic than the perceptions of Bisbee's contemporary community. In this recording of Bisbee, accompanied by his daughter on piano¹¹, the tempo (ca. 105 BPM) by today's general fiddling aesthetic would perhaps be described as stately or on the slower side. But, Bisbee played in a period when dancing was important. He also played for Henry Ford, though only later in his

10 Jasper "Jep." Bisbee, "Money Musk," Edison 51381, 78 RPM, 1923.

Not all recordings mentioned will be cited. The bibliographic information used in the citations for Bisbee and Pattee comes from online resources which will be left uncited.

11 Paul Gifford, "Jasper E."

life, a man for whom dancing was a personal hobby and even a social agenda.¹² Further, Bisbee comes from Southern Michigan where at least some fiddlers would pride themselves on a slower, courteous, danceable tempo even at a later date.¹³

As fiddling has increasingly diverged from dancing, or at least round and square dancing, perceptions of tempo have likely changed,¹⁴ and a tendency to speed up may have resulted as fiddlers have tended to play more as "listening music." Playing fiddle for a step-dancer also allows for different,



COURTESY PHOTOS
Above, Paris fiddle maker and master player Jep Bisbee with his wife, Sarah. Top left, the Bisbee home still stands in Paris.

and in my experience, faster tempos than playing fiddle for group dancing. Bisbee's playing would today still be considered suitable for contra dancing.

Bisbee's fiddling is clean and precise. The fiddling is not heavily ornamented. In fact, it lacks the kind of notes often termed as ornaments – even drones, the simultaneous ringing of open strings in addition to the primary melodic note, are lacking. The obvious emphasis in Bisbee's playing rests on

12 Simon J. Bronner, *Old-Time Music Makers of New York State*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 34-38; Paul Gifford, "Jasper E."

13 *Come Dance With Me: Original Fiddle Compositions and Favorite Tunes of Les Raber*, 26.

14 Conversations with Dr. Richard Blaustein have highlighted the importance of the divergence of fiddling from dance influencing changes in fiddling.

variation. Bisbee's variations are skillful, precise, and in tempo. The range of notes used in his high variation indicates a technical skill encompassing the equivalent of the third position on the fingerboard. This particular high variation exhibits a level of controlled "flash" that indicates a value-system or aesthetic based on technique, precision, and variation within a controlled metre. All of this recorded from a man roughly eighty years old. Above, I used the term "equivalent" of the third position because it is unclear how Bisbee, himself, conceptualized the process of playing up the fingerboard. "Positions" are an idea from the classical tradition.

One of the final variations in Bisbee's rendition of "Money musk" is the "Yankee Doodle" variation – though it is hardly a variation; his switch into the A-part melody of Yankee Doodle is a complete temporary change of tune. The intent is difficult to gauge. Whether Bisbee intended this as a wry comedic moment, or as a "shout out" to his own New York state roots¹⁵ and the New England roots of many who early came to Lower Michigan,¹⁶ or whether it represents something else is hard to say. Still, the effect is controlled, in tempo, and he returns to the "Money musk" melody again before closing.

Bisbee was a fiddler "discovered" by Henry Ford in the way that people, places, and other things already present can be discovered by those in places of greater social prominence. But, the great industrial developer, the man who helped make Detroit the "Motor City," wished to bring about a revival of the older styles of dancing in the country, and consequently, he put the spotlight on old-time fiddlers.¹⁷ Bisbee achieved greater fame as a fiddler as a result and was recorded on the Edison label by Thomas Edison, another inventor claimed by Michigan who accompanied Ford on his first visit to Bisbee's house.¹⁸ Possibly as a result of this "discovery," Bisbee competed in and won a major contest

15 Paul Gifford, "Jasper E."

16 William Nowlin, *The Bark Covered House, or Back in the Woods Again*, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, INC, 1966); Emelyn Elizabeth Gardner and Geraldine Jencks Chickering, *Ballads and Songs of Southern Michigan*, (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, INC, 1967), vii; Writers Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Michigan, *Michigan a Guide to the Wolverine State*, 104.

17 Paul M. Gifford, "Henry Ford's Dance Revival and Fiddle Contests; Myth and Reality," *Journal of the Society for American Music* (2010): 307-338.

18 Paul Gifford, "Jasper E. 'Jep' Bisbee: Old-Time Michigan Dance Fiddler," *The Old Time Herald* 9 no. 6, http://www.oldtimeherald.org/archive/back_issues/volume-9/9-6/jasper-bisbee.html (accessed November 9, 2010).

in Michigan in the early 20th century.¹⁹ Ford drew attention to the old styles of dancing and music throughout Michigan in the early 20th century.²⁰ We can thank Henry Ford and Thomas Edison, inventors and industrialists who helped bring about the "modern era," for making it possible to listen to the fiddling of a man born in antebellum America.

At the Huron Applefest, I sat in the cold and watched the cold-handed contestants compete. Having read the contest rules and having afterwards spoken with the judges, I feel confident that Bisbee not only represents the qualities desired in a champion fiddler at the Applefest, but that if he had been there in 2009 and performed this version of "Moneymusk," along with a comparable jig, waltz, and schottische, he would have won another championship, performing with an aesthetic in contest vogue nearly ninety years removed.

The Michigan Championship contest's "judging categories" depict this kind of aesthetic. They read in part that a fiddler should display "that steady, danceable tempo with no unevenness, pauses or dropped beats. A pleasant 'lift' that makes dancers want to move. This shows the contestant's ability to move dancers around the floor, rather than display 'hot licks'. *Excessive speed is discouraged*" (italics present in original).²¹ This makes it apparent that the contest seeks to continue emphasis on the dance element of fiddling. The italicized warning against fast tempos is of particular note. Bisbee would have been quite at home in these criterion, and he certainly displays a "lift" in his playing.

Also desired, according to the contest rules, is "use of phrasing, dynamics, ornaments and variation. This shows the contestant's ability to make the tune their own by putting some of their own style and personality into the tune, *however, elements that obscure the dancer's musical cues are discouraged*" (italics present in original).²² Again, an emphasis on danceability comes foremost. Bisbee represents these criterion masterfully – his variations are evenly played, without altering the tempo or

19 Bronner, 34-38; Paul Gifford, "Jasper E. 'Jep' Bisbee: Old-Time Michigan Dance Fiddler."

20 Bronner, 34-38; Gifford, "Jasper E."; Greenman and Hendrix, 4-5.

21 "Fiddlers Contest," Huron Township Applefest, <http://www.huronapplefest.com/fiddlerscontest.php> (accessed December 13, 2010).

22 Ibid.

obscuring the rhythm. He maintains his stately poise throughout. Even while he varies and displays his technical accomplishments, the dancers would be able to continue unhindered, or so it seems by hearing it, not dancing to it. In some ways, it seems that these contest rules could have been created based on Bisbee's performance, and in some ways they were. After all, Bisbee is part of "the unique musical heritage of the state of Michigan"²³ that the rules mention.

Both Bisbee and Pattee were fiddlers of noticeable personality both in life and in their fiddling²⁴. Their personalities were different, and I believe this can be seen through their renditions of the tune "Moneymusk." Both perform within the widespread northern standard of piano accompaniment. Both perform at tempos suitable to round or square dancing. Pattee even calls the dance while he plays in his recording of "Money Musk," something Bisbee does in a recording of the "Opera Reel" which he recorded the same day as his version of "Money Musk."²⁵ Pattee's tempo is faster, and his performance more lively. Whereas Bisbee's playing displayed precision, Pattee's variations display vivacity. Pattee is obviously a consummate showman. Bisbee's showmanship displays itself in the technical "flash" of his variations. Pattee's showmanship can be heard in the humour and vigour of his variation.²⁶

On the B section of the tune, Pattee jumps down to the G string and then to the E in executing a rhythmic and melodic variation that is ear-catching and, due to the physical movement involved in this significant melodic jump, was probably rather eye-catching as well. For a man of roughly eighty years old at the time, it also displays significant dexterity. Pattee makes use of drones in a variation on the A section of the tune in a type of variation that is still commonly employed by fiddlers. He draws out certain notes to fill the spaces of following notes which are left out, resulting in an ear-catching

23 Ibid.

24 Paul Gifford, "Jasper E.," Civil War Badges Catalogue, item titled "IRON BRIGADE OLD SOLDIER FIDDLERS ~ CONFEDERATE," CivilWarBadges.com, www.civilwarbadges.com (accessed December 13, 2010).

This can be seen clearly in Gifford's article "Jasper E," as well as the resources on Pattee. The above resource – the Civil War Badge Catalogue – draws attention to his "showmanship." See note 25 for the other Pattee resources.

25 Paul Gifford "Jasper E."

Source for the same-day recording of Bisbee's records and also mentions Bisbee calling the Opera reel.

26 The Civil War Badges Catalogue mentions Pattee's showmanship in regard to advertisement.

moment of suspension and melodic variance. Despite playing at a faster tempo than Bisbee and with a scrappier and more energetic sound, Pattee's bowing emphasizes the beats, clearly marking out a sense of danceable time.

Pattee is a fascinating individual for a number of reasons. Born in 1844 in New Boston, as already mentioned, during the Civil War he fought in the 24th Michigan Infantry, part of the famous Iron Brigade. A photograph shows him with his fiddle in 1860 at the age of 16. He fought in a number of battles in the war. After the war, Pattee "promoted himself to Colonel"²⁷ and formed a vaudeville performance group called "The Old Soldier Fiddlers" who toured throughout the country. This group may have toured at the same time as Jim Scott's Michigan vaudeville show. The Old Soldier Fiddlers were comprised of four or five people, including two confederate fiddler veterans and two union fiddler veterans. Postcards from this time period survive, as well as a number of photographs of Pattee, a man of striking appearance, with a full head of white hair. The postcards give Pattee as the leader of the group, shows their shameless self-promotion, and reveals that their repertoire consisted of Civil War tunes and songs. There is some question as to where Pattee lived after the war, with at least one source indicating West Virginia,²⁸ but it seems this is based on at least one address from a postcard, and it is questionable if these addresses are substantive indications of Pattee's whereabouts. Greenman and Hendrix claim Pattee returned to Michigan after the war, and it seems he died in New York where he had played on the radio.²⁹

27 Rob Richardson, "John A. Pattee," The 24th Michigan Infantry Regimental Website, accessed through archive, http://www.oocities.com/24th_michigan/jpattee.html (accessed December 13, 2010). See note 25 re this source.

28 Civil War Badges Catalogue, item titled "IRON BRIGADE OLD SOLDIER FIDDLERS ~ CONFEDERATE," CivilWarBadges.com, www.civilwarbadges.com (accessed December 13, 2010). This commercial site may not represent the most accurate information, and it shows possible signs of having been lifted in part from another website about Pattee.

29 Greenman and Hendrix, 11; Civil War Badges Catalogue, "IRON BRIGADE."; Rob Richardson, "John A. Pattee," The 24th Michigan Infantry Regimental Website, http://www.oocities.com/24th_michigan/jpattee.html (accessed December 13, 2010).

All the details and information used here about Pattee can be found in the above sources, including websites containing information and where some of the mentioned postcards and photographs can be viewed. The last website listed is no longer maintained or accessible outside of an internet archive, but it also represents the most extensive biographical Pattee resource I have found.

Pattee toured with Southern fiddlers and it is impossible to say how much his style was affected. The fundamental tune of his recording of "The Old Money Musk" is obviously closely related to Bisbee's version. His accompaniment is Northern. His general use of single notes reflects a similar sensibility. However, whether his use of occasional drones and his minutely faster tempo (ca. 112 BPM) reflect Southern influence or simply an energetic personality and showmanship honed on the stages of vaudeville may be impossible to say. Such differences in Bisbee's and Pattee's playing might easily be explained by individual style. Yet what can be concluded is that Pattee persisted in being largely rooted in his native tradition even after extensive exposure to Southern styles of fiddling. Pattee was buried in Arlington cemetery and so far as I can tell, he died in New York City; his obituary reminisced about Pattee's radio barndance shows on stations WEAJ and announced that, as consequence, his upcoming scheduled radio barndance would be cancelled. Having died in 1924, this indicates that a Northern fiddler was likely playing in Northern style on Northern radio in barndance format at an early period³⁰.

It is important at this point to bring into consideration a fiddler from outside the Michigan tradition – and even the Northern traditions. In this way, the Michigan tradition can be brought into more distinct focus by comparison with a tradition of fiddling elsewhere. Further, by examining a West Virginia fiddler playing "Money Musk," possible influences on Pattee can be assessed while making a clearer comparison to Bisbee and Pattee.

Ed Haley's rendition of "Money Musk"³¹ does an admirable job of illustrating how a tune can bear the same name but be remarkably different, almost unrecognizable, between players and traditions. Admittedly, Ed Haley is not a contemporary of Bisbee or Pattee. As already mentioned, Bisbee and Pattee were born in 1843 and 1844 respectively and learned to fiddle in a similar geographical region. Ed Haley, a West Virginian fiddler born in 1883, represents a later generation, and

30 Greenman and Hendrix, 11; Civil War Badges Catalogue, "IRON BRIGADE."; Rob Richardson, "John A. Pattee."
See above note regarding sources. See Richardson for obituary content.

31 Ed Haley, "Money Musk," On *Grey Eagle*, Rounder Select, CD, 1998.

his recordings were possibly later though similar in sound quality perhaps due to their homemade origins.³² Haley's rendition of "Money Musk" is only recognizable with close listening as the same tune that Bisbee and Pattee recorded. It appears that the A and B parts are played in the opposite order and in different registers. The tune is most easily seen as related to the Michigan version in the last portion of Haley's recording when the rhythm of the bowing makes it easier to discern the relationship.

Haley's tempo is faster (ca. 126 BPM) than either of the Michigan versions of "Money Musk" here analyzed, and he is accompanied by the banjo. As a lone accompaniment instrument for the fiddle, this does seem to indicate a different tradition from the pervasive historical use of piano accompaniment in the North. It is interesting that, if Pattee did live for a time in West Virginia, his playing style remained remarkably Northern. It gives rise to speculation about tune commonality among the Old Soldier Fiddlers. If the difference in renditions of "Money Musk" between Haley and Bisbee and Pattee proved normative, significant give and take would have to take place, or an attempt to find similar repertoire. Pattee and Bisbee could have easily played "Money Musk" together. They certainly could have played at the same time as Haley, but the tunes as recorded are so different it would have seemed they were playing different numbers. While it is easy to assume that certain tunes had less divergence between traditions, still, even after such possible give and take, Pattee recorded a version of "Money Musk" firmly within, it would seem, the Michigan or Northern tradition.

Michigan has been fortunate to have a couple of influential women fiddlers. One of these was Lois Bettsworth, a 2011 MFA Fiddlers Hall of Fame Inductee. Another woman, a fiddler respected in her time, and one of my favorite Michigan fiddlers, was Helen Gross of Saline, a town now known for its pioneering fiddle club integrated into the school system. Born in 1902, Gross had the opportunity to take music lessons as a child, and she became a versatile player, able to "play practically any instrument (piano, mandolin, banjo, uke), but her first love was the fiddle."³³ Her father fiddled and

32 "The Old-Time Music Hall of Fame: Ed Haley," David Lynch, The Old Time Music Home Page, <http://www.oldtimemusic.com/FHOFHaley.html> (accessed November 9, 2010).

Gives dates for Haley and describes the homemade nature of Haley's recordings.

33 OMFA, *Original Michigan Fiddlers 1986*, 160.

Gross attended dances with him as a child and began playing dances "before she was out of high school."³⁴

Fortunately, field recordings of Helen Gross were made before her death in 1983.³⁵ Of the six recordings in my possession on which Gross plays, three are quadrilles, one is a jig, one is a waltz, and one is a tune called "Socker Boettger's Tune" which has yet to be identified by me in relation to a particular dance but which may have German or Dutch connections, judging by the title. Gross plays with considerable skill, easily and quickly moving up the fingerboard to reach high notes. Playing up the fingerboard is a characteristic that is not so unusual among Michigan fiddlers. She plays "Socker Boettger's Tune" at a tempo a bit faster than Bisbee and Pattee (ca. 130 BPM). She does not employ drones or double stops. Gross hails from the Southern Michigan region, not an exceptional distance from Pattee's hometown. The playing of quadrilles was not unusual in Southern Michigan by Gross' relative generation of fiddlers.³⁶ In the Les Raber collection of tunes, also a Southern Michigan fiddler, quite a few quadrilles are present.³⁷ In all, she exhibits a style of fiddling not unlike Bisbee and Pattee, though she had an aggressive style.

Though Pattee, Bisbee, and Gross display a remarkable similarity in core stylistics, despite their equally remarkable differences in personality, it would still be much too soon to draw a conclusion about Michigan tradition. When I attended the 24th Annual Michigan Old-Time Fiddler's Championship in 2009, I inquired of at least one of the judges, the daughter of the well-known deceased Michigan fiddler Les Raber, whether more northerly Michigan playing styles would have a place at the contest, and I believe I mentioned Métis and possibly other styles. The response I received was that as long as it would be appropriate for the dancing, it would be fine. I asked if the contest was more a reflection of

34 OMFA, *Original Michigan Fiddlers 1986*, 160.

35 *Ibid.*, 161.

36 *Come Dance With Me: Original Fiddle Compositions and Favorite Tunes of Les Raber*, ed. Judy Raber Burns and Jim McKinney, 4th ed. (Judy Raber Burns and Jim McKinney, 2008), 26.

37 *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Southern Michigan old-time fiddling, and I received an affirmative answer.

It is revealing that the answer I received concerning more northerly fiddle styles was related to danceability. Métis fiddlers often play for jigging, a kind of step-dancing.³⁸ This is also the case on Beaver Island, MI, where the dancing to fiddle music still done by a few people on the island tends toward a kind of step dancing similar to what the Métis refer to as jigging.³⁹ Beaver Island fiddler Patrick Bonner himself said, "they used to have a lot of dances, balls, country dances. In the winter time we used to dance those balls where they'd eat and dance all night. At least 10 or 11 a year. We'd have three or four every winter. The balls. Then we had country dances. There'd be one or two every week throughout the summer months".⁴⁰ These dances probably refer to the same kinds of round and square dances on the mainland, though it is hard to say how much the jigging style of dance could have been intermingled. This account of the frequency of dances on the island is not surprising when seen in light of Stephen R. Williams' article dealing with house parties in Michigan, other Upper Midwestern sources or the many accounts found in the Original Michigan Fiddlers' Association book of 1986.⁴¹

Beaver Island is an almost legendary locale, the only currently inhabited island in an archipelago in Lake Michigan. Now a two hour ferry ride from Charlevoix, the island sees much tourism. In the 19th century, however, the island and its vicinity instead saw much bloodshed in conflicts between Mormons, Irish, and others and the despotic rule of a Mormon king, King James Strang, who was eventually assassinated. An important place for Lake culture,⁴² Beaver Island continues to exist as a destination for Michigan folk musicians.

38 Michael Loukinen, *Medicine Fiddle*, Northern Michigan University, Up North Films, Copyright, Michael Loukinen, 1991, Streaming video via FolkStreams. <http://www.folkstreams.net/film,178> (accessed December 13, 2010).

39 Michael Loukinen, *Medicine Fiddle*.

40 Glenn Hendrix, *An Island of Fiddlers: Fiddle Tunes of Patrick Bonner: Beaver Island, Michigan*, 2nd printing, (East

41 Stephen R. Williams, "House Parties and Shanty Boys: Michigan's Musical Traditions", in *Michigan Folklife Reader*, ed. C. Kurt Dewhurst and Yvonne R. Lockwood, 225-240, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1987), 226, 236-237; The Original Michigan Fiddlers' Association, *Original Michigan Fiddlers 1986*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Mcnaughton & Gunn, 1986).

42 As seen in Ivan Walton's work with song traditions there and Glenn Hendrix's work with fiddling.

The jigging dance of Beaver Island is remarkably different from Southern Michigan square or round dances and consequently, fiddling might have allowed for different requirements and freedoms for satisfying the dancers of that style. On the other hand, a black and white video of Jep Bisbee step dancing also exists. But with the presence of other types of dances on the island as well, it is difficult to say the extent to which this jigging style of dance may have influenced the fiddling. These days on Beaver Island, a fiddler can play at high tempo and still be fairly danceable for the jigging style of dancing.

Based on the above analysis, the Annual Michigan Old-Time Fiddler's Championship judging could arguably be said to be based on the traditions of a southerly region of Michigan, not the traditions of the whole state. This despite their website which claims, "Styles of playing other than Michigan old-time fiddling are not acceptable, although the judges may take into account variations in Michigan old-time fiddling."⁴³ What variations this includes is not stated.

Regardless of reasons for tempo differences, there is only a slight tempo difference in Beaver Island fiddler Patrick Bonner's rendition of "The Devil's Dream"⁴⁴ (ca. 115 BPM) and Jep Bisbee's rendition of the same tune (ca. 107 BPM)⁴⁵. Bonner's playing is more ferocious. Obviously, his technique for clarity of tone is not a match for Bisbee's. In terms of personality, judging from across the O'Donnel recordings of Bonner, his playing is aggressive. In this recording of "Devil's Dream," he is accompanied by guitar.

In general, Bonner's playing, though somewhat scratchy, still reflects a fairly unornamented style. He does employ occasional fingered ornaments on at least one piece. On "Devil's Dream," he employs saw-like bowing, and his use of drones appears mostly the result of his ferocious bow attack,

43 "Fiddlers Contest," Huron Township Applefest, <http://www.huronapplefest.com/fiddlerscontest.php> (accessed December 13, 2010).

44 Patrick Bonner, "Pat Bonner: Beaver Island, Michigan, Historical Folk Music: Edward 'Edgar' O'Donnel Recordings (1950 to Mid 1960s)," Joe O'Donnel, Discs 1-4, CD, 2008.

"Devil's Dream" is track 8 of the third CD.

45 Jasper "Jep" Bisbee, "The Devil's Dream," Edison 51382, 78 RPM, 1923.

but whatever its origins, it is present. It would seem Bonner is trying to drive dancers as opposed to "moving them" as the Michigan State Championship judging criterion requests. On other tunes, Bonner does employ triplet ornaments, seemingly slurred, and his use of drones appears to depend on the tune, with some tunes having a heavy presence of drones, but many others completely lacking drones. Obviously, he plays different tunes in different fashions. He plays a typical Irish range of tune types, including jigs, but his repertoire also exhibits classic American tunes. With Bonner, we have a much greater range of recordings to draw from, with a much greater range of types of tune than we have for Bisbee or Pattee.

Bonner lived among Irish settlers, as well as other ethnicities, on Beaver Island.⁴⁶ Born in 1882, he did various sorts of work, including sailing.⁴⁷ His fiddle arrived, like many of his tunes probably did, by ship across the lake. Bonner said it came from a lumber camp "north someplace."⁴⁸ I had the great fortune and pleasure of playing Bonner's fiddle on the shore of the harbor on Beaver Island in the summer of 2010. I played one of the tunes Bonner played, on a fiddle that had seen both lumber camp and the lake. Bonner's fiddle is currently in long-term loan possession of Glenn Hendrix, a friend of mine from Michigan, a fiddler, historian, and creator of Michigan tune transcription collections.⁴⁹

Bonner's fiddle may well have come down from a lumber camp in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Métis fiddler Coleman Trudeau, who worked in Upper Peninsula lumber camps but was born in Canada,⁵⁰ represents a fiddling tradition in Upper Michigan heavily influenced by Canadian styles. Trudeau's fiddling is even, well-timed, of varied tempo. He incorporates drones, but the usage seems determined by the tune. His notes are clear. Trudeau plays with sensitivity.

On the movie *Medicine Fiddle*, Coleman Trudeau was filmed playing the tunes "Maple Sugar" and "Whitefish Over the Rapids." Both of these tunes have strong connections with Canada. "Maple

46 Hendrix, v.

47 Ibid, v.

48 Ibid, vii.

49 Ibid, x.

50 Michael Loukinen, *Medicine Fiddle*; Greenman and Hendrix, 13.

Section of *Medicine Fiddle* regarding Trudeau begins roughly 31:44.

Sugar" is associated with the legendary Canadian fiddler Ward Allen, and "Whitefish Over the Rapids" is a tune from the Sault Saint Marie area,⁵¹ where the St. Mary's River runs down from Lake Superior to Lake Huron and separates the Upper Peninsula of Michigan from Northern Ontario. "Whitefish Over the Rapids" exemplifies the music of that border region from whence Coleman Trudeau hails.⁵²

Trudeau's rendition of "Maple Sugar" closely resembles Ward Allen's. Trudeau makes fairly continuous use of drones and triplets. The tempo reflects the playing of a two-step dance. Trudeau's playing is clean, despite the drones, which are controlled drones, and the melody is always at the fore. Trudeau's fiddling, while of controlled and even tempo, is markedly different in style from the fiddling of Bisbee, Pattee, and even Bonner. This rendition of "Maple Sugar" was done without accompaniment.

Later in *Medicine Fiddle*, Trudeau is shown fiddling in a smoky building on Sugar Island, an island in the St. Mary's River. Here, Trudeau is accompanied by piano, guitar, and/or mandolin. The tune is "Whitefish Over the Rapids." Coleman plays in a style with few drones and little ornamentation, emphasizing single notes. The tempo is fairly high. Yet even while this rendition of a tune reflects the kind of single-note aesthetic of fiddlers from Southern Michigan, other moments on the film depict him playing syncopated tunes with intentional use of droning and possibly double-stopping. Yet, though Trudeau makes use of these elements, his tunes show a tendency towards playing passages with little ornamentation in ways similar to Southern Michigan fiddlers. As the film *Medicine Fiddle* illustrates, Trudeau's fiddling is likely influenced by French and Native American traditions, among others.⁵³ Further, the history of one of Trudeau's tunes found in *Michigan Jamboree* indicates the strong possibility of a Scandinavian influence.⁵⁴

Though Trudeau was a master fiddler who performed for dancers and played with remarkable poise and style, I could not say with confidence that he would meet with the approval of the judges of

51 Greenman and Hendrix, 122.

52 Greenman and Hendrix, 122.

53 Michael Loukinen, *Medicine Fiddle*.

54 Greenman and Hendrix, 121.

the Michigan Old-Time Fiddler's championship far, far away from Trudeau's stomping grounds. New Boston, not far from Detroit, is a different world from the forests of the Upper Peninsula, part of a larger region sometimes referred to as "the North Woods."

Trudeau worked in the lumbercamps,⁵⁵ where it was no surprise to find a fiddler. "In Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota," wrote Earl Clifton Beck in the introduction to his *Lore of the Lumber Camps*, "woods sheltered numerous good violins. Many of the lumberjack fiddlers were not easily fooled on the value of such instruments. Carl Lathrop of Pleasant Valley, Jack Swan of Gladstone, Harry Blackman of Breckenridge, Kelly Rodgers of Alden, and Ernie Losey of Alma knew fiddle values. Some of these men still fiddle with the best radio talent. Henry Ford did not locate all the good players with his contests."⁵⁶ In Michigan, folk music is closely associated with the shanty boys and the windjammers – in other words, with the logging and shipping industries. The shipping industry likely helped make Beaver Island not a secluded, isolated continuation of largely Irish music but a place obviously connected to the entire Great Lakes region and beyond.⁵⁷ The logging camps, where people lived together in the woods, were centers of folk traditions; those who were familiar with the camps make note of this, and collectors too have shown this to be the case.⁵⁸ The communal camp became a place for storytelling, dancing, and the playing of music.⁵⁹ Trudeau himself remembered dances where "some men would put a, a sheet around them," and take the woman's role in order to fill out the dance.⁶⁰ These lumberjack male-only dances are sometimes referred to as "stag dances." Earl Clifton Beck wrote, "Dancers were many, and stag dances were common. Without women in camp, the shanty boys made a 'woman' out of a man by the simple process of tying a handkerchief about an arm. Solo dancing was common: buck-and-wing, jig, 'stomp.'"⁶¹ Beck then gives a recitation of various

55 Michael Loukinen, *Medicine Fiddle*.

56 Earl Clifton Beck, *Lore of the Lumber Camps* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1948), 7.

57 Hendrix, v-vi; David C. B. Olson, *Life on the Upper Michigan Frontier*, (Boston: Branden Press, 1974) 265, 268-269, 275; Chickering and Gardner, 6-7.

58 Hedrick, 245-249.

For both description of community life in the woods and folklife.

59 Hedrick, 249; Olson, 265.

60 Michael Loukinen, *Medicine Fiddle*.

61 Earl Clifton Beck, *Lore of the Lumber Camps* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1948), 7.

lumberjacks and their dancing abilities.⁶²

One Swedish lumberjack from the Upper Peninsula remembered a camp that mixed Native Americans and Scandinavians.⁶³ This kind of camp would be the ideal place for musical interchange. In *Life on the Northern Michigan Frontier*, a man raised in the Swedish immigrant communities of the Upper Peninsula wrote about life in a lumber mill town and in the logging camps. He vividly recalls the musical traditions of the Swedish immigrants.

A few times on Sunday or holidays or holiday mornings during the warm and sunny summer days that a few young Swedish men, seldom more than three or five in number, would stroll off into the wooded wilderness to some secluded spot that seemed to fill you with tranquility and peace. . . perhaps he subconsciously felt that it was now time for me to absorb some of the more subtle shades of Swedish culture . . . There always seemed to be one member who came with that popular type of accordion known to the Swedes as *Dragspel*. There was never any hectic rush to start playing. First there was the relaxed and gradual adjustment to the tranquility of their selected haven. In due time the proper moment would come to play the Swedish tunes to fit the mood of the location and occasion.⁶⁴

This illustrates the care and respect with which Swedish immigrants partook of their musical traditions. It is apparent that the Swedish immigrants to Michigan brought their music with them and cared about it. The logging camps would have been a perfect place for ethnic musical interplay, and consequently, it comes as no surprise if Trudeau showed such musical influence. No truly thorough examination of Michigan folk music could be done without a thorough examination of the logging and shipping industries that covered both land and water. These industries moved people and created opportunity for exchange and continuation of tradition. Trudeau and Bonner's fiddling reflect this complex reality – a world of industry and motion and of diverse ethnicities. In folklore scholarship, industry and metropolitanism are often seen as the enemy and destroyer. This is a simplistic view. In Michigan, industry had a hand in creating the social interplay that enabled folklore to be passed on and to develop.

62 Ibid., 7-8.

63 Olson, 265.

64 Olson, 18-19.

The lumbercamps and sailing ships are fine examples. Industry, itself, is not the antithesis of folk music, and the metropolitan ethnic interplay helped create a rich and diverse tradition.

Despite their similarities, I believe it would be a mistake to say that all the above Michigan fiddlers represent a single tradition. The more one examines an individual fiddler, the more the differences seem to stand out, and there are plentiful similarities across traditions of fiddling, no doubt in some ways necessitated by the fiddle itself. Coleman Trudeau represents a multi-ethnic tradition of fiddling, and his style is markedly different from Southern Michigan fiddlers. Patrick Bonner, a kind of intermediary both geographically and stylistically, has similarities with the Southern Michigan fiddlers. But, Bonner also has repertoire commonality with at least one Métis fiddler represented in *Medicine Fiddle*, as can be seen from a shared tune found in Hendrix's transcriptions of Bonner's tunes.⁶⁵ The tune, which Hendrix, lacking its name, calls "Whiskey Point" after a point on the Beaver Island harbor,⁶⁶ is rather different as played by Bonner compared to the Métis fiddler, but the tune is nevertheless recognizably the same basic melody. The most notable difference is in Bonner's playing the tune in a different register above where the Métis fiddler plays it. This tune is the first on the accompanying album, "For the Long Winter Nights."

Overall, it is fairly easy to categorize fiddlers from the south of Michigan into a stylistic tradition demonstrated by Pattee, Bisbee, and Gross. Yet, in Southern Michigan, the influence of Southern fiddler immigrants also had a place. Ray Shepherd (b. 1914), a fiddler hailing originally from Kentucky who grew up in Ohio, played in Indiana, and then moved to Michigan can easily be distinguished stylistically, playing tunes like "Black Mountain Rag" or "Birdie."⁶⁷ Yet, he also played a quadrille and waltz with Gross on field recordings.⁶⁸

In more northerly climes of Michigan, the tradition might be more diverse. What becomes

65 Michael Loukinen, *Medicine Fiddle*; Hendrix, 37.

66 Hendrix, xi.

67 OMFA, *Original Michigan Fiddlers 1986*, 153.

68 Field recordings provided by Jim McKinney and Glenn Hendrix.

apparent is that these traditions are part of larger geographical and social patterns that reach far beyond the boundaries of the political state of Michigan. The influences on Michigan music span the entire Great Lakes Region, including the St. Lawrence. Michigan's fiddling also reaches into Europe, Canada, and the South. Southern Michigan's regional style reflects a direct connection with New York State and the Yankee fiddling of New England, and this can be seen in Simon J. Bronner's book *Old-Time Music Makers of New York State*.

It is important to remember that the state of New York borders both Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, as well as the St. Lawrence River, and it consequently interacts with the Great Lakes as a waterway and region. The Great Lakes shipping ballad *The Bigler*, also found on the accompanying album, chronicles a voyage from Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Buffalo, New York. In the Michigan settlers' account, *The Bark Covered House*, William Nowlin vividly describes his family's passage from New York across Lake Erie to Michigan on ship to settle, not long before Bisbee and Pattee were born.⁶⁹ In fact, since Bisbee was born in New York yet moved to Michigan as a small child⁷⁰, the trip may reflect something of Bisbee's family's experience. Bronner reprints in his book a list of fifty-seven of "New York's Favorite Tunes," even though he draws attention to the problematic selectivity of the list.⁷¹ A glance at the list shows significant similarities to Michigan repertoire. To illustrate this, of the nine tunes that Jasper Bisbee record – of which I am aware – seven of them are present in the list of "New York's Favorite Tunes." An eighth tune, a jig, might be as well, I simply do not know the name of it and so would not be able to identify it if it was. I also cannot account for the possibility of name variants. The names of the seven common tunes are "McDonald's Reel," "the Opera Reel," "Money Musk," "The Devil's Dream," "The Girl I Left Behind Me," "Turkey in the Straw," and "Arkansas Traveler."⁷² But, while these tunes are common between Michigan and New York, some of them would

69 Nowlin, 25-28.

70 Paul Gifford, "Jasper E."

71 Bronner, 182-183.

72 A few of these tunes were recorded as a medley. Bibliographic information on all these tunes will not be given here.

Further, the bibliographic information used in regards to the Bisbee and Pattee recordings, including some names, that are cited comes from other online sources as well that could be cited themselves, but for the sake of simplicity, will not

also be considered common not only across the United States, but in Canada as well. They are foundational old-time tunes – at least in name. As has been seen with Pattee's and Bisbee's versions as compared to Haley's, a tune can have the same name and yet be played with remarkable variance between traditions. Much comparison work would need to be done to establish trends in tune renditions between geographical areas.

What becomes apparent is that any simplistic look at Michigan's fiddling is foiled; simplistic definitions fail. Assuming that the height of Michigan's fiddling culture – in terms of its social centrality – existed during the settlement and lumbering periods, there is still little reason to expect to find a homogenous tradition. The most homogenous region musically would appear to be the south of the Lower Peninsula. Michigan's history is a history of remarkable interplay between ethnic groups. Also, its industry helped to stimulate and alter the traditions. Michigan cannot be considered a region to itself, but in fact might be divided up into various regions – as even today its popular culture indicates through the division of Michiganders into Yoopers and Trolls, referencing those from the U.P. and L.P., as well as common understandings regarding the Dutch background of the west coast of Michigan, and the multi-ethnic Detroit area with its African American and Middle-Eastern communities. Then again, Michigan could also be attributed to the Upper Midwest, and in some cases, the "Polkabilly" phenomenon is present. For example, Harbor Springs fiddler Danny Johnson and Beaver Island guitarist and singer Danny Gillespi have long operated as a musical duo. Friends of mine who I have enjoyed hearing perform on various occasions, one of their signature numbers is a song medley. The medley begins with the German⁷³ song "There's No Beer in Heaven," followed by the Slovenian⁷⁴ polka song "E I O Polka," followed by "I'll Fly Away" and "When the Saints Come Marching In," This set aptly illustrates the phenomenon that Upper Midwestern folklorist James Leary refers to as "Polkabilly."

be cited.

⁷³ Leary, 7.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 139.

Michigan's waterways may overshadow land as a unifying regional factor in Michigan's history. The Great Lakes waterway has helped to insure that Michigan as a region is dwarfed by the Great Lakes, a region connecting Canada and many states and helping to move culture. The quest for wage labor jobs have preserved and created wonderful music by bringing people together from different backgrounds into environments where they relied on each other for entertainment. Consequently, the perception that the coming of industry automatically imperils folklife does not survive analysis of Michigan's traditions.

The moving of fiddling out of common social experience in Michigan must be tied to some other factor than industry itself, and perhaps Michigan's own Henry Ford and Thomas Edison have much to do with this: the ease of over-land transportation and commercially available canned entertainment.⁷⁵ Patrick Bonner himself connects this to the downfall of fiddling on Beaver Island. As he himself said, "When the radios come or the pop machines, the victrolas, that spoiled everything. They let the machine do it, not play themselves. Nobody learned to play."⁷⁶

Fiddling in what is the political state of Michigan was common and multi-ethnic, but the traditions of fiddling cannot be examined through the frame of political boundaries. Region is much more dynamic a concept than static boundaries. Region has much to do with the movement and organization of people, and in this way, industry played an important role in the tradition of fiddling. It can be seen through the above analysis of recordings that Michigan's political boundaries include more than one identifiable tradition of fiddling, but further, these traditions are not contained by the boundaries of Michigan as a state, but look more like different but mingling streams of influence moving across the waterways of the Great Lakes.

In September of 2011, Michigan will announce its 26th Michigan Old-Time Fiddle Champion, who will presumably play in a style not so far removed from Jep Bisbee's and the style of Southern

⁷⁵ Dr. Richard Blaustein, interview by author, Johnson City, TN, November 24, 2010.
Regarding the effect of transportation.

⁷⁶ Hendrix, ix.

Michigan fiddlers. But Michigan has a diverse history of fiddling, and many unrecognized and unremembered masters lived and played who likely would not meet the judge's expectations. But even knowing that, the contest at the Huron Township Applefest does Michiganders a great service in encouraging people to play and allowing them to hear the music of fiddles in a unique tradition, perhaps even a tradition dominant in Southern Michigan and New Boston. Was it ever homogenous? That is unlikely, but as the above analysis suggests, there were strong similarities. But to sit in the cold bleachers in September and listen to the fiddlers on the stage, it is apparent, still, that there are as many styles and personalities as there are fiddlers, even when some hard-to-define tradition ties them together, like a Bisbee, a Pattee, or a Gross.