

# Robert Perry Christeson

"Dean of Missouri Fiddle Music"



by Mike Christeson

Robert Perry [R. P.] Christeson, known as the "Dean of Missouri Fiddle Music," has been variously described as "a gentleman's gentleman, very kind and smart," "an important preservationist of early fiddle music," and "quite a character." Because of his lifetime of work as a collector and promoter of traditional Missouri fiddle music and his two important books of transcribed traditional tunes, he has acquired an international reputation among musicologists and historians. If not for an act of familial civil disobedience on the part of his father, though, it's likely that very few would have ever heard of him.

Although fiddle music has been an important part of American life since the beginning of our country's history, for some residents of Pulaski County, Missouri at the turn of the 20th century, the fiddle was a tool of the devil. With its close association with dancing and the inevitable drinking that went along with it, the "Devil's Box" was a frequent topic of sermons and revivals as a sure way to damnation. Not everyone believed this, however, and when R. P.'s dad and his brother set their sights on obtaining one, they were not easily dissuaded. As he would later recall ... "My granddad was of the old school that believed the fiddle was the devil's instrument. There was a lot of that. So, my dad and Uncle Fred sold rabbits to the produce house, which would ship them to St. Louis. They got a few dollars together and ordered a fiddle from the "Monkey Ward's" catalogue. They kept it in the barn in a barrel so it was invisible unless you were just digging

and hunting. And they'd go in there and play and practice. When my granddad first caught them, he'd whip them. They kept going at it. And, finally, he came down there one day and caught them again but instead of whipping them, he went to Dixon, the big store then was W. W. Howard, and bought them the best fiddle they had."

Bob, as he was known to his friends, grew up in a large and loving community which was united by both blood and common experience. His father, Commodore Frank Christeson, was part of the extensive clan of Pulaski County Christesons, who were descendants of three brothers from Kentucky.

Twins, Elisha and Elijah, had arrived first, in 1829, and were followed by their younger

brother, Josiah, in 1835. They settled the bottom lands of the Roubidoux, Piney, and Gasconade Rivers where they raised big families and prospered as farmers, merchants, and civic leaders. An example of their large presence in the community can be seen in the fact that by the early 1900's there were at least 11 Christesons teaching at various schools in the area. They also were numerous enough to field an all Christeson baseball team ... with a winning record.

His grandfather, Commodore Perry Christeson, was one of the eleven children of Elijah, who was married five times. A successful farmer, he owned 390 acres of land on three different tracts. Perry's wife, Malinda Cain, came from one of the wealthiest families in the county, her father having owned land totaling 2400 acres. According to legend, he once hired a "nice well be-

"...the fiddle was a tool of the devil...the Devil's Box..."

Dear adrian  
mr. Wainwright recnt  
to riddle-ford an brout  
me some fish and a  
poupaw, but I didnot  
like it. we have a new  
puppy-dog named  
pershing carries shoes  
all over the yard.  
and teases rose-mary  
and priscilla to de-  
th. a sheep butted  
me half across  
the barn lot this  
morning but it did  
not hurt me.  
claudyscott papa  
died last thursaday  
morning. I have been  
playing with him be-  
cause he is lonesome.  
Lup Murphy went to  
granite City to live.  
write a nother letter  
to me. good bye.  
from Robert Perry  
Christeson



W. W. Howard General Merchandise in Dixon where C. P. Christeson bought his sons a fiddle around 1900. Courtesy of The Jessie McCullie Library, Dixon.

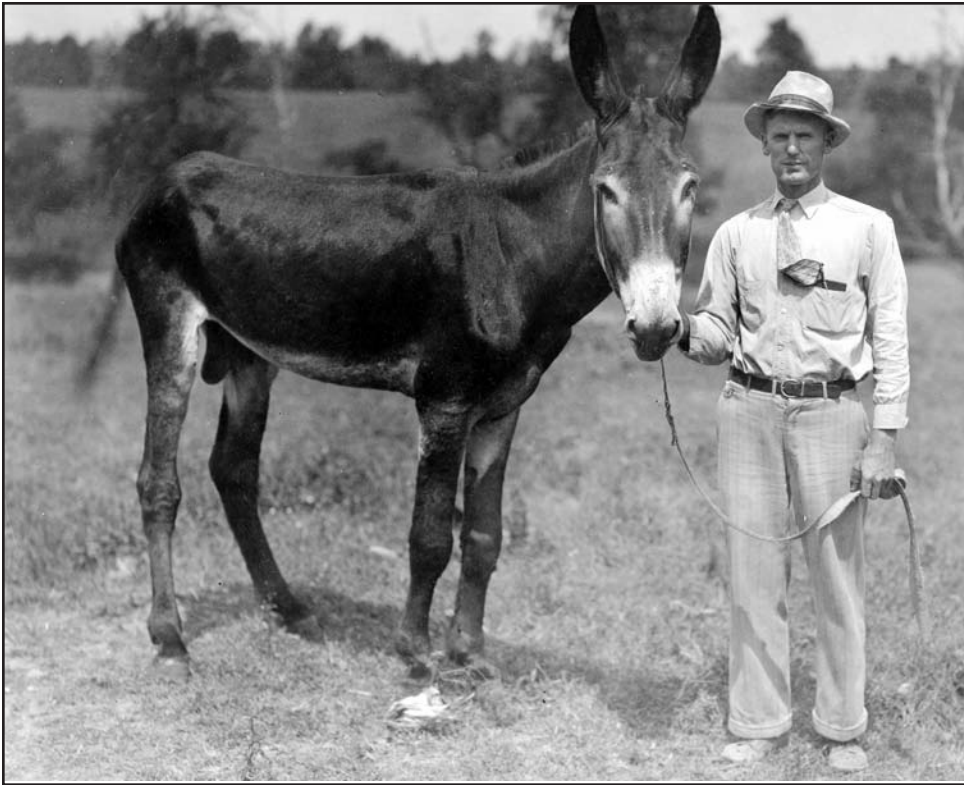
Robert was a precocious youngster. Reproduced above is a letter he wrote at the age of seven.

At right, young Robert at age 9 or 10, about the time he got his first fiddle.

Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection.







Commodore Frank Christeson, Bob's father, was a well known horse and mule breeder in Pulaski County. Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection

haved young man by the name of Jesse James" to train one of his race horses.

The Murphys, long time residents of Dixon, were also leading citizens in the community. Bob's mother, Ethel May, was one of a family of eight sisters and one brother. Her father, Robert, was a carpenter who, for a time, served as city marshal. Her mother, Sue Harris, whose father had built the Frisco Hotel, played the piano at church. May's uncles, operating as the "Murphy Bros.," were involved in a number of activities, including stock buying, lumber sales, merchandising, and newspaper publishing. They were the driving force behind the town's successful incorporation in 1889, after two previous attempts had been defeated by the railroad interests.

Frank and May, who had been childhood sweethearts since high school, were married in 1907. He took a job as cashier at the newly opened Peoples Bank of Dixon, and was an agent for Old Line Insurance, of Hartford, Connecticut. A quiet, unassuming man, he was also distinguished as a breeder of fine horses, mules, sheep, and hogs. In October of 1909, they began raising the one year old son of Frank's older brother, whose wife had become ill. They were heartbroken when little Floyd died, just two months after joining their household. In 1911, they were blessed by the birth of their own son, whom they named Robert after May's father, and Perry after Frank's. He would be their only child.

Dixon was a thriving market town on the Frisco Railroad line and a social center for the hardworking people in the area. It had begun as a railroad



Bob on the family farm on the Big Piney River during the tough times of the Depression. Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection.

boomtown after the Civil War, and had rapidly eclipsed the county seat at Waynesville as the leading business center in the central part of the county. With its heady mix of loggers, drovers, farmers, merchants, traveling salesmen, and railroad workers filling its streets, it was an exciting place to grow up in. It was there that Bob began his lifelong fascination with fiddle music and square dancing, which to him were inextricably joined. As he later recalled ... "They would build a big outdoor dance floor, including a stand for the musicians. And there was a considerable portion of the population which could jig dance ... it's not clogging, not the Dutch clog; it's different. Boy, some

of those people were nimble on their feet, it was beautiful to watch them. Women too. And, they would square dance the whole day long, it cost them a dime per couple to go through the whole set." He remembered being mesmerized by the sights and the sounds, "All the other kids would run around, I'd stand there hour after hour, listening to them."

To save costs, the wood for the dance floor was rented. The merchants then resold the used boards at a slight discount, which, along with the pleasant memories associated with them, more than made up for the nail holes. When the weather was bad, dances could be held in the Legion Hall above Veasmon's Hardware, which doubled as the city auditorium. Dances held in homes were also popular. As Bob would relate... "I have helped my folks carry out two rooms of furniture, out in the yard, I don't know how many times, so we could have a house dance. And the mu-

home.

Once he got it, he worked hard learning to play. Because he was so small, his mother told him to practice while standing over the bed, in case he dropped it. As he got older, she would accompany him on piano and pump organ as he went "squeaking around trying to play." His dad gave him some valuable advice, as well, advice that he never forgot, "to get around fiddlers and loaf, learn and watch."

There were plenty of influences for him to draw upon. Like the Heltons, of whom Bob said ... "Anyone by the name of Helton and living in the general area of Dixon, Missouri, in the 1920s was a fiddler." And, his uncle, Dave Harris, a dance caller, who told him that you always had to start off with a tune called "Wagoner" or it wouldn't be a good dance. He especially remembered Kate Douglas ... "You could set your clock on the 4th of July if you heard an old wagon going down the street rattlin. That would be old Kate Douglas - an old lady, widow, who wore high top shoes and she drove her wagon into town, team wagon, had a bunch of hay in the back and for the horses. The men liked to dance with old Kate; she was a big gal, but she could jig dance. Oh man that gal but she loved it; she'd dance from ten o'clock in the morning until past midnight and sweat - some of those days the humidity would be high and it was awful." Another memorable character was Polly Rezemus, a club footed boy who would entertain the wheat threshers with ribald songs at lunch ... "He could sing the filthiest folk songs I ever heard, and the poetry was - Shakespeare couldn't beat it. It was perfect. Filthy, just absolutely filthy, and the workers would split their sides laughing. They would just die. He had some good ones. And all of the workmen forgot about their ailments or their tiredness, and boy they went back to the field after lunch, ready to go."

He remembered those years as happy ones. His dad owned a farm below the Dixon Cemetery and Bob helped him gather rocks from the fields, which they used on the facade of their home. They placed a tin box "time capsule" inside one corner of the walls, as a memento. The house still stands to this day, an elegant two-story structure with walnut trim, throughout. He also remembered the movie theatre in Richland that played fiddle records before the movies and the radio that his dad brought home in the early twenties ... "One set of earphones, and we'd split in two and one person would listen with the left ear and the other with the right. My grandmother came down one

sicians would stand in the doorway and play for both rooms and people had a good time and socialized."

From an early age, Bob dreamed of owning a fiddle and becoming one of the "Kings of the folks" as he thought of those who played at the dances, and when he was around 8 or 9 years old, he asked for one for Christmas. He nearly chose a watch, instead, because as he put it, "that watch would have made me proud, hanging off the chain into my watch pocket," but in the end, the thought of being on the bandstand won out. His dad was happy about the decision, because it saved him the cost of the watch. He wrote to Fred, and in a short while, the family fiddle came



evening and was listening to WOS, and all at once we saw her shut her eyes, start smiling and patting her foot real quick and smiled, and I ran over and pulled one earphone loose and I listened to it. They were playing "Haste to the Wedding." That was her favorite piece of music."

WOS, whose call letters stood for "Watch Our State" was part of the radio craze that was sweeping the nation. It would be hard to overestimate the influence that WOS would have on young people like Bob, who were interested in the fiddle. From its studio on the 5th floor of the Missouri State Capitol, it broadcast a variety of programming that could be heard in all 48 states, Canada and Mexico. Although its primary function, as an arm of the State Board of Agriculture, was to provide market reports and agricultural information, WOS, as State Board Secretary Jewell T. Mayes described it, was ... "taking the city to the farmer." Conversely, perhaps as a reaction to urbanization, and to the erosion of traditional values exhibited by the flaunting of prohibition laws and the proliferation of jazz, the most popular programming was, by far, the Friday night fiddle shows.

Fiddle contests, characterized by historian Patrick Huber as the equivalent of a "Jazz Age American Idol" were also wildly popular. The excitement they generated was so great that the national music magazine, "Metronome" reported that at the 1923 contest, "2,500 fiddle fans from all parts of Missouri rose to their feet and danced an old-fashioned hoedown in the grandstands." Tunes such as, "Rabbit Spit in the Bulldog's Face" and "I'm Going Home to Mammy" charmed the nation. The fiddle frenzy would reach its peak during the 1926 Interstate Old Fiddlers Contest, when an estimated 1,000,000 listeners tuned in and over 250,000 votes were cast. The winner, who received the majority of the votes, as tabulated both regionally and nationwide, was Daniel Boone Jones, of Stephens in Boone County, who took home a \$500 prize and a silver loving cup.

Despite such mainstream acceptance, in Pulaski, attitudes changed slowly. While Bob could remember his Uncle Fred jig dancing a 6/8 jig in the doorway, as the sets of dancers swirled around him, he could also recall the conflicting emotions that resulted ... "There were preachers who would get up in the pulpit and denounce people who danced and played the fiddle. The fiddle was the devil's instrument. They would go to hell if they continued. My uncle would get a dose of religion. I've seen him go home, open the stove, and

throw the fiddle in there, and take out his tobacco and throw it away - he chewed. And it wouldn't be two months, he'd be trying to get a fiddle again. That comes and goes down there, instant religion."

After graduating from Dixon High school in 1928, Bob won a scholarship to Drury College in nearby Springfield, where his roommate was the actor, Robert Cummings. According to Bob, the character that Cummings was later to portray on screen was pretty much the same person that he knew in school, a happy-go-lucky type, who mugged at himself in the mirror. Bob spent a year at Drury before transferring to the University of Missouri at Columbia. There he studied agriculture, and joined the Farmhouse fraternity. He took up boxing, and broke the thumb on his left hand but, fortunately, suffered no lasting effects from the injury.

It was while he was at Columbia that the full impact of the depression began to be felt in central Missouri. To stay in school he had to take on a series of odd jobs ... "There was a guy in the house who could play piano and Hal Foster played the guitar. The three of us practiced a lot and formed a trio. We would play at Shaw, a small community northeast of Columbia, on Saturday night. It was the main thing in Shaw. We played for a \$1.50 each and had to pay a two-bit [quarter] car fare to get there," he said. It would be the only time in his life that he would accept money for playing the fiddle. He also got a job at a kitchen in a sorority, where a kindly cook "took a liking to him" and made sure that he got at least one meal a day.

As bad as things were for Bob, they

were even worse for his family, and they had to rely on the old ways to pull them through. As he recalled ... "Things were really rough and my dad was cashier of the bank, but all he had was just this one farm. It was mortgaged. It was up on Big Piney River. It was a good farm, and we moved. We had to go up there. And we had no electricity, and kerosene lamps, and we didn't have a pump in the well. There was a well there, but we lifted the water on a rope in a bucket. Mother did her washing in a wash tub, had a big iron kettle she'd heat and put the stuff in. Things were rough, but I didn't, looking back on it, suffer. I had good health. Then there were plenty of dances to go to. It was the only form of recreation you could have. And I played the fiddle. Not very well. But a lot of times we'd carry the furniture out in the yard from one room in the house and pull the piano over in the doorway, and my mom would play accompaniment and I'd fiddle." They had gone from the city back to the farm and from two-room dances to one, but the music still sustained them.

Bob took a job as Garden Supervisor at Waynesville, while continuing to help his father and mother on the farm. In this capacity, he was largely responsible for improving the efficiency of the small, but vital, gardens found on almost every farmstead. These 1/2 acre plots, worked mostly by women and children, would prove crucial to the survival of their families.

In 1934, a severe drought hit the already beleaguered Missouri. Bob, who was working with the County Extension Service in the Missouri Boot Heel, would recall boarding with a family who had only bread and fat to eat. He

served as the first County Agent in Ozark County, and was subsequently employed by the Farm Security Administration as a farm management specialist, teaching former sharecroppers more efficient methods of farming and animal husbandry. His career with the Farm Security Administration culminated in 1939, with a position as administrator at the Laforge Resettlement Project in New Madrid, Missouri. Set up as part of the New Deal social experiments, these communal farms, although decried as communism by some, allowed displaced farm families a chance to continue to live on the land. Bob's empathy and experience helped to ease the transition from the self-reliant lifestyle, previously enjoyed by the residents, to the more regulated requirements of their new situation.

In 1942, he left his beloved Missouri for basic training in Texas, followed by Officer's Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. His first assignment, as a newly commissioned army lieutenant, was at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock where his duties included preparing public reports on farm projects.

He received an honorable discharge in 1943 because of health problems and began a career as a statistician with the U. S. Department of Agriculture in Las Cruces, New Mexico. He prepared livestock and crop reports, reminiscent of those broadcast on WOS during his childhood. It was there that he resumed his involvement with fiddle music and began his now famous recordings. As he would remember in a "Missouri Friends of the Folk Arts" interview ... "I tried to show a guy a tune one night there at a dance in Las Cruces and I'd forgotten it. And I couldn't play a damn thing and couldn't remember anything. When I laid it down - I quit playing before WWII; I had to go somewhere else to make a living - I didn't take my fiddle with me and just stayed away from it for so long. I didn't like or dislike what I'd been hearing out there, but it was just different. So that's what gave me the idea. I just started out trying to refresh my memory. That's the reason, a selfish purpose. I was going to try and improve my recall and I never quit."

After attempting to find books and records with traditional Missouri fiddle tunes, he turned to the music departments of colleges. When this also proved fruitless, he voiced his frustration in a letter to his friend and colleague, the noted folklorist, Vance Randolph ... "I wrote my old Alma Mater, the University of Missouri, and asked if any one had collected and written down some good old Missouri



The Walters Brothers String Band of Decatur, Nebraska, in 1958. From left is Sant Walters, second fiddle; center, Uncle Bob Walters, lead fiddle; and, right, is Harold Walters, guitar. Christeson made more than 30 recordings of Uncle Bob Walters. Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection.

breakdowns. The dean replied that he didn't know what I was talking about." Realizing that learning fiddle music was like riding a bicycle, a self taught and imitative process, he determined that if the music was to be saved, he would have to do it. He bought a Webster wire recorder and on July 7, 1948, while on vacation in Missouri, he recorded his first artist ... the legendary Bill Driver, of Miller County.

He was transferred to Nebraska in 1949, where he met Bob Walters, who, along with Bill Driver, would become a frequent subject of recordings ... "I can't say enough about Uncle Bob. Fred Doxstadder first told me about him, getting me so fired up to meet and record him that I didn't let my shirttail touch me until I got there. Once I heard him play, I knew I'd struck oil. He played a cheap German made fiddle, one right out of a mail order catalogue. But he could make any fiddle sound good. His fingering was precise, and his notes rang clear as a bell."

Walters had an inexhaustible repertoire and Bob would record him more than 30 times over a ten year period. It was his practice when recording to arrange several sessions, in order to explore each fiddler in depth. But, no matter how many fiddlers he recorded, and how many times he recorded

them, he was haunted with the thought that it wasn't enough. As he wrote in the introduction to his first book ... "The close of each recording session left me wondering whether I had been probing the tip of a musical iceberg. Was I delving into a still existing musical heritage of huge dimensions or into one greatly shrunk by the disappearance of large portions which could never be salvaged?"

He continued recording whenever he could, often seconding the players on an army surplus chaplain's organ. This pump operated instrument, known as a Melodeon, could be folded into the size of a large suitcase, making it ideal for his purposes. If anyone questioned its authenticity, he could point to the fact that Stephen Foster had played one. To augment the cheap speaker in the Webster, he had a jack built into the

recorder, and could feed it through an amp and ... "brother, you could hear it across town." The new technology was not without its drawbacks, "Wire was fine, up to a point, good stuff, but you had to be very careful with it. I let it tangle one time. It went across a groove in the recording head and it just cut a slot, finally cut a ditch or a groove, and it just stuck immediately and the momentum of the spool was going and that shot wire all over the room. And it was one of my good ones. I spent hours, day after day, when I could, go in there and try to sort that thing out and take one turn of the wire out and it would curl up over here. It would send a signal around over there, "You curl up." Boy, that was a mess. That took me forever."

In 1956, he was transferred again, this time to the campus of Purdue University, at Lafayette, Indiana. There he met Joan Nalley, a pretty and vivacious young secretary who was working in the same building. He saw something special in her and asked her out, and it wasn't long before they were dating on a regular basis. Bob knew where the good clubs were and Joan soon shared his love for square dancing and the music that propelled it. In 1961, he received another promotion, requiring a move to Washington, D.C. Six months



Bob played the fiddle and keyboards. He often accompanied players on his Melodeon. Pictured here in Nebraska in 1956 are (l-r) Henry Schroeder, Bob Walters, R. P. Christeson, and William "Banjo Bill" Lohridge. Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection.

Gerald Wyatt Excavating

Designs for Nature

Gasconade Hills Resort

Eyeglass Center

Bill Farnham

Deer Crossing Quick Stop



later, he returned to Indiana to ask her to marry him. She was twenty years younger than he, and remembers asking him, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could be together for thirty years?" They would be married for thirty-one.

The newlyweds returned to the D.C. area where he had a rented bungalow in Arlington, Virginia, just three blocks from the Pentagon. While an assignment to the Department of Agriculture in Washington might have represented the ultimate career achievement, D.C. wasn't exactly a hot bed of traditional fiddle music. With time on his hands, and a growing awareness of its passage, he began transcribing some of his recordings. As he recalled, "Since 1961, each succeeding obituary for another of the fiddlers who once played for me also meant that some good tunes had likely gone to the cemetery. I began to question why people in the future should not be allowed to play, hear, or dance to the music of the Bill Drivers or the Bob Walterses." He learned how to read music and began transcribing on hand drawn musical staff paper. These first efforts were the beginning of the two books that would be the culmination of a lifetime of work, and two of the most important compilations of traditional fiddle music ever produced ... "The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory, Volumes 1 and 2."

Tragically, many of the recordings that he had made were no longer available for transcription. In 1940, his parents had been forced to leave their farm on the Big Piney, when the US Army bought their land for Fort Leonard Wood. His dad had driven north until he ran into a friend at a restaurant, who knew of a farm near Auxvasse that he was able to buy. When Bob moved to Washington, he decided to store his belongings there and that's when disaster struck. As he and Joan tell in an interview ... "Well, I was going to get transferred to Washington. So I took most of my stuff to a farm that my dad had out there east of town. Dad lived here [in Auxvasse]. He had a big farm out there and a big barn and a vacant house, big ole vacant house, and I put in that house, up in the loft, in the attic, all my - [Here, Joan interjects - "And padlocked the door."] - Padlocked the durn door, but vandals - I got vandalized. They got my best stuff. I guess it's in the pond. I bet some kids did it. I don't think adults - mighta been adults. Man, I had some good recordings, but that's all water under the bridge now."

It must have been a terrible blow, but fortunately, they didn't get all of his recordings, or the many books and records that he had been collecting since college. He was also able to draw



**Above** Another favorite subject was Bill Driver, born in Eldridge, Laclede County. Bill moved to Iberia in Miller County where Bob first heard him at a Civil War veterans encampment in 1928. Bob made numerous recordings of Bill from 1948-1952. This picture was taken in 1952 when Bill Driver was 69 years of age.

**Right** In 1948 Driver became the first musician that Bob recorded. The "wires" he mentions in his letter refers to the recording made on a Webster wire recorder. Bob wanted to record as much of Driver's huge repertoire as possible.

Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection.

upon his phenomenal memory for material. Since childhood, he had possessed the ability to remember a tune after only one or two hearings. The names, however, did not come to mind as easily, and consequently, many of the tunes in his books are without their proper titles. When possible, he did include the names, as well as the dates and locations of the recordings, and by whom they were played.

He retired in 1968, the same year his mother died, and in 1970 moved to Auxvasse to be near his "Pops," who was still farming in the area. After settling in, he and Joan began traveling to dances, contests, and festivals in their red and white Checker station wagon. Bob had purchased it following a trip to Chicago, after discovering that his hat didn't get knocked off when he got in and out of the taxicabs. He maintained it meticulously, keeping it in a rented garage space in Maupin's Funeral Home in Auxvasse. With his lean good looks and trademark cigar, he became a well known figure on the fiddle

Feb 23/1949

Centertown Mo

My Dear Sir and friend  
 hope this find you well  
 your letter found me not  
 feeling so well, but true  
 hope when you come  
 down this summer I can go  
 down in Laclede Co  
 with you I think you will  
 enjoy it when you come  
 be shure and bring these  
 fiddlers along so I can hear  
 them I know you must  
 be joking about those  
 fiddlers not playing as good  
 as I can, Well the shure  
 have had some of the bad  
 weather here this winter  
 but it is warming up  
 some now oh yes violins  
 are hard to get I mean a  
 real one I should be in

(2)

a hurry to buy just  
 look around and you may  
 find one worth the money  
 your old one is not to  
 bad he might find one  
 down here in Mo  
 that might suit you  
 I will be around  
 will close from your  
 friend  
 I am a Driver  
 to  
 One P P Christeson



music circuit.

Bob was proud of the rich cultural heritage of Missouri and wanted his books to be published there, and the University of Missouri jumped at the chance. In 1973, they released the first volume of "The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory," to universal acclaim. It won awards in New York, Chicago, Kansas City, and St. Louis, including one for its design content, which featured violins and violin accessories from the 1908 Montgomery Ward Catalogue. Its publication sparked a renaissance in traditional fiddle music, inspiring young musicians such as Charlie Walden and Geoff Seitz to take up the torch. He was especially pleased when Geoff won the 1986 National Fiddler's Contest in Galax, Virginia by playing Bill Driver's version of "Marmaduke's Hornpipe".

After Volume 1 of "The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory" was published, he began accepting speaking engagements and giving workshops, using the publicity to advance the cause of traditional fiddle music whenever possible. In part as a result of his efforts, the Missouri Folklore Society, dormant since 1920, was reactivated and his former protege, Charlie "Possum" Walden, founded the Missouri State Old-Time Fiddler's Association. In 1976, a double album of Bob's collected tunes entitled "Old Time Fiddler's Repertory" was recorded by the University of Missouri Press. Although he preferred to stay in the background and let others take the spotlight, Bob accepted an invitation to play for the 1980 Frontier Folklife Festival in St. Louis ... "That was my highlight," he said, "Not to brag, but we got a tremendous amount of applause."

Paradoxically, the resurgence of interest in the old ways that was taking place was primarily an urban phenom-

enon. When asked why rural youth seemed to have rejected traditional music, Bob had this explanation ... "Well, country people haven't quite caught up with civilization. They're rapidly doing it. But I think one of the reasons they quit square dancing was the convergence of a lot of stuff. The state began to build highways like mad in the 30's, and cars became more plentiful, and the Victrola became old-hat and it was a big deal to get in the car and go someplace. And the interstate highway put the finishing cap on that. Instead of going to the next county people could go to California and think nothing of it."

"And prohibition had something to do with it. A lot of the square dances in the 30's were pretty rough affairs. There were people in this state whose specialty was to get drunk and go to a square dance and break it up. There have been a lot of heads busted at square dances. I've seen some rather good brawls. And the proportion of dancers who went and didn't like rough stuff ... they'd drop out. And the people running the dances were a little bit lax."

"But what I'm talking about is a shift in people's values. They shifted away from self entertainment, to buying it. That's why the gas shortage is hurting them. Killing them. They like to get in the car and go someplace and buy a ticket and plop down and watch a paid performer. They're house broken now to that. Plus the boob tube. It doesn't occur to them that they could do something on their own ... visit neighbors and organize a little neighborhood square dance or have a little neighborhood musical group. It doesn't occur to them."

"I really think the interest in the met-

ropolitan areas ... They've just been saturated with commercial entertainment and they're looking for something more fundamental in the way of self-gratification in their amusement. That's my analysis of it."

Although sometimes reluctant to put himself forward as a performer, Bob had no trouble making his views known when it came to music, as Charlie Walden noted ... "He was very outspoken, I really liked him for that because he helped me by the way he felt so strongly about what he was doing. I felt I should feel strongly about what I was doing. If you're going to maintain the tradition, you have to define that genre you're going to play, and play that."

Bob was outspoken, because he believed the things that made Missouri's music and dance traditions unique were being pushed aside by modern trends. Guitars were continuing to replace pianos and organs as accompaniment, and although fiddle contests were flourishing, the growing influences of Nashville and bluegrass styles were radically reshaping their character. Although he had helped to establish criteria for judging contests based on timing, execution, and authenticity, these rules were often ignored by judges and administrators, who followed their own agendas. As a result, an increasing number of prizes were being rewarded based on more contemporary tastes in entertainment, and those who played in the traditional styles were being eliminated from contention.

He felt that the highly participatory and spontaneous Ozark style of square dancing, where each set of dancers had its own caller, was being replaced by a more commercialized form, where a

single, often hired caller, dictated the steps for all. That the traditional patterns of music that allowed a succession of fiddlers and accompanists to take the stage without a break in the dancing, were giving way to individual styles, which took liberties with the tempo and melodies that made such continuity, and in some cases, dancing itself, impossible. He saw the tradition of come-as-you-are dress being changed by the use of elaborately colored costumes, and perhaps most lamentably, the beautifully intricate jig steps which the dancers would improvise through the sets, being replaced by a more pedestrian routine, which suffered in comparison. In short, that the egalitarian spirit and vitality of the art were being lost.

In 1984, the second volume of "The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory" was published, bringing the total number of transcribed tunes to over 450. That same year, the Missouri State Old-Time Fiddler's Association held a reunion for the surviving participants of the 1925 WOS contest. A gala affair, it was held in the original location - the rotunda of the Missouri State Capitol. More awards followed, including one for distinguished achievement from the Missouri Folklore Society and another by the Missouri Friends of the Folk Arts of St. Louis. In 1989, Bob was one of the master fiddlers featured on the Grammy nominated "Now That's a Good Tune" double CD and book set originally published by the University of Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, and re-released by Voyager Records in 2008. The fiddle was now the official instrument of Missouri and fiddle contests were once again standard features at the Missouri State Fair.

Bob continued to promote the music

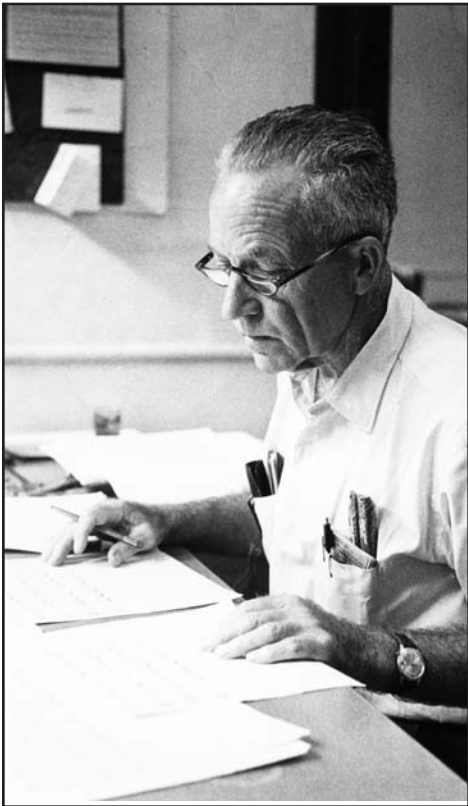


Bob (center with back to camera) and his wife Joan (left foreground) square dancing at a store in Frank's Switch. Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection.



Bob sharing a laugh with a friend outside the store at the Frank's Switch square dance. Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection.

he cherished, but by 1985, time had begun catching up with him and his health started to fail. In the ensuing years he suffered a couple of heart attacks and would spend the last two



R. P. Christeson notating fiddle music at his desk at home. Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection.

years of his life in a nursing home. Despite an almost total loss of memory from the ravages of Alzheimer's, he never lost the ability to play. On April 9, 1992, at the age of 81, he drew his last breath, and traditional fiddling lost its greatest advocate. Fittingly, his tombstone in the Dixon Cemetery bears the likeness of a fiddle and a bow.



R. P. in later years playing his fiddle. Courtesy of Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Robert P. Christeson Collection.

The days of the square dances in the Dixon City Park are no more. Now, when we think of the fiddle, images from our history come to mind - scenes of colonial times, the campfires of a wagon train, the hoe down, and the lonely mountain cabin. With the power to soothe, console, excite and exhort, the sounds of the fiddle encompass a musical map of the heart - a Rosetta

Stone of America's past, with echos of notes first heard in the concert halls of Europe, the pubs of Ireland, and the pipes of Scotland, distilled in the Ozark mountains into a hard-driving, highly danceable genre. Bob had seen how this heritage had been passed from one generation to the next, how the children who had moved away returned for the 4th of July dances to reunite with their loved ones, and how it strengthened and encouraged the community. Recognizing the tenuous nature of the cultural ties he hoped to preserve, Robert Perry Christeson spent the first part of his life trying to help the people he loved, and the second part trying to save what was left of their culture. Whether he succeeded or not, depends on us.

*Mike Christeson lives in Little Rock, Arkansas. "If there are any Christeson descendants out there that have photos or stories about the Pulaski Christesons, or if you are interested in learning more about what I have found on them, I would love to hear from you. Please contact me at Mike@Christeson.com."*





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