

***** JUNE 11, 1975 *****

The Uncle Jimmy Thompson Memorial Dedication Ceremony

Wednesday June 11, 1975 will certainly be a day that all TVOTFA members can look back upon with extreme pride because on that day we (the TVOTFA!) dedicated the Uncle Jimmy Thompson memorial at Laguardo, Tennessee thus culminating our drive of several years to erect markers for both Uncle Bunt Stephens and Uncle Jimmy Thompson.

It was fitting that Uncle Jimmy's marker was engraved to read as follows:

"Uncle Jimmy" Thompson 1848-1931
First performer on the Grand Ole Opry,
Erected by members and friends of the
Tennessee Valley Old Time Fiddlers'
Association, with the generous assistance
of radio station WSM and the world-famous
Grand Ole Opry



Uncle Jimmy's marker - in place at
LaGuardo, Tennessee

Despite indications of a heavy rainfall that threatened to strike a large crowd of more than 200 persons was on hand for the dedication ceremonies. Among this crowd were numerous well-known country music figures; Roy Acuff, Bashful Brother Oswald (Pete Kirby), Charlie Collins, Johnny Wright (of Johnny and Jack fame), Mrs. Tex Ritter, and well-known WSM MC Grant Turner all braved the weather to attend. Representing the TVOTFA were; Bill Harrison (past president and one of the TVOTFA founders), T. A. Hudson (TVOTFA president), Dr. Charles K. Wolfe (who had done much "behind the scenes" work to coordinate the event), and your humble editor.

Master craftsman Jodie Hall, who designed and built the fine marker, was on hand and provided the perfect finishing touches for the ceremonies via a beautiful cover sporting a fiddle which was used for the unveiling ceremony (see picture below).



Draped and ready to be unveiled - June 11, 1975

It was a simple, but dignified and effective ceremony, that was witnessed by the large crowd. Following his introduction, T. A. Hudson presented a speech which characterized Uncle Jimmy Thompson and the work of the TVOTFA in erecting the monument. As if to voice their approval, the heavens opened following T.A.'s talk and voiced their feeling with numerous thunderclaps and streaks of lightning. Other dignitaries, including Roy Acuff, joined in the ceremonial tribute. All who had gathered left, possibly a little wet from the downpour, but unanimously agreed that it had certainly been a fine and fitting ceremony!



T.A. Hudson presents his speech at the Uncle Jimmy Thompson memorial ceremony to an appreciative audience at the LaGuardo, Tennessee cemetery.

(Photos courtesy - Mary Dean Wolfe)

UNCLE JIMMY THOMPSON

HIS LIFE AND TIMES 1848-1931

by

Charles Wolfe

and

Bill Harrison

Traditionally, the history of the Grand Ole Opry has started with November 28, 1925, when George Hay unleashed upon America the music and personality of then-77-year-old Uncle Jimmy Thompson. Yet the picture we have of Uncle Jimmy is curiously one-dimensional. We see a stocky, white-bearded man dressed in a conservative black suit sitting before a large carbon microphone fiddling away with a sort of detached amusement. We see him playing for hours on end during the first few months of the Opry, but then dropping almost out of sight. Looking at the traditional histories, it is almost as if Uncle Jimmy did not exist prior to November 1925 or after April 1926. But he obviously did, and he obviously saw the Opry as a part of a full and long life that ranged from the Civil War to the Texas frontier. There is a man behind the legend. There are still people around who played with him, shared a jug with him, heard him tell jokes, or listened to him "bring cussing to the land." To these people Uncle Jimmy is very much a real person: an independent, self-reliant, out-spoken, hard-living, rough-talking 19th century man of the land. In fact, we have found that the reality of Uncle Jimmy is far more interesting than the legend.

We began researching the life of Uncle Jimmy in conjunction with the TVOTFA drive to erect a monument for him. At the time we started delving, we didn't even know Uncle Jimmy's correct birth and death date; we suspected some Texas influence in his fiddling, but had no idea he had spent a large part of his life in Texas. Bill Harrison made the first explorations about Uncle Jimmy around Laguardo in winter of this year; Charles Wolfe then fleshed out this information with newspaper research and library work. A big breakthrough occurred when, alerted by a casual comment of a colleague, Wolfe located Mrs. Katherine Thompson, Uncle Jimmy's daughter-in-law and closest survivor; Mrs. Thompson still plays the banjo a little, and spent many evenings making music with Uncle Jimmy. The ceremonies at Laguardo brought out even more informants, and soon we had information about Uncle Jimmy running out our ears. The following is a distillation of all this, and the clearest account we have been able to piece together of Uncle Jimmy's fabulous life and times.



A rare photo of Uncle Jimmy fiddling before WSM microphone. (A more common photo of Uncle Jimmy, taken at the same time, shows him merely holding his fiddle before the mike.) The picture was probably made in 1926 to celebrate Uncle Jimmy's return to radio after breaking his arm.

Uncle Jimmy was born James Donald Thompson near Baxter, in Smith County, about halfway between Nashville and Knoxville in northern Tennessee. He had at least two brothers, neither of which distinguished himself musically. However, Lee, who eventually settled around Cookeville, TN, was the father of Eva Thompson Jones, Uncle Jimmy's well-known niece who played back of him on WSM. Little is known about the history of the Thompson family itself, though the line probably sprung from Scotch origins.

When he was a boy, Uncle Jimmy's family moved to Texas shortly before the Civil War. The family must have been fond of Texas, for both of Uncle Jimmy's brothers stayed there after the war, and Uncle Jimmy himself returned there several times. Jimmy was too young for the Civil War, but by the time he was 17 (1860) had begun mastering fiddle tunes like "Flying Clouds," a tune that would remain one of his favorites. The young man continued to learn tunes, some from men who had fought in the Civil War, others from fiddlers whose repertoires might well have stretched back to Revolutionary America. Uncle Jimmy recalled later that on August 4, 1866 he learned a "fine quadrille," the old minstrel show number "Lynchburg" (also known as "Lynchburg Town.")

Though he primarily farmed for a living, the young man Jimmy Thompson travelled widely in his youth and eventually returned to his native Smith County, Tennessee. There, in the 1880's, he married Mahalia Elizabeth Montgomery, of Smith County. The union resulted in two sons and two daughters: Jess (born 1886), Willie Lee (born 1896), Sally (who eventually married and moved to Montana), and Fanny, who died in infancy. (All the children are now deceased.) But about 1902 Uncle Jimmy took his family back to Texas, and settled around the Bonham area, northeast of Dallas and close to the Oklahoma line. He continued to farm, but was beginning to play more and more in public on his fiddle.

In 1907 Uncle Jimmy participated in the famous 8-day marathon contest he so vividly described to Judge Hay the night of his first broadcast. The contest was held in Dallas, and Uncle Jimmy won "the nation's championship in his class against nearly 100 contestants" (T/6/13/25). (The actual figure given by Uncle Jimmy later was 86.) Information is lacking about who was in this contest, but the fact that Jimmy won indicates that he had absorbed a good deal of the Texas "long bow" style during his various stays there. (His style, which has been described as "fancy," is in distinct contrast to the older, heavier styles of traditional Southeastern fiddlers, like Fiddlin' John Carson or Gid Tanner; it has much more in common with the southwestern stylings of Eck Robertson.)

About 1912 Uncle Jimmy, now 64 and with most of his family grown, returned to Tennessee and bought a farm near Hendersonville in north central Tennessee. His wife was dying of cancer, and perhaps she wanted to be back to her native Tennessee before she died. Soon after they returned, she died and was buried in Smith County.

By this time Eva Thompson, Uncle Jimmy's niece, was starting to teach music in rural Tennessee schools. As a young girl, Eva was fond of classical and semi-classical music (and the turn-of-the-century parlor music that passed



(Left) Mrs. Katherine Thompson today, holding Uncle Jimmy's original fiddle case and her collection of clippings.

for such), and used to accompany her father into Nashville when he came to sell stock just to watch the touring shows that played there. Later she was to study at Ward Belmont College, then as now one of Nashville's more prestigious musical schools, and later recalled going by horse and buggy to give music lessons.* In 1915 Eva was teaching in Sumner County, and was indirectly responsible for introducing Uncle Jimmy to his future daughter-in-law, Katherine Womack.

Katherine, who is today Uncle Jimmy's closest living relative, recalls the night she met him: "It was at a school entertainment up here at Number One in Sumner County -- that's the way I met my husband. Eva was teaching music there, and she knew I played a banjo, so they sent home and got my banjo, and he come down to play for us, Uncle Jimmy did, and I played with him. And he was just tickled to death to find a woman playing a banjo. So we really had a big time down there at the school. He went home and told his son about it and that's how I met my husband." Katherine's husband was Willie Lee, Jimmy's youngest child, and after they were married both she and her husband played with Uncle Jimmy on an informal basis. Willie Lee played guitar, Katherine banjo; on one of two later occasions they joined their uncle on the radio. Uncle Jimmy was especially fond of Katherine, and liked to listen to her sing and play the banjo on some of his favorite numbers like "Red Wing," "The Preacher and the Bear," and "Rainbow."

*Most of the biographical material on Eva Thompson Jones comes from Don Cummings' pamphlet, The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry. Mrs. Jones talked to Cummings before she died, and her remarks are reflected in the book.

About 1916, when he was 68 years old, Uncle Jimmy decided to remarry. He chose Ella Manners, from nearby Wilson County, Tennessee, an older woman who soon became known as "Aunt Ella." It was after this that Uncle Jimmy moved down to Wilson County, near Laguardo, and bought a house formerly occupied by an old physician. Both he and Aunt Ella were to live at Laguardo for the rest of their lives.

From all accounts Aunt Ella was just as high-spirited as Uncle Jimmy. She loved to buck dance, and she loved her dram of white lightning as much as Uncle Jimmy. Neighbors in Laguardo recall often visiting the pair and watching Aunt Ella buck dance in a long white dress while Uncle Jimmy played solo fiddle. Occasionally Ella and Jimmy would travel around the mid-Tennessee area playing for fairs and outings, pulling up in their truck, unrolling a special rug for Ella to dance on, and performing an impromptu show. They would then pass the hat and collect quarters and dollars from the audience. One neighbor recalls a fiddling session at Uncle Jimmy's house when both Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Ella had a little too much bootleg. "Aunt Ella finally fell flat on her face, and Uncle Jimmy, fiddling all the time, glanced down at her and remarked, 'Watch it, now Ella, you done gone and spoiled it thar.'" Another neighbor repeats stories about Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Ella chasing each other around their old house, each with a loaded gun, firing playfully into the air.

It is not clear just how much "para-professional" entertaining Uncle Jimmy did before his fame on the radio, but it seems obvious that he enjoyed at least a regional reputation as a fiddler before his WSM days. Some friends have said that he travelled quite widely, both with Eva Thompson Jones and Aunt Ella, and staged shows across Tennessee in the days after World War I. Jim Thompson (no relation), a former neighbor of Uncle Jimmy's, says that Uncle Jimmy began to do shows to make a living when he began to get too old to farm. "Before he played on the Opry, he was mainly a farmer, til his age got the best of him. And while he was a farmer he had fiddled, so he just quit trying to work on account of his age and went to playin' the fiddle. And he'd get right smart o' donations when he'd go around to these different places playing. That's how they lived. They'd put on these little shows."

Uncle Jimmy had a rather unique means of transportation for getting around to these shows. He had taken a little Ford sedan and had built a truck bed onto it in 1922, and had built a little house on the back. It was a rough prototype of the modern-day camper, but it caused quite a stir in the 1920's. Katherine Thompson remembers: "He had furnished it, it was real amusin' to all of us. He had a floor covering on there of matting, and he had the inside all fixed up and had a cot in there. Had a water bucket, a dipper, washpan, towel, even a little wood stove, so he could spend the night travelin' if he wanted to." Uncle Jimmy and occasionally Aunt Ella would travel in this camper and seldom be out any expenses on their trips. Uncle Jimmy was very proud of the little truck, and all of his friends have their favorite stories about the way he cared for the truck. Grandson Fred Thompson remembers that Uncle Jimmy always wiped the truck off with motor oil, and refused to let anybody touch the truck body. "He was afraid that the salt in your hand, the sweat, would rust it. 'Don't touch that boy!' he'd say, and he made 'em back up, he had a big old walking cane." Family



Uncle Jimmy standing beside his famous "camper truck" about 1926. (Photo courtesy Mrs. Fred Thompson.)



Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Ella, ca. 1928. (Photo courtesy L. A. Hayes)

Legend has it that the truck was given to Uncle Jimmy by Henry Ford in recognition of his fiddling. While this may have been the case, there is no record in any of Uncle Jimmy's contest documentation about his winning such a truck.

Sometime in the fall of 1923 Uncle Jimmy, then 75, decided to drive his truck down to Texas. In those days the trip took from a month to five weeks, but this was no problem to Uncle Jimmy. As he himself said in a 1926 interview, "When I got tired, I'd jest drive it in the first open place I found by the road and ask if I could stay all night. 'Yep,' they'd say, and I'd drive it in, fix my bed, and git out my fiddle." (T/1-3-75). His main purpose was to go to Dallas for another fiddlers' contest; there he won a gold watch that was engraved on the back. But the trip had a more significant effect: his success at Dallas enthused him to seek a wider audience for his music. "When he got back that contest was all he would talk about. He was keyed up to try to do something about his music. He felt like he had something and he wanted the world to know about it." (Katherine Thompson).

1923 saw the very first commercial "hillbilly" records by Fiddlin' John Carson, as well as the start of old time music on radio stations like Atlanta's WSB. By the next year, the boom in old time music was on in both media, radio and records, and Uncle Jimmy watched it with increasing interest and anticipation. "When the record market got so big and people got so interested in making records and radio and all, it really made him more anxious. He would just sit and daydream all the time after he had heard

radio and records -- why he thought it would be wonderful to make records of his music, or to play it on the air. 'I want to throw my music out all over the American,' he used to say. (He wouldn't say 'America,' but 'the American.')

He really wanted to record and to go on the air. He wanted to get his music 'caught', was the way he said it." (Katherine Thompson).

Recording fever finally got the best of Uncle Jimmy and in the summer of early fall of 1925 he decided to take matters into his own hands. He took Katherine along with him. "The first time he made a record I was never so tickled, but I was never so mortified, it embarrassed me so. He wanted me to go with him and make a record up in this building on Church Street in downtown Nashville. Somebody had a little recording outfit up there, and they were going to make him a little record for, I don't know, a dollar or so. He wanted to have some records made real bad. He was supposed to pay for these, and that's what embarrassed me so. We got in there and made this record -- I think it was 'Flying Clouds' with me playin' the banjo back of him. And this man played it back to him and it made Uncle Jimmy mad. He said, 'Why, hell, thar, that don't sound like my fiddle. That don't sound a bit like me a-playin' my fiddle. There's just something wrong with your machine, or you don't understand catchin' it one!' I felt like going through the floor, and that man, he didn't know what to say. He tried to be nice, said Uncle Jimmy could take the record for half price. But Uncle Jimmy said, 'Why, I ain't a-gonna give you no half dollar, I ain't a payin' you nothin' for that. You can just break than'un right now!' Out he stormed; he put his fiddle in his case and wouldn't make no more records. And it was a little aluminum record, about the size of a saucer, and it didn't have much volume to it, and it did sound tinny. That started him, though; he was wantin' to get into the record or radio business bad after that, wantin' to get his music caught so it could be throwed out across the American. So it wasn't long after that that Eva took him up to the broadcasting station."

There are several different versions of how Uncle Jimmy actually got to the WSM studios for the first time. According to relatives of Aunt Ella, a member of the Manners family first took Uncle Jimmy up to WSM so he could simply tour the station and see how it worked; while there he mentioned his fiddling, and was asked to play a little. Unknown to Uncle Jimmy, the engineers turned on the transmitter and broadcast his fiddling. A similar version is given in the 1969 official Opry picture and history book, where it is alleged that Uncle Jimmy came up to tour the station on a Thursday night. His guide happened to be the Program Manager (George Hay) and when Uncle Jimmy mentioned his fiddling abilities, Hay asked him to return the next night (Friday) to broadcast.* But according to Eva Thompson Jones, the event occurred with less serendipity. Eva had been performing on WSM as a singer of light classical music, and a pianist. Eva told Don Cummings that Hay had not been satisfied with the direction of the station's shows, and asked her for suggestions. She suggested her uncle, and invited Hay to meet him for an informal audition at her home on Friday night, November 27. He did, was impressed, and invited Uncle Jimmy to appear the next night.**

*However, the 28th of November, which Hay always gave as the date Uncle Jimmy first played, was a Saturday.

**Cummings, Birth of the Grand Ole Opry



The old general store in Laguardo where Uncle Jimmy used to sit on the porch and "talk a heap about Texas." (Photo by C. Wolfe)

Katherine Thompson, for the record, agrees that it was Eva who really got Uncle Jimmy onto the show.

Whatever the case, he broadcast on Saturday, November 28 (the exact date is confirmed by the Tennessean radio column of a week later). His first tune was supposedly "Tennessee Waggoner" and it was carried across the country by the 1,000-watt transmitter. Hay recalled, in his history of the Opry, that "Uncle Jimmy told us he had a thousand tunes" and Hay then announced that he would answer requests. Telegrams poured into the station. After an hour, Hay asked Uncle Jimmy if he wasn't tired, and the old fiddler snorted, "Why shucks, a man don't get warmed up in an hour. I won an eight-day fiddling contest down at Dallas and here's my blue ribbon to prove it." Eva recalls that then Percy Craig entered the studio with an armful of telegrams and announced that they had received a telegram from every state in the union.

Uncle Jimmy and Eva continued to play Saturdays throughout the month of December, and letters continued to come in praising his fiddling. One of the first letters was dated December 6 and came from listeners in the Missouri Ozarks, some 400 miles to the west. By the end of December, WSM had instituted, somewhat reluctantly, a regular program of fiddling on Saturday nights. Their press release in the Tennessean of 12-27-75 announced that Uncle Dave Macon and Uncle Jimmy Thompson would answer requests. The story emphasizes Thompson more than Macon, and provides several interesting new details about his life. It suggests that Uncle Jimmy's repertoire included "375 different numbers", certainly a more realistic figure than the "thousand" that Hay claimed he knew.

The local newspapers at once became fascinated with Uncle Jimmy and throughout January and February 1926 constantly published stories about him and pictures of him. But it was the speed with which radio made Uncle Jimmy famous that is so astounding; within a month of his first broadcast, he was known across the country. This became obvious when, during the first days of January, Uncle Jimmy received a challenge from fiddler Mellie Dunham of Maine.

Dunham had recently been crowned World's Champion Fiddler by Henry Ford and was attaining wide-spread popularity in the north due to Ford's promotion of old-time fiddling. After he had played at Ford's house, Dunham had been deluged with theatrical offers from the stage and vaudeville circuits. On January 2, a Boston newspaper ran a story in which Dunham challenged Uncle Jimmy and Southern fiddling in general. Dunham, the story read, was "tiring of the challenges and criticism heaped upon him by other fiddlers throughout the country," and "is anxious to meet 'Uncle Jimmy' Thompson, recently nominated by unanimous vote as the greatest barn dance fiddler in the South, for a championship contest." The article concludes:

Considerable has been published about the "WSM" star in this section [i.e., of the Boston paper] and repeatedly Dunham has been called upon to comment. The Maine fiddler takes exception to the crowning of Thompson as America's champion barn dance fiddler following a contest which lasted eight days in Dallas.

"He may have defeated 86 opponents in the Dallas contest," declared Dunham today, "but they were all southerners and they don't know as much about barn dance fiddling in that section as they do 'down in Maine.' I'm ready to meet any and all of them but I'd rather like to meet Uncle Jimmy Thompson, who claims the title, first."

Accordingly, Dunham sent a telegram to Thompson, care of WSM. "Mellie Dunham held at Keith's for third week. Sends challenge to Jimmy Thompson of WSM fame. Eager to meet Southern rival."

Dunham's challenge raised a furor in Nashville, and a dispute quickly developed as to where the contest was to be held. George Hay volunteered to serve as a "medium" for the contest, and, with Uncle Jimmy's blessing, sent a telegram to Dunham accepting the challenge. Hay suggested Dunham and Thompson have the contest on WSM Radio "any Saturday night in the near future that suits you." WSM would pay all expenses for the contest. "Let the radio public of America be judge. Our radio station reaches all points of the United States." What happened next is unclear. Hay recalls that Dunham's advisors, "realizing that he had nothing to win refused to allow him to accept. Whereupon Uncle Jimmy remarked, 'He's affeared of me.'" But about the same time, in Boston, Dunham's employers, a vaudeville circuit, denounced the telegram Dunham sent as "undoubtedly a fake." If the telegram was a publicity stunt, as now seems likely, Uncle Jimmy was certainly not involved in it. (The story apparently originated in Boston, though WSM was certainly exploiting it for as much publicity as they could.) But Uncle Jimmy was not even in town at the time, and came in only the next week "to see what all the fuss was about"; one thing that came out of the whole affair was the delightful interview Uncle Jimmy gave a local reporter. The contest itself never came off.



"UNCLE JIMMY" THOMPSON

'UNCLE JIMMY' WINS FIDDLERS' CONTEST AS THRONG CHEERS

Other contests did, though, and throughout 1926 Uncle Jimmy was busy participating in fiddling contests across the South. This year saw the peak of the old-time fiddling craze that swept the nation, spurred on by the enthusiasm of Henry Ford. During the second week of January the Ford dealers in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Indiana sponsored a series of local fiddling contests. The main purpose of these contests -- in addition to fostering fiddling -- seems to have been to draw people into the Ford showrooms to look at the new cars, and this was successful; several Tennessee contests averaged between 1,000 and 2,000 attendance -- and in the dead of winter. The winners of these local contests did not get much cash, but they were allowed to go on to the regional contest. For Tennesseans, this contest was held in Nashville, and from there six winners would go on to compete in the "Champion of Dixie" contest in Louisville. Winners there would go to meet Mr. Ford himself.

Uncle Jimmy won the local contest (held at nearby Lebanon) with ease and participated in the regional contest at Nashville. Because of the Mellie Dunham incident, tempers were running high; "On to Detroit!" became the battle-cry of the contest. According to contemporary newspaper accounts, the 25 winners that played in Nashville on January 19-20, 1926, had collectively played to between 30,000 and 35,000 people in eliminations. All day the day of the contest, according to the newspapers, "groups from various sections of the whole hill country of Tennessee came to the city...to boost their respective contestants." "Coming from some localities in groups of 200 or more, the clans of the hills of Middle Tennessee swarmed into the city...." "The overflow crowd [Ryman Auditorium, where the contest was held, seated then about 3600] bore earmarks of rurality. The presence of family groups, father and mother

and children, was noticeable throughout the audience. Their approval was frank and hearty, if inclined to boisterousness, and they certainly did enjoy the fiddling." A Reverend Roberts, who opened the contest with a short talk, declared that "the real significance of the meeting lay in the fact that this section, by this contest, was paying tributes to the homes of the pioneers, where such music abounded long ago." Undoubtedly, some of the news reporters, and participating civic leaders like Rev. Roberts, were caught up in Henry Ford's romanticized notion of what American fiddling meant; once the fiddling craze died down, many Nashville citizens were quick enough to repudiate this precious heritage as it manifested itself on the barn dance. But there is no denying the enthusiasm of Southerners for Ford's contests, as the Nashville contest demonstrates. Ford and the South were alike in their love for fiddling, though probably for different reasons. Ford saw fiddling as a dying tradition to be resurrected; most Southerners saw it as a vibrant and living tradition to be developed.

Uncle Jimmy's competition here was stiff by any standards. Among those he went up against were Uncle Bunt Stephens, the famous Lynchburg fiddler; Mazy Todd, lead fiddler with Uncle Dave Macon's Fruit Jar Drinkers; W. E. Poplin, of Lewisburg, leader of the Poplin-Woods Tennessee String Band which later recorded for Victor and became an Opry fixture; and John McGee from Franklin, the father of Opry pioneers Sam and Kirk McGee. Marshall Claiborne, a one-armed fiddler from Hartsville who held his bow between his knees and fiddled with his left hand, and very popular in the middle Tennessee area, also played. The Nashville Tennessean referred to the fiddlers as "exponents of the art of Old Ned."

Uncle Jimmy won by playing "Fisher's Hornpipe" and "The Mocking Bird." Claiborne took second, and Bunt Stephens third. All three journeyed the next weekend to Louisville for the tri-state championship. There, their competition included "Blind Joe" Mangrum of Paducah, Kentucky, a fiddler who was later to play often on the Opry. But to the disappointment of Tennesseans, the first place was won by an Indiana fiddler, W. H. Elmore; Bunt Stephens of Lynchburg won second, and one-armed Marshall Claibourne took third. To everyone's surprise Uncle Jimmy did not place. A Thompson family story, which family members are unsure about accepting, holds that certain parties knew of Uncle Jimmy's love of moonshine, and supplied him with drink just before the contest. Supposedly, when his time came to play, he was barely able to make it onto the stage. Uncle Jimmy a few years later tried to visit Henry Ford in Detroit, but was unable to get an appointment with him; perhaps he was wanting to somehow redeem himself. Bunt Stephens' performance in the contest, incidentally, was the start of a long and interesting career for him.

The Louisville debacle hardly slowed Uncle Jimmy's career though. He continued to headline the "barn dance program" throughout the first six months of 1926; he and Eva usually started the program out at 8:00 p.m. for an hour, though on occasion he was scheduled for as much as two hours. In April he was selected by Tennessee Governor Austin Peay to represent Tennessee in a radio fiddling contest staged at station WOS in Jefferson City, Missouri; this station had challenged fiddlers from all states bordering on Missouri. The governor also selected fiddler Fulton Mitchell of Nashville to represent Tennessee, and "urged all Tennesseans to back their representatives" at the

"UNCLE JIMMY" WINS FIDDLERS' CONTEST AS THROG CHEERS

Capacity Crowd Hears One-Armed Player in Ryman Auditorium Take Second Place.

Reverting to the days when it wore straw behind its ears and swung your partners to the left, yes, Nashville took every inch of standing room at the Ryman auditorium Tuesday night to hear the old-time fiddlers of Middle Tennessee compete in a regional contest, conducted by the Ford dealers of Nashville, in which "Uncle" Jimmy Thompson emerged the victor. He was spurred on by the whooping, foot-stamping crowd that revered the 80-year-old champion for his years as well as his melody-making fiddling.

It was nip and tuck from the start for the six good fiddlers and true that came out of the semi-finals held all during the day Tues-

(Continued on Page 12.)

TRAFFIC MEASURE FOR CITY PASSES

(Continued from First Page.)

day, for the old tunes rattled off the strings at the night performance with amazing readiness as sections of the auditorium cheered on their favorites.

One-Armed Man Second.

Marshall Claiborne, one-armed melodist champion from Hartsville, was given second award following an ovation and silver shower that fell from all directions as he ripped off "Sleepy Lou," "Arkansas Traveler" and "Turkey in the Straw," with his bow between his knees and his fiddle in his left arm, which fingers and slides the strings in their tuneful pursuit up and down the rosin.

The third award went to J. L. Stephens of Lynchburg. Others who played at the night contest as conquerors of the 25 or more champions from local contests held all this week by Ford dealers in nearby towns were: Bob King of Carthage, Fred Haislip of Fayetteville and Commodore Loveless of Columbia.

Winners of the three first awards, chosen by the judges, who were Mayor Hilary E. Howse, Col. Bill Smith, Francis Craig, the Rev. Tom Roberts and Clem Holderman, were the guests of the Ford Motor Company at the Andrew Jackson hotel Tuesday night, leaving early Wednesday morning for Louisville, where they will compete with three champions from Kentucky and two from Southern Indiana at the Brown theater Wednesday night, the winner to be dubbed the "Champion of Dixie," and to have a trip to Detroit the last of the month.

Crowd Comes Early.

The old saying that one can take the boy out of the country but never the country out of the boy was never better proved than in the crowd which began entering the auditorium at 7 o'clock Tuesday night, an hour before the performance had been announced to begin. Coming from some localities in groups of 200 or more, the clans of the hills of Middle Tennessee swarmed into the city during the day to whoop 'em up for their choice.

Any tune seemed to do, but all the better if it was bearded with age. "Uncle Jimmy" Thompson, winner of the first prize of \$25, the championship medal and the trip to Louisville, played "Fisher's Hornpipe" as gaily as he played "The Mocking Bird" mournfully. Claiborne, with only one arm to depend on, galloped through his four times up, with the crowd urging him on for more and totally unconscious each time that his four minutes, allotted each player for each time up, had expired, for he laid his ear to his fiddle and took orders only from it. All the contestants rallied to the best fiddling that they knew.

In a short introduction Mr. Roberts opened the meeting. He said the real significance of the event lay in the fact that this section in this contest was paying tribute to the homes of the pioneers where such music abounded long ago.

The contest, which was under the direction of C. R. Johnson of the Louisville Ford dealers was put on in Nashville by the George Cole Motor Company, the Hippodrome Motor Company and the Dresslar-White Company.

Child, 3, Run Down by Auto in Springfield

CONTEST IN LOUISVILLE



Premier fiddlers in the Louisville contest. Top L to R: winner W. H. Elmore, Uncle Jimmy. Bottom L to R: Uncle Bunt Stephens, Blind Joe Mangrum.

contest. But since the contest was judged by the "amount of applause in messages" received at the station, Missouri fiddlers obviously had the edge.

Uncle Jimmy temporarily left the barn dance in May of 1926 when he broke his fiddling arm. But by July 3 he was back on the air, with a good deal of fanfare, and played throughout July. He played less regularly, but steadily, throughout the rest of the year. On November 1, 1926 he and Eva were in Atlanta where they cut their first commercial records for Columbia. Four sides were recorded: "Mississippi Sawyer," "High Born Lady," "Karo," and "Billy Wilson." Only the last two sides were issued, however, on Columbia 15118. Oddly, there was no mention on the label of Jimmy's WSM affiliation. Most of the tunes are traditional fiddle standards; "High Born Lady" is probably an instrumental version of "My Gal's a High Born Lady," a favorite of Uncle Dave Macon. "Karo" is Uncle Jimmy's version of "Flop-Eared Mule" (and was known in Georgia as "Roscoe Trillion."). Sales from the Columbia record seem to have been only average, and Uncle Jimmy got little royalty from them; he, like most old time musicians, probably recorded for a flat fee of \$25 or \$50 a side.

But after 1926 Uncle Jimmy began appearing on the Opry less and less. His time slots were also becoming shorter; as early as the fall of 1926 he was playing only for a half hour at a time, as opposed to the two-hour stints of barely a year before. During all of 1928, he only appeared on the show one time. Since recordings he made in 1931 show him still to be an excellent fiddler, one might well question his departure from the Opry. There seem to be a number of reasons. One might simply be his age; he was 77 when he first played on WSM, and shortly after that he had a stroke which left him blind in one eye. It certainly became more difficult for him to get around, and the 30-mile trip

from Laguardo to Nashville was not an easy one in the 1920's. But a more basic problem was that the Opry was becoming much more formal and structured, and Uncle Jimmy was more attuned to the leisurely 19th century style of performing than the hectic clock-watching 20th century mode. Laguardo resident Bert Norther recalls one significant night toward the end of Uncle Jimmy's broadcasting career: "I remember one night when Bill Bates, had the store here, we went down there one Saturday night to listen to Uncle Jimmy on his radio. Bill Bates called down there and told George Hay to get Uncle Jimmy to play 'When You and I Were Young, Maggie.' He cut loose on it and he never did quit. Finally they had to stop him, got him out of the way. He'd just had one drink too many." The drinking was another problem. Uncle Jimmy liked his white lightning, and associated drinking, dancing, and having a good time. It was normal for him to take along a bottle when he played on the radio. Neighbor Sam Kirkpatrick recalls: "I'll never forget the last night Uncle Jimmy played. He kinda liked his bottle pretty well, he was playin', and before he finished his piece there was this stopping, and we didn't hear nothing for a minute, then George B. Hay come on and said Uncle Jimmy was sick tonight or something. Come to find out later he had just keeled over and passed out." The drinking caused bad blood between Jimmy and WSM, and eventually led to a falling-out. Neighbor Jim Thompson says: "They would have to watch him -- in fact, they told him they didn't want him to come down there drinking. His business down there just finally played out on that account." It was a cruel irony: Uncle Jimmy in the end becoming a victim of the medium that had originally brought him to fame. It must have been bitter.

In the last few years he continued to tour a little, farm a little, and play for his friends. Touring was more lucrative than playing the Opry anyway; Mrs. Katherine Thompson recalls that WSM originally payed Uncle Jimmy five dollars a show for fiddling, and he could make four times that amount by passing the hat at local fairs. He was still able to do some farming; even in his eighties he was strong enough to carry a bushel of corn (150 pounds) on his back to a mill several miles away. In April, 1930 he went to Knoxville to record again -- this time for Brunswick-Vocalion. He did "Lynchburg" and a medley of "Flying Clouds" and "Leather Britches," and recorded some charming dialogue with recording supervisor Bill Brown.

Brown: How old are you Uncle Jimmy?

UJT: 82 - and I've got grown grandchildren, and great big great grandchildren runnin' cars and trucks yet, and a playin' the fiddle yet. And I love to look at a pretty woman just as much as I ever did.

Brown: Say, Uncle Jimmy, were the girls as pretty back in 1866 as they are now?

UJT: They prettier -- they healthier. Stout. Fat, and plump.

Brown: What kind of clothes did they wear?

UJT: They just wore nice, good clothes, plenty width in the skirts, and they were long enough to come down to the shoes.

.

("Lynchburg," Voc. 5456.)



Bert Norther (L) and Capt. Jim Thompson (R), old Laguardo cronies of Uncle Jimmy's who helped locate the unmarked grave and provided a fund of stories for the authors. (The bricks in foreground mark the gravesite.)

74

- Brown: That ('Flying Clouds') is as peppy as a drink of good whiskey, isn't it?
- UJT: Yes. It's all right. All it likes is a good set to dance after it.
- Brown: Uncle Jimmy, did you used to get good whiskey when you were a young man?
- UJT: Sure, get pure whiskey, fine as could be. It was whiskey that jest made you love everybody. Make a fellow love his poor old grandmother.
- Brown: What'd you have to pay for it?
- UJT: 25¢ a gallon. Right to the still and get it. Go to the still-house, didn't have very far to go. It made you love everybody instead of wanting to fight.
- Brown: Say, I've got a fellow here that plays guitar. Want you to listen to him, see what you think of him.
(guitar solo)
- UJT: Well, a guitar's pretty, but they ain't near as pretty as a violin. They're the finest musical instrument we've got in America....I call'em fiddle, some call'em violins, but fiddle just as good as violin, people know what they mean.

("Uncle Jimmy's Favorite Fiddle Pieces," Voc.5456.)

Less than ten months after he spoke those words, Uncle Jimmy was dead. He passed away of pneumonia at his home in Laguardo, about 3:00 P.M. on Tuesday, Feb. 17, 1931. Even his death is shrouded in legend; there are at least five

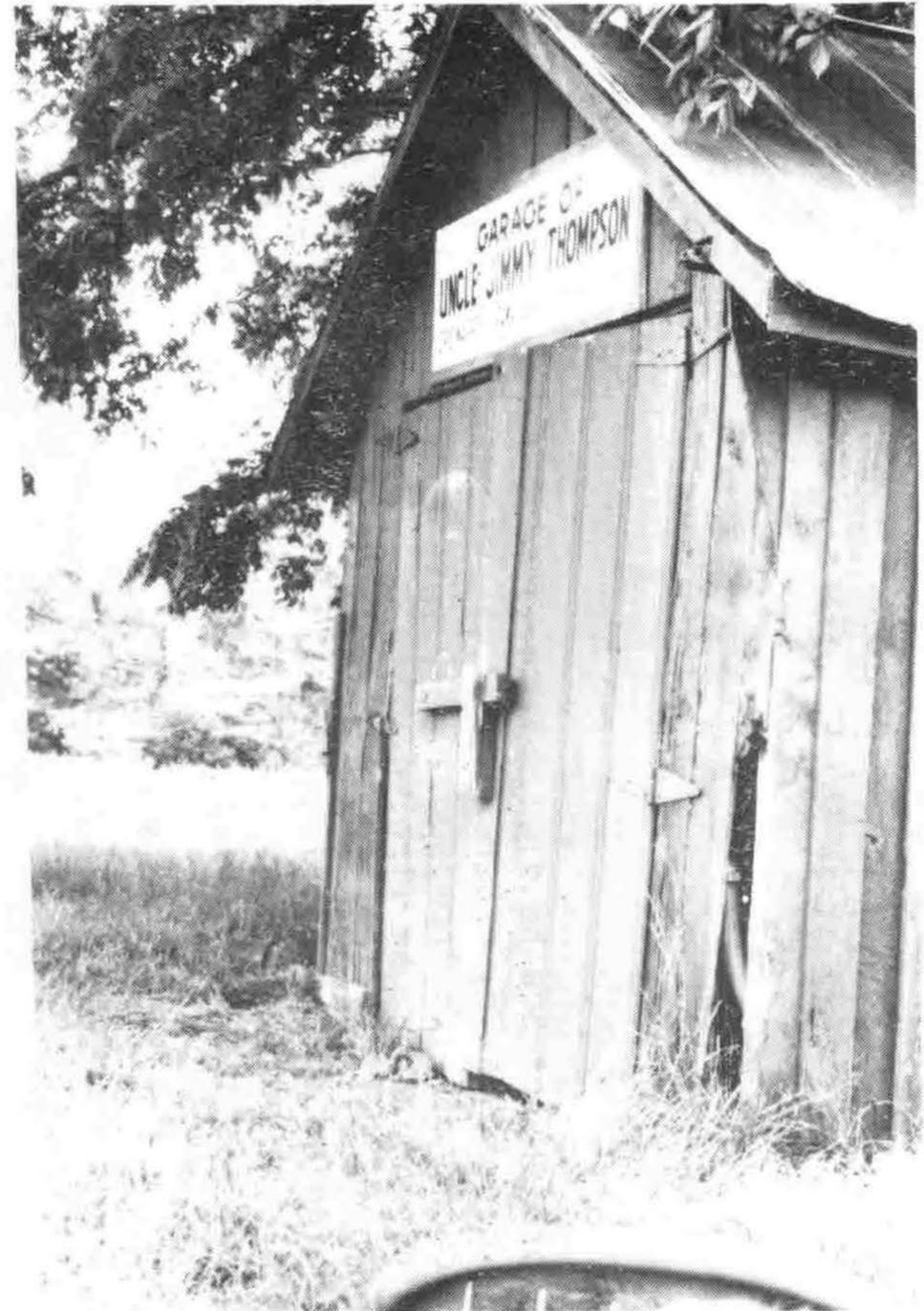
different versions of how he died. Some stories hold that he passed out one night and froze to death; others say he caught pneumonia trying to repair his car in a snowstorm. The Thompson family says that he caught pneumonia one night when his house caught fire; dressed only in his long underwear, Uncle Jimmy managed to put out the fire by drawing buckets of water from his well, but while doing so soaked his long johns. The underwear froze on him and he fell ill the next day. The day of his funeral was cold and icy, and Eva Thompson Jones was the only member of the Opry cast to attend.

* * * * *





Katherine Thompson and one of Uncle Jimmy's grandsons, William Thompson, of Greenbrier, Tennessee, examine Uncle Jimmy's fiddle case. Trademark on the case is dated 1893. Uncle Jimmy's fiddle itself is on display at Roy Acuff's museum in Opryland, near Nashville.



Uncle Jimmy's old garage which still stands near his old homesite in Laguardo.

MEMORIES OF UNCLE JIMMY

The facts can reveal a picture of Uncle Jimmy's role in the history of country music, but what of Uncle Jimmy the man? Glimpses of his personality can be gained by talking with his old friends, neighbors, and relatives. Here is a sampler of some of their favorite "Uncle Jimmy" stories.

* * * *

"He wasn't a trick fiddler -- he was serious about everything he played. He was always real entertaining, though; he'd always have some kind of little story to tell about something that was interesting to him. He could tell you just where he learned each fiddle tune, tell you where he first heard it played and who played it. And he used to tell about when his daddy or his uncle had this distillery, and they had a big flock of geese. Them geese would get up there at the mill dam where they had the grist mill -- they had their still above that. And this water would come through there, where they poured the whiskey mash. Well, the old geese would get drunk, and -- it just tickled you to hear him tell about how crazy them geese flopped around."

(Katherine Thompson, daughter-in-law)

* * * *

"We had a ferry down here at the river and he used to go to the other side of Gallatin to get his bootleg. There was a gate across the road...there was no fence laws at the time, and we had to keep fences to keep the people's cattle from comin' down here in the corn. One day my father and I went over there and fixed that gate up, next day or two Uncle Jimmy went over there at Gallatin, got him some whiskey, got drunk. Had one of those little model T roadsters, and he hit that gate, and he tore that thing all into splinters. Didn't hurt the car much. Uncle Jimmy said, 'The damn car wouldn't open the gate.' Tore the gate all to pieces, we never did fix it up. That wound the gate up."

(Sam Kirkpatrick, Laguardo neighbor)

* * * *

He would get into a buckboard and drive the team at a fast run into town, and frighten anybody who was with him.

(Eva Thompson Jones)

* * * *

"He took exercise every morning; he never failed. Would get up and take calisthenics. One time, it was 1918, the year of the war, my husband and I lived in Gatlinburg and he came to spend the night with us. Uncle Jimmy shared the room with cousin Jack Womack, the man we were living with as boarders. She Uncle Jimmy, he got up the next morning, it was gettin' up time, I hadn't called them for breakfast. He got up and was goin' through all of that exercising and kicking -- he'd always kick his feet. So after he went home, cousin Jack was a terrible religious old man, he said to me one morning, he blared his eyes real big when he'd talk, he said to me, 'Let me tell you something. That poor old man is in bad shape. I seen him a-havin' the awfulest fight with the devil that you ever seen in your life. He was kickin' and a snortin' and a beatin' hisself in the breast -- he was havin' the awfulest fight with the devil.'"

(Katherine Thompson)

"He would chew a whole package of gum at a time, but he would then put it in a vaseline jar he kept in his vest pocket. Would carry it there. He said he'd biled that jar out, and would stick the gum in there when he finished chewing it. Always said, 'You can't wear that gum out' -- so he could chew it over and over again as much as he wanted to."

(Jim Thompson, neighbor, Laguardo)

* * * *

"The first time he got his engagement on the Opry, Eva made him have his pants pressed. So she took his pants and had them cleaned and pressed, and he came in there when he got ready to put them pants on, hollered in there and said, 'Hey, thar, who ironed them damned wrinkles in these britches. I like my britches smooth and round. Fit my kneecaps. Don't want no crease in'em.'"

(Bill Thompson, grandson)

* * * *

"He was fond of Texas, always braggin' on Texas. Fellow that run the store down there, Mr. Bill Bates, made up with this salesman one time to knock Texas. So Uncle Jimmy come in, and this salesman started talking about how he was in Texas one time and there was fellow out there had a pair of oxen driving, and one of them froze to death, and he was gonna go out and skin him and before he got him skinned, the other one died from overheat. And Uncle Jimmy, he jumped up and said, 'That's a damned lie!' And Uncle Jimmy got mad at Bill, and he'd walk right by his store a half mile on up the road even if he wanted a nickel box of matches."

(Sam Kirkpatrick, neighbor)

* * * *

"I once asked him how he liked to stay out at Eva's house when he came into town (Nashville) and he said, 'I wouldn't have it, I wouldn't have it.' I says 'Why?' and he says, 'Well there ain't nowhere for to spit when I chew my tobacco.' I says, 'Couldn't you get you a little bucket of ashes?' 'Why,' he says, 'there ain't a damned ash thar.'"

***** (Katherine Thompson)

"I remember we had a little colored community over here, not too far from his house, and he liked to go over there and play for them from time to time. And he'd get real hot if anyone said anything to him about it."

(Jug Stewart, neighbor, Laguardo)

* * * *

"He knew all about the stars. He used to tell us about them, what their names were. He could tell where he was just by looking at the stars in the heavens. That's how he was able to never get lost when he was travelling around."

(Mary Irwin, relative)

* * * *

"He called his fiddle 'Old Betsy.' He told the history of it lots of times, but I don't remember it now. He kept rattlesnake rattles in it, and in his case a piece of red flannel. And he'd spread it over Old Betsy's breast every night, he'd 'put her to bed,' he'd call it."

(Katherine Thompson)

ROY ACUFF AND HOWDY FORRESTER:

COMMENTS ON UNCLE JIMMY'S FIDDLING

Just how good a fiddler was Uncle Jimmy? How would he stack up to modern fiddlers? Measure up to modern standards? Since Uncle Jimmy only made a handful of records -- and those when he was an old man -- we can probably never really know. But we can get some indication from the old records, and Bill Harrison played tapes of these records for the two Opry members who probably know old-time fiddling better than anyone else: Roy Acuff and his fiddler Howdy Forrester. Though he gained fame as a singer, Roy started out as a fiddler (he learned one of his first tunes from an old record by Tennessee fiddler Uncle Am Stuart) and has worked with most of the great fiddlers throughout the last 30 years. Though coming from a different fiddling tradition, Howdy Forrester has established himself as perhaps the premier fiddler in Nashville today. After listening closely to Uncle Jimmy, Howdy and Roy had the following comments.

Roy: "Uncle Jimmy was a great fiddler and in his prime playing years would probably compare with our best fiddlers today. His style was quite different from the fiddling I remember in east Tennessee. The rolling notes and bowing must have been unusual for the time. It's too bad that he did not make more recordings."

Howdy: "Listening to Uncle Jimmy Thompson I wonder if he didn't take some of the "Texas style" fiddling to Texas. His playing has some Scotch (not whiskey) in it and he didn't seem to have any trouble with the fingerboard finding positions. It is possible that Eck Robertson met him in Texas as he was in the area at the same time of the 8 day contest. Eck was in Tennessee in 1921. I believe that Clark Kessinger also heard Uncle Jimmy. This man (Uncle Jimmy) was good in his very late years -- he must have been great at his peak."

UNCLE JIMMY'S REPERTOIRE

The list reproduced here was drawn up by Eva Thompson Jones before her death and purports to list what are presumably the favorite "Old Fashion" tunes of her uncle. The date on the list is uncertain and a copy of it is on file in the CMF archives, Nashville. The list contains 76 songs, but one might question how accurately they reflect Uncle Jimmy's actual repertoire; most of them are popular songs from the 1890's commonly found in songbooks of that era. Missing are many of the fiddle breakdowns we know Uncle Jimmy loved to play; for instance, of his seven recorded numbers, only two ("Flying Clouds" and "Leather Britches") are listed here. Missing are "Lynchburg," "Karo," "Bill Wilson," "High Born Lady," and "Billy in the Low Ground." Also missing are tunes like "Nubbin Ridge" and "Old Hen Cackle", with which he won a 1926 Clarksville, Tennessee contest. So we must take this list with a large grain of salt; Eva once reportedly said that many of the old fiddle breakdowns sounded alike to her, and while Uncle Jimmy undoubtedly played these tunes, they were probably more Eva's favorites than his.

C.W.

Ena Thompson Jones Studio

SCHOOL OF MUSIC, DANCING AND ALLIED ARTS

123 FIFTH AVENUE, NORTH
NASHVILLE 3, TENNESSEE

Old Fashion Tunes

*of Ena Thompson Jones
(the Jones list)*

Jimmie Lind Polka	Pop Goes The Weasel
Virginia Reel	Sally In Our Alley
Kiss Waltz	Arkansas Traveler
Oh Susanna	Irish Washerwoman
Mocking Bird	Paddy Wack
Mountain Belle Schottish	Irish Jig
Haste To The Wedding Jig	Sailors Hornpipe
Rueben Rueben	Old Zip Coon
The Girl I Left Behind	Devils Dream
Leather Britches	Fisher Horn Pipe
MC Leads Reel	The Lost Rose Of Summer
Rosy O'More Jig	Darling Nellie Gray
Sally Goodwin	Strauss Waltz
Moonlight & Roses	Dixie
Yankee Doodle	Bicycle Built For Two
Home Sweet Home	Maggie
Turkey In The Straw	Buffalo Gals
Skip To My Lou	I Wish I Was Single Again
Liza Jane	Annie Laurie
Moonlight & Roses	In The Shade Of an Old Apple Tree
Red Wing	Down By The River Side
The Yellow Rose Of Texas	My Gal Sal
Maudy Lee	Fascination
Ida Sweet As Apple Cider	Bill Bailey
Dear Old Girl	After The Ball
Good bye My Darling Good bye	Little Brown Jug
Camptown Races	Oh Dem Golden Slippers
Band Played On	Beautiful Dreamer
Beautiful Blue Danube	Beautiful Heaven
Big Rock Candy Mountain	Home On The Range
Hot Time In the Old Town Tonight	Two Little Girls In Blue
Merry Widow Waltz	Old Grey Mare
When You And I Were Young Maggie	Silver Threads
Put On Your Old Grey Bonnet	After The Ball
Jeannie With Her Light Brown Hair	Flying Clouds
Clog Dance	The Girl I Left Behind
Birmingham Jail	Old Dan Tucker
Wagner	Over The Waves

(This document reproduced by permission of the Country Music Foundation, Nashville.)

KARO based on the version by Uncle Jimmy Thompson

I. Standard Music Notation. Key of D. 2/4 time.

II. Tablature Notation. Key of D. 2/4 time. Use High 1's, Low 3's except as indicated.



WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE -- IT'S THE MUSIC THAT COUNTS!

Roy Acuff (1) and others in attendance at the Uncle Jimmy Thompson Memorial Dedication Ceremony listen to some of Uncle Jimmy's fiddling (from old 78 RPM records) being played by Charles Wolfe. Was it good music? See Roy's comments on page 53! (Photo courtesy of Virginia Braun).