

West Texas Fiddlers and the B

“Hardy Pioneers” and Amarillo’s Panhandle Fiddle Contests

By Joe Carr

In the period from 1928 to 1931, at least six fiddle contests were held in Amarillo, Texas, most under the auspices of the Tri-State Fair Association. Contemporary newspaper reports offer interesting insights into the workings of the contests and the activities of the contestants, giving us a fascinating glimpse into the lives and fortunes of numerous early Panhandle fiddlers, including noted musicians Eck Robertson, J. T. Wills - father of Western Swing legend Bob Wills, Jess Morris, and others.¹ Census statistics indicate just over 15,000 Amarillo residents in 1920, and the town had grown to a city of 43,000 by 1930.² Amarillo’s older citizens who noticed the changing landscape may have had fond memories of the old days, and the Old Fiddler contests gave them an opportunity to enjoy what was perceived as a fast dying art.

44 The first All Panhandle Old Fiddlers Contest in Amarillo was sponsored by the Tri-State Fair Association and directed by Dr. O. H. Loyd. It was held March 20, 1928, a Tuesday night, at the city auditorium in conjunction with the Cattlemen’s Convention. The first mention of the contest in the newspaper appears to be March 12.³ The following day another article appeared, which included this excerpt from a letter by director Dr. Loyd:

Most of the Panhandle counties are taking an active interest in the old fiddlers’ contest and will, by elimination contests or otherwise, send the very best fiddlers in every interested county to compete, thereby giving those who attend an opportunity to hear in one evening all the real old fiddlers in this whole country.

Loyd declared the contest would present a demonstration of old time fiddling “such as Panhandle people have not heard since the days of the cowboys.” Loyd continues in the flowery style of the day with a romanticized description of the frontier fiddler:

The cowboys who were youths twenty to forty years ago are old men now. As young men, their only companion many a lonely night was an old violin. And when they sat and looked at the bare walls of their little huts or dug-outs, they heard their fiddles talk as they could not have done had company been present.

These conditions developed some of the best fiddlers on the Plains that ever attempted to draw a bow. They played for the old square dance to which lads and lassies would ride bucking broncs as far as fifty miles to attend. Where is there a cowboy who does not remember these dances and long to be at one again.

Loyd obviously felt an appeal based on memories of the “old days” was the best approach to draw a crowd. His language presents the frontier days as the long distant past while, in truth, only twenty years had past since the “days of the cowboy.” He concludes his pitch for customers:

Every person who is interested in the development of this great Panhandle country should lend every possible assistance to the men who are so liberally giving of their time and energy to make a success of the Tri-State Fair, and should, therefore, make it a point to attend the old fiddlers’ contest.⁴

By March 18, two days before the event, there were 25 entries. Reserve ticket sales were heavy, with ticket prices ranging from fifty cents to one dollar. Several contestants wrote letters to the *Amarillo Sunday News and Globe* detailing their personal histories. These letters contain stories of the old fiddlers’ lives in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Interest in the frontier days appears to have been strong, as considerable space was devoted to histories of fiddlers such as Jess Giles of Vega, Texas, Marcellus Bates of Claude, and Jess Morris of Dalhart.⁵

Morris is best known as the “author” of the cowboy anthem “Goodbye Old Paint.” He was an active semi-professional musician in the Amarillo area as well as a working cowboy.⁶ Morris’s account in this article of his learning “Old Paint” differs somewhat from a later account to folksong collector John Lomax, who recorded Morris singing and fiddling “Old Paint” in 1942. Morris told Lomax that he learned the song from Charlie Willis, a black cowboy who worked for Morris’s father. Willis, according to Morris, learned the song on a trail drive in the 1880s and played it on a jew’s harp.⁷ In his letter to the *Amarillo Daily News*, however, Morris related:



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Fiddler Entertainer Tonight



Eck Robertson, one of the best-known old-time fiddlers of today, will be one of the star entertainers at the Old Fiddlers' contest tonight at the Municipal Auditorium.

Eck is considered the champion old fiddler of the United States. His family, all good entertainers, will be with him. They are also on the program.

Photo Courtesy of: Panhandle Plains Museum

I learned to play "Old Paint" (Goodbye Paint, I'm Leaving Cheyenne) in a dugout a mile from Vega. I lived in that section eight or nine years playing for dances from 1891 to 1900. I also lived in Vega for a time playing for dances. I learned all my old fiddling tunes in the dugout. I will sing the old tune "Old Paint" and play it on the fiddle at the convention . . . I wrote the music to "Old Paint" and gave it to Mr. Fox of San Antonio who will put it in his old cowboy songs. I learned the "Old Paint"

song from an Oklahoma cow puncher in 1892. The old boy played it on a french harp.

The two accounts do not necessarily conflict, except for references to Willis playing the jew's harp in the Lomax account and the french harp in the letter to the *Amarillo Daily News*. "French harp" was the common name for the harmonica, while the jew's harp is a metal instrument which a player presses against the mouth and plucks rhythmically to produce sound. This inconsistency remains unexplained. Also in his letter, Morris requested help finding local musicians to serve as "seconds" (accompanists) for the contest. The article continues, "He [Morris] wants some of the Mexican guitar or cello players in Amarillo for his sides, saying they know how to put real life into old cowboy and Spanish music."⁸

The rules for the contest were printed in a separate article in the same edition of the *Amarillo Daily News*.

RULES: OLD FIDDLER'S CONTEST

1. Each contestant will draw place by lot, giving him his order on the program.
2. Each contestant shall be 40 years old, but not over one hundred ten.
3. Each contestant shall play one piece only, unless requested by the judges to play more, but shall be required to have ready at least five selections for emergencies.
4. Each selection offered shall be not less than three minutes nor more than five minutes.
5. Each contestant is to play old fashioned music, preferably quadrilles, as this is more closely associated with the old breakdown dance.
6. Each contestant to be allowed not to exceed two accompanists.
7. In forming conclusions of the merit of each contestant, the judges shall pass on a percentage basis, taking 100 per cent as perfect, and that no man is perfect. They shall judge each separate selection under its column, giving it the percentage that in their judgment it is entitled and the final total of these added percentages will show the winner in order. If any ties should develop, and the judges require, then those who are tied for place shall play another selection, or until such tie is settled.
8. The judges at their discretion may use the applause of the audience in reaching a decision if it is declared necessary.
9. Being an Old Fiddler's contest, credit shall not be allowed to the modern jazz.
10. Contortions of the body of the artist shall not be given undue credit, patting of the feet justified.
11. Each contestant shall furnish, by March 16, information giving his birth place, date of birth, incidents of his life, and his picture, late photo if convenient.⁹

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Although many of these rules are similar to those in modern contests, several are curious, including the provision excluding contestants over 110 years of age. One wonders whether this restriction was necessary. The oldest participant in this whole series of contests was 89. The stipulation that fiddlers be at least forty had a profound affect on the nature of the contest. While it enabled the old time fiddlers to compete, it eliminated a number of younger fiddlers who were able to compete successfully in subsequent contests after this rule was changed. Rule ten tries to ensure the contest would be judged on musical merits rather than choreography.

Contestants included several notable fiddlers. W.C. Massey of Roswell, New Mexico was very likely related to the Massey Family of Roswell, from which came the well known Louise Massey and the Westerners.¹⁰ Pat Hooker of Shamrock, Texas was a cowboy fiddler whom Eck Robertson often cited as his first fiddle teacher. Louis Franklin of Vernon was perhaps an early member of the famous Franklin family of Texas fiddlers.

On March 21, the day after the contest, an article headlined "Louis Franklin of Wilbarger Wins Old Fiddlers Contest" ran in the *Amarillo Daily News*. Franklin, who was a left-handed fiddler, won after a play off between himself, H. E. Welchel of Amarillo (variously spelled Whetchel, Whelchel, and Welchel in these articles), and Milt Trout of Dimmit. In the final decision, Trout and Welchel placed second and third respectively. The other place winners included W. T. Walker, Endee, New Mexico, fourth; W. C. Massey, Roswell, New Mexico, fifth; J. T. Marshall, Canyon, sixth; and A. F. Copeland, Lubbock, seventh. Franklin was awarded one hundred dollars cash for the first place finish.

Twenty fiddlers and about thirty accompanists participated in the program. Several other contestants were singled out for mention. W. J. Brewer, an 89-year-old Confederate veteran, played "Napoleon's Retreat" to tremendous audience response. Hugh Roden of Childress, was a big hit with his presentation of stunt fiddling, and Jess Morris's rendition of "Goodbye Old Paint" apparently brought down the house. Of Morris's performance, the reporter observed, "the audience forgot all dignity and joined in a hearty, lusty yell on the chorus."¹¹

Organizer and contest emcee O.H. Loyd presented numerous "talks" between the performances. The subjects of his comments included the fair, the old fiddlers, and the opportunities in the Amarillo area. His part of the program must have been well received; it was reported that he kept the audience "in an uproar."

In addition to the \$250 prize money, local businesses made donations of services and supplies to the contest. A belt, a shirt, a pair of cuff links, a pair of silk hose and a watch chain were among the clothing items donated. Music stores provided a violin bow and some old time fiddle records. A studio provided a pho-

tograph of the contest winner and forty-pound sacks of flour were given to the first three place winners.¹²

The success of this contest, with reportedly over 2,000 paid attendees, apparently prompted O. H. Loyd to hold another contest only one month later. This event offered an expanded program with stunt fiddling, some popular music selections played by Miss Anna Merrick (a local violin instructor) and a short political talk from Tom Connally, a candidate for United States Senate. Eck Robertson, who promoted himself as a world champion fiddler and a Victor recording artist, was prominently featured in an article the day of the contest. Robertson was apparently well known in Amarillo at this time, and his entry into the contest must have been a source of pride for contest organizers. Louis Franklin, winner of the March contest, also registered to compete, although he was mistakenly identified as "Felix Robertson of Vernon."¹³ The promise of a run off between the recently crowned Panhandle champion Franklin and the self proclaimed world champion Robertson must have been an exciting prospect for fiddling fans.

That neither of these two fiddlers competed in the contest produced unexpected results. Thomas G. Crawford of New Mexico won the one hundred dollar first prize before an estimated crowd of 2,000. Crawford, who played left-handed with the fiddle braced by his knee, was a late entry whose registration only arrived the day before the contest. Previous champion Franklin's absence was unexplained, but Robertson arrived late to the event and was not allowed to compete. He and his son, Eck, Jr., were allowed to perform however, and Eck Jr. reportedly filled his banjo with money thrown to the stage by appreciative fans. A list of contestants, their home counties, place, and selection performed was given in this order:

- Charles Grouce, Palmer Co., "Drunkard's Hiccoughs"
- J. T. Marshall, 5th place, Randall Co., "Fisher's Hornpipe"
- K. W. Jackson, Swisher Co., "Forked Deer"
- John S. Ray, Crosby Co., "Cotton-eyed Joe"
- Jim Chapman, Deaf Smith Co., "Fisher's Hornpipe"
- Louis J. Propps, Roosevelt Co., NM, "Sally Goodin"
- F. M. Beach, 3rd place, Hale Co., "Tom and Jerry"
- W. F. Walling, 4th place, Donley Co., "Arkansaw Traveler"
- W. C. Massey, Chaves Co., NM, "Pretty Polly Ann"
- Milt Trout, Castro Co., "Cattle in the Cane Break"
- H. F. Whelchel, 6th place, Potter Co., "Sally Goodin"
- J. O. Kelly, 8th place, Quay Co. NM, "Stay All Night"
- Babe Barker, 7th place, Armstrong Co., "Tom and Jerry"
- Babe Helton, 2nd place, Wheeler Co., "Jenny Nettle"
- W. D. Fulton, Ochiltree Co., "Irish Washerwoman"
- Joe McPherson, Lincoln Co. NM, "The Lone Star Trail"
- T. G. Crawford, 1st place, Eddy Co. NM, "Meledy Hornpipe"
- A. M. Murray, Collingsworth Co., "Arkansaw Traveler"

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R. L. Hunter, Dawson Co., "Where are You Going, My Pretty Gal"¹⁴

The day after the contest, at the invitation of an old friend, Eck Robertson and his son performed an impromptu concert at the Potter County Jail for the sheriff, his officers, and the prisoners. According to the newspaper article, they were joined in their music-making by Eck's first fiddle teacher, Pat Hooker, who had served as one of the contest judges the night before. Here it is also related that Robertson arrived late to the contest due to car troubles in route to Amarillo.¹⁵

The following day's paper (Sunday) includes an article about J. O. Kelly of Tucumcari, New Mexico, who placed eighth in the contest. Kelly, 77 years old, drew special attention during the contest when he broke into an animated clog dance on stage during another contestant's selection.¹⁶

The second annual Tri-State Fair Association Old Fiddler's contest was held March 7, 1929. Eck Robertson won this year, again accompanied by his eight-year-old son on banjo. Second place went to Milt Trout, who had also placed second in the contest the year before. Although there were twenty-five contestants registered, only twenty competed. The contest was broadcast over WDAG radio. After the competition, Robertson played "Brilliantcy", and the grand finale was led by Trout, who was joined by all the fiddlers and their seconds in a rendition of "Turkey in the Straw."¹⁷ Also reported was another contest held a few weeks after the March 7th event. Milt Trout won this contest.¹⁸

Many of the contestants for the first and second contests of 1929 returned for the Third Annual Old Fiddler's Contest on March 6, 1930. It was noted that Eck Robertson was not entered as of the March 1st deadline.¹⁹ While not mentioned in the article, it seems the significant rule requiring contestants to be over forty years old was changed for the 1930 contest. The article begins:

*A new champion stepped into the limelight Tuesday night when Major L. Franklin, youthful fiddler of Dosier community in Collingsworth County, beat the old-timers at their own game and walked away with first prize of \$75 in the annual Old Fiddler's Contest.*²⁰

This seemingly simple rule change reflects a major shift in the focus of these events. Newspaper coverage of the earlier contests was generally focused on the age of the participants and their connection to the frontier days of the Panhandle. Intentionally or not, the dropping of the age requirement changed the contest focus from a nostalgic gathering of early settlers to a competition designed to determine the best fiddler regardless of age. It is significant that the first winner after the rule change was well under forty years of age. This suggests the fiddling art was perhaps not dying after all and that, at least in Major

Franklin's case, younger players were capable of winning performances when competing against the older fiddlers.

Major Franklin, along with Benny Thomasson, is considered a shaper of the modern Texas contest style. Franklin, who was 26 years old in 1930, surely would have seemed a kid to most of the "old timers" at the contest. According to the report, Major was not related to the elder Louis "Lefty" Franklin who won the 1928 contest, but he did have a nephew named Louis, born 1923, who became well known in contest circles. The 1930 contest winners were:

1st - Major Franklin	\$75	"Sally Johnson"
2nd - George C. Cockrall	\$50	"Dusty Miller"
3rd - Zeke Welchel	\$25	"Sally Goodin"
4th - Babe Helton	\$10	
5th - Henry Leste	\$7.50	
6th - Ed Hardin	\$5	
7th - Delmer Shirley		
8th - Babe Barker		
9th - F. M. Beck		
10th - F.W. Jackson		

The audience was estimated at 2,000, most of whom stayed until the winners were announced shortly before midnight.²¹ That the audience would stay so late on a weeknight is testament to their interest in the outcome of the contest.

The Fourth Annual Old Fiddler's contest was perhaps the largest event of the series with sixty-one pre-registered contestants. The program was expanded to include a square dance contest that attracted ten sets of dancers. Notable contestants included Pat Hooker, Eck Robertson, J. T. Wills, C. E. "Shorty" Loter, Jess Morris and Mrs. Eva Deadwiley, the only female contestant.²² The winner of the \$50 first prize was A. E. Rusk of Canyon. Jess Morris of Dalhart took second place, while Eck Robertson placed third. Robertson and son once again drew special attention from the press:

None of the fiddlers were allowed to play enchores [sic] although Eck Robertson and Eck Jr. were applauded several minutes. Eck, Jr., 12 year old, Eck, Sr., accompanist, seemed to be the main attraction. His ability to strum a banjo was outstanding.

Attendance was over 1,000, reduced no doubt by a blizzard which blew in on the afternoon of the contest. The president of the Fat Stock show announced that the top ten winners of this contest would compete again in another contest to be held several weeks later.²³

Eck Robertson won this next event, which was held April 3, 1931. A professional publicity photograph depicting Robertson

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in a trick fiddling pose appeared in the *Amarillo Daily News* on the day of the contest. The caption read:

*Fiddler Entertainer Tonight; Eck Robertson, one of the best known old-time fiddlers today, will be one of the star entertainers at the Old Fiddlers' Contest tonight at the Municipal Auditorium. Eck is considered the champion old fiddler of the United States. His family, all good entertainers, will be with him. They are also on the program.*²⁴

Finishing behind Robertson were W. E. Walling in second place and J. T. Wills in third. The crowd was estimated at 700. Robertson and Family performed a thirty-minute program of music and there were contests held for both square and tap dancing. O. H. Loyd, who directed many of the contests, was the emcee.²⁵

While numerous typographical errors and other misinformation are apparent in these articles, they are important documentation of early contest activity in the Panhandle. The contests were obviously popular both with the paying audience and the fiddlers. Interestingly, over the four years covered by these articles, the number of entrants grew, even as the prize money decreased. Perhaps the onset of the Depression accounts for smaller cash prizes. While admission ranged from a dollar to fifty cents in the 1928 contest, ticket prices are not mentioned in later articles for any of the other contests. The author found no evidence of an Old Fiddlers Contest in Amarillo after 1931.

From the winner's lists it can be seen that, while many of the same fiddlers entered these contests, no one dominated the top places. Whether it was due to uneven judging, audience voting, or other factors, the results of each of these contests is unique even when the participants were similar. Even Eck Robertson, who is the best known of this group and, as evidenced by his recordings, a great fiddler, placed third in the March 1931 contest.

Students of Robertson's career will find his home listings interesting during this period. Robertson was reported as being from Oklahoma in 1928, Lubbock in 1929, and Borger in 1931. Robertson's title, "World's Champion Fiddler," was much used and unquestioned in this newspaper coverage. His announced appearance at or absence from one of these contests was always noted, as were his performances with his son. That he provided a posed publicity photograph to the newspaper is evidence of Robertson's professional savvy.

Newspaper reports are, in many cases, the only record of early fiddle contest activity. While the accuracy of specific information has to be considered carefully, these articles nonetheless provide important information about the contest repertoire, hometowns of participants, details of contest presentations, rules, names of judges, and anecdotes of fiddlers lives, which otherwise would be unavailable. Through the reading of the achievements of these early fiddlers, they become more than names on the page. In a small way, it gives them and their victories new life.

Notes

1. These articles were found at the Panhandle Plains Museum Library in Canyon, Texas during research for *Prairie Nights To Neon Lights*, Texas Tech University Press, Lubbock, Texas, 1995, a history of West Texas country music written by the author and Alan Munde.
2. *Texas Almanac*, A. H. Belo Corporation, Dallas, 1951, 75.
3. "Many Old Fiddlers Entering Contest Here for March 20," *Amarillo Daily News*, 12 March 1928.
4. "Old Fiddler's Contest Here Will Be Great," *Amarillo Daily News*, 13 March 1928.
5. "Hardy Pioneers of Panhandle Compete As Old Fiddlers," *Amarillo Sunday News and Globe*, 18 March 1928.
6. Lillie Mae Hunter, *Book of the Years*, Pioneer Book Publishers, Hereford, Texas, 1969, 111-112. Dallam County History
7. Jess Morris in correspondence to John Lomax, quoted in booklet accompanying *Cowboy Songs, Ballads and Cattle Calls from Texas*, Library of Congress Folk Recordings L28, 1952. Recorded by John A. Lomax and others.
8. "Hardy Pioneers . . ."
9. "Best Fiddlers of Nation To Compete In Program Here," *Amarillo Sunday News and Globe*, 18 March 1928.
10. Elvis Fleming, archivist, Historical Center for Southeast New Mexico, telephone conversation with author, Roswell, New Mexico, 10 November 2000. Mr. Fleming found a listing for W. C. Massey in a 1920s Roswell telephone directory and concluded he was possibly the brother of Henry Massey, father of Louise.
11. "Louis Franklin of Wilbarger Wins Old Fiddlers Contest," *Amarillo Daily News*, 21 March 1928.
12. Ibid.
13. "Fiddlers Gather In Amarillo for Contest Tonight," *Amarillo Daily News*, 27 April 1928. Reporters for the *Daily News* apparently mixed up the names of Eck Robertson and Louis Franklin. Felix Robertson of Vernon is reported as having won the contest held one month earlier. The winner was actually Louis Franklin (see note 11). On April 28th (note 13), the confusion continued with a reference to "Felix Franklin, winner of the recent contest held during the Cattlemen's convention." The names Felix Robertson and Felix Franklin do not appear in the lists of contestants.
14. "Southpaw from New Mexico Is Champ Fiddler," *Amarillo Daily News*, 28 April 1928. Louis J. Propps is likely the Louis H. Propps who was recorded by John Lomax in 1936 in Pleasanton, Texas for the Library of Congress.
15. "Oklahoma Fiddler Touches Hearts of Veteran Officers," *Amarillo Sunday News and Globe*, 29 April 1928.
16. "Veteran of Adobe Walls Battle Can Clog Dance at 77," *Amarillo Sunday News and Globe*, 29 April 1928.
17. "Lubbock Man Is Winner Of Fiddler Prize," *Amarillo Daily News*, 8 March 1929.
18. "30 Registered For Fiddlers' Contest Here," *Amarillo Daily News*, 1 March 1930.
19. Ibid.
20. "Winners' List In Fiddlers' Contest Given," *Amarillo Daily News*, 6 March 1930.
21. Ibid.
22. "61 Fiddlers To Play Here On Saturday," *Amarillo Daily News*, 25 February 1931.
23. "Rusk of Canyon Wins Old Fiddlers' Contest," *Amarillo Daily News*, 2 March 1931.
24. "Fiddler Entertainer Tonight," *Amarillo Daily News*, April 3, 1931.
25. "Eck Robertson of Borger Carries Off First For Fiddlers," *Amarillo Daily News*, 4 April 1931.