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## Old-time fiddling

Square dancing and knowledge sharing were part of the Harrisburg Pete McMahan Memorial **Fiddlers** Reunion, Contest and Barn Dance

By RENATA JOHNSON  
staff writer

When Bubba Hopkins was 5 years old, his family took him to the Powderhorn Festival in Minnesota, and he saw a **fiddle** contest. Bubba was fascinated by the music and decided he wanted to play **fiddle**. His grandfather had played the instrument in the 1940s, and the music came naturally to him.

Bubba's mom, Lisa Hopkins, said she remembers almost going nuts after listening to him play "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" all day. "But it has all paid off," she said.

Bubba, now 12, has played the **fiddle** since then. He has already won the Oklahoma State Championship twice but doesn't follow a strict practice schedule. He says he just plays "for the fun of it."

The Hopkins family came from Spavinaw, Okla., to attend the Pete McMahan Memorial **Fiddlers** Reunion, Contest and Barn Dance on Saturday.

About 700 fans of old-time fiddling and square dancing came to the Harrisburg

Lions Club, where they were treated to more than nine hours of music.

Howard Marshall, retired MU professor and member of the Missouri Traditional **Fiddle** and Dance Network, said the Missouri style is famous around the country and the world for its traditional fiddling that invites people to square-dance.

“It seemed like we were losing the tradition of Missouri-style fiddling,” said Steve Young, member of the **fiddle** and dance network and one of the event’s main organizers.

One of the reasons **fiddle** contests were growing apart from dancing was because “hot licks” wanted to demonstrate their virtuoso abilities, Marshall said. But the essence of old-time fiddling is to make people dance.

“This is hard-driving square-dancing music,” Marshall said.

Boone County’s own Pete McMahan was the epitome of that, Marshall said. McMahan once said that you’re not playing the **fiddle** if you don’t make people dance.

The legacy of McMahan, who died two years ago, was a constant presence throughout the event. Marshall said you couldn’t know McMahan and not be influenced by him.

“You can learn to play the **fiddle**, but you have to be born with a bowing arm,” Marshall said. McMahan was famous for his driving accent, which came from his bowing style.

“Every person here today has learned something from him,” said John Williams of Madison, one of McMahan’s last students.

Williams, 20, is known among his fiddling friends in Minnesota and South Dakota as “Little Pete.”

“Pete had a style completely his own, and somehow it seems that it sunk in,” Williams said.

Charlie Stallcup remembers his old friend McMahan from years organizing the Hannibal **Fiddle** Contest.

“Pete was smooth, precise,” Stallcup said. “He wouldn’t fool around like they do in the Texas style.”

For some, Texas-style fiddling is too embellished with improvisations and too slow to dance. Missouri old-time fiddling has a constant syncopation of high and low notes that invites people to the dance floor.

“There is nothing more wonderful than letting your body react to the music,” said Ellie Grace, who taught clog dancing at the event.

Many of the songs date back to Scottish-Irish tradition passed orally from one generation to the other, Marshall said. John Bryden of Scotland recognized some of the tunes the children were playing in the contest.

“It reminds me of ‘feis,’” he said, referring to a traditional Gaelic festival of the Scottish highlands. Much like the Scottish ‘feis,’ **fiddle** contests are a way to keep the old-time tradition going.

Matt Wyatt, who also studied with McMahan, said that people who only learn from a book play exactly the same. Wyatt has lived in Nashville, Tenn., as a **fiddle** instructor but said he plans to come back to Missouri. He said that a reunion like this is important to expose people to different **fiddlers** “so they can pick up one thing here and one thing there to form their own style.”

The event allowed an exchange of music between people of different ages.

“We are the ones left to carry the tradition,” Wyatt said.

And Wyatt is already leading the next generation of **fiddlers**. He was the reason why Bubba Hopkins and his family came to the Harrisburg reunion.

Bubba won second place in his division and was happy with his finish. Wyatt invited the Hopkins family to spend the night at his parents’ home in Independence.

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