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## 75th Fiddle Grand Champion crowned Friday

By **Cristin Ross**

He does for fiddling what Kix Brooks, of country duo Brooks & Dunn fame, does for guitar picking — and Oklahoma resident Monte Gaylord is the 75th Fiddle Grand Champion.

"I feel wonderful," Gaylord said upon accepting his \$500 cash prize. "I'm so proud of my students, Bubba Hopkins and the Thompson brothers."

Hopkins placed third in the grand champion fiddle off and first in the 18 years and under category. The Thompson brothers, Douglas and Michael, placed second and third in the 18 years and under category respectively, and were two of the youngest players in the competition. All three youth hail from Oklahoma as well.

The 75th annual Texas Fiddlers Reunion & Contest, held on the square in downtown Athens, began Thursday with the annual jam session and street dance and continued Friday with a lunch-time concert, the day-long contest and another jam session and dance.

Each contestant played two fiddle pieces per category they competed in. Gaylord chose 'Sweet Georgia Brown,' for "more swing," he told the judges and 'Billy In The Lowground,' which he dedicated to Carl — and played both while swaying, wiggling, jumping and rocking in time to his sawing and the strumming of the backup guitars. He even played with his eyes closed for a spell.

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"If I were a judge I'd just have to go shoot myself, or get drunk," contest emcee James Weaver told the audience camped out on the west side of the courthouse lawn, while the judges scored the grand champion hopefuls. "I'd sure hate to have to choose from so many great fiddlers."

The competition began back in 1932, when C.H. Stanton gathered a bunch of friends together from the Bethel community and decided there was enough talent around to hold a fiddling competition. An estimated 14 to 17 string bands entered that inaugural contest, and enough people turned out that the event had to be moved to the Athens High School auditorium the next year. The competition was held twice so everyone had a chance to hear it.

The rise in popularity eventually moved the contest again, this time to its current home on the lawn of the Henderson County Courthouse. It has remained there since 1934.

"I've never heard so many great fiddlers," event organizer Bud Hall said as the grand champion was announced. "The youngsters play just as good as the old timers, sometimes even better."

Top five winners in the Over 65 years category are: first place, Earl Garner; second place, Jesse Mears; third place, E.J. Hopkins; fourth place, Tom Fonville; and fifth place, Benny Bennett.

Top five winners in the Under 65 years category are: first place, Monte Gaylord; second place, Eddie Davis; third place, Tonya Hopkins; fourth place, Jim Chancellor; and fifth place, Gordon Townsend.

Top three winners in the 19 to 30 years category are: first place, Sheila Wheat; second place, Laliah Hoskins; and third place, Jacob Johnson.

Top five winners in the Ladies category are: first place, Brook Wallace; second place, Rebekah Enright; third place, Lydia Elseth; fourth place, Sally Wallace; and fifth place, Tonya Hopkins.

Top five winners in the 18 years and under category are: first place, Bubba Hopkins; second place, Douglas Thompson; third place, Micheal Thompson; fourth place, Rebekah Enright; and fifth place, Brook Wallace.

Each first place winner competed in the fiddle off for Grand Champion.

The ranking for that contest is: first place, Monte Gaylord; second place, Brook Wallace; third place, Bubba Hopkins; fourth place, Earl Garner; and fifth place, Sheila Wheat.

"You just have to come out here to have a lot of fun, and that's what I did," second place winner Brook Wallace said. "I had a great time."

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