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Mellie Dunham: A Remembrance Norway Maine Summer Festival, July 2003

David Sanderson

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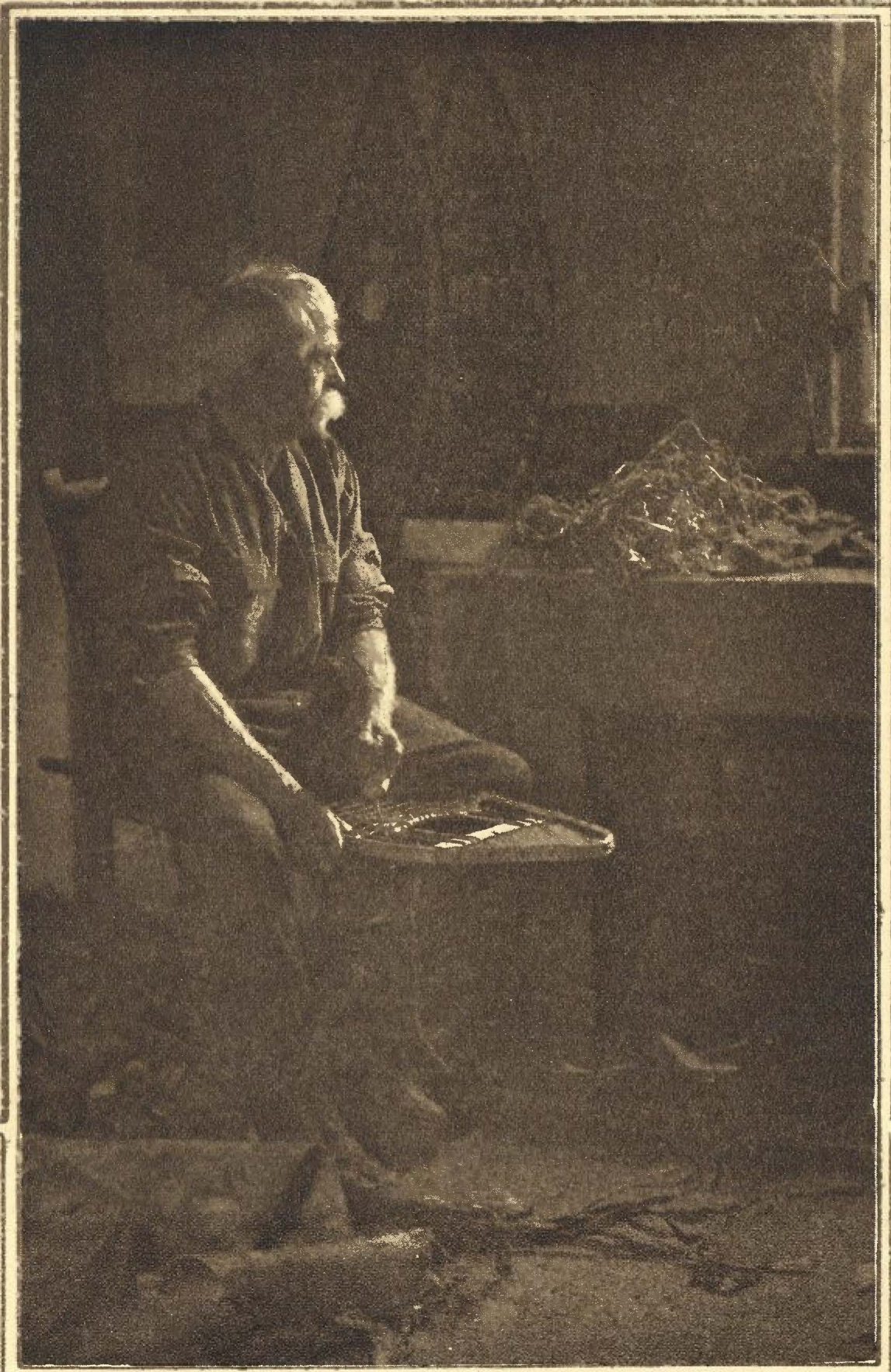
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**Mellie Dunham
A Remembrance
Norway Maine
Summer Festival
July 2003**

*Mellie, Champion Fiddler of
Maine, and Maker of the
Famous Peary Snow Shoes*

© V. Akers

Main Street, Norway, Maine



Rippling Waves

Waltz

Original Version as featured by MELLIE DUNHAM in his sensational performances on the Keith Circuit and as arranged and played by Henry Ford's Orchestra at Dearborn.

Mellie Dunham

1 *mf*

Chorus *f*

Fine

D.C. Cho.

To be bowed "Fiddler Style" Slur 1st and 2nd beats, adding pressure to 2nd beat, giving slight accent to 2nd beat. Continue throughout number as marked.

Introductory

The story of Mellie Dunham continues to fascinate, even some seventy-five years after the events. The tale of the 72-year-old country fiddler invited to play for Henry Ford, made famous by the media, then hugely successful as a vaudeville performer, seems almost too perfect to be true. But it all happened, and it was Mellie's own grace and lack of pretense, a genuineness that inspired the public's affection for him, that was as much as anything else responsible for the events of 1925 and 1926.

This booklet was created to mark Mellie's 150th birthday, July 29, 2003. We call it a "remembrance", as being something neither specifically biographical nor specifically historical, but rather a sort of picture of events, relying very much on the words of Mellie and others. One of the unusual things about Mellie's short period of fame was the amount of verbiage it inspired. We have accounts by journalists; letters and other narratives from observers; and Mellie's own words, especially in letters home to the Norway, Maine *Advertiser* during early 1926. And while Mellie's story has been told in published articles over the years, much of the original source material used here has never been reprinted.

We rely also on the many photographs of Mellie; and a word must be said here about Vivian Akers, for those who do not know of this part of Norway's history. Akers was an immensely talented artist in whatever media came to hand, born and raised locally, studied in New York and Paris, and by the 1920's home again, working primarily as a photographer. He was clearly fascinated by Mellie, and did a number of fine portraits of him, besides documenting the events of Mellie's departure and return from Dearborn, and creating key publicity pieces for Mellie's vaudeville tour. Akers' images are another of the lucky pieces of Mellie's story, and we would be remiss not to call attention to his contribution.

Our cover is a reproduction of the publicity piece that Akers designed for Mellie's vaudeville tour in early 1926, used at the New York Hippodrome and elsewhere to advertise the Keith vaudeville tour. The original was printed by rotogravure, with the specific locations and dates printed later in the space in the upper right corner of the cover, where our title appears.

Other contributions come from so many sources that it is nearly impossible to list them all. We must note the extensive scrapbooks of newspaper clippings and other items in the collection of the Norway Historical Society, assembled by local people and donated to the Society; and the copies of correspondence between the Dunhams and Frank Campsall, Henry Ford's Secretary, provided by the Benson Ford Research Center of the Henry Ford Library. Mellie's compositions are reprinted on the inside covers and the back cover by arrangement with the Carl Fischer Company, the owner of the copyrights. Mellie had a cordial relationship with the Fischer Company, and we are pleased to have been able to arrange with Fischer to get his tunes reprinted. It is probably accurate to say that every piece of information in this booklet reflects the contribution of one or another person or organization, and to urge the reader to be mindful of this fact.

David Sanderson
July 2003

Credits

Photo of Henry Ford and Mellie Dunham on Page 11 from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Materials from the Dunham-Campsall correspondence from Accession 285, Box 621, Folder: Mrs. Mellie Dunham, The Benson Ford Research Center, The Henry Ford.

Cover and fiddle setting for *Rippling Waves* (back cover, inside front cover) from an original copy of the sheet music, Copyright Carl Fischer Company, reprinted with permission.

Dunham fiddle tunes (inside back cover) from an original copy of *Mellie Dunham's Fiddlin' Dance Tunes*, Copyright Carl Fischer Company, reprinted with permission.

“Way Back on a Farm in Norway, Maine ”

—Vivian Akers, Dunham snowshoe brochure, Ca. 1926

Alanson Mellen Dunham - it is pronounced “a - LAN - son”, accent on the second syllable, a Dunham family name for several generations, interesting because none of the successive Alansons seems to have been called by that name familiarly. So Alanson Mellen Dunham, Junior was “Mellie”, occasionally “Mell”, and signed his formal documents “A.M. Dunham”.

Mellie’s father came from Paris, Maine, to Crockett Ridge, just west of the village of Norway, Maine, overlooking Lake Penesseewassee. He settled there and built the farm where Mellie was born on July 29, 1853, and where Mellie would spend his life. In those days small Maine farms were self-sufficient places. Mellie - and his wife, Emma Richardson Dunham, a local

woman whom he married in the fall of 1875 - never lost that practical independence, or the fundamental dignity of being plain country people.

Mellie’s early memories would have included seeing local men returning from the Civil War, hearing their



Mellie’s home, probably ca. 1910



Crockett Ridge, 1880

stories, and perhaps stories of the many Maine soldiers who did not return. He grew up hunting and fishing, with a love of the outdoors shared by Emma



Emma with fox, 1920's

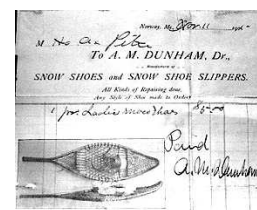
and passed on to the Dunham grandchildren. “A dead shot,” the newspapers later said of Emma, and pictured her nonchalantly holding up a red fox she had killed.

He must have had the instincts of a tinkerer and craftsman from his boyhood, and the touch to go with it, because we hear first of his craftsmanship with snowshoes. “When he was 12 he traded for the frames of an old-fashioned pair of snowshoes and filled them with rawhide,” reports a 1906 newspaper interview. Later, in his early 20's, he began making snowshoes for sale.

Whitman’s history of Norway (1924) says “Clarence M. Smith was the designer and maker of a snowshoe that turned up at the toe. Alanson M. Dunham, Jr., began making snowshoes at his home for the trade in a small way and employed Mr. Walter F. Tubbs and others.

He broadened the toe of the shoe and made a long and short kind.” The result was a showshoe that became the model for local makers and manufacturers. The Tubbs family were neighbors just down the road on Crockett Ridge. Walter Tubbs eventually started his own company, and by the 1930's Norway boasted that it was “the snowshoe capital of the world.”

Mellie’s most famous customer was explorer Robert Peary. Peary was born in Pennsylvania, moved to Portland, Maine at age three, and graduated from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine in 1877. He spent the next two years



Receipt for snowshoes, 1905

working as a surveyor in Fryeburg, Maine, not far from Mellie's home in Norway, before joining the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, then the Navy.

We do not know how Mellie's friendship with Peary came about, but by the time Peary was planning his 1905-06 expedition they were friends. The February 1906 interview quotes Mellie: "I always said I had rather make snowshoes for Peary than for any other man I know of. Early last spring a letter came from my old friend, asking me to make the snowshoes for his party. I added a special pair for my old friend and also shoes for Mrs. Peary and Master Robert."

When the first expedition failed to reach the Pole, Peary went North again, in 1908-09. He reached the North Pole in April, 1909, on Mellie's snowshoes, one of the few pieces of equipment that Peary did not manufacture for the expedition himself. As the photo shows, the special shoes Mellie designed for Peary were unusually long and narrow; one newspaper account says that it was Peary himself who developed the design.

It was a matter of some pride for Mellie when Peary was quoted as saying that the Dunham snowshoes never failed him. Peary showed his appreciation in return by bringing Mellie gifts from the Arctic that filled a room at the Dunham home, and included a narwhal tusk and a whale vertebra that the grandchildren used as a kind of exotic rocking horse. Lowell Barnes, Junior was Mellie's first great-grandchild, the son of Rose Noble Barnes and Lowell Barnes. In a 1982 magazine article he remembered Mellie's house:

"When I was a small boy living with my great-grandfather, there were long periods of time when I had no other children to play with. I used to go into the room with all the artifacts - it was like a museum - and sit for long hours at a time. I memorized every artifact; and were I an artist, I could recreate that entire room very precisely. I particularly remember that there was a whale's vertebra in the middle of the room. It was so large that when I sat upon it, my feet would not touch the floor. In another corner there was a kayak made out of hide that leaned obliquely in a corner, and next to it were three harpoon-type of spears made of ivory. There was a walrus skull with tusks that was very impressive to me in another corner of the room. It was all very, very fascinating."



**Mellie with Peary
Snowshoes, 1905-08**

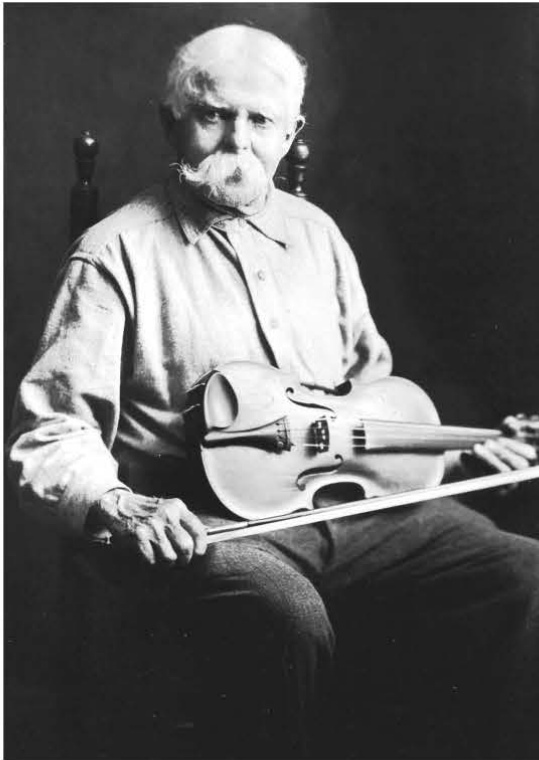
“I just got to playing by sort of an accident, I guess ”

—Mellie, newspaper interview, December 1925

The Boston newspaper reporter who asked Mellie how he started fiddling had a good ear for dialect: “Feller lived next to me had a fiddle. And I kind of liked the sound of it. Tried it out and then got me a fiddle. Pretty poor fiddle it was. Had it five years and got me a better one. Had that one about 25 years and then got me this one. It’s a pretty good fiddle; isn’t worth a whole lot, I guess, but it plays good, it does, and I won the championship on it.”

The story has it that a local man named Abner Jackson sold the 13-year-old Mellie a fiddle, in pieces, with assurances that it would sound good if repaired. Mellie fixed it, and picked up some basics from Horace Dinsmore, the “feller lived next to me.” After seeing a photo of Classical violinist Ole Bull Mellie adopted a playing position modeled on the Classical position, left arm out, fiddle held high under the chin. He played by ear: “Can pick out a note from music, about one note in five minutes, but can’t read to play at all,” he told the Boston reporter.

Mellie’s fiddles have names, and sometimes stories. The fiddle he refers to in the interview is the Joe Pike fiddle, found by a local man called Uncle Joe Pike in the attic of a grist mill. Joe traded some flour for the fiddle, and played it until his death, when it got put away in an attic in the Milletville neighborhood, up the road from Mellie’s home. Mellie found it, with an F hole gnawed by mice, and took it to Lewiston, to Nathan Taylor, one of the best of a large number of Maine violin makers active before and after 1900. Taylor did a professional repair job on it, but the mouse damage remains visible in photographs of Mellie with the fiddle, right in the middle of the F hole on the bass side of the instrument.



Mellie, 1925, postcard by Vivian Akers

In 1925 Mellie wrote to Henry Ford: “I am 72 years old - have played for dances 55 years. Cannot play jazz nor in the position [that is, above first position] on the violin. Am not a violinist just an ‘Old Time Fiddler’”. If Mellie’s account is accurate, he would have started playing as a teenager, and started playing for dances about the time of his marriage, 1875. With travel restricted to horse-and-buggy distance for an evening out, these dances were neighborhood and community affairs for the most part, frequent but not large. People who were willing to travel a bit, say ten miles or so to surrounding towns, could dance every night of the week if they wanted to. A corollary of this situation was that there were plenty of opportunities for musicians, and a continuing supply of players, especially fiddlers, to fill these needs.

Mellie’s father died at the end of 1885, and Mellie’s mother Mary Denison Dunham in the spring of 1889. By that time Mellie and Emma had a daughter, Ethna Pearl, born in the summer of 1878. Pearl married Nathan Noble in 1897; by 1905 the couple had four children. Nathan, learned snowshoe making from Mellie, became part of the family business, and eventually opened his own snowshoe and woodworking shop in Norway.

In the fall of 1903 some neighborhood ladies formed an organization: “for charity and sociability”. Such organizations often had a literary side to them as well, so it was the Benevolent Literary Club, then in 1904 the Ladies Heywood Club, after John Heywood, the pre-Shakespearean English author of plays and

poetry, then included on most college reading lists. Emma Dunham was a charter member, so when a clubhouse was built in 1907 just up the road from the Dunham farm, it was natural for Mellie to begin fiddling for the dances the club held. While the details are not clear, by about this time there must have been a Dunham family group playing. The pump organ was still more common than the piano in rural Maine homes at that time, as being less expensive, more portable, and requiring less maintenance. The Dunhams owned an organ, as did the Heywood Club, and Mellie's daughter Pearl Dunham Noble had learned to accompany her father.

The third member of the group was Pearl's husband Nathan Noble. Nate was another rural musician, born in 1876, a couple of generations younger than Mellie. He had grown up in the Noble's Corner settlement in Norway, north and west of Mellie's Crockett Ridge neighborhood. He started playing the fiddle when he was quite young, tutored by his uncle Harrison Noble, and began playing for neighborhood dances when he was 16. Harrison was a veteran of the Civil War, who had been a well-known fiddler before he joined the Norway Company of the 10th Maine. He was wounded and lost his right arm, leaving a short stump. This did not stop him from playing, though he never again played for dances. A January, 1926 newspaper interview with Nate describes how it worked:

"He would sit down in a chair, rest his fiddle on his right knee, place the bow under the stub of his right arm, and work the violin back and forth with his left hand. He would finger it and twist it to hit the right string at the same time, of course he couldn't get the pressure onto the bow to put the volume into his music as when he had his arm, but he played sweetly as ever and got in all the notes.

"It was from him, in this condition and by this painful process that Nate learned to fiddle.

"'And' he said to the writer in a burst of admiration for his uncle, 'if I could take a fiddle under my chin with my two good arms and play as we ll as Uncle Harrison played with his relic of Cedar Mountain [the Civil War battle where he lost the arm], I swear I would fiddle all the time!'"

Nate switched to the bass and cello when he started playing with Mellie, playing both as rhythm instruments, with a bow. He also acted as floor manager at Mellie's dances, and by the time the group recorded in early 1926 Nate was the caller. While we see mostly plucked basses now, it appears that prior to about 1930 and the evolution of jazz styles all such playing used the bow, creating long, sonorous bass notes quite different from the highly percussive plucked style. Nate, who had his own orchestra during the 1930's and 1940's, seems always to have been a little suspicious of the new style. We are told that he was willing to loan his bass to someone who plucked it, but would invariably make sure that it hadn't been put out of tune before he picked it up again himself.



The Dunham Orchestra, with Gram, mid-20's; Nate in rear with cello, Cherry center.

“Way down in Maine there is a family of nine motherless grandchildren ”

___Mellie Dunham, letter to Norway Advertiser, 1926

Ethna Pearl Dunham Noble died in 1918, immediately after her ninth child, a daughter named Pearl after her mother, was born. Ethna Noble's death left Nate and the Dunhams with nine children to raise, ranging in age from newborn to 19 years old. Nate and his family were living next door to Mellie and Emma on Crockett Ridge; and the Dunhams assumed a major role in raising the children. Money was never plentiful. When Mellie decided to perform in vaudeville in January 1926, he was unapologetic about taking advantage of the commercial opportunity. The *Norway Advertiser* reprinted comments from the *Baltimore Sun* lamenting the idea of promoters and the media taking advantage of an old man and his wife, allowing them to be turned into a public spectacle. Mellie replied:

“I see the ‘*Baltimore Sun*’ thinks it a pity that the old man’s head got ‘turned.’ I don’t think *Sun* man quite understands. Little old white haired Mellie is foolish, just like a fox. He started out to earn a little money. He has earned a little - not so much perhaps, but some, and if his health holds out, hopes to earn more for a purpose. Way down in Maine he has a family of nine motherless grandchildren. The youngest, 7 years old. He is not wealthy, worth perhaps a little. He has lived his ‘three score and ten.’ The rest of his life belongs to someone else. Who? To those nine grandchildren, and the one great grandson. Now, I have a chance to help those kids more than ever before and if I do not do it, the “*Sun*” man should call me the lowest kind of a cuss.”

Most of the children were musical in some way; but it was Cherry, born in 1905, who took her mother’s place in the orchestra, by 1920 or so playing the piano for dances at the Heywood Club and elsewhere, having learned on the pump organ at home. She also performed alone, playing and singing in programs at the Norway Grange and elsewhere.

Cherry had a tale of overcoming physical handicaps that rivals Uncle Harrison Noble’s. In 1924 she fell down the cellar stairs carrying an armload of firewood, and smashed an elbow so badly that it had to be removed. Doctors constructed a new joint, from celluloid, which made it possible for her to use the arm, and to continue playing the piano.

The local programs Cherry and her neighbors participated in could become quite elaborate. When the Dunhams’ 50th wedding anniversary came along on October 3, 1925, the Heywood Club found out late, and had only four days to plan a celebration. In this time they arranged to have invitations printed in the newspapers, planned an elaborate ceremony, and baked and decorated two cakes. Club member Mrs. S.I. Jackson wrote a poem for the occasion, which she read during the ceremony. The club house was decorated with streamers and autumn leaves. The Dunhams were marched in by two grandchildren, to songs and music by Cherry and others, and seated in a kind of bower decorated with leaves. Then, says the *Norway Advertiser* account of the affair, “the entire company of over a hundred formed in line and showered them with autumn leaves. It proved to be a veritable shower of greens and gold to the amount of at least one dollar for every year they had been married.”



Nate and the children, early 1920's: Rear, L to R, Ethna, Floretta, Alanson, Rose; Front, Orrin, Cherry, Mellie, Pearl, Amos, Lona.

“ A type of Yankee fiddler that is rapidly passing.”

____Lewiston Evening Journal, October 14, 1925

One account of the anniversary celebration concludes this way: “Mr. Dunham’s friends are urging him to take part in the Pageant of Progress at the Lewiston Armory the coming week, but he has not yet decided.” The reference is to a fiddle contest scheduled for October 13, 1925, at the Lewiston, Maine Armory. There is no indication that fiddling was a competitive sport around Norway, or that Mellie had ever felt competitive about his music, so it is not surprising that he would hesitate.

The Pageant of Progress was the brainchild of John J. Sullivan, of Auburn. It was a five-day combination of trade show, entertainment, county fair and everything else that could be packed into it. The Lewiston Armory was filled with the exhibits from local industries, but was also used for dances, free daily vaudeville shows and other events. Similar exhibitions were occurring elsewhere in the country during the early 20's; Sullivan was taking up an idea that was in the air.

Here on the right is Sullivan’s program for the day of the fiddle contest. It was a far cry indeed from Mellie’s accustomed haunts at the Heywood Club or local Grange halls. The *Lewiston Sun* reports that Mellie wrote to Sullivan that he would “be there”, but that he didn’t consider himself “much of a fiddler.”

What the event itself revealed about Mellie was something quite different. Here is what happened, through the eyes of the *Lewiston Evening Journal’s* reporter:

“The thousands who watched A M. Dunham, 72 year old Norway fiddler, win the fiddlers’ contest at the Pageant of Progress, Lewiston Armory, Tuesday evening realized instinctively that they were watching type of Yankee fiddler that is rapidly passing.

“Nowadays instead of the grisley type of bewhiskered or mustached fiddler we have the patent leather hair and slicker type of ‘violinist’. Whereas the fiddler used to be indispensable at dances even the violinist can be dispensed with today if the banjo is right jazzy and the ‘sax’ is mournful enough.

“Dunham’s performance won for him a contract to appear at the annual Thorne's Corner Grange barn dance Oct. 19th. He will play for the dancing - and it may be some folks’ last opportunity of dancing to the tunes of the old master.

“Mr. Dunham won the contest against a large field, fiddlers coming from all over the state for the contest which went over big with the crowd. Each contestant had to fiddle for about three minutes and while they were all clever Dunham was by far the most picturesque.

“ Mr. Dunham was easily the winner in the men’s contest, his expressive capering and prancing about winning him his justly deserved place in the hearts or the crowd. He put real expression and fervor into his, playing; it was difficult to restrain oneself from attempting a breakdown on the crowded Armory floor.

“As winners were indicated by the applause of the crowd it was easy to see that Mr. Dunham was the favorite, and the old fellow was deeply touched.

	Tuesday, October 13 th Doors open at 1.00 P. M.
Power Co.	2.00 P. M. Electrical Cooking School conducted by Central Maine
	3.30 P. M. Singer (The Fashion) Style Show. Prof. Arthur. Pettengill at piano. Vaudeville. United Chain Wall Paper, showing of exclusive patterns of wall paper.
	Doors open at 7.00 P. M.
Quartet.	7.00 P. M. Band Concert. Dominican Band. Songs by Cloutier's Entertainers and Harmony Pour
awarded.	8.00 P. M. Abbott Bros. Fashion Show. Living Models 9.00 P. M. Fiddler's Contest. Open to entire State. Loving Cup Vaudeville.
Trot.	10.30 P. M. Dancing. Featuring the new Charleston. Prize Fox
on Oil	Seltzer-Rydholm night. Soda Pop race. Amalie Oil night. Dan Tanner, Gen. Sales Mgr., of NY, talks manufacturing. NoKol night. Mr. Bode, Gen Sales Mgr., of Chicago, talks. Central Maine Power Co. night. Saunders the florist night. Atherton Furniture Co. night. Glenwood Range night. Rickenbacker night. Auburn Grange No. 4 night. United Chain Wall Paper night. Buick Used Car Department night. Cushman, Hollis Co. night. Berry Paper Co. night. Pepsinic-Seltzer night. Vermont Maple Products night. Robinson-Wire Jewelry night.

“ ‘This is the proudest moment of my life,’ he began when shouts of ‘speech, speech’ went up from various sections of the Hall. His voice faltered a bit, rose, then drifted away again before he swallowed - with obvious effort - the lump that persisted in rising in his throat, and went on: ‘Yes, sir, I would rather have your applause than the President's chair.’ He couldn’t go on, but the crowd was satisfied.”

A couple of months later, while Mellie was visiting Henry Ford, reporters drew Mellie’s own version of the contest out of him: “ ‘I wasn’t any better,’ he confessed, ‘than those other old fiddlers at Lewiston. The difference was that they came all dressed up and I wore what I got on now [a brown flannel shirt], and I didn’t sit down. I just kicked the chair away. Was the old man scared? He was NOT.’ Where the competing fiddlers played only one tune in the three minutes allotted to each contestant, Mel stood there democratically in his brown flannel shirt sleeves and gave them five pieces.”

Mellie may have been realistic about his lack of musical sophistication; but it is clear from these descriptions that he had somehow found within himself the instincts of a natural performer, along with the self-confidence to stand in front of 7000 people at the Lewiston Armory and win them over. Modest, yes; and deeply affected by the contest win; but unexpectedly a man who was something more than just a fiddler.

At the same time, we see how much the reporter valued Mellie as a symbol of traditional rural culture. In 1925 the country may have been at a sort of balance point, between the rural, small town life earlier in the century and the urbanized, mechanized society that was about to overwhelm it. We will see Henry Ford’s response to these changes; but it is clear even from this local reporter’s comments that there was a pervasive sensitivity to the changes that were taking place, and to the losses that would accompany them.

Lewiston Armory		October 12-17
P ageant of P rogress		
5 AFTERNOONS 2 P. M. to 5 P. M.	6 EVENINGS 7 P.M. to 11 P.M.	
Maine's Greatest Show Event		
SPECIAL PROGRAMS Unique show features, contests with valuable prizes, community wedding, professional vaudeville, band concerts, dancing, quartettes, mid-way. FOUR SOLID HOURS OF ENTERTAINMENT. FUN AND FROLIC FOR 25c		
EXHIBITS OF PROGRESS Pure Food, Industrial, Electrical, Style, Radio, Automobile (new and used), Better Homes and State of Maine Exhibits from Springfield Exposition.		
Free 1926 Ford Sedan Saturday, Oct. 17	6 Admissions for A limited number of books available \$1	
DOWN TOWN BOX OFFICES NOW OPEN		
LEWISTON HAMEL'S JEWELRY STORE ALDEN'S DRUG STORE	AUBURN RIVERSIDE CIGAR STORE. COURT ST.	

Pageant of Progress newspaper ad

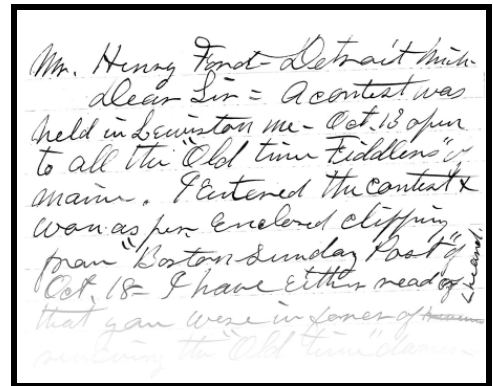
“The war put the billy bow wows into everything. One of the remedies is old-fashioned dancing.”

—Henry Ford, speaking to reporters, December 10, 1925

Henry Ford was a man of instinct, and a man of contradictions. His instincts led him to create products and organizations that changed the industrial world profoundly; yet he was able to assert, under oath, that the American Revolution occurred in 1812. By the 1920's, having been one of the people most responsible for the economic and social changes that the Lewiston reporter was complaining about, Ford was reacting to the new environment by working to revive the traditional dance and music of his youth. At the time Mellie won the Lewiston fiddle contest, Ford had already spent several years locating old time fiddlers and inviting them to play for him in Dearborn. He had hired Benjamin Lovett, a Massachusetts dancing teacher, and brought him to Dearborn to teach quadrilles, contras and other dances to everyone from Ford employees to school children. He had a dance orchestra on staff, which played regularly for dances organized by Ford and Lovett.

And, being Henry Ford, he had publicity, which he encouraged by using his resources freely to support the project. And, being Ford, it was a project. Not content with simply promoting the dances, Ford had developed a plan to collect all the information, standardize and simplify it, and thereby create a single body of dance and music that was portable and universal, a sort of terpsichorean Model T.

On October 23, ten days after the Lewiston contest, Mellie wrote to Henry Ford. This sort of self-promotion was uncharacteristic of Mellie, who was usually modest about his musical skills, as we have seen. But perhaps he was emboldened by his win in Lewiston, and encouraged by the story about the contest that appeared in the October 18 Boston Post; and perhaps he had some urging from friends and relatives, such as we see in the story of his anniversary celebration above. This is what he wrote:



Mellie's letter to Ford

“A contest was held in Lewiston Me, Oct 13 open to all the ‘Old Time Fiddlers’ of Maine. I entered the contest and won as per the enclosed clipping from ‘Boston Sunday Post’ of Oct 18. I have either read or heard that you were in favor of reviving the ‘Old Time’ dances. Should you need an old-time fiddler I would like to ‘try out’ for it. I am 72 years old have played for dances 55 years. Cannot play jazz nor in the position on the violin. Am not a violinist just an ‘Old Time Fiddler’. Please pardon me for the liberty I have taken in writing you & trust there is no harm done.

“P S: In the spring of 1919 I bought a Ford car. She has been banged through about everything but she still goes & I expect to go to town in her tonight to do a ‘Fiddle’ job at our Grange Hall - Best wishes.”

Ironically enough, Mellie’s “fiddle job” was “Maine Night” at the Norway Grange, an evening devoted to promoting all things Maine, featuring “short speeches by prominent men who will enthuse all for a very few minutes each”, according the hopeful phrasing of the *Norway Advertiser*. Mellie represented “Old Time ‘Maine’ Music” on the program. A primary objective of the evening was to promote - “boom” in the language of the time - Norway and its businesses. And Mellie’s letter to Ford was about to set off a “boom” for Norway such as no one had ever imagined.

At first, Ford’s office was not interested: “Mr. Ford has a sufficient number of well trained musicians”, a secretary wrote on November 5. A few days later, however, things had changed, apparently because Mellie’s letter reached Henry Ford himself. On November 11 Ford’s office wrote: “we shall be glad to have you visit us for a few days here at Dearborn”. A November 19 letter expanded the invitation “to include, of course, Mrs. Dunham. It being Mr. Ford’s idea that you would enjoy a trip down here to see what he was doing along the lines of oldtime music.”

Almost instantly word about the invitation got out, and the media storm broke. On November 24 we find Mellie writing to apologize: "I wish to apologize for the trouble + annoyance coming to you as the result of my blunder - when I read your letter of November 11 I was so pleased that I told many of my friends + the next thing I knew it was all over the country."

It was indeed. Frank Campsall, Ford's Assistant Secretary, wrote to Perley Ripley, the local Ford dealer, to arrange Mellie's transportation to Michigan. Meantime, news of the invitation was featured in the Boston papers and beyond, while local folks planned a sendoff that would be covered in newsreels and the Sunday New York Times. Mellie reacted to it all with remarkable equanimity. The front page of the Boston Sunday Post for December 6 featured Mellie, under a headline that said: "Jaunt Fails to Excite Fiddler"; "Completes Plans for Detroit Trip by Purchasing New Cap - Wife Splurges, Buys \$12 Dress".



When they left for Michigan on December 7, Mellie had on his new cap, and was carrying his fiddle case and a pair of Peary model snowshoes for Henry Ford, wrapped in paper. Each of the Dunhams had one suitcase, packed for a week or so. As it turned out, they would not be back until May.

The photo below shows the array of photographers and others who watched the Dunhams get picked up at their home and driven to town in a new Lincoln sedan. In Norway, schools and businesses were closed, Main Street was lined with people waving signs, and Mellie and Gram were paraded right through it all.

Every business organization in the area was represented in the crowd and the parade. Governor Ralph Owen Brewster made the farewell speech, and sent Philip Shorey, Maine's Director of Publicity, off with the Dunhams. Joining them on the train were reporters for the *Boston Herald* and several other papers.

Mellie and Gram arrived in Dearborn on December 8, after a stop in Montreal for a visit with the local snowshoe club. The next morning Mellie arrived at the Ford plant, complete with his entourage. An AP story says: "Mellie is the thirty-ninth



fiddler who has been brought to Dearborn by Henry Ford within recent months, the Ford organization let it be known today. The other 38 came without ostentation and departed as they came.

"For that reason Ford officials wondered why such a crowd appeared today when 'Fiddler Dunham' presented himself. With the 'Fiddler' and his wife, there were eight newspapermen, including four from

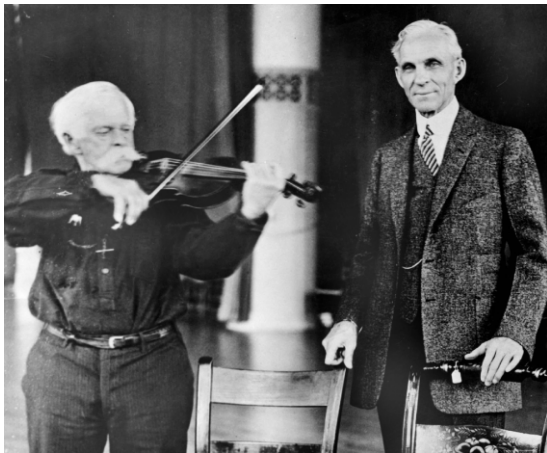
Boston and one from Portland, Me., four photographers, three motion picture camera men and one official representative of the state of Maine."

This last was Mr. Shorey. The *Detroit News* described his predicament: "Mr. Shorey's idea was that on delivering Mr. Dunham into the hands of the Ford organization he could sit down and rest until Mellie was ready to go home. He got a nice room and went to bed. He is no longer in that nice room. He is in a suite of rooms. The hotel management saw to that right after his room telephone began working overtime and a night shift. Newspaper men, news service men, theatrical managers, motion picture men, ex-Maine citizens, and others began to call up. They seemed to think he had Mellie in his clothes closet."

“That man is not going home until my orchestra learns to play that waltz of his as well as he does.”

__Henry Ford, December 11, 1925, after dancing to “Rippling Waves”

Ford and Benjamin Lovett had organized the Early American Dance Orchestra. After some experimentation, they had settled on its instrumentation: violin, cymbalom, dulcimer and sousaphone. Lovett liked it: “They seem to be wonderfully adapted to giving, along with the music that marks time, the delightful atmosphere appropriate to the graceful old dances.” The cymbalom (cimbalon, zimbalom - there are multiple alternate spellings), a large hammered dulcimer of East European origin, was popular in traditional dance bands throughout the Midwest. The “dulcimer” was a regular hammered dulcimer, such as Ford remembered from his youth. Mellie, who had never seen or heard of such instruments, was most interested. The dance hall was in the engineering laboratory at the Ford plant, where one floor of the 800-foot-long building was kept polished and waxed. A space 100 x 30 feet, with a bandstand, was curtained off to make the “ballroom”.



Mellie with Ford, in an oft-reprinted PR shot at the engineering lab, December 11, 1925

Mellie played for Ford and rehearsed with the orchestra for a couple of days, while Lovett took notes on his style and repertoire; but the showpiece of the visit was Ford’s dance on Friday, December 11. However unexpected the throng of newsmen may have been to Ford, he adapted gracefully, and the reporters found him quite accessible for interviews. Then for the dance on Friday, Ford invited the three reporters from Boston papers who had come with the Dunhams. And while the reporters may have thought that the invitation was strictly a journalistic one, they quickly found out differently. The *Boston Post’s* Herbert Baldwin reported that they “were met at the door tonight by Mr. Ford. ‘Good evening, boys’, he said jovially, ‘I’m glad that you were not late. Get your clothes off and get ready to dance.’”

There were about 25 couples at the dance, ranging from ordinary Ford employees to corporate executives. With Lovett calling, they went through an evening of old

time dances: “11 round dances, plain quadrilles, the lancers, the opera reel, Virginia reel and the badger gavotte. Mellie was the hit of the evening.” But Mr. Baldwin was also impressed by Henry Ford: “Mr. Ford is some dancer no wallflower. He dances every dance and he gets a tremendous lot of fun out of it. an extremely graceful figure on the dance floor. He, as does Mrs. Ford, knows every step and there is no more graceful figure possible than Mr. Ford with his wife in the dainty steps of the old fashioned varsovienne.”

And then there was Mellie’s waltz *Rippling Waves*. The *Detroit Free Press* said: “The orchestra seized on Mellie’s tune; the musicians harmonized it, and trimmed it and wove broideries round it, and altogether made it wonderful. The fiddle’s voice was a full contralto, and it did indeed fill every inch of the vast dancing space. Of course, they applauded. He played the waltz again. They applauded more. Again Mellie played.” Ford’s reaction was the comment that heads this section; he later called the tune “as good a waltz as any I ever heard in the world.” And when Henry Ford asked Gram to dance with him, the Dunhams’ evening was surely complete.

Mellie and Gram were having a wonderful time, but remained a little nonplused by it all: “Will you explain why persons attach so much importance to us?”, Gram asked Mr. Baldwin. Baldwin responds: “And so it is explained to them that they come like a breath of clean, crisp air from their own pine woods to a jazzy world satiated with an hysteria of tom-toms, saxophone shrills, crime and bunk.” Strong words indeed, coming from a reporter for a major newspaper, and another indication of the deep discomfort with change

that the Dunhams embodied for large segments of the American public.

Departure from Michigan was set for December 13, with the couple set to travel home via New York and Boston. Gram's letter home to the children was printed in the *Norway Advertiser*: "We are going from here to Alfred Masury's and stay a few days on our way home." This plan was not quite so matter-of-fact as it sounds. Everywhere the Dunhams went, friends from Norway turned up, and Masury proved to be one of the best of them. He vacationed on Lake Pennessewassee, just down the hill from Mellie, and had been a close friend for many years. And he was a Vice President of International Motors, who built Mack trucks. Masury had been the designer of the Mack AC, the original "Bulldog", as remarkable and influential in its own way as the Model T. The Dunhams were to stay with him at his home in Manhattan.

And while the Norway Board of Trade was interested in booming Norway, a couple of Mellie's friends had turned their attention to booming Mellie. On November 25, soon after the Ford invitation, Freeland Howe, the owner of the music store in Norway, wrote Harry Jordan, who was the manager of Keith's theater in Philadelphia. This was another local connection; Jordan was from South Paris (Norway and South Paris form what is in effect a single village). "Mellie would like to cash in on this thing a little," writes Freeland, "I told him today I would write to you about it."

Jordan had not seen press coverage yet: "If you will tell me just what the young man does", he wrote back. Howe sent press clippings, and Jordan replied that he had "discussed him as an attraction for the New York Hippodrome while in New York this week. Kindly let me know how much Dunham would want for a week at the Hippodrome, being of course the outstanding feature, supported by a group of people. Would he be interested with additional weeks?"

Masury, in New York, was fielding more inquiries on behalf of Mellie, from theatrical bookings to recording deals. And when Mellie and Gram arrived on December 16, he was ready for them. The Dunhams and their entourage of reporters - some traveling with them, others from local papers - were met by two tour buses and some 50 people carrying signs saying "Mellie Dunham's Reception Committee." The buses were similarly bedecked with placards, and balloons. Three motorcycle policemen led them to Masury's home on West 71st Street. It was only the beginning of that day.

Mellie and Gram met Mayor John Hylan. Herbert Baldwin was still with them: "Let me have that fiddle," said the Mayor. He adjusted it and tried it like an expert. Then he handed it back." Mellie tuned up. "Little higher on that E string," criticized the Mayor. Then he began 'Turkey in the Straw'. The music swept through the stuffy reception room like a magic spell. 'That brings back old times,' called out the Mayor. 'We boys used to pick the prettiest girls, didn't we Dunham?'" Mellie played, while Gram and others danced

They visited the Stock Exchange: "They were led out onto the Visitor's Gallery and stood there watching the exciting scene below. Suddenly some one spied the Dunhams. Trading actually stopped for some 45 seconds while the brokers waved their greeting. Some youngsters on the floor started singing the tune of 'Dollie Gray,' 'Good-bye, Mellie, you must leave us.' Mellie walked out still waving his cap, and said to a *Post* reporter at his elbow, 'Them fellers aren't bad singers, are they?'"

Freeland Howe's efforts had now resulted in a meeting with Bart Grady, Keith's Boston manager, and others. The Keith organization, Earl Carroll (of *Earl Carroll's Vanities*) and Tex Rickard, who had just opened the new Madison Square Garden and was planning a square dance for 20,000 there, were all interested in Mellie. The Dunhams signed with Keith, and Mellie was blunt: "We need the money for the children.' Whereupon Gram folded up the contract and tucked it safely away in her handbag." And the inevitable happened again: "Mellie and 'Gram' fairly charmed an office full of theatrical men, who up to that time thought they were calloused to everything. But this simple old couple from the backwoods of Maine just melted them and they treated Mellie and 'Gram' as they would have treated their own parents."



Gram, Mellie, the Mayor

“We went over the top and never touched.”

—Mellie Dunham, Telegram to *Norway Advertiser*, December 22, 1925

Once the Keith contract was signed, the sightseeing trip on the way home to Norway was over. When the Dunhams headed for Boston, it was to get to work creating the act that would open at B.F. Keith's on December 22. “MELLIE TO TURN ‘PRO’” trumpeted the front page of the *Boston Post* on December 16. It was front page news, with perhaps a touch of disappointment that such a symbol of old-time America might be succumbing to the “jazzy world.” But Henry Ford had warned the newspapermen: “That man is no simpleton. He has his feet on the ground.”

In 1925 the Keith-Albee organization was an immense theatrical enterprise, virtually a monopoly, with control or minority ownership of 450 theaters and control over booking in 775 theaters. Unlike vaudeville acts who developed their own material and whose relationship with Keith's was simply as performers, the contract with the Dunhams was inclusive: Keith's would develop, manage and present their act, a job that had been handed to Bart Grady.

Grady lost no time in promoting his yet-to-be-developed act. The same *Boston Post* edition that carried the news of the contract contained an ad for Mellie: “NEXT WEEK - Greatest Exponent of Old-Time Dancing - MELLIE DUNHAM - Henry Ford's Famous Champion Fiddler of Maine”. And the Dunhams, already tired from their whirl in New York, spent another day being celebrities. They collected money for the *Post* Santa campaign; Mellie played for Governor Fuller; the Acting Mayor presented him with the key to Boston; and with a bit of urging from the ever-present reporters, Mellie replaced the traffic policeman at a busy downtown intersection, exchanging greetings with drivers as he directed traffic for ten minutes.

The serious work began on Friday the 18th. They had four days to create an act that would headline on Monday evening. Grady advertised for dancers for the show: “WANTED - SIX COUPLES who can dance the old time dances.” But according to an article in the *Norway Advertiser* he had little success: “few can dance to the fiddle here in Boston.” Grady, the article says, was prepared to send back to Norway for some “real steppers.” In the end he hired a group from the Braggiotti-Denishawn School in Boston, a respected academy of modern dance, who might not know the dances but were teachable; and several older folks who did know the dances, including at least one former Norway man living near Boston.

In developing Mellie's act, Grady made two significant decisions. First, he conceived it as a scene of rural life, not just a musician's performance. And second, he included Emma Dunham in the act from the very beginning. The first decision, the classic barn dance scene, is quite natural. The second is more interesting. When Ford's invitation included Gram, he made it possible for the Dunhams to appear as a couple. And while Mellie was the star musician, Gram was never far from the spotlight, and the two functioned together in a way that only emphasized their appeal as a symbol of rural America. The reporters helped confirm this by making her a constant part of their stories.

No one was immune. In Dearborn, Mellie and Gram had gotten acquainted with Frank Campsall, one of Ford's secretaries, who shepherded them around during their visit. In November he writes “Dear Mr. Dunham”; but after their week in Michigan it is “Dear Dad and Mother”, the beginning of an affectionate correspondence that went on for years afterwards.

The result of those few days of hard work in Boston was described by a Norway summer resident who saw Mellie's first show. This is one of the first of the remarkable eyewitness descriptions of the shows, written back to Norway and printed in the *Norway Advertiser*. We retain the original punctuation:

B.F. Keith's THEATRE Tel. Beach 1724
CHRISTMAS WEEK!

EXCLUSIVE APPEARANCE!
The Champion Fiddler
of Maine

MELLIE DUNHAM
Most Famous Exponent of the Old-Time Dances

Henry Ford's Favorite! Popularizing Classics, such as
The Portland Fiddler, Virginia Green, Goodbye, Little Valley,
Polka, Requisite, Boston Fiddler and Lady of the Lake,
As told by the
BRAGGIOTTI-DENISHAWN DANCERS

20 PEOPLE!
A Series of Swedish Favorites in an
OLD-FASHIONED BARN DANCE
WITH "GRAM" DUNHAM
Mr. Dunham will also play his own compositions.

SURROUNDED BY A GRAND HOLIDAY VAUDEVILLE BILL!

ADA REEVE The Famous English Comedienne	WM. & JOE MANDELL DE MAR & LESTER MONTY & GARL
AL & FANNY STEDMAN	BERT ERROL
PRINCETON & WATSON	
AUSTRALIAN WAITES	PATHE NEWS
TOPICS	KEESOP'S FABLES
XMAS PANTOMIME Every Afternoon. A Gift from Santa Claus for Every Boy and Girl, Being the Children.	
SUNDAY	IRENE RICARDO, LAHR & MERCEDES, PAUL TISEN'S BAND, CHARLES RUGGLES, SANDY LANG, LYTTEL & FANT, ROWLAND & MEEHAN, ZELDA BROS., REBLA, Etc.

AT 8 P. M.

“Frank Newhall of Saugus, Mass., was interested in the Dunhams having been coming to Norway for the past fifteen years and wrote the following to Miss Edith M. Smith of the James Smith Shoe Store:

‘Well, Mrs. Newhall and I saw Mellie Dunham and Mrs. Dunham at Keith’s Theatre, Boston, this p. m., (their first performance). Please let me describe to you as near as I can what took place. The theatre was packed to the doors but we had advance seats down near the front. When it came Mellie’s turn, they first gave a moving picture statement as to who he is and where he has been, then the orchestra started to play (When you and I were young, Maggie) the curtain went up very slowly and showed the interior of a barn. A sign over the door said “Mellie’s Barn Dance,” while the orchestra was still playing Mr. and Mrs. Dunham came in through the door, arm in arm. The audience, well they just went wild. All the women cried and I must admit my heart was in my mouth (and so was everybody else in the same condition). They just acted natural. Not a bit stage struck or affected in any way. Here they were in a city that is jazz crazy representing the true old American stock and everybody in that audience knew it and welcomed them. Following Mellie and his wife through the door came six couples. Three couples were old timers and three couples much younger. They danced perfectly. Mrs. Dunham left the stage, Mellie stood at one side with his fiddle and tells the audience the first dance will be a Virginia Reel and the audience goes wild again.

[Here Newhall lists the other numbers Mellie played:]

‘Henry Ford Feature Dance.

‘Rippling Waves Waltz

‘Quadrille - “For the old and young.”

‘Portland Fancy

““Turkey in the Straw,” sometimes called “Old Zip Coon.”

‘Mrs. Dunham comes back on the stage and the crowd won’t let them go. Cheering, crying and applauding. It brought them all back home. After a while Mellie held up his bow and said “The next dance will be an intermission” and they both left the stage. The ovation lasted five minutes longer.

‘Afterwards they had a Christmas tree on the stage for the children and both Mr. and Mrs. Dunham helped distribute the presents to the kiddies and every man and woman in that vast audience was made better by being in their presence.’”

Newhall is describing not just an entertainment, but an audience deeply moved by what they saw - “It brought them all back home”. And more: “every man and woman was made better by being in their presence.” Mellie’s own verdict is contained his short telegram back to Norway, which heads this section.

The *Boston Post* listed the other acts on the bill that night: “A remarkable surrounding holiday bill is provided in addition to Mellie’s barn dance. Excellent comedy and music, interspersed with dancing, are included in the several numbers. Others on the programme included: Al and Fanny Stedman in ‘Pianocapers,’ a comedy skit; Miss Ada Reeve, comedienne, who offered a group of comedy character songs; William and Joe Mandell, comedy acrobats; Jack Princeton and Lillian Watson, in a comedy number; Bert Errol, English female impersonator; Richard DeMar and Lillian Lester in a song and dance skit; the Australian Waites in a boomerang throwing exhibition; and Monty and Cormo in a gymnast act.” It was a typical vaudeville bill; and Mellie was not performing with novices. Ada Reeve was British, a vaudeville veteran of 30 years. Bert Errol was also English, the most successful female impersonator in British music hall; he began appearing in America in 1910.

By December 29 the performers had changed (vaudeville theaters normally changed acts weekly), except for Mellie. He was now performing with the great vaudevillian Bill (later “Bojangles”) Robinson; Ernest R. Ball, who wrote “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” and “Mother Machree”; an actual dog and pony show; and others. The *Boston Post* praised improvements in Mellie’s performance: “Mellie demonstrated that he is coming strong as an honest-to-goodness vaudevillian. Whereas, last week he went through his set part without variation, last night he had so far progressed that he was able to poke fun at Gram and otherwise vary his programme, much to the pleasure of the audience, which was generous in its applause.”

“It is a Mellie Dunham crowd ”

—Account of Hippodrome show, January 1926

Mellie appeared in Boston for three weeks. During the last week there was a dance contest each day, with finals Saturday and loving cups to the winners. On January 4th, the Norway Maine Club of Boston was invited to attend, and to meet Mellie and Gram after the show. There were 135 former Norway people there, an indication of the size of the exodus from small towns to the cities, and the continuing strong connection of these people with the places from which they had emigrated. Similar events were to occur in other cities throughout the Dunhams' tour.

Mellie was explosively successful, but restive after so long in the city. “He may not thank us for printing it.” was the *Norway Advertiser's* comment on this letter:

“We went out to the Wayside Inn [in Sudbury, Mass., west of Boston, then owned by Ford].the Manager, took us for a long walk over the hills, where we could not see a building of any kind. But we did see the tracks in the snow, of rabbits, partridge, weasel, squirrels and they looked like old friends.

“It was the first time we have had a chance to walk on the ground for three weeks. They keep us pretty close. I suppose they have to do so in order to convince the public that we are a wonderful curiosity.

“I have seen a bear in a cage walk back and forth the length of the cage and keep it up for a long time. I know just how that bear felt.

“The people here are very nice to us, but sometime we hope to see Ketchum [Mellie had a hunting cabin in the mountains north of Bethel, Maine] - cross the old bridge over Sunday river - and run, jump, and scream. We hanker to get into God's own country - beyond the fences.”

Instead, they headed for the Hippodrome, in New York. This was one of the most spectacular of the twenty or so theaters controlled by Keith-Albee in and near Manhattan. It was styled like a Moorish palace, held 6000 people, and had a stage large enough for circus acts to perform. Downstairs was a miniature village and petting zoo, with child care, where people could leave their youngsters while they saw the show. With them went the dance troupe, both the Braggiotti-Denishawn dancers and the oldsters hired from Boston. Mellie and Gram were now in the hands of a woman named Errol Trainor, whom Mellie called a Private Secretary but who was also a manager for the act. Miss Trainor's Draconian protection of the Dunhams in Boston was described in a letter to the *Advertiser* by O.W. Brown, formerly of Norway, a reporter for the *Boston Herald*: “I had a much easier time during the past summer in reaching President Coolidge at Swampscott than in getting to Mellie.”

The show at the Hippodrome was a repeat of the Boston success, and again we have a description from a letter to the *Advertiser*, from a woman with close Norway connections:

“Miss Mildred Seitz of New York writes us the following letter.: ‘Yesterday afternoon Mrs. Shorey and I went to the Hippodrome to hear “Mellie” play. I wish I had a magic pen, for nothing less could adequately describe the whole amazing affair. First let me say that if there is any one left in the state of Maine who still cherishes a fear that either the state or the Dunhams are being “made a goat of,” they can wrap that fear up in a nice neat package and put it away for some other use. The audience laughs at the act but they laugh with “Mellie” and not at him. There is a simple and unassuming dignity about both “Mellie” and “Gram” which precludes any hint of mockery.

‘I phoned the house manager, to see if it would be possible to pay a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Dunham. the guardian of the gate let me and Mrs. Shorey through and on across the huge Hippodrome stage to where “Mellie” and “Gram” stood waiting in the wings. And there, quite at his ease in the midst of managers, scene shifters, secretaries and what not, was Vivian Akers, already busy with plans for the special Maine Night program.

‘I wonder if I can give you the slightest idea of the incomprehensible immensity of the thing “Mellie” is doing. The Hippodrome is not as large as it once was when it was famous as being the biggest theatrical house in the world, but it is considerable larger than that little cottage on Crockett Ridge or the Heywood Club or even the big barn on the lake.

‘The other numbers on the program included an elaborate act by a troupe of Chinese jugglers and

acrobats with a gorgeous back curtain of colorful Chinese embroideries and costumes of the bewildering beauty that only the Orient can produce. Then there was a Hawaiian “prince” with his band of South Sea singers and dancers, a company of “diving-girls” who did all sorts of stunts in the Hippodrome’s famous tank, and half a dozen other typical vaudeville “acts” and in the midst of all that super-theatricalism and lavish display of paint, powder, scenery, costuming, and lack of it, “Gram” in her quiet dress and simple dignity with not a thought beyond taking the best of care of “Mellie” and he, perhaps a bit nervous underneath but outwardly calm and unaffected, fiddling away through the program of his beloved dances and getting the biggest “hand” of the entire show!

‘ we laughed and applauded and I think we wanted to cry a little bit, it was so intensely human, and I know that we came away from the theatre more than ever proud of Mr. and Mrs. Dunham.’”

Another letter, from a South Paris woman, described the audience’s reaction to the act: “When the entire act is done the audience keeps right on cheering and shouting for Mr. Dunham He comes back again and again, making a courtly little bow. He came back that Wednesday afternoon seven or eight times and the audience would have kept calling for him had not the management started the next act. As the next act begins a large part of the audience leave the theater. It is a Mellie Dunham crowd who are attending the Hippodrome these days and when Mellie is through they are ready to go home. The remainder of the bill does not interest them.”

Very shortly after the successful New York opening, the pace accelerated. First, Keith-Albee arranged with the Dunhams for an extended tour that would keep them on the road until May. Second, a plan was concocted to create Norway-related publicity pieces for the tour. Third, Victor wanted to record Mellie’s tunes; and finally, the Carl Fischer music publishing company wanted to publish “Rippling Waves” and a book of fiddle tunes that would include several of Mellie’s compositions.

Mellie writes “The Akers Person blew in today, as usual just when he was needed and with everything to work with. He looked pretty good to us, if any inquiries should be made.” This was, of course, Vivian Akers, down from Norway; the *Advertiser* reported that he was there “to superintend the scenic part of the special program booklet at the Hippodrome for Maine Night to carry out plans for an artistic program to boom Norway, conceived by Don C. Seitz, on his recent visit here.” Maine Night again, and again with a crowd of 100 or more people with Norway connections, family and summer people both.

And Norway again. Seitz had grown up there; his father, a minister, published a religious newspaper. He started in the newspaper business by setting type, and went on to become the Business Manager of the New York World and an author. Akers used his own photographs to create a four-page brochure with pictures of Mellie and Norway, and space to print in advertising for shows and theaters. The cover of this booklet is a reproduction of Akers’ cover, with our title printed in the space where the Hippodrome and other theaters advertised their shows. 50,000 were printed for Mellie’s tour, the *Advertiser* reported.

We assume that Don Seitz invited Akers; but Mellie himself sent for Nate and Cherry a few days after he opened in New York, a slightly cryptic message that said simply “Drop everything and come at once”. This was, of course, more big news: “PRETTY GRANDDAUGHTER WILL PLAY FOR MELLIE” was the headline. The occasion was the Victor recording contract, and the trio was in the Victor studio in New York almost as soon as the Nobles arrived. Meantime, Fischer seems to have stolen a march on Henry Ford, who had announced that he would publish Mellie’s waltz in his book of dances; by early spring the sheet music for “Rippling Waves” was in stores, and *Mellie Dunham’s Fiddlin’ Dance Tunes* had joined it, complete with a photo of Mellie and Henry Ford, and four of Mellie’s own tunes plus 46 other, mostly standard, tunes. On our back cover and inside covers we reprint the front of the “Rippling Waves” sheet music, with the fiddle music for that and the other three Dunham tunes.

Nate and Cherry stayed through the Hippodrome engagement, and appearances in Philadelphia, Newark and Brooklyn. They never played for Mellie in the show, which relied on the theater orchestra for accompaniment (and occasionally overwhelmed Mellie’s playing). But after they had waltzed together, father and daughter, alone on the huge stage at the Hippodrome while Mellie played “Rippling Waves”, they became a part of the act for a few weeks, waltzing at each show, sometimes alone with a single spotlight following them. They returned home in mid-February, just as Mellie opened in Providence.

“Another week gone. They go like flocks of ducks in the night.”

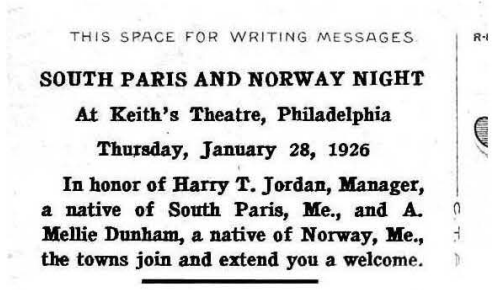
___Letter from Mellie, February 1926

The Dunhams were now booked on Keith’s regular weekly schedule: open Monday, close Saturday, travel Sunday. The logistics of this depended upon reliable train service and Pullman cars. It was routine for any traveler to take a train in the evening, sleep on the train, and wake up at his destination, as the Dunhams had done between New York and Boston. Here is their schedule after they left Brooklyn - it must have looked like a typical vaudeville tour:

February	15 - Providence	March	1 - Washington	April	5 - Youngstown	May	3 - Syracuse
	22 - Baltimore		8 - Cleveland		12 - Cleveland		10 - Lowell
			15 - Detroit		19 - Toledo		17 - Portland
			22 - Indianapolis		22 - Grand Rapids		29 - Return to Norway
			29 - Cincinnati		26 - Pittsburg		

In Philadelphia the Dunhams had participated in another Maine Night, this one under the aegis of Harry Jordan, who had contacted Keith’s about Mellie in the first place. The Norway and South Paris Boards of Trade got together and printed 6000 souvenir postcards, which were distributed to the audience. Jordan wrote that he made a speech, and “certainly did boost the old village.” The reception afterward hosted some 200 former Norway residents and summer visitors to the area.

Back in Norway, Vivian Akers and friends Fred Cummings, Ralph Haskell and Henry Cullinan had been busy, carving a six-foot-long fiddle with a bow to match, for Mellie on his return to Norway. The carving ended up over the front door of the Dunham home, with the bow leaning in the doorway waiting for a fiddler of the appropriate size to pick it up and play.



We can follow the tour through the letters that came back to Norway and appeared in the *Advertiser*, and the Dunhams’ regular letters to



Frank Campsall at Ford. February 21: “We are loafing away the day here in Providence.” Week of March 1: “Playing Washington this week. The act going over the best it has anywhere. A great week for us. We have met the President [Coolidge, whose uncle, John Wilder, was a fiddler]. met a lot of Maine people. We went to the capitol and saw Congress in session. I don’t think I shall try to run for Congress when it comes to disputing I should get mad and ready to fight and I am too small for that.

We went to the Smithsonian Institute. I had my photo taken with a pair of snowshoes I made that have been to the North Pole since I last saw them.” A letter from Gram is clearer about the Washington success: “We had lots of applause in New York, but nothing like the reception we got last night. They called us back and called and called until Miss Trainor had to tell the electrician to shut off the lights. We done what they call ‘stopped the show.’”

From Cleveland the *Advertiser* heard from Dr. L.H. Trufant, a former Norway physician: “They are just the same as ever, hale and hearty and the same good old souls as of old.” At the show, Trufant saw another display of enthusiasm: “It takes a lot to awaken a Cleveland audience. but from the time the curtain rolled up and revealed Mellie until his seventh and final encore the audience was wholly his. Even after the next act had begun they were still trying to get him to respond once more.” From Detroit, Mellie wrote that they had been to visit Ford plants and Henry’s 5000-acre farm. They had also been to visit Mrs. Ford: “ so nice to us and seemed so interested in our welfare and success.”

The Dunhams’ Indianapolis appearance included another gathering of Norway people, “ that

welcomed Mellie to Indianapolis but whose hearts were in Maine.” Mellie writes to Campsall that “One of our townsmen has written a very flowery article about Gram and myself. he has dug up a lot of old stuff we had forgotten years ago. He has magnified these things and polished them up so they seem like rare jewels.”

“We hear from home nearly every day,”the Dunhams report from Cincinnati. And from Youngstown, Gram says: “Here we are in a new town and like it here very much. The Manager has let me have the kitchenette in the theater. I have to furnish dishes and have bought white enamel and have some of our people to lunch every day. The Manager brought me three apple pies and a great big loaf of frosted cake. .His wife made them. .Don’t you think everyone is very nice to me?”

They were in Cleveland again, at a different theater from their earlier engagement, for a week, then spent three days in Toledo and three days in Grand Rapids. In Toledo the Dunhams stopped the show three times; finally Miss Trainor took charge and simply refused to allow more encores. At Grand Rapids Mellie says “They met us at the station with a string of ‘Fords’ and a brass band. .The people are filling the theater.”

Gram’s letter to Frank Campsall from Grand Rapids was positively frisky: “I am having a great time here shopping. I have bought me three new dresses and a new pair of shoes and now I can dress up, but I guess I will wait until I get back to Portland and then put on my new dresses and show them to our friends.”

Gram is showing changes that others saw clearly. Mellie is described as the same man people had known at home. A Norway resident saw him at the Hippodrome: “Truly it seemed to us as if Mellie’s heart was right in his work, as if he was back home with all those he loved.” And another, from Philadelphia: “Mellie will be the Mellie we all knew until he is taken to the great beyond. None of this publicity has turned a thought in his head, he possesses just the same splendid philosophical love for everybody as he did in the days when his daily toils were of his own choosing.” But here is the same person, describing Gram: “and now a. word about Gram. I have never seen her look so care free, she seems to have come to a realizing sense that there is really something in this world but hard work, and she is going to bring home to you a something different in feeling that is hard to describe but which every one of you will be happy to see.” Mellie himself noticed it; after they were home again, he writes to Campsall: “Gram is fine. She has certainly left 20 years somewhere on the circuit.”

But there is a strange twist to this. Errol Trainor wrote to Campsall from Pittsburgh with a different story. Gram, she explained, had been suffering continually from angina: “After every ‘sleeper-jump’ she has this ‘indigestion’ .it is usually a day or two before she gets over it. I have seen some very acute symptoms of angina. I hope you will use your influence to prevent her ever going out in this way ever again.it would be the end of her if she ever undertook such a thing again - I am far too fond of little Gram to want her rushed into eternity any sooner than is necessary.”

I have guarded them so carefully ,” says Miss Trainor; as the Dunhams headed towards home, appearing in Syracuse and Lowell, and finally Portland. If Gram was carefree, it was surely in part because of the care, attention and protection provided by Errol Trainor. And as with most of the people who met the Dunhams, Miss Trainor’s affection was not contrived; she visited them in Maine long after the 1926 trip, and attended Mellie’s funeral in 1931, by that time Mrs. Charles Gooding, of Dorchester, Massachusetts..



**Cleveland: Gram, Miss Trainor,
Hotel Manager R.M. Keith, Mellie**

“It is not very warm yet, but the sun is shining and the wind is right ”

___ Letter from Mellie and Gram to Frank Campsall, June 3, 1926

On May 18 Mellie wrote to Campsall with a characteristically evocative description of the reception in Portland: “They brought us across the city in an auto and I waved my hands and bowed many times - They are giving us as much honor as they could if I had won a war and brought back a conquered country under my arm.” The theater was sold out for the week, and Thursday, May 20, was Norway Night. Vivian Akers’ tour advertising piece was used as an “Advertiser Extra” by the Norway paper, publicizing Mellie’s week at B.F. Keith’s in Portland, and of course the May 20 festivities. The climax of Norway Night was another spectacular display from Mellie’s neighbors:

“An 80 pound basket of mayflowers and a seven foot violin were presented Mellie and Gram Dunham following their performance in Keith’s theatre here tonight by a delegation of nearly 500 fellow residents of Norway.

“The presentation was preceded by an original musical sketch with the three characters, Mrs. Amy M. Tracy, vocalist, Marion Haskell, violinist and Ruth Cummings Huston, pianist, all of Norway dressed in quaint old new England costumes. When Mrs. Tracy had concluded singing, “Fiddle and I,” she responded to an encore by leading Gram and Mellie Dunham to the stage center.

“The Hon. Bertrand G. McIntire of Norway was master of ceremonies. Assuring Mellie and Gram of Norway’s unwavering loyalty and happiness in their achievements he presented a huge basket, formed of willow and pine boughs and filled with mayflowers and the huge violin, the creations and gifts of the townspeople of Norway. Mr. McIntire suggested that the huge violin be placed outside the Dunham home as a

lifetime reminder of Mellie’s notable rise to nation wide fame.”

By the time the Dunhams took the train from Portland to Norway on May 24 the fiddle had been hung over their front door, and the Kiwanis Club had finished organizing the homecoming they had originally anticipated in December, before the vaudeville tour was arranged. Schools were closed and children waved flags and miniature fiddles while Chandler’s Band from Portland led a long line of cars down Main Street to the reviewing stand.

Errol Trainor came with the Dunhams, attentive to the end, and very likely relieved as well. The crowd cheered her, too, having read about her in Mellie’s letters home to the *Advertiser*. Reporter Herbert Baldwin was still on hand, too, recording the event: “‘Well,’ said Mellie, as he stepped out of the limousine and salaamed at the crowd, ‘here’s the prodigal calf; have you killed the fatted son?’”

They were finally driven home. “‘Well, I see the stove’s blacked,’ said Gram, the first remark she made when she went through the front door. ‘And I see somebody’s moved my workbench, where’s that gone?’ said Mellie.” What sort of mixture of relief and happiness, strangeness and perhaps a bit of sadness, the return home evoked in Mellie and Gram does not seem to have been recorded. They were, clearly, happy to return to the family and to familiar ways. Mellie’s talk at the end of the tour was of planting, fishing, the cabin at Ketchum, and other



parts of life on the farm. Gram got her own kitchen back. And the children, who had resented having to share Mellie and Gram with the world, got their Grampy and Grammy back.

“Saturday night always comes ”

— Mellie to reporter, in Portland, May 1926

Returning to familiar scenes did not mean returning to the old life entirely, however. Mellie now commanded \$100 a night - “by order of the Keith circuit people.” During the tour Mellie had written “They seem to be afraid I won’t last out the trip. They don’t know the stuff the old people of Maine are made of.” He now seemed bent on proving it again. He continued writing to Frank Campsall. July 22.: “Last week we played for 6 dances and rode 1100 miles in the car.” Then in December : “I want to tell you of one trip we had in a Ford sedan. Last Saturday we were to play at Newton N.H. We had 2 or 3 inches of new snow - a cold day and high wind- We left home about 10:30 A.M. and got there about 5:30 P.M. with the glass at zero - We were pretty cold - Had our supper went to the hall - played to 12 - Got into the little “Sedan” about 12:30 A.M. with the glass 4 below zero headed her for Norway and rolled up to our door at 6:50 A.M., just sunrise - with the glass at 10 below zero. Gram goes with us to all the places we play.”

The dances were large and successful: “There were at one of the dances 1815 dance tickets sold and there were over 500 couples dancing at once.” And Mellie speculated about another contract with Keith: “We do not hear anything as to whether we go back on the stage next winter.” There was one brief engagement; but the pattern of the next several years of the Dunhams’ lives would remain pretty much the same, traveling New England and playing all kinds of venues, from large hotels to the Norway Grange to local children’s camps. The money from the Keith tour was gone. Except for what he could do for his grandchildren and others, Mellie never really cared about money, and he had “loaned” - with no prospect of repayment - or given away much of it, happy to help his friends.

In the winter of 1930 Mellie arranged bookings in Florida, where he appeared in St. Petersburg and elsewhere. It was a pleasant trip; Mellie and Gram arrived home in March, as the Maine winter was ending. And then the chimney of the old house, which, like so many chimneys in so many old houses should have been repaired, caught fire in the night, and Mellie was left with four fiddles and the key to Boston, the clothes he had managed to struggle into, and Gram with a nightgown and fur coat. Mellie was still news, so the reporters came again, and Mellie didn’t disappoint: “Never say die! When adversity strikes you - why, strike back and knock it out!”

Neighbors rallied, and the Dunhams had a new house in a matter of weeks. And by the end of the summer of 1931, Mellie was 78, still traveling and playing. At the beginning of September he had been north to play in Jackman and Greenville, Maine; then shortly afterward he was taken sick. In spite of an emergency operation on the 22nd, Mellie continued to fail, and died on September 27. Gram, truly lost, it seems, after seeing the destruction of her home and the death of the husband she had been so close to, lived until the fall of 1933. She had “just been existing” since Mellie’s death, she told a reporter. Finally, home again on Crockett Ridge after being hospitalized, the problems Miss Trainor had worried so about caught up with Emma, and she had a stroke - a “shock”, in the vernacular of the time. She died quietly on October 31.

The Dunhams were still news seven years after their great success: “Widow of Maine’s Famous Fiddler” was the headline for Gram. Even with the Depression and all the changes in the rest of the world, the deep impression Mellie made was still there. “It brought them all back home,” says Mr. Newhall in the letter we quoted earlier, and this feeling about the Dunhams lingered for a very long time.

For Mellie himself, one can do no better than to end with his own words. In Portland, at the end of his great tour, he was musing for a reporter. Mellie always had a way with words, and what the reporter wrote down is surely as perfect an epitaph as Mellie ever could have wished for himself:

“Saturday night always comes,” said Mellie sadly, his mild blue eyes dimming a little. “That’s the only trouble with the show business. I’ve made lots of friends in every city I’ve been in and Saturday night I have to leave ‘em. I’m a natural mixer and I’ve made friends with everyone, stage hands and all. I pay just as much attention to them as I would to the President, and they’re all awfully nice people. Of course I’ll be glad to get home, but I hate to leave so many nice folks. But then, that’s the way of life. Saturday night always comes and you have to leave friends you’ve made.”

Happy Hours Waltz

Mellie Dunham

2

mf

1

2

f

Detailed description: This block contains the first four measures of the 'Happy Hours Waltz'. It is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 3/4 time signature. The first measure starts with a dynamic marking of *mf* and a fermata over a quarter note. The second measure has a first ending bracket over the final two notes. The third measure has a second ending bracket over the final two notes, with a dynamic marking of *f* below it. The fourth measure concludes the phrase with a double bar line.

Norway Schottische

Mellie Dunham

3

mf

1

2

v

Detailed description: This block contains the first four measures of the 'Norway Schottische'. It is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps and a 4/4 time signature. The first measure starts with a dynamic marking of *mf* and a fermata over a quarter note. The second measure has a first ending bracket over the final two notes. The third measure has a second ending bracket over the final two notes, with a dynamic marking of *v* above it. The fourth measure concludes the phrase with a double bar line.

Haywood Schottische

Mellie Dunham

4

mf

1

2

f

Detailed description: This block contains the first four measures of the 'Haywood Schottische'. It is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps and a 4/4 time signature. The first measure starts with a dynamic marking of *mf* and a fermata over a quarter note. The second measure has a first ending bracket over the final two notes. The third measure has a second ending bracket over the final two notes, with a dynamic marking of *f* below it. The fourth measure concludes the phrase with a double bar line.

RIPPLING WAVES

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DUNHAM**

*Maine's
Champion Fiddler*



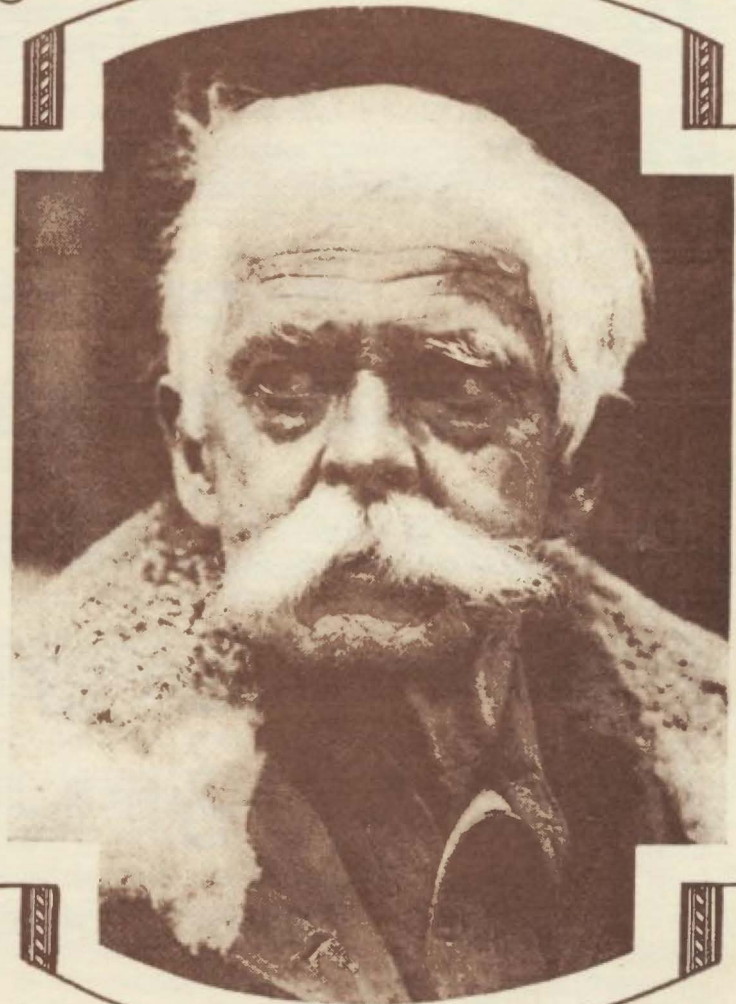
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