

Spring 5-13-2023

## Texas Exceptionalism and Texas Style Fiddling: Fiddle Contests, Patriarchs, and Musical Markers

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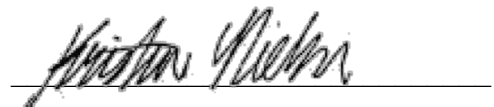
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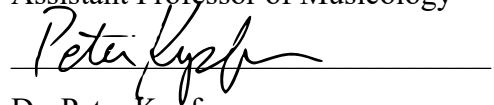
TEXAS EXCEPTIONALISM  
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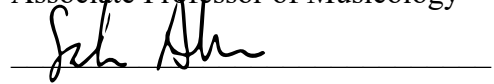
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TEXAS EXCEPTIONALISM  
AND TEXAS-STYLE FIDDLING:  
FIDDLE CONTESTS, PATRIARCHS, AND MUSICAL MARKERS

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Meadows School of the Arts  
Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Music

with a

Major in Musicology

by

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May 13, 2023

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to first thank my advisor, Dr. Nielsen. It has been a pleasure learning the ropes from you.

Thank you to my parents, Dave and Charlotte, for supporting me through this important step in  
my career.

To Katie Crawford, Dr. Rebecca Glass, “Texas Shorty,” and “Wes” Westmoreland: thanks, y’all  
for your time and your insights. This project would not exist without your help. I so look forward  
to continuing the work.

Thank you to my right-hand woman Linda, and my left-hand, right-brained, double-ventricled  
partner Tony.

Most importantly, thank you Neelix, who always woke me up for breakfast.

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Texas Exceptionalism

And Texas-Style Fiddling:

Fiddle Contests, Patriarchs, and Musical Markers

Advisor: Dr. Kristina Nielsen

Master of Music Conferred May 13, 2023:

Thesis Completed April 13, 2023

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This is dedicated to my first teacher, Dale Morris Sr., a true Texas Fiddle Player, accent and all.

I hope my work makes you proud.



## CHAPTER 1

Every June, thousands of fiddle players from the continental United States converge on a small Idaho town just off the Oregon border, Weiser, for the National Old Time Fiddler's Contest. For one week, fiddlers compete against their peers in multiple rounds of three-minute sets until the contestant pool has been whittled down to the top three players. However, the main event, and the fiercest competition, is in the Grand National Champion Division. This division is open to fiddlers of any age, so one usually sees a mix of ambitious teenagers competing against fiddle players with multiple decades of experience.<sup>1</sup> Adding to the intensity is the fact that many of the contestants in this division have multiple fiddle contest victories to their name when they step on that stage. In 2022, a man from Porter, Texas, named Carl Hopkins won third place in this division. This is hardly remarkable for him as he has a long history of fiddle contest wins and a spot in the Texas Fiddlers Hall of Fame. The most interesting things about this performance are the interactions between Hopkins and the contest's M.C. At the end of his third-round set, the M.C. sends him offstage with the following: "Carl Hopkins, from Porter, Texas, bringing us a little Texas up here to Idaho!"<sup>2</sup> Later, in the fourth and final round, she introduces Hopkins this way: "Carl's heading at us *of course* from Porter, Texas! [laughing at something off stage] You can't mistake Texas!"<sup>3</sup> Something about Hopkins's performance and general demeanor charms the M.C. in a way that she equates to his being from Texas. Even though she

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<sup>1</sup> National Old Time Fiddlers Association, "Contestants and Accompanists," Accessed March 17, 2023, <https://www.fiddlecontest.org/contestants/>.

<sup>2</sup> Lyle Dixon, "Grand National Champion, Round 3 (Top 8)-2022 National Old Time Fiddle Contest (Weiser), Accessed March 17, 2023, <https://youtu.be/Y4rxG9k4plM>, 11:45.

<sup>3</sup> Dixon, "Grand National Champion, Round 4 (Top 5)," Accessed March 17, 2023, <https://youtu.be/pCmggPio104>, 13:27.

hears a division full of equally impressive players, she makes no connections between any other player's state of residence and their musicality or personality, not even for the first or second-place winners—Luke Price from Oregon and Tashina Clarridge-Lindley from California.

Hopkins's Texan-ness, the M.C.'s comments imply, makes him unique among all contestants.

Indeed, "Texas Fiddle Player" is a unique musical identity within the greater North American fiddling community. Members of that community practice it and believe in it; musicians outside of that identity agree that it exists. But one would be hard-pressed to find any concrete definition of a Texas Fiddle Player, or of Texas Style Fiddling for that matter; nonetheless, the label persists. It is a musical form of "Texas Exceptionalism," or the general insistence on Texas's uniqueness in American history and culture. Texas Exceptionalism plays out in the public-school classroom, where the Texas Revolution is taught with the same gravitas as the 1776 American Revolution, and a Catholic mission building as a symbol of Texas's emancipation from Mexico (the Alamo). Additionally, Texas public school students recite this immediately after the traditional Pledge of Allegiance: "Honor the Texas Flag. I pledge allegiance to thee, Texas, one state, under God, one and indivisible."<sup>4</sup> Some Texans like to proclaim that their state still maintains the right to secede from the United States as a sovereign nation at any time (when in fact it cannot).<sup>5</sup> It gives rise to the idea of "true Texans" are a different breed from people who happen to live in Texas. Contemporary Texas historian Ty Cashion writes that from the perspective of *true* Texans, "[history] is not about self-awareness. It is about telling anybody within earshot that Texas is a special place, populated by rugged and

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<sup>4</sup> Texas State Library and Archives Commission, "Pledge of Allegiance to the Texas State Flag," Accessed April 4, 2023, <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ref/abouttx/flagpledge.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ty Cashion, "The Traditional Mind," in *Lone Star Mind: Reimagining Texas History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 49.

persistent individualists.”<sup>6</sup> The belief in a unique style of American fiddling by both Texan and non-Texan fiddlers alike certainly falls under this “Texceptional” brand.

From a sociological perspective, Texas Exceptionalism is not far removed from the concept of nationalism, which itself comes from the idea of a sovereign nation. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” Nationalism, in turn, is a shared ideology between people who believe in their community’s inherent sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> Culturally speaking, Anderson argues that nationalism rose from the embers of a decline in religiosity in eighteenth-century Europe, citing two main factors for this shift. First, he notes the beginnings of global exploration, which abruptly shifted explorers’ conception of the variety of humanity on Earth.<sup>8</sup> Second, he describes the decline of sacred written language in favor of the vernacular. For two communities to be connected religiously, they would have had to share a common written language for their sacred texts. That written, sacred language could be learned and in turn give outsiders a path to becoming insiders.<sup>9</sup> The turn of the eighteenth century saw a general decline in texts published in sacred languages like Latin and a rise of publications in vernacular languages, which lowered the necessity for learning to read in Latin. This decline of a uniting, sacred, written language could only be a catalyst to the fragmentation of otherwise united communities.<sup>10</sup> Texas history does not demonstrate a decline in religiosity to the same degree Anderson describes. In fact, the Texas fiddle-players at the center of this project are descended from European-Americans who continued their ancestral colonization cycle by immigrating south and west to modern-day

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<sup>6</sup> Cashion, “The Traditional Mind,” 27.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Texas. However, Texas Exceptionalism behaves like Anderson's conception of nationalism in that a small group of people, relative to the full population of United States, believes it to be true, and outsiders accept it. Additionally, Texas fiddle players engage with the symbols, rituals, shared histories, and musical traits included in this project as if these were their own set of vernacular commodities, different from their American equivalents. The point in framing Texas-style fiddling within the context of Texas Exceptionalism is not to highlight truth versus fiction, or to perpetuate Texas Exceptionalism narratives in American music history. This framework can illuminate the ways in which members of the Texas fiddling community orient themselves in the grand scheme of American folk music. To say that Texas Style Fiddling is Texas Exceptionalism manifested is simply to say that Texas Fiddle Players group themselves in contrast to their American peers, and that these same peers acknowledge the existence of that group within the greater American fiddling community.

Communities, imagined or otherwise, have traditions or sets of symbolic rituals and practices with rules regarding their use; it follows that these traditions distinguish those communities from each other.<sup>11</sup> Again, it does not matter whether there is any truth to claims of a practice's exclusivity to specific communities. When put into practice, a tradition communicates community-specific values and norms, and establishes continuity with an imagined past, that tradition is most likely invented. British historian Eric Hobsbawm employs the term to indicate practices that are overtly invented and those that "[emerged] in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period...and establishing themselves with great rapidity."<sup>12</sup> To that end, traditions are ideologically functional, rather than practical. Otherwise unremarkable

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3. Hobsbawm uses the word "societies" instead of "communities."

<sup>12</sup> Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1.

practices within the greater American fiddling community become remarkable when fiddle players symbolically connect them to Texas, giving them invented qualities. For example, the fiddle contests discussed in my first chapter are functionally identical to fiddle contests in the Southern and Northwestern United States; however, the “Texexceptional” spin on many of the practices within those fiddle contests gives them an invented quality that is not felt in out-of-state contests.

It is important to address Texas Exceptionalism again before moving on, as it is, at its core, an Anglo-centric invention that privileges Anglo-centric peoples and views when it comes to writing the history of the state. A quintessential text in this vein is T. R. Fehrenbach’s *Lone Star* from 1968. In short, *Lone Star* places Anglo-Texans, European descendants who primarily speak English, at the center of Texas history, privileging a specific version of their narratives over the multitudes of others who contributed to the state’s development.<sup>13</sup> Fehrenbach’s Texans were and are tenacious, frontier-hardened individualists who earned their claim to the land through a literal game of “Cowboys and Indians.” Fehrenbach’s Davy Crockett could only be played by John Wayne, heroically blowing himself up *with* the Alamo in the 1960 film *The Alamo*, lest he let the Mission fall back into Mexico’s hands.<sup>14</sup> The Texas Fiddle Player equivalent would be Billy Bob Thornton’s Davy Crockett from the 2004 re-telling of the story, also titled *The Alamo*, standing on one of the mission’s walls, silhouetted against the rising sun on a desert landscape, and improvising a suspiciously modern-sounding fiddle solo against Santa Ana’s battle hymn.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, contemporary historians of Texas and the American South are revising such narratives to take into account the broader range of voices that actually participated

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<sup>13</sup> Ty Cashion, “Introduction” in *Lone Star Mind: Reimagining Texas History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Cashion, “The Traditional Mind,” 33.

<sup>15</sup> *The Alamo*, directed by John Lee Hancock (Touchstone Pictures, 2004), 1:27:29-1:29:23.

in the development of the state.<sup>16</sup> However, Fehrenbach's personification of Anglo-Texans works for this project because Texas Style fiddling is, in effect, Anglo-Texas folk music, and the narratives surrounding tradition, history, people, and musicality are all Anglo-centric.

The "Chicken and Bread Days" fiddle contest in Bowie, Texas, offers a microcosm for considering Anglo-centrism in Texas fiddling. The town is named for another Alamo folk hero, James Bowie, and the name is supposed to evoke his spirit of "courage, strength, and faith."<sup>17</sup> The name "Chicken and Bread Days" refers to the town's history with one of Texas's largest poultry producers in the 1920s—the M. Johnson Poultry Ranch—and a man named Amon Carter who peddled sandwiches to railway workers until a 1908 city ordinance prevented such activity. Around the same time, the Johnsons started their poultry business with "\$15 and one box of chicks."<sup>18</sup> Both stories are rife with the gumption and resilience in the face of adverse conditions that is part and parcel of Fehrenbachian Texas Exceptionalism. The mythology of the Johnson's humble beginnings conveniently leaves out those who helped them cultivate the farm, grow the feed, or process the eggs and the chickens. The contest itself has a legacy of similar resilience in that it was the first contest to be held amid the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic.<sup>19</sup> While the contest and its connected festival boast about its century-old roots, it has only been held annually for the last twenty-seven years. Participants thus play the (invented) part of artistic champions of those days "done gone."

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<sup>16</sup> Examples of this scholarship include Bryan Burrough's *Forget the Alamo: The Rise and Fall of an American Myth* (2021), Ty Cashion's *Lone Star Mind: Reimagining Texas History* (2018), and Glen Sample Ely's *Where the West Begins: Debating Texas Identity* (2011).

<sup>17</sup> City of Bowie, "Our History," Accessed February 28, 2023, <http://www.cityofbowietx.com/207/Our-History#:~:text=Before%20the%20formal%20formation%20of%20the%20City%20of,after%20the%20great%20Texas%20hero%20James%20%22Jim%22%20Bowie.>

<sup>18</sup> Pam Tucker, "Chicken and Bread Days-First Live Fiddle Convention in Texas this Year," Accessed February 28, 2023, <https://bluegrasstoday.com/chicken-and-bread-days-first-live-fiddle-convention-in-texas-this-year/#:~:text=For%2025%20years%2C%20Bowie%2C%20Texas%20has%20held%20an,the%20home%20of%20the%20world%E2%80%99s%20largest%20chicken%20ranch.>

<sup>19</sup> Tucker, "Chicken and Bread Days."

The sociological aspect of this exploration informs the musicological. Just as the concept of nationalism is based in political ideology over historical or scientific fact, the concept of identity manifested in music is equally subjective. Theorist Nicholas Cook has written about the process of drawing connections between musical stimuli and emotional reactions. In a study about commercials, Cook demonstrates music's role as a binding agent between an image and an idea. One of his examples is a commercial for a Citroen XZ 16-v that uses the overture to Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* to connect the car's technologically and visually attractive qualities to the idea of fine art.<sup>20</sup> We can retroactively apply this concept to Michael Beckerman's exploration of Czech nationalism in Western European instrumental music. Connecting cultural artifacts to musical events involves a similar process to connecting the image of a flashy car to a Mozart overture. In his attempt to isolate Czechness in music, Beckerman identifies musical elements that line up with Czech composers' *idea* of Czechness, but he does not identify anything exclusively Czech about those musical elements themselves. As he notes, "there is in fact no single musical detail that can be shown to occur in Czech music and nowhere else."<sup>21</sup> However, Beckerman did articulate a few concepts to help musicologists orient themselves within their own explorations of music and identity:

- 1) "Czechness" is an idea formed when composers and listeners connect the sound of the music in question to Czech imagery, history, folklore, or geography.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Cook, "Theorizing Musical Meaning," *Society for Music Theory* 23 no. 2 (2001), 176-177.

Nicholas Cook, "Music and Meaning in the Commercials," *Popular Music* 13 no. 1 (January 1994), 29.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Beckerman, "In Search of Czechness in Music," *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1986), 64.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

- 2) Identifying Czechness involves a process of imbuing something (i.e. the mountains, or the story of a revolution) with national identity, and then connecting that compound idea with specific sounds in the music.<sup>23</sup>
- 3) To a creator or consumer who identifies Czechness in a piece of music, that concept of Czechness in music is as tangible as the Czech things around them.<sup>24</sup>

One only needs to swap “Czechness” with “Texan-ness” to see how this process starts to work:

- 1) “Texan-ness” is an idea formed when fiddlers and listeners connect specific aspects about a fiddler’s playing to Texas imagery, history, folklore, or geography.
- 2) Identifying Texan-ness involves a process of imbuing something (i.e., the “frontier,” the Lone Star, or stories of Alamo heroes) with state identity, and then connecting that compound idea with specific aspects of a Texas Fiddle Player’s sound.
- 3) To a fiddle player or listener who identifies Texan-ness in a sound, that concept of Texan-ness in fiddle music is as tangible as the pieces of Texas around them.

Just as “Czechness” does not manifest in specific musical traits that are exclusive to Czech composers, “Texan-ness” in fiddling does not manifest in traits or practices exclusive to Texas. Both identities emerge through a process of associating musical and cultural artifacts.

When considering how this thought process might work in the study of fiddling communities, it is useful to expand our definition of music to something broader than just the melodies and harmonies. Christopher Small’s term “musicking” comes to mind when considering fiddling culture: “To music,” writes Small, “is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>24</sup> Beckerman, “In Search of Czechness,” 73.



providing material for performance. . . or by dancing.”<sup>25</sup> In addition to fiddle tunes and contests, fiddling culture encompasses technical diversity, interpersonal relationships, various performance contexts, teaching and learning, and the stories making up a community’s collective memory. However, very little scholarship specifically about American fiddling looks at the practice from this holistic standpoint, and even less tackles the topic from a regional standpoint. This is very odd, especially given the vast number of regional fiddling dialects that exist in American popular music soundscapes including bluegrass or Old Time/Southern Appalachian.

Much of ethnomusicological discourse lumps all non-western European, violin-based music under a general “fiddling” blanket. A 1975 article by Linda C. Burman-Hall places “southern fiddling” up against standard classical violin and compositional pedagogy.<sup>26</sup> Tracing printed versions of popular fiddle tunes back to printed versions of their British and otherwise European ancestors is also a popular route to fiddling scholarship. Chris Goertzen, one of the more prolific writers about American fiddling, particularly from the Southern regions, has traced the evolution of specific Scottish fiddle tunes in some of today’s most popular contest fiddle tunes (for example, “The Braes of Auchtertyre” evolved into present-day “Billy in the Low-Ground.”)<sup>27</sup> Two of Goertzen’s more recent books, *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests* (2008) and *Rugs, Guitars, and Fiddling* (2022) place the fiddle contest into both musical and sociological contexts, rather than strictly one or the other. Goertzen and others have also slowly but surely added multiple biographical works to fiddling scholarship. With the exception of a few chapters in Charles Wolfe’s *The Devil’s Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling* (1997),

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Linda C. Burman-Hall, “Southern American Folk Fiddle Styles,” *Ethnomusicology* 19 No. 1 (January 1975), 47-65.

<sup>27</sup> Chris Goertzen, *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 5. His 2017 book *George P. Knauff’s Virginia Reels and the History of American Fiddling* explores fiddle tune evolution in greater detail.

Goertzen’s body of work, (including multiple interviews with Texas fiddler Howard Dee “Wes” Westmoreland), and the occasional mention of Eck Robertson and Benny Thomasson in a journal article, Texas fiddling has received limited scholarly attention. This project is a first attempt to examine Texas Style fiddling from a wholistic, “musicking” perspective, and this first chapter examines the how the fiddle contest helps maintain the Texas fiddling identity. In the following chapter, I will introduce recurring figures from Texas fiddling history and examine their role as archetypal figures, constructed over time to perpetuate the belief in a unique, Texas Fiddling identity. The final chapter examines observable musical traits in past and present Texas Fiddle Players. Echoing Beckerman, I suggest that very few elements exclusively belong to the Texas fiddling community. Instead, I believe that symbols, rituals, stories, and musical markers work together to create a distinctly Texan fiddling community that can be understood as a manifestation of Texas Exceptionalism.

### **1.1: If You’re Gonna Fiddle in Texas...You’re Gonna Play in a Fiddle Contest: Symbols, Rituals, and Establishing Identity**

Texas Style fiddling is a performance of Texas identity. Practitioners believe in it, and outsider fiddlers agree that this identity exists. When a Texas fiddler enters a fiddle contest, they are literally performing that identity; when the fiddle contest is in Texas, they perform for other Texas fiddle players. While fiddle contests generally follow a universal structure with certain exceptions, the ones in Texas are special because—well, they happen in Texas. British historian Eric Hobsbawm writes that a tradition with practices designed to give it the appearance of relative antiquity is considered invented.<sup>28</sup> They can be formally invented, like the events and rituals surrounding the Boston marathon every April; alternatively, an invented tradition can

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<sup>28</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. By Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

develop organically over an observable period. In both cases, continuity, and predictable repetition work together to create an impression of antiquity.<sup>29</sup> Fiddling is more of a practice than it is a tradition, but fiddle players often use phrases like “traditional” and “old-timey” when describing certain aspects of it. Fiddle contests occur all over the continental United States, and they are especially concentrated in the South and Northwest. They are not Texas inventions by any stretch of the imagination. Nevertheless, aspects of fiddle contests in Texas behave like aspects of invented traditions. A typical Texas fiddle contest acts as a hybrid of both types of invented traditions: the intentional, as in those deliberately established with a set of specific expectations, and the organic, those associations that develop from repetition through time. The contests themselves are connected to specific locations and contestants abide by formal expectations. They run the same way every year, which means that knowledgeable observers can reasonably predict the outcomes. At the same time, Texas fiddle contests are often connected to events in local or state history, most of which occurred multiple decades before a specific contest’s establishment. This blurs the line between a contest’s actual age and the idea of longevity. Additionally, symbols like the Lone Star flag, and a fiddler’s choice to wear cowboy-inspired regalia like boots, hats, and belt buckles connect the contest to ideas of Texan-ness. Fiddle contests are also invariably connected to small towns, removed from urban centers like Dallas and Fort Worth, which begets an association between fiddling and a simpler, rural, small-town American lifestyle. This all works together to connect Texas Fiddle Players and spectators to an imagined version of the past that they readily accept, one aspect of the community’s shared history. While one can find all of these aspects (minus the Lone Star) at virtually any American fiddle contest, the difference between the National Old Time Fiddlers’ contest and “Chicken and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

Bread Days” is only the fact that the latter takes place in Texas. Their practices are otherwise functionally identical. Finally, encounters between fiddlers and spectators speak to the shared belief in a distinct, Texan musical identity different from non-Texas fiddle players, hearkening back to Anderson’s imagined communities. The fiddle contest provides a forum in which Texas Fiddle Players perform for each other, exchange musical ideas (new and inspired by other fiddlers), and potentially recruit new Texas Fiddle Players.

### **1.2: Vignette and Case Study: Chicken and Bread Days Fiddle Contest (Bowie, TX)**

Early one October morning, I packed my viola and set off on a day trip out of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, to participate in the “Chicken and Bread Days” fiddle contest in Bowie, TX. I drove due West on highway 380 from Allen to Denton (about an hour) and turned left at a gas station. When I merged onto Highway 287, I traded suburbia for something reminiscent of Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charlie*. The four-lane highway was reduced to two, and speed limits topped off at fifty-five mph. The scenery before me hit on several Texas stereotypes: big sky, wide swaths of farmland with barbed wire fences and “no trespassing” signs, single stoplight towns, and the occasional Lone Star displayed in various windows. I tried not to think too hard about the fact that my playlist—my individualized touch of urban millennial—contained several country songs describing scenes just like this. I knew that I had reached my destination when I spotted a modest gathering of shiny vintage cars beneath a large banner reading “Chicken and Bread Days.” I parked along the main drag, shouldered my viola, and headed towards the vintage cars. I paused to appreciate a gorgeous, albeit prehistoric Ford truck with wooden sides and rounded features before turning towards the Bowie Firehouse. I wove my way through a miniature state fair—food trucks and craft booths selling all manner of hand-made, American fare—until I could hear the fiddle contest in full swing.

Upon entering the Firehouse, my eyes confirmed what my ears suspected: I had not missed the senior fiddler's division. An elderly Caucasian man played a conservatively paced fiddle tune into a microphone. He wore a western shirt, a ball cap, and jeans held up by a large belt buckle—a popular prize for grand champions at larger fiddle contests. An enormous Texas flag hung as a backdrop behind him. Even though his chosen tempo was on the slow side, the audience punctuated his ornamentations of double stops, octave leaps, and other flourishes with whoops and cheers. Indeed, fiddle contest spectators often treat senior fiddle players to a kind of reverence akin to religious leaders, shouting affirmations after noteworthy musical phrases. I spotted a friend, Ed Henson, son of beloved fiddler Claude Henson, on deck to play next, wearing a black fedora and bolo tie. We greeted each other with a mutual hat-tip and a wave while I made my way to the registration table.

I hit an unexpected snag when I tried to register to compete. While I had arrived with plenty of time, I was not allowed to register until I renewed my long-lapsed Texas Old Time Fiddling Association membership (TOTFA). Since I still carried an out-of-state driver's license, the TOTFA representative asked me to show proof of Texas residence. Only after showing both my Allen Public Library card and my student ID from SMU (Southern Methodist University) did they accept my \$40 Venmo fee and pass me the division sign-up sheet for ages 19-40. Once that was settled, I ducked behind the stage to find my primary contact, Howard Dee “Wes” Westmoreland. Wes is a lifelong Texas fiddle player with an impressive contest resume, from a family of lifelong Texas fiddle players with equally impressive contest resumes. His family was the subject of Alan Govenar's 1985 *Texas Style* documentary, and Wes himself has been a frequent subject of study by University of Mississippi musicologist, Dr. Chris Goertzen. Goertzen's *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests* includes a lengthy interview with

Westmoreland, and multiple transcriptions of Westmoreland’s recent “Grey Eagle” performances appear in *Rugs, Guitars, and Fiddling*.<sup>30</sup> Westmoreland quickly re-introduced me to fiddlers and guitarists whom I had not seen in over a decade: brothers Randy and Marty Elmore (fiddle), Robert Chancellor (guitar), Roberta Rast (introduced as the “World Champion” fiddler from Idaho), Katie Crawford (fiddle teacher), and Dr. Rebecca Glass (Dallas-based violinist and hobbyist fiddler with a DMA in viola performance from Cleveland Institute of Music).<sup>31</sup>

As this was my first fiddle contest after a years-long hiatus, I introduced myself to one guitarist and warmed up with him between the fire trucks parked behind the building. The sound of my viola garnered some curious attention; I was playing fiddle tunes everyone knew, but a perfect fifth below their usual keys. I soon found myself warming up in front of a small audience. When it was my turn to compete, three guitarists joined me on the stage for “one tune of choice.” Neither the judges nor the audience seemed to mind that I played “Cotton Patch Rag” in F instead of the traditional C-Major, but Westmoreland has repeatedly reminded me that these choices buck tradition. Later that afternoon, I learned that I ranked sixth out of eight in my division, so I concluded that viola was not entirely unwelcome on the stage. I was thrilled. In its entirety, the contest took up most of the afternoon. Right before we moved into the Grand Champion Round, a city representative addressed the audience from her front-row seat. She thanked the Bowie Fire Department for the use of their space, the fiddlers for performing, and, most importantly, the residents of Bowie Texas for their role in making this contest “the best damn fiddle contest in the nation.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Chris Goertzen, *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contest* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 139-152. Chris Goertzen, “Weekend Sounds: The Multifarious Craft of American Fiddling,” in *Rugs, Guitars and Fiddling* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022), 133, 146-147.

<sup>31</sup> A large fiddle contest in Crockett Texas has been called the “World’s Champion Fiddler’s Festival” since its inception in 1937. Joe Angle, “The World’s Champion Fiddler’s Festival at Crockett: An East Texas Tradition,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 8 (October 1970), 177.

<sup>32</sup> Field recording excerpt, unnamed speaker, October 1, 2022.

As far as fiddle contests go, the one described above is typical. Most small fiddle contests are one of several events connected to local festivals (such as “Chicken and Bread Days” in Bowie, Texas or “Yamboree” in Gilmer, Texas). TOTFA runs most of these smaller contests, which means that they decide who can or cannot compete. Valid membership, as I learned, is required to compete in these contests, though some TOTFA representatives adhere to the Texas residency requirement for membership more strictly than others. My out-of-state license nearly barred me from renewing my own membership. At comparable Southern fiddle contests, judges “may have some musical experience,” but they are not required to be fiddlers themselves. Judges are often men from the host community with an affinity for fiddling.<sup>33</sup> Judges’ musical tastes combined with audience involvement determine division winners. At a Texas contest, where Texan-ness is an expected musical quality, the judges are, with rare exceptions, fiddlers and guitarists with their own histories of contest experience. They watch the contestants attentively and are often observed exchanging looks when they hear something notable. In the seniors and children’s divisions, ranking is not often difficult, as the playing level varies from beginners to years (or decades) of experience. The top players usually make themselves known within the first few notes. Between divisions, while the judges deliberate or take a break, some of the more popular fiddlers are called up to entertain the audience. At Chicken and Bread Days, members of the Elmore family bore this responsibility: brothers Randy and Marty Elmore each took a turn, and Marty’s son Ryan accompanied his partner, fiddler Katie Crawford, on his own turn.

Divisions are almost invariably determined by age group: children, juniors (teenagers 18 and younger), young adults (19-40), adults (40-64), and seniors (over 65). “Chicken and Bread Days” had an extra “Twin Fiddling” division. Larger, longer-running Texas fiddle contests, like

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<sup>33</sup>Chris Goertzen, *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 29.

Crockett’s “World’s Champion Fiddle Festival” and Hallettsville’s “Fiddlers Frolics,” often have separate divisions for Texas residents and out-of-state residents. As far as my research has found, Texas is the only state with residency expectations in its fiddle contests. At most fiddle contests in the country, but certainly at all Texas fiddle contests, each division’s first and second-place winners square off in a “grand champion” division. Crockett’s “World Championship” used to take this a step further by requiring the most recent World Champion to square off against their predecessor.<sup>34</sup> A listener with limited fiddle contest experience might not garner a clear sense of what distinguishes Texas fiddling from other regional American fiddling in terms of actual musical sound and technique. Those distinctions are clearer to performers and listeners who spend a significant amount of time at these events in and outside of Texas. However, even the casual listener will have an idea of what it means to be part of the Texas Fiddling Community after spending a day at a Texas Fiddle contest.

### **1.3: The Fiddle Contest and Texas Identity**

James “Texas Shorty” Chancellor, a Texas Fiddling patriarch, has stated plainly that “if you want to hear good fiddling, you gotta go to a fiddle contest.”<sup>35</sup> The idea of a unique and traditional regional sound is immensely important to the Texas Style fiddlers and their listeners, and multiple fiddlers have expressed belief in a symbiotic relationship between Texas Style fiddling and fiddle contests. Fiddle contests contribute to Texas Fiddling Exceptionalism in two meaningful ways. First, they ritualistically acknowledge the belief in a separate Texas fiddling community from the greater North American fiddling community. Symbols (like a giant Texas flag), surrounding festivities (like Hallettsville’s barbecue contest), and participants’ declarations

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<sup>34</sup> Presently, World Champion winners are no longer required to defend their titles in future contests. Interview with Howard Dee “Wes” Westmoreland, October 15, 2022.

Joe Angle, “The World’s Champion Fiddler’s Festival,” (October 1970), 180.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with James “Texas Shorty” Chancellor, September 24, 2022.



establish the identity; fiddlers and spectators acknowledge the identity by participating in “Gone to Texas” divisions or by joining TOTFA to gain entry. Second, Texas fiddle contests attempt to ensure the community’s longevity by indirectly recruiting new fiddle players. An invented tradition’s purpose is not limited to establishing a community’s idea of its shared identity; its practice must also ensure the community’s longevity by attracting new members. To that end, Hobsbawm postulates that “any social practice that needs to be carried out repeatedly will tend . . . to develop a set of such conventions and routines, which may be de facto or de jure formalized for the purposes of imparting the practice to new practitioners.”<sup>36</sup> As an example, members of the Scottish Highland Community, a group with comparable exceptionalism ideals, consider the kilt’s established history with equal importance to Scottish Highland Culture as the act of wearing one.<sup>37</sup> Had it not been for small fiddle contests like the one connected to “Chicken and Bread Days,” many of my interviewees would not otherwise be involved in Texas Style fiddling.

Back in the Texas fiddle contest heyday (circa 1950s and 60s), Texas Shorty was much like the fiddlers I interviewed from my own contest division: a talented young musician to be recruited into the Texas fiddling world. He credits Gilmer’s “Yamboree” with putting him on the path to becoming “Texas Shorty” because this was one of the contests that introduced him to fiddlers like his mentor, Benny Thomasson. Texas Shorty shared with me in an interview that he “remember[ed] Gilmer because . . . Benny was there, and I enjoyed listening to him play...[Gilmer] sticks in my mind because Benny was there and Major Franklin was there, many of the great fiddlers of that era.”<sup>38</sup> Chancellor also shares that he was drawn to “that competitive spirit that was going on” that was particularly present in Gilmer at a time in his life when that

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<sup>36</sup>Hobsbawm, *Invented Traditions*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Highland Tradition of Scotland,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15-41.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with James “Texas Shorty” Chancellor, February 11, 2023.

appealed to him.<sup>39</sup> Millennial fiddler Katie Crawford, like Chancellor, has been a competitive Texas Fiddle Player since childhood. Under the tutelage of sisters Valerie and Lydia Ryals (also students of Benny Thomasson) in Burlison, Texas, Crawford grew up competing in the Texas fiddle contests. Like Chancellor, Crawford credits a contest connected to her teacher as the factor that pushed her to take her fiddling seriously: the Red Steagall fiddle contest, hosted by the Ryals sisters. “That’s a youth fiddle contest, which means that that was the first fiddle contest I played in, and that’s why I competed to start with,” she shared in an interview with me. Crawford explains that participation in the contest is by invitation only, and presumably with Valerie Ryals’s approval.<sup>40</sup> The Red Steagall contest is controlled more than its open contemporary events, but that control creates a safe space for the youngest generations to practice competitively engaging with each other. Contests like this are an integral to the growth of the Texas fiddling community.

Texas fiddling contests provide a vibrant microcosm of fiddle players, fiddle enthusiasts, fiddle teachers, and local residents, combined with a hefty dose of regional pride. However, it would be irresponsible to ignore the decline in fiddle contests in the past twenty years. Several small contests like “Chicken and Bread Days” have quietly disappeared, leaving little evidence of their existence behind. The Louis Franklin Fiddle Contest in Whiteright, Texas, last occurred in 2010.<sup>41</sup> A contest in Burnet, Texas seems to have befallen a similar fate; an uncredited photograph on the city’s website seems to be the only evidence that the contest existed at all.<sup>42</sup> A few factors could be at play in this decline. First, tunes like “Arkansas Traveler” and “Grey

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Katie Crawford, January 27, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> City of Whiteright, “6<sup>th</sup> Annual Whiteright Fiddle Fest Set May 29,” Accessed April 30, 2023, <http://www.ntx-news.com/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi?archive=38&num=62169>.

<sup>42</sup> City of Burnet, “Community of Burnet,” Accessed April 30, 2023, <https://www.cityofburnet.com/community>.

Eagle” have evolved from social objects with living connections to the community to relics of a past “done gone.” Fiddlers are not writing tunes about contemporary phenomena like Facebook, Amazon, or Covid-19. This begets an anxiety about the future of Texas fiddling that is seldom discussed. Dr. Rebecca Glass, a Texas native, earned a DMA in viola performance from Cleveland Institute of Music, and wrote a master’s thesis on folk melodies from central Europe. She entered the Texas fiddling community when she moved back to the Dallas area in 2019. She occupies a unique position in this project as a hobbyist Texas fiddle player with musicological training, albeit from a western classical perspective. By the time she and I formally connected, she had spent most of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic taking virtual lessons from Roberta Rast and was regularly landing in the middle of her division.

By all accounts, Dr. Glass can hold her own in a Texas fiddle contest, but she does not identify herself as a Texas Fiddle Player. Her academic training combined with her self-distancing from the Texas Fiddling Community offers a unique, detached perspective. When asked about the role of the fiddle contest, Dr. Glass posited a symbiosis between Texas fiddle contests and Texas Style fiddling: “I don’t really think fiddle playing would be going on if it wasn’t for the contests, because there’s not a lot of motivation,” adding that most of the contestants are not professional players outside of this context. “[It’s] basically a showcase with a little bit of motivation to come out,” she continues. “Obviously, there is a little bit of who’s placing against who . . . but I don’t really think that’s why they were created in the first place.”<sup>43</sup> Perhaps her thoughts could be brushed off on account of her classical background, but a similar sentiment is shared by Texas Shorty: “I’m not sure that it will continue to be as successful, even though it’s a part of our folk music roots. But it played its course, and the revival was good for it

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<sup>43</sup> Interview, Dr. Rebecca Glass, October 3, 2022.

to come back, but I'm not sure it will continue like it has been."<sup>44</sup> While a fiddle contest itself might reflect a thriving musical community, the reality is that there are noticeably fewer fiddlers filling up the younger divisions than there are older ones. This indicates that fiddle contests are not attracting new fiddle players, even though they might have played that role a generation ago. One factor behind this that fiddle contests advertisements have not kept up with digital advancements. They are not very well advertised. TOTFA members work together to manage an online presence through a website, Facebook page, and digital newsletter.<sup>45</sup> The website and Facebook page are both publicly accessible, and work towards boosting local fiddle contests' reach; the newsletter is only available to those who request it. Additionally, a man named Lyle Dixon has made it his mission to manage a YouTube channel for the community called "Fiddle Supporter."<sup>46</sup> Dixon does a lot of his own legwork: He travels to Texas fiddle contests, records divisions, edits and uploads the videos, and organizes playlists by contest. Distance is potentially another barrier for growth, in addition to advertising challenges. As I mentioned above, Texas fiddle contests are always hosted in small, rural towns, which are often more than an hour's drive away from any urban center. My average drive to contests was two hours, and those were the ones most conveniently located to Dallas. Because of these obstacles, the people attending Texas fiddle contests are more likely to be those who already know how and where to find them than someone who runs across them by happenstance. These barriers effectively make Texas Fiddle Players an exclusive musical community, a fact that fuels a Texas Exceptionalism narrative.

While the modern fiddle contest was not invented in Texas, the Texas fiddle contest has become a vehicle for preserving and perpetuating a musical tradition based on the idea of Texas

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<sup>44</sup> Interview, James "Texas Shorty" Chancellor, September 24, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Texas Old Time Fiddlers Association, <https://totfa.org/>, Accessed April 19, 2023; Texas Old Time Fiddlers Association, <https://www.facebook.com/TexasOTFA/>, Accessed April 19, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Lyle Dixon, "Fiddle Supporter," <https://www.youtube.com/user/FiddleSupporter>, Accessed April 19, 2023.

Exceptionalism. Organizations like TOFTA utilize modern platforms like websites, social media, and electronic newsletters to help facilitate the continuation of Texas fiddle contests and opportunities for learning, such as workshops. The contests themselves are often connected to community festivals, which are in turn connected to local folklore; Bowie's "Chicken and Bread Days," as mentioned, is tied to the town's origin story of tenacious Texans who built a thriving poultry business out of almost nothing. The operations of a Texas fiddle contest are virtually identical to comparable fiddle contests in other states. It is the fiddlers and their listeners who make it a Texas contest. This was the case when Alan Govenar observed the Westmoreland family at Hallettsville's Fiddlers Frolics in 1985, and when I participated in Bowie's "Chicken and Bread Days" in the fall of 2022. Regardless of the veracity of any traditionality claim, Texas Style fiddling and Texas Fiddle contests are closely related invented traditions. Moreover, Texas Fiddle contests are a celebration of what fiddling means to *this* community of fiddle-players. To them, fiddling is an expression of who they are, who they have been, and their place among American fiddle players.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2.1 Socially Constructed Symbolism, Archetypes, and Texas Fiddler Players

Real and imagined communities have histories made up of events, collective memories, and figures akin to characters in a story. Those characters are based on figures from the community's actual history, and they are pillars of the community's ideals. However, despite their basis in community history, these figures reflect community nostalgia more than they reflect historical accuracy. In some cases, tension between the figure's characterization and their real-life personality further justifies their legendary status. When community members share stories, these figures act as community archetypes—symbolic stock characters who are constructed to further a theme or a message within a story. The best place to observe archetypes in action is in literature, where they take the form of characters with specific missions. Popular characters like Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, and Frodo Baggins act as hero archetypes. These characters start out as unassuming, immature figures who discover their innate potential for greatness on a journey; they act as vehicles for readers to explore boundaries between good and evil, strength and weakness, and adolescence and adulthood. Images can also function as archetypes: Shakespeare scholar Elaine Showalter claims that a specific image of the mad Ophelia in *Hamlet*—wild hair, flowers, (white) night dress—evolved from a popular on-stage portrayal into a visual archetype of a particular brand of female “madness.”<sup>47</sup> A British actress popularized the image in 1827, when she entered Ophelia's final scene wearing a white dress, a

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<sup>47</sup> Elaine Showalter, “Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism,” in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 1986), 80-81.

black veil, and unbound hair which she bedecked in wildflowers. The white dress signaled Ophelia's former purity—of mind and body—whereas the unkempt hair and wildflowers were overt symbols of female sexuality.<sup>48</sup> The resultant implication is that Ophelia has lost her senses, and soon enough, her innocence.<sup>49</sup> Ambitious Victorian (male) psychiatrists took to posing their female patients in Ophelia-inspired poses and commissioning artistic renderings for medical journals, in the interest of developing diagnostic criteria for women's "hysteria."<sup>50</sup> This archetypal image has remained popular on the stage, such as Donizetti's murderous Lucia in the opera *Lucia Di Lammermoor*; as well as in film, such as Samara from the *Ring* franchise in the early 2000s. This portrayal served as an effective demonstration of a young woman's dangerous instability. While art consumers might be more likely to recognize archetypes encountered in popular culture, these devices also appear in sociological discourse.

Legends and personal anecdotes are part of a shared history and just like a fictional story, these narratives contain symbols and characters. It is possible to examine elements within these stories, such as setting and character as functional archetypes, in search of a community's shared values. The process of constructing an archetype is closely related to that of imbuing symbolic meaning to objects. In his book *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Daniel Miller asserts that an object's meaning is socially constructed. He argues that symbolism

. . . is held in most studies to be a highly variable process which is dependent upon the social positioning of the interpreter and the context of interpretation. This is fairly obvious with a relatively abstract form such as a moral code. We are used to the idea that a statement of belief or propriety is continually open to challenge, and that debates concerning its direct interpretation are never fully resolvable. The artifact, on the other hand, tends to imply a certain innocence of facticity; it seems to offer the clarity of realism, an assertion of certainty against the buffeting of debate, an end or resting point

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<sup>48</sup> Jane E. Kromm, "The Feminization of Madness in Visual Representation," *Feminist Studies* 20 no. 3 (Autumn 1994), 513.

<sup>49</sup> Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia," 83. Smithson was not the first actress to portray Ophelia in this way, but her youth and popularity captured public imagination, as well as composer Hector Berlioz's romantic attention.

<sup>50</sup> Kromm, "The Feminization of Madness," 521.

which resolves the disorder of uncertain perspectives. All this is, of course, quite illusory; the object is just as likely as the word, if not more so, to evoke variable responses and invite a variety of interpretation.<sup>51</sup>

There are two important ideas in the statement above. First is Miller's point about an interpreter's "social positioning" and the context of a specific interpretation. The archetypal figures discussed in this chapter might be of little importance to a general narrative of American music history, but they occupy the same symbolic space as a Founding Father in Texas fiddling history. Second is his assertion that objects offer a degree of symbolic certainty to the interpreter, despite symbolism's overall variability. Benedict Anderson's analysis of anti-colonial novels in his book *Imagined Communities* demonstrates how one can construct settings and characters to evoke nationalist feelings in a specific group of people, while remaining symbolically ambiguous to outsiders. Works like the 1924 Indonesian short story "Semarang Hitam" ["Black Semarang"] contain settings and characters that evoke feelings of familiarity and empathy within members of the targeted emergent community. These characters are unremarkable, but their effects are remarkable: They are everyday people, who do everyday things, who speak in the vernacular, and whose reactions to events are portrayed as only natural. Thus the narrative compels indigenous Indonesian readers to "[fuse] the world inside the novel with the world outside."<sup>52</sup> Anderson's chosen "Semarang" passage provides an intimate look at the city of Semarang on a Saturday night, a perfect example of a setting that would have felt familiar to the targeted readers:

It was 7 o'clock, Saturday evening; young people in Semarang never stayed at home on Saturday night. On this night however, nobody was about. Because the heavy day-long rain had made the roads wet and very slippery, all had stayed home.

For the workers in shops and offices Saturday morning was time of anticipation—anticipating their leisure and the fun of walking around the city in the evening, but on this night they were to be disappointed—because of lethargy caused by the bad weather and

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 106.

<sup>52</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 30.



the sticky roads in the kampungs. The main roads usually crammed with all sorts of traffic, the footpaths usually teeming with people, all were deserted.<sup>53</sup>

Kartodikromo constructs this imaginary Semarang to speak to a specific community of readers: indigenous Indonesians who felt disenfranchised by British colonial rule.<sup>54</sup> A passage like this—describing a particular city on a particular night that is different from all other nights—provides just enough general detail to help a reader from Semarang find a kinship with the people who might live there. The passage cuts to the story's hero, but instead of describing his political disposition, it introduces him with his actions and emotions: "A young man was seated on a long rattan lounge reading a newspaper," visibly reacting to the stories within. Of note is an article about a "vagrant" who died of exposure on the side of the road. Here, readers experience the hero's torrent of emotions:

One moment he felt an explosive anger well up inside. Another moment he felt pity. Yet another moment his anger was directed at the social system which gave rise to such poverty while making a small group of people wealthy.<sup>55</sup>

By placing this solitary hero into a "socio-scape described in careful, *general* detail," and setting him about familiar activities to the target audience, the writer creates a path to feeling empathy for the character. In short, Indonesian readers from that era will recognize Semarang on a Saturday, enter the headspace of a nondescript young man doing a familiar task—reading the evening newspaper—and will thus empathize with his outrage at the colonial system that allowed a destitute man to die in the dirt. The nondescript young man, therefore, is a stand-in, an archetype for the average Indonesian citizen, constructed to draw readers into the author's anti-colonial sentiment. Just as Miller argues in *Material Culture*, the interpreter's—or in this case,

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<sup>53</sup> Kartodikromo, Mas Marco, "Black Semarang," *Three Early Indonesian Short Stories by Mas Marco Kartodikromo*, trans. Paul Tickell, (Melbourne: Monash University, Center of Southeast Asian Studies, 1981), quoted in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 31-32; Kartodikromo "Black Semarang," 7.

the reader's—social position is crucial to imbuing specific meanings into symbols like setting and character. Moreover, to his second point, details within the setting and character will not hold the same symbolic significance to a non-indigenous reader, or to one living in present-day Semarang. The process of associations through which an archetypal figure forces an empathetic response from media consumers is not exclusive to the fictional world. Figures with tangible historical footprints can also become archetypal characters in stories told about them because people share stories to share something with or about their community. The fiddle player has become one in his own right.

It is important to remember that American fiddling as it looks today is as closely tied to post-World War folk revival movements as it is to the Anglo/European colonizers who brought their fifes and fiddles across the ocean blue. The fiddle player is himself an archetype constructed to further a specific narrative of American values and nostalgia for an imagined Anglo past. Dr. Chris Goertzen asserts the following on fiddle players as symbols:

Fiddling [is] a way to celebrate down-home fun, competence, and historically grounded cultural patriotism at the same time. A good fiddler is self-reliant, hard-working, full of humor, and skilled in an impressive but not intimidating way. And fiddling helps maintain that channel through American culture that *refers back to Europe*.<sup>56</sup>

It would be irresponsible to ignore the Anglo-centric implications woven into a declaration of fiddling's nostalgic backward reach to Europe. Just like the Ophelia figure conveys ideas of mental illness, innocence, and unhinged sexuality, so does the fiddle player archetype communicate ideas about a solid work ethic and a (white) American wholesomeness. Henry Ford, the automotive tycoon, believed as much. His enthusiastic, albeit brief, endorsement of fiddle contests and square dances in the early 1920s demonstrates his interest in lifting up a

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<sup>56</sup> Chris Goertzen, *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 5.

“good old” American alternative to emerging “immoral” musical genres like jazz.<sup>57</sup> The Texas version of this archetype draws upon an independent, trailblazing streak, summarized best in the following passage from T.R. Fehrenbach’s *Seven Keys to Texas*:

Anglo-Texas, even the newly arrived, do not see themselves as refugees or heirs to some vanished foreign grandeur but as conquerors or the heirs of the conquerors of the American continent—and many of them see that conquest, not 1776 and all that, or the War Between the states, which interrupted it, as the transcendental fact of American history.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, Anglo-Texans, a demographic of people whose primary language is English, tend to center themselves in their own version of American history.<sup>59</sup> It follows that Anglo-Texan musicians, like those in the Texas fiddling community, would center themselves in their understanding of American music history. Moreover, Texas history places rebellious heroism at the center of its narratives. Ardent Second Amendment activists often use the phrase “Come and Take It,” evoking an 1835 conflict between the Mexican army and Anglo-Texas settlers in Gonzales, Texas. Until recently, Texas history classes teach this story as a standoff between brave settlers and the oppressive Mexican army trying to rob them of their only defense: a single canon.<sup>60</sup> This perspective omits the fact that Mexico had loaned the canon to the Gonzales settlers as a courtesy in 1831; when they sent a group of soldiers to recover the canon in 1835, the Gonzales settlers took them hostage instead. The phrase “Come and Take It” arose as a taunt to the Mexican soldiers who were sent to follow up with their comrades.<sup>61</sup> These details are lost in the phrase’s current usage. It appears everywhere from Second Amendment assemblies to restaurant billboards. The phrase evokeschutzpah, bravery in the face of adversity, and the

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Blausten, “Traditional Music and Social Change: The Old Time Fiddlers’ Association Movement in the United States,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1975), 35.

<sup>58</sup> T. R. Fehrenbach, *Seven Keys to Texas* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1983), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Fehrenbach, *Seven Keys to Texas*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Lief Reigstad, “The Great Texas ‘Come and Take It’ Controversy,” *Texas Monthly*, October 12, 2016, Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/the-daily-post/great-texas-come-take-controversy>.

<sup>61</sup> Reigstad, “The Great Texas ‘Come and Take It’ Controversy.”

conviction that Texas belongs to whoever claims it. Fehrenbach writes that to understand a Texan one must understand that Texan's home "was, and is an eternal frontier," a place they are continually conquering.<sup>62</sup> In this way, the Texas Fiddler Player Archetype functions much like the Semarang everyman; when this archetype Texas enters a narrative like a personal anecdote, he is familiar to the Texas Fiddle Player telling and/or listening. Details within that narrative will be filtered through this independent, rebellious, and frontier-conquering lens. Not only does the Texas Fiddler embody Goertzen's "hard-working attitude" and non-intimidating skill, he also embodies this Texan independent, rebellious streak; moreover, the Texas Fiddler treats the music he plays as an eternal frontier. He does not play a fiddle tune; he makes it his own—he claims it.

## **2.2: The Texas Fiddle Player Archetype: From Eck Robertson to "Texas Shorty"**

Several men have gone down in Texas fiddling history as fiddlers who conquered their musical frontiers and thus embody the Texas Fiddler Archetype. Eck Robertson (1887-1975) embodies the role of Founding Father, who he earned his proverbial pedestal through his early interest in recording fiddle tunes. A generation later, Benny Thomasson (1909-1983), Major Franklin (1904-1981), and Bob Wills (1905-1975) carved Texas out as a separate frontier from fiddling America. Thomasson and Franklin brought a hypercompetitive streak to the fiddle contest itself, aided by their famously opposing personalities.<sup>63</sup> Bob Wills's frontier was on the accompaniment front, rather than the soloistic. His lifelong affinity for jazz heavily influenced the development of Western Swing. Wills and his Texas Playboys included their own arrangements of popular Texas contests tunes, infusing their accompaniment with jazz-inspired

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<sup>62</sup> Fehrenbach, *Seven Keys to Texas*, 10.

<sup>63</sup> National Fiddler Hall of Fame, "Major Franklin," Accessed April 30, 2023, <http://nationalfiddlerhalloffame.org/HallOfFame/majorfranklinbio.html>; National Fiddler Hall of Fame, "Benny Thomasson," Accessed April 30, 2023, <http://nationalfiddlerhalloffame.org/HallOfFame/bennythomassonbi.html>. Charles K. Wolfe, "The Recordings of Eck Robertson," in *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling* (Vanderbilt: Country Music Foundation Press, 1997), 12; Wolfe, "Bob Wills, Fiddler," in *The Devil's Box*, 153, 162.

chords. This appealed to enough guitarists that it quickly became common practice to move beyond I-IV-V progressions when backing up contest fiddle players. Finally, Terry Morris (1956-1988) and “Texas Shorty” (b. 1943) conquered the most recent frontier: synthesis and melodic variation.<sup>64</sup> Both “Shorty” and Morris gained notoriety among Texas Fiddle Players in their teens, and maintained that notoriety by absorbing, synthesizing, and improvising the stylistic elements from every fiddle player they studied with—including Thomasson, Franklin, and countless others. Their influence is most readily seen in the way current Texas Fiddle Players study any accessible recordings of their predecessors with the goal of one day obtaining “Shorty” and Morris’s proficiency. Examining the biographies and anecdotes surrounding these archetypal personalities will suggest that to Texas Fiddle Players, fiddling functions as its own frontier to conquer.

One of the most popular narratives passed between Texas fiddlers is that about “Cowboy Fiddler” Eck Robertson and his first recording session with New York label Victor Studios. As the story goes, in June 1922 two fiddlers in Confederate regalia entered Victor Studios in New York and convinced the company representatives to record some fiddle duets. These men were Eck Robertson of Texas and his companion Henry Gilliland of Oklahoma.<sup>65</sup> The audition was reportedly so successful that Victor representatives immediately set Robertson and Gilliland up in their studio. Here, the two fiddlers recorded “Arkansas Traveller,” and Robertson recorded a solo version of “Sally Goodin’.” This session earned a second booking for Robertson the following day.<sup>66</sup> These recordings not only introduced listeners in the greater United States to

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<sup>64</sup> National Fiddler Hall of Fame, “Terry Morris,” Accessed April 30, 2023, <http://nationalfiddlerhalloffame.org/HallOfFame/terrymorrisbio.html>; National Fiddler Hall of Fame, “Jim ‘Texas Shorty’ Chancellor,” Accessed April 20, 2023, <http://www.nationalfiddlerhalloffame.org/HallOfFame/jimtexasshortych.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Wolfe, “Eck Robertson,” 13.

<sup>66</sup> Wolfe, “Eck Robertson,” 16.

fiddling, but also were the First Contact with Texas fiddling that sowed the seeds of Texas fiddling in its current form. These are significant recordings in American music history because they are the first commercialized recordings of American fiddle players and Robertson himself was a Texas fiddler who learned his craft from other Texas fiddlers.<sup>67</sup> Being the first fiddler to record commercially certainly justifies Robertson's Founding Father status within the Texas fiddling community. However, there is another side of this story that receives less attention. While the 1922 recording session frames is as a spontaneous event, the truth about Robertson is that he was a commercially savvy musician who noticed a growing public interest in regional folk musicians.

Robertson embodies the "hard working" and "self-reliant" aspects of the American Fiddler Archetype over a varied and lengthy performing career. His father, a Confederate veteran and fiddler, connected Robertson with collaborators and national performing opportunities through his involvement with Confederate veterans' reunions.<sup>68</sup> Robertson met Henry Gilliland at one of these reunions, and the pair made a popular fiddling duo in Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle. Texas Shorty, who knew Robertson in his twilight years (and who incidentally performs on Gilliland's fiddle) likened their modus operandi to a popular historical fiction novel, *News of the World*. The book tells the story of a man who makes his living giving live newspaper readings to mostly illiterate towns in post-Civil War Texas:

And that's what Eck did. He would go around to little towns and play the fiddle. He and Henry would play tunes for the people. They didn't have the vast entertainment complex that we have now, so anything was good for them. He was an original, a big-time artist in the world of fiddling back in those days.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> In a TOTFA.com blog post, Alexander Campbell reports that a wax cylinder recording from 1903 exists, but the fiddler on this recording remains uncredited.

<sup>68</sup> Wolfe, "Eck Robertson," 14. This connection opens up the door for a deeper analysis of race and Confederate legacies in Texas fiddling history. Robertson's involvement with Confederate veterans' reunions directly led him to the opportunity to make those 1922 recordings, though there is currently limited data on race and Texas fiddling.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with James "Texas Shorty" Chancellor on February 11, 2023.

In addition to his partnership with Gilliland, Robertson played in the fiddle trio The Vernon Fiddlers, with fiddlers Lewis Franklin and A. P. Howard.<sup>70</sup> The trio was so popular that Fox News (the newsreel company started by movie mogul William Fox in the 1920s)<sup>71</sup> sent a recording team to Vernon, Texas to record them in April, 1922.<sup>72</sup> This was likely Robertson's first real taste of national visibility and it follows that the experience boosted his confidence in the nation's interest in fiddlers like himself. Sadly, the only surviving evidence of this recording is a photograph from one of Robertson's scrapbooks, showing Robertson, Franklin, and Howard playing for a videographer.<sup>73</sup>

This is all to say that the June 1922 Victor Records sessions did not happen on a whim. The Confederate Veterans connection placed Robertson and Gilliland at a reunion in Richmond, Virginia, around June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1922.<sup>74</sup> Richmond was close enough to New York for an acquaintance of Gilliland's to extend an invitation; this acquaintance happened to have experience legally representing Victor Records, which put Robertson and Gilliland's proverbial foot in the door. Robertson's surviving documents indicate that he took full advantage of the opportunity, and he managed to secure two recording sessions: one for the duo and one for himself. The 1922 "Sally Goodin" recording saw the most commercial success out of the set and boosted Robertson's visibility.<sup>75</sup> While this was certainly a promising outcome for Robertson, he would never land a permanent recording contract.

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<sup>70</sup> Wolfe, "Eck Robertson," 15.

<sup>71</sup> Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 106-107.

<sup>72</sup> Wolfe, "Eck Robertson," 14.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> Wolfe references a clipping from the *Richmond News Leader* from that date, which features an article about the reunion along with pictures of Robertson and Gilliland. Wolfe, "Eck Robertson," 14.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Robertson continued to make his living performing at Confederate reunions, touring the American South with his family band, and appearing at fiddle contests. He continued to tour till the end of his life, remaining hopeful that someone might one day offer him a lucrative contract. He maintained intermittent correspondence with Victor Records, particularly with their southern talent scout, Ralph Peer.<sup>76</sup> This relationship led to recording sessions in the summer and fall of 1929, which produced one of his largest commercial successes in his “Brilliancy Medley.”<sup>77</sup> During this time, Robertson attempted to file for authorship rights to several of his recorded tunes, due presumably to mounting competition from other recording companies and peer fiddlers like Fiddlin’ John Carson and Henry Whittier. Many of those authorship rights would later go to other fiddle players like Lefty Franklin and Matt Brown.<sup>78</sup> Unfortunately for Robertson, his success recording fiddle tunes proved short-lived as Victor Records indefinitely put his contract on hold due to the 1929 Wall Street Crash and subsequent Great Depression. Robertson did not record again until 1940 when he recorded at J. E. Sellers’s transcription studio in Dallas.<sup>79</sup> Much to the dismay of Southern American music scholars, these discs have been lost to time.<sup>80</sup> Robertson’s recordings from the 1920s remain the most contemporary ones currently in circulation to date.

To credit Eck Robertson with “inventing” Texas Style fiddling would be a disservice to the dozens of other active fiddle players in Texas in his lifetime. His most significant impact comes from his drive to enhance his musical career in the recording industry. While he was far

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>77</sup> Robertson’s “Brilliancy Medley” consisted of four fiddle tunes: “Drunken Billygoat,” “Wake Up Susan,” “Old Billy Wilson,” and “Bill Cheatum.” The last tune lives on as a contest breakdown. Wolfe, “Eck Robertson,” 24.

<sup>78</sup> Robertson lost his bid for “Texas Wagoner” to Lefty Franklin, and “Brown Kelly Waltz” (a.k.a. “Kelly Waltz”) to Matt Brown. Ibid. 21-22.

<sup>79</sup> According to Wolfe, transcriptions referred to “discs designed strictly for airplay on regional stations in the Southwest.” Ibid., 27.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 28.



from the only fiddler to record with Victor Talking Machine Records, he is credited with being the first. Even though the 1920s recordings never quite launched a career as a recording artist, they survive a century later and bear witness to America's first contact with Texas Style fiddling. More significantly still, this introduction drove a competitive wave of recording crews travelling to Texas to document its homebred musicians, especially its fiddlers.<sup>81</sup> Surviving documents, colorful personal encounter stories, and nearly a century of distance between Robertson's "Sally Goodin" and the tune's most recent recording speak to a legacy of "hard work," "good humor," wide-spread appeal, and a conqueror's level of ambition harkening back to Texas as an untamable frontier. In this sense, Robertson launched the Texas Fiddler Archetype, and this legacy is a significant claim to fame for Texas Fiddle Players.

Benny Thomasson, Major Franklin, and Bob Wills represent the next generation after Robertson, but today their names are spoken with more reverence than his. Their "every man" commonalities include a life spent in Texas and early childhood exposure to fiddle music, multi-generational fiddling families, their demographics as white men, competitive streaks, and most importantly, a deep commitment to the craftsmanship of Texas fiddle music. Their individual differences add nuance to the Texas Fiddler Archetype. Like Robertson, Thomasson and Wills managed to leave legacies beyond the Texas border. Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys pioneered the genre of Texas swing, which combined big-band jazz and Texas fiddling. Thomasson's voice survives in both the fiddling and art music worlds through his composition "Midnight on the Water," which Mark O'Connor recorded on his 1996 album of the same name. Franklin lives on in a few published recordings, and in the stories passed between fiddlers like

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<sup>81</sup> Wolfe includes a list of over a dozen Texas fiddlers who benefited from this 1920s wave of interest, including Daniel Williams—fiddler for the East Texas Serenaders, who recorded for Columbia Records in 1927, and for several more over his long career—and Oscar Harper, a "formidable" contest fiddler who is best known for his 1928 recording of "Kelly Waltz" with Okeh Records. Wolfe, "Eck Robertson," in *The Devil's Box*, 18-19.

tunes (and beers) at jam sessions. Their most significant commonalities are the musical contributions they brought to the Texas Fiddle Contest scene in their time—contributions that have since spread outside of Texas.

Since Texas fiddling history beyond Robertson’s generation has not received significant scholarly attention, much of the following information comes from sources including personal interviews, blog posts, and in a few cases, personal vlogs. Benny Thomasson and Major Franklin both started fiddling in early childhood, under a family member’s guidance. Thomasson’s father and uncle, Luke and Ed Thomasson, were competitive fiddlers themselves and friendly rivals with Robertson.<sup>82</sup> Franklin started playing when his father, also a fiddler, gave him a small metal fiddle at age four. Multiple sources, including family stories shared on the TOTFA blog, claim that Franklin took such a strong and immediate interest in the craft that whenever his father left town, he would illicitly practice on his instrument. Stories like this portray Franklin as Beethoven-like savant; according to his nephew Louis Franklin, tune variation ideas often spurred him out of bed in the middle of the night. In these episodes, he worked until the notes he played matched variations in his mind.<sup>83</sup> Thomasson approached fiddling with a similar compulsion. “[He] was kind of in competition with himself. He was always trying to best himself,” Texas Shorty reflected in an interview. “[In] that sense, he played for himself, he was always trying to get better, and people really responded to that.”<sup>84</sup> Thomasson and Franklin’s distinct personalities function as two sides to the Texas Fiddle Player Archetype: Thomasson is a laid-back, melodically driven fiddler, whereas Franklin is often called “feisty” and “angular.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Michael Mendelson, “Benny Thomasson and the Texas Fiddling Tradition,” *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (Autumn 1974), 117.

<sup>83</sup> Jim Day, “TOTFA Stories: Major Lee Franklin,” Accessed March 6, 2023, [http://totfa.org/about/stories/major\\_franklin.html](http://totfa.org/about/stories/major_franklin.html).

<sup>84</sup> Interview with James “Texas Shorty” Chancellor on February 11, 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Multiple interviews used these words to describe Major Franklin. See the next chapter for a more in-depth discussion of how this manifests musically.

Texas Fiddle Players remember Thomasson for his patience and warmth, whereas they remember Franklin for his attitude and grit.

Like Thomasson and Franklin, Bob Wills grew up in a family that was full of fiddle players. Wolfe reports that “both [Wills’s] grandfathers, nine uncles, and five aunts” fiddle; additionally, his father, John Tompkins Wills, was a formidable contest fiddler who “on occasion even defeated the legendary Eck Robertson.” Wills’s reflections offer a rare glimpse into personal conflicts between fiddlers in Robertson’s generation. In an interview with Wolfe, Wills offered this story about his father, Robertson, and a third fiddler named Forrest Copeland: “Eck Robertson won first that night, and Papa won second, and Copeland third. Copeland got mad, and he went over there and rented a café to stay open and let them play. Them three, they was gonna contest.”<sup>86</sup> This family connection made the young Bob Wills a regular fiddle contestant, and it laid the practical and musical foundations he would need to build his beloved entertainment persona.<sup>87</sup>

Thomasson and Franklin frequently appear in stories as rivals who lived to outdo each other. My interviews with fiddlers and investigations into their personalities supports the assertion that Thomasson and Franklin were competitive, but not as the other’s artistic foil. Instead, they were complementary to each other. To this day most, if not all, Texas Style fiddlers look to both men for inspiration when learning a tune, pointing to how Thomasson’s and Franklin’s legacies are more intertwined than independent. Simultaneously, Thomasson is a beloved figure in and outside of Texas. This is partially due to the success of two of his mentees (“Texas Shorty” and Mark O’Connor) as well as his lengthy resume of fiddle contest wins,

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<sup>86</sup> Bob Wills, quoted by Charles Wolfe. Wolfe, “Bob Wills, Fiddler,” 154. Wolfe does not specify where he obtained this particular quote. Given that he dedicated his body of work to country music scholarship, I have to assume that the quote came from an interview Wolfe himself conducted with Wills.

<sup>87</sup> Charles Wolfe, “Bob Wills, Fiddler,” 153.

including a double victory in the 1974 National Old Time Fiddlers Contest in Weiser, Idaho, where he won both the Seniors and Grand Champion divisions.<sup>88</sup> Franklin's fiddle contest resumé is just as impressive: According to reporting by music journalist Joe Carr, Franklin made Texas fiddling history early on when he won the Amarillo All Panhandle Old Fiddlers' Contest in 1930, at twenty-six years old. The *Amarillo Daily News* reported this of Franklin on March 6, 1930:

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.

In preceding years, this fiddle contest restricted participation to fiddlers aged 40 and up. Carr speculates that Franklin's victory suddenly and drastically altered the virtuosic potential of Texas fiddling. In other words, Franklin showed judges, fiddlers, and listeners alike how Texas fiddling would look as "a young man's game."<sup>89</sup> He lives on in countless recorded performances, including multiple albums and televised jam sessions. In these respects, Franklin does not mirror Thomasson. Franklin is not frequently recognized outside of Texas, nor was he generally liked. While he was known to play for local radio stations (most notably, with his band "The Nighthawks" for KKRK radio in Sherman, TX), there are few accessible recordings of his playing.<sup>90</sup> Multiple fiddlers report that Franklin was wary of candid recordings. It is not unusual for fiddlers to approach one another with recording devices in hand during warmups and jam sessions, but Franklin was uncomfortable with this practice. His son Royce reports that this

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<sup>88</sup> Mendelson, "Benny Thomasson," 1.

<sup>89</sup> *Amarillo Daily News* March 6, 1930, quoted by Joe Carr, 2001.

<sup>90</sup> Major Franklin did play for commercial recordings, but his name does not appear to have been the selling-point, unlike Benny Thomasson and his "Master Fiddler" album. He is featured most prominently in the 1966 County Records Album, *Texas Fiddle Favorites*. Jim Day, "Major Lee Franklin."

discomfort was due to the risk of picking up the background noise.<sup>91</sup> “Texas Shorty” has a different theory about Franklin’s wariness: he claims that Franklin was worried that someone might turn a profit off a candid recording.<sup>92</sup> In an interview with me, Wes Westmoreland shared a story about Franklin pouring a beer onto a spectator’s recording device, backing up the idea of Franklin’s preoccupation with candid recordings.<sup>93</sup>

These opposing personalities appear in Thomasson and Franklin’s individual musical tastes. Thomasson’s waltz “Midnight on the Water” perfectly encapsulates this difference. The waltz requires the fiddler to “cross tune” their strings to D D A D, instead of the standard G D A E. The melody is then played on the higher strings, allowing the low D to resonate. Franklin, according to fiddlers who knew him, thought that cross-tuning was akin to musical cheating. One of Westmoreland’s favorite stories about Franklin demonstrates both this rigid belief and a slice of his cantankerous personality. At an unspecified contest, Franklin heard Benny Thomasson play “Bonaparte’s Retreat,” a breakdown that is often, but not always, played with the same tuning as “Midnight on the Water.” According to Westmoreland, Franklin thought that Thomasson sounded “too good” for standard tuning and appealed to the judges to disqualify him from the contest on the grounds that he was playing with a cross-tuned fiddle. Thomasson, evidently knowing what Franklin was up to, plucked his strings in Franklin’s direction at the end of his set, to show that he was using a fiddle with conventional tuning.<sup>94</sup> It is likely that some of these details are exaggerated or misremembered to fit a specific narrative, but an important effect is clear: this story, and others like it, set up a stylistic tension between Thomasson’s fluidity and Franklin’s conservatism.

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<sup>91</sup> Day, “Major Lee Franklin.”

<sup>92</sup> Interview with James “Texas Shorty” Chancellor, February 11, 2023.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Howard Dee “Wes” Westmoreland, October 15, 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Howard Dee “Wes” Westmoreland, “Chicken and Bread Days” Jam Session, October 1, 2022.

In contrast to Thomasson and Franklin, Bob Wills was not a competitive fiddle player, despite his early involvement in Texas Fiddle Contests. Charles K. Wolfe writes that Wills's fiddling is melodically "straightforward" compared to that of Thomasson and Franklin. Listeners do not have to be experts in Texas Style fiddling to hear that Wills takes very few liberties in his solos. Wills himself admitted at one point that he felt self-conscious about his fiddling abilities: "I was a little afraid of my fiddle all through there . . . I couldn't navigate it very good."<sup>95</sup> Rather than pushing the boundaries of Texas Fiddle player, Wills fused his contest fiddling background with his life-long love affair with big-band jazz to eventually form Texas Swing. Between 1929 and 1942, Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys recorded about 197 tracks, mostly of fiddle-heavy pop and blues arrangements. Many of those tracks included popular contest tunes like "Beaumont Rag," "Done Gone," and "I Don't Love Nobody," all of which sold reasonably well even decades after their original releases. In these recordings, Wills's guitarist Eldon Shamblin played outside of a traditional fiddle tune's chord progression, adding jazz-influenced chords including diminished chords, sevenths, and a walking bass. This captured the imagination of guitarists in the Texas Fiddling community, notably Franklin's preferred guitarist, Omega Burden.

The link between Burden and the Texas Playboys is murky, but one can safely assume that, given their popularity, Burden was one of many guitarists who listened to, liked, and emulated them. In this sense, Wills' influence changed the nature of the musical canvas which supports fiddlers. Due to his influence, jazz-influenced chord progressions like chromatic bass walk-ups, diminished chords, and sevenths are heard today accompanying fiddlers on the contest stage. In fact, a guitarist's ability to play such advanced chords—without a capo, for the older

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<sup>95</sup> Bob Wills quoted by Charles Wolfe. Wolfe, "Bob Wills, Fiddler," 159.

generation—is one of those unspoken musical expectations within the Texas fiddling community. While Wills himself did not embody the same competitive spirit as Thomasson and Franklin, he still acts as a Texas Fiddle Player archetype. His contribution impacted the foundations on which Texas Fiddle Players improvise, giving rise to the variation levels demonstrated in later generations of fiddlers. By developing the Texas Swing genre, Wills invited Texas fiddle players to seek out new musical frontiers to conquer.

If Wills can be credited with fusing old-style Texas fiddling (that of Eck Robertson and Benny Thomasson’s generations) with jazz-like chords and improvisations, then Terry Morris and Texas Shorty should be credited with raising the improvisation bar to virtuosic levels. Both Morris and Shorty rose to fame early in their musical careers, which opened doors for them to study with multiple notable musicians—Texas Fiddle Players and otherwise. This combined musical aptitude nurtured by a fiddling family gave rise to musical personalities that fused the best of the frontier around them into something entirely their own. A brief look into Morris and Shorty’s life stories and careers will reveal forces that shaped them into the Texas Fiddle Player Archetypes they have become.

According to fiddlers of Westmoreland and Texas Shorty’s generations, the Morris brothers were some of the most competitive Texas Fiddle Players of the 1970s.<sup>96</sup> Terry, the youngest, was regarded as a Texas Style prodigy. His interest in the style began when he started attending fiddle contests with his older brother Dale. He quickly became Dale’s backup guitarist but later switched to fiddle.<sup>97</sup> Friends of the Morris family often joke that Dale had no choice but to concede the fiddling mantle to his more talented little brother and take up the guitar to stay

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with “Texas Shorty,” September 24, 2022; Interview with Westmoreland, October 15, 2022.

<sup>97</sup> Cliff Fryer, “Terry Morris, 1989,” *Fiddlers Frolics Hall of Fame*, November 7, 2019, Accessed March 17, 2023, <https://fiddlersfrolics.com/hall-of-fame/f/terry-morris-1989>.

involved. He began working the contest scene in earnest in as a teenager in the early 70s, and ultimately rocketed to the top of the field, where he more or less stayed until his premature death in 1988.

Much like Hank Williams's untimely death served his legacy, Terry Morris's early death propelled him to folk hero status. Those who knew him as an adult speak of an unmatched fiddler with a contest resumé and performing career to prove it. The older generation, who are gradually moving into the seniors' contest division, remember a fiddling savant who knew to take advantage of the time he lived in. Early in his career, Morris spent weeks at a time with individual fiddlers learning from them, jamming with them, and asking them questions. Texas Shorty recalls Morris having sought out Thomasson for this purpose; similarly, Wes Westmoreland remembers Morris as fiddling peer who learned what he could from various Westmoreland fiddle players.<sup>98</sup> His entry in the Texas Fiddlers Frolics Hall of fame describes him as a gracious, generous, good-humored man whose musical curiosity could never be fully satisfied.<sup>99</sup> His loss is still strongly felt among his friends and family in the Texas Style fiddling community. Terry's virtuosic aptitude for Texas Style fiddling, his musical versatility (giving him appeal outside of Texas), and stories that feature his extreme likeability create a narrative tension against his untimely death. This tension catapulted Morris to legendary status in much the same way stories about Alamo figures like Davy Crockett have captured the imaginations of many Texans.

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with James "Texas Shorty Chancellor," September 24, 2022; Interview with Howard Dee "Wes" Westmoreland, October 15, 2022.

<sup>99</sup> Cliff Fryer, "Terry Morris, 1989."



“Texas Shorty” also began his musical career as a young prodigy. He began playing mandolin at age seven, and by nine he was performing with his brother on KTER radio.<sup>100</sup> This is where he earned his nickname:

When I was young, my dad, my brother, and I had a group called “Texas Al and Shorty.” My brother left home when he got grown, and so we just became “Texas Shorty.” the Al part got dropped. I always tell people that I was a little short boy, and kind of round, a Texas shorty.<sup>101</sup>

He was inspired to switch his focus to the fiddle after meeting Benny Thomasson when he was thirteen.<sup>102</sup> “Shorty” captured the Texas Fiddling Community’s attention when he became the youngest World Champion fiddler in Crockett and proceeded to win three years in a row (1955-57). This means that by the time he was fourteen, he was the second-ever fiddler to achieve undefeated status at this destination fiddle contest.<sup>103</sup> Similarly to Robertson, “Shorty” was one of the first Texas Fiddle Players to make a point of recording himself; unlike Robertson, these recordings by “Shorty” did obtain significant commercial success.

When asked to name a favorite fiddle tune, a Texas fiddle player will often talk about a favorite recording by Benny Thomasson or Major Franklin, or even a favorite arrangement by Bob Wills. They will also invariably include a favorite “Texas Shorty” performance or recording. Unlike Terry Morris, “Shorty” enjoys the privilege of becoming a patriarch within the tradition while still living. Organizations in and outside of Texas have inducted him into various halls of fame.<sup>104</sup> Additionally, the National Heritage Foundation has named him a Master of

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<sup>100</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, “Jim ‘Texas Shorty’ Chancellor: Fiddler,” June 23, 2011, Accessed March 17, 2023, <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/jim-texas-shorty-chancellor#:~:text=Jim%20Chancellor%2C%20or%20%22Texas%20Shorty%22%20as%20he%20is,seven%20when%20his%20father%20brought%20home%20a%20mandolin.>

<sup>101</sup> Interview with “Texas Shorty,” September 24, 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, “Texas Shorty.”

<sup>104</sup> Fiddlers Frolics Hall of Fame, “Jim ‘Texas Shorty’ Chancellor, 1988,” November 7, 2019, Accessed April 20, 2023, <https://fiddlersfrolics.com/hall-of-fame/f/jim-texas-shorty-chancellor-1988.>

Traditional Arts, and he has received recognition from the National Endowment for the Arts.<sup>105</sup>

When I asked him about his feelings regarding the recognition he receives as a “living legend,” he offered:

I think it’s because of my root system . . . I got to meet Eck Robertson and Bob Wills’. . . not Bob Wills, but his sister . . . It’s kind of like growing up on the street with some famous painters. You’d say, “Oh he’s been there. He got to see them paint a picture!” I think that’s a big part of my attraction to people, that I was there.<sup>106</sup>

At this point in time, it is hard to say what specific impact “Shorty” will leave on the greater American fiddling community. However, as will be explored in the next chapter, “Texas Shorty” and Terry Morris introduced new levels of virtuosity in Texas Style fiddling improvisation.

Given the century-long gap between Robertson’s surviving recordings and the contemporary Texas fiddle contest, “Texas Shorty” is one of only a few living Texas Fiddle Players with a first-hand connection to the “Founding Father.” He had this to say about a twilight-years Eck Robertson:

Eck Robertson, he was quite the character. He lived in Amarillo, Texas, when I met him . . . He went to fiddle contests because that was a forum for most fiddle players . . . people came to the contests kind of like they do the bluegrass festivals now, because that was the place where you were gonna hear the stuff that you wanted to hear. That was the forum for performing the music. So I guess it kind of transferred from the home to the fiddle contest, and Eck was active in those as I was.<sup>107</sup>

Despite his struggles with the early recording industry, it seems that Robertson was as interested in hearing Texas Style fiddling as he was in playing it. Stories that place their teller in the room

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National Fiddler Hall of Fame, “Jim ‘Texas Shorty’ Chancellor,” 2019, Accessed April 20, 2023, <http://www.nationalfiddlerhalloffame.org/HallOfFame/jimtexasshortych.html#:~:text=He%20has%20recently%20stopped%20traveling%20due%20to%20health,the%20National%20Fiddler%20Hall%20of%20Fame%20in%202019.>

<sup>105</sup> Masters of Traditional Arts, “Jim ‘Texas Shorty’ Chancellor,” 2010, Accessed April 20, 2023, <http://www.mastersoftraditionalarts.org/artists/56>.

“Jim ‘Texas Shorty’ Chancellor: Fiddler,” *National Endowment for the Arts*, June 23, 2011, Accessed March 17, 2023, <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/jim-texas-shorty-chancellor#:~:text=Jim%20Chancellor%2C%20or%20%22Texas%20Shorty%22%20as%20he%20is,seven%20when%20his%20father%20brought%20home%20a%20mandolin.>

<sup>106</sup> Interview with James “Texas Shorty” Chancellor, September 24, 2022.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with James “Texas Shorty” Chancellor, September 24, 2022.

with Thomasson and Franklin—or anyone else from that generation—act as a status symbol for the current generation of leaders. This is because stories are acts of creation, and their products reach into both past and present. One person’s account of meeting any of these figures works with dozens of other accounts, to create an idea of a whole person. All fiddle players channel generations of predecessors, but Texas fiddlers channel a specific line of their own. A claim that these predecessors are the only ones who significantly impacted the course of American fiddling history stem from the Texas Exceptionalist perspective.

As an archetype, the American fiddle player is part of a specific narrative of American wholesomeness and nostalgia for an imagined Anglo past. The Texas version of this archetype embodies the spirit of those gritty pioneers from T.R. Fehrenbach’s *Seven Keys to Texas*. Musically speaking, the figures in the Texas Fiddle Players arsenal of anecdotes conquered American fiddle playing just as Fehrenbach’s Anglo settlers conquered an untamed Texas frontier through their own blood, sweat, and tears. “Founding Father” Eck Robertson facilitated the first contact between Texas fiddle playing and the rest of the United States by blazing a trail into the early recording industry. In doing so, Robertson piqued America’s interest in Texas and its unique musicians. Benny Thomasson and Major Franklin act as complimentary competitors, turning contest fiddling into something that an individual fiddle player could tame and make his/her own. Their opposing personalities fulfill the friendly and rebellious aspects of the Texas Fiddle Player Archetype. Bob Wills, like Eck, created his own frontier within Texas style fiddling, through the development of a hybrid genre, Texas Swing. This opened up new possibilities for improvisation for both Texas Fiddle Players and the guitarists who accompanied them. Finally, Terry Morris and “Texas Shorty” increased the virtuosic possibilities for Texas

style fiddling, which then captured the hearts and imaginations of fiddle players in and outside of Texas.

## CHAPTER 3

The community side of the cultural capital exchange should not be ignored when examining fiddling and regional identity, because it is the community that determines what is “authentically Texan.” Chris Goertzen reports an incident about a woman who won a Mississippi fiddle contest with a “Paganini-esque fantasy on ‘‘Old Joe Clark’ that had had nothing to do with fiddling beyond the barely recognizable kernel of a tune she had employed as a point of departure.” The judges, it seemed, were impressed enough with her musicality and technical command to overlook her “lack of acquaintance” with fiddling, enough to grant her a win.<sup>108</sup> This would not be acceptable at a Texas fiddle contest. Texas Shorty theorizes that a region’s collective of listeners determines its musical priorities: “You know a lot of the competition comes from the people becoming interested in it. Maybe the fiddlers didn’t have that much to do with it...they were always comparing the styles.” To illustrate, he tells an anecdote about an unsuccessful bid at a Montana fiddle contest:

There, they had a great connection to the ‘old style.’ I was actually disqualified for playing in that contest because I didn’t play the tunes like the old timers played them. They wanted to play it a certain way, and that was the way it was done, very culturally structured.<sup>109</sup>

Despite his popular appeal in Texas and the surrounding states, Shorty found that his tendency to “color outside the lines” like his mentor Benny Thomasson was not appreciated outside of Texas, or at least in Montana at that time. As discussed in Chapter 1, Texas fiddle contests have their own set of regional musical expectations. “They want people to play the authentic tunes . . . as they did in the old days-they call it old time fiddle music,” Shorty explains to that end. “If you do

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<sup>108</sup> Goertzen, *Southern Fiddlers*, 29.

<sup>109</sup> When asked, Chancellor could not remember when or where this Montana contest occurred, rendering the prospect of tracking down any documentation impractical. Interview: James “Texas Shorty” Chancellor, 11 February, 2023.

‘fancy stuff,’ and put ‘fancy music’ in them, then you’re not going to do very well.”<sup>110</sup> What Texas Shorty describes here is an intuitive exchange of cultural goods between artists and art consumers reminiscent of Nicholas Cook’s discussion of musical meaning. According to Cook, music cannot have meaning without a person connecting something in the music to the world around them. An association between a sound and an emotion or action only exists because we, the listeners, make that connection. This perspective is particularly relevant to an exploration of regional musicality because “authenticity” is a socially constructed idea that varies between different fiddling communities. In a fiddle contest, this exchange of social objects takes two pathways: a) fiddler to listeners and, b) listeners to the fiddler by way of the results. A fiddler’s results have as much to do with how well a fiddler performed as they do with the community’s judgment of their adherence to local authenticity. This exchange is precisely the reason that a popular Texas fiddler would effectively tank at a fiddle contest in Montana, a region with its own set of expectations regarding “good, authentic fiddling.” One goes to a fiddle contest to hear “the authentic tunes,” but local expectations determine what authenticity means.

### **3.1: In Search of “Texan-ness” in Texas-Style Fiddling**

In his exploration of Czechness in Western Classical music, one of Michael Beckerman’s enlightening conclusions is that there is not a list of musical features that are exclusively Czech.<sup>111</sup> However, just as composers and listeners bought into the idea of distinct Czechness in music, American fiddlers buy into the idea of a fiddling style that is distinctly Texan. Like Beckerman, I too must conclude that the “Texanness” I am seeking in fiddling “must come about as the result of a *process*.”<sup>112</sup> This process is a subconscious association between insider

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<sup>110</sup> Interview: James “Texas Shorty” Chancellor, September 24, 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Beckerman, “In Search of Czechness in Music,” *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 64.

<sup>112</sup> Beckerman, “In Search of Czechness,” 64.

knowledge of a place, such as people, culture, lore, as well as observable aspects of the music that includes melodic figures, rhythms, harmonic movement, as well technique, or the way a musician plays. This process might also be considered as a cultural exchange of goods—sounds, symbols, and images—using a musical performance as a vessel. With regards to Czechness in art music, Czech composers established their music as being “Czech,” but the rest of the art music community had to agree that this was so. The process is no different between Texas Fiddle Players and the greater American fiddling community.

An obvious place to start would be with what Texas fiddle music is not. It is not the contemporary conception of Old-Time fiddle music, which is closely related to the fiddling practices of Southern Appalachia. But because the vast majority of Texas fiddling repertoire stems from this tradition, fiddlers from Westmoreland and Chancellor’s generations often use the phrases “Texas Style” and “Texas Old-Time” interchangeably. In contrast, younger generations of Texas fiddle players consciously omit “old-time” when referring to Texas Style fiddle playing.<sup>113</sup> Texas Style fiddle music is also not bluegrass music, even though some of the tunes come from Bill Monroe and his fiddle player Kenny Baker. Many skilled Texas Style fiddlers find themselves naturally suited to bluegrass, and Texas fiddle albums often receive a “bluegrass” label on popular streaming services. It is certainly not Tejano music, which is more related to Bordertown musical culture than it is to Anglo, southern musical culture.<sup>114</sup>

It bears repeating Beckerman’s assertion that no individual cultural-musical identity exclusively owns any single musical marker. However, a conversation with Howard Dee “Wes” Westmoreland yielded a two-fold explanation of mechanical and stylistic markers of Texas

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<sup>113</sup> Fiddle player Crawford affirms this observation in our conversation on January 27, 2023.

<sup>114</sup> Donald A. Henriques, “Tejano Music [*música tejana*] (Tex-Mex),” *Grove Music Online*, January 31, 2014, Accessed April 20, 2023.

Fiddle Players. First is that Westmoreland believes in a significant mechanical difference in a Texas fiddler's bow arm from that of their peer fiddlers. Second, the Texas Style fiddler's ability to spontaneously synthesize a body of pre-existing knowledge into something completely original. Westmoreland does not necessarily contradict Beckerman's assertions. Consider the following analysis:

[The] opening chords of *Má vlast* are not specifically Czech: I-vi-V6-I in the key of Eb . . . Yet when Smetana juxtaposes these chords with the image of the great rock Vyšehrad, and that image is further abstracted into a symbol of the enduring quality of the Czech people, the chords become imbued with a sensibility, and the sensibility becomes tied to something concrete. Having been suffused with Czechness, the chords become Czech and impart this quality to surrounding material, which ultimately redefines and enhances the very sensibility that produced it.

The techniques Westmoreland discusses below are not specifically Texan. However, when one couples these techniques with the practices discussed in Chapter 1 and reverence for the archetypal figures in Chapter 2, these techniques become imbued with Texan-ness.

### **3.2: A Texas Fiddle Player, on Playing Texas Fiddle**

“If you really want to get down to it, somebody that—and not all Texas players get it—somebody who gets the right hand. It's the right hand,” Westmoreland explained to me matter-of-factly. “You gotta know what you're doing with your right hand. Somebody has to show you.”<sup>115</sup> From a classical standpoint anything short of a German-inspired, classical violin bow-hold, with the stick cradled by the thumb and two middle fingers and balanced between the index and pinky fingers, is less than ideal. Classical violinists and their bow-holds are products of decades of technical standardization in service of a sound that is equally flexible and projectible. Much of that power comes from having a bow-hold that balances the hand across the stick. However, this kind of technique is impossible for an entirely self-taught violinist to develop.

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<sup>115</sup> Interview with “Wes” Westmoreland, October 15, 2022.



They need a mentor who has had decades of training themselves. Texas Style fiddle players, at least of Westmoreland's generation, were primarily self-taught by musicians who were themselves self-taught. It must be understood that the bowing technique has developed differently over the last century and that this affects the overall sound. Westmoreland's bow-hold places the weight of gravity against the front end of his hand, favoring a circle made by the thumb and index finger. His middle finger rests against the index finger, but his ring and pinky fingers hardly touch the bow, if ever. "The only time I ever lay my pinky down is when I pick my bow up. Most of the time, it's like here,"<sup>116</sup> Westmoreland explained, letting his pinky curl up over the pen he was using in place of a bow. It was Westmoreland who turned me towards one of the more extreme versions of this kind of bow-hold.

In surviving videos, Texas fiddler Orville Burns (b. 1921) holds his bow loosely between his thumb and forefinger, letting the rest of his fingers hang free "like a dishrag."<sup>117</sup> This is the clearest example of the bow-hold Westmoreland describes: Burns holds the bow exclusively between his thumb and forefinger, letting his other three fingers hang over the frog. When in motion, his wrist drives most of his direction work and not his elbow. The resulting sound is loose, and groovy. "The bow arm is a completely different being with Texas fiddle players. Notes are notes are notes are notes. It's the same thirteen over and over and over again, but that's not going to change,"<sup>118</sup> Westmore continues. Here, he continues to use classically trained fiddle players as a point of comparison. According to his observations, classically trained fiddle players tend to play with a higher elbow than self-taught fiddle players, which—again, according to Westmoreland's observations—leads to a locked wrist. "When you lock your wrist, what do you

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<sup>116</sup> Interview with Westmoreland, October 15, 2022.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

have to play from? The elbow . . . You just don't have much there."<sup>119</sup> There is some truth to this. In my personal experience, my own wrist has been the subject of countless lessons and masterclasses in my time as a classical player. However, the goal with classical mechanics is projection; in contrast, the goal of Texas fiddle players is groove.

Hopkins demonstrates a looser bow-hold in comparison to Lindley and Price at the Weiser fiddle competition. Hopkins's bow-hold favors the forefinger end of his hand over his smaller fingers, which in turn allows the pinky and ring fingers to hover above the stick. The result is not as relaxed as Burns's "dishrag" hold, but is still visibly loose. In contrast, both Lindley and Price play with the evidence of more traditional violin training in their bow mechanics. Both fiddlers play with balanced bow-holds, evidenced by their tendencies to keep all fingers on their frogs, no matter where they play in the bow—frog, middle, or tip. More evidence of their formal training when compared to Hopkins lies in the way they initiate a change in direction with their elbow and keep their upper arms stationary. This is not to say that Hopkins never uses his elbow to change direction—he does. When in motion, his entire arm tends to move more freely than Lindley's and Price's.

While Westmoreland's description of a typical Texas-Style fiddler's bow hold can be demonstrated in many active fiddlers of this tradition, these tendencies also appear in fiddlers from other regions. It is also true that just as many Texas-Style fiddle players receive classical-style training as those who do not. Fiddler Crawford's remarks about her formative years in Valerie Ryals's studio indicate that she received technical training in the form of pointers after group lessons. Additionally, fully classically trained musicians very often find their way to their local fiddling communities. Dr. Chris Goertzen has cited a growing presence of Suzuki violin

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

students competing in junior divisions across the South, including in Texas.<sup>120</sup> Dr. Glass is a more extreme example, having earned a DMA before seeking out the Texas fiddling community. This is all to say that bowing mechanics alone do not define a fiddler's regionality. However, many Texas fiddle players display the same bowing mechanics in comparison to their non-Texan peers.

The second part of the Westmoreland equation for Texas Style fiddling is the fiddle player's ability to synthesize a large body of musical knowledge, including the most competitive fiddle tunes and their multiple variations, into something unique to that individual. This does not mean that an individual fiddle player is finished once they have created and memorized one specific version of a tune. It means that the fiddle player can manipulate and *improvise* on a tune without losing the melody's integrity. This is a slippery concept for a few reasons. Foremost is how impossible it is to avoid bias. Westmoreland's generation carries the most artistic authority within the community right now, which means that they set the trends. Next is the subjective nature of improvisation and the countless questions the word itself raises. Additionally, the issue of regional ownership remains: anything discussed as part of the Texas Style fiddler's unique toolbox can also be found in other regional fiddling styles.

At the heart of this matter is this idea of synthesis and spontaneous melodic variation, the blurring of lines between famous variations, and new improvisations. In a fiddle contest setting, improvisation is a task left to the soloist whereas it might be a collaborative activity in other settings, such as a Western Swing or a jazz band. Fiddle contest improvisation departs from jazz improvisation in that a fiddle tune's chord progression is not a template for free improvisation like it would for something like "Rhythm Changes" in a jazz ensemble. While folk music

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<sup>120</sup> Chris Goertzen, *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests*, 28.

enthusiasts might hear elements that overlap with bluegrass, Texas fiddling improvisation does not fall under that umbrella either. Bluegrass allows for more extended techniques from the fiddler like the percussive bow “chop” during their solo. Texas-style fiddling strongly discourages extended techniques like this. Nor does Texas Style fiddling borrow improvisation from true Old-Time practice, where melodies are generally fixed, but the bowings are improvised. To complicate things further, Texas fiddle players are discouraged from adhering to a single version of their fiddle tunes. It would not matter if that version featured a quotation from someone like Benny Thomasson, nor would it matter if that version did well at a previous contest. Players like Westmoreland and Hopkins have been synthesizing for so long, that they even vary repeated phrases. “It’s taking a simple tune like ‘Eighth of January’ and making it a *tune*, adding to it *on the fly*,” Westmoreland said on the topic of improvisation in Texas Style fiddling. “On the fly” is the most important part of this statement, because the phrase implies that a fiddle player has such a grasp on a particular tune and all its past and possible variations, that they can pull any one of them out at any moment.

The precedent for this kind of “spontaneous melodic variation” practice lies in both a fiddle tune’s longevity and its history of aural transmission. While plenty of published fiddle tune anthologies claim to contain specific transcriptions of specific recordings, tune synthesis with the best results happens aurally. “If it’s printed on paper, then it’s locked in stone,” Westmoreland elaborates. In contrast, aural transmission allows a tune to “morph and change” with individual fiddle players. Whether one hears regional elements in a fiddle player is less important than an individual’s style. Westmoreland gave two personal anecdotes as evidence of aural transmission’s role in creating the “Texas sound.” The first concerns his grandfather, H.D.

Westmoreland Sr., a self-taught fiddler who regularly picked up tunes from a Sunday night AM-radio program with Howdy Forrester and Georgia Slim:

My grandpa would stop everything and hear it on the radio *one time*, and have to remember to play it . . . He would remember that tune as best he could and his mind would fill in the blanks. And so, when learned it, it would be how Grandpa heard it. And so you wind up with these different kind of versions.<sup>121</sup>

There are two pieces to this story contributing to the idea of a “Texas sound.” First Georgia Slim’s infusing “Texan-ness” into his brand. The band was similar to Bob Wills’s Texas Playboys (fiddle, guitar, bass) and his weekly show, “Texas Roundup” showcased fiddle tunes played in a style similar to Benny Thomasson and Major Franklin.<sup>122</sup> Second is Westmoreland Sr.’s filling memory gaps in himself to create his own versions of fiddle tunes. Any Texan-ness within his variations would have been the result of his musical memory and his Texas Fiddle Player self-classification.

Westmoreland’s second anecdote offers a snapshot into how Texas-style variability was passed to him, through a left-handed fiddle player named Bill Gilbert:

The first time I heard “Sally Goodin,” he’d teach me the first part of “Sally Goodin.” And then he’d teach me another way to play the same part. Then he’d show me a third way to play the same part. Then he’d show me a *fourth* way to play the same parts. So, I’ve learned four parts—only the first part of “Sally Goodin” four different ways. Then he’d say, “Now *you* change it.”

“In doing that,” Westmoreland concludes, “You’re taught how to manipulate the melody without losing the melody.”<sup>123</sup> This concept of spontaneous melodic variation comes up repeatedly when talking to Texas Fiddle Players about Texas Style fiddling, but even this is not unique to Texas. Aural transmission is very common among American fiddle players, and fiddlers who regularly compete do so with multiple variations of multiple tunes. One needs only to return to Weiser,

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<sup>121</sup> Interview with Westmoreland, October 15, 2023.

<sup>122</sup> Schlappi, Elizabeth (1993), *Roy Acuff: The Smoky Mountain Boy*, Pelican Publishing Company, 94.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Westmoreland, October 15, 2022.

Idaho to witness fiddle players from all corners of the United States manipulating their fiddle tunes to varying degrees. Carl Hopkins, Tashina Clarridge Lindley, and Luke Price set themselves apart from other competitors because of their ability to vary their fiddle tunes (see Appendices 1A-1C for examples of transcriptions of breakdowns by Hopkins, Lindley, and Price). However, Hopkins sets himself apart from even Lindley and Price because his variations *sound* more spontaneous than the others. Lindley’s “Say Old Man” and Price’s “Grey Eagle” contain sweeping runs, leaps between positions, rolling chords, and other impressive ornamentations, all cleanly executed, indicative of a greater than minimal degree of pre-planning. Hopkins’ variations on “Billy in the Lowground” are equally complicated, but not always successful. His body language acts as a tell for him: the wilder his movements become, the more complicated “lick” he plans to try. Additionally, his sound moves in and out of clarity, as if he is sounding out each variation in the moment.<sup>124</sup> One can use these factors as evidence of Hopkins’ lack of pre-planning, but to do so would fail to acknowledge Hopkins’s expert command of the tune. The Texas-Exceptionalist would say that Hopkins demonstrates fearlessness in the face of musical risk. Like a stock John Wayne character, shooting from the hip and hitting his mark, Hopkins will play what he feels in the moment, regardless of its success, and still walk away with a third-place medal. That third-place medal, plus the M.C.’s delight by Hopkins’ Texas-affect, indicate a national consensus that variations by a Texas Fiddle Player are in a league all their own.

### **3.3 Variation Precedent**

There is some precedent in the recordings from the founders, but not as much as one would hope given the way these men are idolized. Charles Wolfe, along with other fiddling

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<sup>124</sup> Lyle Dixon, “Grand National Champion Round 3 (Top 8)-2022 National Old Time Fiddle Contest (Weiser),” Accessed April 28, 2023, <https://youtu.be/Y4rxG9k4plM>, 7:35.

scholars, claims that Robertson’s “Sallie Gooden” sets a strong precedent for melodic variation, one that Texas Style fiddlers pride themselves in emulating. Depending on the listener’s criteria for distinguishing a new variation from a previous one with different ornamentations, they might hear between ten and fourteen different variations in this recording. For the sake of this analysis, I am choosing to be generous with my own counting of variations. After initially stating two primary themes (A and B), Robertson cycles through about eight distinct variations and returns to A and B three times. The starkest departure from its A-Major soundscape happens near the end in his penultimate variation, when Robertson starts a variation of the B-section in *f#-minor*. The section resolves with its signature tag in A-Major before Robertson moves into his final iteration of the A-Section/Primary Variation. What we hear in this recording is creative fiddling with variations that progress logically as the tune goes on—meaning that Robertson saves his more technically challenging and surprising variations for the second half of the recording. What we do not hear is spontaneous melodic improvisation on the same level as later generations of Texas Fiddle Players.

Regardless of where one places Thomasson and Franklin on the American music evolutionary timeline, their distinct voices, and future fiddlers’ reliance on them helped define the Texas sound. When Texas Fiddle Players look for new and interesting variations to add to their personal improvisation arsenals, they often turn to Benny Thomasson and Major Franklin, two fiddlers whose individual styles could not be more different from each other. Their differences can easily be heard in their respective versions of the breakdown “Forked Deer,” in recordings from within the same three-year period. Thomasson’s “Forked Deer” demonstrates his proclivity for “long bow” style (meaning longer phrases slurred together) and for left-handed ornaments (See Appendix 2B). Thomasson connects measure 62 into 63 with a trademark

“longbow,” and liberally uses eighth note triplets as neighbor figures (measure 49) and to connect large intervals (measure 59). These aspects of Thomasson’s style give him an easy listenability that appeals to both fiddle and classical players. In contrast, Franklin seldom slurs more than a beat or two and rarely employs left-hand ornaments. This gives his sound a more percussive quality than Thomasson’s, although, on paper, his variation looks simpler (Appendix 2A).

Compared to the melodic variation in players like “Texas Shorty,” Terry Morris, and Carl Hopkins, Thomasson and Franklin’s variations are less complex. Both men have distinct approaches to ornamentation and variation that play to their individual strengths, and they did not have access to the same level of technology fiddlers enjoy today. Being in the same generation as Westmoreland’s grandfather, Thomasson and Franklin would have drawn upon live performance (at fiddle contests or on the radio) more easily than they would have recorded sources. As a result, these individualized voices flourished with minimal cross-pollination from other fiddlers outside of what they could hold in their minds. None of this is meant to imply that Thomasson and Franklin were not spontaneous players. Again, because they possessed unique musical strengths, their improvising choices played to those strengths. It was players like “Texas Shorty” and Terry Morris who pushed their predecessor’s memory-based melodic variations to the kind of virtuosic level admired by today’s active Texas Fiddle Players.

At the end of March 2023, fiddler and composer Mark O’Connor re-released a recorded round-robin jam session on “Billy in the Low-ground” from 1975, featuring none other than Benny Thomasson, Texas Shorty, and Terry Morrison. It is the perfect case study in Texas Style spontaneous melodic variation in that it showcases multiple fiddlers and their individual approaches to the same fiddle tune. To reiterate, “Texas Shorty” and Terry Morrison fused stylistic



synthesis with spontaneous melodic variation. Both fiddle players learned from and competed against fiddlers in the Thomasson/Franklin generation and molded their individual styles from what they liked best. Their musical strengths are diverse, flexible, and on full display in O'Connor's recording. Thomasson's "Billy in the Low-ground" (Appendix 3A) demonstrates his long-bow proclivity (measures 10 and 18), and his fondness for eighth-note triplets. "Texas Shorty" demonstrates many of those same tendencies in his own variation (Appendix 3B): the opening I chose for him employs multiple bars of "long-bows" and triplets (m. 49-51). He seamlessly moves from a Thomasson-style variation into something else entirely on the next round. The figure starting at measure 57 is a repeated, broken C-major chord, with the bottom notes slurred together. The effect is a feeling of three against four, something rarely heard in a traditional breakdown at this point in time. Terry Morris's excerpt demonstrates familiarity and fluency with Thomasson-style interval-connecting triplets (Appendix 3C, mm. 89 and 94). He fuses these triplets with chromatic neighbor figures (mm. 79 and 83), and even employs a brief, but effective g-pedal (m. 90). The difference between Morris and "Shorty's" variations is Morris's tendency to move in and out of Thomasson-style figures within the same variation, while "Shorty" stays mostly within Thomasson's style for that variation's duration. An untrained ear can certainly hear clear differences between each fiddle player on this recording, but the listener might not know what factors make up those distinctions. A trained ear might not even be able to pinpoint what factors make these individual sounds distinctly Texan over North American. Texan-ness comes from the connections these fiddlers (and their listeners) make between their playing styles and their identities as Texans.

For fiddlers like Carl Hopkins and Wes Westmoreland, those connections are intuitive, and their patriarchal origins are evident, if you know what to look for. The Texas Fiddling

Community is quite small, so Westmoreland and Hopkins' friendship should come as no surprise; they grew up competing against each other in and outside of Texas. In one of our conversations, Westmoreland explained his theory of Hopkins' role in carrying on Major Franklin's stylistic legacy. "Now there's a lot of people that have learned a Major lick without knowing where it came from because they got it from Carl," he answered when I asked about the discrepancy between the number of Major Franklin-inspired "licks" and the general inaccessibility of his recorded body of work. "Carl won't teach them to other people, but people will *steal* them from Carl."<sup>125</sup> If this is true, then Hopkins might be well on his way to achieving long-term legendary status himself. A fiddle player with a resumé like his that includes decades of state-wide and national fiddle contest victories, and a close connection to one of the communities more elusive patriarchs (Major Franklin) has earned Hopkins his own community leader status, and many younger fiddle players wish to emulate him. Regardless of whether they know he borrows from Major Franklin, his fiddle playing is imbued with associations of greatness just given his family lineage and his resumé of Texas and National fiddle contest victories. Players borrow licks from Hopkins for the same reason Hopkins does so from Franklin: They see something worth emulating in the original fiddle player. The act of borrowing from another Texas Fiddle Player (especially one like Hopkins) also allows a fiddle player to imbue more Texan-ness into their playing.

When Beckerman explored manifestations of "Czechness" in European art music, he essentially explored regional norms of authenticity. As a concept, authenticity is loaded with regional expectation, but it is nevertheless important to include in an exploration of identity and music. It helps to think of authenticity as a socially constructed idea, because it merges human

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with Westmoreland, October 15, 2022.

association with community expectations and musical events. For Beckerman's Czech composers, authenticity was a matter of forming associations between Czech history, lore, and geography with specific musical events. For Texas Fiddle Players like Wes Westmoreland, authenticity is a matter of connecting a vast body of knowledge to specific aspects of a fiddler's performance. This body of knowledge includes multiple variations of specific fiddle tunes, the ability to synthesize those variations into something new on the fly a la "Texas Shorty" and Terry Morris, and a certain sound that can only come from a loose bow-hold. A Texas Fiddle Player will base their authenticity determination on these factors. "Texas Shorty's" disqualification in Montana demonstrates the diversity of authenticity ideas across the United States. Moreover, Goertzen's story about the "Old Joe Clarke" Caprice in Mississippi is evidence that not every fiddling community values the idea of authenticity to the same degree. It is clear that Texas Fiddle Players have established a set of technical and musical expectations separating their version of authenticity from the rest of the American fiddling community.

As I considered in Chapter 1, the Texas fiddle contests embody a Texas Exceptionalist spirit not in any unique elements within the contests themselves, but in the performance of being a community of Texas Fiddle Players. The contests provide a forum for Texas Fiddle Players to perform being Texan for both themselves and non-Texas fiddle players. A future examination of Texas Exceptionalism in fiddle contests might examine other regions of the United States with high concentrations of fiddle contests. One such area is the Northwestern United States (Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington). The figures from Texas fiddling history in Chapter 2 act as archetypes for Texas Exceptionalism, because each man exhibits an independent, frontier-conquering streak that Fehrenbachian Texans value about themselves. This area is ripe for

further study, as there were several other men that I could not include in this project.<sup>126</sup> Finally, Chapter 3 begins to examine technical and musical commonalities between notable Texas fiddle players and compare them to non-Texas fiddle players. This area also holds great potential for further study, as fiddling technique varies drastically across the United States. Such a study could address the effects various bow-holds and postures have on sound production and timbre, for example. Nothing discussed in this project is found exclusively in Texas, nor did any of it originate there. The Texas Fiddle Player identity is the result of a performance of culture, a shared historical narrative, and a few specific musical components. To the Texas Style Fiddler and consumers of Texas Style Fiddle music, the concept of “Texan-ness” in music is as real to them as the summer heat, or the bluebonnets that bloom every spring.

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<sup>126</sup> For example, Dick Barrett, Lewis Franklin, Bryant Houston, Vernon Solomon, and others.

APPENDIX

[1A] Luke Price, National Old Time Fiddlers' Festival, June 2022

“Sally Johnson,” A-Section (mm. 17-32).<sup>127</sup>

Musical score for "Sally Johnson," A-Section, measures 17-32. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts at measure 17 and is labeled "Price A2". The second staff starts at measure 21 and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The third staff starts at measure 25 and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The fourth staff starts at measure 29 and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

[1B] Tashina Clarridge-Lindley, National Old Time Fiddlers' Festival, June 2022

“Say Old Man,” A-Section (m. 1-16).<sup>128</sup>

Musical score for "Say Old Man," A-Section, measures 1-16. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts at measure 1 and is labeled "1A". The second staff starts at measure 5 and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The third staff starts at measure 9. The fourth staff starts at measure 13 and includes two triplet markings over eighth notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

<sup>127</sup> Lyle Dixon, “Grand National Champion Round 4 (Top 5), <https://youtu.be/pCmaggPio104>, 25:45.

<sup>128</sup> Lyle Dixon, “Grand National Champion Round 4 (Top 5), Weiser,” <https://youtu.be/pCmaggPio104>, 7:00.

[1C] Carl Hopkins, National Old Time Fiddlers' Festival, June, 2022

"Billy in the Low-ground" A-Section (m. 17-32).<sup>129</sup>

Musical score for "Billy in the Low-ground" A-Section, measures 17-32. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of five staves of music. The first staff begins at measure 16 and includes a first ending bracket labeled "2A" with a "3" below it, indicating a triplet. The second staff starts at measure 20. The third staff starts at measure 24 and includes another triplet marked with a "3". The fourth staff starts at measure 28 and also includes a triplet marked with a "3". The fifth staff starts at measure 30 and ends with a double bar line.

[2A] Major Franklin, 1966 "Forked Deer," B-Section (m. 17-32).<sup>130</sup>

Musical score for "Forked Deer," B-Section, measures 17-32. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins at measure 15 and includes a first ending bracket labeled "1B". The second staff starts at measure 20. The third staff starts at measure 25. The fourth staff starts at measure 30 and ends with a double bar line.

<sup>129</sup> Lyle Dixon, "Grand National Champion Round 4 (Top 5), <https://youtu.be/pCmaggPio104>, 13:20.

<sup>130</sup> "Forked Deer," Track B2 on *Texas Fiddle Favorites*, County Records, 707, 1966.

[2B] Benny Thomasson, 1966-1969 “Forked Deer,” B-Section (m. 49-64).<sup>131</sup>

Musical score for the B-Section of "Forked Deer" by Benny Thomasson, measures 49-64. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It consists of five staves of music. The first staff (measures 49-50) includes a first ending bracket labeled "2B" and a triplet of eighth notes. The second staff (measures 51-52) continues the melodic line. The third staff (measures 53-54) features a triplet of eighth notes. The fourth staff (measures 55-56) includes another triplet of eighth notes. The fifth staff (measures 57-64) shows the final measures of the section, ending with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

[3A] Benny Thomasson, 1975 “Billy in the Low-ground” A-Section (m. 1-16).<sup>132</sup>

Musical score for the A-Section of "Billy in the Low-ground" by Benny Thomasson, measures 1-16. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of five staves of music. The first staff (measures 1-3) is labeled "Thomasson A1" and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The second staff (measures 4-7) continues the melodic line. The third staff (measures 8-11) includes a triplet of eighth notes. The fourth staff (measures 12-15) includes another triplet of eighth notes. The fifth staff (measures 16-16) is labeled "Thomasson A2" and shows the final measure of the section.

<sup>131</sup> “Forked Deer,” Track 13 on Benny Thomasson, *Legendary Texas Fiddler: Recordings from 1966-1969*, Rebel Records, 2005.

<sup>132</sup> “Billy in the Low Ground,” Track 1 on *Billy in the Low Ground (feat. Benny Thomasson, “Texas Shorty,” and Terry Morris)-Single*, OMAC Records, 2023.





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