

Cherokee Fiddle:
A Study in Cultural Hybridities

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ABSTRACT

Despite a rich tradition of North American Indigenous fiddle playing, there is a severe lack of scholarship on the topic. This thesis works to mitigate that by highlighting marginalized voices among the Cherokee. To do so, I combine ethnographic fieldwork with an examination of archival materials to demonstrate how fiddling within the Cherokee Nation and Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians serves a wide variety of interrelationships that 1) forge a connection for Cherokee peoples to their sense of history as it relates to their music making; 2) create a focal point for Cherokee community events and expressions of identity; and 3) offer various bridges between Cherokee and non-Cherokee peoples through joint music-making practices, styles, and gatherings.

This argument draws on the concept of cultural hybridity as well as the lenses of identity, location of culture, and third space. I employ the work of Homi K. Bhabha (2003), Néstor García Canclini (1995), and Peter Burke (2009) to set a framework for analyzing hybridities in Cherokee fiddling, and I trace a network of contact zones (places where different cultures meet), convergence (the act of combining various cultures), and transculturation (a flow of information between cultures) that reveals how hybridities have supported a lasting tradition of Cherokee fiddle.

In establishing the foundation of Cherokee fiddle, I explore players past and present from both the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian, in North Carolina, and the Cherokee Nation, in Oklahoma. Cherokee fiddling was deeply influenced by interactions between European settlers and Indigenous people, as well as by the displacements caused by the Indian Removal Act and Trail of Tears. Speaking to the role that diaspora has

played in the development of style, I share stories of such fiddlers as Manco Sneed (1886-1975), Osey Helton (1879-1942), and Sam O'Fields (1934-2020), demonstrating their influences on fiddle traditions. Further, relying on contemporary collaborators, including Jerry Bigfeather and Regina Scott, I position activities at the Cherokee National Holiday Fiddle Contest in Tahlequah, Oklahoma as expressive of Cherokee identity, community, and homecoming. Overall, this research contributes to an underrepresented section of fiddle history and propels the Indigenous fiddle narrative forward.

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CHAPTER 1 : "TATER IT IN"–KICKING OFF THE RESEARCH

As I pull into the casino parking lot at 10:30 am on August 31st, I question all the decisions that have led to this moment. I've slept 1.5 hours and consumed 3.5 Red Bulls and nearly a pound of Sour Patch Kids. The last half can of Red Bull is soon to follow. Having driven through the night from my home in Knoxville, Tennessee, I arrive in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, just in time for the 72nd Annual Fiddle Contest, an event connected to the Cherokee National Holiday Festival.

Extracting myself from the car and stretching out my tired body, I only want to climb into a comfy bed and sleep; however, this will not happen for another 14 hours. Looking around, I see people entering the convention center, and I suddenly feel nervous. I ask myself again, who am I to think I can tell this story? Why does this white girl, born and raised in North Dakota, think she has any right to speak to a history of which she was not a part? Summoning all my courage, I sling my fiddle on my back, finish the Red Bull, and cross the parking lot.

As I walk through the front door of the Chota Center, I am greeted by a lobby full of brightly colored vendor booths. Wandering, looking for the Fiddle Contest, my eyes roam a sea of colors and textures. From beaded bracelets to a wall of ribbons, vendors peddled their wares to eager families; the place is bursting with energy. Finally, I stumble across a tiny handwritten sign pointing participants of the Fiddle Contest toward conference rooms four and five. Entering, I observe two men wearing plaid shirts, jeans, and cowboy hats on stage, running fiddle tunes. A handful of others are milling around as registration has just begun, and more fiddlers are starting to arrive. An older man is situated off to the side, warming up as strains of the hymn "How Great Thou Art" fill the air. It is striking that a prominent Christian hymn was the first music I heard that day. That is not what I expected. I don't know why it threw me off guard, but I was expecting to hear some new sounds. I didn't expect hymns.

Thirteen Hours to Oklahoma

The connection between Christianity and fiddle I witnessed that day points to cultural hybridity, which Néstor García Canclini (1995) defines as the deconstruction and mixing of the systems utilized to organize cultures. Canclini's (1995) concept brings awareness to relationships between the Cherokee and Christianity (Cherokee Nation,

n.d.) and between the Cherokee and the fiddle, relationships that persist today (p. 207).

These are also relationships that I witnessed firsthand at the Fiddle Contest.

Approaching the registration table, I am unexpectedly nervous. Luckily, I am soon put at ease by volunteers clad in purple shirts featuring Bigfoot playing a fiddle. I quickly explain that I am looking for Jerry Bigfeather, my point of contact for the day. To my surprise, I am directed to the men on stage, specifically the guitar player. I will soon discover that in addition to being the Fiddle Contest coordinator, Jerry is also the primary accompanist for the contestants. Walking up to the stage, the first thing I notice is Jerry's smile. His joy is contagious, and I find my excitement level rising. Jerry will prove to be a key participant in my ethnographic research.

As Jerry and I talk, an elderly Cherokee woman pushing a walker shuffles up and begins speaking to Jerry in Cherokee. She and Jerry continue their conversation for several minutes, flowing between English and Cherokee. This is another example of hybridity, and it suggests the concept of "code-switching." Burke (2009) argues that those who are bilingual and often switch languages can experience a blending of the two languages and identities, as it is challenging to keep them separate (p. 70). As I stand there looking around the room while they catch up, I notice the Cherokee syllabary and pronunciation guide running around the top border of the room.

Concerning cultural hybridities, the conversation and the signage I witnessed that day struck me in multiple ways, at the level of surface observation and in terms of deeper hybridities and their meanings. This has implications for my positionality too. For all the ways I am an insider in this space, including being a fiddler myself, I still feel out of place.

As a new scholar of Indigenous people and a white researcher, I recalled the concepts of emic and etic and their roles throughout this research. Representing insider and outsider views of the research process in these terms stems from the work of linguist Kenneth Pike (1990) who defines emic as, "A physical or mental item or system treated

by insiders as relevant to their system of behavior as the same emic unit in spite of etic variability" (Headland et al., p. 28). Pike's earlier work (1967) further defines these roles, wherein he states that, "The etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system" (p. 37).

Applying Pike's (1967) emic and etic concepts allows researchers to better understand how their research methods relate to a culture or system. Further, Pike argues that the etic approach treats entire cultures or groups simultaneously, while emic is applied to one group at a time (p. 37). When considering how these approaches apply to my current research methods, I acknowledge my position as both on the inside of one tradition (emic) and the outside of others (etic).

This dichotomy of emic and etic provides a space for me to recognize hybrid roles with respect to myself. At the heart of this is the fact that I have been a fiddle player for more than 30 years. This places me firmly in the emic approach regarding fiddle scholarship. On the other hand, I am solidly in the etic as it applies to Indigenous life. I have gained access to many spaces and places within the Cherokee life and culture, but as a visitor, I am not a citizen. This colors my views and what I find to be important features of Indigenous life from the outside, which may be different from what is considered significant to those on the inside.

One's role as an insider or outsider is fluid, which resonates with Bhabha's (1994) concept of third space. When speaking on the roles of emic and etic, ethnomusicologist and Eastern Band of Cherokee citizen Marcia Herndon (1993), argues that as researchers,

it is impossible to be entirely an insider or fully an outsider. Simply participating in fieldwork, our research affects our participants and ourselves (pp. 69-70). This idea of not fully being in one space or another situates the researcher in a new space, a "third space," that prevents them from ever again being the same when returning to the spaces and places they came from. My position mirrors this fluidity. However, as I learn to navigate in and out of research spaces, I have had to be aware that my approach is, as Herndon (1993) observes, coming from a Western mindset. I have had to exercise cultural sensitivity and empathy.

I am not the first, nor the last, researcher to struggle to navigate the liminal space between insider and outsider. Many scholars have written about this struggle in terms of ethnomusicological research. Despite growing up with Cherokee traditions, Herndon (1993) states that she never felt like a complete insider or outsider. Her heritage positioned her within the Cherokee culture, but she also grew up when being Cherokee was not the proud statement it has come to be in the twenty-first century. Herndon (1993) states, "It is no longer clear that either a conceptualized dichotomy of emic vs. etic or a continuum from total insider to total outsider is entirely useful" (p. 87). She goes on to state that there needs to be a look inward, both on a personal level as well as a professional level, to realize the role of the partial insider in research and the shifting attitude of researchers in better understanding these concepts (Herndon, 1993, pp. 87-88). The argument is no longer cut and dried as to insider vs. outsider; much like Bhabha's liminal third space concept, one's position is a constant flow, not fixed, and often non-

dual. This fluidity also allows for researchers like me to float in and out of spaces that previously had been closed off.

The Cherokee Play Fiddle?

The use of music in ways that contribute to community and connections among the Cherokee can be traced at least as far back as the earliest written accounts of Cherokee music-making in the nineteenth century. Based on these accounts, the historian T. Walter Middleton (1919-2012) has explored the role that music and dance played in the daily lives of the Cherokee living in the Qualla Boundary of North Carolina in the early twentieth century. For example, Middleton (1999), states that "Entertainment was a big factor in the early Cherokee lifestyle" (p. 227). Since then, entertainment has taken on various forms and remains an important part of Cherokee lifestyles today. This includes traditional Cherokee dance and music or Westernized versions, such as English dancing. Many Cherokees also hosted and participated in square dances, as discussed below (Castro, 2008, p. 21).

Not much is known as to when, why, and how the Cherokee began to play the fiddle. However, I speculate that it was through their contact with Scots-Irish settlers and enslaved African Americans who were beginning to settle in Appalachia during the eighteenth century. The fiddle was likely an early and easy way for Cherokee people to begin the process of acculturation, much of it forced, to European ways of life, including dance and music.

Today, the fiddle plays a vital role in Cherokee cultural practices connected to entertainment forms of the past. Fiddling also produces and maintains cultural hybridities

that cross boundaries and barriers such as race, economic status, and gender. They are also evident at the Cherokee Nation's Fiddle Contest, which features older legends and tomorrow's youth. This is not new either, as such hybridities are also present in accounts of early fiddle players in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian, such as Miles Krassen's (1983) work on old-time fiddle masters and Blanton Owen's (1980) coverage of Manco Sneed.

Hybridities Begin

Throughout this thesis I demonstrate how fiddling within the Cherokee Nation and Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians serves a wide variety of interrelationships that 1) forge a connection for Cherokee peoples to their sense of history as it relates to their music making; 2) create a focal point for Cherokee community events and expressions of identity; and 3) offer various bridges between Cherokee and non-Cherokee peoples through joint music-making practices, styles, and gatherings. This argument draws on the concept of cultural hybridity as well as the lenses of identity, location of culture, and third space. And I do this by positioning myself as a researcher and fiddle player.

When speaking of cultural hybridities, it is essential to understand some of the key concepts as set forth by the work of Homi K. Bhabha (2003), Néstor García Canclini (1995), and Peter Burke (2009). By examining these works, a fully realized picture of hybridity is formed. When talking about the shift in culture as societies grow and interact with each other, Canclini (2009) observes, "We have gone from societies dispersed in thousands of peasant communities...with homogeneous cultures...to a largely urban scheme with a heterogeneous symbolic offering" (pp. 207-208). This idea suggests that as

the world became more urban and people moved from the country to the city (or as people had similar transitions forced upon them by colonists), cultures involved new mixtures of everything around them. I position Canclini's previous statement with Bhabha's (2003) concept of creating a new and different third space via the mixing of two cultures or activities. Also relevant here is Burke's (2009) statement on hybridity; "hybrid forms are often the result of multiple encounters rather than a single one" (p. 25). These concepts establish the importance of recognizing repeat interactions' impact in forming new pathways and spaces for traditions such as the fiddle. These concepts also illuminate various aspects of the Cherokee fiddle tradition.

Marginalized Voices Find the Light

My efforts to bring attention to the untold stories of the fiddle in Indigenous communities echoes other scholarship on the fiddle. It is important to note that Black Americans have made many important contributions to the fiddle that have only recently been acknowledged. Just as with the lack of scholarship on Indigenous contributions to this music, Black string band players have been marginalized from the discourse as well. Folklorist and founding director of the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University Paul Wells (2003) observes, "It is clear that in the rural South black fiddlers remained a strong, if generally overlooked, presence throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century, with some remnants of the tradition continuing to the present" (p. 136).

In the liner notes for the CD *Black Appalachia* (1999), folklorist Alan Lomax observes, "The earliest records of slavery in Virginia show the importance of black

fiddlers, dance callers, and banjo players in the musical life of the South" (n.p.). This importance is often overshadowed by the telling of history from a Eurocentric voice. Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje (2016) points to one of the reasons for the delay recognizing some of their contributions stating that,

Because many folklorists believed blues had interesting lyrics that addressed issues and problems confronting blacks, and that the fiddle was a relic of the past identified primarily with whites, they avoided research on traditions in which black fiddlers were dominant. As a result, most folklorists did not begin collecting materials on rural black secular music until the 1930s. (p. 2)

Sadly, the omission of Black contributions to the fiddle, as well as the silencing of Black voices in the scholarly discourse, is reflected in scholarship on Indigenous music-making too.

Definitions and Terms

It is necessary to define some terms that will appear in this thesis. The first relates to the differences between the violin and fiddle. These differences can be subtle, and there are many perspectives. Mary Remnant (2001), for example, states, "Colloquially, 'fiddle' is often used for a member of the violin family" (n.p.), while Miles Krassen (1973) states the only real difference is in the style of play and the way the instrument is set up (p. 6). The adjustments that Krassen speaks of point to the fact that fiddlers often prefer a flatter bridge to hit two strings better at once. They also prefer that the strings are made of different materials, such as steel, which produce a brighter and louder sound. Despite these differences, I can pick up a two-million-dollar violin and play fiddle tunes.

The differences between violin and fiddle also pertain to repertory. Regarding fiddle repertory, fiddle scholar Chris Goertzen (1988) argues,

A large number of today's fiddle tunes can be traced back to the reel, strathspey and jig repertoire of mid-to-late eighteen-century Scotland, a repertoire partly adapted from music in oral tradition, but mostly newly composed by professionals for a broad public including members of the upper class. (p. 108)

As time progressed, the fiddle shifted from its primary role of playing for dances to becoming part of a growing trend of Appalachian musicians who valued virtuosity.

Another difference relates to the method of transmission. Violin music is often taught by reading music notation, whereas the fiddle is mostly an aural tradition. Krassen (1973) puts it this way, "Fiddle music has almost always been transmitted by living example" (p. 5). I have found this to be true on multiple occasions, both in my personal experience and during the interviews with my Cherokee collaborators. One of the most challenging skills for a classically trained violinist is learning by ear and vice versa; many highly skilled fiddlers cannot read a lick of music.

Another term that warrants further clarification is folk because the fiddle is often associated with folk music traditions. For this research, folk will have a two-fold meaning. The first is music made with acoustic instruments (guitar, fiddle, banjo, upright bass, mandolin) (Cohen, 2013). This type of music is often associated with rural and mountain regions and community activities such as dances and festivals (Cohen, 2013). I frequently think of folk music as made for and by the people of a specific region. Styles and types shift with each area, and regions are blended, but each region has a distinct

sound at the end of the day. In attempting to define such diverse sounds, folk music scholar Norm Cohen (2005) defines folk music "as the music that survives without complete dependence on commercial media" (p. xxii). This statement indicates that folk music is a living and breathing art form that reflects the lives of those living it. In my thesis, folk music reflects the fiddle tradition as it travels through generations, from parent to child and old timer to youth.

The second way I use the term folk is to refer to the culture and traditions of a set nationality or community. Folk art is often touted as representing a set culture or people (Vlach, 1980). Throughout this thesis, I use folk to refer to the arts within the Cherokee and English cultures. With Cohen's definition of folk in mind, it becomes apparent that traditional Cherokee art, such as basket weaving and mask-making, falls easily within the parameters of folk, as does fiddling. One important folk artist was Will West Long (1869-1947), a knowledge keeper and torchbearer active in the early twentieth century for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian who aided in creating hybridities (Olson, 1995, p. 70). Long accomplished this through his work within the folk art world; I discuss his contributions further in Chapter 2.

Another essential concept in this research is community. This word functions in two ways, referring to the Cherokee and fiddle communities. I utilize Benedict Anderson's (1983) *Imagined Communities* to understand further how a community functions in the larger sense. When speaking of the location of a nation, Anderson (1983) states, "Finally, it is imagined as a community because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep,

horizontal comradeship" (p. 7). To tie this to my research, I consider how "horizontal comradeship" relates to cultural hybridities by examining how fiddle creates connections across many horizontal planes, including the relationship between the Cherokee Nation and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian. Horizontal comradeship also comprises the relationship between the Cherokee and the at-large fiddle communities. The concept of horizontalism suggests a shared pool of knowledge and equal ground. These relationships are often not acknowledged in histories shaped by colonialism, and I aim to recognize them here.

Finally, I must address the term Indigenous. Today, many contributors to Indigenous research are reconsidering the labels used to refer to Indigenous studies and peoples. There are many perspectives and preferences. For example, I asked three members of the Cherokee people about their preferences and received three different answers. According to EBCI member Kim Smith, there is a new movement that refers to Indigenous people by specific group names, for example, Cherokee, Creek, Mandan, and Sioux. Smith states, "A lot of the younger generation prefers to use Cherokee to uplift tribal sovereignty and distinction of our nation specifically" (personal communication, February 5, 2025). According to Cherokee Nation citizen Jerry Bigfeather, some of the older generation still prefer to be called Native American or American Indian (personal communication, February 5, 2025). Research guides suggest using Indigenous in place of Native, stating, "Native peoples is becoming a less common umbrella term in some places." (Towson LibGuide, n.d.) Many current researchers, such as Margeret Kovach

(2021) and Justin Castro (2008), use both the terms Cherokee and Indigenous. To create culturally sensitive research, I utilize both terms in my work as well.

The Cherokee People

In the larger narrative of Cherokee history, there are three recognized tribes: the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians. For the context of this thesis, I will speak of two primary communities: the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian (EBCI) in the Great Smoky Mountain region of northwest North Carolina and the Cherokee Nation (the Nation) of eastern Oklahoma. Due to time constraints, I could not explore the United Keetoowah Band, also located in eastern Oklahoma, but I plan to in the future.

The Cherokee have proven to be a proud and resilient people, including in the face of mistreatment they endured from outsiders, namely colonialists and white Americans. Much of their resilience is evident in, and was further fueled by, what history calls "The Trail of Tears" or simply the Removal. This event marked one of the darkest chapters of American history. This event occurred in the 1830s when the federal government forcibly removed the Cherokee from their homelands in the Appalachian region (Blackburn, 2018, et al. p. xi). In his book on Cherokee storytelling, Cherokee Nation citizen and Indigenous scholar, Christopher Teuton (2023), poignantly summarizes the violence of this action,

When citizens of the Cherokee Nation were forcibly relocated from their homelands to Indian Territory in 1838-39, the US federal government assaulted not only their sovereignty as a self-governing nation but their very notion of

themselves as a community of relatives, whose extended family included not just their fellow human beings but the lands, waters, creatures, and spirits with whom they had shared life. (p. 15)

Teuton (2023) speaks to the struggle many had while attempting to reestablish their lives in an unfamiliar place, ultimately, for many, in Oklahoma. Here, the Cherokee encountered new and different plants, animals, and people while grieving the loss of the relatives they had been forced to abandon in the Great Smoky Mountain range (Teuton, 2003, p. 15).

Beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the westward expansion to gold being found on Cherokee land in 1829, the Cherokee people found their land steadily stripped away during the nineteenth century. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act to negotiate the seizure of native lands, particularly in the east, and their subsequent removal to lands west of the Mississippi (Teuton, 2023, p. 15).

Over the years, artists have depicted the Removal as a means of processing and conveying its associated emotions and struggles. The painting *Silent Graves* (2024) by Cherokee Nation artist Ron Mitchell, shown in **Figure 1.1**, speaks to the pain and suffering faced by those who endured the arduous travel. I became familiar with this painting at the Cherokee National Holiday Art Show and was struck by the poignant scene it captured. Standing before this piece, I could feel sorrow well up, and I had to take a moment. The only other times I have been affected to this extent were at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Berlin Wall Memorial.



Figure 1.1 *Silent Graves*, by Cherokee artist Ron Mitchell (2024). Used by permission of the artist.

The EBCI is the older of the two communities, and the smaller population comprised of the people who took refuge in the Appalachian Mountains when the Removal occurred. Settling in Cherokee, North Carolina, within a region known as the Qualla Boundary, the EBCI are the direct descendants of the approximately 800 Cherokee who hid in the mountains to escape removal (French, 1998). This small band has grown to 8,000 plus in the years since. Within this tribe, there is a history of fiddle that dates to the 1800s, as evidenced by the journal of Major John Norton and his travels from 1816 (Norton, Klinck & Talman, 1970).

Major John Norton, whose father was Cherokee, wrote of traveling around the Southeast and visiting with the Cherokee people who lived in that region. His journal shows that English dance and fiddle were prevalent among the Cherokee inhabiting the Eastern Band area in the early nineteenth century. While visiting an old friend, Norton spoke of the friend's sons observing, "The oldest of whom was married to a very

respectable Cherokee...The good man invited us to a dance and entertainment at their house" (Norton, Klinck & Talman, 1970, p. 38). These entertainments often included fiddling, and this statement positions dance and fiddle as prominent within the Cherokee culture. Further, Norton (1970) writes, "Afterwards an English Dance was struck up in the house. They now begin to be very fond of these dances, but for want of skilful [sic] teachers, none have yet acquired any proficiency in music; the fiddlers seem only to imitate their simple notes, which, however, are sufficient to enable them to dance in cadence" (p. 41-42). While some may think that some of the language in this quote speaks ill of Cherokee players, when positioned within the larger context, it is seen to be untrue. Other early fiddlers, including non-Cherokee players, are often described in the same fashion as there was a dire lack of proper teaching in colonial Appalachia. These two anecdotes confirm a tradition of English dance and fiddle used by the Cherokee as early as the nineteenth century. These journal entries also do much to convey that cultural hybridities were already taking place, including fiddling.

The Cherokee were some of the first and most thorough to adopt many customs introduced by colonists invading their territory (French, 1998, p. 5). To this point, the Cherokee became recognized as one of the Five Civilized Tribes, which made their forced removal all the harder (French, 1998, p. 5). The term Five Civilized Tribes, first used in the mid-nineteenth century, refers to the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole nations, and refers to their ability and willingness to adapt to colonial ideas and concepts (Frank, n.d.). In the eyes of colonialists, these qualities rendered these

particular Indigenous "civilized." The Cherokee continued their story of adaptability and resilience from North Carolina to Oklahoma.

The Cherokee Nation, located in eastern Oklahoma and centered around Tahlequah, was born out of those who survived the Removal. According to the official city website, "The City of Tahlequah is the oldest municipality in Oklahoma by virtue of an incorporation act by the Cherokee National Council of 1843, more than half a century before Oklahoma gained statehood" (City of Tahlequah, n.d.). As of the 2020 census, the population is 16,301 (City of Tahlequah, n.d.). Former Cherokee Nation Chief Bill John Baker states,

Cherokee Nation will always tell our story. Telling our history ensures it is preserved, told accurately and that there is a way to pass it down for future generations of Cherokees. From our great success as society-builders to the darkest chapters of forced removal, [the] Cherokee Nation's history is intertwined with the history of the United States. (Baker, as cited in Blackburn et al., 2018, p. x-xi)

The Cherokee Nation boasts a population of more than 465,000 registered citizens, which makes them not only the largest of the Cherokee tribes but also the largest federally recognized tribe (Cherokee Nation, n.d.). The Nation is the current torchbearer for the fiddle tradition as well, due to many active players and events occurring within the Nation's borders. As I discuss further in subsequent chapters, the Nation is unique in this respect, with a more vibrant contemporary fiddle tradition surviving here compared to the EBCI.

This tradition of fiddle stands apart in its hybridity from the traditional music and dance of the Cherokee. Rituals and ceremonies such as the Stomp Dance, The Booger Man (discussed further in Chapter 2), and the Friendship Dance have remained unchanged following interactions with outsiders (Speck & Broom, 1993, p. 5). In contrast, other forms of music, such as Cherokee hymns and fiddle, represent an exchange of ideas and styles between cultures and communities.

The Cherokee had to have consistent contact with outsiders to take music learned from the Europeans and adapt it to their own culture. Important to note is that within the Cherokee fiddle tradition, no significant stylistic difference makes them stand apart from their European counterparts. The only distinctive stylistic traits I heard in the recordings I listened to and at the events I attended aligned with the regional differences evident in North Carolina for the EBCI versus Oklahoma for the Cherokee Nation. In my listening, I observed that the players hailing from North Carolina seemed to be exposed to more Celtic tunes, such as jigs and reels, while their counterparts in Oklahoma were listening to Western Swing rags.

When speaking of the influence of Scotch-Irish music on the music of Appalachia, Michael Scoggins (2013) states, "Dance music depended on instrumental musicians playing at a fast tempo, and in the Southern colonies the dominant instrument for dance music was the fiddle" (p. 53). He elaborates that much of this fiddle style originated in dance music, such as jigs and reels, from Scotland and Ireland (Scoggins, 2013). On the other hand, in his description of the beginnings of Texas-style fiddling, Francis Abernathy (2001) observes, "It is of interest to note that the double shuffle

[bowing style] is seldom used in other fiddling styles, such as the Appalachian and Southern style" (p. 65). These distinctions are essential to note as they represent the effects of region and the consistent contact necessary for hybridities to form.

The Cherokee musicians embraced several genres as they grew and adapted to the changing world. Speaking about the late 1970s, ethnomusicologist Charlotte Heth states, "The Cherokee today [1979] have four different genres of music... There are dance songs... hunting and magic songs, hymns and gospel songs, and fiddle-guitar tunes" (Heth, 1979, p. 1). Some popular dance songs include the Stomp Dance and the Ballplayers' Dance. In defining the Stomp Dance, Victoria Levine (2013) states, "Most Stomp Dances occur during the summer at rural outdoor locations called ceremonial grounds. While some non-Native people may attend, Stomp Dances are Indian-oriented and everyone present participates" (n.p.). Speck and Broom (1993) define the Ballplayers' Dance, which is done in preparation for a traditional stickball game, as "[an] esoteric ritual preparation for the team, to add spiritual strength to its efforts and to weaken those of its opponents" (p. 60). This intersection of dance and fiddle is discussed further in Chapter 2 and represents a deep site of connection and hybridities between the fiddle, Cherokee tradition, and Anglo music.

Scope and Methodology

My research aims to break the cycle of non-Indigenous researchers exploiting the knowledge of Indigenous culture as a static object of study. This approach includes the obligation to recognize Indigenous people as living individuals and communities, constantly changing and developing. When talking about the treatment of the early

Indigenous studies, scholar Peter Collier (1973) observes, "But Indians are still fixed in the minds of white Oklahomans as part of the past" (p. 4). Additionally, ethnomusicologist Charlotte Heth (1992) argues, "An early trend in social-science research tended to freeze Indian groups into ancient categories, with no recognition of the native capacity for change" (p. 14). She further states that if researchers focus on just finding "pure" traditional forms, it devalues the ability of the Native person to grow and change, qualities often associated with the Western world's definition of "art music." By devaluing their abilities to shift with the times, Western outsiders tell the world that the music of the Indigenous peoples is not worthy of study in that fashion and indicate that it can only exist in the past. This frame of mind does not account for the fact that Indigenous musicians have agency within their musics and traditions, nor does it account for the fact that they decide what those traditions mean to them. Such anachronistic representations place them in a box and fail to account for change.

An example of this can be found in the introduction to the book about the Gwich'in Athapaskan fiddlers by Craig Mishler (1993). While I find Mishler's work overall very valuable, it does make the following statement, "I had a hunch that by flying into an area well off the road system where the Indigenous language was still strong, I would find a well-preserved rural folk culture. I was delightfully right" (p. viiii). At the beginning of my research, I fell victim to this mindset too. I had the idea that I was going to find a uniquely isolated and historical style of fiddle playing and uncover some fiddle tunes that no one knew about. As I went deeper into my research, I found that to be a very harmful view and had to reevaluate my approach.

I acknowledge that I am a Western scholar who writes about Indigenous culture; therefore, I aim to highlight my collaborators' voices. My work must mirror the approaches taken by those it represents. When speaking about her work and the approach best taken by researchers today, ethnomusicologist Tara Browner (2009) states, "Contemporary research is much more community based and oriented, with service to Native peoples as primary goal" (p. 2). The best way to build community with others is to join them in the daily walk of life.

Research like this must be entered into with relationships at its core. Kovach (2021) states, "Indigenous methodologies is less about identity than it is about relationship and responsibility" (p. 39). I am cognizant of interpersonal relationships, which remain greatly important, and how my work can benefit the greater Cherokee community by sharing a story that is not often told, thus aiding in preserving history for future generations. My collaborators are both adamant and vocal about this latter point. And I understand why: too often, researchers and outsiders come in to strip them of their knowledge and other resources and then leave. This message is one that I take to heart, and it shapes much of my research.

Relationships I have formed by engaging in this study include many active Cherokee fiddlers as well as the family and friends of legends who have passed. When speaking about the people he sees yearly at the Fiddle Contest, Jerry Bigfeather states, "I see the same familiar faces year after year. Even though I may not remember their name or know their name, I recognize them. I look across the audience, and I see your face. A lot of people say this [Fiddle Contest] is the only event that I come to that I care about

seeing" (personal communication, October 10, 2024). I have already been asked by several of my new friends if I will be at the Fiddle Contest this upcoming year, and the answer is yes. I look forward to a weekend of jamming and reconnecting.

To understand more deeply the role that fiddle has played in the lives of the Cherokee, I use ethnographic fieldwork to explore the community and connections that emerge in spaces that exhibit cultural hybridity. While doing my initial research, I was reminded of ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl's (2015) research on the Indigenous music community of the Blackfoot people and his struggles to connect with sources (pp. 142-143). Nettl (2015) recalls, "Getting started in the field is a time of stress, the moment of entry sometimes one of great tension, self-searching, requiring courage, patience, wit" (p. 143). He then recounts meeting future collaborator Joe and the challenges of gaining Joe's trust and respect. The request to come back the following week occurred multiple weeks in a row, much to Nettl's frustration and dismay. Joe might have been doing that to teach respect for the way of life Nettl wanted to study. It may also have been a way to ensure that this was not just some passing interest and that Nettl's commitment was genuine (Nettl, 2015, p. 143). Nettl's challenges reflect my struggles in contacting potential collaborators, sometimes with little to no results, and remind me that while this is a project for me, for my collaborators, it is life. I am asking them to allow me into their homes, interact with their families, and intervene in their daily lives. It is easy to get wrapped up in the research and narrative and forget that I am requesting to step into someone's life. It is crucial to proceed with respect and compassion.

The Cherokee's commitment to retain tribal sovereignty of information gathered by outside researchers results from decades of mistreatment and misinformation by outside forces. (Teuton, 2023, p. 15). In the initial phase of my research, I was vastly ignorant of the history of the Cherokee, reflected in my early dealings with the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) from the Nation and the EBCI. As I began to learn and correct my perceptions, I also learned from these boards that retention of information by the tribe is of paramount importance. To that end, all of this research is destined for the archives of both the EBCI at the Museum of the Cherokee People and the Nation at the Cherokee National Research Center.

The legitimate worries of Indigenous peoples regarding the sovereignty of information reflects a common stereotype of ethnographers that Shannon Garland (2020) refers to as "the proverbial white ethnomusicologists" (p. 14). These are researchers who travel to a given culture to "discover, extract from, and finally convey [information] to elite peers" (p. 14). I think of the work of early scholars, such as James Fillmore (1843-1898), who explained Indigenous music using a Western lens. While respected during his lifetime, his work has become controversial and problematic in retrospect. This issue was apparent in his work during the early 1890s. For example, Fillmore (1899) states, "In this paper, I shall confine myself to an examination of the essential structure of Indian melodies and a careful comparison of them with our folk-melodies with reference to the intervals of which they are made" (p. 299). Further, he argued that Indigenous singers often failed to hit the notes they intended to sing (Keeling, 1997, p. xv). Fillmore attempted to do good work, which was groundbreaking for his time. However, it still

adopted a comparative approach, setting Indigenous music alongside Western music as if the latter were a benchmark. Today, I and others struggle with his approach and aim to improve upon it.

To help rectify such problems, which have been pervasive well into the twentieth century, many researchers have addressed the importance of building respectful relationships with collaborators. Anthropologists David McCurdy, James Spradley, and Dianna Shandy (2005) state, "Working with informants is the hallmark of ethnographic fieldwork. It involves an ongoing relationship" (p. 41). They observe that ethnographic work is unique due to the nature of that ongoing relationship. Not only does one have to locate collaborators, but the researcher must also win their cooperation and trust (McCurdy et al., 2005, p. 41). One of the challenges I have run into with my research is simply that many of my interlocutors live 13 hours away, which means I cannot pop across town for follow-up research. To date, I have made only two trips to Tahlequah, which has made establishing close relationships tricky. Thankfully, technology has provided an additional route for researchers such as me.

I employed a hybrid system that involved adopting technological approaches, which are increasingly emergent in ethnographic research. In speaking to current changes, Liz Przybylski (2021) states, "The hybrid field offers more information and spaces of interaction than a fully online or full offline field and more analytical tools as well" (p. 7). The advent of Zoom and the like allows a researcher to continue those long-distance relationships in a way that was impossible before. Also, the increasing availability of digital archival resources assists in pre-research methods. For example, in

preparation for my second trip to Oklahoma, I knew I was visiting the Cherokee National Research Center in Tahlequah to dig through the archives. So, I first perused their digital collections online to better understand the materials before arriving in person, creating a streamlined and efficient use of my time. I also did this in preparation for my visit to the archives at the Museum of the Cherokee People in Cherokee, North Carolina.

Visiting these archives aided my research in a multitude of ways. First, they gave me access to numerous primary source materials to learn and grow my understanding of Cherokee life and culture. Additionally, the visits brought me into the space where history is stored and revered. I was surrounded by those who work in that space and share a passion for understanding the past to shape our future. I am humbled that I, a non-Cherokee citizen, was granted the honor of entering those spaces and the chance to learn more from those whose history is stored therein. I was able to find old manuscripts from scholars, program books from years gone by, and even sheet music from John Philip Sousa that suggests Cherokee connections. These puzzle pieces acquired during my visits aided (and continue to benefit) the scope and direction of my research.

A significant development in my methods of research came in the form of ethnohistorical studies, which, according to Keeling (1997), means to "consider the results of contemporary (or relatively recent) fieldwork in relation to archival data and/or information from earlier published sources" (p. xxxiii). Additionally, James Axtell (1982) describes the role of the ethnohistorian as "to determine just what the patterns are in [a] particular society over time and how the individual parts—whether actions, beliefs, or artifacts—together constitute the functional whole" (p. 6). I find this approach highly

beneficial to my work. Axtell's statement in particular, has supplied me with a method for approaching this story. The Cherokee fiddle narrative, being informed by the past, makes for an excellent example of employing an ethnohistorical lens.

From a fiddle researcher perspective, there is an underwhelming amount of material dedicated to Indigenous methods and styles. Often, Indigenous involvement is relegated to a sentence or two. This problem is represented, unfortunately, in the work on fiddle contests in the South done by Chris Goertzen (2008), who states, "Now, Native Americans participate in fiddling in, for example, parts of Oklahoma, but it is clear that they are expressing the rural and assimilated layers of their identities when they fiddle" (p. 63). I wish I could say the prior sentence is part of a much more significant portion of the work, but it is one sentence in an entire book dedicated to the fiddle. Reports like this have long perpetuated an underrepresentation of the Indigenous population. My research aims to mitigate this problem by providing a study entirely focused on Indigenous fiddling.

Theoretical Framework

Giving the Cherokee authority in the fiddle world via articulating their influence and ongoing support of the fiddle tradition grants the Cherokee a voice in a history that underrepresents them. Beyond the framework previously established, which brings together elements of Bhabha (1994), Canclini (1995), and Burke (2009), I also draw heavily on the writings of Indigenous scholars, such as Cherokee Nation citizen, and ethnomusicologist Charlotte Heth (1993). I am inspired by the ways they present their stories and cultures and draw on their work to relay what it means to be an Indigenous

fiddler and discuss how that identity allows these fiddlers to interact with greater social structures.

The concept and theory of cultural hybridity provides a methodological lens through which to share the narrative of Cherokee fiddling. The Cherokee have lived a hybrid life since their first encounters with outsiders in the sixteenth century. When discussing the importance of cultural hybridities, Burke (2009) states, "We must not forget hybrid individuals, whether they were born into this situation because of their mothers and fathers came from different cultures, or entered it later, willingly or unwillingly, because they were, for example, converted or captured" (p. 31). At the nexus of these hybridities, where the Cherokee fiddle sits, we also find examples of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "double consciousness."

Although double consciousness emerged from Du Bois' grappling with the experiences of African Americans, the concept has been advanced by others and applied in scholarship that engages with Indigenous communities. About double consciousness, Du Bois (2004) states that, "It is a peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 2). And philosopher John Pittman (2024), describes double consciousness as "a concept in social philosophy referring, originally, to a source of inward 'twoness' putatively experienced by African Americans because of their racialized oppression and disvaluation in a white-dominated society" (Introduction).

In his work on double consciousness in the Sioux, Ethan McGinty (2019), argues that "A state of double consciousness is achieved when a colonized individual maintains

dual perspectives of his identity, stemming from the competing forces of both his native and colonizing cultures" (p. 75). This concept helps us understand the Cherokee because of the dualities in their ways of life that emerged after the white settlers arrived. On the one hand, the Cherokee adopted many new traditions, including Christianity, styles of dress, and playing the fiddle. On the other hand, they fought to retain sovereignty and traditional life as they knew it and to continue to know themselves as Cherokee and as agents within their own lives and culture.

Bhabha's (1994) work on the location of culture and third space offers further insight into culture and its role in shaping one's identity. His idea resonates with the concept of double consciousness and accounts for states of doubleness or in-betweenness. Bhabha (1994) states, "This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (p. 4). With regards to "third space," Bhabha (1994) claims that when two cultures or peoples interact, they no longer live in the spaces they began in; but instead, now occupy a new third space that may contain elements of the original spaces, as well as new aspects. Bhabha's lens for viewing this comes from a post-colonial context and, therefore, is relevant to the Cherokee people who live in a post-colonial world. Such encounters between cultures are examples of what Burke (2009) refers to as "contact zones" or "encounters between people from different cultures, or people from one culture and things from another" (p. 72). These zones are found throughout the tradition of Cherokee fiddle and aid in the creation of third space.

That space is not a fixed position. It is fluid and shifts with each new interaction. During the colonial encounter, Cherokee music interacted with the European settlers and their practices. Those interactions created new music, relationships, and customs, which then occupied a different third space, unlike the ones that had existed before colonial contact. This space proved restrictive and productive; it partially allowed for the Cherokee fiddler's growth, autonomy, and sovereignty. Ethnomusicologist Heth (1993) observes this too when she comments on the interaction of the past with an ever-changing present, "It is commendable to re-enact [sic] a dance ... but equally important to compose a new song" (p. 14).

Positionality

To date, this project represents my most prominent and extended research. I learned some lessons the hard way only after much struggle and difficulty. Understanding the most ethical and empathetic route for research did not come without a few missteps, like when I incorrectly identified the Cherokee Nation as the Western Cherokee (two distinctly different tribes) to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Cherokee Nation. Shortcomings such as this presented an unfortunate but necessary wake-up call: I needed to ensure my sources were credible and valid. Also, it drove home the importance of not being the white savior coming in to "help" the Cherokee; if anything, they helped me better understand the world around me and how I fit into it.

While attending the National Holiday in Oklahoma, I found myself conversing with two women who work for the Cherokee Nation; I expressed my fears about being the one to tell a Cherokee story, stating my lack of Indigenous ancestry. One of the

women responded by grabbing my hand and exclaiming, "No, you are the one meant to tell this story. We are so glad that you are here." She then took a bracelet from her arm, one her friend had just made, and gave it to me. Those women were so excited that someone cared enough to come, interact with the Cherokee, and bring the story into a wider world. This interaction made me feel more comfortable about being in that situation. Their enthusiasm alleviated the fear that I would be seen as someone coming in to strip away their position and authority. That bracelet hangs on my bulletin board, and I look at it often when imposter syndrome creeps in.

My experience with fiddle playing offers a unique site of intersection for me as a researcher. I began playing fiddle at six years old and have performed in bands since I was ten. Being an established fiddler of 33 years has allowed me to make inroads that might not have happened otherwise. The fiddle broke down barriers early in my fieldwork too. For example, I felt out of place at the Fiddle Contest until I was invited to take out my fiddle and join in a jam with other players. By participating, I was moved from the position of an outside observer to a fellow player and participant. When speaking about how participation invites one to be a part of something, Matthew Rahaim (2019) observes, "While a piece of music may be studied at some distance by an observing subject, participation requires becoming part of something. It thus seems to blur the lines between knower and known" (Berger & Stone, p. 219). It is not lost on me that without the fiddle, I would have struggled to connect with collaborators. Being a fiddler provided me with authority that I would not have had otherwise. It also equipped

me with a more profound knowledge of techniques and styles. And importantly, it established a bridge and point of connection with other fiddlers of varied backgrounds.

Indigenous Scholarship

As I examine the works of those who have come before me on the journey of Indigenous research, it is essential to acknowledge some important works and scholars. It is also paramount to recognize the effect of the Cherokee diaspora on the spread, change, and loss of culture within and among the Cherokee people.

An excellent account by Mishler (1993) of fiddle from the Athapaskan people in Alaska, specifically the Gwich'in people, echoes the situation among the Cherokee in many ways. Mishler (1993) begins this account by defining the two central communities in this region: Upriver (older community) and Downriver (p. 1). The moment I read this, my mind went to the Cherokee diaspora and the spread of the Cherokee peoples due to the Removal and colonization of their lands. While the circumstances for the Upriver and Downriver diaspora are different from those I have found amongst the Cherokee, it represents a split in playing style, history, and culture that is also expressed in the Cherokee fiddle tradition and its bifurcated location within the United States.

This account also speaks of the English square dance and its American descendant, the contra dance, as prominent in Gwich'in culture (Mishler, 1993, p. 2). Mishler states that those viewing these fiddlers from the outside might see this as playing "white man's music." However, he then argues that while Gwich'in people initially learned this playing from the whites, they went on to create their style of fiddling, and as a result of being so far removed from the mainstream culture, they were less influenced

by it (p. 5). The Indigenous peoples Mishler worked with have a playing style that differentiates them from "traditional" folk fiddling. The fact that their style represents something unique is one of the reasons the Gwich'in fiddle tradition has an entire book dedicated to it. In contrast, the Cherokee, who play a much less musically distinctive style, have not been written about nearly as much.

An interesting viewpoint Mishler brings up later in the account relates well to my experience at the fiddle contest. Speaking about an event he attended, the Athapaskan Old-Time Fiddling Festival, Mishler (1993) states,

The festival is a multi-semiotic event of quite startling complexity. Of the social groups in attendance, one finds not only representatives from various tribes informally organized into musical bands and dancers, but promoters, photographers, video crews, journalists, ethnomusicologists, folklorists, and curiosity seekers—all of whom converge upon a single place at a single time to rub elbows. Out of this mix comes a unique cultural configuration, a festive society of performers and observers. (p. 136)

Music can create spaces like this in a fashion that many other cultural practices never can. Additionally, Mishler's comments reflect my experiences at the National Holiday Fiddle Contest, as discussed further in Chapter 4.

Another scholar I draw upon is ethnomusicologist Beverly Diamond, whose work has long been considered a principal source for Indigenous work. Diamond has shown respect for her collaborators through her studies in a set of relationships whose integrity I aim to emulate. In addition, her work speaks to the past and present trends in how

ethnomusicologists have approached Indigenous studies. She states (2008), "In recent decades, ethnomusicologists have emphasized practice and praxis (a word that combines two meanings: 'accepted practice or custom' and the 'practicing of an art or skill')" (p. 34). Insights such as this significantly aid the direction of my work by igniting conversations about what an accepted practice or custom is. It also represents how embracing new customs allowed the Cherokee to integrate their traditional culture with the new world encroaching on them. By engaging in this research and adding to the scope of work currently available on Indigenous music, particularly the fiddle, I aim to mitigate the underrepresentation of the Cherokee.

A significant hurdle to overcome is that for the Cherokee tribe, as widely known and recognized as it is, there is limited research on the history and scope of their culture and traditions. Frank Speck and Leonard Broom (1993) observes, "The ethnology of the Cherokee has been so little investigated that Cherokee culture is known chiefly for its acquisitions from white civilization rather than for its native properties" (p. 1). Most available scholarship is dedicated to traditional Cherokee music, dance, and ceremonies, such as the works of Frank Speck (1881-1950) and James Mooney (1862-1921). In the course of this research, I found only a few sources that mention or dedicate space to folk music or fiddling. The most prominent scholars to engage folk traditions in their work include Marcia Herndon (1971), Beverly Diamond (2008), and Tara Browner (2009).

However, I did not find a single source dedicated to sharing the story of folk music made by the Cherokee, as most scholarship on folk music is centered around the Anglo traditions of this music style. The most relevant source I found was Justin Castro's

(2008) master's thesis on music in the Ozark Mountains, which includes an entire chapter on Cherokee fiddling and highlights the importance of filling in the gaps of history that have long been untold.

North American Fiddle Scholarship

In the narrative of academic writing on the fiddle, there have been significant advances lately. A very important resource that emerged in 2011 is the *North American Fiddle Music: A Research and Information Guide* by Drew Beisswenger. This extensive project not only breaks down the fiddle by genre but also regionally, ethnically, and by state. It includes both recordings and printed sources. It is an excellent starting spot for many researchers looking to explore the tradition of fiddle in North America and represents how far research has come in terms of exploring styles outside of the Eurocentric views previously prioritized.

Much of the existing fiddle scholarship is a combination of history and transcription, meaning it shares the story of a particular player or region while at the same time providing written versions of certain influential songs. Scholars such as Miles Krassen (1973, 1983) and Marion Thede (1962) have produced some of the most pivotal works on the larger narrative of the fiddle, while Howard Marshall (2012), Eryn Marshall (2006), and Harry Bolick & Tony Russell (2021) home in on regions such as Mississippi, West Virginia, and Missouri.

Other scholarship focuses on a more historical approach with fewer translations. This includes work by Chris Goertzen (1985, 2003, 2008), who has written more than five books and articles describing everything from the role of fiddle contests around the

nation to studying the spread and method of transmission of fiddle tunes. Another fiddle scholar that highly utilizes the historical approach lies in the work of Howard Marshall (2012) on old-time fiddling in Missouri. This book breaks it down by time and place as fiddlers move in and through Missouri. It should be noted that this book does include a chapter on Indigenous fiddlers, many of whom are of Cherokee descent and found their home in Missouri via diaspora after the Trail of Tears.

Also of note is that within the tradition of fiddle scholarship, there is not the demand for an academic background that might be needed in other genres. Often those who are most knowledgeable come by that knowledge through playing the music (Marshall, 2022, p. 42). This includes players like John Hartford (1937-2001) who collected songs and their histories.

This project falls into the historically focused camp and works to share an under-told history that includes marginalized people, and it aligns with current trends in string band scholarship that aim to shed light on historically silenced voices.

Chapter Overview

This introduction has set up the discussion on the fiddle's role in supporting hybrid cultures among the Cherokee people. I have used scholarship from Burke's *Cultural Hybridity* (2009), Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (2016), and Bhabha's *Location of Culture* (2003) to support my claims of the role and importance of cultural hybridities for the Cherokee fiddle tradition. I have further supported this work through the scholarship of Craig Mishler (1993), Charlotte Heth (1993), and Margaret Kovach (2021) and their extensive works on Indigenous culture. Further, I have situated my

position in this work as both a researcher and a fiddle player, as well as one living in both worlds (a kind of third space), to better understand and present the narrative as only one knowing both worlds can. Lastly, this chapter has identified key terms and concepts related to the intersection of culture, identity, and Indigenous life.

Chapter 2 explores the beginnings of hybridity among Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian fiddlers, such as Manco Sneed, and those who shaped and influenced them. Utilizing archival work and personal interviews with the descendants of those who were instrumental in forming this culture, I position the story of the EBCI fiddlers within the unfolding of a larger cultural narrative. I argue that the fiddle tradition was established by the work of such players as Junaluska (1775-1858), John Sneed (nineteenth century), and Manco Sneed (1885-1975). I also establish a timeline of fiddle that positions Cherokee players as some of the first in their area of the country, North Carolina. Stepping outside the fiddle community, I explore the life of banjo player Walker Calhoun (1918-2012). Here, I explore the role of Cherokee folk tradition in influencing the fiddle tradition, showcasing hybridities in Calhoun's banjo playing and Cherokee storytelling. I also employ the ideas of Bhabha (2003) and Burke (2009) to explicate further the culture and hybridities related to the Cherokee fiddle tradition.

Chapter 3 transitions to Oklahoma and the Cherokee Nation. It is vital to establish a new history of fiddle tradition carried by those who traveled the Trail of Tears and the significance of cross-cultural connections for the Cherokee settlers, who were transplanted from the East to the West. After establishing a more comprehensive history of the Cherokee Nation, this chapter explores fiddle legends of the Nation, who aided in

establishing firm foundations of fiddling and folk traditions. My interview with fiddle player John Church (present-day) and archival work on the prominent player Sam O'Fields (1934-2020) create a narrative of beginnings within the Oklahoma fiddle tradition. I share the stories of some modern-era players such as Monte Gaylord whose work brings Cherokee fiddling to a national scale. Additionally, this chapter delves into examples of cultural hybridities in the fiddle community and across the music and folk traditions of the Cherokee Nation. For this, I draw upon the work of Bhabha's (1990) concept of identity.

Chapter 4 explores using the fiddle to form and claim identity in present-day terms, as seen at the National Holiday Fiddle Contest. Additionally, it contextualizes the National Holiday Fiddle Contest among other contests by defining what a typical contest consists of. It also highlights the players who participate (past and present) in the National Holiday Fiddle Contest. Drawing upon the work of Chris Goertzen (2008), I provide a history of fiddle contests to position the National Holiday contest's legacy and importance within it. Interviews with my collaborators Heidi Malham, Regina Scott, and Charles Davis provide insights from current participants. Furthermore, this chapter argues that the contest allows participants to create a deeper Cherokee identity through the fiddle.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I conclude by stating how the Cherokee fiddle story fits into the larger narratives of Indigenous studies presented and written by today's researchers. Additionally, I position Cherokee fiddling through past, present, and future as an important example of the constant fluidity of cultural hybridity, as seen through Bhabha's

(2003) third space concept. I share more of the scholarship and work currently being done on highlighting marginalized voices in the string band world. I also inform the reader of how they can support Cherokee artists to aid in continuing this legacy and preserving it for future generations. This is not my story but theirs, and it is a story that needs to be heard and told.

CHAPTER 2: THE FIDDLE DANCES THROUGH APPALACHIA

Sitting by the Oconaluftee River running through Cherokee, North Carolina, with my fiddle, I take a moment to look at my surroundings. Being on the ancestral lands of the Cherokee is a special moment for me, as these mountains are where the story began. It strikes me how much history lives in these mountains, and I consider all the stories the stream tells. It is easy to sit in that beauty and forget the struggles to retain rights and land, and the issues surrounding sovereignty for the EBCI.

The musicians of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indian (EBCI) set the foundation for the growth and flourishing of fiddle traditions that variously persist throughout Cherokee communities today. This chapter introduces essential figures, places, and customs that aided in building the Cherokee fiddle tradition. Utilizing the work of Blanton Owen (1980), Ted Olson (1995), and Miles Krassen (1983), alongside ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, I show how cultural hybridities inflected the work of early players, such as Manco Sneed (1885-1975), to establish a lineage carried into the present. Additionally, I explain how cultural events, such as festivals and fairs, provided ample opportunity for early fiddlers to showcase their talents and allowed hybridities to grow. Much of this chapter is archival due to the lack of current players within the EBCI, as I discuss at the end of this chapter.

Way Back When

The Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indian comprises those who sought refuge in the mountains when the Removal occurred. The region they currently occupy, their homelands, is referred to as the Qualla Boundary, as shown in **Figure 2.1**, and this is where they have lived for more than 15,000 years (French, 1998, p. 2). The Museum of the Cherokee People, located in Cherokee, North Carolina, documents their history, and

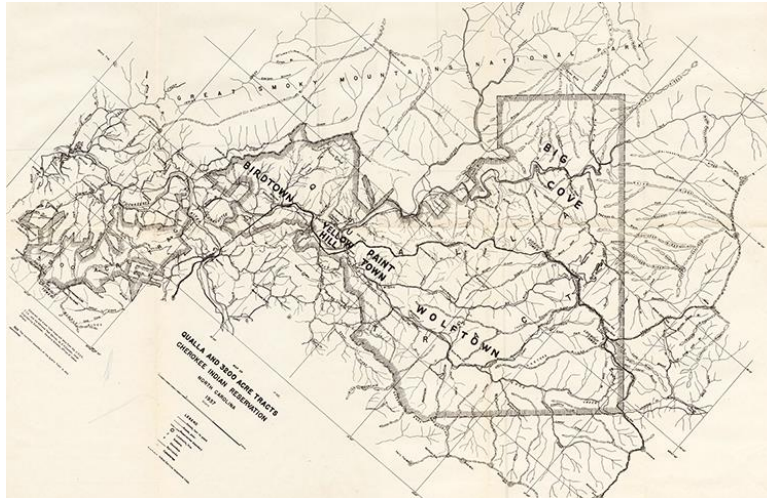


Figure 2.1 *Qualla and 3200 Acre Tracts, Cherokee Indian Reservation, North Carolina, Coulson (1941)*

its website states, "We do not just inhabit the land: we are of the land" (motcp.org, accessed March 4, 2025). This firm statement demonstrates a sense of belonging and a conviction that forms the foundation for the EBCI and community.

During first contact with Europeans in 1540, via explorer Spaniard Hernando de Soto, the Cherokee represented the largest and most influential group of Indigenous people in the Southeast United States of America (Teuton, 2023, p. 15). At the time of contact, their land consisted of more than 40,000 square miles (25,600,000 acres) spanning "much or most of the modern states of West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama" (Cherokee Nation Website, n.d.).

As Europeans repeatedly stripped away their land, piece by piece, the territory shrank considerably. Historian Ronald Satz (1989), in overviewing the loss of Cherokee land, reports, "As a result of the Treaty of 1817 and another treaty negotiated in 1819 by

Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, four million acres of Cherokee land were opened to white settlement" (p. 440).

Today, Cherokee lands cover around 56,000 acres. These lands were acquired through an early alliance between the Cherokee people and William Holland Thomas (1805-1893), a white man, lawyer, and trusted friend of the Cherokee, who helped the tribe purchase land and held the deeds until the EBCI could rightfully own them (French, 1998, pp. 64-70). Thomas was vital in aiding the Cherokee in forming the EBCI during the late nineteenth century (French, 1998, p. 65). Currently, the federal government holds the land in a land trust for the EBCI. Therefore, it is not a reservation but a parcel of land that the Cherokee can own and sell to other Cherokee but not to anyone else (French, 1998, p. 76). The trust ensures the land will remain among the Cherokee and that outsiders cannot come in to develop it.

History is palpable in this region; from the Museum of the Cherokee People, which works to preserve and promote the history and story of the Cherokee, to the individual dressed in full regalia whom I observe wandering the main road, there is a presence that weaves into every aspect of life. Part of the fabric woven into this history is found within music and fiddle.

Indigenous fiddlers are rarely credited for their contributions to fiddle music, but scholars are working to correct that. In an article on Cherokee fiddlers, musician and researcher Bob Carlin (2007) states, "Native Americans are one of the ethnic groups that have contributed to fiddling in America" (p. 14). And in a master's thesis on the fiddle, Natalya Miller (2018) observes, "It is important to acknowledge the understudied, but

highly likely, role of Native American musicians in this cultural exchange in the South. In Western North Carolina specifically, Cherokee musicians have been playing string band for generations" (p. 18). Cherokee players were influential in creating the sound of Southern Appalachia and they did this by participating in square dances, bands, and fiddle conventions.

Fiddles, Festivals, Square Dances

A key factor in the popularity of the fiddle more broadly lies in the beginnings of the fiddle convention and contest. The first recorded contest occurred in Hanover County, Virginia, in 1736 (Blaustein, 2003). Part contest and part jam session, these fiddle conventions offered fiddlers from all over the region the chance to gather and showcase their talents. In spaces like this, the oral tradition of fiddle lived with players sharing tunes between each other (Goertzen, 2008, p. 3). At the beginning of the early twentieth century, these conventions became popular in the Great Smoky Mountain region (Fiddle Contest, n.d.).

One of the centers of the activity was, and remains, Cherokee, North Carolina. Dr. Brett Riggs observes, "Cherokee was the go-to place for music and dance. People would come from all over. It was a vibrant scene" (personal communication, March 6, 2025). The Cherokee Fair and Festival (also known as the Cherokee Indian Fair) which honors Cherokee history and culture is celebrating its 113th year (VisitCherokee, n.d.). Carl G. Lambert, director of the 1968 festival, recalls,

Another highlight of the Fairs were the old-time fiddling conventions held in the old auditorium. One of our favorite local musicians was Uncle John Sneed, a left-

handed fiddler. Of course, they really square danced in those days for the pure joy of it. (Lambert as cited in Chiltoskey, 1978, p. 10)

Including fiddle and square-dancing in the fair shows us that these have remained key components of the culture and lifestyle of the EBCI well into the twentieth century (Jamison, 2015, p. 38).

At the fair, vendors have also used fiddle players to draw business to their booths. Lambert recalls, "My father hired Uncle John Sneed to play the fiddle to attract attention, and boy did we have the business" (Lambert as cited in Chiltoskey, 1978, p. 10). As a player who has also been asked to drum up business (ask me about my summers spent fiddling at a fireworks stand), I can attest that similar practices are still common and not restricted to Cherokee events.

In addition to fiddle music, Europeans brought their dances to the mountains too, which, in turn, were adopted by the Cherokee. Square dances have been an integral form of entertainment in Cherokee life since at least 1809 (Jamison, 2015, p. 38) and fairs like the Cherokee Fair and Festival often feature them, which creates incentives for Indigenous communities to gather. In an interview with Carmelita Monteith, great-great-niece of Cherokee fiddle legend Manco Sneed, she spoke of growing up in the Cherokee, North Carolina region in the twentieth century. She recalled dancing in her youth, stating,

My mother was a Sneed. She played seven instruments by ear. The string instruments, and then she just played for us to dance, and our houses were so small, we took the furniture out and then had a place to dance because you dance with Southern Appalachian music. We would get together on weekends and go

spend the weekend with relatives and have our music. (personal communication, March 7, 2025)

This recollection points to a culture in this region during the early twentieth century and tells us that individuals were actively preserving and promoting it. Square dances were an essential piece of community engagement and a vital point of connection between Cherokee and non-Cherokee people. These dances also created opportunities for fiddle players to perform and connect with other players because the dances required music.

Bascom Lamar Lunsford (1882-1973), from just down the road in Asheville, North Carolina, played a crucial role in the community and helped foster connections between players, which often included the Cherokee. Lunsford was a well-known self-taught fiddler and folklorist and in 1928 he started the ground-breaking Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, where Cherokee players would have likely encountered many non-Cherokee influences. Additionally, he was chosen to represent the United States in Venice, Italy, at the International Folk Music Festival (Jones, 2013).

Lunsford was a complicated man who traveled around the Appalachian region collecting songs from Black folk players but never hiring them to play at his Mountain Dance and Folk Festival (Jones, 1984, p. 97-98). In addition to this questionable behavior, he was known to be anti-Semitic (Van Ronk, 2005, p. 30). Early in his career, Lunsford worked with ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger, a leftist, and hired Charles' son Pete to play at the festival. However, when Pete's brother Mike asked to use some of Lunsford's songs, he refused due to his changing views on who he considered "outsiders" (Jones, 1984, p. 65). Lunsford considered anyone with radical social notions an outsider,

and he most likely feared how outsiders would influence the festival and mountain life (p. 65).

Knowing this makes his support of and friendship with Cherokee musicians an intriguing dichotomy. For example, Lunsford regularly hired Cherokee players, including Manco Sneed and Osey Helton (discussed below). Further, Monteith recalls that Lunsford visited with the Sneed families often (personal communication, March 8, 2025). An interesting note is that in the works written about Lunsford, there are only a few short mentions of his time spent with the Sneed family and the Cherokee. This omission, once again, demonstrates the highly curated version of history that seems to have discounted Indigenous involvement in Appalachian fiddling.

The Myth of Identity and Double Consciousness

W. E. B. Du Bois' (2004) concept of double consciousness gives a unique lens through which to explore the identity of Cherokee fiddlers. His idea of twoness or "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings," highlights the struggle many Indigenous folk musicians faced (p. 2). Indigenous studies scholar Shalene Jobin (2016) describes this struggle by stating, "The sense of 'two-ness,' of an internal struggle between two warring selves, is one of the devastating effects of racial prejudice and systemic injustices" (41). This internal struggle and the response to it often reflect and result in cultural hybridity.

Du Bois' concept has been extended to the experiences of Indigenous people by scholar Ethan McGinty (2019), who writes, "A state of double consciousness is achieved when a colonized individual maintains dual perspectives of his identity, stemming from

the competing forces of both his native and colonizing cultures" (p. 75). Indigenous people often lived in two minds simultaneously, attempting to continue their traditions while figuring out how to live in an ever-changing world surrounded by outsiders. For the Cherokee, this involved a struggle to define who was accepted as Cherokee.

Anthropologist Circe Dawn Sturm (2002) argues,

As a result of local blood politics, what most Cherokees experience on a day to day basis seems to me to be best described by the Gramscian idea of contradictory consciousness, which combines uncritically absorbed dominant ideas and implicitly critical ideas that arise from lived experience. (p. 206)

This struggle to define oneself presents unique challenges, not just for Cherokee fiddlers, but for the Cherokee people as a whole.

When discussing how Du Bois' concept of double consciousness applies to Cherokee musicians, it is helpful to understand Cherokee culture throughout history. When the Great Smoky Mountain National Park opened in 1934, it displaced many of the area's original settlers. Subsequently, it drew many new visitors to the region, and with that influx came outside expectations of identity and culture that many in the area still need to cater to (French, 1998, p. 133). Even within their Indigenous life, the Cherokee were forced to live a life of double consciousness, playing into the narratives that tourists wanted to experience and witness. This expectation created what French (1993) calls the *imaginary Cherokee*, which continues today (p. 133).

In an article discussing the formation of the Blue Ridge Parkway in 1936 and its impact on the Qualla Boundary, scholar Anne Mitchell (1997) discusses, "Tourism

seemed a plausible solution to many, especially with the recent opening of the new Great Smoky Mountains National Park next door, but not everyone on the reservation agreed about how to build such an industry" (p. 147).

Nonetheless, tourism loomed large in this region, impacting native and Indigenous folk traditions. While exploring the effects of tourism along the Blue Ridge Parkway, Jean Haskell Speer (1987) states, "Traveling the Blue Ridge Parkway to most any tourist destination in Appalachia demonstrates the extent to which folk culture of the region has become a commodity to be bought and sold" (p. 212). She further discusses the role of duality in Appalachian myths and perceptions. She demonstrates how the concept of double consciousness can apply to a variety of marginalized groups; her example is the mountain man and the hillbilly buffoon (Speer, 1987, p. 212). The concept of double consciousness comes into play when thinking about how stereotypes can negatively affect a person's identity. When someone is forced into double consciousness, culture and identity become fuzzy and can be lost or misrepresented.

Modern-day Cherokee, North Carolina, features a casino and numerous shops that tout "authentic" souvenirs, from jewelry to moccasins. There is even a drama celebrating 75 years in 2025, *Unto These Hills*, that recounts the formation of the EBCI from its first contact with the Europeans to the Removal period (Cherokee Historical Society, n.d.). Scholar Gregory Smithers (2015) attended this play and observed, "The racially mixed cast included local Cherokee, non-Cherokee, and white performers, an unwitting nod to the racially and ethnically diverse nature of the twenty-first-century Cherokee diaspora"

(p. 265). This example of hybridity and diaspora shows how the region's culture has shifted over time.

Brothers Osey (1879-1942) and Ernest (1895-1979) Helton, from Asheville, North Carolina, are strong examples of individuals who grappled with double consciousness. Their father, Matt, was Cherokee and a native language speaker, while their mother, Laura, was of Irish descent (Carlin, 2007, p. 14). The brothers spent their lives and careers in what Bob Carlin (2007) refers to as "a kind of shadow existence on the edges of society" (p. 14). This meant the brothers sometimes needed to lean into what the public wanted and expected from Cherokee performers, including dressing in Indigenous mail-order costumes commonly associated with Indigenous people of the Plains, as shown in **Figure 2.2**. The brothers played into the public's desire to see what French (1998) calls the "myth of the *imaginary Cherokee image*" (p. 133). I position the brother's concept of identity with Stuart Hall's (1990) argument that "Cultural identities



Ernest Helton, niece Costine (age 14) and Osey Helton. The family is shown sporting the typical mail order "Indian" costumes often seen in photographs of medicine show and vaudeville performers of the day.

courtesy Charity Gales

Figure 2.2 Osey, Costine, and Ernest Helton, Carlin (2007)

are the points of identification...which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*" (Hall in Rutherford, p. 226). This idea of performing one's cultural identity for tourism is something many performers turn to time and again.

The duo spent much of the 1920s-30s traveling the Asheville, North Carolina, region performing on the radio, at festivals, square dances, and recording (Carlin, 2007, p. 16). They also became staples at Bascom Lamar Lunsford's Asheville-based Mountain Dance and Folk Festival. At the festival, Osey performed a mock fiddle contest with fellow fiddler Bill Hensley, a non-Cherokee player from North Carolina, which became a prominent feature each year (Carlin, 2007, p. 16). Not much is documented about these "fiddle-offs," as they were commonly called.

However, in a 2014 newspaper article from the *Asheville-Citizen Times* about Fiddlin' Bill, there is a brief mention where journalist Rob Neufeld states, "Where Fiddlin' Bill was always exuding an impish personality, [Osey] was ... more the melancholy type" (Neufeld, August 14, 2014). Intriguingly, Lunsford created a space in a "fiddle contest" for a Cherokee player when, during this time, most contests were not welcoming to non-white players.

Osey became Lunsford's staple musician, which included bringing Helton around the country with him to perform at festivals (Carlin, 2007, p. 17). Lunsford even had Helton and Hensley recreate their mock fiddle contest for New York City radio audiences (Carlin, 2007, p. 17). Ernest was married with a family by this time and could not travel as much. However, he met country music player Jimmie Rodgers (1827-1933), with

whom he formed a duo that played around Asheville for a time; however, this duo eventually fell apart (Carlin, 2007, p. 17). The connection between Rodgers and Ernest presents what Burke (2009) defines as an "encounter, exchange and translation," which aids in speaking to the interactions both within a set culture as well as between cultures (p. 77). Rodgers, active in Asheville during 1927, became known as the "Father of Country Music," while Ernest remained in the Asheville region (Country Music Hall of Fame, n.d.).

Du Bois' (2004) double consciousness reminds us that the brothers continually had to navigate between two worlds. This was made more difficult due to living in the Asheville region, a more metropolitan area where they were in consistent contact with outsiders. Living in the city did not allow for a connection to a rich Indigenous culture; instead, it demanded an affected Cherokee persona of the imaginary Cherokee. This was contrasted with those residing in Cherokee, who were more isolated from the colonial world and therefore allowed to be themselves with only the occasional demand for the myth of the Cherokee.

Manco Sneed and His Cherokee Influence on Fiddle

A player living in Cherokee, North Carolina, proper and, therefore, not as pressed to meet such urban and commercial demands was Manco Sneed. Sneed's name came up repeatedly in my early research as one of the most influential Cherokee who set an early foundation for the Cherokee fiddle tradition. Interestingly, while well-known as an Indigenous player, Sneed never seemed to adopt this as an essential part of his identity, not in the same way that the Helton brothers did. By remaining in the Qualla Boundary

and surrounding himself with Cherokee people, Sneed's identity was less dependent upon his Indigenous identity than being a fiddler.

Sneed, born February 18, 1885, in Jackson County, North Carolina, to John and Sara Lovin Sneed, grew up in a musical household (Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, n.d.). His father was a fiddler and a showman who played the fiddle left-handed without changing how the fiddle was strung, so essentially, he played it backward (Owen, 1980, p. 60). Manco and his father, John, were not the only family members to play; Manco's brother, Peco, was also a musician.

Manco lived around Jackson County, North Carolina, for much of his early life. Here, a young Sneed encountered fiddler Dedrick Harris, a non-Cherokee player from East Tennessee, with whom he began to play and learn. Harris and Sneed, both of whom could play banjo and fiddle, often played for square dances in the region, with Sneed frequently ending up on the fiddle (Owen, 1980, p. 61). This contact zone with Harris provided Sneed with a connection to European traditions and old-time fiddle, creating what could be described as one of Bhabha's third spaces (Bhabha, 1994).

However, this partnership would not last long; when Sneed was 18, his family moved onto Cherokee land within the Qualla Boundary. Scholar Brett Riggs recalls that the timing of this move was shortly after the formation of the EBCI government, which granted the family certain rights and opportunities (personal communication, March 6, 2025). While in Cherokee, Sneed continued to play for square dances and parties. Sneed was often the go-to fiddler in the Cherokee region. Riggs recalls a story of Sneed and some local square dancers being invited to play for President FDR and Eleanor. But in a

twist of irony, the youngsters had missed too much school and could not attend, so another group received the opportunity. Riggs recounts, "We were this close to getting Manco fiddling at the White House and having video of it (personal communication, March 6, 2025). It is a shame that this opportunity never came to fruition, as there is a severe lack of documentation of Sneed's playing.

Much of the documentation available comes from an article by Blanton Owen that appeared in the 1980 November issue of the *North Carolina Folklore Journal*. Owen interviews Sneed about his playing and provides transcriptions of several tunes. The journal's cover features a photo of Sneed sitting alone in his chair. That photo, taken by Owen during his visit, is one of only a handful circulating on the internet. In the photo, **Figure 2.3**, an elderly Sneed sits cross-legged with his fiddle tucked against his chest. This style of holding the fiddle is typical among the old-time community, less so among the contestants or bluegrass players. In her thesis work on music in the Cherokee Outlet region of Oklahoma, scholar Martha Lincoln (1949) observes, "He [the old-time fiddler] does not hold the violin with his chin... but bears the weight and steadies it in his left hand... has his head free to nod, to chew, or to call the square dance" (p. 76). For the most part, this style has been replaced by the more modern approach of holding the fiddle under one's chin with a shoulder rest (Thede, 1967, p. 15). I have attempted the chest style occasionally, and I curse my short arms every time, which makes doing so difficult.

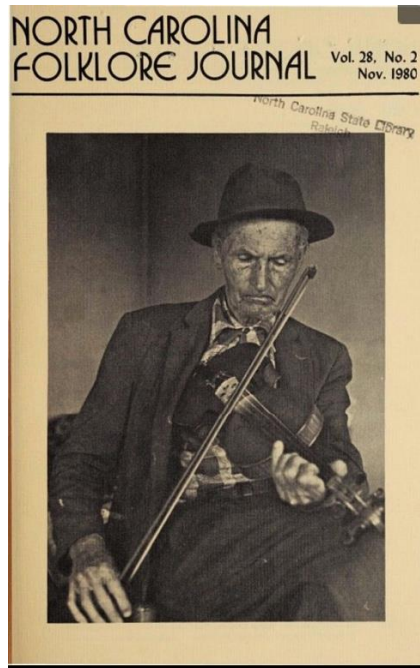


Figure 2.3 *Manco Sneed*, journal cover of North Carolina Folklore Journal, Owen (1980)

As time passed, Sneed developed a more intricate and showy playing style, most likely influenced by watching his father's style growing up (Krassen, 1983, p. 122). Several fiddle tune variations are attributed to Sneed and his unique style of bowing and fingering technique. Music scholar Miles Krassen (1983) showcases Sneed's style and suggests, "Manco Sneed's music is unlike anything we have previously studied. His tunes consist of unusually complex melodic lines and peculiarities in timing" (p. 122). Due to his unique style choices, Sneed's music continues today and is known internationally. From Australia to California, players continue to emulate Sneed's versions of tunes. Sneed's great-great-niece, Carmelita Monteith, recalls, "A couple came back from Australia, New Zealand. They had been there, and they were using my great-great uncle's technique there. A friend of mine at the hospital was taking lessons from somebody in California on [the] Manco Sneed technique" (personal communication, March 7, 2025).

Putting in the Work

It would be a disservice to write an entire thesis on fiddle and not play some myself. To that end, working on a Manco Sneed tune made sense. As seen in the transcription in **Figure 2.4**, I chose to work on Sneed's version of the old traditional tune, "Polly Put the Kettle On." This tune is one of the few recorded during the field recording session done in 1963 by Peter Hoover (Ray et al., 1963). It is said that this G minor version most likely came from Manco's father, John, and varies from other versions collected from others in the region (Krassen, 1983, p. 122). Other fiddle players have expressed that Manco tunes are difficult to learn, and I can confirm that. His technique for double-stops and bow styles work against what my intuition tells me to do. Still, it has been enjoyable to work on his music.

Additionally, by studying Sneed's transcriptions, I have participated in the growing process of cultural hybridities as a fiddler from North Dakota. And I can't help but bring my distinctive regional stylings to the table while playing these songs. This type



Figure 2.4 *Polly Put the Kettle On* by Manco Sneed, transcription from Krassen (1983)

of engagement recalls Bhabha's (1994) work on the location of culture in which he argues, "For it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity" (p. 170). After all, isn't solidarity the goal? From my position, as I connect with a Cherokee fiddler from North Carolina, new hybridities are formed, and the relationship between music and player grows. By interacting with this music, I become part of a much larger story and connect with those around me in a new way. Learning some Sneed transcriptions as a fiddler also allows me, as a researcher, to interact with this material on a deeper level than those outside of the fiddle tradition might be able to experience.

In thinking about my participation in this research, I reflect on the work of J.P. Spradley (1980), who shares what it means to approach participation with a dual purpose in mind. Spradley defines participant observation as having two purposes, "(1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation" (p. 54). Similarly, by engaging with and attempting Sneed's technique I am better able to understand his influence on the fiddle tradition as a whole. Hybridity is a living, breathing concept (Burke, 2009, p. 66).

Dance and Fiddle Collide with Manco Sneed

Another tune associated with Sneed is the popular old-time fiddle tune "Boogerman." It is difficult to pinpoint the authorship of old fiddle tunes with many variations within the tune and name. For example, "Boogerman" is also known as "Ol' Booger Man" and is very similar to the tunes "Chasing the Devil Round the Stump" or

"Whip the Devil Round the Stump" (Traditional Tune Archive, n.d.). Of significant note is that Sneed's mentor, Dedrick Harris, is well known for playing "Whip the Devil Round the Stump" and even recorded a version of that song during a 1924 session with Broadway Records in New York City and featuring Ernest Helton on the banjo (Traditional Tune Archive, n.d.). The fact that so many players based in and around the Asheville region played and recorded this tune suggests that Sneed had some hand in creating and popularizing it.

Furthermore, there is a traditional Cherokee dance named "The Booger Man," where the dancers don masks made with exaggerated faces, as shown in **Figure 2.5**. In describing the significance of both the dance and the mask, anthropologist Jim Maus (2005) states, "The Cherokees needed some help to ward off the perceived European wickedness, and they got the aid with the development of the Booger mask" (p. 186). According to Speck and Broom (1993), the Booger's actions "portray the Cherokee estimate of the European invader as awkward, ridiculous, lewd and menacing, a dramatic perpetuation of the tradition of hostility and disdain" (p. 37). Often within the dance, the Booger had a crass name as well, such as "Sooty Anus" (Speck & Broom, 1993, p. 36).

In further describing the significance of the dance, Speck and Broom (1993) explain the dance as having "the functional value of weakening the harmful powers of alien tribes and races, who, as living beings or ghosts, may be responsible for sickness or misfortune" (Speck & Broom, p. 37). Beyond their exaggerated facial features, the "Boogers" acted during the dance as outsiders, such as Europeans, Chinese, and even other Indigenous people (Speck & Broom, 1993, p. 28). When the Cherokee portrayed

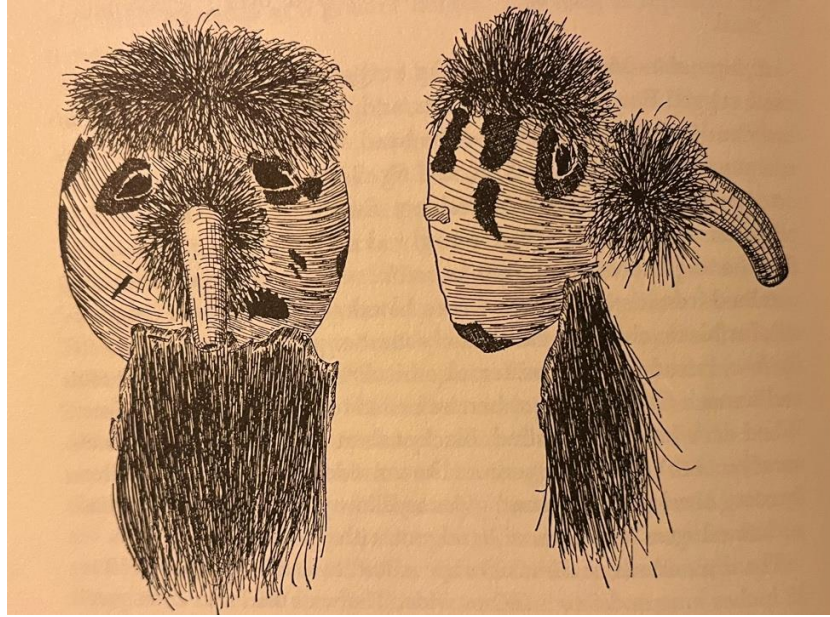


Figure 2.5 *Illustration of Gourd Booger Mask*, Speck and Broom (1993)

the outsiders, anything was fair game; the dancers played into outside perceptions placed on them, such as their purported desire to fight constantly and the idea that outside men consistently lusted after Cherokee women (Speck & Broom, 1993, pp. 31-34). When writing about the Booger Dance, Smithers (2015) states, "The Booger Dancers thus portrayed both black and white outsiders as lewd, ridiculous, and menacing. Such performances made the Cherokee peoples' feelings about the changes occurring around them abundantly clear" (p. 76).

Referring to the similar titles shared by both the fiddle tune "Boogerman" and the traditional Cherokee dance, Monteith observed, "I would say definitely he [Manco] was influenced by that title [of the Booger Man Dance]" (personal communication, March 7, 2025). This connection, an example of intricate cultural hybridity, speaks of the importance of Manco's Cherokee heritage and his place in the fiddle tradition.

Contemporary ethnomusicologist and fiddle player Jake Blount has also explored Sneed and his connections to "Boogerman." The following statement accompanies a YouTube video of Blount and his band performing the tune,

Jake had visited Sneed's family in Cherokee and been advised that his playing of the fiddle tune was too slow... 'I couldn't dance to that' commented a retired clogger. In the posted video, Blount says, 'Today, we make amends.' (Deep End Sessions, 2023)

This video represents hybridities via the tune's interaction with the modern world and modern technologies. Further, hybridity pertains to Blount's identity as a musician with a Swedish and Black lineage (Adventures By the Book Jeffery Blount Bio, n.d.) who specializes in Black and Indigenous musics. In particular, much of Blount's recorded and scholarly work looks at Black and Indigenous string band music, which he seeks to highlight as the expressive work of traditionally marginalized peoples. He has released two CDs, *Reparations* (2017) and *Spider Tales* (2020), that pull music from the Cherokee influence on old-time fiddle by way of Sneed.

Cherokee Folk Life

The fiddle tradition is preserved and moved forward by the work of those who dedicate themselves to ensuring that this tradition is taught to the next generation. One such individual was Walker Calhoun (1918-2012). While not a fiddle player, Calhoun is a vital component of the folk traditions of the EBCI, as well as traditional and ceremonial music and dance. I share Calhoun's story here to illustrate aspects of cultural hybridity between the traditional song and dance of the Cherokee, on the one hand, and Anglo-

American folk music, on the other. Thinking back to Bhabha's third space, Calhoun's work marries traditional Cherokee practice with a modern twist to create a unique socio-musical space, one that is constantly changing.

Calhoun was a well-respected man whose efforts to preserve traditions were highly regarded. In 1992, Calhoun was recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts as an NEA Fellow (arts.gov, n.d.). Another honor awarded to Calhoun came from the Cherokee people, "At a gathering of the Eastern and Western Bands of Cherokee in 1988 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Trail of Tears, Calhoun was presented the first Sequoyah Award in recognition of his contributions to the folklife of the Cherokee nation" (arts.gov, n.d.). In a discussion of Appalachian musics, Deborah Thompson observes, "Walker Calhoun is a very important link between traditional Cherokee culture and modern Cherokee lifestyles" (Andrade et al., 2015, p.216).

Calhoun's uncle was Will West Long (1869-1947), a torchbearer of Cherokee culture not only for his neighbors in the Big Cove community of the Qualla Boundary but also for several scholars studying Cherokee traditions (Olson, 1995, pp. 70-72). Which speaks to the environment in which Calhoun was raised. Calhoun recalls accompanying his uncle to fairs to watch the dancers,

On the day of the fair, we would leave early in the morning for Cherokee [from up in the rural outskirts surrounding Cherokee proper]. We would walk down to Raven Fork, where we would meet the one person in the community who owned a Model T. There were very few cars in those days and only wagon roads to travel

on. We had to ford streams several times. It took a long time to get to the fair. (as cited in Olson, 1995, p. 74)

The above quote demonstrates the importance of the Cherokee approach to community events and music-making in the folk tradition. It was not an easy task to attend such functions, yet it was a priority, and extra efforts were made.

Long and his family exhibited a dedication to preserving traditions and presenting them to those around them. In turn, they instilled in Calhoun a similar appreciation for that act of preservation. Calhoun did not forget this passion, although it took some time before he got to work on it. Between serving in World War II and then raising ten children, it was not until his retirement that Calhoun began to resurrect the old songs and dances that his uncle had taught him (Olson, 1995, pp. 74-75).

Notably, while Calhoun was growing up, he was also exposed to the old-time music of the mountains. His brothers had banjos that Calhoun snuck off the wall and played when they were not around (Olson, 1995, pp. 76-77). While he did learn a little by watching his brothers and listening to old records, he was primarily self-taught. Olson recounts a performance he witnessed at a folk festival featuring Calhoun and the Raven Rock Dancers in 1992. Formed in the 1980s, The Raven Rock Dancers is comprised of Walker Calhoun's descendants. The troupe is still active today, demonstrating the traditional dances of the EBCI (Blue Ridge Heritage, n.d.). In a twist of fate, in 2023, I witnessed this troupe perform at the Our Common Nature festival in Knoxville, Tennessee, featuring renowned cellist YoYo Ma. Watching them dance, the connection between the dancers and the earth was evident and palpable.

In recalling the performance that he saw of the Raven Rock Dancers, Olson (1995) writes, "Toward the end of their set, the dancers disappeared behind the stage, and Calhoun reappeared with a banjo, which he picked with great flair for about 15 minutes" (p. 72). As shown in **Figure 2.6**, Calhoun often played banjo to entertain himself and always played it solo.

Additionally, Calhoun was invited to perform at the Tennessee Banjo Institute in the 1990s (Olson, 1995, p. 77). This three-day gathering of banjo players from around the world occurred only three times, in 1988, 1990, and 1992, at Cedars of Lebanon State Park near Lebanon, Tennessee (UNC Archive Database, 2018). This invitation places Calhoun in high regard within the banjo community and speaks to the influence that he had. This event provided a opportunity for Calhoun to further interact with non-Cherokee musicians and researchers.

In a recorded performance from 1993 at Seedtime on the Cumberland, Calhoun states, "We used to have these dances... There was a caller, something like a

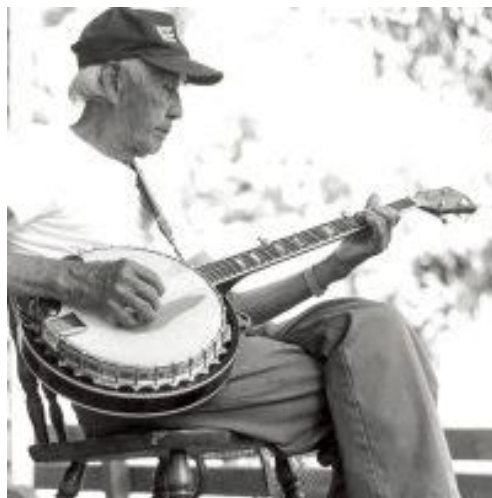


Figure 2.6 *Walker Calhoun playing banjo on the porch, Blue Ridge National Heritage Area (n.d.)*

square dance. He would holler, 'Halfway round and halfway back.'...They call it partner dance" (Appalshop Archive, 2021).

Calhoun also shares that they dance to the Virginia Reel too (Appalshop Archive, 2021). This dance style is a strong example of the cultural hybridity growing around the Cherokee fiddle tradition. The Folk Dance Federation of California describes the reel:

The Virginia Reel, named after the state of Virginia, is an American dance in contra formation. The dance was first published in England in 1695 ... It was danced by New World colonists. Perhaps because movie directors have used the Virginal Reel in many films portraying early American life, it has often been thought of in Europe as 'THE' American folk dance. (SoCal Folk Dance, n.d.)

Thus, the Virginia Reel dance demonstrates hybridities; it carries associations from European history, blends with the American practice of square dance, and ends up at a Cherokee gathering.

The music of Calhoun represents the marriage of traditional Cherokee music and mountain music and how they come together to create a new narrative. It also shows that it is possible to exist in two ostensibly separate worlds while simultaneously creating a new one, much like Bhabha's (1994) third space, which tell us how the blending of cultures and styles can occur. Calhoun's work preserves the traditional aspects of Cherokee music-making while promoting Anglo-American music, enabling future generations to continue his work.

Pushing the Bow a Little Further

Despite Calhoun's efforts, and those of others, when I first began my research, I struggled to find a present-day fiddle connection within the EBCI music scene. Time and again, I came up empty-handed. I just could not find any active players within the Qualla Boundary. For a region so rich in history, the current fiddle scene lacks musicians. This could be the result of activities such as square dances losing popularity, or it could also be the result of the loss of people and culture due to the Removal. One should remember that the Cherokee fiddle tradition is often passed down through families via aural learning. When the Removal tore apart those families and moved knowledge over vast distances, that knowledge dissipated and stayed with the larger community that formed in the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. However, there is no way to know what caused such a decline.

Thankfully, that is not where this story ends; a small group of people are attempting to bring the tradition back to life among the Cherokee in these mountains. In 2018 and 2019, Brett Riggs (personal communication March 7, 2025) and Carmelita Monteith (personal communication March 8, 2025) partnered with Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) to offer some after-school lessons to youth in the region (jamkids, n.d.). Inspiring the next generation of musicians is vital to a culture's survival. Sadly, the COVID pandemic stopped this programming, and although they have not restarted yet, they hope to in the future.

Down the Mountain

The day is winding to a close, and once again, I find myself on the side of a mountain after a full day of talking about fiddle. Driving down a

switchback road coming off Peco's Drive (named after Peco Sneed, Manco's brother and a fiddler), I reflect on the information I gathered that day and its significance. The road's sharp curves remind me of the twists and turns this research presented. With every turn, a new piece of information sends me down a new rabbit hole.

I acknowledge that much of this chapter is historical and archival due to the lack of fiddlers in Cherokee, North Carolina. However, because of the Removal, an era of fiddling among the Cherokee diaspora began, and with it, the transmission of music and fiddle to new locations. In speaking of the effects this had on the Cherokee, Smithers (2015) states, "For Cherokee, life in the diaspora and outside the homelands...both challenged and revived the significance of Cherokee identity" (p. 228). As this pertains to the fiddle tradition, the diaspora, and forced removal meant a redefining of the fiddle's role, both as a point of connection to their new neighbors in Oklahoma and in terms of how Cherokee Nation fiddlers would connect to the rich traditions laid for them by the players of the EBCI.

CHAPTER 3: SWINGING INTO OKLAHOMA

*As I wind my way up the mountainside, my excitement rises with the road.
I am moments away from the end of my journey, a return trip to
Tahlequah, Oklahoma to follow up with interlocutors and attend a jam at
a friend's house. Once again, I am struck by the beauty of this region. As I
settle into my hotel, I think back to the circumstances that brought me to
this point.*

Homecoming and Connection

At the start of the fall semester of 2024, the professor in my Music of Appalachia class, Sean McCollough, posed a question. He asked, "what is Appalachian music?" Most students answered with genres like bluegrass, country, or old-time. He then played several examples of Appalachian music, including Cherokee flute player Tommy Wildcat. McCollough's intention was to point out that all music created in the Appalachian region is Appalachian, not just certain genres or the music performed by specific groups of people. As a fiddler, I was intrigued by the flute and wondered if there was a history of fiddle among the Cherokee people. This simple question sent me down the route that became this thesis.

Throughout history, musicians have used music to describe their heritage, culture, and the personal connections it can establish. This chapter explores how members of the Cherokee Nation have used and continue to use the fiddle to shape, identify, and define their culture. To establish this, I use the work of Bruner and Turner (1986), Peter Burke (2009), Jonathan Rutherford (1990), Justin Castro (2008) and Stuart Hall (1990). To begin, I introduce the Cherokee Nation's history to acquaint readers with the circumstances surrounding the Nation's beginnings and growth. By examining the work and careers of players such as Sam O'Fields (1934-2020), John Church (present-day), and

Bubba Hopkins (present-day), who laid the foundation for those who followed, I then analyze the fiddle's role in cultural hybridity through the lens of Burke (2009) and demonstrate its application to today's Cherokee Nation.

Deeper History

I offer this history toward a broader understanding of the Nation's position as it relates to the Cherokee people's actions and reactions. The journey from the East to the West during the Trail of Tears took its toll on the population and deeply impacted the emotions of those forced to make their way by land and water to Oklahoma. Once the Cherokee arrived in the West, conditions did not improve. The rations they received were infested with weevils, and the meat was inedible (Woodward, 1988, p. 219). Chief Ross purchased supplies for his people with leftover funds provided by the U.S. government for "emigration" (Woodward, 1988, p. 219).

This was just one of the many terrible aspects of the world into which Cherokee refugees were thrust. To receive this level of mistreatment after proving themselves as successful society builders surely struck a hard blow to the newly arrived Cherokee in Oklahoma. However, the Cherokee were resilient and resourceful people who rose to the challenge of beginning over in a new homeland.

As of 2018, more than 360,000 Cherokee are scattered over fourteen counties in the northeast region of the Ozark Mountains in Oklahoma (Blackburn et al., 2018, p. 228). The center of this, as previously discussed, is Tahlequah, which was founded in 1838 and became a hub as both the capital and the center of business and cultural activity of the newly formed Nation (Blackburn et al., 2018, p. 73).

Hybridity Travels the Trail

It is known that the fiddle traveled the Trail of Tears during the Removal, which is remarkable considering how brutal the journey was, and the horrors the Cherokee faced once they arrived in Oklahoma. According to Angelina Jumper, a member of the EBCI IRB board, an inventory of personal items carried on the trail shows a number of Cherokee traveled to Oklahoma with their fiddles (personal communication, October 8, 2024). One of those individuals was prominent Cherokee leader, Junaluska (1775-1858).

In a twist of fate, Junaluska had saved the life of the very person who sent him and his fiddle to Oklahoma. That person was Andrew Jackson, and his life was saved during the Battle at Horseshoe Bend in 1814. Rather than repay Junaluska with a kind gesture, Jackson would drive the Cherokee from their homelands (Clarke, 2003, p. 5). Later, Junaluska went on record saying that he regretted saving Jackson (Clarke, 2003, pp. 5-6). He also returned to North Carolina and died in his North Carolina homelands.

Scholar David Bennett (1940) refers to Junaluska in his work on North Carolina musician Fiddlin' Bill Hensley (1873-1960), stating,

[Fiddle tune] "Georgia Horseshoe", Bill attributes to Junaluska, an Indian chief [author's note: he was not an actual chief] during the Civil War. Bill saw the Indian when he was a small boy, and told me that his white hair hung almost to the ground. "Snow-bird on the Ashbank" was a piece that Junaluska played.
(p.22)

Not only did Junaluska play "Snowbird on the Ashbank," a well-known fiddle tune today, it is rumored that he may have had a hand in writing it too (Jumper personal communication, October 8, 2024).

Another Cherokee member who valued his fiddle enough to have it on the trail was Andrew Griffin (mid-nineteenth century), who carried it in a flour sack (Castro, 2008, p. 96). The Griffin family used fiddle playing as a means to make some extra money in addition to farming. Once they reached the Ozark mountains, they continued their tradition of fiddling. Much later, Andrew's great-grandson, Louis, founded the Keetoowah Band's annual National Indian Fiddlers Contest in 1973 (Castro, 2008, p. 96).

The cultural hybridities that characterize Cherokee fiddling in Oklahoma can be partly attributed to the Removal. When speaking of this history, Bigfeather states,

Fiddling was part of the Cherokee culture after the Removal. Cherokees had to adopt the white man's ways, and part of that was through fiddling and square dancing. This was way back before we had TVs or electricity. Square dancing and fiddle music was a Saturday event, a social gathering that Cherokees have been a part of ever since. (Bigfeather, as cited in Henson, September 2017)

Fiddle, as always, was present and prominent during events like square dances and it provided a way for the Cherokee to connect with those around them. By adopting Anglo-American music, the Cherokee engaged in cultural hybridities that allowed them to bridge the gap between themselves and their new neighbors in the Ozark Mountain region.

This included connections with the Black community (Castro, 2008, p. 109). Like the Cherokee, the Black influence on fiddle has been grossly underrepresented. When speaking to Black string band musicians, Jamison (2015) notes,

As early as the mid-1600s, black fiddlers were playing for both black and white dancers at street celebrations in the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam (New York City), and by 1690 slave fiddlers were routinely providing the music at plantation balls in Virginia. As elsewhere, dancing was the chief form of entertainment on the eastern edge of the North Carolina Piedmont, and in the early nineteenth century every town and village had its ball-room, and its musician [was] almost always a negro fiddler. (pp. 44-47)

This makes the connection between the two groups even more vital and intriguing. It is noted time and again that many early square dances had fiddlers who were Black or Indigenous. This fact demonstrates that hybridities were flourishing between varied cultures.

That the fiddle became such a strong part of the new cultural practices in Oklahoma was consistent with other Cherokee transplantations and adaptations. The Cherokee quickly transplanted other pre-existing concepts and practices to their new homeland too, such as their literature and school (Blackburn et al., 2018, p. 73). Much like how the Cherokee quickly adopted European customs back in North Carolina, when they arrived in the Ozark region, they were able to rapidly implement those practices from home into their new lives. The fact that the Cherokee possessed fiddle skills before arriving in Oklahoma, where fiddling was part of a wider practice, meant they could

connect to their new region and neighbors faster than if the fiddle had not been part of their culture already.

Culture is sometimes considered as belonging to one set of people, when in fact, it often involves a blurring of practices across many lines. Burke (2009) states, "There is no sharp or firm cultural frontier between groups, but rather a cultural continuum" (p. 2). There are many instances of this throughout cultures, not just in music but across the creative board.

About this, Burke (2009) further explains that the language around hybridity has shifted to include terms such as fusion (p. 47). A typical example that springs to mind is the fusion of cuisines, such as what is served at one of my favorite food trucks, which combines Pakistani cuisine with Appalachian comfort food. They call it Pakalachian. When speaking to the notion of food as a representation of cultural hybridity, Anette Svensson (2020) states, "The creation of this hybrid version functions as a familiarization process where food becomes the means through which a particular source culture is translated" (p. 70). This blending of two cultures to create a unique experience makes me think of how the fiddle has seamlessly blended into the fabric of Cherokee culture.

Hybridity and fusion became prominent features of Cherokee music once the Cherokee settled into the Ozark region. This came in the form of their playing style, which began to shift from one that displayed the strong Scots-Irish influence of the Appalachian Mountains, including jigs and reels, to one inflected more noticeably by the Texas style of playing. The latter focused on rags from influences like western swing fiddler Bob Wills (1905-1975). Thus, whereas the players of the EBCI were often

referred to as old-time players, the next generation of Cherokee players were more associated with the western swing Texas style of playing. In describing the difference between the styles, Francis Abernethy (2001) explains, "The Texas fiddler emphasizes the down bow stroke in contrast to the Appalachian 'shove and pull' style that emphasizes the up bow stroke" (p. 58). This subtle difference vastly alters the playing style, moving it from the square dance arena to the two-step style. This regional differentiation again marks the transition from the Appalachians to the Ozarks.

Speaking similarly to regional styles, ethnomusicologist and Texas-born fiddler Emily Williams Roberts recalls, "When I am at a jam outside of Texas, I most often find myself playing with those who use more of a 'Georgia Style' bowing, as my teacher called it the traditional fiddle shuffle. In Texas, if you use a Georgia bowing style, you're going to get practically disqualified from any contest" (personal communication, March 11, 2025). The Cherokee players in Oklahoma utilize the Texas style, and this distinction speaks to the regional differences in fiddle styles, demonstrating an aspect of cultural hybridities found in Oklahoma-based fiddling.

The Old Guard

Someone who exemplifies cultural hybridity is Cherokee fiddler John Church. Sitting in the living room at Church's house in Oklahoma, surrounded by memories and fiddles, the story of fiddling within the Cherokee Nation began to unfold. Like many other fiddlers within the Cherokee tradition and without, Church learned fiddling from his family and still owns his grandfather's fiddle (personal communication, November 16,

2024). He toured and played with Cherokee fiddle legend and cousin Sam O'Fields (as shown in **Figure 3.1**).

When I first met Church at the Holiday's Fiddle Contest a few months before I visited his home, he spoke of his love for tinkering with instruments. This passion is reflected in the fiddles stuck in boxes around his living room. As he points out the pictures of his family, he tells me how his dad had to repurchase his grandfather's fiddle from the mountain man he had sold it to for \$25. Church has since converted it into a five-string violin. He explains, "That's what I do. I take old violins, and I've got about eight five-string violins" (personal communication, November 16, 2024). He tells me he has about 100 more in storage somewhere and threatens to send me home with at least one (I decline and make it out empty-handed this trip, but I may take him up on it next time).



Figure 3.1 *Sam O'Fields and John Church*, Ruckman (2006)

It was through this tinkering with instruments that he began to play fiddle. But, due to a lack of teachers around the Tahlequah region, much of what he learned was self-taught. He once tried to take some lessons at a music store in Tulsa around 1974, but the teacher didn't know much about the fiddle and was much more of a classical player (personal communication, November 16, 2024).

When I visited, he played me a few tunes, but time has not been kind to John's hands, and it was tough for him to get them out. This is not uncommon for older fiddlers, as many develop tendonitis or carpal tunnel syndrome, thus changing the way they approach this music. Church was also quick to point out he is not a contest fiddler. He still loves to play and said, "Music is my out" (personal communication, November 16, 2024). John is also a Vietnam Veteran. He is a classic wheel-and-deal picker (via trades with other players or looking out for a good deal to turn around, sell, or trade) who is always looking for new and different musical gear. In fact, in a small world coincidence, Jerry Bigfeather owns several instruments that once belonged to Church, demonstrating additional material circulations through the Cherokee community.

Using his connection to the fiddle and music, Church can more fully interact with his Cherokee identity by playing and participating in music-making with those around him. When I visited, his pride was on display. He wore a Native Pride hat, his guitar had his name in Cherokee syllabary inlaid on the headstock, and he sang a soulful version of the Cherokee adaptation of "Amazing Grace." The English hymn, again, speaks to the hybridities evident throughout Cherokee music-making.

One of the most prominent fiddlers to come out of the Cherokee Nation is Sam O'Fields (1934-2020). Like Church and others, O'Fields learned fiddling from family and friends, listening to songs and then going home to work on them. O'Fields recounts going to the homes of those in his area around Tahlequah, stating, "Back in those days, folks were just glad to have the company and the music, and the whole time I was learning. It didn't take me long to learn how to get a tune out of a fiddle" (O'Fields as cited in Ruckman, June 19, 2006). O'Fields knows more than 500 songs (Ruckman, 2006).

Often referred to simply as "The Cherokee Fiddler," O'Fields once stated, "Someone said I was made to do it [fiddling], but I don't know that...When I tried it, it seemed like I was born to do it" (O'Fields as cited in Ruckman, 2006). This statement speaks to a sentiment expressed by many other players I have encountered in my musical journey, for whom fiddle and music are integral parts of them that they can't live without. This connection to fiddle as it relates to one's Cherokee identity is a belief I discuss further in the following chapter.

The O'Fields legacy continues today through his great nephew, Nokosee Fields, a Cherokee Nation citizen. When asked about the playing style of his great uncle, Fields stated, "He had a complex style of playing, he liked a lot of things, but it was a lot of country stuff, Texas style of tunes" (personal communication, January 31, 2025). This comment reinforces the role of regional differences in fiddle style choices.

Fields himself started playing violin at around ten years old in the school orchestra in Stillwater, Oklahoma. Growing up with parents who were visual artists, it made sense for Fields to pursue a creative life. While attending college to study early

music of the European Renaissance, Fields recalls being vaguely interested in fiddle music, but it was not a priority (personal communication, January 31, 2025). After taking a few years off from music due to burn-out, Fields reentered through bluegrass. However, he eventually transitioned into old-time, stating, "I felt like that was the sound I was craving that I didn't know I was looking for" (personal communication, January 31, 2025).

Despite only meeting his great-uncle a few times when he was younger, the deeper Fields got into playing old-time, the more aware he became of his great-uncle and his playing. Lately, Fields has been digging into that music more, which is a very Texas-inspired style of fiddling. However, Fields states that cassette tapes containing recordings of home jams from the mid-twentieth century are what he finds most appealing now. This is a prime example of modern hybridities in action: it pertains to musical styles as Fields blends his love of old-time and Texas styles and various transmission styles, from those of the oral tradition often associated with fiddle into the more modern recording era.

The Modern Era

Many players continue the fiddle tradition in the Cherokee Nation today. Through events such as the Fiddle Contest at the Cherokee National Holiday, they have the chance to connect and be a part of a community larger than themselves. This includes Monte Gaylord (1962-present), Bubba Hopkins, and Mary Parker, all of whom competed at the Cherokee National Holiday Fiddle Contest that I attended in 2024. These players also reflect the concepts of convergence and contact zones as previously presented in earlier chapters.

Monte Gaylord marks the transition from the old guard to the modern era. Gaylord can present Cherokee fiddle on a more national level than previously seen by Cherokee fiddlers and therefore come in contact with people and styles not available to prior players. Gaylord was raised in a musical family and began playing fiddle at a young age. At age 14, he attended his first fiddle contest with his teacher and mentor, Ace Sewell (Grand Lake Festival, n.d.). Since then, he has played with prominent country and Western artists, such as Grammy winners Brooks and Dunn, Clint Black, and Asleep at the Wheel (Grand Lake Festival, n.d.). Additionally, Gaylord is listed in the *Oklahoma Music Guide: Biographies, Big Hits, and Annual Events* (Carney & Foley, 2003).

The fact that Gaylord played with such well-known country acts represents his contributions to musical hybridities in blending musical genres and cultures. The fact that this required repeat contact between these cultures recalls Burke's (2009) argument that hybridity takes multiple encounters rather than just one (p. 25). In addition to supporting cultural hybridities, consistent exposure helps Cherokee players like Gaylord achieve such successful career heights.

The next generation built upon that national access by increasing the flow of information between styles and players. This is evident in Bubba Hopkins playing, which has raised the bar for Cherokee fiddlers. Hopkins owes his love of music to his grandparents, who allowed him to jam with them at the young age of two years. At age six, Hopkins began learning the violin and eventually took fiddle lessons from Monte Gaylord and his brother Dave (Hopkins Music, n.d.). In April 2018, the Cherokee Nation honored Hopkins for his cultural contributions by gifting him a Cherokee blanket and

river cane flute signed by Tommy Wildcat (Cherokee Nation, 2018). Hopkins has also represented Cherokee players at fiddle contests around the nation. He even played a tribute to Bob Wills alongside the Gaylord brothers and country/bluegrass fiddler, Jana Jae on the floor of the House of Representatives at the Oklahoma State Capital (Castro, 2008, p. 112).

As a Cherokee fiddler, Hopkins' success has influenced the community around him. His story also gives us a sense of how hybridities emerge as the Cherokee fiddle tradition becomes more deeply situated within Cherokee culture. This integration of cultures, between the fiddle, the Cherokee, and the Ozark mountains, reflects Burke's (2009) transculturation: a two-way street with influence flowing back and forth (p. 41). Hopkin's interaction with the fiddle, while being deeply integrated into the Cherokee community, shows a clear path for cultural flows between these worlds.

Mary Parker is taking Cherokee fiddling to new heights by breaking barriers and shifting what is possible as a young Cherokee fiddler. She is pushing forward beyond what Cherokee fiddle has traditionally been. A young woman in her twenties, Parker is redefining Cherokee fiddling. She attends Bethel University in McKenzie, Tennessee, and participates in the bluegrass ensemble. Parker has played since she was four years old (Mary Parker Music, n.d.). Like many other fiddlers, Parker speaks to the community that helped shape her playing, stating,

I've had some local fiddlers take me under their wing and teach me. I'm beyond blessed to have them shape me. They have a heart for the young people, keeping

the tradition alive. This place [fiddle contest] is like an archive keeping the traditions in music. (Parker, as cited in Berry, 2022)

The experiences Parker has playing the fiddle reflects horizontal comradeship and what Anderson (2016) means when speaking of imagined communities. Fiddle, being such an aural-based tradition, means that songs are often passed from one person to another.

Parker very likely learned tunes from those who learned tunes from others. Think of it like this, fiddler A learns a tune from fiddler B, who learned that tune from fiddler C. Fiddler A and C have never met but by way of horizontal comradeship and imagined communities through B they have impacted each other's playing and culture.

Parker's playing style is high energy, as demonstrated in her offering during the 2024 Holiday Fiddle Contest, where she danced while playing fiddle in the No Holds Barred round. She represents a new generation of Cherokee fiddlers and shows that this tradition remains vibrant. Additionally, Parker's playing style is a hybrid of the traditional music she grew up around and modern fiddling styles of today, which draw from jazz and blues at a significantly higher level than in the past. Her musical creativity represents a case of modern hybridity and forward momentum for the Cherokee tradition and suggests great possibilities for future generations.

Gaylord, Hopkins, and Parker exemplify the power of experience in shaping identity, a notion addressed in the work of Roger Abrahams (1986), who states, "Experience addresses the ongoingness of life as it is registered through the filter of culture" (Bruner & Turner, p. 55). This exposure to different cultures allows their Cherokee identity and the fiddle community outside the Ozark region to blend. Further,

this meeting of cultures is what Burke (2009) defines as "convergence," where cultures meet more intensely than those that meet in a passing fashion and create contact zones through which hybridities then move into the third space (p. 67). This is shown through the progressive nature of fiddle playing represented by the players in this section.

If You're Gonna Play in Oklahoma

Remembering the struggle and horrors the Cherokee faced on the Trail of Tears, the fact that fiddles made the journey westward speaks volumes to the importance of such an instrument and tradition for the Cherokee. Reflecting on the history of diaspora and transmission, the power of the fiddle shines through.

These players represent a strong movement of highly active individuals in both the performing and contest worlds. The modern-era players are strong in Texas style while branching into other areas, such as jazz and bluegrass, and like so many in the Ozark region, they honed their playing chops at fiddle contests. With such strong horizontal comradeship (Anderson, 2016) and convergence of styles (Burke, 2009), they represent cultural hybridities that exist within the Cherokee fiddle tradition as well.

CHAPTER 4: PLAY IT ONE MORE TIME

Fiddle Me This

Sitting in the conference room on August 31st at the Chota Center in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, strains of fiddle music fill the air. Once again, I am struck by the reality that this contest has been part of the Cherokee National Holiday for 72 years. At this point, generations of families have been able to participate and attend.

Being here brings me back to my childhood in North Dakota, where I grew up traveling north to the International Peace Gardens and the International Music Camp on the Canadian border. It was there that my experiences with fiddle contests began. My entire family volunteered. I was the judge's runner and gopher. This started a tradition that lasted most of my childhood. And it always felt like going home. I got to see friends I only saw once a year, much like Bigfeather recalled when he told me, "I see the same familiar faces year after year. Even though I may not remember their name or know their name, I recognize them. I look across the audience, and I see your face" (personal communication, October 10, 2024).

This chapter shows how attending and participating in the fiddle contest is a homecoming and a point of connection to Cherokee identity for participants. In part, I establish the rich history of the Cherokee National Holiday Fiddle Contest, the preservation of heritage through the Cherokee fiddle tradition, and the authority granted to Cherokee players participating in the competition. Then drawing upon the work of Chris Goertzen (1985, 1988, 2008), Gregory Smithers (2015), and Peter Burke (2009), I argue the Cherokee National Holiday Fiddle Contest, which still thrives in the Cherokee Nation, is a clear example of cultural hybridity.

Get Down Yer Fiddle

The Fiddle Contest at the Cherokee National Holiday continues throughout that August afternoon, with contestants fiddling tune after tune as a mother and her small children dance in the back. Having charged my laptop enough to sit in the audience, I get to sit back and finally enjoy just

being there. The joy that fills the faces of those around me is contagious and I find myself settling in for some good tunes. The crowd by the end of the day has reached a few hundred families and friends. As I sit and think about what I have seen today I am once again reminded of how similar this contest is to the others I have attended.

Fiddle contests have been around since the early twentieth century and served as a popular way for fiddlers to gather and for the public to enjoy a concentration of skilled players (Goertzen, 2008, p. 9). They also create the perfect breeding ground for hybridity to occur. Players meet others from around the region and nation through the contests and conventions. With this diversity of players comes the exchange of different tunes and styles, as well as interpersonal and social exchanges.

Contests also serve a deeper function. They are a point of connection (or a contact zone) for one's identity, community, and for developing an understanding of history and one's place in it. This was evident at the Fiddle Contest I attended as part of the Cherokee National Holiday in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

While there are distinctive aspects of the Fiddle Contest in Tahlequah, the broader contest experience is not unique to a particular region or area. When sharing his own experience at a fiddle contest in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, fiddle scholar Chris Goertzen (2008) observes,

This event is not just fun: there is an underlying and pervasive feeling that these tunes are old, real American music. Showing respect for this music and the people that make an effort to play it well show respect for a way of life, for America as it used to be in the good old days. Or for how the good old days should have been, anyway. (p. 4)

The ideas of respect, a connection to history, and something more profound, are important as they relate to those traditionally marginalized in early fiddle contests, including Indigenous and Black players. Of course, the idea of the good old days referenced here fails to recognize the hardships endured by marginalized groups.

Round One: A Breakdown, Waltz, and Tune of Choice

For those unfamiliar with the experience, I offer here an overview of the components of a typical fiddle contest. In a typical fiddle contest, three tunes are played: a breakdown, a waltz, and a tune of choice. Fiddle player and scholar Ross Holmes recorded an entire album, *Not Very Good at Winning* (2018), in the spirit of a Texas-style fiddle contest. In the preface to the transcriptions that accompany the record, he describes contests: "In a fiddle contest, similar to the format of a classical violin concerto, each player performs a 'round' of three pieces: a breakdown (fast), a waltz (slow), and a tune of choice (a piece other than a breakdown or waltz)" (Holmes, 2019, p. i).

A breakdown is a tune of a quicker tempo that one can dance to, specifically a contra or square dance (a variety of English-style dance). These fiddle tunes often have eight-bar phrases that repeat and are in AABB fashion (Root, 2001). This means that the A part is played twice, and then the B part is played twice. Often, a breakdown is referred to as being "square" due to the structure of the tune, which is symmetrical in its four sections. Goertzen (2017) explains the contest setting, "Each fiddler is allowed a breakdown (a rapid common time piece—think of 'Soldier's Joy' or 'College Hornpipe')"

(p. 134).

The contestant then plays a waltz. About this style, Goertzen (2017) states, "The waltzes are about plaintive beauty, often fueled by multiple double stops" (p. 134). The fact that waltzes are included as a contest requirement harkens back to the days when square dances were the main form of entertainment for both the Cherokee and the settlers. While waltzes that were meant to be danced to often feature simple melodies, the waltzes played at contests are highly embellished versions designed to show virtuosity and technique. Goertzen (2008) describes waltzes used in fiddle contests as "containing plentiful double-stops, or especially graceful and varied ornamentations, or unusual vivid harmonic changes" (p. 113).

Following the waltz, a tune of choice is performed. This piece can feature crooked timing or fancier bowing techniques and usually one that is considered difficult to contra or square dance to. Holmes states, "A tune of choice is something other than those, like a polka, schottische, or variant" (personal communication, April 12, 2025). Although some of these tunes of choice originally derive from dance contexts, they have been adapted over the years to emphasize the fiddler's skill and interpretation.

All of this must usually occur in a three-to-five-minute time frame. Typically, the player is accompanied by one to four acoustic guitars and the occasional upright bass. Some rare fiddle contents (such as the one I grew up attending) use a piano to accompany the fiddler, but that is not the typical arrangement.

A common practice is for the judging to be done blind, meaning the contestant's name is not announced, and the judges are either in a different room or sitting with their backs to the players. This is done to ensure equality, as it is common for a judge to know

many players competing. This process is repeated anywhere from one to three rounds of play before a winner is decided.

The style of contest playing has evolved over the years as the fiddle became more separated from the dance tradition. As it shifted, the fiddle began to borrow from other styles. Goertzen (1988) describes this transition stating,

Much of the new rhythmic and melodic vocabularies seem freely borrowed from jazz and related musics. Rhythms are highly syncopated—melodies include plenty of leaps—Bowling is technically expert. Double stops, glissandi to certain important notes—are also common. (pp. 117-118)

This change in style is well represented at the Cherokee National Holiday contest. The choice of tunes reflects the more intricate and virtuosic playing that contest fiddling has become.

The fiddlers at the National Holiday contest are highly influenced by the Oklahoma and Texas regional style choices of players such as the king of Western Swing, Bob Wills (1905-1975), and famed fiddler Johnny Gimble (1926-2015). This differs from the jigs and reels that the players from the EBCI back in Cherokee, North Carolina, heard from the Scots-Irish influence brought to the Smoky mountains. The rags (think ragtime style tunes) favored by the Western players present a new style of hybridity that reflects Bhabha's (1994) concept of third space, or the fluidity of identity and culture, that are constantly shifting and moving. This regional difference represents a blending of musics being made in the Ozark mountains, and also an influence of Latin

music traveling up from Mexico via Texas into Oklahoma. The fact that so many contact zones and cultures were and are present represents hybridities.

Cherokee Nation Fiddle Contest

Drawing on my experiences with fiddle culture, I observed cultural hybridities at the Cherokee National Holiday Fiddle Contest. From the standard tune choice to the judging set-up, this contest presents like many others I have been involved in. However, there is a distinct difference in that this festival represents a celebration of Cherokee tradition, which is not often associated with fiddling or with the environment of other contests. The Cherokee National Holiday dates to 1953, and according to the official website,

[It] commemorates the signing of the 1839 Cherokee Nation Constitution. It is an annual celebration of our shared history and heritage that draws tens of thousands of visitors each year over Labor Day weekend. It reaffirms that the Cherokee Nation is a sovereign nation and honors the goodwill, camaraderie and positivity that Cherokees share with one another. Welcome to our homecoming. (Cherokee Nation, n.d.)

Thus, this Fiddle Contest, which occurs as part of the Cherokee National Holiday, is fundamentally woven into the definition of Cherokee history, community, and identity. Further, it is essential to make note of that last phrase, "our homecoming," and apply it to the Cherokee people. It suggests, in part, that fiddle is seen as part of that homecoming, which speaks to the value of fiddling for the Cherokee people. Much like a family

reunion, the Holiday offers the Cherokee an opportunity to reconnect with their heritage and the people who have scattered far and wide due to the diaspora.

Music can create a sense of home, including familiarity and return. While attending the Mississippi state contest in Jackson, Goertzen (2008) recalls, "I did immediately feel at home at this contest. It fits enough norms that anyone accustomed to such events will know what is going on immediately" (p. 27). The concept of home and belonging creates the space for identity to form and grow. Homecoming is also a time and space for those who have left to return to where they feel rooted. In an article on the role of home in Appalachian music, scholar Loyal Jones (1988) observes, "Those who went away from home yearned for home" (p. 161). The Cherokee National Holiday Fiddle Contest is positioned in a way to help satisfy such yearnings, and as discussed further below, my participants testify to this in various ways.

The diaspora of Cherokee, with implications from the Removal to present-day actualizations of self, means they are scattered around the United States with diverse relationships with Cherokeeness. The National Holiday offers them a chance to return and reconnect. The Fiddle Contest plays a vital role in that connection. It provides an opportunity for many to gather and see friends, whom they may only see once a year at the Holiday (as Jerry mentions above). There is something powerful about being around people who truly understand where one comes from. For Cherokee fiddlers, the contest is a rare chance to gather and feel the power of coming home.

As early as 1963, the Cherokee Fiddle Contest was listed as part of the official events of the National Holiday, alongside such events as powwows and State of the Union

addresses. As previously stated by Bruner (1986), there has been a decline in research based on the notions of acculturation (pp. 139-140), a term that can be perceived as harmful and carrying negative connotations; however, Burke (2009) presents an alternative term that I apply here to the Cherokee fiddle tradition. Burke (2009) presents the work of Fernando Ortiz, who coined the term "transculturation," which indicates a two-way transmission of information (p. 41). This two-way street of Cherokee fiddling's interaction with Anglo style of music-making is on high display at the Holiday Fiddle Contest. Such transculturation is illustrated in **Figure 4.1**, which features a program booklet from the Cherokee National Holiday (Cherokee National Holiday, n.d.). The program includes fiddling alongside traditional Cherokee events like stickball games, and prominent speeches such as the State of the Union. This shows the importance and significance the fiddle holds within their traditions.

DATE	START TIME	LOCATION	DATE	START TIME	LOCATION
AUGUST 10 & 17, SATURDAYS			AUGUST 31, SATURDAY CONT.		
10th Cherokee Anticostume (8/10)	4 pm	22	Schlegel Chorus Open House	9 am	27
J. Mix Cherokee (8/17)	6:50 pm	23	Soc 2 Basketball	9 am	29
			Band	9:30 am	17
AUGUST 22, FRIDAY			Art Show	10 am	23
Men's Stickball Tournament	5:30 pm	1	Art & Crafts	10 am	4
Softball Fast Pitch Game Tournament	8 pm	1	2014 Cherokee Calendar Signing	10 am	6
			Cherokee Nation Cemetery	10 am	3
AUGUST 24, SATURDAY			Open House	10 am	9
Men's Stickball Tournament	8 pm	1	Cherokee Nation Gift Shop Art Show	10 am	10, 14, 16
Softball Fast Pitch Game Tournament	9 pm	1	Cherokee Nation Museum	10 am	10, 14, 16
Miss Cherokee Coronation	4 pm	Coronado Church	Free Admission		
AUGUST 25, SUNDAY			Art & Crafts	11 am	12
Softball Fast Pitch Game Tournament	9 am	1	Thompson House Open House	11 am	20
			State of the Nation Address	11:30 am	18
AUGUST 27, TUESDAY			Children's Fun Days	12 pm	4
"Harvest-Beyond Women of the Cherokee" - a Musical Play	7:30 pm	19	Older Fun Day	12 pm	6
			South Fair	12 pm	4
AUGUST 30, FRIDAY			Miss Cherokee Official Crowning	12 pm	18
Golf Tournament (Sponsor: Stage Show)	7:30 am	3	Veterans' Center Open House	12 pm	25
Golf Show	9 am	22	Softball	12 pm	4
Art & Crafts	10 am	4, 12	Briggs	1 pm	4
Cherokee Nation Gift Shop Art Show	10 am	6	Briggs Contest	1 pm	12
Cherokee Nation Museum	10 am	10, 14, 16	Cherokee Cultural & Traditional Activities	1 pm	24
Free Admission			Fiddlers' Contest	1 pm	28
Art Show	1 pm	22	Art & Crafts	2 pm	2
Art & Crafts	2 pm	2	Intertribal Powwow	2 pm	2
Intertribal Powwow	2 pm	3	Chorus Singing	4 pm	4
Heavy Wood Rotation	2 pm	19	Veterans' Reception	4 pm	25
2nd Round Softball	2 pm	12	Traditional Food Cook-off	5 pm	4
Softball Stickball Sign Up	5:15 pm	12	Alibi/Kanoo Races	6 pm	28
Alibi/Kanoo Races	6 pm	28	"Harvest-Beyond Women of the Cherokee" - a Musical Play	7:30 pm	19
Briggs	8 pm	4			
Children's Fun Days	8 pm	4	Stickball Game	9 pm	1
Open House	8 pm	4	Cherokee National Youth Choir	11:30	18
Softball Tournament	9 pm	1			
Softball Stickball Game	9 pm	12	SEPTEMBER 1, SUNDAY		
"Harvest-Beyond Women of the Cherokee" - a Musical Play	7:30 pm	19	Golf Tournament (Sponsor: Stage Show)	7:30 am	3
			Golf Show	9 am	22
AUGUST 31, SATURDAY			Softball Tournament	9 am	1
Conanick Shoot Competition	7:30 am	4	Art Show	10 am	23
St. Holiday Bar	7:30 am	5	Art & Crafts	10 am	6
Golf Tournament (Sponsor: Stage Show)	7:30 am	3	Cherokee Nation Gift Shop Art Show	10 am	10, 14, 16
Junior Circle Children's Fishing Day	7:30 am	7	Free Admission		
Art & Crafts	9 am	18	Southside Morning Workshop	10 am	1
Cherokee Cultural & Traditional Activities	9 am	24	Art & Crafts	11 am	12
Hawkins Park Competition	9 am	4	Briggs	1 pm	4
Muskie Tournament (Briggs)	9 am	12	Children's Fun Days	1 pm	4
Golf Show	9 am	22	Free Food	1 pm	1
Softball Tournament	9 am	1	Traditional Indian Games Play-off	1 pm	4
			Car Show	4 pm	21
			Fireworks Show	Dark	21

Figure 4.1 1963 Cherokee National Holiday Event Schedule, Cherokee National Holiday (1963)

Further, the program establishes the contest as an essential piece of the Holiday dating back generations and shows the community's embrace of a culture that came to them through European settler contact. By including the contest on the printed program, the Cherokee have stated for all to see the value they hold for the fiddle tradition.

More broadly, the importance of having a bridge for connection between the Cherokee and non-Cherokee cannot be overstated. The fiddle was often used as that bridge. It is a portable instrument and does not require much (if any) formal instruction to produce a workable sound. It makes sense then that the fiddle was brought along on the rough journey from east to west, as explained in Chapters 1 and 2. As someone who brings my fiddle on almost every trip and hike, I can say from first-hand experience that it is much more portable than a guitar or banjo. Carrying my fiddle allows for a greater connection to the world around me and grounds me in uncertain places and spaces.

The contest is open to the public and free to enter. Bigfeather, director of the Fiddle Contest since 2007, states,

When they first did it, I was told it was downtown at the courthouse square.

There's a gazebo that's still there, so the fiddle player would get up, and the public would gather around and there was no amplification or microphone. They [would] just get up there and play, and that was back to the early/mid-50s. (personal communication, October 20, 2024)

Contestants have come from as far away as Chattanooga, Tennessee, to participate. At the 2024 contest, 15 to 20 (the exact number is difficult to nail down as many play in more than one category) fiddlers have shown up to compete with ages ranging from 8 to

82. The divisions include Little Britches (10 and under), Junior (11 to 17), Old Timers (62 and up), Open (akin to the championship bracket, this is open to anyone regardless of age or if they have competed in a different division earlier) and the ever popular No Holds Barred (where anything goes, all rules are out the window). Each division awards a cash prize to the top three contestants. Prizes range from \$50 to \$1000, depending on the division ("Fiddle contest returns", August 20, 2024).

In addition, the contest is recorded using high-end equipment and posted to YouTube via the Cherokee Nation public television program *Osiyo: Voices of the Cherokee People* (Cherokee Nation, 2024). This, to me, represents the value that the community sees in supporting the Fiddle Contest, as these videos represent the Cherokee Nation to a wider public. Osiyo in Cherokee means "hello" or "it's good to see you," a sentiment that I felt from everyone I encountered at the festival.

When I attended the contest, I had the privilege of performing on stage with many of my new friends, as shown in **Figure 4.2**.



Figure 4.2 *Author Performing at Cherokee National Holiday Fiddle Contest, 2024*, Photo by Tom Fields (L to R: Jim Christensen, Bill Perkins, Evie Andrus, Rick Conley, Jerry Bigfeather)

This moved me from participant to participant observer and allowed me to become more engaged with the Fiddle Contest.

Diaspora and Cultural Identity

The Cherokee endured many terrible events and circumstances in terms of forced migrations, violence, and oppressions. At the same time, these circumstances contributed to many important aspects of identity for Cherokee musicians. In his work on the Cherokee diaspora, Gregory Smithers (2015) states, "In diaspora, the Cherokee people became settlers and were forced to re-imagine their nation, their identities, and the nature of their homeland" (p. 23). This notion of creating a new image and homeland makes the fact that fiddle remained a large part of that community all the more important. The fiddle could have easily been lost as the Cherokee moved from one place to another, yet it persisted.

Smithers (2015) also observes there are two types of homelands in what he calls a "multi-sited" sense of identity (p. 23). This concept of multi-sited suggests a fluidity that recalls Bhabha's third space, in which there is a constant fluid motion of interaction and change (Bhabha, 1990, as cited in Rutherford, p. 211). Being fluid and able to fit into many new spaces and places allowed for Cherokee persistence in the face of significant diaspora; many Cherokees even continued to the West Coast (Smithers, 2015, p. 9). Still, that fluidity also presented a struggle to find a home for that identity. It makes sense that music and fiddle could offer people feeling displaced and disconnected a way to center themselves. This notion is highly displayed by the contest participants during the Cherokee National Holiday.

Cherokee Identity

A unique effect of the contest is that it assists members of the Cherokee Nation to connect more fully with their heritage and identity. While speaking with contest participant Heidi Mahlum, she said, "When I go to the Holiday, it enables me to be more of a participant than just an observer" (personal communication, November 11, 2024). Mahlum, now middle-aged, has played fiddle since the fourth grade and currently plays in a rock and roll band as well as a string quartet near her home in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Her father was born within the Cherokee Nation, and she is an enrolled member of the Nation (personal communication, November 11, 2024). This lineage goes back three generations. Mahlum grew up in a broken home that made it difficult to connect with her Cherokee heritage. Reconnecting with her father as an adult, she attempted to establish a link to that part of her history, but unfortunately, her father passed not long after. She states, "I had this longing to reconnect with my dad's side of the family and all of that history" (personal communication, November 11, 2024). Mahlum was able to find some of this connection via the National Holiday and the Fiddle Contest.

When asked about how she first got involved with the contest, she states, "I didn't even know about the Cherokee National Holiday until shortly before Holiday time in 2018. So, a girlfriend and I went to the Holiday and found there was a Fiddle Contest" (personal communication, November 11, 2024). Mahlum first participated in 2023, with her husband backing her on guitar. She recalls, "We just went and had the best time" (personal communication November 11, 2024).

She then states that participating allows her to feel a connection that has been missing for most of her life. Growing up, she did not interact much with the Cherokee side of her heritage and family, so attending the National Holiday and participating in the Fiddle Contest has moved her from a simple observer to a fully engaged participant. This shift in roles allowed her to connect more fully with the contest, the holiday, and her heritage. The shift also represents an example of Spradley's (1980) participant observation, as discussed in more detail below. Further, her experience demonstrates how a desire for connection is often realized through music. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino (2008) observes, "One of the main things I seek through musical performance is a particular feeling of being deeply bound to the people I am playing with" (p. 18).

Regina Scott is another member who had the experience of drawing closer to their Cherokee culture through fiddle. Growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Scott began playing violin at age five after hearing an older cousin, Cody, play. Like many, Scott started playing in a classical violin style but had a teacher who brought her to fiddle contests. Scott recalls how she got more connected to fiddle, "There is a great community of fiddling in Oklahoma" (personal communication, January 26, 2025). At one of her early contests, an older youth told her about this Fiddle Contest, "where you had to be Cherokee to enter" (personal communication, January 26, 2025). She was speaking of the contest at the Cherokee National Holiday, which, up until 2006 or 2007, had at least one category that required contestants to be Cherokee (Scott, personal communication, January 26, 2005). This separation no longer exists at the festival but was an important distinction early on.

When she was 14, she became the youngest contestant to win the Grand Lake National Fiddle Championship in Grove, Oklahoma. This contest has run more than 25 years and is open to Cherokee and non-Cherokee alike (Considine, 2006). Being able to represent Cherokee fiddling on such a large-scale makes her proud. Scott states,

I think it's really cool that I am Cherokee and that I play the fiddle because the fiddle was part of the Cherokee culture. I know there are a lot of people that are Cherokee that probably don't have a direct connection to their culture, so I am really proud that I have the fiddle because I feel it brings me closer to my Cherokee culture. (Scott, as cited in Henson, September, 2017)

This statement indicates that in the twenty-first century, the fiddle is firmly established as a long-standing part of Cherokee culture. Scott connected more closely to her Cherokee identity and a sense of a Cherokee past by playing the fiddle.

When speaking about that connection and community, Scott explains, "When I started playing fiddle and meeting more of the other fiddle players who were Cherokee, I think that is what gave me more of the community aspect of being part of the tribe" (personal communication, January 26, 2025). The Fiddle Contest also opened many doors for Scott within the Cherokee Nation by creating connections with others, such as through the Indian Woman's Pocahontas Club, a women's group within the Nation whose mission statement states: "We are the caretakers of our culture, our heritage and our communities" (Indian Woman's Pocahontas Club, 2018). These opportunities allowed even more connection to Scott's heritage and forged for her a deeper Cherokee identity. In speaking about identity and how the personal experience relates to and shapes one's

identity, folklorist Roger Abrahams (1986) argues, "Our individual experiences are so central to the ways in which we put together a sense of our own identity" (p. 50). Scott's Cherokee identity is formed by the experiences she was afforded through playing the fiddle.

A third member of the Cherokee Nation who has found a deeper sense of his identity through fiddle and dance is Charles Davis. I visited Davis on a research trip in November of 2024 and as I walked into his house, he sat in a recliner with a display of fiddles lined up on the couch, as seen in **Figure 4.3**. Davis was raised on Black Gum Mountain near Vain, Oklahoma, just outside of Tahlequah, part of the Cherokee Nation reservation lands. He grew up in a musical family that had get-togethers once a week. He wasn't into music much during that time, just the harmonica, but his cousin, Gerald Ritter, lived just a few miles away and played fiddle professionally.

As time progressed Davis learned the guitar and started to sing but kept thinking about the fiddle. Around the age of 50, he began to collect fiddles by going to fiddle



Figure 4.3 *Charles Davis and his fiddles*, photo by the author (November 16, 2024)

conventions, pawn shops, and just trading for them, and slowly started to teach himself how to play. Davis states, "After I collected a whole slew of them I decided, 'Heck fire Charlie you got all these fiddles you need to learn how to play them'" (personal communication, November 16, 2024). Now in his 80s, Davis jams every Wednesday night at a friend's house. He states, "I just enjoy the fiddle" (personal communication, November 16, 2024). He has also played in a more formal capacity a few times for the Cherokee Nation, at their request, when they needed some fiddle for a convention or other public event. This connection to the fiddle and the Nation allows Davis to interact on a meaningful level and deepens his connection to his Cherokee community.

Growing up Davis attended and even played at square dances with his own band, Chuck Davis and the Country Crew, at an old building called Black Gum Grade School, also part of the Cherokee Nation lands. Davis states that he started the band because of his parent's love for dancing (personal communication, November 16, 2024). This aligns with Bigfeather's recollection from Chapter 3, in which he states, "Square dancing and fiddle music was a Saturday event, a social gathering that Cherokees have been a part of ever since" (Bigfeather, as cited in Henson, September 2017). Davis's involvement in square dance illustrates a convergence of historical cultural expressions, and their continuation to the present day (Burke, 2009).

After the school burned down, the Davis family decided to donate some land and build a small community center. No dancing happens these days at the community center, but Davis and his wife still find places to cut a rug. They attend what he calls "country dances" where no smoking or drinking is allowed and the participants consist mainly of

senior citizens. This regular contact is what Burke (2009) deems necessary for transculturation to occur, as historical forms, with various national and cultural influences, persist in Cherokee Nation.

To Davis music isn't just part of how he connects to the Nation and his neighbors. It also represents a carrying on of his family legacy, a persistence of living histories. Much of his identity is attached to music-making or dancing. In a twist of fate, Davis is actually the first player I heard at the Fiddle Contest, the one playing "How Great Thou Art," as discussed in Chapter 1.

Just Jerry

While in Tahlequah, if one were to ask musicians about Cherokee fiddling (as I did), one of the first names brought up will certainly be Jerry Bigfeather (shown in **Figure 4.4**). Since 2007, Bigfeather has been the director of the Fiddle Contest and is a passionate advocate for preserving and promoting fiddle within the Cherokee Nation. A musician himself, Bigfeather has spent years keeping the tradition alive and thriving. Under his guidance, the contest has become integral to the Holiday festivities.

Much of Bigfeather's life has centered on preserving and making folk music. Although he did not start playing until later in life, music now occupies a vital role in his social interactions with others. Whether jamming with friends at his house, working on the Fiddle Contest, or performing somewhere, he has his finger on the pulse of most folk music-making in the Tahlequah region. Bigfeather was once asked for a fun fact people may not know about him, to which he responded,



Figure 4.4 *Jerry Bigfeather*, Fite (July 2, 2022)

I once backed up Carrie Underwood. I played bass, John Church played guitar and Sam O'Fields played fiddle. She was not the big star that she is today, but that night, I heard a talented singer in that young lady. She let me play her guitar, and when I gave it back, I told her that she needed to be making records. She just giggled at what I said, but five years later, I watched her win American Idol, and the rest is history. I always wondered if she took my advice. (Fite, July 2, 2022)

This story could have been about any number of young musicians that Bigfeather has encouraged over the years.

Musicians like Regina Scott who, when asked about Bigfeather states, "Undeniably, he is the backbone of keeping the Cherokee Nation contest going. He works so hard on it, so dedicated" (personal communication, January 26, 2024). Fiddle contest participant Heidi Mahlum recounts, "From the first time I contacted Jerry with questions about the Fiddle Contest, he made me feel welcome—I have begun looking forward to the Holiday and the contest months in advance" (personal communication, March 17th, 2025). For Bigfeather, the contest is a labor of love.

I asked fellow musician Rick Conley to speak to Bigfeather's impact on fiddle in the modern-day Cherokee Nation fiddle tradition. Conley explained,

Well, I've played music with Jerry for probably 17 years or thereabouts.

Through Jerry's kindness and patience that he emits through his teaching and playing the fiddle or guitar [it] makes him a joy to be around. I believe with hosting the Fiddle Contest he's inspired lots of young fiddle players and other musicians to learn more about the music. He also helps keep the older musicians on their toes. With the way he integrates the Cherokee language into the show [it] also inspires Cherokee citizens to also learn the language. I usually learn a little myself when we're together. Overall, Jerry is an invaluable piece of the local puzzle in the community of fiddle players. (personal communication, March 17, 2025)

Many echo Conley's statement, both people in the Cherokee Nation and those outside the region who have interacted with Bigfeather.

Conley's observation about Bigfeather's use of the Cherokee language is important from a perspective of Cherokee identity and community. The written Cherokee language dates back to 1821 when Sequoyah (1770-1843) devised the Cherokee syllabary (Cherokee Nation, n.d.). When speaking about the origin of the Cherokee language scholar Ellen Cushman (2011) argues, "The real genius of Sequoyah rests in how well this writing system works to codify the language so that every single use of it helps the tribe's language survive and is a political act that traces its legacy to Sequoyah" (p. 68). It is vital to note the Cherokee were one of the first North American Indigenous people to

create and implement their own language (Guyette, 1981, pp. 215-216). Moreover, Cushman (2011) states, "Peoplehood and perseverance are sustained through Native languages in every body of work, casual conversation, or legal document that uses a tribal language" (p. 70). Bigfeather's use of the Cherokee language aids not only in the preservation of culture but also provides a source of identity for Bigfeather and those around him.

Bigfeather carries with him the legacy and lineage of fiddle within the Cherokee Nation. Additionally, his passion for aiding in preserving and promoting both the fiddle tradition and the Cherokee language speaks to his character and his dedication. Further, he often weaves these two together, as I conveyed in Chapter 1, thus, creating new hybridities in keeping with the concept of third space (Bhabha, 1994).

Left Turn at the Bottom of the Hill

Fieldwork of any variety presents many trials and tribulations, especially to a new ethnomusicologist. Throughout the day, I met with three fiddle players to discuss the role and significance of the fiddle in the Cherokee tradition. One interesting aspect I was unprepared for was geographic, as I contended with a lack of consistency regarding addresses and difficulties with navigation. My GPS struggled mightily with the addresses given to me, and I was also unprepared for the distance between my collaborators. I don't know what I expected, but that day brought me an hour from my hotel, then another hour and a half to the next location, and then another hour to my last appointment. Part of the ethnographic process entailed learning how to do field research better from a practical and logistical perspective.

Another challenge I had to overcome during fieldwork was feeling like I didn't belong. Researchers are often thrust into the role of *participant observer* and, therefore, must approach tasks from a position of complexity, which is quite different from the single-mindedness that the *ordinary participant* might experience. Instead, the participant observer's approach must keep in mind a dual purpose, as Spradley (1980) outlines, "(1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation" (p. 54).

I found myself in this situation at the Fiddle Contest. A good number of people approached me to ask if I would compete. I told them I would not, as I wanted to be available to observe without participating as a contestant. I imagined that if I were to compete, I would spend my time prepping for that. Looking back, I wish I had spent more time in the hallway, where everyone was warming up, rather than just in the conference room where the contest was occurring. However, when I got on stage with Bigfeather and friends (as discussed earlier in this chapter), I passed from observer to participant observer. This shift allowed for a deeper connection to both the event and the people, which led to fuller relationships with my collaborators.

Jam at Jerry's

The day is ending, and I am again on an unfamiliar road, heading into the now dark night to a jam hosted by Bigfeather. Thankfully, I know most of the folks that will be there; after a day full of arrivals at new houses with new people, it feels good to be heading to a friend's home. I pull into the driveway after a frantic call with him (GPS has failed me once again). Immediately I see a car with the license plate FIDLER and I am reassured that I have found the right spot. He has prepared a crockpot of stew and some cornbread to eat before we jam.

In addition to Bigfeather, Bill Perkins (a non-Cherokee judge from the contest and bluegrass player), Rick Conley (a non-Cherokee judge from the contest and bluegrass player), and Ronnie Kimble (a Cherokee snare drum player) are present. We sit and eat a few bowls of stew each while laughing and relaxing. Then comes the time to start jamming.

At first, I am unsure what to expect, but I get my fiddle out and sit down. The demographics of the evening are typical for a bluegrass jam; I am the only female and the youngest by about 15 years. I am, however, not the only non-Cherokee in the room. Half of the jammers there are non-Cherokee.

This entire night represents the extent to which cultural hybridities have infiltrated the Cherokee culture, from tune choices to conversations around music and everything in between. I know that I am stepping into a space where many of the jam "rules" are disregarded (as this is a private jam and not a community-based one), and the flow of tunes and choice will be more organic and less structured. I am nervous but excited as I settle in for the next few hours.

Mostly, this jam unfolds like the thousand other bluegrass jams I have participated in, apart from the atypical addition of a snare drum. The songs being called can be found in countless situations like this one. And while there are a few regional differences overall, this could easily have been a jam at home in East Tennessee.

I have been jamming for as long as I can remember; there are pictures of me around four years old with a train whistle at a bluegrass jam (not typical, and I don't recommend bringing one!). Growing up, my father was a founding member and president of the Bluegrass Association of North Dakota (B.A.N.D., n.d.), which led to much of my childhood being spent attending festivals and jams across the region. Additionally, I am a founding member and current president of the East Tennessee Bluegrass Association

(ETNBA, n.d.), which hosts eight monthly community-based jams. This information establishes my position as an expert on jamming techniques, etiquette, and atmosphere.

For a jam, like the one at Jerry's, at a private residence, the expectations are vastly different from those at a jam open to the community. In a typical bluegrass community jam, all the players sit in a circle, and there is a designated jam leader. Song choice and chances to play the melody are passed clockwise around the circle. Such an action creates an equal opportunity for all to be involved. In this way, community jams are often democratic in nature and designed to include the maximum number of players. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino (2008) speaks to such inclusion by stating, "Participatory traditions offer the conditions for flow for people at all skill levels" (p. 181).

However, at a curated private jam, most of those types of standard "rules" are forgotten, and it is more of a free-for-all where songs are just started without following any set order or pattern. This style of jam allows for more conversation to occur and sets a less formal structure for the players to follow. It is the preferred style for those looking to hang with friends and catch up while also playing some music.

We pick and laugh for the next few hours while sharing stories and songs. Finally, around 10 pm, the party starts to break up, and we say our goodbyes, excited for the next time we can gather again. This experience exemplifies the depths of cultural hybridity present and represents transculturation, the two-way street of information that Burke (2009) speaks of. The evidence of this occurs in the tune choices, the instruments being used, and the players in attendance.

On the Road Again

The good thing about my 13-hour drive home from Oklahoma is that it gives me plenty of time to process my trip and the vast information and knowledge I have gathered. As I cruise down the road, I am once again struck by the similarities between the Ozarks and the Great Smoky Mountain ranges.

Tahlequah is nestled high up in the mountains with a curving, winding road that leads in and out of town. The road passes a rock that pays tribute to the late great Merle Travis, as seen in **Figure 4.5**. It was during the supper at Jerry's, mentioned above, that I found out he is the one who has maintained painting that rock (which also happens to be sixteen tons, like Travis' big hit song "16 Tons"). He took over after the original artist passed away (Roadside America, n.d.). It was also during dinner that I was informed that Travis had a home not far from the rock, and that he had passed away in Tahlequah. Travis was known for creating a style of guitar playing aptly called, Travis Pickin' and is rumored to have influenced what became known as the Fender Telecaster electric guitar body (Kienzle, n.d.). Like the Cherokee people, he also had roots and connections back to the East, as Travis was born and raised in Kentucky. Travis' connection to the region, and the Cherokee's clear respect and fondness for him, represents another example of musical hybridity.

It seems that there are examples of hybridity everywhere I look; my experiences consistently resonate with concepts that Burke (2009) and Bhabha (1994) write about. Once again, Burke's (2009) concept of convergence, where there is a meeting of cultures, is foremost in my mind (p. 67). This concept fuses well with the ideas that Burke (2009) presented regarding transculturation. Together a wonderfully complete picture of fusion

and hybridity is formed, one that is well represented by the Cherokee National Holiday Fiddle Contest. It is also this convergence that allows for such a deep sense of connection and identity to form for the participants and players in that region.



Figure 4.5 *Merle Travis Rock*, Roadside America (n.d.)

CHAPTER 5: SHAVE AND A HAIRCUT, THE BIG FINISH

Tag It

As my research begins to wrap up, I find myself with more questions than answers. One thing I know for sure is that this story is far from finished. There is more to be told, but I have made some strong, solid discoveries. The ethnographic and archival research presented in this thesis have served two purposes: to collect and preserve the history and memories of those involved in the Cherokee fiddle tradition, and to create a living history that tells a tale often forgotten or unknown. Additionally, I present concepts for future research involving Cherokee folk traditions and music.

Throughout this thesis, I have presented the story of the Cherokee by speaking about the cultural hybridities that the fiddle brought forth. I employed the concepts of Peter Burke (2009) and Homi Bhabha (1994) to create a framework through which I highlighted my collaborator's voices. Through their stories, a sense of Cherokee identity has been highlighted, which demonstrates how the fiddle offers Cherokee a sense of place within their communities. I have shared the stories of players past and present, based on ethnographic and historical research. In so doing, I have established a tradition that has stood the test of time, that has persisted in the face of hardship and diaspora, and one that has emerged as an element of community and resilience.

Play it With Style

When I first approached this research, I assumed I would uncover fiddle tunes and styles unique to the Cherokee. Even as I sat at the Fiddle Contest in Tahlequah during the fall of 2024, I kept trying to figure out how to present the music as something new and

different. However, the reality is that I found nothing in playing style that marked the Cherokee fiddle as distinct from other traditional fiddling styles. While there might be some players that have created unique styles, like Manco Sneed, and there are some regional differences, at the end of the day, what sets these players apart is their heritage, sense of connection, and culture.

The music being made by Cherokee fiddlers could fit into any jam or contest around the country, and if one were to shut their eyes and just listen, no discernable difference could be heard. Just the other day, I was thinking back to the jam I attended at Jerry's. Once again, I was struck by how much it had reminded me of the jams of my youth with my dad and his friends. Being in a space, such as the jam, where information and culture were flowing back and forth, between Cherokee and non-Cherokee, represented cultural hybridities on a deeper level, and furthered the convergence of information through contact zones. However, until the project began, I had never attended a bluegrass jam on reservation land. This fact was not lost on me. The experience of participating in a jam on reservation land placed me in what Burke (2009) refers to as a "contact-zone" of culture (p. 72), where Bhabha's (1994) third spaces flourish and grow.

I Love to Tell the Story

Through the efforts of scholars such as Craig Mishler (1993), Justin Castro (2008), and Jake Blount (2023) significant strides have been made concerning the research and telling of marginalized stories. Still, more barriers need to be broken down. For most of history, the story of the fiddle has been whitewashed. Only recently have

other voices begun to step out of the shadows and into the light. Recently, I was watching a video featuring Black banjo player and Pulitzer Prize winner Rhiannon Giddens. In it, she spoke about the African history of the banjo and the "inclusionary history" she is attempting to foster by bringing awareness to work that shifts the narrative from exclusion to inclusion. Much of Giddens' work also centers around folk traditions and the Appalachian Mountains. Regarding her inclusionary work, Giddens stated, "It's actually just widening the focus and showing the entire story. Which is actually beautiful" (The Great Courses, 2023). From the start, I knew that this aspect came into play as I widened the lens on the fiddle, paralleling Giddens' work on the banjo.

In her impactful keynote speech at the International Bluegrass Music Association's 2017 annual conference Giddens (2018) declared,

In order to understand the history of the banjo and the history of bluegrass music, we need to move beyond the narratives we've inherited, beyond generalizations that bluegrass is mostly derived from a Scots-Irish tradition, with 'influences' from Africa. It is actually a complex creole music that comes from multiple cultures, African and European and Native—the full truth that is so much more interesting, and American. (Giddens, as cited in Povelones, 2018)

Statements such as this point to the importance of broadening the lens by which traditional folk musics are viewed. It also speaks to hybridities, as when she identifies bluegrass as "creole." I do find it intriguing that while Giddens speaks to the lost story of Black string players, there is only one small mention in her speech of the people who lived on the land before contact was made.

Moving forward from the Eurocentric ideals that shaped the early decades of Indigenous music research, it is refreshing to acknowledge how much progress has been made. But there is still much work to be done. The whitewashing of America's traditional music, including in the Appalachian region, is vast and deep. Unfortunately, precedents for such racialized storytelling were set early on, by scholars such as Cecil Sharp (1859-1924), a folklorist who traveled the Southern Appalachian region gathering and preserving folk music. He often neglected non-white musicians, and presented a skewed version of history (Povelones, 2018). In the same keynote address, Giddens (2018) remarks on this history, as when she observes, referring to Sharp,

My favorite quote is this one; after a long hard hike looking for the most isolated homesteads to record, they caught sight of some likely looking log cabins. Sharp says: "We tramped—a very hard and warm walk, mainly uphill. When we reached the cove we found it peopled entirely by negroes!! All our trouble and spent energy for naught." Except of course, he didn't say negroes. (Giddens, as cited in Povelones, 2018)

Accounts such as the one above make sharing histories, difficult as they are, inaccurate, biased, and rooted in racist ideologies. However, by seeking out the torchbearers of information and culture, among the people who practice it and promote themselves, traditions and histories are preserved for the future. By engaging with the history and story of the Cherokee fiddle tradition, I work to mitigate this problem and propel the story forward.

One final note on history that must be acknowledged when speaking to the contact zones between the Cherokee and enslaved African Americans, is that for a time a small population of Cherokee were slave owners (Blackburn et al., 2018, p. 85). This means it is entirely possible that the Cherokee fiddle tradition could have also been influenced by contact with enslaved peoples. This relationship needs to be addressed but also handled with care and empathy and is not something this project had the time or resources to adequately tackle.

Future Research Pathways

Future research might consider the effect the Trail of Tears had on the cultures, including the musical cultures, of both those who remained in the East and those who migrated West. Undoubtedly, a massive loss of culture occurred when the Cherokee were split into three diasporic groups, namely the EBCI, Cherokee Nation, and the Keetoowah Band. The negative impact of the diaspora during the nineteenth century is discussed by Smithers (2015), who argues, "Cherokee leaders on both sides of the Mississippi—recognized that the loss of land, migration, declining Indigenous populations, and biological and cultural mixing posed serious challenges to the future of an identifiable Cherokee people, much less a Cherokee homeland (or homelands)" (p. 227). This cultural mixing led to challenges relating to Cherokee identity; nonetheless, many players have found their identity through fiddle, initially something introduced to them by outsiders.

The true impact of the Removal and forced diaspora may be impossible to track and report due to a lack of resources, associated violences, and the difficulty in asking "what if" questions. Still, it is a vital event in Cherokee history to acknowledge and

explore further. Undoubtedly, the impact was significant but documenting it may prove difficult.

Much can be said about the story of Cherokee musical traditions. While this project focused on the micronarrative of the fiddle's role, an entirely different set of stories must be told and shared. Researchers must consider how the fiddle fits into the larger narrative of Cherokee music. To accomplish this one must step into other musics made by and for the Cherokee.

For instance, an example that struck me during this research shows the influence of Christianity and folk music on the Cherokee tradition. I am referring to a 1954 record of Delaware, Cherokee, Creek, and Choctaw music compiled by Willard Rhodes (Rhodes, 1954). One of the tracks on the recording features a group of Cherokee singers performing an unknown Christian hymn. I was listening to this record in my apartment and lying on my bed, and when that track came on, I sat up and said out loud (to an empty apartment), "That sounds like shape note singing!" This should be no surprise, as shape note was popular in the Great Smoky Mountain region during the twentieth century and remains so today (Eskew & Downey, 2001). When speaking to the connection between the Cherokee and shape note practices, Pete Gregory (1995) states, "The plaintive 'Long Cry' of the Oklahoma Cree and Yuchi square ground, like the newer, Christian shape-note singing of the Cherokee church choirs, carry forward strong sacred music traditions often dating to ancient times" (p. 16).

For those unfamiliar with shape note singing, a little background will aid in understanding the similarities. Gavin Campbell (2006) states, "Shape notes were invented

to improve the quality of church singing" (p. 1207) by increasing congregational participation. This notation replaced the traditional round note with a triangle, square, oval, and diamond (Campbell, 2006, p. 1207), which allowed those who did not know how to read traditional notation to participate in singing along in church. This style was initially intended as a teaching aid and used by many missionaries, such as the ones who found themselves in the Appalachian Mountains. While American at its core, this form of notation has its roots in England. Shape note scholar Lisa Grayson (2024) tells the history by stating,

The English used a four-note system centuries ago; a villain in Shakespeare's 1605 *King Lear* sings "fa, sol, la, mi." But they did not use noteheads of different shapes. A 1721 Boston music book placed the first letter of the four syllables on the music staff and used dots to indicate duration. But not until around 1800 did William Little and William Smith of Philadelphia introduce the four-shape system as a sight-reading aid in *The Easy Instructor*. It worked so well, others soon adopted it. (p. 5)

Thinking back to the record and hybridities, I observe that a Christian hymn sung in the Cherokee language in a shape-note-related style represents a level of hybridity that suggests deep, long-lasting interactions, ones that incorporate white European traditions, American worship practices, and Cherokee adaptations. This type of interaction is what Burke (2009) defines as "convergence" which requires constant contact between cultures (p. 67).

I see another example of convergence here in the modern era, in the artist Agalisiga, a young man in his early 20s who sings old Hank Williams country tunes in the Cherokee dialect. Additionally, he used prominent Cherokee musicians for his recordings. The biography on his website describes him stating, "Audiences are universally intrigued to hear the Cherokee language sung in this mode and [are] captivated by Mackey's authentic folksy presence on stage (Agalisiga Mackey Music, n.d.). His 2024 debut record, *Nasgino Inagei Nidayulenvi (It Started in the Woods)*, features both old classic country and gospel covers but also originals written in the Cherokee language. Exploring the transculturation present in his work provides a rich example of cultural hybridity.

What To Do

One of the main questions I asked my collaborators was, "what would you like seen done with this project and the information contained therein?" Monteith stated, "to help educate, motivate, and to create. I hate to use the word pride, but acknowledge" (personal communication, March 7, 2025). Regina commented, "it [this thesis] showcases the importance of fiddle music in the Cherokee Nation, and how fun it is, how exciting the community is to be part of, and inspires more people to join and to keep passing it down. I think that that's the absolute best thing, is the preservation of the culture" (personal communication, January 26, 2025). The importance placed on preservation is shared by many of my collaborators as necessary for the continuation of the fiddle tradition as it pertains to the Cherokee and Indigenous people.

I have big dreams for this project that continue beyond this thesis. To bring this story to as many people possible, I plan to create a lecture–performance that can be taken to Oklahoma, North Carolina, and everywhere in between. Collaborating with the players I have met during this process, I will continue to highlight the story of the Cherokee fiddle tradition. Additionally, this thesis has a home in the archives of the Cherokee Nation and the EBCI, both as an in–person physical item and online via their archival websites.

Bring it on Home

Returning from one of my many research trips and pulling into my driveway, I sit in the car as I gather the strength to make that final journey into the house.

Much like coming home after a whirlwind research trip, as many of these trips were, this project has shown me the importance of taking a moment to gather one's thoughts before jumping to the next item. Preparation is key; and, to do that one needs to take a breath.

Throughout this project, my ethnographic and archival research have been aimed at the preservation, acknowledgment, and promotion of Cherokee fiddling, because, yes, the Cherokee do play fiddle. By honoring the rich tradition begun in the mountains of North Carolina and uplifting the story that is continuing to be told in Oklahoma, I acknowledge that, in various ways, we are all part of this story. And what a story it is.

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VITA

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Andrus has been performing since she was six years old. Her family band, Family Ties, toured around North Dakota and Canada throughout her high school years. She has worked as a performer at the Hatfield and McCoy Dinner Feud (Pigeon Forge, Tennessee) as well as performing with acts such as Foreigner and Il Divo, and appearing on HBO's *The Outsiders*. Andrus is a co-founder and President of the East Tennessee Bluegrass Association. Andrus released an album of original tunes in May 2022, *Evie's Great Adventure*.