OUR FORD: *Old Tim*

During the past decade corporate sponsorship for bluegrass events and, occasionally artists, has assumed increasing significance in the bluegrass music community. One only has to attend the seminars on the topic at the IBMA World of Bluegrass Trade Show to sense the excitement generated by the idea of increasing profits and managing risk by involving outside businesses in bluegrass for the promotional value. Many observers cite the example of stock car racing, raised in less than twenty years from southern sideshow to major national sport through the influx of corporate sponsorship dollars.

Yet the greatest example of corporate sponsorship involvement in American string band music happened twenty years before the birth of bluegrass when industrialist Henry Ford preached the gospel of old-time music and dance to counteract the perceived excesses of the Roaring Twenties. Ford's activities provided a live performance push for the music at the roots of both country and bluegrass. This happened at a time when radio was revolutionary communication and entertainment in America and record companies tried to meet the new competition by producing discs for non-mainstream audiences. An oddly anti-modern innovator, Ford also did much to shape the hayseed, archaic and racist stereotypes that have plagued bluegrass and country music ever since.

Here's Ford's description of his activities, taken from his autobiography, published while these efforts were underway:

> That started us hunting for fiddlers and we have already had forty or fifty of them from all over the country playing for us, not so much for their playing, but to record the old country tunes. We are getting quite a library of old dance music and Mr. Edison and the Victor people have recorded some of it for the phonograph.
>
> It is fine to see how these old fiddlers come to life through their music . . . The old men played for two hours and they forgot that they were old. They had something in their music which the younger men—who are probably better players—do not seem to have and they were keen, too. The oldest of them was dancing and playing and he was eighty-five!
>
> Henry Ford
> *Today And Tomorrow*
> (Garden City: Doubleday, Page, & Co., 1926

In a biography of Ford written by muckraking journalist Upton Sinclair there's a description of some of Ford's fiddlers:

> There was a raised dais for the musicians—no jazz band, but three fiddlers, skinny old men with whiskers, the only persons in the company who did not wear evening dress. They grinned happily, revealing the fact that one had store teeth and another had only a few and the third had only two—"but thank God they hits," said he.
>
> The fiddlers struck up: "Turkey In The Straw," jolly old jig tune to which millions of pioneers danced on festival occasions . . . The old fiddler with the longest whiskers and the store teeth called the numbers. Grand march. All form. It was half-past ten o'clock and the guests were dancing a Lancers; four sets, 32 people, nearly everyone present. "Old Zip Coon" was the tune and the three fiddlers were sawing away, one of them calling as he had called in a backwoods village in his youth, when corn-huskings and cabin-raisings were occasions for festivities. "Honor your partners"—the gentlemen bowed to their ladies. "Lady on the left"—they bowed to the next gentleman's partner. "All join hands and circle to the left"—the gentleman gave his hand to the lady on his left and turned her and then taking his partner's right hand proceeded round the cirle, right hand, left hand, ladies coming toward

e Fiddling And Dancing

—By Art Menius

Caufield and Shook Collection, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville

you. Not all these people knew the old dances and they had fun setting one another straight.

Upton Sinclair
The Flivver King: A Story of Ford America (Pasadena: By the Author, 1937)

Henry Ford was foremost among American heros from 1914 to 1929 not just because he made the most popular automobile, nor merely because he was a midwestern farm boy who had become one of the richest men in the world. He seemed to mirror many of the concerns and feelings of middle American during an age of unprecedented and accelerating change. Ford, the industrial giant, stood with one foot in the twentieth century and the other in the pastoral nineteenth. While his Model T's rolled off his immense assembly lines, Ford waxed eloquent about the virtues of simple rural life and advanced quixotic schemes for using industry to return the people to the country. The larger his Rouge River facilities grew, the more Ford talked, with apparent sincerity, about decentralization of American life.

So much did Ford reflect certain values of his customers, that at the very time the record companies were discovering the lucrative nostalgia market of old-time tunes and that radio stations were initiating barn dances, Ford independently began a program to revitalize old fashioned dances and old-time music. For Ford, who longed for the simplicity of his youth, this was the means to counteract the doleful influences of jazz and newer, more suggestive dance forms. A devotee of the sentimental songs of his youth and a believer in a melting pot that would impose Anglo-Saxon norms upon all Americans, Ford charged that contemporary Tin Pan Alley and jazz material was an effort to "Africanize" music. He blamed both the new music and cigarette smoking on "a certain strain of nasty Orientalism . . . observed in this country to be affecting our literature, our amusements, our social conduct and our business standards." "Orientalism" was a code word for Jewish influence and this was understood as the anti-semitism that it was.

By contrast, Ford said in 1926, "the old American dancing was clean and healthful. In the square dances and the circle two-step one finds rhythm and grace of motion and people are thrown together and have to know one another. The old dances were social." Ford's advocacy of old-time dancing and music, therefore, relates to a whole matrix of his beliefs that the old days were the best days. They manifested themselves in his museum and historical village at Dearborn as well. These projects also signified Ford's shift from a social reformer who advocated pacifism, vegetarianism and educational reform to an older man who increasingly indulged in nostalgia. Historians Allan Nevins and Frank Hill wrote in the most extensive study of the industrialist-idealist:

> Prohibition was the answer to urban intemperance, old-time dances the answer to jazz, the Victorian essays of the *Dearborn Independent* the answer to H.L. Mencken's stinging ridicule of rural simplicities. Ford was an agent of change, who refused to accept the results of the massive alteration of American society that he had helped to create. In that ambivalence lay much of his appeal to the average American.

The Fords had learned the old steps at dances during their youth in the 1870s and 1880s. Sometime during the teens the subject of those youthful dances came up at a party in Dearborn. The Fords and their friends dug up long dormant memories of the old calls and patterns.

Their interest did not fully develop until Ford bought the venerable Wayside Inn in south Sudbury, Massachusetts, in 1923. There he met Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Lovett, professional dance instructors who knew the antiquated steps. Soon Ford had brought the Lovetts to Dearborn, engaged an old-time "orchestra" of cymbalum, hammered dulcimer, fid-

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dle, sousaphone and bass and forced his executives to take nightly lessons from the Massachusetts pair.

As with most of Ford's fads, he spared no effort in pushing his obsession upon the unwilling. He had Lovett organize a dance program in the Detroit public schools that eventually involved 22,000 pupils. Ford provided old fashioned dance classes at 34 colleges including Radcliffe and the University of North Carolina.

From 1923 until the death of their son Edsel in 1943, the Ford's hosted Friday night old fashioned dance parties without alcohol or tobacco. No one, however, could afford to refuse the Flivver King's invitation. If one had guests the Ford's simply invited them also. No transportation needed, Ford of course had a fleet of autos at his disposal. Ford had another, more dubious advantage. If he had trouble with a certain step, Lovett and the old-time orchestra remained on call. Often Ford would invite someone for a lunch of milkweed and dandelion greens on soybean bread with a nice cold glass of soybean milk followed by the healthy exercise provided by old fashioned dance instruction.

Ford kept expanding his outreach program, even while narrowing his list of approved dances from 28 to just 14. He brought 200 Ohio and Michigan dance instructors to Dearborn to learn the gospel directly from the Lovetts. Mr. and Mrs. Ford, meanwhile, drafted a dance instruction book, which became a standard text, called *Good Morning: After a Sleep of 25 Years Old Fashioned Dancing Is Being Revived By Mr. And Mrs. Henry Ford.* Appearing in 1926, the same year as Ford's best selling autobiography, *Good Morning* quickly sold out its initial printing of 50,000 copies. It appeared in four editions, the last coincided with the end of the Friday dances in 1943.

No simple kook, Ford's mastery of public relations allowed him to appreciate the publicity to be obtained by advocating the outrageous and the unpopular. During 1925 and 1926 his advocacy of old-time music and dancing earned him and his cars more publicity than anything other than his interest in aviation. He put his interests to work, moreover. During January of 1926 and 1927, when the new Model T's (not just a repetition, but a contradiction) appeared, Ford created a national radio network to broadcast old-time music such as "Arkansaw Traveler" and "The Girl I Left Behind Me" so that Ford dealers could set up a PA and invite potential customers to his show room for an old fashioned barn dance. The promotional device served as a last ditch effort to bolster sagging Tin Lizzy sales. Ford figured the clattering Lizzy was a nearly perfect car for everyone and having helped create industrial progress, figured it was okay to stop it in its tracks. But he underestimated the powers of the socio-industrial revolution he had helped fuel. The Model A appeared in the fall of 1927.

Ford, however, simply failed to master the art of dancing and fiddling simultaneously. When he discovered in 1923 eighty-year-old Traver City, Michigan, resident Jep Bisbee, who could do both, it was love at first sight. Naming Bisbee "King Of The Old Time Fiddlers," Ford rewarded him with a sedan and a gold fiddle set with diamonds. He filmed the old timer's playing. Bisbee, in response, raised his nightly fee from three dollars to thirty-five.

Ford lost interest in Bisbee two years later with the discovery of a new "King Of The Fiddlers," 72-year-old Mellie Dunham of Norway, Maine. Dunham became the point man of the Ford fiddling craze, but not without a struggle. After winning a 1925 contest in Lewiston, Maine, Dunham became an overnight sensation when the press learned that he had refused an invitation to Dearborn because he was too busy making snowshoes, his means of livelihood. Dunham, in fact, had provided 60 pairs of his no-sag snowshoes for Admiral Perry's North Pole expedition. Dunham relented when the governor of Maine paid a personal visit begging him to go to Ford in the best interests of the state.

Two weeks before Christmas in 1925 Dunham fiddled in Dearborn for a Ford square dance that reputedly was the best publicized dance in American history. That night Dunham played "Pop Goes The Weasel," "Weevily Wheat," "Speed The Plow," "Fisher's Hornpipe," "Old Zip Coon" and others not recalled for Ford's dancers. Now the best known fiddler in the country, Dunham signed a vaudeville contract for $500 a week. That figure tripled before the fiddling craze peaked the next summer.

During January, 1926, the Mellie Dunham Orchestra, consisting, in addition to Dunham's fiddle, of daughter Cherry on piano and her husband Nathan Noble on bass, headlined an old-fashioned barn dance at New York City's Hippodrome Theater for two weeks. Riding his fame, Dunham cut several sides for Victor, toured as far west as Indiana, and received a hero's welcome in Boston.

An excitement for old-time music and dancing generated by Ford's involvement spread across the land, scores of old-time fiddlers stepped forward to challenge Dunham. Many of these people also earned vaudeville gigs. Groups like North Carolina's Da Costa Woltz' Southern Broadcasters, which featured Ben Jarrell, father of the legendary Tommy Jarrell, found themselves playing Loew's Theatres in New York City.

During 1926 Ford sponsored fiddle contests at his dealerships in hundreds of communities across the land. Held on Saturday nights, local contest winners advanced to state competitions in larger cities and eventually to a national championship in Detroit. "Ford's Fiddlin' Five," who averaged seventy years of age, popularized square dancing and old-time music on Ford-sponsored tours.

His promotion of fiddling and square dancing did leave lasting results. It helped spread country music across the nation at the very time when record companies were beginning to promote the old-time sound, which Ford enjoyed for the very same sentimental reasons that millions of rural Americans did. Fiddler's contests became an established part of life in the rural South. The famed Union Grove, North Carolina, event, for example, began in 1925. The fiddling craze helped George D. Hay to convince the management of Nashville radio station WSM to permit him to go ahead with the barn dance show that became the Grand Ole Opry.

Indeed, Jimmy Thompson, the fiddler whose performance led to the establishment of the Opry, had his own media fueled run-in with Mellie Dunham, as reported by Charles Wolfe in *The Grand Ole Opry: The Early Years, 1925-1935*. On January 2, 1926, a Boston newspaper reported that Dunham had grown tired of challenges and was eager to meet and defeat Thompson in a battle of the northern corporate backed fiddler and the southern radio star. Dunham's challenge, as quoted in the newspaper article, provides interesting reading for those who tend to overemphasize the southern roots of string band music:

"He may have defeated 86 opponents in the Dallas contest, but they were all southerners and they don't know as much about barn dance fiddling in that section as they do 'down in Maine.' I'm ready to meet any and all of them but I'd rather meet Uncle Jimmy Thompson, who claims the title, first."

Unfortunately, this Superbowl of fiddling never took place despite an exchange of telegrams between the two parties. Thompson and Hay insisted the event take place in Nashville on WSM and Dunham never came. Wolfe speculates that the affair may have been more of a publicity stunt by the two fiddlers' backers. In any case, the Dunham-Thompson rivalry forms something of an exclamation mark at the end of Ford's passion for old-time music and dance.

Ford, at the height of his popularity between his anouncement of the five dollar daily wage in 1914 and the stock market crash of 1929, created a national craze for old-time music and old-fashioned dancing. By the end of 1926, however, interest outside of the South had died down. Ford, meanwhile, turned more and more of his energy toward his museum and the Greenfield Village complex which included his experimental schools.

Ford made millions aware of old-time music and dance. He demonstrated that with proper promotion and publicity, string band music can become a national fad in addition that old-time music can be used as an effective industrial promotional and advertising vehicle.

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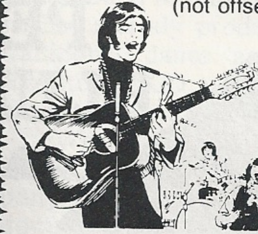

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