



# 84TH ANNUAL ATHENS OLD FIDDLER'S REUNION AND CONTEST

By Chalisa Madsen

*East Texas has long been known* for its fiddlers and musicians. In fact, some say this tradition goes back even further than Texas itself has been around. Every barn raising, field harvest, corn husking, and quilting bee was followed by a dance. It would seem that we Texans have always looked for any reason to celebrate with some good music and good friends. Therefore, it only seems logical that we would make a contest out of it.

So in 1932, the little community of Bethel, just 6 miles north of Athens, got together to throw a county-wide contest to find the best fiddle players around. The only problem; they couldn't find enough bands. So they decided to branch out and write the local newspapers to advertise their little contest to the neighboring counties. As more incentive, a couple of farmers pooled their money together and offered a cash prize, a whopping \$47.50.

Despite pouring rain that week, nine hundred people showed up for the first Fiddler's Contest to hear fourteen bands try their hands at winning a piece of that prize money. When the contest was over, the crowd was asked if this should be made into a yearly contest. The response was so enthusiastic that they got busy, straight away, to make plans for the next year.

One of the changes they included was to move the contest to Athens to have more room for the crowds. And that turned out to be a very wise decision, indeed.

Attendance doubled the next year, and in only ten short years, the Fiddler's Contest was drawing in crowds of over 50,000 people. If you can imagine the entire Athens Downtown Square area as "standing room only," then you have a pretty good idea of just how packed it was.

Even the Great Depression couldn't put a damper on the Fiddler's Contest, with attendance still soaring through those tough years, as well.

It's safe to say East Texas is pretty serious about its music.

These days the Old Fiddler's Reunion and Contest is still a very big deal, drawing in quite the crowd and even making Texas Monthly's Top Six Must-See Texas Events for May last year.

Apart from being the oldest yearly contest of its kind, Fiddler's is known nationwide and musicians travel from all over to compete.

The first day of the Fiddler's Contest is the reunion part, with the Downtown Square turning into one big jam session underneath the old oak trees. Ballads of long lost loves and forgotten battles help transport you back in time as a mixture of seasoned veterans and young-bloods alike join forces. It's truly a magical time to wander around and just listen.



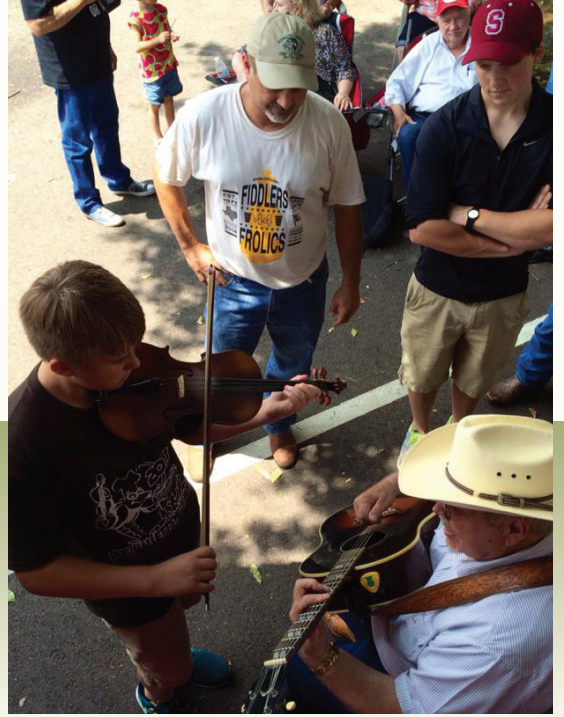
Day two of the festival is the actual contest. Starting at 9am, favorites like “Kentucky Waltz,” “Bonaparte’s Retreat,” and “Sally in the Garden” echo across the Courthouse lawn as some of the best fiddle players in the country serenade the crowds.

The contest is divided into 5 different categories: Seniors (ages 66 and over), Adult (ages 30-65), Young Adult (ages 19-29), and Youth (ages 18 and under), as well as an Open Division, which covers all ages. Once the top three prizes are awarded in each category, the first place winners all compete for the title of Grand Prize. What started out as \$47.50 in prize money back in 1932 has turned into almost four thousand dollars. Needless to say, competition is tough and it’s always a good show watching these artists at their craft.

Once the competition is over, everyone files out into the streets for the Annual Street Dance. Beginning at 8pm, various bands and singers take their turn at the microphone to inspire boots to scoot and rugs to be cut. Bring your own partner or just snag one from the crowd, either way works just fine. The Street Dance runs well into Midnight, so just make sure that those boots are made for dancing.

East Texas is packed full of fascinating history, and the Old Fiddler’s Reunion and Contest is a most fitting way to pay homage to that history. Not many places around can you attend an annual event that your great-grandparents frequented, but Fiddler’s is just that. Living history, harkening back to the hey-day of Texas Swing and our area of this Great State’s glorious and colorful past.

*See you under the old oak trees.*



*Photos courtesy of the Athens Old Fiddlers Association*

