

Biographies of the Musicians

By Amy E. Skillman, with Charlie Walden, Julie Youmans, and Howard Marshall

R. P. Christeson

Born in Pulaski County in 1911, Robert P. Christeson could be called the dean of Missouri traditional fiddling. A fine fiddler himself, he began collecting tunes with the wire recorder and has transcribed over 500 fiddle tunes which have been published in two volumes of *The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory*. In these widely-praised documentary volumes, Christeson raises issues which remind us of the complexity of old-time fiddling: the variety of names one tune might have from region to region, the relationship of dancing to traditional fiddling, and the impact of radio and other media on local repertoire.



David Rees photo

R. P. Christeson pauses to light one of his special-order cigars.

Christeson's great-grandfather Elijah and great uncle Elisha Christeson came to Missouri from Kentucky in 1819. Elijah settled along the Gasconade River. For four generations, the Christeson family farmed along the Gasconade and Big Piney Rivers in Pulaski County until the building of Fort Leonard Wood forced them to move. Christeson's father drove north until he met an old friend at a restaurant in Auxvasse who heard of his plight and sold him a new farm. By then, young R. P. had entered Drury College in Springfield. He later transferred to the University of Missouri in Columbia to study agriculture. Mr. Christeson recalls the square dances held in the park in his hometown of Dixon:

They would build a big outdoor dance floor, including a stand for the musicians. And there was a considerable percentage of the population which could jig dance ... it's not clogging, not the Dutch clog; it's different. Boy, some of those people were nimble on their feet, it was beautiful to watch them. Women too. And, they would square dance the whole day long, it cost them a dime per couple to go through one set.

Although Christeson's mother, Ethel May Murphy, played the piano and his Uncle Fred played the fiddle, old-time music was not always approved in his family. He explains:

My granddad was of the old school that believed the fiddle was the devil's instrument. There was a lot of that. So, my dad and Uncle Fred sold rabbits to the produce house, which would ship them to St. Louis. They got a few dollars together and ordered a fiddle from the "Monkey Ward's" [Montgomery Ward] catalogue. They kept it in the barn in a barrel so it was invisible unless you were just digging and hunting. And, they'd go in there and play and practice. When my granddad first caught them, he'd whip them.