

Special Feature Article

The Great Fiddler's Contest at Monte Ne in 1901

By James F. Hales



No. 12 - Arkansas Fiddler

TOM. P. MORGAN. ROGERS. ARK.

This postcard of George Wiseley as the Arkansas Fiddler was a great success and traveled across the country. George was the grandfather of noted Rogers' resident, Thelma Wiseley Graham. Thelma and her husband, Pete Graham, both grew up in Monte Ne and their families were very prominent in the history of area from the 1900s until today. (Photo courtesy of the Rogers Historical Museum)

Coin Harvey announced in the Rogers Democrat on June 6, 1901: A unique entertainment will take place at the Hotel Monte Ne on the 20th of this month. It is a Fiddler's Contest, and if no one has ever seen one, it will pay him to travel many miles to see it. Expert fiddlers from all walks of life, some in coonskin

caps or cowboy hats, and others dressed in the height of fashion, will attend and try their skill before judges.

The program for the contest was announced as follows: It will open with a speech of welcome by W. H. "Coin" Harvey (of course). Then Hon. George Sengel, of Ft. Smith, the master of ceremonies will give a talk and conduct the contest, which will probably last for two or three hours. Then, at 6 p.m. there will be a banquet with speech making in the dining room of the Hotel Monte Ne. After the banquet, it will give way to a country dance that will go on until the wee hours of the morning.

The Contest Banquet - For Men Only

Harvey explained the rules for the banquet in the June 6th Rogers Democrat: As banquets are not so very common in Benton County, a few words of explanation of how they are conducted may be appropriate. Banquets are for men only, and this one will be no exception. The custom has risen out of the fact that the presence of ladies serves as an embarrassment to the men and when ladies are present the gentlemen do not so easily unbend and enter into a jovial good time. It is also usual at banquets, which will also be true of this one, for wine and cigars to be served with the supper. After all have feasted, and the cigars are lit, the speech making begins. There is a toastmaster who presides and calls out the wit, the speakers of humor and on this occasion one may expect to hear all the good anecdotes on Arkansas fiddlers since the days of the Arkansas Traveler.

The banquet for men only appeared to be discriminatory, and it was, but at the time women did not have all of the rights of men. Women were not even allowed to vote until 1920.

The Rules of the Fiddler's Contest

Coin Harvey laid out the rules of the contest: Each will be instructed to play the Arkansas Traveler. After that each will play tunes of their own selection. The judges will be selected from men who are accustomed to fiddle music, and who call it the fiddle. No one will be regarded as competent to judge who is in the habit of calling it a violin. The fiddlers whose music has the greatest effect in reviving sentiment, and which has the greatest effect on the lower limbs and feet will be declared the winner. The first prize was a fine silver headed cane.

Harvey announced that the governor of Arkansas, Jeff Davis, would attend the contest, but he did not show up. Distant Visitors came to Monte Ne by taking the train to Rogers, and catching one of the hack (a horse and buggy or wagon taxi) services to Monte Ne. There were several hack services operating and they all appeared to have been busy taking visitors to Monte Ne. (Note: This was before the Monte Ne Railroad was built)

According to Harvey's account in the newspaper after the event, approximately 1500 people attended the big contest. There were about a dozen contestants and the first-place winner was judged to be Dut Dutton, better known to the citizens of this section as "Blind Dutton." The second place was awarded to the only woman in the contest, Mrs. N. E. Pardue. About 75 persons of the masculine gender attended the banquet and a big time was reported. After the banquet, the country ball commenced with the fiddlers supplying the music, and lasted until well along in the morning.

George Wisely and the Arkansas Fiddler postcard

Tom Morgan was a nationally known writer from Rogers who possessed a keen sense of humor. Tom liked to make and market postcards about Rogers and the vicinity. At the time of the fiddler's contest, he was in Monte Ne with his photographer, Howard Fowler, making a series of postcards. Coin Harvey

suggested that he make a postcard of an Arkansas fiddler. Morgan looked around at the contestants, and his eyes fell on George Wiseley. George Wiseley posed for the postcard, but could not play a single note on the fiddle. He was a stonemason that did considerable work for Coin Harvey. The postcard was a tremendous success and sold more than any others in the Monte Ne collection. (Data from the book, The Lost Town of Monte Ne by James F. Hales)