



The Story of Henry Ford's Fiddler

All the oldtime dancers and all the oldtime fiddlers have been looking in vain for something to emerge from the Ford Archives reflecting American folk art, of which Henry Ford was an enthusiastic exemplar.

In that mass of documents there are notes and papers and photographs telling of Ford's interest in such music.

But thus far no one has given them specific treatment. So we are going to proceed without overture to tell about Henry Ford and Jep Bisbee—who came to the end of his years in a blaze of glory that could have indicated he was a great virtuoso from Paris, France, instead of an oldtime fiddler from Paris, Mich.

Old Jep's fame well-nigh swallowed him up when it came upon him so sudden-like at the ripe age of 83. But he was equal to it, survived it, basked in its spotlight for a dizzy decade and then succumbed, at 93, having just played

BILL FINZEL, HENRY FORD, "JEP" BISBEE
Fame Came Suddenly to Fiddler at 83

his fiddle for the last time at a program near Ludington.

ONE WHO REMEMBERS

There are very few who still remember, but one of these is Bill Finzel, to whom fate had dealt a hand in this strange business of music and Henry Ford. You have to go back long before the time when Old Jep got his music cue and came on the scene, with his fiddle tucked under

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his chin and the bow scraping like mad.

Henry Ford, the young engineer, and Bill Finzel, the young musician, were pals when very young. Bill's folks knew the Bryants when the Bryant farm was on Monnier road. He used to go out there and have fun with the Bryant children: Fred, Marv, Roy, and Clara.

Henry Ford went out there, too, to court Clara. The Bryants were great ones to give parties, featured by the square dance. Henry Ford never missed a week end, never missed a step when Clara was his partner.

LOVED SQUARE DANCE

Henry's zeal for the square dance never waned. Years later, when it had developed to a point when he was sponsoring exhibitions of American folk dancing, Bill Finzel interested Henry in the idea of staging one at Arcadia, where Finzel's orchestra was all the rage.

It was a year later that Jep Bisbee came into Henry's life. Bill Finzel, on the basis of an old and cherished friendship, promoted an Old Fiddlers' Contest for Henry again at Arcadia.

Henry Ford said, "You know, Bill, I'm no professional in this business. All I ask is that this be on the square."

It was. Judges of the contest were Bill Finzel, Eduard Werner, now president of the Detroit Federation of Musicians, then orchestra leader at the Michigan Theater, and the late Judge Charles Bartlett, of recorders court and himself a fiddler of no small dimensions.

JEP NAMED CHAMPION

There were 32 fiddlers in the contest, and the judges unanimously named Jep Bisbee the champion. He got a gold cup donated by Mr. Ford.

Bill Finzel's memory is still bright with the tunes old Jep played. And he likes to tell how Jep emerged from little old Paris up there in Mecosta County to bow and scrape in the metropolitan spotlights.

Henry Ford, Thomas A. Edison and Harvey Firestone were on one of their rambling vacations. Up north they heard about Jep and his violin and went to see him.

There was some talk and Mr. Ford—a man who liked to come straight to the point—asked Jep if he would sell his fiddle.

MADE A BARGAIN

"Wouldn't take a cent less than \$75," said Jep. "I'll give you \$150," said Henry.

Pretty soon, after the old man had played for his distinguished guests, and charmed them all, it was a bargain—with Jep thrown into it.

Next time around, Henry gave the old fiddler a car. Jep had no garage and there was an ugly barrier across the space where the barn door opened.

"We'll fix that," said Henry. "Get me some boards, nails, and a hammer."

Pretty soon Ford, Firestone, and Edison had built a ramp. And Jep had a new car and a shelter for it contrived by the most valuable labor in the world.

ECHOED IN FARMYARDS

Old Jep got around quite a bit after that, by rail, by car, often in company with Mr. Ford. He played all over and people loved him and his music.

It ought to be set down, though, that his legal name was Jasper E. Bisbee, but he won't be remembered as such.

He'll be remembered just as Old Jep, whose fiddle didn't sound in the concert halls of the rich and highly placed but echoed through the farmyards and the barns of rural America.