

New England Fiddles

Annotated transcription (annotations by Nicholas Hawes)



New England Fiddles was filmed in 1983 and first released in 1984; it represents a moment in the traditional music of the region. It is based on research by Nicholas Hawes and his personal enthusiasm for the music of the northeastern United States. We couldn't include everyone we wanted; so we tried to film a cross section.

We always regretted not including Simon St. Pierre. He lived too far north for our budget. That year he received a National Heritage Fellowship and came to Washington, DC where Alan Lomax shot videotape of him playing with his friend Joe Pomerleau. I found that footage while working with the Alan Lomax Archives and have included it on this DVD.

Many of the fiddlers played regularly for dances. The community aesthetic found in a distilled form in the virtuosity of the musicians was shared more diffusely with the community of dancers. In 1989 we finished a companion film, **New England Dances**.

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John Bishop
April 2004

Chorus Jig (Traditional)¹

Oh yes, we've got lots of fiddlers in New England, good ones. We've got 'em that plays the French style and from Scotland and Ireland, and of course, Yankees. Course it sounds different from the rest of the country, but that's the way New England fiddles.²

NEW ENGLAND FIDDLES

a film by
John M. Bishop

associate producer
Nicholas Hawes



¹ *Chorus Jig* is a *contradance*, or longways dance, and one of the few old time contras still popular today. Although it has been adapted in many ways to suit suburban modern dancers, it is essentially the same dance done by older, rural dancers later in the film.

This bi-monthly dance in the Town Hall at Northfield, MA was among the most popular in the contra dance revival, and attracted a young, suburban audience from all over western New England.

² This text was spoken by John Bishop's neighbor, Herb Kimball.

Wilfred Guillette³
Derby, Vermont

La Grondeuse (Traditional)⁴
Wilfred Guillette -fiddle

Wilfred Guillette: When I was young, my dad used to play the fiddle you know. And Sundays, he'd generally take it out Sundays, and before dinner he'd take the fiddle and play a few tunes. And he'd put it on the table, and he'd take his paper and start reading, see.

One Sunday he did the same thing again. He played, and he put his fiddle on the table like that you know and I asked him if I could play his fiddle. "Yeah," he said, "Go ahead." And he was reading away and when I played that tune he brings his paper down and look. "Well I guess you're beginning to know how to play fiddle. Well you can play the fiddle any time you want to." Well I tell you I was a happy boy.

I used to play at nights. Every time I had a chance, you know, I'd really play that thing. Like I say, I like to do that at night, by myself, that's when it sounds good to me.

Reel Des Jigeurs (Traditional)⁵
Wilfred Guillette -fiddle

Wilfred Guillette: When I was young, I had, that was before I was married, they used to come and knock on the door, you know, they wanted a fiddler because they was having a party. I'd get up and I'd go, and I'd play five- six o'clock in the morning. I worked on the road, you know, the next day and the boss, when he knew I'd played all night, he was over at the dance too, so he knew, he'd tell me to go in the little barn and take a little nap.



³ Derby lies just across the border from Canada, and Wilfred Guillette plays a distinctly French-Canadian style, typical of rural Quebec's dance music. The rhythm he taps out with his feet is called *jigging* or *clogging* (, *tappement de pieds* in Quebecois); it is used both as an accompaniment and to keep time.

⁴ *La Grondeuse* is the title for a whole family of similar tunes featuring a low part and a high part.

⁵ Wilfred's *Reel des jigeurs* (*Stepdancers' Reel*) is a French-Canadian version of the Scottish reel *Lord MacDonald's*, better known as *Leather Britches* in the southern United States. A large portion of French-Canadian repertoire consists of tunes adapted, like this one, from other traditions.

Harold Luce⁶
Chelsea, Vermont



Soldier's Joy (Traditional)
Harold Luce- fiddle

Harold Luce: When I first started to want to play, my brother had the violin and I wasn't only six years old. And I took a few lessons when I was fourteen. At that time I got so I could play fairly well, so I played with Ed Larkin quite a lot for old contra dances, learned all the old ones I could learn that way. When I was seventeen I took some more lessons. I've been playing for dances ever since.

Pop Goes the Weasel (Traditional)⁷

⁶ Harold Luce is an old-style Yankee fiddler and dance prompter. He plays and calls much in the manner of his mentor Edwin L. Larkin, who dominated the local dance scene for the first half of the 20th century. As a young man, Harold played many dances for Mr. Larkin; today he is carrying on Larkin's tradition as a member of the performance group, The Ed Larkin Dancers.

⁷ Kitchen dances used to be a common part of life in rural New England. With no television and few movie theaters, the local dance was often the only entertainment around. Although most towns offered occasional large public dances, most dancing took place at the kitchen junkets, kitchen rackets, or kitchen tunks.

The kitchen was used because it was generally the largest room in the house. All the furniture would be removed—including the stove in summer—and the fiddler would be placed out of harm's way in a doorway or even the sink. Kitchen dances are no longer a common occurrence in New England—in fact,

Harold Luce- fiddle & calling
Gertrude Larkin Roberts- piano

Harold Luce: You can control the band by waving your hand a little bit if want to go a little slower, a little faster.

Edith Luce: Can you call easier with the music or with...

Harold Luce: I can call easier with myself if I'm going to call, by my own playing.

Gertrude Larkin Roberts: I know that Harold can take the tempo. Because I notice if I get going too fast, he slows down.

Nick Hawes: Is he a hard fiddler to play with?

Gertrude Larkin Roberts: No, he's very good.

Chorus Jig (Traditional)⁸

Harold Luce- fiddle
Gertrude Larkin Roberts- piano
Ray Hull --caller

the last kitchen dance Harold played was the one at which he met his wife Edith, and today they have 19 grandchildren.

When we went to Chelsea to film Harold, we recorded some fiddle tunes and commentary in his living room and on a hillside behind his house. When we packed up to leave, Edith mentioned that they had invited some friends over for a kitchen dance that night, and that we were welcome to stay. Though they hadn't had one in many decades, it had been arranged for our benefit.

⁸ This is a more traditional version of the dance that opened the film. *Chorus Jig* is one of a half dozen traditional contradances, which are as popular today as they were a century ago. Although the form is the same, the performance style applied to these older dances has changed dramatically to meet the needs of modern dancers. The differences between the two *Chorus Jigs* in the film are typical of the changes incorporated into old contras by dancers of the new revival.

At Northfield, there was a greater overall level of activity, more contact between dancers, and a lot of individual variation. In Chelsea, the dance is done as a more relaxing *triple minor* (subsets of three couples instead of subsets of two), there is much less contact between dancers (especially in the *cast off* and *contra corners* moves), and individual variation is not encouraged.

Ron West⁹
Richford, Vermont

Opera Reel (Traditional)

Ron West- fiddle

Ron West: You hear a lot of guys today that that will play and they'll just barely touch the fiddle, you know. Unless it's over a microphone or something you couldn't hear it. That wouldn't go back then. You had to hear the fiddle because that was the lead instrument.

When I was growing up there, most of your fiddlers, they didn't actually know that many tunes. Their repertoire of tunes wasn't that great. Probably 25-30 tunes was just enough to carry them through an evening of dancing.

Waltz of the Leaves (Graham Townsend)

Ron West- fiddle
Dave Carr-- guitar

Ron West: Organizing the Old Time Fiddlers and having these meetings was one of the best things that ever happened to us. And it's a change for the better: you've got more players, you've got better players, and they seem to improve every year. With the contest and things it keeps people practicing all the time. Before that losing interest all the time; I think that's what was happening to fiddling. Old time fiddle playing was simply dying out.

What's nice about the whole thing though is all the people that you are meeting, the friends that you are making. It's just like, you go to these meetings and it's just like a big family reunion.

Uncle Jim (Traditional)

Ron West- fiddle
Dave Carr—guitar



⁹ Ron West's simple, elegant bowing has repeatedly won him top honors at fiddle contests throughout New England. He learned from older relatives and played often at dances in his youth; in the 1980s when this film was made, Ron played mostly at contests and with his son's country-western band. For many fiddlers, the fiddle contest has taken the place of the *kitchen tunk* as the principle performance site. Of course the demands of the contest are very different from the demands of the dance, and this is gradually changing the nature of fiddling in New England.

Exposition Jig¹⁰

Jodi Maranchie—fiddle

Announcer: Open fiddler number six has won the open division for the past two years. This is Jerry Robichaud.

**Jerry Robichaud
Waltham, Massachusetts**



York County Hornpipe (Earl Mitton)¹¹

Jerry Robichaud—fiddle
Bob Robichaud-- guitar

Jodi Maranchie: Jerry Robichaud is my fiddle teacher. We go to all the competitions around this area and Jerry, Jerry is one of the best fiddlers around here. And he has a really great style and that's what we wanted to get from him so we've been going to his house about once a month or so. And he'll tape us a bunch of tunes, and he'll play for us. What he does is give us his style; we're trying to learn his style. We pick it up by listening to what he does. He helps us with our competition tunes. And since we've been taking from him we've been doing a lot better, so he must be doing something right.

Woodchopper's Breakdown (Ned Landry)

Jerry Robichaud- fiddle
Jodie Maranchie- fiddle
Tracy Maranchie- fiddle

¹⁰ This fiddle contest, held each Spring at Spencer, Massachusetts as part of a giant flea market and carnival, attracts many of the excellent fiddlers who tour the major New England contests. Among the younger competitors—most of them girls with some training in violin technique- the Maranchie sisters, Jodi and Tracy, are frequent winners.

¹¹ Both the tune and the fiddler come from New Brunswick, Canada. Jerry Robichaud is a superb fiddler in the modern Maritimes style, a style pioneered by Don Messer. It is characterized by a light tone, precise ornamentation and technique, and fluid bowing. Jerry is a master of this style and has won so many contests that he often chooses not to compete in order to make room for younger fiddlers.

Jerry Robichaud: These kids are already fiddlers. But they are also half and half violinists. The only thing I could teach them was the use of their wrist, how to bow their tunes better. A violinist will use most of his bow for whatever he's playing and if he wants to turn into a fiddler, he's going to have to change his style.

If you use too much bow, you run out of notes. You gotta keep going up and down, you gotta pick up on your way down what you lost on your way up.¹²

Concert Reel (John Durocher)

Jerry Robichaud- fiddle
Joe Robichaud- fiddle
Bob Robichaud- guitar

Joe Robichaud: Nobody can beat this guy here. Nobody can beat him. He's by far the best, that I've ever heard, I'll tell you. I've heard a lot of them, I'm 66 years old, started playing the fiddle at six and nobody gets a tune out of the box like this guy.

The Butcha Dancers Jig (John Durocher)

Jerry Robichaud- fiddle
Bob Robichaud- guitar

Jerry Robichaud: When I first started playing, I asked my mother if I could use her fiddle, I wanted to be a fiddler. And she told me that I was too young, couldn't reach the fingerboard, and I started scratching away, and within a week I could play one tune. I was eight. After that they came very easy, most of the tunes that I wanted to learn I picked them up pretty fast.

This tune that I'm about to play, I learned from a good friend of mine in Canada when I was a kid. He took sick and he had to stay in bed, he couldn't play anymore. So I would go over to his house and he would whistle this tune. It was a little hard to pick up— I finally got it.

Twin Sisters (Traditional)¹³

Jerry Robichaud—fiddle

Growling Old Man (Traditional)¹⁴

Jerry Robichaud—fiddle
Sandra Robichaud- step dancing

¹² Although a violin and a fiddle are identical instruments, a *violinist* and a *fiddler* are opposites. The ways in which each approaches the instrument and the music—especially the ways in which each *learns* the instrument and repertoire—are so radically different that there is little common ground between them.

¹³ Jerry was born an Acadian and a Francophone. Although much of his repertoire is of Irish or Scottish origin, *The Twin Sisters* is very French Canadian in feel. Note the unusual phrase length and the bowed triplet in the second strain. Jerry learned this tune from Oscar Melanson; it is a variant of the *Swallowtail Reel/Pigeon on the Gatepost* family of fiddle tunes from Ireland.

¹⁴ Jerry's daughter Sandra is an award-winning stepdancer. Stepdancing, a forerunner of modern tap-dancing, used to be common to all Northeastern traditional communities: Yankee, Irish, Scottish, Maritimes, and French-Canadian. Today it is largely restricted to competition forms.



Reel des aveugles (Traditional)¹⁵
Ben Guillemette- fiddle

Ben Guillemette: I like the look of a piece of wood, especially before it has any finish at all on it. I was a finish carpenter, then I started working at home and I started doing things at night for people, a little bit better things. And then we got to buy a little bit more machineries and first thing you know got pressed into just doing this.

Ben Guillemette¹⁶
Sanford, Maine

Ben Guillemette: I like to work as I feel, and if I feel like coming over here at night and doing a bit more work, I will. And in the daytime, if I feel like picking up my fiddle, I'll

¹⁵ The casual style of this woman filmed at a Biddeford, Maine senior citizen dance is more typical than Sandra Robichaud's competition form. The dance that concludes this film has a stylish and regionally specific example of casual stepping when William Chaisson steps to the playing of Joe Cormier.

¹⁶ Ben Guillemette is a cabinetmaker. He plays in a number of styles, ranging from traditional French-Canadian music to Swing and Country-Western. Although self-taught, Ben is a remarkable technician and very concerned with bringing out the most beautiful qualities of a violin. This attention to tone and expression has caused Ben to be considered "too violinistic" by some fiddle contest judges (particularly Yankees). However, it should be noted that in this aspect of his playing, Ben is similar to many great Quebecois fiddlers (for example Jean Carigan or Willy Ringuette).

pick it up. It's very relaxing. Just like going and sitting down and having a cup of coffee, or sitting down and chewing the rag with someone else, you know, so instead of doing that you talk to the fiddle and it talks back to you.

The MacDougall's Polka (Traditional)

Ben Guillemette- fiddle

Ben Guillemette: The fiddle is a little scratchy. Now it wasn't, but now it is, see? Now on a no good fiddle, it's always the same tone, you know. There isn't a bad day, it's always a bad day. But on a fine instrument, it's not like that at all; the finer, the more sensitive it is, and the weather changes-- you notice it. But you start playing with it, and the more you play, the better the sound.

Blue Jeans & Gingham (Spade Cooley)

Ben Guillemette- fiddle

Lionel "Toots" Bouthot—piano

Ben Guillemette: Then after awhile we started going down to this old fella, down at the bottom of the hill. He came from Canada, and my grandfather and him were neighbors. At that time, when you were a kid you used to sit there and you could listen, but you couldn't say anything. You know what I mean.

These two guys, they each have a batch of home brew going all the time, see, and they'd play a number, you know, and then they'd tell a story, you know. They were funny as hell-- but they were very clean people, never a word out of the way, see. But I'd go there about every Saturday night, I'd go down there, knock on the door, they'd invite me in and I'd just sit right there. I didn't say a word, just listen, you know. I remember some of the tunes they play. Yeah, I remember that.

Money Musk (Traditional)¹⁷

Ben Guillemette- fiddle

¹⁷ Although *Money Musk* was originally a Scottish strathspey (*Sir Archibald Grant of Monemusk's Reel* composed ca. 1775 by Daniel Dow), it has entered the repertoire of most New England fiddlers, who commonly play it as a reel. Ben said it was traditional for fiddlers to play *Money Musk* to accompany the bride and groom as they left the church after a French-Canadian wedding.



Paddy Cronin¹⁸
Boston, Massachusetts

Paddy Cronin: Boston's a grand place, one of the grandest places under the sun, this place right here. You couldn't beat it.

Filmmaker's Reel (Paddy Cronin)

Paddy Cronin—fiddle

Paddy Cronin: All the old fiddlers in Ireland, you know, used to sit around the fire and play away. It was good music. The folk music of any country is better than what they, the other things, you know. When the music goes modern, it's not so good, you know, takes a lot of the music out of it.

If you don't have a musician for fiddler, forget him; he might as well leave it there, because you just can't do it. He's going to be mechanical, and a mechanic and a musician are different things all together.

Lord Gordon's Reel (Traditional)¹⁹

Paddy Cronin—fiddle
Betsy Gerber—guitar

¹⁸ Paddy Cronin comes from County Kerry in Ireland. He emigrated in 1949 and quickly became an important figure in the Boston area quadrille scene. In Boston at that time, the Irish (like the French and the Scots) held regular public dances. Paddy playing the driving, strongly accented dance music of Kerry, was one of the most popular fiddlers.

¹⁹ The heart of Irish fiddling lies in variation: making each repetition of the melody slightly different. Variation can be melodic, rhythmic, or both. When asked what made a good tune, Paddy responded that it should have plenty of room for variation, and he played this classic four-part Irish reel as an example.



Joe Cormier²⁰
Waltham, Massachusetts

MacDonald's Reel (Traditional)²¹
Joe Cormier-- fiddle

Joe Cormier: I play all the old traditional tunes. Some of them are very old, some have no names. A Cape Breton fiddler plays Scottish music primarily-- there's some Irish tunes mixed in it. A Cape Breton fiddler doesn't play like a Scottish fiddler, Scotland fiddler. No. He's got his own style. How to explain what it is, I don't know. It's just, I guess, a Cape Breton soul. That's the only thing I can see.

²⁰ Although a master of Cape Breton Island's Scottish fiddle style, Joe Cormier is an Acadian and comes from the village of Cheticamp, Nova Scotia. Cheticamp was settled circa 1785 by Acadian refugees who had been deported by the British from Nova Scotia (including what is now New Brunswick) and Prince Edward Island between 1755 and 1763. Early in the next century, Cape Breton was flooded with Scots immigrants, who had themselves been deported by the British from the Western Islands and Highlands of Scotland, who brought their distinctive fiddle repertoire and style. The major feature of Cape Breton style is the plentiful and unusual ornamentation, which each fiddler applies to his performance of a tune.

²¹ This tune, *MacDonald's Reel*, is not related to the more commonly known *Lord MacDonald*, but is a reel version of *The MacDonald's March*. Changing a tune from a march to a reel or jig, or from a strathspey to a reel, is common in the Cape Breton tradition.

Sir William Wallace (J. Scott Skinner)²²

The Highlander's Farewell to Ireland (Traditional)

Old King's Reel (Traditional)

Joe Cormier—fiddle
Edmund Boudreau—guitar
Joe Patinaude-- piano

Joe Cormier: I was the youngest of seven, seven kids, two girls, five boys. My father played the fiddle, also played the accordion. At our house it was kind of a way of life.

Well I came here in 1961. Jerry Robichaud played the French Club then, and of course we used to go there every Saturday night, and I always got up and played fro a square set. Right now they play two quadrilles, every night, and then waltz. The fiddler plays for two quadrilles and for waltzes.²³

Tiny Bubbles (Leon Pober)

Joe Patinaude and the French Club Band

Joe Patinaude: Ok. Right now we'd like to bring out Joe Cormier to do a waltz before the second square set. Joe Cormier.

Hundred Pipers' Waltz (Traditional)

Joe Cormier—fiddle
with the French Club Band

Goldenrod Jig (Wilfred Gillis)

Speed the Plough (Traditional)

Old King's Reel (Traditional)

Joe Cormier—fiddle
William Chaisson—caller
with the French Club Band

Don Messer's Memorial Waltz (John Durocher)

Jerry Robichaud- fiddle
Bobby Robichaud—guitar

²² This is an excerpt from a medley; a number of different tunes played one after the other without stopping. The use of medleys is an important characteristic of Cape Breton fiddling.

²³ The French American Victory Club in Waltham, Massachusetts is the site of the oldest continuous quadrille tradition in New England. Every Saturday night since long before the club was founded, William Chaisson has called a regular dance for the French community. Originally a benefit fund-raiser for needy immigrant families who were ineligible for public assistance, the dance is now an institution in the Boston area.

A quadrille is actually a sequence of short square dances. Mr. Chaisson calls three figures that make up the French Club quadrille, for the film, these dances have been combined. For more information, see **Gerry Robichaud: Maritime Dance Party** (Philo/Fretless/Alcazar FR201) with notes by Tony Parkes.

Joe Cormier: My father played the fiddle. At our house it was kind of a way of life.

Wilfred Guillette: Well I know when I'm blue or something, I'll take up my fiddle and forget about it.

Ron West: And it's a change for the better, you've got more players, you've got better players, and they seem to improve every year.

Ben Guillemette: It's very relaxing. Just like going and sitting down and chewing the rag with someone else. So instead of doing that, well you talk to the fiddle and it talks back to you.

Paddy Cronin: Nothing would make me give up the fiddle. I'll be playing it till I die. I never made a penny on it, but I put it on the dinning room table and every time I go by it, I play a tune on it.