

NORVA News

Special Galax Edition

A supplement to the September 2018 newsletter

Foot-stomping music and Airstream fellowship make for a great rally in Galax

Story and photos by Patsy Nagel

The Rally

W.B.C.C.I.'s Region 3 sponsored the 18th Galax Old Time Fiddlers' Rally, held Aug. 5 to 11, 2018, in and around the Cool Breeze Campground in this southwestern Virginia town. The Rally Directors from Region 3 were Julian and Lynne Clements who live in Cornelia, Ga. Junior and Betty Patton, members of Virginia Airstream Club #109, served as hosts. The Pattons, who live in Galax, organized and conducted this annual rally for many years prior to Region 3 taking on the responsibility.

Thirty-nine Airstream rigs participated in this year's rally. There were three couples from NORVA: the Nagels, the Wests, and the Worralls.

Special highlights again this year were concerts presented at the campground by friends of Robert Sells (the campground owner) and friends of the Pattons. On Sunday, our first concert included a group of Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) students and the "Loose Strings Band." The JAM Program has been ongoing for nearly two decades. Realizing the need to preserve a vital aspect of mountain culture as well as the need for positive activities for underserved youth, Helen White, then a elementary

Editor's note:

Last month, NORVA's Patsy Nagel and husband, Gerry, were first-time participants in Region 3's Galax Rally, which was timed to coincide with the 83rd Annual Old Time Fiddlers' Convention. The couple joined W.B.C.C.I. last year. This "Special Galax Edition" of NORVA News is devoted to Patsy's article about her experiences in Galax.

The Airstreamers pose at Hillsville Courthouse with cast members of "Thunder in the Hills."



school guidance counselor, founded the first JAM program in Alleghany County, N.C., in 2000, with help from other local musicians and educators. Interest in the program spread rapidly with assistance from the National Endowment for the Arts, North Carolina State Arts Council, Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, and “The Crooked Road – Virginia’s Heritage Music Trail.”

Monday’s rally activities included a get-acquainted watermelon feast at Cumberland Knob Park on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Betty Patton spoke about local history and the impact the Parkway had on the area at the time it was built in the 1930s. She also provided us with some background information about the Galax Old Fiddlers’ Convention. The mountain weather was not very cooperative that day. Before the watermelons could be cut, a storm rolled in and the group adjourned to the campground recreation room, so as to not drown us or the watermelons.

Later Monday afternoon, Carson Peters and Iron Mountain entertained us with a concert at the Galax Rex Theater. Carson is a 14-year-old music prodigy who began playing the fiddle at age 3.

The next morning, there was a Ladies Breakfast Tea at the country home of a friend of Betty Patton. A delightful array of food was spread out in a large room the hostess had built for “any group to use.” That afternoon, everyone drove to the Blue Ridge Music Cen-



Rally Co-host Betty Patton, a Galax resident, provided the group with background information about the town, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Old Fiddlers’ Convention.



Above: 14-year-old music prodigy Carson Peters (l.) performs with banjo player Tyler Comeau.

Right: In the shop where he makes highly-prized acoustic guitars, Wayne Henderson (l.) chats with NORVA’s Gerry Nagel.



ter where Rally Director Clements conducted an Opening Ceremony. At Milepost 213 on the Blue Ridge Parkway, the Center is home to an award-winning, interactive exhibition honoring the musical history of the Blue Ridge Mountains. There we were then treated to a performance by Wayne Henderson, Herb Key and Helen White, all well-known area musicians.

On Wednesday, we traveled 12 miles to Hillsville Courthouse, the scene of what became known as the “Allen Tragedy,” an event which happened on March 14, 1912. The short story is that members of the “Allen Clan” and local lawmen engaged in an epic gunfight that made national headlines and shook the community like an earthquake. In barely a minute, a judge, prosecutor, sheriff, juror, and witness were killed or mortally wounded. “Thunder in the Hills,” is a play about this tragedy written by Carroll County playwright Frank Levering. It features an all-local cast and has enjoyed many sold out performances. After we took our seats in the courtroom where

the actual events occurred, four of the costumed cast members spoke about their characters. Mr. Levering told us about the research he had done to write the play. Most of the descendants he interviewed did not know much about what happened back then, he said, because “it was not talked about.”

Afterwards, we enjoyed lunch at the historic Hale-Wilkinson-Carter Home next door. We took some time to explore this restoration-in-process mansion, built in 1845. Later, back at the campground, we listened to music by Presley Barker, a 14-year-old guitar prodigy. Barker performed to a “standing room only” crowd in the recreation room because more rain drove the performance indoors.



Thursday, we traveled 27 miles to a town named Mouth of Wilson, Va. There, we visited Wayne Henderson’s guitar shop. Wayne, who had entertained us on Tuesday, is a world-renown “luthier” (a fancy name for a maker of stringed instruments) with a waiting list a mile long to purchase one of his guitars. The group toured Wayne’s shop. He spoke about things he has learned in the creation process over time, and graciously answered questions. Interestingly, his daughter, Jane, is following in his footsteps and has her own shop in Asheville, N.C. Wayne’s colleague, Herb Key, was also present and he and Wayne entertained us by playing a couple of tunes. Afterwards, back at the campground, we had more musical entertainment, this time from a group that

included banjo player Stevie Barr, one of Betty Patton’s former students. Friday morning presented an opportunity for golf or a Galax Walking Tour. I took the walking tour, which stopped at Barr’s Fiddle Shop. The barbershop next door, which is now part of Barr’s, was where the southern Appalachian musical group named “The Hillbillies” formed and now this section is part museum, part fiddle shop. On Friday evening we had dinner at Crossroads Convention Center, catered by another of Betty’s former students. It was the last scheduled event for the Galax Rally and Julian Clements ceremoniously declared the rally over.

Thus far, I have reported on the Airstream-unique activities during our week-long Galax experience, but I have not accounted for our nightly participation in the town’s

Above left: Carson Peters and “Iron Mountain” play at the Rex Theater.
Above right: (l. to r.) Presley Barker, Marsha Harris & Wayne Henderson practicing for a performance.
Below: Region 3’s Lynn Clements

principal summer attraction—The Old Fiddlers’ Convention. It was this big event, going on all around us, that made the Galax Rally double the fun!

The Old Fiddlers’ Convention

Sponsored by Moose Lodge #733, the Old Fiddler’s Convention began in 1935 and has grown over the years to include six days of competition. Its venue for the large gathering is Felts Park in Galax.

Its attendees aren’t just from the local area; they come from all over the world. Most who come are not there to play music; they are there to





Clockwise from the top:

--A bird's eye view of the stage and the parking/camping area beyond. The Old Fiddlers' Convention is held at Felts Park in Galax. The Airstreamers camped at a nearby campground in town.

--Fiddler Eddie Bond jammed nightly at this old "Farm Truck."

--Jamming Wednesday night on the tailgate of the "Farm Truck."

listen and renew old acquaintances. However, a few hundred do show up with their instruments to "jam" and compete for cash prizes. The instruments vary from mouth harps, carried in pockets, to bull (bass) fiddles strapped to the roofs of cars and trucks.

The highly anticipated Youth Competition was added in 2000 and it was amazing to watch these young

people demonstrate their skills Monday night. Old Time Fiddle, Dobro, and Mandolin performances kicked off the adult competition on Tuesday evening.

Unique at the convention are the gatherings in the camping/parking area where the musicians rehearse and get in tune. Often dancers and players try out their abilities in the parking lot because they would not

dare go on stage. Some listeners and onlookers follow these bands around and lose contact with what's happening on the Convention stage. I became one of those people on Wednesday night. I had heard about this and began walking around the camp area to check things out. I discovered a jam session that, when I arrived, had four fiddles, a bass, mandolin, banjo and guitar. The

sound was riveting, its high energy drew me in; I simply could not leave. Before the evening was over, different musicians would come and go with six or seven fiddle players jamming with the group at the same time. And then there were the Dancers. They moved around the grounds with their portable dance boards to visit good jams. On display were flatfoot, clog, and buck Dancers, some having taps on their shoes. I became acquainted with these Dancers and they became my information network. From a Dancer I learned that this jam music was called, "Old-Time," and "you can dance to it." Earlier in week I would have told you I was a Bluegrass fan, and I still am, but "Old-Time" has really won me over after hearing it. What's the difference between Old-Time and Bluegrass? I learned that Old-Time music is mainly upbeat instrumental dance music, while Bluegrass is more a vocal style, where the instruments freely improvise. In Old-Time, the fiddle is boss. In Bluegrass, most often the singers take the lead. Also from the Dancers, I learned that the fiddle player, who seemed to be orchestrating this jam, was Eddie Bond, and they considered him the best. A Google search revealed that he has just received a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship and is well-known for teaching, assisting, and encouraging the next generation of fiddlers.

This jam session was conducted from an old farm-use pickup truck that had an awning set up to spread outward from the open tailgate. The Dancers told me the "Farm Truck" belongs to a couple of the people in the band, and they had to jump start it to get it to Felts Park. The band uses it to anchor their jam and practice area.

From this point on I pretty much abandoned the stage competition and, Thursday evening, I was back at the Farm Truck. I was amazed



Top and right: Old and young play together at the 83rd Annual Old Fiddlers' Convention.

Below: The "Large Awning" jam session attracts many listeners.



at the number of musicians that would come and go to this jam. As I started to recognize faces and did a little research, I learned I was in shoulder-tapping distance of the *Who's Who* of "Old-Time" music. Even the guy who placed first in the Bluegrass Fiddle competition showed up to jam. I don't know the etiquette for jam spectators, so I just tried to stay out of the way. Nobody ran me off. I was able to identify Mattias Thedens of Oslo, Norway, who placed second in "Old Time" Fiddle; and Jake Krack of Marlinton, W.Va., who has placed first in "Old Time" Fiddle numerous times in the past, but placed fourth this year.

On Friday evening I managed to watch some of the "Old-Time" band competition on the stage, but most of my time was spent following the jam sessions in the camp lot. I learned from one of my Dance contacts that a real good jam was going on "down the way." The Farm Truck jam seemed to be breaking up, so I headed "down the way." This jam was under a large awning with the Dancers and their boards at one end. Sometime later, I looked back at the musicians and Eddie Bond had joined them. I stayed there until the rain came in, when I realized it was late and that my husband, Gerry, had long ago gone back to the truck.

Gerry and I went back to the Fiddler's Convention late Saturday afternoon. No one was at the Farm Truck yet, so I made my way around the camp area to several other jams. It was common to see young people and older people jamming together. It was obvious the music and the talent are being passed on. And I did not see anybody absorbed in a cell phone. Back at the large awning jam, the Dancers were really having a good time and, from one of them, I learned that Eddie Bond's band, the "Music

Hollow Strings Band" was to meet for practice at the Farm Truck at 8 p.m. That information was correct. Bond's band practiced there for the second night of Old-Time and Bluegrass band competition. We stayed through the performances and the announcement of winners.



Photos below:

Renowned fiddler Eddie Bond at the "Farm Truck" jam.

Some members of the "Music Hollow Strings Band.." Left to right, Dennis Hall, Eddie Bond, Bonnie Bond & Caroline Noel Beverly.

We were thrilled to learn that the "Music Hollow String Band" placed first in the "Old Time" Band category.

It was after one o'clock in the morning on Sunday before we arrived back at the campground. At this point Gerry said to me "You are a groupie." I replied with one word: "Yep."

I'm already making plans for next year.

Editor's postscript:

Patsy and Gerry Nagel live in historic Occoquan, Va. They have a 2017, 25-foot, International Serenity trailer. Upon joining NORVA, they immediately and energetically embraced the spirit of W.B.C.C.I. and were eager to become involved in Club leadership. Elections were held in August and, beginning in October 2018, Patsy will be NORVA's Secretary and Gerry will be the Club's 2nd Vice President.