

# Fiddling in Kitley Township

by Elaine Keillor

Kitley Township is located at the northern end of Leeds County in Southeastern Ontario and is part of the corridor known as the Ottawa Valley. The original route of the Rideau Canal ran through this township, but its first settlers arrived in 1795 and by 1798, 38 persons were listed as being granted lots in the township. They were United Empire Loyalists who were anxious to get free land in Upper Canada. Although there were pioneers from Ireland or of Irish descent prior to 1830, it was the potato famines in Ireland in the early 1840s that caused an exodus to Upper Canada. Almost a thousand of the recent arrivals in Kitley as reported in the 1851 census of 3,525 inhabitants were from Ireland. Thus the strong Irish character of Kitley was established at this time and remains evident to this day in the fiddle music to be heard in the township.

Not only is this township noted for its fiddle music which formed the backbone of entertainment in the region from the early pioneer days to the present, but Toledo was renowned for its bands under the direction of Cyrus Albert Wood Sr. and his son, C. A. (Bert) from 1866 until 1942. In the mid-nineteenth century singing schools formed the foundation of the music for the churches and the area has produced professional pianists/organists as well as fiddlers. However, it is the music of some of the latter with which this article is concerned.

As in other Irish communities in the Ottawa Valley the tunes used by the fiddlers were from the traditional Irish repertoire, with some coming from the Scotch tradition and from travelling minstrel shows. Fiddlers who could read musical notation would draw from collections such as *Cole's 1000 Fiddle Tunes* and *O'Neill's Music of Ireland*. For dances held during the first half of the 20th century fiddlers in Kitley were expected to know tunes for square dances, the two-step, waltz and fox trot. One of the distinct characteristics of dance tunes in Kitley is the frequent use of notes played outside of first position, even to begin the piece. Examples 1, 2 and 3 were tunes used for square dances that have this characteristic among several others.

Example 1:



Example 2:



Example 3:



Example 4: *Blackberry Blossom* by Alfred Leacock



As might be expected in a district heavily influenced by Irish tradition, each note is bowed separately, with only a rare occurrence of slurring. Although there was no use of scordatura in this area to facilitate double stopping, some double stopping was done, particularly before amplification was used. According to Elgin Lockwood, a fiddler well-known throughout Kitley and beyond, and active from the late 1920s until the late 1960s, one fiddler using double stops could make more sound than three fiddlers playing a tune monophonically. Recently Lockwood played for me some tunes composed by fiddlers in Kitley during the earlier part of this century and his performance of these

incorporated some double stops.

*Blackberry Blossom*, a breakdown, and *Midnite Gallop*, a square dance jig, were created by Alfred Leacock, a fiddler from Jasper who did not read musical notation.

Another creative fiddler has been Wilbert Burns from Frankville, who has created several tunes. Thus, the fiddlers of Kitley Township have not only kept the fiddling tradition of the Ottawa Valley alive and distinctive, but have made their own unique contributions, largely in the Irish style.

**Example 5:** *Midnite Gallop* by Alfred Leacock

