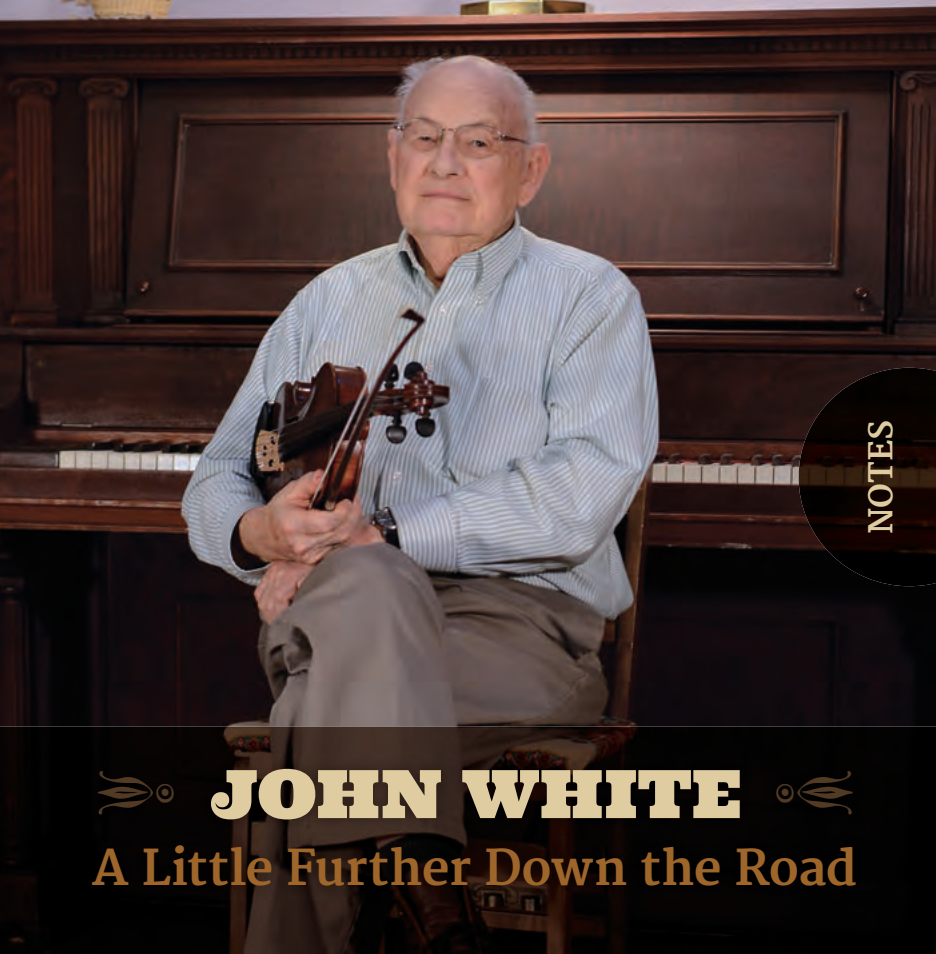




NOTES

❧ **JOHN WHITE** ❧

A Little Further Down the Road

Sometime between 1936 and 1951, John Thurman White learned to play the fiddle. He doesn't remember it; as far as he's concerned, there was never a time before fiddling.

A handful of John's first tunes came from his grandfather, Thurman Fields, but after determining John's *Arkansas Traveler* was just too good, his grandfather refused to give John any more lessons. So, unlike most fiddlers of his generation, John learned the majority of his earliest tunes from a woman: his mother, Lucille (Fields) White. John's grandfather had also refused to give Lucille fiddle lessons; he didn't believe

a woman should play the fiddle (though banjo was okay). Lucille wasn't easily discouraged. She'd snuck off to learn from an uncle, Wally Hulet, a bachelor, hermit, and a bit of an animal whisperer, who lived so primitively they said he drank the water "pollywogs and all." Lucille also played five-string banjo, piano, and guitar; she and her husband, Von, also a fiddler, were farming near Ethel, Missouri when John was born in 1936. The family lived in Ethel, Marceline, and Clarence as John went through his school days. At Clarence High School, John learned to read music (and play trumpet). Serendipitously, his band director's father was one E. F. Adam of St. Louis, who had written a book of fiddle tunes, *Old-Time Fiddlers' Favorite Barn Dance Tunes* (1928). John acquired a copy and had his first realization that fiddle music could



be written down, and read. The book became a favorite source for new tunes, and paved the way for John to use written sources for many more tunes, all of which he edits to suit his own ears.

When John joined up in 1959, the Army quickly identified him as an expert rifleman—like a lot of farm kids, he'd grown up shooting and had plenty of practice—but also as a quick learner. The Army sent him to school, where he was so successful that he wound up editing technical manuals for then-cutting-edge technology in radar and surface-to-air missile technology. John soaked up the knowledge and still maintains a strong interest in science, especially physics. That curiosity and willingness to try something new is exactly the way John approaches music, even now; for instance, he recently played a dance with guitarrón backup.

Opposite: Lucille White holding a very young John

Right: John's parents, Von and Lucille White

John says he didn't really learn to fiddle dances until the Lily Dale dances. Lily Dale was a one-room schoolhouse near Clarence, MO, closed as a school by 1953. When community dances started there in 1960, John naturally wound up behind a fiddle; he'd graduated from high school at Clarence a few years earlier, and was part of the community even though he was, by then, living at the University of Missouri as a first-year student.





John says the dancing was fast and furious, with lots of “whoopin’ and hol-lerin’,” and charged him up like nothing else. The dancers didn’t care if the tunes were fancy—they wanted a good steady beat, and they wanted to dance all night, which meant a fiddler had to have endurance above all else. John says it was those dancers who really made a fiddler out of him. He learned to keep his movements small and his

John’s well-loved original copy of the E. F. Adam fiddle tune book. The edges are tattered and the binding completely missing—luckily John has another copy of a more recent vintage.

focus on steaming ahead, regardless of what havoc broke loose on the floor or in the band.

Though John moved to Columbia, in central Missouri, in the 1960s, he never left his North Missouri sound behind. Contact with “horney-pipe” fiddlers brought John classics like *Flow-ers of Edinburgh*, *Rickett’s Hornpipe*, and the *Canary Waltz*, and they were absorbed into his repertoire without a hitch. When he went home, his mother backed him up on a little keyboard set to “organ” at her kitchen table, and she would scold him for playing “too note-y,” as he dressed up his tunes with the melodically complex touches he’d heard in Boone and the surrounding counties.

John claims to be a dance fiddler first and foremost, and it is true that he is nowhere as at home as playing for a crowd of dancers—and the more raucous, the better. But it would be an understatement to consider him “just” a square dance fiddler, as his tunes include a surprising variety: everything from pop radio, to New England-style contra tunes, to Grand Old Opry favorites from the 1940s, to the hits of the gay '90s are run through John's filter and turned into something that works with his style and preferences. The process seems to be a bit like whittling: he'll say he just learns the notes, then keeps taking them out till it feels like a good tune.

John has informally taught fiddle to young people for decades; he's also been a master at Bethel Youth Fiddle Camp for many years, sending many young fiddlers off with a solid core of Missouri tunes to build on.

John, on- and off-duty, in El Paso, TX while serving in the Army, 1959 & 1962.





John's granddaughter Adlie shows John a new bowing technique (2011).

In the early 2000s, John and his wife, Betty, began hosting a community dance themselves, in their small central Missouri town of Hallsville. The band is open, calling is open, and a jam and potluck precede every dance. In the more than 15 years since, a dedicated community has grown around the dance. A few have learned to call dances—a necessity when calling is in

the set. More than one young person has gone from beginner fiddler to a solid dance fiddler, and a few have gone on to college music programs or even professional music careers, spurred in part by the fun they've had at Hallsville. Perhaps most impressively, a community of dancers has also grown, many of them young people who've danced through high school or college—some now even come back with families of their own. None of this would have been possible without John White's love of nurturing learners, and his laid-back, accepting nature that's happy to see anybody dancing or playing music.

Credits John White, fiddle; Amber Gaddy, banjo, accordion, and piano; David Cavins, guitars

Booklet text and tune notes written by Amber Gaddy. David Cavins recorded the audio and did the graphics work on this project.

© 2017 Missouri Valley Music

511 South Pleasant St., Canton, SD 57013 • missourivalleymusic@sio.midco.net

☞◉ The Tunes ◉☞

1. Yellow Cat

John learned this tune from *The Fiddle Book*, by Marion Thede. He says you can hear the old cat yowling in the high part.

2. Bill Cheatum

A traditional tune widely played in many regions. John's version started life in what is affectionately called "The Book" by Missouri fiddlers, *The Missouri Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory*, a labor of love and transcription by tune collector and musician R. P. Christeson, originally published in 1973. The version in the book was transcribed from Floyd Smith in 1952.

3. Oak Ridge Stomp

A lively hoedown from Nile Wilson, a fiddler from Bucklin, Missouri, about 10 miles down the road from Marceline. Can also be found in *The Complete Fiddle Tunes I Either Did or Did Not Learn at the Tractor Tavern*, by Gene Silberberg of Seattle, WA.

4. Crying Waltz

John doesn't remember learning this waltz, but believes he heard it at the annual Fiddler's Convention at Harrison, AR. It was also played by Pete McMahan, though he played it in A.

5. South

South is a 1924 foxtrot, now considered necessary for dances in northeast Missouri, where it's a popular two-step. John isn't sure where he learned this one, but suspects it came to him from the annual Fiddle Camp at Bethel, MO. *South* was first recorded in 1928 by Bennie Moten's Kansas City Orchestra, and remained popular through the late '40s. Moten, the African-American band leader and pianist who co-wrote the tune, was also a Missourian, which could explain some of its popularity in Missouri—but it's also a great dance tune!



Jordan Wax and John White jamming. Jordan, a native Columbian, learned fiddle and picked up many of John's tunes.

6. Black Sally Goodin

John says when he first heard this tune, he thought it was someone trying to play *Sally Goodin* who did not know how. This tune is also available in *The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory*, credited to Bill Katon, an African-American fiddler from mid-Missouri. Bill was well known as a radio fiddler on WOS out of Jefferson City, though his listening public likely did not know he was black.

7. Billy in the Lowground

Another widely played hoedown, John's unique version came from his grandfather Thurman Fields. John says he was quite young when he learned it, and

did not get the melody quite like his grandpa played it, but that it is a good example of his bowing style, which John still uses for square dance tunes.

8. Limpin' Sal

John learned this tune from the *Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory*, where it's credited to Bill Driver. Bill was another African-American fiddler from central Missouri, of considerable note and in great demand as a dance fiddler. John's bowing style slots into this tune perfectly.

9. Atkins Polka #1

One of two Atkins polkas John learned from *The Don Messer Anthology of Favorite Fiddle Tunes*. John says this is a very fun polka to play, but that he has taken some liberties with the tune. Polkas are popular at Hallsville, where the "12-step polka," likely originally a varsovienne, is danced regularly.

10. Liberty

A classic of the Missouri square dance repertoire, *Liberty* is a must-have for any up-and-coming fiddler. John doesn't remember learning this tune, but says he started playing it for dancers at a young age.

11. Double Shuffle

This one came from the E. F. Adam book, *Old Time Fiddler's Favorite Barn Dance Tunes*, later republished by Mel Bay. John says this one is an exercise in shuffle bowing.

12. Over the Waves

"Sobre Las Olas" was the original Spanish-language title of *Over The Waves*, a waltz written by Juventino Rosas in



1888. It's become a chestnut in fiddle repertoires of all sorts and remains a very popular waltz at dances today. John learned this from his mother, Lucille White, early in his fiddle playing days.

13. Aunt Mary's Hornpipe

Learned from the *Old Time Fiddler's Repertory*, from a transcription from the playing of Vee Latty of Fulton, MO. This tune is played by other mid-Missouri fiddlers as well, but John's unique bowing makes the high part a bit magical.

14. Maggie

Maggie started life as a sentimental poem, *When You and I Were Young, Maggie*, written by a Hamilton, Ontario schoolteacher about 1864. A few years later, the poem was set to music by an American, and it became an enduring minstrel show and sheet music hit. John learned *Maggie* by hearing many people play and sing it—now, perhaps we'd say his version was "crowd-sourced."

John played the opening party for the Macon Allis-Chalmers dealership in the mid-70s. 400 people came to the square dance (that's 50 squares!).



*John's grandparents, Minnie and
Thurman Fields*

15. Wagner

This is the first tune John learned from the E. F. Adam book; it helped that he could remember his grandfather Fields playing it!

16. Atkins Polka #5

The second of John's two Atkins Polkas from the Don Messer book. The Atkins Polkas are sometimes played by Missouri Valley fiddlers as well.

17. Marmaduke's Hornpipe

John learned this tune in mid-Missouri from the playing of left-handed fiddler Jake Hockemeyer. It was one of Jake's favorite contest tunes. Some folks call this the national anthem of Missouri fiddling, and it's played lots of different ways all over the state. It was named for John Sappington Marmaduke, a Confederate general from Little Dixie who, despite a lackluster military performance, was elected governor after the war.

18. Tunes From Home

From the *Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory*. This is one of two schottisches regularly played at the Hallsville dances, the other being *Hi-Lo*, sometimes called *Southern Schottische*.

19. Lauterbach Waltz

Lauterbach was published in 1870 as sheet music, though it may have been traditional prior to that. *Lauterbach* is another Missouri standard, perhaps due to the

influence of Missouri's many German immigrants, or perhaps because of the popular 1930 record by the Kessinger Brothers. Or perhaps just because it's a catchy tune, the refrain of which most people will recognize—something about a dog? John learned his A part from his mother, and the B part by note at a later date.

20. Durang's Hornpipe

John doesn't remember learning this tune, but it's another very popular Missouri tune. He says his version might not be correct, because it's been adapted for square dance use.

21. John Ryan's Polka

John Ryan's is a well known Irish traditional polka that John learned from *The Fiddler's Fake Book*. It's easy to play and lively—popular with the dancers!

John, student Clayton Beall and Mike Hartgrove in 2005. Mike learned from John as a kid and grew up to be a pro bluegrass fiddler, performing with everyone from George Jones to The Bluegrass Cardinals. Mike's also a founding member of IIIrd Tyme Out.

22. Ole Opry Reel

John doesn't remember learning this tune, and isn't quite sure what it's good for, even if it is fun to play. He says, "Maybe it's got a little culture about it?"

23. Rock All the Babies To Sleep

This waltz started life as a song, complete with yodeled high part, popularized by Jimmie Rodgers' recording in 1932. John doesn't remember learning it, but thinks it could have come from Compton Ridge, a Branson, MO area fiddler's convention.

24. Goodbye Miss Liza Jane

John says this is one of his most recent tunes: he learned it from the internet. He likes to play it as a square dance tune.





John has mentored many young fiddlers over the years. At left, he poses with Gregory, Ethan and Sophia Schindler. Above, John (third from right), with the other masters and campers at the annual Bethel Youth Fiddle Camp.