

Thursday, September 25, 1980

(F1D)

Teacher plays fiddle with old-time band

By JIM WINDELL

Gene Menton well remembers the nights in northern Minnesota.

When chores were finished, the family gathered around the living room to play and sing music. Grandfather played the fiddle and everyone else sang. Not Tin Pan Alley, but the songs were classic American hybrid music nonetheless.

Menton, a Southfield resident, and chairman of the Detroit Country Day Middle School Science Department, has long since left the Minnesota Iron Range and farm country. But he remembers those long-ago nights.

It was this fondness for early American music that led to the formation of the Ruff Waters String Band. Menton plays a fiddle in that band.

THE RUFF WATERS String Band was created three years ago to satisfy a craving many people have for authentic early American music. Menton, in a recent interview, acknowledged a growing interest in what he refers to as old-time folk music.

"It took me about six months when I first came to Michigan several years ago to find a folklore society. There are now five such organizations in Michigan and our chapter (the Paint Creek Folklore Society in Rochester) has swelled to about a hundred members," he said.

"I don't know if the growing interest is a fad or if more people are going back to their roots. Maybe it's something people used to hear and they miss it," Menton said.

"A lot of people, like myself, remember grandparents playing the music and it takes them back to happier days and a simpler time," he said.

The music studied by the folklore societies and the music played by the 10-member Ruff Waters String Band is a re-creation of folk tunes played in Michigan 120-150 years ago. "The music is made up of Irish jigs, reels and

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— Early music lover Gene Menton

horn pipes (a type of syncopated music). There is a strong French-Canadian influence and the actual songs we play came, for the most part, from Ireland and England," Menton said.

Principal lead instrument is a hammered dulcimer, a trapezoidal-shaped wire-stringed instrument, used by the lumberjacks in Michigan and throughout the Midwest. Dulcimers, Menton said, were used instead of pianos that were cumbersome items when moving from logging camp to logging camp.

"People came to New England from Europe and then followed the logging industry westward taking the music with them," Menton said. "The music of the Ruff Waters String Band is more often French-Canadian with some Southern Appalachian tunes thrown in."

Ruff Waters String Band got together out of the membership of the Paint Creek Folklore Society two years ago when there was a need for a dance band for old dances. "Our beginnings were really simple," Menton said. "We just wanted to play for ourselves and help spread the old-time dance music."

A band was first needed to accompany the Detroit Country Dancers led by Bert Schwartz of Birmingham. However, the band now finds itself in constant demand, playing most weekends at folk festivals, street fairs and old-time dances.

Like Menton, all other members of the band have regular jobs. But with increased demands for original American music, the members have had to re-examine priorities. Menton, in past

summers, rode the Kansas countryside as a cowboy herding cattle on a large ranch. His boots were stored in the closet this year, spending more time as fiddler.

Menton's great-grandfather emigrated from Germany in the mid-19th century during the Civil War. After that, he moved to Minnesota to take part in the burgeoning logging industry. By 1900, logging camps were closing down and the family turned to farming.

"When I was in college at UCLA," Menton said, "my grandparents and their relatives were dying and I began to miss the music. I met an old man in Berkeley, Calif., at a fiddling festival who was from my old neighborhood and he taught me to play some of the old tunes."

At the Paint Creek Folklore Society, he discovered other early music enthusiasts. The need to perpetuate that music led to Glen and Judi Morningstar suggesting the creation of a band.

The band plays during the fall and winter every third Saturday night at St. Timothy's Church at Puritan and Archdale in Detroit.



Gene Menton, science teacher at Detroit Country Day School, is a fiddler with the Ruff Waters String Band. (Photo by Jim Wendell)

Entertainers star at Art-in-the-Park

The performing arts will be much in evidence amid the 125 artists' displays of varied media at Art-in-the-Park on Saturday and Sunday in downtown Birmingham's Shain Park.

Entertainment will be staged in the center of the park, kicking off at noon Saturday with the Mime Ensemble.

Based at Oakland University's Barn Theatre, the Mime Ensemble will be appearing at Art-in-the-Park for the sixth consecutive year.

Birmingham's own Straw Hat Band will take the spotlight at 2 p.m. Saturday to instigate some toe-tapping among fairgoers. The 15-member

group plays old and new favorites and is open to requests from the audience.

The Michigan 5-Cent Refund, a duo composed of Joe Vermillion and Jan Boonstra, plays guitar, banjo and mandolin. The twosome will perform folk selections and English ballads, beginning at 4 p.m. Saturday.

AT 6 P.M. SATURDAY, Sue Stoltz will entertain on guitar and banjo with vocal accompaniment.

All performers at Art-in-the-Park are donating their time to benefit Common Ground, a youth and family crisis center in Birmingham.

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