



10-15-1985

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### Recommended Citation

Flowers, Lois (1985) "Fiddling Around," *Westview*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol5/iss1/10>

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# FIDDLING AROUND

By Lois Flowers



Music of many sorts appeals to residents of Western Oklahoma, but the music that really tugs at the heartstrings of the people of this area is the good "old string music" brought by our forefathers across the prairies. We call it many things — blue grass, folk, country, western, homespun.

One of the masters of old-time country music is Joe Flowers of Sweetwater. He can charm the birds from the trees with his violin, and he is equally adept with the guitar. In fact, he never saw a stronged instrument he couldn't play.

Actually, he wasn't born with a fiddle in his hand; but by the time he was four, he was playing tunes on the harmonica and mandolin. Now at age seventy, he knows a thousand tunes by heart plus the hymns he leads at church services.

One of ten children, he never had a chance to take music lessons, but his parents taught him what they could about chords and such. He was also permitted to visit other musicians in the community and learn what he could. His only formal training was the occasional singing school where he was taught to read shaped notes.

Joe played for dances around the country and presented programs on the local radio stations. After he married, he quit the dances. He said that he would rather play for fun and work for a living. Besides, he thought his children deserved a father who was at home.

He dairied, farmed, and held down a steady job. For twenty years, he farmed a half section and drove twenty-eight miles to Cheyenne where he worked for the Roger Mills County ASCS. Of course, I was his willing — though rather inept — plowboy at home. However, many nights he plowed until midnight doing jobs that I couldn't.

But Joe never dropped the music. He might play only a couple of tunes after supper, but still he practiced. Usually, there was a musical or program on Friday nights.

When the immigrants came to America, each brought his own music. By the time the pioneers crossed the plains, that music was a happy blend of Irish lilts, Scottish laments, sailor hornpipes, German polkas, English ballads, and good old American tunes. Music was the golden thread that made the fabric of everyday, hard living endurable. If disaster struck, they made music to forget their troubles. If God smiled on them, they used music for thanksgiving. Songfests, musicals, and dance drew the community together.

The pioneers pictured the events of their lives in song. They told of the big events and the little ones. The farmer and his boll weevil ranked right along with the sinking of the Titanic.

Joe Flowers knows most of the songs. His music spans the history of the country and is a panorama. He knows "Yankee Doodle" from the Revolution, "Battle of New Orleans" from the War of 1812, "Dixie" from the Civil War. He knows girls from songs by the dozens — Sue, Sal, Dinah, Clementine, Fraulein, and Margie. He's acquainted with scores of Indians — Red Wing, Kaliga, Snow Deer, Arawana. He knows the hoedowns from "Wagner" to "Devil's Dream," "Eighth of January" to "Cotton-Eyed Joe." Schottishes, waltzes, one steps, two steps, polkas, and spirituals are up his alley.

Joe has made thirty-six one-hour tapes of himself singing while playing the violin and two guitars; he labeled them "the All-Joe Band." A professor in  
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California heard him play and made tapes to put in the Folk Music Department of his college. Tapes of him and his band were sent to the Smithsonian Institute on request. On a visit to Hollywood, he played in a talent show and was offered a job on the spot, but Western Oklahoma was home.

For eight years, he has played with a group of retired people who entertain all over the country. They go regularly to four rest homes and occasionally to two more. Recently

they also played at a SWODA meeting in Hobart and at Cars Unlimited in Elk City.

If you knock on Joe's door, he's likely to greet you with a fiddle in his hand. He plays through his little black book of tunes once each week. Besides, his six fiddles need a regular workout. His prized possession at present is a five-string violin that Santa brought him.

Joe Flowers' music has been a pleasure to him and brought joy and inspiration to thousands. ❧

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from the extended period of inactivity and unemployment in legitimate theater.

Mignon helped make "Who Cares" notable by offering a dramatic presentation, a sort of female version of Harpo Marx, who was the non-speaking, harp-playing Marx Brother. As the season progressed, she also played the leading lady in a sketch called "Action." Her other dramatic roles included parts in "Daughter" and "A Big Surprise."

Mignon Laird took work when and where she could find it. She was a member of Shubert's cast of "Artists and Models," which made tours to Toronto, Chicago, and San Francisco. She signed a special contract with Florenz Ziegfeld and made another short run to major cities in cities in Canada.

However, the best opportunity that knocked on her door during the Depression was her winning three scholarships at the New York School of Music. The scholarship assistance allowed her to study harp with A. F. Pinto, the foremost harpist in New York City.

Her greatest problems at that time were food and transportation. More often than not, she had to walk miles for private lessons. Every penny was necessary for food for her mother and

herself. Riding the trolley was a luxury she couldn't afford. If she were lucky, she found dinner engagements in exchange for their meals. No one had extra money to pay salaries.

Even though Mignon's star may have dimmed on Broadway, she continued to be recognized by the press in classical music production. She and nine other brilliant harpists received their fair share of bookings. One of her most important engagements during the Depression was aboard the British BRITANIC on a cruise to the West Indies, Nassau, Kingston, and Havana in 1932. Mignon was the BRITANIC's highest paid musical artist. She and her mother were allowed to travel as first-class passengers. The thirty-day cruise was truly a paid working vacation far away from the dreary, dirty, and hungry streets of New York City.

During the 1930's, the theatrical world changed forever. Flo Ziegfeld's Frolics and Follies closed in 1932--never to reopen. Those nights of glitter, glory, and free-flowing money failed to return. Because of her multi-talents, Mignon usually found work; but her glorious ten years of fame and fortune became memories and yellowed clippings in meticulously kept scrapbooks compiled by Elbertine, her mother, and herself.

During the 1970's, she was among

the last of the Ziegfeld Girls who founded their Ziegfeld Club, Inc., in 1936, four years after the Follies ended on Broadway at 55 West 42nd Street. Of the original 2,000 girls, only 304 of them were still living in 1978, and they were scattered throughout the world.

Mignon Laird lived in the fourth-floor "Penthouse" at 19 West 46th Street in the heart of downtown New York City for sixty-three years. Her studio-apartment was fifty-five steep steps upward, and there was no elevator. It was here that she died alone on August 21, 1984. Her only known living relatives were two distant cousins in upstate New York. During her last lonely years, she always carried with her a favorite quotation written in her own spidery handwriting: "God be between you and harm in all the empty places you must walk."

She had no fear of the streets of New York City. New York had been good to her during the sparkling years of her stardom. Yet her deepest love was for the memories of her parents and her childhood when they traveled from town to town across the spacious, scenic countryside of Western Oklahoma.

Mignon called herself "A Gyp Water Production," and to the peaceful Western Oklahoma prairies she chose to return for her final performance ❧