

The Mountains Ring and the **Strings Sing**

at the **Official Maryland State
Fiddle Championship**

Written by **Dan Whetzel**
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**



Fifteen-year-old Kathleen Myers, of Keyser, West Virginia, is a regular contestant at many fiddle competitions including the Maryland Fiddle Championship. In the Youth category she has placed 1st in the Banjo Championship (twice) and 2nd in the Fiddle Championship.

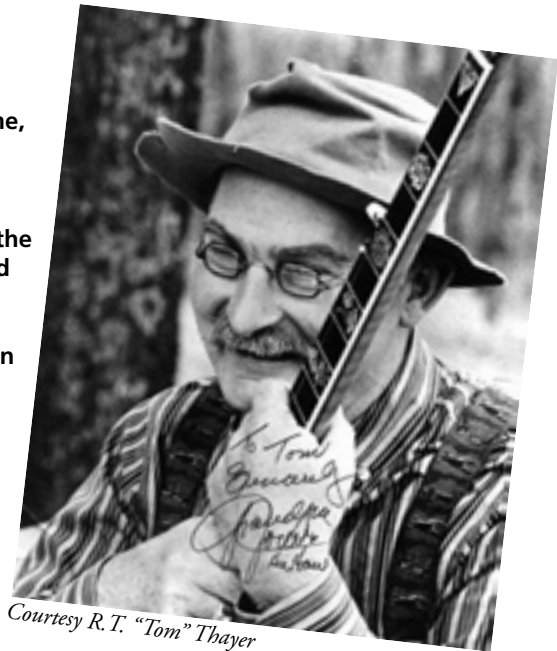
Garrett County is host to the Maryland State Banjo and Fiddle Championships at the Autumn Glory Festival in Oakland, Maryland.

The championships and fall festival are the most successful events of their kind in the region. Progress has been achieved because residents understand that combining local heritage with natural resources will pave the way for a better future in the hospitality industry.

The Autumn Glory Festival was built upon a fall foliage tradition dating back to the days of excursion trains sponsored by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Arrangements between the railroad and the Garrett County Promotion Council, forerunner of the Garrett County Chamber of Commerce, brought visitors to the historic Oakland train station during the month of October where hosts provided tours of Deep Creek Lake, Swallow Falls, and other historic and scenic sites. Council organizers believed the rail excursions could be expanded to create business opportunities that would lengthen their tourist season. At the time, the Garrett County winter hospitality program wasn't fully developed, so there was a need to explore new options. Officials decided in 1968 that the time was right to initiate a fall foliage festival. Initially the council decided to call the program "Autumn Glory Turkey Festival," but later the title was shortened to the current name.

Organizers discussed several marketing ideas and programs during the early phases of planning. Long time Garrett County resident and one of the festival organizers, Lynn Beckman, recalled, "We were looking for an event that would attract a wide audience and bring excitement

Grandpa Jones, of Hee Haw fame, was a featured entertainer to a "standing room only" crowd at the first and second Autumn Glory Festival Fiddle Contest. While in Garrett County he stayed with R.T. "Tom" Thayer.



Courtesy R.T. "Tom" Thayer

to the festival, so the idea emerged that a fiddle contest would be organized."

Fiddle contests in Garrett County can be dated to events held in Friendsville, Maryland, beginning in 1964. Mr. Beckman recalled, "There were several area fiddle contests before Autumn Glory, like the one in Elkins, West Virginia, but I only knew of one in Garrett County, which was the Friendsville fiddle contest.

Autumn Glory rules required that each contestant would perform two tunes. If they desired, accompaniment could be provided. Officials hoped for a good turnout for the inaugural year, and they were not disappointed. The first Maryland State Fiddle Contest exceeded expectations



This photo is believed to have been taken during the first or second Autumn Glory Festival in 1968 or 1969. At far left is R.T. "Tom" Thayer looking on as Hee Haw's Junior Samples (guest speaker at the Kick-off Dinner) poses with Linda Shuttleworth, Autumn Glory Queen. On the right is Lynn Beckman, instrumental in getting the Fiddle Contest off the ground. Thanks, Lynn, for helping *Mountain Discoveries* with old pictures and invaluable information on the beginning of the festival and contest.

Courtesy Lynn Beckman

because it was both exciting and successful in terms of participant and visitor turnout. There were about a dozen musicians from Maryland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio, while visitors arrived from the Tri-State area. Supplementing the fiddle contest was Jim and Jesse's Grand Ole' Opry act appearing at the National Guard Armory in Oakland, thereby providing another musical venue. Mr. Beckman reflected, "We had no idea in those days the events would become so popular. Autumn Glory became the largest festival in the region and the fiddle contest evolved to the point that we added additional age categories."

The festival's subsequent years brought several changes, including a banjo contest that created a new title to the music venue, The Maryland State Fiddler's and Banjo Contest. And due to the popularity of the fiddlers' contests, the Grand Ole' Opry acts were moved to Friday night as part of the banjo contest's expanded program. According to Lynn Beckman, "We had so many fiddle contestants that it meant the entertainment time would have been too long for the Saturday night program." More good news occurred in 1981 when Maryland Governor Harry Hughes proclaimed the fiddle contest to be the "Maryland State Fiddle Championship."

The Tri-State area is a hotbed for bluegrass music, so there are many skilled musicians who have grown up listening to the high lonesome sounds. Lynn Beckman has heard many fiddlers perform and can recall a special one from the early contests. "It was decided by organizers that if a fiddler won the contest three consecutive years, he would be declared the Grand Champion. After that, the Grand Champion could not compete for several years. There were a lot of outstanding fiddlers from West Virginia in those days but the one I remember as being one of the

best was Jimmy Currence; he was the first fiddler to win the Grand Championship."

The 2008 Autumn Glory Festival promises another series of outstanding programs, celebrations, and events including the musical ones. As is customary in recent years, the contest weekend will include a mandolin competition in addition to the traditional fiddle and banjo contests. **October 10, 2008**, is the date for the banjo championship and mandolin contest, while **October 11th** is slated for the fiddle championship. Enjoy all the festivities of the 41st Autumn Glory Festival from October 8th through the 12th. Contact the Garrett County, Maryland, Chamber of Commerce for details.



Courtesy Lynn Beckman

Lawrence Fluharty, West Virginia Champion Fiddler at the time, was one of the first contestants to sign up for the first fiddle contest in 1968. He is shown here with wife, Verna.

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by
Lance C. Bell

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Scenes from Deep Creek Lake and Garrett County.