

Mellie Dunham

By Andrew Kuntz

Fame for his fiddle playing came late in life for Alanson Mellen “Mellie” Dunham, who for most of his life worked his land at his home in Norway, a small town in southwestern Maine. Mellie was born in 1853, too young to participate in the American Civil War, a quiet farmer who, by the end of the century, achieved a modest local reputation as a dance fiddler. At that time he had a much broader reputation as an expert snowshoe maker, who was selected by Commodore Robert Peary to construct snowshoes for his expedition to the North Pole in 1909. Mellie might have lived out his remaining years at his farm, making snowshoes and playing the occasional dance gig, save for some prodding by a friend in the fall of 1925. On a bet, Mellie entered a fiddle contest at the nearby city of Lewiston, Maine, and finished first in the contest, upon which he was crowned the “Champion Fiddler of Maine.”

At this point Mellie’s story collides with Detroit automobile magnate Henry Ford’s. The successful Ford had long been interested in fiddling and dancing as a conservative response to what he perceived as an erosion of traditional American values in the midst of the Roaring Twenties and “jazz age” social changes. He also had the money to do something about it, and, starting in 1923, he began to patronize old-time fiddlers and dancers in an organized manner. Knowing his interest, a Boston-based journalist (who just happened to hail from Mellie’s home town of Norway) sent Ford a clipping of the elderly musician’s victory. Ford responded with an invitation and arranged for the fiddler, accompanied by his wife, to travel to play for his dance group in Michigan. Meanwhile, the newspapers caught wind of the story, and by the time Mellie and “Gram” (as she was known in the columns) departed for Dearborn, there was a small media frenzy feasting on the event. Dunham did feature with the Henry Ford Orchestra at a square dance in December, 1925, but left Michigan soon afterwards to take advantage of a vaudeville tour that had been booked for him. He also was invited into the recording studio where he waxed eight sides for Victor early in 1926, and he lent four original tunes and his name to a music folio published by Carl Fisher, Inc.

After a few months the furor died down, the tour ended, and Mellie and Gram returned home. He resumed farming and playing for dances at Norway’s Heywood Club, and although he occasionally played larger venues, his life gradually returned to normal. He made some money from his brief time in the national spotlight, and provided for extended family with much of the proceeds. In September, 1931, he passed away after a brief illness.

Mellie’s brief popularity was partly sustained by his appearance, for he looked every inch — short though his stature was — the icon of the old-time fiddler. His foursquare attitude, unassuming appearance, his age and his straight-ahead, barely adorned fiddling, all helped to thrust him briefly into the national limelight.

[The above was distilled from Paul F. Wells monograph entitled “Maine’s Champion Fiddler,” JEMF Quarterly, vol. 12, No. 43, Autumn, 1976. For more information on Mellie Dunham see http://www.megalink.net/~davids/dunham_jemf_article.html and http://www.megalink.net/~davids/mellie_dunham.html]

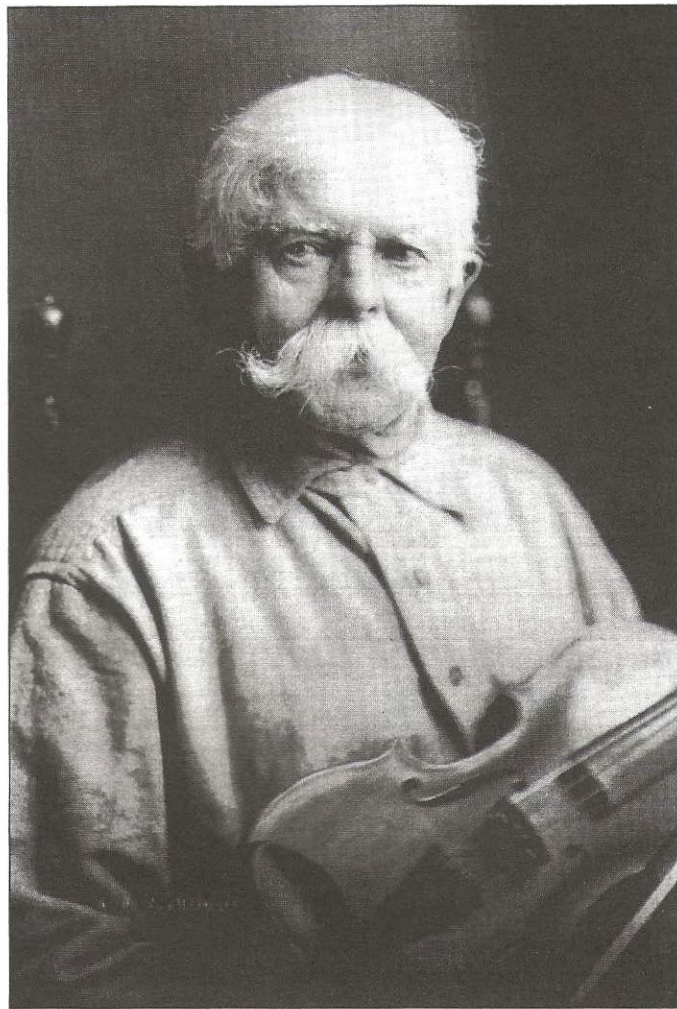
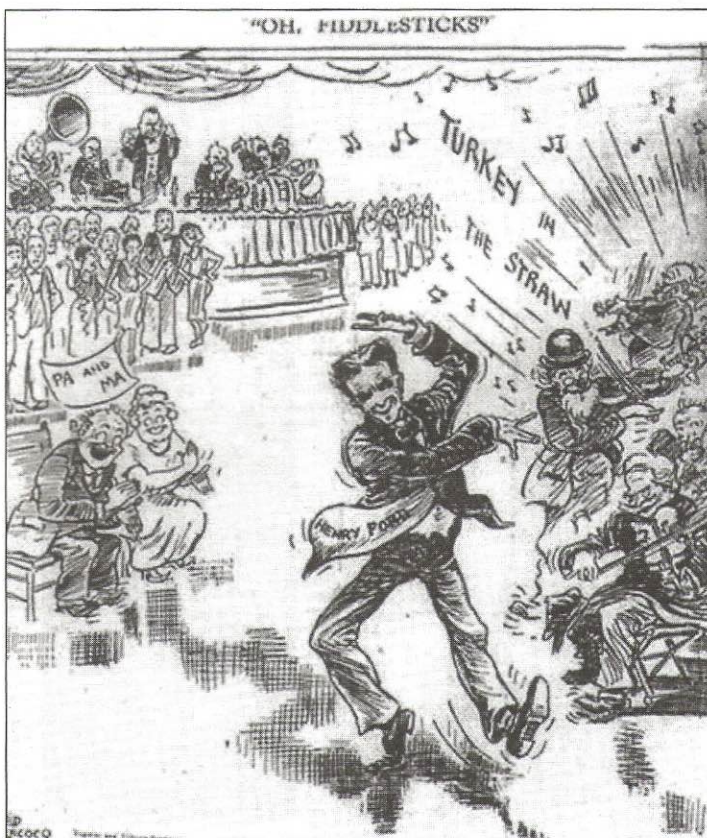


Photo courtesy of Jeff Green



A 1927 newspaper cartoon lampooning Ford’s interest in old time music.