

FIDDLIN' COWAN POWERS AND FAMILY

Pioneer Recording Artists of Country Mountain Music

Roy L. Sturgill

I was about the age of eight or nine years old when the first string band I ever heard, or saw, was Fiddlin' Powers and Family. I vividly remember being in attendance with my mother, father, and perhaps a younger brother. I don't recall exactly where it was, but am reasonably sure that it was in a school, theater, or some other public gathering place, in, or near, Coeburn, Virginia. This was about 1920. To me this was a thrilling and memorable occasion. This even led me to be a great fan and lover of country music, and as the years have gone by, each time I see or hear country music, my mind goes back some sixty years to my hearing Fiddlin's Powers and Family.

It is imperative that the Powers Family string band be remembered. too often, interesting history and persons, places and events, have been left to mold and yellow, until the vivid picture of the past is lost forever. It is of importance to our heritage that we save the bits and pieces of our fading history, so that the threads of time gone by, may, in a small way, be pieced together and the memorable people and events not be forgotten.

Country music is, and has always been as much a part of our mountain culture and heritage as "cornbread and 'taters." Cut off from contact with the outside world the mountaineers of the last century and earlier, became a highly self-sufficient people, creating everything they needed. This, to be sure, included their entertainment. Singing, playing and dancing was an important part of that entertainment.

The country music field has always been noted for the relatively large part family groups have played in it. There are scores of sisters and brothers, and entire families who have made up singing and playing teams, which have won wide favor with the ever growing public that acclaims the honesty and beauty of country music.

At the top of the list of family groups is the Fiddlin' Powers and Family of the western part of Russell County, Virginia. For years these folks traveled the Carolinas, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, and perhaps a dozen other states, and brought a unique warmth wherever they played. Theirs was the kind of music that gave hands the urge to clap, feet the urge to dance, the kind that brought laughter, where, otherwise there might have been crying, joy, where there might have been sadness.

All their music had the simple, yet fascinating sound that made the Fiddlin' Powers Family famous and loved over the entire country. Individually, the members of the band were all excellent musicians, a fact which certainly played a major part in their success. For though Cowan Powers was a star in his own right, the Powers Family as a group,



FIDDLIN' POWERS & FAMILY
L to R, Charles, Ada, Orpha, Carrie, and the father, Fiddlin' Cowan Powers.

were equally well known for their proficiency in the field of ole-time dance music.

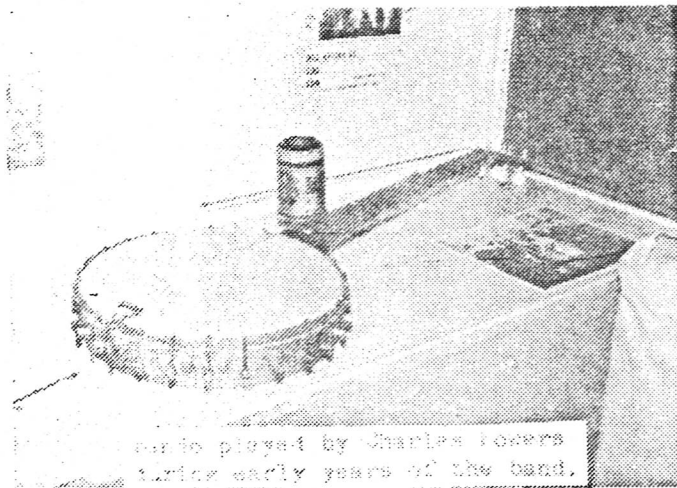
The Powers Family knew where their music should go, and their artistic energies were spent in making their music reach its destination. And so, the music they played, and the songs they sang became a part of the group, and the group a part of them.

Like the mountains where they grew up, the menfolk were rugged, strong and handsome, the girls of the band, beautiful as the native mountain flowers, their voices as soft as the cooing of the doves and melodious as the bubbling of the clear mountain streams.

Cowan Powers was born October 1879, and lived his entire life in what is called the Lower Castlewoods area of Russell County. He married Matilda Lambert, who was a talented banjo picker, so, it was only natural that their children be musicians. Matilda was born and reared on Cowan's Creek in Scott County, Virginia, near Dungannon. With all the talent in the family, it was therefore no big undertaking for the patriarch to organize the Fiddlin' Powers and Family Band. Matilda died in February 1916, at the age of 35. At her death, son, Charles became the banjo picker. As a small boy Charles got a job as water-boy with a county road crew in order to earn money to purchase his first banjo. In addition to playing the banjo, Charles also did a comedy dance routine with his younger sister, Ada. Charles enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps in November 1928, served in the Hawaiian Islands, then in the

Philippines under General Douglas MacArthur, was captured by the Japanese during World War II, was in the Baatan death march, and died in a Japanese prison camp due to exposure and starvation on May 8, 1942.

Ada, the youngest girl played the ukulele and did a clog and buck dance. Orpha, the oldest girl played the "tate-bug" mandolin, and Carrie played the guitar. The father played the fiddle, (I do mean "fiddle" — the word violin was never used when speaking of mountain music.)



For their concerts, the Powers Family traveled from town to town mostly by train — automobiles were few at that time. It was a familiar sight to see them boarding the train, either at Dungannon or St. Paul, depending on the section of the country in which the concert was held. At the time, Ada was only about 7 or 8 years old and the brakeman would have to lift her up the steps of the coach. She was too small to make the steps alone, but from all reports she was a great entertainer even at that tender age.

Their "big break" came while taking part in a concert in Johnson City, Tennessee, in the early twenties. They were chosen by an executive of The Victor Talking Machine Company and sent to Winston-Salem, North Carolina for testing, thence to Camden, New Jersey, to cut their first recordings. Whereby, The Fiddlin' Powers and Family became the very first Southern Appalachian string band to make commercial records. They were paid one hundred dollars for each side of a disc, plus a fraction of a cent royalty for each record sold. Their housing and travel expenses to the recording sessions were paid by the record companies.

Following are the four pages of a brochure distributed by the Victor Talking Machine Company, dated October 1924. The brochure was

printed on both sides of a single sheet of paper, then folded in the middle to make four pages. These brochure pages established the fact that the Fiddlin' Powers and Family made commercial recordings during and, or, prior to 1924, since their records are advertised in this particular brochure.





Ex-Governor Alf Taylor and members of Old Lumber Quartet

NEGRO SPIRITUALS

15451 "Pharaoh's Army Got Drowned"
 Ex-Governor Alf Taylor and the Old Lumber Quartet
 The story of this record, Ex-Governor Taylor, of Tennessee, will tell you
 in his own words, with many of his own songs, some to be sung
 with the quartet and some solo. Then the quartet itself will
 sing "Pharaoh's Army Got Drowned" and "Drowners" and you but
 need not be told that this is from the lips of the old Negro master of
 the spiritual.

NOVELTY RECORDS

15452 "Pharaoh's Army Got Drowned"
 Ex-Governor Alf Taylor and the Old Lumber Quartet
 The story of this record, Ex-Governor Taylor, of Tennessee, will tell you
 in his own words, with many of his own songs, some to be sung
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 sing "Pharaoh's Army Got Drowned" and "Drowners" and you but
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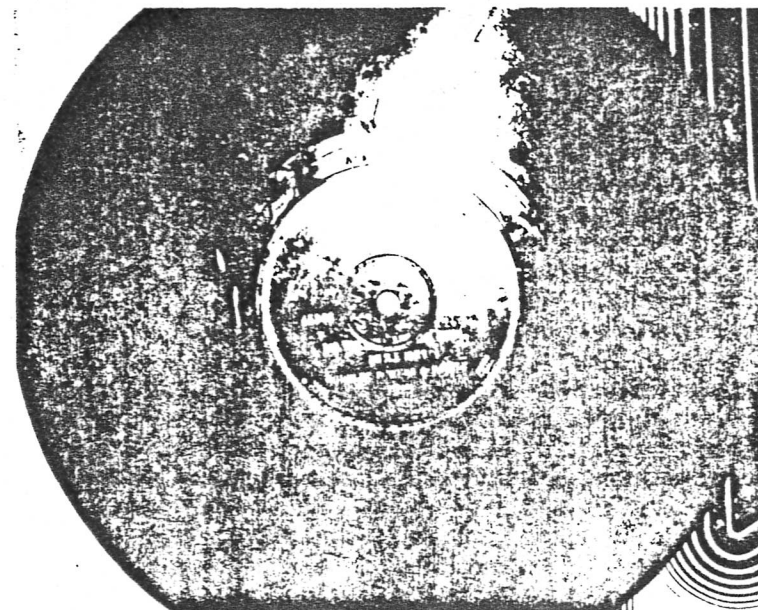
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Date →



York in about the mid-twenties.

Mr. Joseph E. Bussard, Jr., of Frederick, Maryland, a collector of old recordings, gave the following concerning recording dates of the Powers Family: "The Victors were the first discs cut, sometime in 1922. The Edison's were cut sometime around 1926, and the Okeh's were cut in 1927." A prized possession and keepsake is one of their old Okeh records, pictured here.

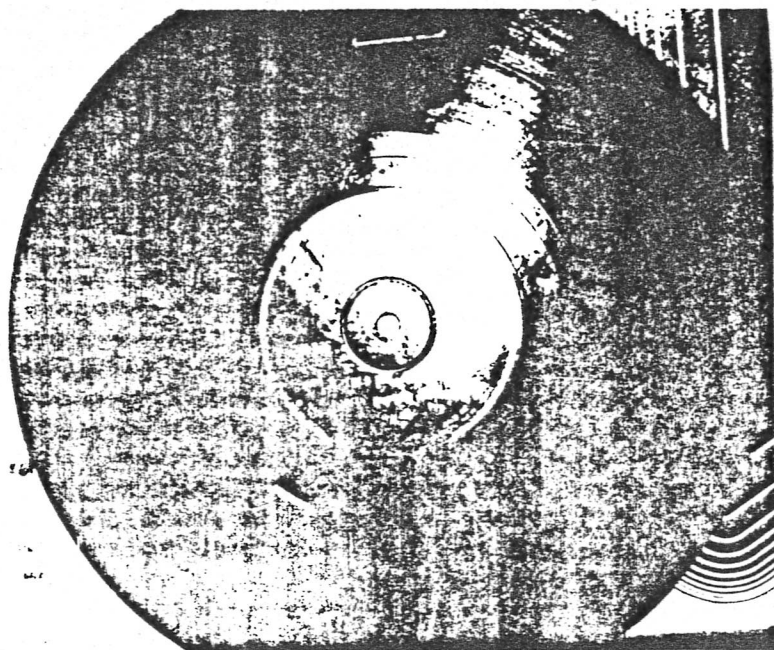


One side of an old 78 rpm recording by Fiddlin' Powers and Family, entitled, "Did You Ever See The Devil, Uncle Joe"? Recorded by Okeh Phonograph Corp. in mid-twenties.

The Powers Family was also among the first local country musicians to broadcast over WOPI radio station in Bristol, Virginia. They were much in demand throughout the eastern United States for concerts and dances, and their popularity continued for a number of years until the girls married and temporarily gave up their music in order to devote more time raising their families. Then too, the depression crippled the record industry, and knocked the band's records off the market, along with the recordings of dozens of other groups.

Afterwards, the father played some shows with other groups, and while playing in Saltville, Virginia, he suffered an apparent heart attack and died in an Abingdon, Virginia hospital, August 22, 1953. He was 74 years old and was laid to rest in his native soil at Castlewood, Virginia, just a few yards west of Milton's Store.

In 1970, the Band re-organized with the daughters, Ada, Carrie, Orpha and Orpha's husband, Eugene D. Ireson. Ada was now playing the Autoharp instead of the ukulele. They performed on radio and television shows in the area, and in 1971, Ada was named Southern Highlands Champion Autoharpist at the Folk Festival of the Smokies in Tennessee, and was presented a walnut plaque in honor of her achievement on the autoharp.



Flip side of above, entitled, "Old Molly Hair". (Record property of Roy Sturgill.)

The Powers Family again enjoyed much popularity and success, playing many old-time festivals in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

What a pleasure it is for anyone to visit these wonderful ladies, who were members of the Fiddlin' Powers Family Band. Mrs. Carrie Bell (Powers) Porter still lives in the vicinity where she grew up, near Castlewood. Carrie's husband, Mr. J. Leonard Porter was killed in a farming accident some years ago. Ada is also a widow and lives in St. Paul, Va., her husband, the late Bascom S. Salyer, having passed away several years ago. Both these ladies tell many interesting stories about their lives as musicians, and their travels with their father and brother. Orpha, the oldest of the girls is the wife of Mr. Eugene D. Ireson and resides at Pound, Va. Carrie and Ada note that Orpha's health has not been sufficient to allow her to travel and play with them in the last year or two. As a result, Carrie and Ada have carried on as a duet in the true tradition of country musicians who live their music.

In the last few years, one of the favorite groups to attend the Old-time Country Radio Reunion in Jonesboro, Tennessee, is Ada and Carrie Powers playing the guitar and autoharp, singing songs and ballads dating back to the twenties and earlier. But, unfortunately they



The reorganized Fiddlin' Powers Family Band
L to R: E.D. Ireson, Orpha Powers Ireson, Ada
Powers Salyers and Carrie Bell Powers Porter.

too, have been forced to limit their performances. However, the ovations and cheers have proven to the world that the Powers Family are still crowd-pleasers.

Old age, ill health, and death, as it does in every human endeavor, has all but retired one of the greatest and best old-time string bands, that this, or any other area has ever produced.

Though memories remain, the old cylinder and 78 rpm records have almost entirely disappeared. Yet today older people and lovers of old-time mountain music still speak fondly of the Fiddlin' Powers and Family. There are new songs and new sounds, others have recorded some of the music, sung some of the songs, but nobody has been able to lend them the grace, depth and beauty, as did the Powers Family.

Cowan Powers and his Family Band were true pioneers in the field of old-time country music, they were our own local folks, born and reared amongst us, and their music was so good its sound spanned the miles to reach the ears of the big recording firms of the large metropolitan centers, who readily recognized their talents and summoned them to record their music, in order that the masses and future generations could enjoy it for all time.

And in appreciation for the joy and happiness they brought to the people of a troubled world, we, as a people, extend to them our sincere thanks and gratitude, and recognize them as a great part of the institution of Country-Mountain Music.