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Clockwise from top: Pierce Peters; Malcolm Beaton; Sandy MacLean; John Alex "The Big Fiddler" MacDonald system and the whole hall full of dancers?' He said he played with his brother, some? times. They'd have the two fiddles going. But there'd occasionally be just one violin and a piano and no P.A. system. And if you were using high bass for more volume, that was one thing; but basically, a lot of players just played standard tuning, and they didn't all have violins that would project all that well. But Pierce said that in some cases they used a prompter, especially in town, and the prompter kept things quite under control. It was almost like the dance was a sort of a drill-- a lot of the dances had organized steps that were to be gone through. It wasn't everybody just swinging his partner and promenading; it was much more controlled than that. You were still having fun, but you were realizing the violin had to be projecting and had to be heard at the other end of the hall. Those halls were pretty big, and they weren't built for acoustics. The people were there to have a good time, but you'd never get rowdy to the point that you'd drown out the violin player. Through the prompter making his calls and everybody moving through his steps, it was a much more organized affair than what we would think of. There was a lot more respect for the music and the playing, to make sure it was heard. Still, those fiddlers were really working hard. And they had a grasp of the bow, that if they wanted to lean on it to bring out more music, they could. Mary MacDonald sort of grabs the bow the way it was lying on the table, just almost in a fistful. If you wanted to come onto the violin quite heavy, you could get the volume if you needed it. So there's some people who could play with finesse, even though they were chucking out a great deal of volume. There were others whose playing would suffer quite a bit if they tried to overplay. And the wages were terribly low. Depending on what area you're looking at, certainly in the '20s, people were only making two dollars a night, the fiddler, to play the whole evening. That wasn't uncommon. There were house parties in those days. I've heard in some cases, if the host put on a party, he'd charge admission at the door to the party, say maybe a quarter. Half of the money would go towards the treats that would be provided, and half to the violin player. This would be in lieu of passing the hat. Some fiddlers would hold dances in their own homes, with a quarter to get in. Young people of the community were starving for entertainment and social life and would jump at an opportunity like that. (That phrase, to play "close to the floor"--what does that mean?) I think that basically sums up the feeling that comes from a player that plays the kind of music that would draw you right off your chair and make you want to dance. They always talk about good Gaelic music--that's the old traditional flavour stuff that's got the Gaelic right in it. If you play too clean, where you're just playing straight melody, with none of the colour that goes with it--the extra notes and the tricky cuts--it comes out as a bit flat. Whereas a player who plays close to the floor, you just want to tap your feet and yell out. And if you want to talk about a vanishing Cape Breton fiddler, what possibly is vanishing are these old techniques, these old flavours. We've always got the books for the tunes. Even the old-time



players--some of their settings, mind you, are very rare--but they did play tunes that you'd find in books as well. A lot of those tunes are written down, and some of the old settings are starting to be written down, which will be a great thing, too. But what would be lost, if the old fiddler vanished, would be the old techniques that were passed on by ear. I think the only hope in some respects now of maintaining what's typically Cape Breton, is if we've captured it on the tape-recordings of the great old players, and people who are ambitious enough can once again rely on the ear, can go back and learn those techniques. I just want to make sure, if the fiddling survives in Cape Breton, that that old music survives with it--that music that survived here for 150 years. It could just drift away with the loss of some of our older players right now. If we had more people digging into that old stuff, getting into the old tapes and notating those old tunes, but not just notating them, because that defeats passing them on in a way. You've got to get out there and play them in front of people and turn other people on to them, so that they listen and see what they can steal from you. Preserve (48)