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Mary MacDonald with Margaret MacPhee, Piano time, the method she was using to learn tunes from an old man called Alexander J. Beaton, who was born in the 1830s. His father was born in the 1700s, so we'll assume that Alexander had some very old music. And Mary had it in two hops from the 1700s. Mary said, when old Alex was showing her how to play the fiddle, he used to say, "Look at my hands, look where I'm placing my fingers--here and here." She said, "And my sister used to watch, but I'd turn my head away, because it was the tune I was wanting"--this is the way she phrased it. That to me typifies the type of approach that the players had in those days. So much reliance on the ear--it came through the 1800s. There was little book reading among the Cape Breton populace because often they weren't even literate in their language, let alone in their music. -But they had a great emphasis on correctness, and they got not only the tune, note for note. but they got all the nuances of the Gaelic flavour of playing, from listening--things that couldn't be notated even if they could read the music in the first place. They were relying heavily on the ear, and the ear can become highly developed when you're not relying strictly on note-reading. Players will tell you that today. You talk to Robert Stubbart or Wilfred Prosper, that when they were first learning to play there was a great reliance on the ear. They found once or twice listening to a tune--and you know how complex some of these reels can become--they'd even hear them on the radio--just a couple of turns through it, they could almost go to the violin and play it. There were cases of guys who heard a tune, and didn't even bother to play it till the next day. Then they'd say, "Oh geez, that tune I heard last night--I must give it a shot." They had developed their ear to that point. Today we're putting a lot of emphasis on note-reading, getting the tunes from books. And as soon as you get into the note-reading, you put your emphasis in a different direction, the ear will lose its sharpness; so that if you play a tune for a guy, he'd want to say, "Would you mind writing that down for me?" You would lose that strong reliance on the ear, and its keenness would fade away. It's almost like a blind person--Jose Feliciano, Doc Watson--they can put the emphasis on the ear because they've got to concentrate in that way. You take a modern violin player who even starts out reading music, how highly developed can his ear really become? So, although we didn't have a high degree of education, we did have this great fidelity to aural transmission. And the music that we were playing in Cape Breton, especially in the early 1900s, it probably sounded very much what you would have heard in the early 1800s. Because of the isolation in Cape Breton and the reliance on the correctness and the flavour that was passed on, that couldn't have been passed on by book. If you take a piece of music, any tune, "Cock of the North" or whatever, it has a melodic notation, a series of notes that can be hummed by an individual--that's the tune--that's what you'd find in a book. Now, an old-time Cape Breton player, and even a lot of the modern players, because we're still carrying over some of the old techniques, are adding a lot extra. They say it came from a time when there was no rhythmic accompaniment like guitar or piano, and you



had to develop new techniques for volume, to emphasize a chord progression even though they hadn't a rhythm instrument. So what they did, for one thing, they played extra notes around the melody. Some of it was influenced by the bagpipe; they played a lot of drones. One important example of the drone technique is the actual tuning of the violin. They have a scordatura tuning, a number of them actually; one of them's called "high bass," one is called "high bass and (counter) tenor," and another two are called "low bass." It means adjusting the bass strings of the violin so that when you're playing that single melodic line, you're also bowing these extra notes to create an accompaniment for yourself, to give what we'd call a polyphonic texture, more harmonies and richness around that tune. Standing: Peter MacIntyre, Benacadie; Joe Walker, Lake Ainslie; Alex MacIntyre, Benacadie. Seated: Bernie Gillis, SW Margaree; Mike MacLean, Iona' Jack Gillis & Alex Gillis, SW Margaree. New Bedford, Mass., 1922-23.