

A Fiddler's First Time Experiences at Scandia Camp Mendocino

– So I went away to what seemed to be a far corner of the earth, to spend a week with people who share a passion for Scandinavian folk music and dance. When it was nearly over, the editors, asked me to tell of my experiences as a first time participant.

Although I write this anonymously, the other participants will certainly recognize me – a 63 year old male, a still-aspiring fiddler, and a non-dancer (so far).

History: How I got to the right place at the right time –

I have been playing American folk music all of my adult life. I got hooked on Norwegian-American gammeldans music in 2003.

In 2006 I recognized that bygdedans tunes might be in my future. A Tom Paley album that I listened to on a long drive back to from a distant house concert of his is what hooked me. I recognized a cover of “Hjortingen's” which I knew from the Björn Ståbi/Ole Hjorth album of 35 years earlier. That earlier album was one I had revisited every couple of years, never imagining that I would ever understand or even play fiddle rhythms like that.

In 2008, Steinar Johansen brought up “Steffa Leken” at a workshop. I recognized this Røros pols from the Paley album, and it kind of fell together. Steinar taught the tune in C on a two-row accordion. A month later, when I got together with my friends who had also attended the workshop, I tuned my fiddle down a whole step and fingered the tune in D – the music was actually coming out in C. My friend Tom, who had been struggling with it on the fiddle, playing from the page, in C, paused in amazement. I had to explain to him what I was doing, and that I had already been familiar with the tune when Steinar brought it, and no, I did not walk on water, either. I think this event was my arrival to playing bygdedans. From that point, I started to stretch for more repertoire.

Back to the present - when I saw that Björn Ståbi was teaching here this year, I decided that Scandia Camp Mendocino would be my fiddle camp this summer. I was curious as to what Björn was up to now, but I also knew that I would be satisfied if he just showed the tunes that I heard 40 years ago, at that Saturday afternoon Newport Folk Festival workshop.

And I recognized that this time, I would make better sense of what Ståbi was playing and maybe even play those reasonably well myself.

My experiences at camp this year –

Johan Nylander was also teaching, but I did not know of what Johan was about until he showed up for class. We got about a half-dozen great tunes from Johan. Rättviks tunes. But also for me, what will be quite noteworthy, is coming to understand a technique of double stops that I sometimes hear in fiddling, but until now have glossed over because it was beyond what I was doing. Johan showed me (us) what was going on. I am delighted to have added that to my palette.

What I took away from Björn's classes, besides a dozen and a half great Orsa tunes, was a good foundation and understanding of Orsa fiddling, and that style's lineage.

I also took home a short stack of CD's. Listening to them, and in hearing three different renditions of Orsa “Systerpolska Nr. 1,” I recognized that the rhythm that I had been playing in “Steffa Leken” was just what was going on in that Orsa polska. I had absorbed the rhythm, although not consciously,

over 30 years, from Björn's playing on that folk fiddling from Sweden album. Yes, I was playing Røros pols different from most others, but I may have been applying the folk process out here in California.

Also important to me was that Björn gave us permission to not be so rigid, both in bowing and in ornaments.

My third “course” was the Allspel sessions.

These comprised daily one hour's review in class, then practicing on my cabin's porch during the free hour, and finally playing about 8 tunes for the dancers in the evening.

The allspel was led by Peter Michaelsen, not only a capable leader, but a great player and teacher. He brings a huge number of tunes – and one could say he knows how to use them.

The tunes that Peter chose for the group were based on dance requests submitted by the dancers on the previous night. In the packet of notes that was handed out at camp check-in was a page listing 147 different dances, named from 16 different regions, plus “Other.” This list served as a reminder to the dancers, something like a menu from which to make requests. Based on the previous night's requests, Peter chose tunes from the allspel packet that would work for those dances. The packet was substantial, 177 tunes assembled over 10 years. Peter also chose a few other tunes not in the packet, pulled out *ad hoc*. When I first saw this list of dances, I asked, “How many ways are there to promenade then turn, really?” But the other night, at a fiddle jam, there was a list of tunes that matched in number the dance list, so I can no longer be surprised at such counts.

Even though the allspel is billed as “All Instruments Welcome,” the nyckelharpe players who showed up for practice seemed to have been left behind in the dust, and with one or two exceptions dropped out for all but a very few tunes. Instruments tuned for just intonation in G and D, may be noticeably different when playing in A.

I think in the future, some gammeldans tunes might be welcome by a few of the musicians for the allspel. But I also recognize that quite a number of folks traveled 1000 miles or more for bygdedansar.

The large number of tunes here forced me into a new approach to learning and playing. I do not read printed music in real time, and my preferred method of learning is an aural one.

I already had the melodies of a not small fraction of the tunes in my head, from having listened to a lot of music while driving. Consequently, I was able to fake my way along with those tunes without killing the music.

It was nice to find that many of the tunes that had been “on my list” to work up (aurally), that those tunes had printed transcriptions in the packet, and that with that information I did ok. And my process of really finishing these tunes will go quicker with the printed transcriptions.

The second technique that having to deal with a large number of tunes drew from me was one of my making the best of reading from the page. I found it pretty easy to identify a key note or two in each measure. Those notes stand out either in their duration or their pitch or being in an important location in a phrase or by virtue of their being on the down beat. For those, I was able to play along with the skeleton of the tune. Further, by the middle of the week I was getting a good feel for the some ornaments in each individual tune.

As I reflect on the allspel repertoire, four weeks later, I realize that the allspel experience broadened my repertoire with many delicious tunes that will keep me in good music for decades to come. I am grateful to Peter and to all the others who came before him for opening this repertoire up to me.

So I came home with lots and lots of tunes, most of which I like. And I realize it will take a good deal of practice to finish working them all up by next year. And I'll have a great time trying to do that.

Other aspects –

Eighty great folks to spend a week with. And I likely started new friendships for years to come. There was decent weather for the coast. Very good food. Bitter coffee. On Wednesday night, I got started dancing some easy ones, prompted in turn by two of the best dance teachers from America's heartland, as well as by some bay area friends. Also one evening, Laurel, a good guitarist and very fine singer, got started playing rhythm for three new (for her) gånglåtår that I showed her. Who would have imagined Swedish rhythms from a flat top guitar?

One of the new CD's that I brought home was of fiddle and keyed accordion duets, bygdedans tunes. I have already started to work a couple of those up with my gammeldans music partner Jan. This, for the first time, is moving Jan into the bygdedans repertoire.

I was touched by the generosity and spirit of the auction participants. And it seemed that most of the folks who were not on work-scholarship still volunteered for dozens of odd jobs making the camp run smoothly and making it such a wonderful experience.

It was a great week! And thanks to all!