

## [A Berkshire Fiddler and Dirt Farmer]

Mass. 1938-9 A Berkshire Borneer Sammy Spring - Dirt Farmer and Old Time Fiddler

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER EDWARD WELCH

ADDRESS PITTSFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

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SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT SAMMY SPRING

ADDRESS OTIS, MASSACHUSETTS

Sammy Spring, dirt farmer and old time fiddler is fifty-six years old, a slim little man, not much over five feet tall, grey haired and grey eyed. Around his Otis farm, Sammy is unassuming and unpretentious - on the podium of a dance hall he is king of all he surveys. Folks dancing to his music must dance correctly. Let the uninitiated set fail to follow his calls and Sammy is down on the dance floor. Tapping the erring couples with his fiddle bow, he suggests they watch a more experienced set and listen carefully to his instructions as he calls out the intricacies of each number. No matter how many or how few dances, the program calls for, Sammy decides on a certain number of rounds and square sets for an evenings entertainment and plays and calls them, ignoring the program completely. 2 Sammy is of pure Yankee stock. His ancestors fought in the Revolution and settled in the nearby town of Sandisfield where the family always lived until Sammy came north a few miles, to Otis to live. Sammy's forefathers were as Sammy says, "dirt farmers like me." Sammy's work day garb consists of a well washed and well patched pair of blue denim

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overalls, a grey flannel shirt, old grey faded suit coat, large [brogans?] and an oversize battered cap, that sets loosely on his grey head. bending his ears forward so as to give him a elfish look.

Sammy Spring was in the little wooden shack workshop at the rear of his Otis home, “fixing” his patient wife's washing machine. Being well acquainted with the temper of our Berkshire Yankees, we discussed washing machines in general, and the Spring washing machine in particular, for some time before we introduced the subject of fiddling and launched a question.

“So you want to know how I came to take up fiddlin”. Well of course, I started in as a lad going to kitchin dances. In those days a fiddler was considered to be, or at least to me seemed to be , an important man, and there were several pretty good ones in this part of the country — a Heath feller from Monterey, an Irishman from Becket and a coon from over Tyringham way. Of course I was too young to do much dancing, but not too young to like the way these fellers fiddled and called. I used to go to the dances with my folks when I was a kid and I'd sit and listen to the fiddlers callin “out the sets all evenin'. When I got the most of them down good I bought a fiddle from the coon from Tyringham with some money I earned , and started in to learn for myself. I took a couple of lessons from Heath over in Monterey and after awhile got so I could play preeety good.

“It wasn't long before I was playing for dances — mebbe a couple of years or so. Of course, I got most of the work in Sandisfield and Otis. I got so good that some of the other fellers got kinda jealous. Some one of them sent me a letter telling me I'd better quit or there'd 2 be some trouble; but I kept right on and nothin' ever come of it.

“Well, about then I married Ella May and a few years later my first baby came along; Martin Van Buren, named after my father. We had an old organ at the house and when he was only a little tyke Martin learned to play chords on it. When he was old enough, I'd take him on the handle bars of my bicycle to the dances and have him play for me. Soon after ,

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we began to get jobs over in Tolland and down Colebrook way. Then Bill Hall from over in Tolland joined up with us. Bill played banjo. The three of us ran dances in the Otis Town Hall. We didn't make much at first, but we had a whale of a lot of fun.

"You know in those old days," specially over at the East Otis Tavern, we used to play for chicken pie suppers. That is, it was a combination affair, that cost a dollar apiece, fifty cents for the supper and fifty cents for the dance. Well at those suppers you could have all you wanted to eat. Course, chicken pie was the main dish, but that wasn't all. They would have home-made pies and cakes, home-made butter, pickles, cheese, cookies, well jest about every kind of home-made food you could imagine. Tea, coffee and home-made doughnuts, but no hard stuff. These dances used to last all night long. We even played at one that ran three nights in a row. Those used to be darn good times. No rough stuff nor anything wrong either. Whole families would attend, out for a good time and they sure had it.

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"That's what I call living. Folks don't know how to live today. They won't go out like they used to, 'cept to go to the movies, most of 'em, or stay at home and listen to the radio. Those old chicken pie suppers and things like that used to make them more neighborly. It's too bad. When you look at the way folks used to live and see how they git along today. They ain't no more of that ole spirit of corporation. Just dog eat dog today.

"Well back about '29 I got a job for my orchestry playing in the Bloomfield Grange. Our program was broadcast over Station WTIC Hartford. I had Bill Hall on the banjo, Martin an pianer, a feller from Winsted on the drums and young Elwin Tacy, an Otis boys, as singer, then. Well for awhile we went great guns. Got bids to play all over Conneticut, Eastern New York, and down in the east part of the state. Guess this broadcasting was 'sponsible for me gitting the job at Stowe Village at the Eastern State Exposition in Springfield.

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“You know we were one of the featured attractions at the fair; playing there night and day the full week. You'd be s'prised the number of friends we make down there. Why I git so many bids now I can't take care of them all. We've played at some high and mighty places too; let me tell you.

“Couple years ago we went down to the County Fair Carnival down at that rich Yatch Club in Madison , Conn. Now those folks didn't want to dance right at all. They asked asked to come down jest to make a monkey of us small town folks. I wasn't ask to play until about eleven o'clock.

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By that time they all were pretty much liquored up. Couldn't dance right if they wanted to. Well I tried to get them going right, but I guess they had too much to drink and they felt kinda coltish. So I warned then once fer all. Told them if they wa'n't going to dance the proper way I would pack up and go home. Well they didn't lissen to reasons so I told them all what I thought of them, and got out. Ain't no sense a-foolin' round with folks like that. Nobody is a goin' to monkey like that with me. If they want to dance the sets proper I'll play all night. But if they want to monkey-shine around they'd better git an organ-grinder. My o'chestrty ain't no monkeys fer anybody I don't care how high and mighty they be....

“They was a time I was playing down in Connecticut pretty regular one night a week. The manager of the place got some high falutin' notions in his head. Wouldn't let the folks dance unless they wore a coat. Well, business began to drop off. Mind you most of these folks that went to this place were / people that followed me wherever I played publicly. They'd come to me and tell me if they couldn't dance with their coats off they wouldn't come any more. Well I went to the manager and tried to tell him in a nice way but he wouldn't listen to me. Well I didn't say nothin more to him but got right back up on the platform and told them folks to go ahead and take off their coays and if anyone said they douldn't dance that way, I would pack up and git home.

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“Well I guess that fixed things once and fer all. Now what harm is they to dancing with your coat off. They's more crime committed by men wearing coats than there is by men with coats off, I reckon. You take on a warm summer night and dance a couple of sets with your coat on and you get pretty well warmed up. Well, if you want to go outside and cool off you're bound to ketch a cold. On the other hand if you take your coat off and dance awhile and want to cool off, you can go outside and put your coat on and you won't ketch cold.

“Reminds me of the time that the state trooper came into the dance hall up in Otis Center. The folks were dancin' without coats and these cops came in and told everyone they either put on their coats or they would be no dancin'. Well that got me riled. I told off those cops and don't you fergit it. And they got out too. Nobody's goin' to tell me how to run my dances. I run them and they ain't nobody runnin' Sammy Spring.

“I've played fer some of the nicest folks in the country. We went over to Mrs. Anne Hyde Choates over in Springfield, New York once and played fer the best of New York's s'ciety, real 'ristcorats 'ristocrats . We were treated like the rest of the guests. Had butlers and maids waitin' on us hand and foot. They even invited us to stay at their house all night. Now them is real folks, ain't they? ?

“Most every year I go down to Bostin to play at the Girl Scouts Convention at Hotel Statler. Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt has been there 6 several times. She's a real nice person, friendly and real neighborly. Nothin high and mighty about her. So long as these Roosevelts stay in the White House, I guess the country is safe enough and in the hands of the right kind of folks.

“ ‘Bout once a week now I go down to the Westchester County Work Shop to play. We all have a real good time down there, too. These folks are right smart interested in real old time square dancing. I don't think they're making much money; but we always get paid.

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And it won't be long before we'll be crowdin' them in because they's a lot of newcomers every night we go down.

“You know I've played at the Dance-Internationale at the Rainbow Room at Rockefeller Center in New York. That was an affair where folks from all nations put on their native dances. Jest Martin and me played at that one and I guess we kind of stole the show. We played at the Hotel Pennsylvania the same time and made a hit there.

“Now at places like that we find the folks are really interested in the old-fashioned square dance. They don't monkey around like the folks did at that Yacht Club. They do as I tell them, and dance right.

“I honestly think that old time dancing is coming back. For instance there are several groups that are learning these square sets. Take in Springfield for instance. They have a group of youngsters down there, Girl Scouts that can do all the squares like real old timers. We went down there just once and took a set from Otis to show them how 7 to dance and they caught right on to it. You know they's some sense to square dancin'. Why I rather see younguns dance that way then to try to do that crazy jitterbug stuff. Ain't no sense to it at all. Jumpin round like crazy loons or monkeys trying to climb a tree, that ain't dancin'. They aint no sense to it.

“Well, I guess I'd better be gittin this washing machine fixed up, or Ella May will be wantin' to know what's holdin' me up. It took a lot of head work to figger this machine out. Oh I don't mean me. I mean the feller that made this up.

“I see fiddling hasn't prevented you from being mechanically-minded, Sammy”.

“Good land, you don't think I'm just a fiddler, do you. That's only my side-line. I'm really a plain dirt farmer and an old-time saw mill man. Up to the last few years I used to do farming on a big scale, that is big for this part of the country. Then when the sawmills began to do a good business I got a job with one outfit as a fireman and later became

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an engineer. Course I worked at saw mills off and on all my life. My father had one and I worked with him as a boy so I know a leetle about it. ?

“It was when the World War came along that the sawmills really got revived here in Otis. Why school boys used to earn thirty-five dollars a week during vacation time on the mills. They worked as swapers, markers and did about everything but the actual sawing. That was a man's job.

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“There are still some mighty good sawyers still in town. Take Frank Werden for instance, and then there's Amos Witter. Two of the best sawyers in the country. They know the game from A to Izzard.

“Otis was a prosperous town in war days. The young lads were dressed as well as any city chap too. Why they used to think that young Ruben Cowell over in East Otis was a regular dude. He owned more silk shirts and suits than anyone. Spent all his earnings on clothes. Most all the boys owned cars and used to drive around the county like [helions?]. People had so much money they didn't know enough to put some in the banks. Mebbe it's just as well.

“I don't do as much farmin' as I used to. I've only five cows seventeen pigs and of course I raise enough vegetables for the family. I also got a fine sugar bush.

“A sugar bush!”

“Didn't you never hear what a sugar bush is?” Well it's a nice stand of sugar maples. When the sap begins to run in the early spring we go out and tap the trees and take the sap to boil down to syrup and sugar. Most everybody in this part of the country owns their own sugar house.

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“Did you ever go to a sugar eat? Well now, that's too bad. You certainly missed something. Well we usually hold the sugar eat at the church. We take enough sap that's just about right to make wax. The wax is a sort of gummy stuff that rises to the top when you're boilin' sugar. That is just before it hardens into the sugar. Folks get a plate full of snow and then the wax is ladled out of the bi'lers on to the 9 snow and when it hardens a might, you eat it.

“Sure you might get sugar sick, but 'twon't hurt you none. You might feel bad for a day or two, but 'twon't kill you. Never heard of anyone dying from it. Better get back to this machine.

“All your jobs must keep you pretty busy, Sammy.”

“We-ll, they do and they don't. I got them figgered out so they ain't so bad. I always worked on my farm during the daytime and fiddled at night. The days I worked in the sawmills, I worked from five o'clock in the morning 'til dusk at night. Then I'd go home, wash up, have my supper, milk ten or twelve cows, feed the stock, fill up the wood box and take Martin on the handle bars of my bicycle and ride off to a kitchen dance to play until about four in the morning. Course that wouldn't be every night in the week. But 'twould be two or three nights a week. Folks used to be pretty much put out when I wouldn't get to these affairs until about ten o'clock. But once I got to fiddlin' and a-callin' they'd soon forget all about it.

“I've worked hard, played hard and had a darned good time in my life. I ain't made much money and I'm still a young man — goin' on fifty-six. I like to see folks a dancin' the old square sets. Something wholesome about it. You know you tell a lot about folks watchin' them dance. Folks that like to dance the good old dances you'll find are pretty apt to be reliable. I hate like the dickens to see those nice youngsters of today trying to ape monkeys. It jest don't seem right somehow. Here is how I figger it all out. You'll always find real folk a'doing the real things worthwhile, and the artificial folks takin' 10 to artificial things



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and that's all there is to that". [ The quick tones of Ella May inquiring as to the state of the washing machine ended our conversation for the day. ]