

FIDDLES AND FIDDLERS

Our pioneers loved to sing and dance and warmly welcomed good musicians into their midst. Of all instruments we have more records of the violin than any other.

Our earliest violin story goes back to the 1760s. It is said that during the 106-year-long colonial period there was only one instance of a Catawba killing a white man. The story goes that a Frenchman appeared in the Nation with his violin which he played sweetly--too sweetly as it turned out.

A young warrior, entranced by the music he had heard, followed the Frenchman. Some distance from the village, the Indian killed the musician in order to gain possession of the "magic box". We can only wonder about his dismay when he found that the magic had been in the trained hands of the Frenchman.

The Frenchman's body was found by some white settlers who went as a group to inform King Haigler, the Catawba chief.

Justice was swift according to Maurice Moore. "[Haigler] . . . taking up his handsome, silver mounted rifle, put in fresh priming, blew a piercing blast on his hunting horn, with air of a king and eye of an eagle, watched the approaches on every side. In a few moments, an Indian came in view, toiling up the ascent with a fine buck on his back. As soon as the Indian king descried him, he raised his piece to his shoulder, fell on his knee, took a rest, deliberate aim, and fired. The unerring rifle did its work, the victim of the savage monarch's justice fell dead.."

A few violins are now more than 200 years old. A fiddle that ended up in the Hand family of York County's Allison Creek area was documented as having been made in 1780 and brought to this country in 1810 by a German by the name of Herman.

Around 1855, Alexander Sutton, who lived north of Fort Mill, sent to New York for Mr. Herman to come to York County for the express purpose of teaching a slave named Mingo to play the fiddle for the country dances.

Mr. Herman stayed with the Uriah Hand family. Uriah Hand owned a grist mill at the site of Col. William Hill's old iron works. Many of the dances took place there. Hand eventually bought the violin from Herman.

A news item in 1923 told of a Rock Hill man, J.H. B. Jenkins, Sr., having a violin that was 113 years old. The Hornstiner violin was gotten in trade with a black man who said it was once the property of Dick Hackett.

Dick Hackett had been a slave of the Latta family of Yorkville. He, like Mingo, was taught to play for dances. Hackett, also known as Dick Latta, was considered to be the finest violinist of the whole area.

Hackett was playing for a dance in Lancaster in 1886 the night the big earthquake struck the Summerville-Charleston area with such force that the vibrations were felt as far as Canada, the Mississippi River and the Bermudas.

The quake so frightened Hackett that he "slammed the old violin down and could never be persuaded to play it again." When Jenkins acquired the violin he said the neck was broken off, there was a big hole in the side, the finger board was wrecked, and it had become unglued.

In spite of the violin's condition, a violin maker of national reputation was able to restore it.

There are records of the Virginia reel being danced in the area since the 1780s. A favorite: "Jenny put the kettle on; Molly, blow the bellows strong; we'll all take tea".