Dad Nordyke bought his "old gourd of a fiddle" for $2.50 when he was twelve years old and played it for seventy-five years. Mother Nordyke cared little for music of any kind, except a few hymns.

My Dad's Best Crop Was Music

When boll weevils and floods tore at the spirits of his Texas neighbors, the author's father could fiddle optimism right back into their hearts.

By LEWIS NORDYKE

When dad played his fiddle the world became a bright and morning star. To him his violin was an instrument of faith, hope and charity. Some of his neighbors deep in the heart of rural Texas at the turn of the century had been brought up to believe that the fiddle was the devil's music box.

But dad could tuck his old fiddle to his shoulder, wave his bow almost magically and then bring it down lovingly across the strings, and the agonies of plowing with diabolical mules, the catastrophe of burning drought, the mutilation of buffeting winds and pounding hailstones, the memories of all the ills that flesh is heir to—the harms and hurts of dirt farming—would disappear. It was as if dad in his old blue-billy overalls, but with his hair neatly combed and his hands as clean as homemade soap and well water could make them, had sat down square-dab on Pandora's box and put the devil to shame.

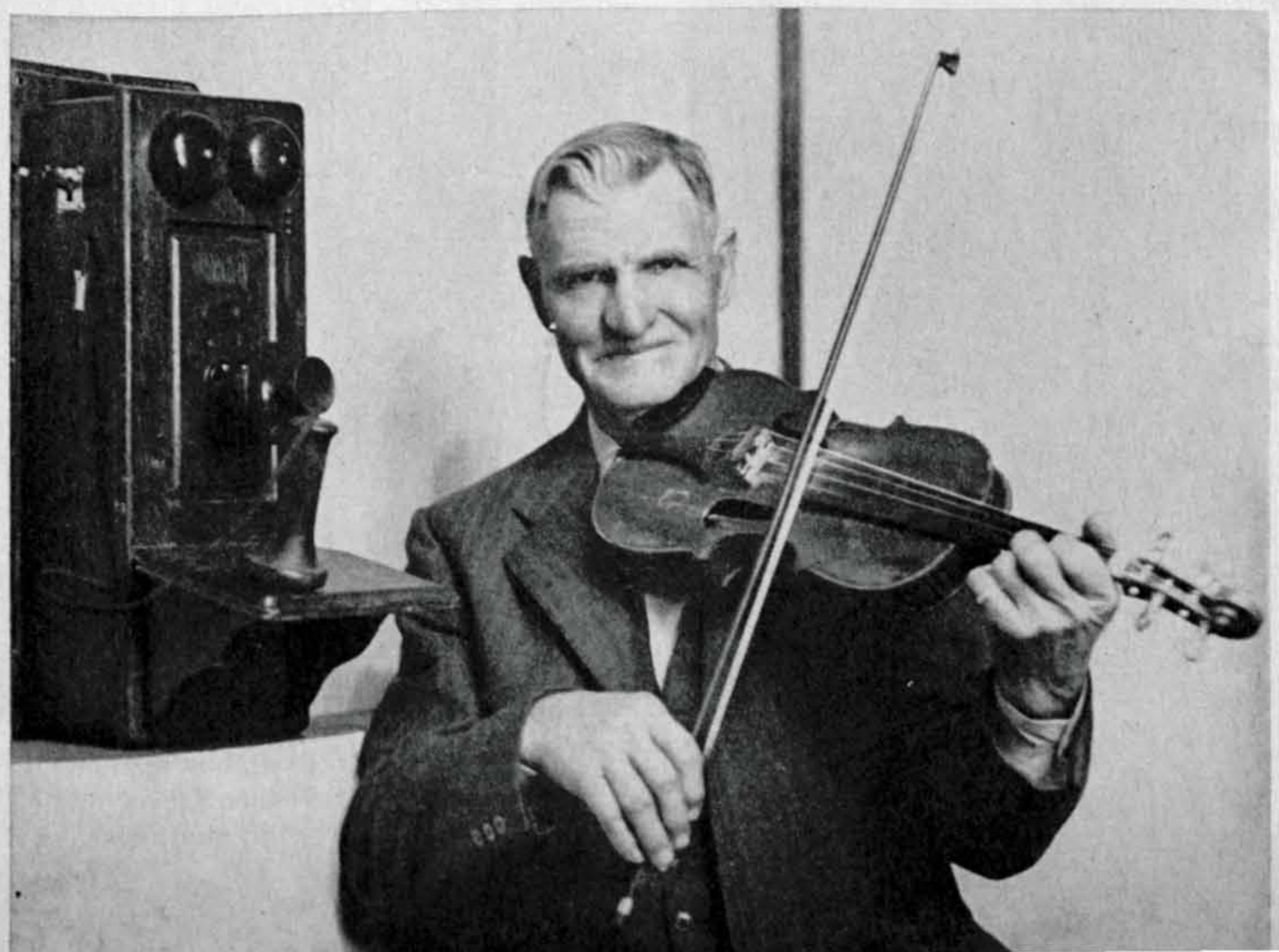
Dad—his full name was Charles Thaddeus Nordyke—was husky and broad-shouldered. He had blue eyes and light brown hair that pointed into a sharp widow's peak in his forehead. He stood just under six feet. When he was sixty he could, with one hand, lift a sixty-pound sack of wheat from the ground and place it in the back of a truck. His hands were large and grooved by plow and hoe handles, but they could dance like popping popcorn over the fiddle strings.

When dad was twelve he spent his first $2.50 for what he called an old gourd of a fiddle and he played it seventy-five years. He played only by ear and by heart. From early childhood he yearned to study music but never had the chance. It is doubtful whether he would have enjoyed life as much as a concert violinist as he did being the Fiddler of Nubbin Ridge making music for his neighbors.

Our 247-acre farm—not a very big spread in boundless Texas—was called Nubbin Ridge because it had ridges, and often the cornfield yielded nubbins instead of pearly, full-grained ears of corn. It was in a region of cedar-clad hills, timber-lined creeks and oval valleys. The fields dad tended lay in one of the lovely little valleys with a wooded stream meandering across the middle and rocky ridges at the edge. In every direction we could see hills that rose to the blue of the sky. We were sort of hemmed in our own tiny world. Nine of us lived by the sweat of the brow on the farm, dad and mother and their four daughters and three sons.

When I was a boy on Nubbin Ridge, there were no such agricultural aids as subsidies and guaranties; it was a time of "do it yourself" and "go it yourself." And a man had only his two hands and a skyful of weather.

Our neighbors were about like us, people living on one-family farms wresting a living from the furrowed earth. The community was named Turkey Creek (Continued on Page 81)



When a neighbor phoned Dad Nordyke for a few tunes to raise his spirits, people on the party line for miles around listened in to his pioneer network.

My Dad's Best Crop Was Music

(Continued from Page 25)

for a big stream which wandered through it. Turkey Creek folks were connected with one another and the rest of the world by narrow, tree-bordered lanes, a rural mail route and the sagging party lines of a small telephone exchange at the village of Cottonwood, five miles east of Nubbin Ridge.

Our Turkey Creek schoolhouse, a one-room, white building, sat beside the road in a wildwood grove. It was our educational, cultural, social and entertainment center. It also served as the Baptist Church.

Dad furnished music for school plays, picnics, Christmas programs and nearly every get-together at the schoolhouse. At home his fiddle never gathered dust. When the chores were done or when he needed to express his joy in life or play away the blues, down came the fiddle. And what dad could do for himself he could do for others. He applied the Golden Rule to music.

One spring the countryside was verdant, and every farm looked like a picture on a livestock-remedy calendar. Our corn, with bannerlike blades waving in the breeze, was just beginning to tassel. On a sultry afternoon, an ugly cloud full of wind rumbled up from the west and dumped torrents of rain and six inches of baseball-sized hail on the community. Our corn was beaten into the ground, and so was every growing thing; moreover, the fields were almost ruined by flood waters.

I walked with dad over the farm to survey the desolation. I was a towhead about knee-high to a grasshopper. Dad's shoulders seemed to sag when he gazed out over the battered ground where his young cotton had been. We had put up terraces in the field, across a draw which dad called the Jordan. Every one of them was broken, and much of our rich, black soil washed away, exposing plowshare marks in the hardpan. While we sat on a terrace trying to figure out how we could repair it, a neighbor joined us. His face wore a look of abject desperation of the kind that only a soul-sick man of the soil can know. Whetting his pocketknife on his muddy shoe, he told us of the ruin at his place.

"You know, Charley," the neighbor said, "sometimes I'm a good mind to just ram my knife into my jugular vein and have it over with."

He made a slight movement toward his throat with his knife. A startled look came into dad's eyes. He got up and brushed the back of his overalls. "It could have been worse," dad said. "Let's go to the house and get a cold drink of water."

By the time we reached the house the neighbor had suggested that maybe dad could play a few tunes on the fiddle. At first, despite dad's effort to be jolly with the distraught neighbor, there was a feel of sadness in the music. But he stuck to spirited tunes—*Cotton-eyed Joe*, *The Irish Washerwoman*, *The Arkansas Traveler*—and the music became lively and gay.

Within a little while dad and the neighbor left the house talking and laughing about how they'd bed up the land and start over.

The Mexican boll weevil caused more anxiety than almost anything else. In 1909 Nubbin Ridge contained only 160 acres, the standard for a one-family farm. An eighty-seven-acre patch just to the south of us was for sale, and dad was almost wild to buy it. One day in August, when the cotton was beginning to open, dad hurried to the house from the field and called mother.

"I want to show you something, Sis," he said, and his face was a yard long. Dad called mother "Sis" for short, her name being Narcissus.

He opened his clenched hands. In one of them were several yellowed cotton squares and in the other were half a dozen grayish bugs with long snouts. "You've heard of the Mexican boll weevil," he said. "Well, there he is. And these punctured squares show how he works. At last, we've got the boll weevil, which means we had just about as well kiss cotton good-by."

Mother examined the squares and bugs. "But we've other things," mother, the eternal optimist, pointed out. "We can diversify. We'll make it."

"I don't know how," dad said, and his voice was shaky. One by one he placed the weevils on the floor and crushed them with his heavy shoe.

Everything on Nubbin Ridge—and on a majority of the small farms in Texas—was built around cotton as the money crop. A man could mortgage his first bale by the time the seeds that would produce it had sprouted and buy essential supplies at the store on fall credit. The weevil was changing this.

For years the bug had been creeping northward from Central America, devastating cotton in the Old South and in southern Texas. By the time it hit Nubbin Ridge the Government was estimating that the insect was causing an annual loss of $200,000,000 to cotton farmers in the South.

Dad wandered around the yard as if lost. After a while he walked into the house and tuned his fiddle. He started playing sad pieces in tones that tore at the heart—*Darling Nelly Gray*, *Carry Me Back to Old Virginny*, *Little Old Cabin in the Lane*, *When You and I Were Young*, *Maggie*.

Gradually the music quickened. *Listen to the Mockingbird* sounded a bit cheerful. Then came *Little Brown Jug* with considerable zip, and the same for *Boom-ta-ra*.

Dad finally ended with a rousing rendition of *Turkey in the Straw*. When he came out of the house he was whistling the tune.

"Sis," he said to mother, "I think you're right. We'll make it somehow. We can raise chickens and livestock. Anyhow, I guess we won't have such a hard job of picking cotton from now on."

Having used his old reliable fiddle to play away trouble and replace it with hope and courage, dad bought the eighty-seven acres and faced a $1500 debt at 10 per cent interest.

"I just hope I haven't bit off more than I can chew," he said.

It turned out to be quite a mastication—ten years of toil to pay for the land.

Mother cared little for music, except old sacred songs which she hummed when at work, but she heard more fiddling than perhaps any other woman in Texas. She seldom complained and she enforced only one absolute rule on music: dad was not to play when a thrasher crew or any visitors were eating at our house. Once he had been persuaded to play while a part of a thrasher crew was still at the table. Some of the women who had come in to help mother whispered around that dad had used his fiddle to toll men from the table, thereby cutting down on the consumption of food. Mother wanted no more of that.

At least a thousand times, she said, "Your papa would play his fiddle if the world was about to blow up."

And once dad came about as close to that as could ever be possible. In May of 1910 the folks at Turkey Creek, and all over the nation, were in a space-age state of turmoil over Halley's comet. It had been predicted for seventy-five years, and it had appeared on schedule. There were all sorts of frightening stories about the comet, the main one being that the world would pass through its tail, said to be millions of miles long, or else the wavering, fiery plume would switch, like the tail of a milk cow at a fly, and swat the world, sending it winding and everybody with it.

One night in telephone party-line conversation several of the neighbors decided that on the evening of the next day, May eighteenth, they would gather at Nubbin Ridge and view the comet from a peak, which we called Signal Hill, just to the west of our house. This was supposed to be the day the earth would pass through the tail of the comet and thus the most dangerous time to the earth.

Dad was up at the usual time of five o'clock that portentous morning. He started a fire in the black kitchen range, using dead cedar shavings for kindling. The pungent, sweet smell of the burning cedar floated through the house on the cool morning air. Next he ground the coffee and put it on to boil. Then he hunkered down beside a flickering kerosene lamp to put a new set of gut strings on his fiddle. His plunking awakened mother.

Stepping into the kitchen, she looked at him and said, "Why in the world are you fiddling with that fiddle at this time of day?"

"Just putting on new strings," he said, thumping all four of them. "Why?"

Mother laughed out loud. She knew dad by heart: if the world blew up, he intended to go out of it playing his fiddle, with four brand-new strings; if the world kept on rolling peacefully along, he'd have an opportunity to play for the neighbors who were coming to our house for the comet watch.

Darkness gathered quickly with a drone of insects that evening. I remember the incidents on Signal Hill mainly by having heard them talked about through the years. One of the neighbors who traveled to Nubbin Ridge that night and climbed Signal Hill was a maiden lady called Miss Eula. There was one thing about Miss Eula that made people talk—she fainted at funerals.

"I don't believe the world will come to an end tonight," Miss Eula insisted, as the neighbors walked up the hill. "The Bible tells us that the world will end at a time least expected. With everybody expecting the world to come down like Humpty-Dumpty just any minute, it can't do it—not according to the Bible."

"That's sort of the way I feel," Will Bowen, a close neighbor, said. "I was out there cutting oats today and I got to thinking about the comet and I noticed that there wasn't a cloud in sight. Just as blue and pretty. The Bible says Jesus will come in a cloud. Well, without clouds, how can anything like the end of the world happen? I just hope it don't cloud up."

The rocky brow of Signal Hill gave a grand view of the valley of Turkey Creek. There, hanging in the sky above the hills to the northwest, was Halley's comet. It was a magnificently awesome thing. It looked like a huge, flaming kite with a tail a yard or so wide. The tail sort of looped around and had some places that were brighter than others. Maybe it was because people were fearful, but the tail seemed to move a little, as if getting ready for a mighty lash.

Away from the comet the distant sky was studded with stars. The Milky Way was heavy and glowing. The Turkey Creek folks stood in silence, every eye on the comet; it was a wonder to behold.

All at once a shooting star streaked through the Milky Way.

"Great Jehoshaphat!" one of the men cried out. "Here she comes!"

"Ooooh!" Miss Eula gasped, and she fainted dead away, just as if she had been at a funeral. Several men and women worked over her until her eyes fluttered, and she came to with a little groan and asked, "Is the world still here?"

Of course the world was still there. Over the country, farmers huddled in their storm cellars, and many city workers stayed home, desiring to spend their last hours on earth with their families. Turkey Creek folks stood on the hill at Nubbin Ridge and gazed at the wonder in the sky until they decided it was time to walk back down the enduring earth and return to our house.

As dad had doubtless suspected, he soon had his chance to try out the new fiddle strings. When the some thirty neighbors had found seats on the front porch and in the yard, Will Bowen suggested, "Charley, how about getting down your fiddle and bow and giving us a little music?"

"Aw, I don't think anybody'd want to hear me saw the gourd tonight," dad replied.

"Let's do something daring and reckless—I'll read and you knit."

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

"Come on, Mr. Nordyke," one of the younger women urged, "why don't you play for us?"

"Don't think I can tonight," dad said. "I've got a bone in my finger."

That was a little joke he pulled when he was just dying to play but wished to be coaxed. Eventually he went in the house for his fiddle. He stopped at a mirror and roached his hair—this a sort of bow to music.

Dad had a knack for getting people in the mood for his music. Knowing of the scattered prejudice against the fiddle, he eased into a song titled *Gloryland*. It was a church song with church tones, but it was fairly fast with some good runs. He shifted from *Gloryland* to *The Bonnie Blue Flag*, a Confederate war song, which created a big stir—foot stamping, hand clapping and a few Rebel yells.

Dad was ready for his next move—an old familiar heart song, *Nelly Gray*. He started the tune a bit mournfully and gradually brightened it. Then he shifted to trilling *The Mockingbird* and went from that to *My Old Kentucky Home*.

Almost before anyone realized what was happening to the music, dad was "eating up" *Turkey in the Straw*, and every foot was tapping and every body was swaying.

Will Bowen, apparently having forgotten Halley's comet, shouted, "How about giving us *Sally Goodin?*"

Dad played the old breakdown with vigor. Several men jumped up and jigged around.

The next tune was a novelty number called *The Wild Indian*, a fast one which raced up to a break—just long enough for a sustained yell, something like "Hoooooho!" Dad gave the yells. Pretty soon nearly everyone was joining in. Children gathered around and gazed wide-eyed at the performance.

This put dad in a mood to entertain. *Pop Goes the Weasel* has a place which is thumped instead of played with the bow. Dad loved the tricky tune. He grasped his bow in the center and played with the front part; when he came to the thumping place, he revolved the bow and played with the other end until the next thump. In this way he kept the bow spinning. During one thump he placed the bow between his knees and clamped it there; then he sawed the fiddle up and down the bow. Actually, he was playing the bow with the fiddle, but the tune came out clear as a cowbell at dawn. When he came to the thumping part, he thumped and spun the fiddle all the way around and hit the bow without slurring a note.

All our neighbors went home whistling or humming. Very few remembered to look toward the northwest to see whether the comet and its wicked tail were still around.

Of course, the anxiety over the comet was soon a thing of the past, but the fiddling and the plight of "weeviled-out" farmers were not forgotten. One evening Will Bowen called dad on the telephone and said, "Charley, I'm downhearted and blue. I was out in the cotton patch today. Got a few little squares showing up. Every time a square forms, there are four boll weevils waiting there to puncture it with their snouts. Just wondered if you could play a tune or two for me?"

"I sure could, Will," Dad said. "Could you come over?"

"No. I mean play on the phone box."

"The phone box?"

"Sure," Mr. Bowen said. "I can hear you talk. Why couldn't I hear the fiddle?"

"I hadn't thought about that," dad said, "but I can try anything at least once."

Dad hurried to the mirror and combed his hair. He took the fiddle to the telephone and thumped the strings. Putting the receiver to his ear, he said, "Hear anything, Will?"

"Sure can," Mr. Bowen said. "Just as plain as day. Now try a tune."

"What would you like to hear?"

"Could you try *Sally Goodin* and play it just like you did the other night?"

Dad handed the receiver to me. He stepped up to the mouthpiece on the wall box and cut loose on *Sally Goodin*. I could hear Mr. Bowen whistling and yelling.

By the time the tune was finished there were half a dozen neighbors on the line, and they talked about how wonderful the music sounded over the telephone. They made numerous requests; I relayed them to dad and he played the numbers. The central girl at Cottonwood had a call for our line. She asked the caller if he'd like to hear music, and he was willing. Then she cranked a long ring on each of the party lines. That brought down nearly every receiver. With all the lines hooked up with our line, dad was playing for people as far as ten miles away. I don't know whether this was the nation's first broadcast of entertainment, but it was certainly one of the pioneers. Moreover, with all the lines linked, we had a network. And it lengthened.

A cattle buyer in Fort Worth placed a call for Richard Cordwent, London-born owner of the Cross Bar Ranch which horseshoed around three sides of Nubbin Ridge. Central hated to break up our party and she said to the caller: "Mr. Nordyke is playing his violin on Mr. Cordwent's line right now. Would you like to listen?"

"I'd like to listen," the cattle buyer said, "if you won't charge me and if you'll ask him to play *Corner Twelve, Rusk Street, Fort Worth, Texas.*"

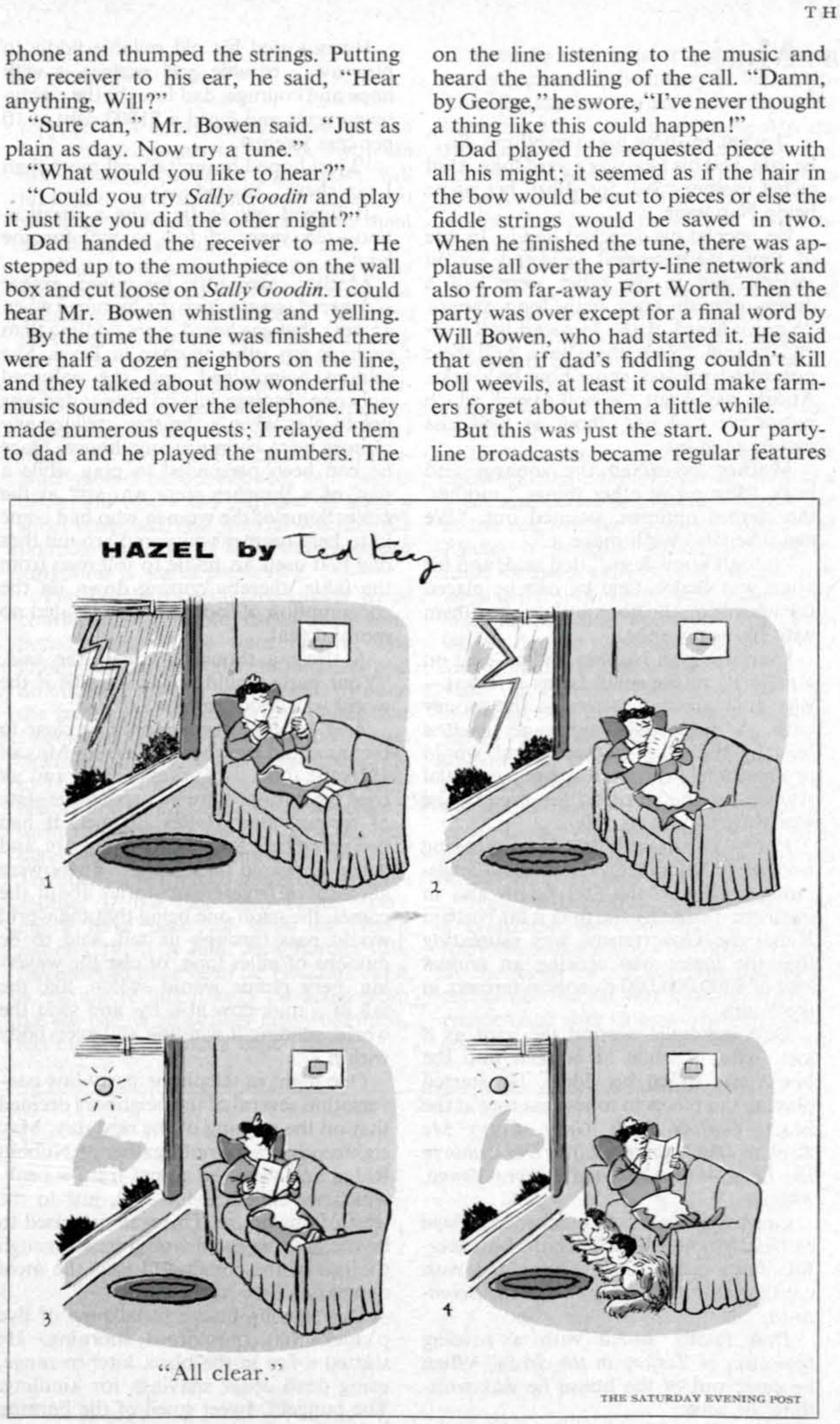
This long-titled tune, a breakdown, was named for the location of a once-famous section of Fort Worth known as Hell's Half Acre. Dad knew the tune. But he was a little shocked at the thought of being heard all the way to Fort Worth. It so happened that Mr. Cordwent was on the line listening to the music and heard the handling of the call. "Damn, by George," he swore, "I've never thought a thing like this could happen!"

Dad played the requested piece with all his might; it seemed as if the hair in the bow would be cut to pieces or else the fiddle strings would be sawed in two. When he finished the tune, there was applause all over the party-line network and also from far-away Fort Worth. Then the party was over except for a final word by Will Bowen, who had started it. He said that even if dad's fiddling couldn't kill boll weevils, at least it could make farmers forget about them a little while.

But this was just the start. Our party-line broadcasts became regular features of community life. On rough-weather days of winter when farm folks were forced to remain in the house, someone would ring us and ask dad to play, and usually it developed into a network affair. At times, though, dad played over the telephone for an individual—someone who was ill or an old person who was shut in. Our phone kept ringing with requests for music until radio came in. By this time people were whizzing everywhere in automobiles, and winding rural lanes were being bulldozed into roads.

On Nubbin Ridge, as I suppose on all farms, there was no time quite like late summertime when the crops were laid by. The haze lay misty and blue on the distant hills. It was whippoorwill time, with the languid calls of the unseen birds drifting out of the dark woods along the creek. Katydids played their unending tunes, and the yellow roses were in bloom. There was a lull on the farm. Except for sowing the fall turnip patch and a few odd chores, the work was light. No hurry.

Dad liked to sit on the front porch in the cool of the evening, with moonlight sifting through a latticework of vines, and play for hours, nearly every tune he knew. When he finally ended the solitary musical session he invariably whistled tunes as he put up his violin.



Dad was a music-loving dreamer, but he was also a practical man, a hard worker and a good farmer. He took care of things: he used the same farm wagon for more than half a century and it was still in good condition. He was one of the first farmers in Callahan County to terrace fields to hold moisture and restore soil fertility. Through diversification, he by-passed the snout of the boll weevil and was a good provider. He could go to Bob Norrell at the First National Bank in Baird, our county seat, and borrow whatever money he needed with only his name on the note.

After the children had gone to college or married, dad continued his work and, of course, his fiddling. He farmed Nubbin Ridge just short of half a century, until 1950, when he was seventy-eight and mother was seventy-five; then he decided to turn out the teams and lay down the hoe. He and mother retired to a white cottage with a *bois d'arc* tree out front on Poplar Street in Baird.

We children worried about dad when he moved to town. He had never been idle a day and he had known only farm life. We were afraid he would miss the hills, woods and fields of Nubbin Ridge and grow lonely and waste away. But dad fooled us. He was in his element there in Baird. He put away his blue-billy overalls and heavy shoes and dressed up every day. His life-long dream came true: for the first time, he could play the fiddle all he wanted to—and he wanted to. Occasionally the Baird neighbors dropped in to hear him, and to his delight he was asked to play at functions in Baird. At times mother confided to her visiting children that so much fiddling in the house almost drove her out of her mind.

For several summers our whole family returned to the hills of home for an annual picnic. Dad always slipped his fiddle into the trunk of a car—just in case the need for music should arise. After an hour or so on old Nubbin Ridge he was happy to be getting back to town.

Retirement brought dad another glory: for the first time he had an opportunity to attend the Callahan County Old Settlers Reunion, which is held one day each August. One of the main events of the reunion is an old fiddler's contest. Dad entered and won first place four years in a row, making him the undisputed champion of the whole county. I'm sure he wouldn't have swapped the honor for all the oil in Texas.

Fiddling was undoubtedly good medicine for dad. From the time he had measles when he was six until he was well up into his eighties, he was not sick in bed a single day. He could see and hear as well as ever. He never had a dental cavity or lost a tooth and he had his full head of hair.

The last tune I heard him play was the one he liked best, the haunting *Listen to the Mockingbird*. He was old and feeble then but he played the tune with the same springtime zest he had performed it the night of Halley's comet so long ago.

On a mellow October day in 1958 dad became seriously ill. The doctor said he must be hurried to a hospital. When an ambulance was summoned, dad called mother to his bedside.

"Sis," he said, "could you get my fiddle out of the case and bring it here?"

Mother flew to get the fiddle. "Could you thump the strings?" dad requested. "I want to see if it's in tune."

Mother thumped the strings as she had heard dad do thousands of times. He approved the tones.

That was the last he ever knew. He left this world at eighty-seven with the happy knowledge that his old gourd of a fiddle was in tune. THE END