

Berkeley, 1968

In February 1968 I promised the lady I was seeing that we would drive out to the west coast during that coming summer. By the time summer came around, we were no longer seeing each other, but she still needed to get out there, and I was wanting to visit my brother who was attending school at the University of California in Berkeley. What the hell. We went. Me, her, and her dog.

We drove across the northern route to get to her family home in Seattle. Even with my hot 4-carb, **Fitch modified Corvair**, it took an endless time to get across Montana-- where the speed limit was posted only as "reasonable and proper."

We spent four days in Seattle on Mercer Island, and then headed to California. I dropped her off at her destination in Berkeley and hooked up with my brother. We went to look up my old New York City playing buddy David Cohen who, by this time, was playing keyboards for Country Joe and the Fish. David mentioned there was an old-time fiddlers contest the next day in Berkeley, and prizes were being offered. I went.

It was the called "The 35th annual Berkeley Old-Time Fiddler's Convention." Of course, it was the first they had held. It was held at an outdoor park-- officially Constitution Park, but locally known as "Provo Park."

It was Berkeley in 1968 -- the height of California flower power. It was like walking into an alternate universe.

The park was filled with folks, many smoking big spliffs under the watchful eye of the Berkeley police. It was certainly NOT like it was on the east coast! David introduced me to Augustus Stanley Owsley, the acid king who was wandering through the crowd. It was a brief conversation:

David: Owsley! I'd like you to meet Winnie, a friend of mine from New York.

Owsley: Nice to meet you. Ever try any of my acid?

Me: Indeed.

Owsley (smiling): Good, huh?

And off he wandered.

The contest was about to get underway, and the judges made their way to their seats. John Lundberg, came in a fancy pin-striped suit, wearing spats and carrying a silver cane, shouting: "Here come de Judge!" The other judges were "Big" John Campbell, Campbell Coe, and Richard Greene. They were given a bottle of "Wild Turkey" for their efforts. They became rather drunk during the contest. Points were awarded and deducted, but the criteria were never announced. One of the judges said there was nothing to worry about, all the winners had been pre-selected and their names were in sealed envelopes. The "Poison Coyote Kid" got 4 points just for the name.

It was not quite like Union Grove. I can't imagine what the audience in North Carolina would have made of it all. One of the early bands to perform, called "Ye Golden Toad," was a conglomeration of about 15 folks playing Tibetan music - bells, whistles, and loud death-like groans from a long horn that rested on the ground. Another large assemblage of ten players got 1/2 point for having a baton twirler, but were disqualified for unlawful assembly. Rick Shubb (now of Shubb capo fame) entered the banjo contest with his wife. She played the left hand of his banjo and he played the right.

It was a completely outrageous afternoon.

At about 5 p.m., the winners were announced. I was awarded first prize in the banjo category. Said the judges, "Anyone who comes all the way from New

York deserves to win." I won a beautiful ribbon , made from the top of a can, and five pounds of prime rutabagas.

The second place went to someone who wasn't even present but, said the judges, "He would have won were he here." The prize of six pounds of rutabagas were thrown out (one at a time) to the audience, some who tried eating them raw.

It was a most bizarre experience.

That evening I got to meet Earl Crabb, the author (with Rick Shubb) of the magnificent "**Map of the World**." The next day my brother and I took some Owsley acid and explored Tilden Park.

Then I found someone wanting to head east who was willing to share driving, and we headed back to the east coast. We did it in 52 hours. And that was without cracking open the pharmacy bottle that held four timed-release dexedrine capsules.

Them were the days!

As for the Fiddler's Convention... Charles Perry did a review of it in the August 10, 1968 issue of *Rolling Stone Magazine* . He said it was "the first totally bullshit competition in a public place." The next year they held the 17th Annual in Provo Park. The prizes were home baked pies.

The following year they held the 22rd annual. The first prize was an expense paid trip to Emeryville-- two bus tokens and a meal ticket to the Doggie Diner.

After that, there were no more. Rick Shubb told me that there were plans for a real "First Annual Berkeley Old Time Fiddler's Convention" but nothing ever came of it. Of course, it was going to be held in Seattle...



First prize ribbon at Berkeley: Indian fabric, and a tuna can lid!