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Frontier Fiddler: The Life of a Northern Arizona Pioneer
Kenner Casteel Kartchner

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A pioneer rakes brush, saws wood, drills wells, ploughs fields. His role in this world resembles that of a biblical prophet, who lays a highway in the desert, makes the crooked straight and the rough places smooth. Or, to put it in other terms, a pioneer edits the wilderness.

Such a person was Kenner Kartchner, a third-generation pioneer of the American Southwest who left some quite literate memoirs. These have been lovingly preserved and edited by his grandson, Larry Shumway, in the book Frontier Fiddler. That Kartchner was a pioneer/writer and Shumway the grandson/editor are facts that determine the strength and the weakness of this book. The strength comes in the direct, image-filled prose that pioneer life seems to have bequeathed Kartchner and that descendant Shumway refuses (wisely) to obstruct. The weakness is that the pioneer work ethic often leads Kartchner to eschew self-reflection and intimacy in his prose in favor of a rather detailed employment history. This penchant sometimes results in a mass of work-related anecdotes that Shumway appears reluctant to trim where other, nonfamilial, editors might (wisely) have been more ruthless.

While Kartchner revels in recalling tiny details of ranching, mining, and store clerking—his vocational pursuits—he remains tight-lipped on matters of the mind and heart. Courtship, for instance, is entirely overlooked, the only reference to it coming in the following passage, which appears after nearly two hundred pages of blow-by-blow descriptions of his work (including building a room onto the family homestead for himself and his bride): “Culminating a beautiful romance of several years standing, the wedding was set for March 25, 1908” (186). One longs for some account of this evidently warm courtship amid the book’s blizzard of mundane details. Likewise all Kartchner writes of the birth of his first child is that it was “by far the most exciting event while [we were] living in Salt Lake City” (192). He dutifully gives birth statistics, then goes on to recount at length more humdrum events. Although he is obviously sensitive to language, Kartchner never mentions schooling except in a brief reminiscence of his math studies with Joseph Peterson (12–15). One cannot help but feel hidden ironies in every page of this memoir: here is a man who knows how to write a book but who never mentions reading one; he writes for his posterity but never of them.
The book is sometimes prone to moralize where it could more profitably meditate. Kartchner occasionally tries to instruct by precept rather than edify by simple storytelling. (He writes on the first page that his work was “impelled” by the hope it might provide examples from which others can “emulate” the good and “avoid” the bad.) He instructs us best when he simply ruminates. Two examples come to mind: one, when he reflects on his detachment from his father, who left on a Mormon mission at a crucial time in the son’s life (17, 43); the other when Kartchner mulls over the evolution of his attitudes toward the “outside” (non-Mormon) world during his adolescence, gradually coming “to respect the religion of any man, conscientiously pursued, and to appreciate more fully a nation founded in freedom” (58).

Between such passages as these, one finds a profusion of job-related episodes and digressions that can become tiresome to a disinterested reader. Several sections of the book (such as the one concerning Commodore Owens [111–14]) intrude into the narrative without dramatic or structural purpose and should have been cut. At such points in the text, the editor’s kinship to the author clearly disadvantages him. After all, editing an ancestor requires uncommon fearlessness: to delete a forebear’s words is something akin to kicking over a headstone. Nevertheless, probably the best tribute to a pioneer writer is to approach his manuscript as he would have approached a parcel of land to be cleared.

The actual extent of Shumway’s editing is unclear; he describes his editorial philosophy and methods in a mere two sentences (xiii), and there is virtually no annotation. But, although I think he could have cut more from this manuscript than he did, a light hand with this text was probably better than a heavy one. Kartchner’s style is plain, in the best sense of the word, with a pleasing balance of modesty and self-confidence. He avoids the sort of affectation that sometimes blurs an eye for detail. The margins of my copy of the book are strewn with arrows and asterisks marking especially nice passages, such as those concerning the Grand Canyon (62–65), a stampede of cattle (141–42), sheep-shearing (114–16), tree-climbing (212–13), and even eating (131). Kartchner’s instinctive musicality emerges in passages such as this comment on a hard-riding horse named Blue Dog: “It so happened that Blue Dog was one among the twenty to thirty head they were breaking, and, next to a ‘singer’ called Squealer, was the wickedest bucking horse of the lot. So, as well might be surmised, I wanted no part of the handsome Blue Dog” (25). Prose like this, with its strategic repetition and transformation of consonants, suggests how sonorous vernacular writing can be. And Kartchner relishes every
opportunity to describe the frontier “characters” he has known, like John Hance, an aged “tourist amuser” whose beard “waved in the canyon breeze and . . . vibrated accompaniment to his constant chatter. Now and then an unruly denture shook loose from excessive enunciation, only to be mashed back in place while he caught his breath for the next sentence. Loose in his pants pocket was a hundred-dollar gold note for frequent, ‘accidental’ exhibition as he fumbled for a match, pocketknife, or small change” (71, 72).

The Blue Dog excerpt, like much of Kartchner’s memoir, also alludes to the frontiersman’s spiritual kinship to the horse. Indeed, so much of this autobiography recounts with delight life among horses (not to mention mules, cattle, and like creatures) that it could aptly have been titled Frontier Cowboy. The meticulous recounting of ranching throughout the book might seem tedious at times but is needed to reinforce some of Kartchner’s underlying purposes. For this book is meant to be, in part, a nostalgic tract on the beauties of cowboy life, which Kartchner feels have unjustly faded from memory. The vivid detail expresses how much there is to savor in such a life. And, he explains, if the book helps do that, “the writer will be glad it is written” (170).

He should be glad, then. Whether he really illuminates the art of fiddling, however, is another question. Most of Kartchner’s accounts of fiddling concern its ability to earn him money or enhance his job connections. These accounts are useful, to be sure, since they show how inseparable much of music-making is from the bread and butter of workaday life. Nevertheless the title Frontier Fiddler may forecast more than the text can deliver in musical insight. The book taught me, a nonfiddler, some of the hidden vicissitudes of fiddling, such as how arduous breakdown playing can really be (38). It also reminded me of the almost supernatural wonder that surrounded the early phonograph (104). Moreover, Shumway, an ethnomusicologist and a fiddler to boot, has provided for the musicologically minded a list of his grandfather’s repertoire and seventeen transcriptions of fiddle tunes, together with a brief essay on how Kartchner played them. More contemplation by Kartchner on the experience of fiddling, either aesthetic or technical, would enhance the book’s worth to the musicians who might be drawn to its title.

This conclusion leads me to the essential question: who should read this book? Kartchner wrote the manuscript chiefly for his descendants. They should study and cherish it, for seldom are reminiscences so well kept, even if their scope here seems somewhat limited to an outsider like myself. Scholars who want to sharpen their vision of the Southwest at the turn of the century

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should read it, as should those interested in cowboy life generally and in forestry work specifically (see 205–42). Musicians, especially fiddlers, should read it too, or at least parts of it, with the understanding that similar works have covered much of the same ground and only a little insight into the sociology of vernacular music emerges here. Students of Mormon history—among whom are some of the readers of this journal—should consult the book for at least two sections: “Trouble with the Church” (39–43), which describes Kartchner’s unpleasant confrontation with ecclesiastical “justice”; and “Sunday School Superintendent” (201–4), which recalls his pleasant months as a religious administrator in a small town.

The appearance of a book such as this is one of those unlikely events so routinely provided by small university presses. It is a book which has almost no discernable market but which deserves publication more than much of what passes for publishable nowadays. It does more for its readers than do many books, leaving in their minds some precious, indelible images from our regional past, colorful impressions not likely to be conveyed by secondary works.

Although Frontier Fiddler is a book about a pioneer, it is not a pioneering book. Yet it can occupy a clearing in our knowledge of the past much as a log cabin might, without airs or pretense. The book is rough but sturdy.