

Fiddle Pal Camps

by Lisa White

A fiddle teacher and the parent of a fiddle student meet. They talk about music lessons. They commiserate about the lack of local music summer camps. Together they decide to create something wonderful.

Brian Wicklund, a Minnesota-based fiddler and master instructor, had been traveling for decades to teach at top camps and workshops around the country. In 2008 Marty Button offered to run the logistics for a local fiddle camp. That first camp began with 27 students and three instructors. Fiddle Pal Camp eventually grew to three locations across the US, serving over 200 students annually from ages 7 to 80.

The 15th annual Fiddle Pal Camp will be held in Stillwater, MN June 20–23, 2023. The four-day camp is taught by some of the top fiddle, mandolin, and guitar teachers in the country. Brian describes camp as an “eclectic and diverse community” where nationally recognized instructors teach bluegrass, Irish, Scottish, Canadian, Appalachian, old-time, blues, and jazz. This year features fiddle teachers Brian Wicklund, Becky Buller, Jessie Burns, and Zack Kline. Other teachers include Eric Christopher on mandolin and Chris Silver on guitar.

Wicklund says he carefully selects his instructors, “Surprisingly, not so many great musicians are also great teachers. I get to see a lot of people teach and perform, then select a staff who is good at both.”

“There’s a lot of thought that goes into the daily schedule,” says Wicklund. He is careful to ensure a variety in each camp day that caters to both kids and adults. Each day includes four class sessions with four different fiddle instruc-

tors, seminars, electives, group lessons, lunch and snacks, outdoor activities, review sessions, instructor-led seminars, and a student recital on the final day. He



is careful to ensure maximum instruction time, while encouraging outdoor fun, providing time to meet new friends, and giving opportunities to perform for the



community.

Fiddle students at the camp are grouped by ability and learn to play new tunes in jam sessions with the guitar and mandolin students. New music is taught

by ear, but sheet music is also provided.

Evening activities include a barn dance and the very popular Fiddle Masters Concert featuring the camp’s staff on Thursday, June 22 at Trinity Lutheran Church in Stillwater. The student recital and Fiddle Masters concert are open to the public.

Some of Brian’s best ideas were gleaned from the many camps he has taught. Those ideas are applied to Fiddle Pal camps to make them educational and fun. He has taught at Rocky Grass Academy, Augusta Heritage Weeks, Targhee Bluegrass Camps, Sore Fingers in the UK, Musikvidsiljan in Sweden, and many more fiddle camps, bluegrass camps, and Suzuki violin festivals in the US and Canada.

American Fiddle Method Books.

Thousands of kids and adults have learned to play fiddle from Brian’s books, *The American Fiddle Method*. Published by Mel Bay, his best-selling method has sold nearly 100,000 copies since 1998 and arguably introduced more string players to fiddling than any other method. In addition to solid string pedagogy and authentic tunes, the method’s friendly, accessible approach to learning fiddle certainly explains its popularity.

American Fiddle method on-line.

In 2018, Brian brought the method into the 21st century with americanfiddlemethod.com. Fiddle students subscribe to a course at their level from beginner to advanced and learn from an innovative combination of video lessons, play-along backing tracks, and sheet music using an interface that Brian designed.

In addition to three AFM courses,



Brian created a beginner and intermediate level bluegrass fiddle course and co-produced two Scottish fiddle courses with Boston-area Katie McNally. He also began live, weekly group classes that follow his curriculum that meet via Zoom. Brian says, “I love teaching these live classes. So many people struggle to stay motivated when they are learning on their own. But the students in these classes develop a great camaraderie over the weeks and really encourage each other. We end up laughing a lot and having a ton of fun.”

Who is Brian Wicklund?

Brian’s professional career spans over three decades and is incredibly diverse. Brian’s love of bluegrass began around

the age of ten, when he heard a Flatt and Scruggs record called *Foggy Mountain Banjo*. Through events put on by MBOT-MA, he connected with musicians in his area and began weekly jam sessions with his dad on bass. That jam group turned into the band River Basin Bluegrass. As a teen he connected with Matt Thompson (currently of Monroe Crossing) and formed Bluegrass Connection, which performed for several years and culminated in winning first place at the Minnesota State Fair talent contest.

In college Brian majored in elementary education and spent a year studying in Japan, but continued to perform with a Japanese bluegrass band in Osaka. Upon

graduating in 1987, he joined Stoney Lonesome, with whom he played for seven years. In the decades following he has played as a sideman in many national and international touring bands, including the Judith Edelman Band, Kathy Kallick Band, Lorie Line’s Pop Chamber Orchestra, and the Chris Stuart Band. He has been busy as a studio musician and producer, laying down fiddle and mandolin tracks on hundreds of projects. His trio Brother Mule with mandolinist Ben Winship and bassist Eric Thorin won them an Indie Music Award for best Americana Album of 2005 with their release *Big Twang*.

Brian currently fronts progressive bluegrass/Americana band The Barley Jacks. The four-piece plays concerts and festivals across the Midwest. They released *Either Side of Night* (2010) and *Lighthouse* (2011). The production costs of their 2021 release *Coming Down the Mountain* was funded almost entirely by their fans.

“My whole life I have gotten so much joy from the bluegrass and fiddle music communities. Hosting my camps, writing books and teaching online have given me an opportunity to give back.” says Brian. “I’ve really got a great job!”

Fiddle Pal Camp will be held at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Stillwater, MN, June 20-23, 2023. For more information about camp, the Fiddle Masters Concert, and American Fiddle Method visit americanfiddlemethod.com.

