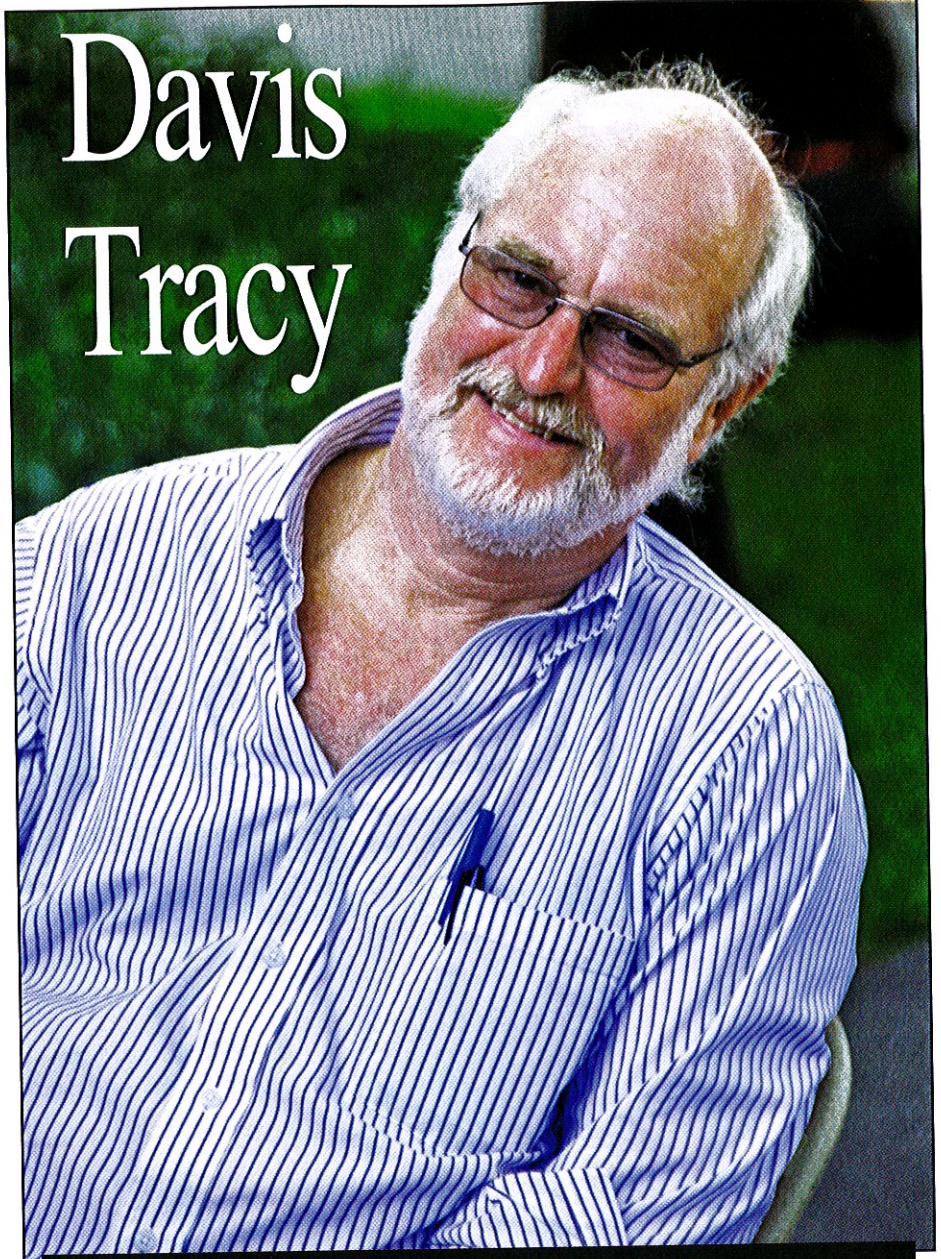


If you were to stroll through the quiet little city of Carlisle, located twenty miles west of Pennsylvania's capital of Harrisburg, you might be struck by the town's colonial history (dating back to 1751), its architecture, and by the pervasive presence of the Dickinson College campus on the western edge of town. You could take a peaceful and leisurely stroll through the college's vast quad, filled with mature trees and open space. But you might be taken by surprise to know that, since 1995, this outdoor locale has hosted a free bluegrass and old-time music festival on the second Saturday of each July.

The principal architect of this annual event, known as Bluegrass on the Grass, is a soft-spoken man named Davis Tracy. A self-professed Yankee who was born in New England, he followed a twisted path through music and academia that led him to earn academic degrees in psychology and to a career in counseling. At an early stage in his life, after a stint in the military, he found himself employed at a Naval Station in Millington, Tenn. It was there he discovered the Lucy Opry, a haven for bluegrass concerts and jamming, where he recalls, "I met these young guys who were about my age. One was a Vietnam Vet who carried a loaded .38 Special in his Martin guitar case. It probably was part of his experience in Vietnam, protecting something dear to him. So they kind of adopted me because they were Tennessee boys and here I am a Yankee... playing a Guild D-40 with a capo with elastic bands on it."

From there, he moved on to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where another chance encounter shaped both his musical development and that of the future festival. He found himself "teaching class there and a woman in the class said, 'If I go home and tell my boyfriend I met someone who played guitar and I don't know their name and don't invite them over, he'll be real upset.' So she invited me to come to their home, the oldest family-owned farm in Tennessee. I went there and I met her husband Don (Cassell) who was the mandolin player in the Dismembered Tennesseans."

Fiddler Fletcher Bright & the Dismembered Tennesseans have since become the anchor band at Bluegrass on the Grass, the one group that is part of the event's lineup every year without fail. But



Davis Tracy

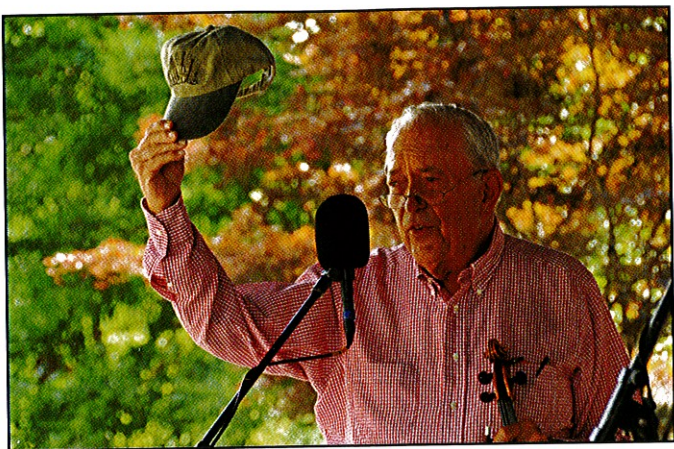
Bluegrass On The Grass

the festival itself had more humble origins at first, traceable literally to Tracy's backyard. In the early 1980s, he had moved to Pennsylvania to begin his counseling career at Dickinson College and had settled comfortably into a quiet country home with a dilapidated barn, which he and his wife spent years restoring. "For a number of years we had parties in the barn, fall or spring music parties. We had acoustic musicians playing there—one year, Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard. And having those two

in my home was a lot better than having the President. So they played up in the barn, and we had a lot of people out for those parties from the college. So two of those college people, one who was a dean and one who was an executive assistant to the president, suggested, 'Davis, would you do a bluegrass concert?' I asked, 'Do you mean play at one or organize one?' And they said, 'Yes.'"

Bluegrass on the Grass debuted on the lawn of the campus' performing arts center, as Tracy's homespun band soon

By Henry Koretzky
Photos by A. Pierce Bounds



Fletcher Bright waves his cap to the audience, summer 2013



L-R: Michael Cleveland joins Bob Martin and Don Cassell during Dismembered Tennesseans set



Steep Canyon Rangers



Crowd enjoying the festival in Dickinson Academic Quad

gave way to the likes of Kim Fox and Lynn Morris. But as word spread and crowds grew, it moved to its current home of the college's sprawling academic quad. Tracy is quick to give copious credit to the supporting role that Dickinson College has played in the festival's development. "The college has been a significant sponsor, particularly in kind, because to put on a festival you need a lot of facility maintenance and equipment support. We've been lucky to have been given that. The most recent past president, Bill Durden, came to the festival in about its fifth year. And he was delighted with the festival because he was, and is, a man who embraces community and saw that this event brought more people to a college campus who might never have been on a college campus, and he thought that was worthwhile."

The community of bluegrass performers has also caught wind of this festival, and this has allowed him to bring in the likes of Claire Lynch, Audie Blaylock, the Grass Cats, Steep Canyon Rangers, and many more high-profile acts to a festival that charges no admission fee. This mutual trusting relationship with the bluegrass community is one that the festival's organizer deeply appreciates and cultivates. "We do have strong relationships with bands because I love the music and I can converse with musicians, not learnedly, but familiarly about their vocals, their songwriting, their instrumentation, their musicianship. It's just all the things that you pay attention to if you love music and you play an instrument, or try to.

"The two influences in the bands being warmly received are, first, that Dickinson College does that, and having worked with them for 28 years I learned that, so that was a significant influence. My parents were very warm hosts and I was taught to honor people of all walks of life at home, and to value people who are skilled artisans. I consider musicians to be skilled artisans. What I like to do at the festival is to ask the musicians to play a lot of music while they're on the stage because that's what people come to hear and they do like a show. And to me the most important part of the show is the music. I also like to have that for the audience and I like to stretch them a little bit, because sometimes people who are fans of a specific genre are myopic."

Consequently, Bluegrass on the Grass is also noteworthy for its regular inclusion of old-time music groups, such as the Freight Hoppers and this past year's representatives, the Georgia Crackers, in the midst of a predominantly bluegrass lineup. "We try to have a variety of folk musicians from old-time string bands, clawhammer banjo players, fiddle players who only play in the key of D and A, and some groups who stretch toward Americana. Because the way the music will survive is through the narrative experience.

"If you have an event of that size, you do hear a lot of praise and you hear some criticism. The particular reason I like to have old-time music is that it was the precursor to bluegrass music, so I like to have that. And sometimes I hear people say, 'Well, that ain't bluegrass!' Perhaps it's not the bluegrass that they like, which might be narrowly focused to the sound of a banjo and a mandolin and high-lonesome singers. Since I'm concerned about people feeling happy and welcome, I have sometimes wondered if an old-time band would be warmly received, but I was more worried about the musicians.

"I don't worry that much about stretching people's musical receptivity, but I like people to be happy. No one has ever let us down. I think that musicians know from the size of the audience and its receptivity and its response that this is going to be an okay

place to play. Then when they get off stage, all these folks who brought their lawn chairs also bring money with them to buy the music from the performers. Performers always do very well. We have had old-time musicians who were understandably fearful about performing at a bluegrass festival. I'm not sure where that came from, perhaps a sheltered previous playing environment experience."

It's clear that he trusts his audiences to be as open musically as he is. "When it's free, I think you can be more open. When things are offered to you without your having spent your hard-earned dollars, (you can) hear it and think, 'Well, that's a good thing too.'"

In addition to his all-consuming work as the festival's principal emcee and organizer, Tracy also manages to stay involved with music on many levels. Although now retired from his counseling career, he maintains a part-time independent practice, but still manages to find time to host a bluegrass radio show on campus. "I started doing a radio show again about 1995 for Dickinson College radio station. I still do that. The value of that to me personally is I get to follow my own stream of consciousness and play tunes that remind me of the musicianship on a particular instrument or a theme or a tune or a vocal style. I have permission to wander around through a big collection that has been provided to me by the record companies who record bluegrass musicians. The music that I hear is sent to me by the record companies because they know that the college radio station is a solid promoter of real American country music: bluegrass and old-time."

He also books a Chautauqua performing arts series for the campus summer program, an occasional bluegrass series at a local venue called the Holly Inn, and he still even performs occasionally as the lead singer of his own band. Although he and his early band were the inaugural performers at the first Bluegrass on the Grass, and the Dismembered Tennesseans were able to cajole him to sing a tune with them at a recent festival, he demurs, "I think I get to perform as much as I deserve. I think I do most of my performing in the barn at home. Frankly, I love doing that. I think I'm perhaps more skilled at finding quality musicians that others would really appreciate and not

have an audience endure my attempts at delivering the music."

Bluegrass on the Grass has been drawing a steady audience of about three thousand listeners, with its open setting and afternoon/evening set format allowing listeners to come and go freely throughout the day. The audience is marked by a happy demographic mix of young and old that would be the envy of many larger festivals. This is also reflected in the planning and organizational group that helps Tracy run the annual event. "I have some very talented young people who help make the festival happen. And I'd like to ensure its longevity by continuing to engage young people who really do like the genre or like being a part of this sort of service to community. Since we've come to be known to do this party every second Saturday in July, that is a more powerful social medium than an iPod."

Now 65 years old, he sees the future of Bluegrass on the Grass as a bright one, and continues to hone his vision for its evolution. "I think that what I'd like to do over the next couple of years is maybe stretch a little bit more into the youthful Americana area with musicians such as Nora Jane Struthers and the Party Line. I would love to have a band like the Infamous Stringdusters who are youthful and perhaps arguably the most talented band in the genre, musicianship-wise. So I'd like to have a little bit more stretch in that direction, to invite more young people to hear real tone from real American instruments."

If anyone can claim to have established a legacy that benefits bluegrass music and his home community in a way that spans the generations, it's Davis Tracy. Looking back, he wistfully recalls, "To me, it has always been a privilege and an honor to meet the musicians and to introduce them to the people who love the genre, who love American music so. It's a pretty delightful event—guess that's a good thing since that's the pay."



Henry Koretzky, a native of Harrisburg, Pa., is a guitar player and frequent contributor to Bluegrass Unlimited.
