The Mescher Bones Playing Tradition:
Syncopations on the American Landscape

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Abstract

The Mescher Bones Playing Tradition: Syncopations on the American Landscape

This dissertation explores the creation and transmission of the Mescher two-handed bones playing style which was first developed by the German-American farmer, Albert Mescher, in the 1920s, in Iowa, and subsequently passed on to his son, Jerry. Jerry has since passed on the style to his sister, Bernie, and the siblings are now the principal exponents of the style. The style is marked by a pervasive rhythmic syncopation derived from the ragtime music that Albert pumped out of the family player piano when he was a young boy learning to play the bones. The Mescher bones players are amateur musicians and their performance practice is characterised by an almost total reliance on recorded music, rather than live music. The Mescher bones players do not belong to any community of folk musicians, and they rarely play their bones in live music ensemble contexts.

The parlour of the family home served as the primary site for the development and aural transmission of the style. A self-taught musician, Albert Mescher invented his bones playing style in the technologised parlour soundscape, where the player piano and the phonograph gave him access to the post-Victorian sound of ragtime music and facilitated the cultivation of his musicality. A central theme in the dissertation is the critical role played by domestic music playback technology in the creation of the Mescher sonic environment, and more generally in the transformation of the American musicscape in the early twentieth century.

While Mescher musicality was forged indoors in the parlour, Mescher spatiality was constructed outdoors on the landscape where Albert passed on his regionally-inflected, hereditary German-American farming practices to his son. Analysis of Mescher spatiality reveals a set of aesthetic imperatives, including an appreciation for order, repetition, and symmetry of design which were inscribed through a dynamic and dialectical engagement between the Mescher farmers and the gridded midwestern landscape. Analysis of the bones arrangements composed by Albert reveals the presence of these same aesthetics of measure in Mescher musicality. On the land, the relationship between father and son was dissonant. In the parlour it was more harmonious. There, entrained to the sonorities and rhythms of American popular music, and a shared musical aesthetic, father and son realised a realignment of their relationship.

Albert created a set of rhythm bones arrangements, which he passed on beat-for-beat to Jerry. Each of Albert’s bones arrangements is composed to accompany a particular recording of music and they are performed with these same recordings today by Jerry and Bernie. Father and son also developed a duetting practice that is characterised by the synchronisation of the sonic materials of the bones arrangements and the choreographic alignment of the players bodies. The arrangements and the choreography have prescriptive force in Mescher practice and they constitute the primary musical artifacts of
the style. Today, Jerry and Bernie perform the Mescher duets in a ritual act of embodied remembering.

The theoretical armature for the research is interdisciplinary, and is constructed at an intersection of ethnomusicology and cultural geography. The development of Mescher spatiality and musicality is framed by the formation of the American midwestern landscape and the micro-geography of the American, technologised domestic soundscape. This panoramic sweep in the research is complemented by an ethnography of Mescher musical and farming practices, and a search therein for a perspective on “the territory of the heart and the mind”.
Declaration

I, Mel Mercier, hereby certify that this thesis has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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Mel Mercier
Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Peadar Mercier, who brought me into the groove of Irish Traditional Music. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In this dissertation I present an account of the creation and transmission of the Mescher bones playing style. Albert Mescher, a German-American farmer, first heard the bones being played at a local fair in Carroll County, Iowa, and began to develop the style in the 1920s. During the 1950s and 60s, Albert passed on his bones playing technique and his repertoire of rhythms to his son, Jerry. Today, Jerry is the principal exponent of the style and he, in turn, has passed on the style to his sister, Bernie, and, in more recent times, to his wife, Sharon. Apart from these family members, there are no other exponents of the Mescher bones playing style. In addition to passing on a musical style, Albert also transmitted a set of farming practices and agrarian sensibilities to his son. Throughout his school years, Jerry developed his ‘outdoor’ relationship with his father while helping out on the family’s traditional 160-acre farm. When he finished high school in 1960, Jerry stayed at home to work fulltime with his father. He took over the farm when Albert died in 1967 and he continues to live and work there today with his wife, Sharon.

The narrative of the transmission from father to son of both husbandry and music is central to my exposition. While the transmission of farming practices took place outdoors, the transmission of the musical style took place indoors. In the parlour, filled with music, Albert and Jerry worked together in relative harmony to hone the style. In the parlour, they shared the same groove. Outdoors, on the land, or in the machine shed, the relationship was more asymmetrical and dissonant. Despite the fraught nature of their
outdoor relationship, Jerry acknowledges that, in his own farm work, he now shares many aesthetic sensibilities with his late father.

I propose that what passed between father and son on the land was a set of modified, hereditary farming practices, which can be understood as a methodology for the Mescher interpretation and construction of their quarter section of the regional midwestern landscape. I argue that Mescher farming practices are dialectical; that they construct and are constructed by the ‘aesthetics of measure’ that characterise Mescher spatiality. I locate and analyse the development of the Mescher aesthetics of measure within the context of the historical construction of the midwestern landscape, in particular the inscription of the landscape resulting from the late eighteenth-century federal Land Ordinances and the socio-cultural development of farming practices in the rural Midwest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Central to my thesis is the hypothesis that the aesthetics of measure, which I reveal through my analysis as characteristic of Mescher spatiality, is also constitutive of Mescher musicality. Several intrinsic aspects of the Mescher aesthetics of measure, such as an appreciation for precision, for symmetry of design, and repeatability can be observed in both the musical and farming practices of father and son. The exploration of this aesthetic concordance is at the heart of this dissertation.

My exploration of Mescher musicality is located in the specific socio-acoustic context of the Mescher domestic, technologically-mediated soundscape, and, following recent ethnographically informed investigations of technological mediation (Bull et al, 2004),
my argument reveals and celebrates the creative engagement of the Mescher bones players with technologically mediated sounds. A central theme in the narrative presented here is the role played by music-making, specifically two-handed rhythm bones playing, and music technology, specifically the player piano and the phonograph, in the expansion of Albert Mescher’s experience of the world as a farmer-musician. Albert first taught himself to play the rhythm bones at the age of ten by playing along to the ragtime music he pumped out of the player piano in the parlour of the family farmhouse in Halbur, Iowa, in the late 1910s. Here, at the spatial heart of the family home, immersed in syncopated musical space and time, he transcended his immediate environment, honed his musical practice and shaped his rhythmic creations.

My account of Albert’s creation of the Mescher bones playing tradition may be understood in the context of what Kazal describes as the move away “from ethnic affiliations and towards new formulations of multiple identity” amongst German-Americans in the first half of the twentieth century (Kazal 2004, p.5). There were, as Kazal points out, many routes out of German America in the 1920 and 1930s for the many German-Americans, especially the children of immigrants, who sought to replace their hyphenated identities with new multiple identities. Assimilation was achieved within the context of a broad range of dynamic socio-cultural forces, including politics of race, class, religion and mass culture (Kazal 2004, p.6). Tawa points out that the acculturation of immigrants results from the modification of cultural practices “in response to the ethnic American’s habitat, educational opportunities, economic status, interest in politics, and growing acceptance by other Americans” (Tawa 1982, p.123).
Musical acculturation, he argues, occurred over generations, as immigrants and their children “heard an unfamiliar music when they attended school, worked among strangers, relaxed in American entertainment halls, listened to the radio, watched the movies (and, later, television), visited with nonethnic acquaintances, and witnessed family members marrying outsiders” (Tawa 1982, p.123).

Commentators note that, over time, as the musical tastes of first- and second-generation ethnic Americans gradually changed, they increasingly chose to construct and inhabit new musicscapes, which may or may not have included traditional hereditary sounds but which invariably included, and were often dominated by, the sounds of contemporary American popular songs and dance music. The player piano, gramophone and radio in the 1920s, and the movies in the 1930s, exposed immigrants and their children to the shifting American musicscape, and when they tuned in to non-traditional music, they usually chose to listen to American popular music (Tawa 1982, p.128). The technologically mediated soundscape of the domestic parlour served as the primary site for Albert’s construction of multiple identity; within the liminal dimension of the musical practice he developed there, Albert’s multiple identity was transformed in a process of socio-musical acculturation.

In my account of the consumption of technologically-mediated music by the Mescher bones players, I demonstrate that “schizophonia” – “the separation of sound from its sources” (Erlmann 2004, p. 7), which Schafer and other scholars of sound have identified as a distinguishing feature of the modern soundscape, effectively created the fertile sonic
environment for the development of Mescher musical practices. Sitting at the player piano, and, later, playing along to disc recordings of American popular music, Albert developed his unique musical style. The technologically mediated soundscape of the domestic parlour served as the primary site for his construction of his musicianship and reconstruction of his identity. Through the musical practices he developed there, Albert remade his ethnic identity in a process of socio-musical acculturation. In the parlour, in the company of the player piano and the phonograph, he created his rhythmic compositions, and entered a musical world—an alternate gravity—where he experienced a lightness of being and flow that he never realised on the land.

Sitting at the player piano, Albert experienced the “synaesthetic spillings and minglings” (Connor 2004, p.153) that may occur when the predominantly active sense (hearing, in this instance) is “shadowed and interpreted” by the other senses. Enveloped in the mechanically produced sounds of the player piano, Albert was ‘touched’ and ‘moved’ by the music that surrounded him. The intersensorality of Albert’s experience of music was determined by the all-consuming physical effort of producing sound at the player piano. Pumping air into the mechanical lungs of the instrument with his feet, Albert’s arms were drawn into their symmetrical dance as his body was enveloped by the sounds he released from the piano roll. In this iconic moment of sound consumption (Bull 2004, p.173) in the history of the Mescher musician-farmers, music entered Albert’s body and he moved into sound.
The development of new technologies of sound at the end of the nineteenth century, including the player piano and the phonograph, coincided with a general shift in the culture of leisure in America. The new ‘sounds of progress’ presented some challenges to the traditional socio-musical sensibilities of the Victorian parlour. Amongst the most provocative of the technologically mediated sounds to shimmy into the parlour in the slipstream of the player piano and the phonograph was ragtime music. During the early decades of the twentieth century the piano roll carried ragtime’s intercultural, urban rhythms across the gridded Midwestern landscape and into the American parlour, where its African-American accent and sensuous syncopations disturbed the measured cadences of Victorian, middle-class, socio-musical culture. Albert Mescher first encountered musical syncopation in the stylised ‘ragging’ of piano ragtime. In the late 1910s, in the parlour of the Mescher homestead in Halbur, Iowa, nothing in his inherited German-American soundscape could have prepared him for the asymmetrical order of the rhythms released by the mechanical player piano.

Albert played several instruments, including the accordion and harmonica, on which he performed a small but eclectic repertoire that included ragtime tunes, waltzes, minstrel and Tin-Pan Alley standards. The family piano roll collection is similarly composed of ragtime tunes, marches and minstrel favourites and is further evidence of Albert’s catholic taste in music. I propose, nonetheless, that ragtime played on the piano is the most significant music in the Mescher tradition. Albert was clearly moved by the asymmetrical rhythms of piano ragtime, the originary source of the syncopation that is a defining feature of his bones arrangements. Most of the tunes in the Mescher bones
playing repertoire, ragtime and non-ragtime, are in duple or quadruple time and my analysis shows that syncopation, achieved through the articulation of various linear combinations of three-beat and two-beat patterns over the underlying regular symmetrical pulse of the music being accompanied, is characteristic of Mescher bones style.

Albert’s bones arrangements are primary artifacts of Mescher musical practice; each arrangement encodes important structural aspects of Mescher musicality. Albert passed on his bones arranging skills to his son, Jerry, who now performs several arrangements of his own. Through an analysis of the design of the bones arrangements created by Albert and Jerry, I show how each one is composed of a set of carefully measured rhythm patterns ordered into alignment with the temporal design of the music they accompany. In the precise execution of the Mescher two-handed style, left hand and right hand synchronise to sound out the patterns of beats that describe the temporal architecture of each bones composition. I propose that the Mescher aesthetics of measure is sounded in the performance of the Mescher bones arrangements; performance breathes life into the rhythmical phrases and animates the aesthetic determinants of the bones playing style scored therein. The aesthetic markers of the Mescher style are located in both its aural and visual dimensions, and my analysis, therefore, includes a consideration of both the musical text and modalities of performance. Musical transcriptions of performances by Jerry and his sister, Bernie, in solo and duet configurations, will serve as the material objects of my analysis of the rhythmic content and structure of the style. Through this text- and performance-centered approach I will provide a definition of the style and reveal its primary aesthetic parameters.
My analysis demonstrates that the aesthetic determinants of Mescher spatiality – a taste for orderliness, alignment, symmetry of design, repetition and precision – are analogous to those that regulate Mescher musicality, thus revealing an aesthetic concordance between Mescher outdoor and indoor habitation. My analysis of Mescher musicality will also reveal that the aesthetic taste for spatial symmetry expressed in the regular rhythms of the Mescher farmscape is reflected in the synchronous performance of musical materials that is so characteristic of Mescher duetting. In addition, I will argue that the Mescher musical aesthetic differs from, and exceeds, that of Mescher spatiality in one critical regard: Mescher musicality is vitally inflected by a temporal syncopation, derived from piano ragtime, that sets it apart from the ever-symmetrical nature of the Mescher visual aesthetic; no such displacement of the regular visual rhythm occurs on the familiar, foursquare, geometrically scored manmade landscape of Carroll County, or in the built environment of the Mescher farmscape itself.

In the performance of the Mescher two-handed style, the syncopations inscribed in Albert’s arrangements are amplified, sonically and visually, when sounded in unison by two pairs of bones, one pair in each hand. The musical effect is doubled again in the performance of Mescher unison duetting. Finally, my analysis will reveal that syncopation is most dramatically displayed during the performance of what the Mescher bones players describe as the ‘offset’ technique, during which the performer divides the constituent beats of the syncopated patterns between two hands. The ‘offset’ technique magnifies the syncopated rhythms that characterise the style and serves as a vehicle for the display of Mescher virtuosity.
In my discussion, I emphasise the embodied nature of Mescher sonoric experience. Following Leppert (1998), Feld (1996) and Baily (1985), my acoustemology endorses an intersensorial epistemology of musical meaning. “Music”, Leppert writes, “connects to the visible body” and any attempt to understand ‘how “music” means’ must include an account of the visual, as well as the aural, experience of music (Leppert 1998, p.293). The relationship between the sonic and kinesic dimensions of Mescher bones playing style is a dialogical one, in which musical sound and structure, and the ergonomics of two-handed bones playing, constitute each other (Baily 1985). On the land, where the work ethic dominated, Albert’s stance was rigid and unyielding; in the parlour, by contrast, his stance softened, and he explored the embodied pleasures of music and the sensuous experience of space.

The human body is centrally implicated in the auditory habitation of the Mescher soundscape and Mescher bones playing style is singularly eye-catching. The emphasis on extrovert display in the Mescher style is typical of American two-handed bones playing, in general, and evokes images of the flamboyant performance of Brother Bones, the nineteenth century minstrel show end man. The comparison with Brother Bones illuminates an essential dimension of intentionality in Mescher performance and a critical aspect of the performance ethic transmitted from father to son: the will to entertain. At first glance, the image of a young Albert playing alone in the parlour in the company of the player piano or the phonograph might be construed as a state of “accompanied solitude” (Adorno, quoted in Bull 2004, p.176), rather than a performance of “responsibility to an audience” (Baumann [1977] 1984, p.11). Albert’s children,
however, speak of their father’s longing to be a professional entertainer, and their testimonies reveal a latent sociability in his early musical practice. Engaging in a sonoric experience that was always more than a “ceremony of the solitary”, Albert displayed his performing body in front of an imaginary audience in the parlour. Today, Jerry and his sister, Bernie, resound the rhythm patterns of their father’s bones arrangements in a ceremonial act of embodied remembering. In private practice and public display, they enact a ritual repetition of inherited musical style and share the experience of a familiar expansion of their sense of identity.

On the land, Albert Mescher projected himself against the environment. In the parlour, at the player piano, he projected himself into an imaginary world of musical entertainment. Later, in the same parlour, surrounded by musical sound, he projected himself into the spiraling micro-grooves of ragtime recordings to create virtual ensemble performances. The machine in the parlour was his bridge to a new world of musical experience. Crossing the bridge, he left the land outside behind him and began a journey that led him to a liminal space where he underwent a profound dissembling and a reinvention of his social self. A reluctant farmer, Albert aspired to be an entertainer and, according to Jerry and Bernie, he was happiest when playing the bones. Consequently, when father and son left the land and entered the parlour to play their bones duets, the relationship between them softened and they realised realignment within the patrilineal relationship. In the parlour, father and son shared an imaginary stage, the deceit giving them licence to reinvent their relationship through a form of dissembling within an imaginary frame of
musical entertainment. In their bones duets, father and son explored and communicated a love they could not speak.

**American Bones Playing**

I first encountered the Mescher bones players on September 23, 2000, when Jerry and Bernie performed at Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the annual gathering of the Rhythm Bones Society. One year earlier, in September 1999, I attended Bones Fest III in Brightwood, Virginia. This was my first experience of Bones Fest and, at the time, I was still relatively unfamiliar with the American two-handed style of bones playing. I met some wonderful bones players at the Brightwood event and discovered a diverse range of bones playing styles, fascinating characters and a shared passion for the instrument. My experience of the event prompted me to consider writing my doctoral dissertation on the history of the rhythm bones in American music. When I saw Jerry and Bernie performing in Chattanooga one year later, I was captivated by their presentation. I was thrilled by the finesse, musicality and virtuosity of their playing, and moved by the raw emotion infused in it. Gripped by the display of virtuosity, overt performativity and musical precision, I experienced an immediate compulsion to shift the focus of my research away from a wide-ranging exposition on the historical and contemporary position of the bones in American music, towards an exploration of Mescher bones playing style.

Despite this shift of research focus, the Rhythm Bones Society has remained the primary site for my engagement with American bones playing over the last ten years. This
community of bones players has played a significant role in my research, and the annual Bones Fest gatherings, in particular, have been the locus of much of my fieldwork since 1999. As an active participant in this bones playing community, I have gained privileged access to many of its members, including Jerry Mescher and his sister, Bernie. The Rhythm Bones society brought me into contact with Jerry and Bernie in the first instance and it has contributed to the meaning of our relationship, and provided context for our discussions, ever since. In addition, the Rhythm Bones Society has facilitated my engagement with the historical and contemporary traditions of American two-handed bones playing, and my membership of the Society has contextualised my own history and practice as an Irish one-handed bones player. The Rhythm Bones Society is, therefore, doubly meaningful in my research. For this reason, I continue here with a brief account of my ‘discovery’ of American two-handed bones playing and the formation of the Rhythm Bones Society.

I first heard about Bones Fest and the growing community of American two-handed bones players from two of the founding members of the Rhythm Bones Society, Everett Cowett and Russ Myers. In March 1999, several months before I attended my first Bones Fest, I met Everett and Russ when I went to visit with them in Greensboro, North Carolina and Brightwood, Virginia, respectively. At the time, I was a visiting scholar at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, attending some postgraduate Ethnomusicology seminars. In one seminar, led by Eric Charry, students were required to engage in a small-scale ethnographic project and I chose to focus on American two-handed bones playing. I first became aware of the style some years earlier when, on a visit to Toronto
with my father to perform in John Cage’s Roaratorio, I met the prominent Washington-based bones player, Percy Danforth\(^1\). Percy was in Toronto working on a project with the percussion ensemble, Nexus, at the time. We met him at a party and he played his bones for us. I never met Percy again after that but he made a significant impression on me and several years later, when considering what I might focus on for my ethnographic exercise at Wesleyan, I decided to search out other exponents of the American two-handed style. I had no means of contacting Percy Danforth and I knew of no other American two-handed bones players at that time. Eric Charry knew no two-handed bones players either, but one of his former colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro had recently heard about a bones player by the name of Everett Cowett, who lived in Greensboro. I contacted Everett and made arrangements to visit him. He suggested that I should also visit another bones player by the name of Russ Myers, who lived not far from him, in Brightwood, Virginia. I made plans to visit Everett and Russ in early March of 1999.

When I arrived in Greensboro on March 6\(^{th}\), Everett was celebrating his birthday at home with his family. He and his wife, Val, have raised four boys, Dan, Al, John and Tommy, and a girl, Martha. Everett taught them all how to play the bones when they were young and all have continued to play into adulthood. According to Everett’s wife, her children stopped playing the bones for a period in their teens, preferring instead to play electric guitars and drums, instruments she and Everett refer to variously as the ‘appliances’,

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\(^1\) For a discussion of Danforth’s style and contribution to American bones playing, see Beth Alice Lenz (1989) *The Bones in the United States: History and Performance Practice* (The University of Michigan: unpublished MA dissertation). Lenz describes Danforth as “the most prominent player in the country today” (p. 164). She also includes brief biographical accounts of several other contemporary North American players and she presents the most comprehensive historical account to date of bones playing in nineteenth-century minstrelsy.
‘electronics, ‘utensils’, and ‘electrical gadgets’. Eventually, however, they all returned to
bones playing and for many years they have played together at family gatherings. While I
discovered that Everett was most comfortable playing along to his preferred music on
cassette tapes and CD recordings, his son, Dan, plays guitar and he sometimes provides
what Everett calls ‘background music’ for the family bones playing. Over the course of
the two days I spent with the Cowetts, I played the bones with them in the informal
music-making sessions that took place and spoke to Everett about his bones playing
history and practice.

Everett Cowett’s bones story is in many ways typical of those told by many of the more
senior American players. A retired agronomist, Everett grew up with his parents and six
brothers on a potato farm in Northern Maine in the 1930s and 40s. His mother played the
accordion in the French-Canadian style and he has memories of dance parties in their
home when he was a child. He remembers accordion, fiddle and harmonica players
providing the music on those occasions. He was aware that there were bones-players
associated with this music tradition but he cannot recall ever seeing one play. Everett
began playing the bones as a young boy after two children in his neighbourhood showed
him how to play; they had learnt to play the instrument from her uncle. According to
Everett, a lot of the kids he knew could ‘click’ the bones and he described it as a common
‘trick’ at the time. Unlike his childhood friends, Everett continued to play the bones as he
grew up. His first public performance was in high school in 1950, when he accompanied
some girls who sang the song ‘Dry Bones’ at assembly. In college, his bones-playing act
was a popular feature at fraternity parties and other events. Everett knew of no other
bones players at that time and his unique talents contributed to his celebrity during his college years.

Everett continued to play the instrument throughout his adult life but he never met another bones player until the 1990s, when he met Fred Edmunds, a retired doctor and bones player from Lexington, Virginia. That year, while on vacation with his family, his son’s car was stolen and Everett’s bones were stolen with it. When he couldn’t find any replacement bones in the local music stores, he began to make his own. He also began to do some research into the history of the instrument and was invited to talk about the bones on a locally produced TV show, Crossing Carolina with Arlo Lasson. Within a few weeks of the broadcast, Fred Edmunds contacted Everett. Everett went to visit Fred and the two men shared their bones playing experiences. Up to that point, both Everett and Fred had wondered if they were the only bones players left in America. Fred spoke to Everett about his desire to hold a rhythm bones convention and it was this idea that led to the first Bones Fest event. Everett and Fred made contact with several other bones players in America and Everett hosted a gathering of this small, dispersed community in his home in September 1997.

The following year, the Cowetts held Bones Fest II in a local park where participants had a small informal audience of people who were using the park for afternoon recreation. Steve Wixson, a bones enthusiast traveled from Tennessee to attend the event and in the following years he became a dynamic force in the development of what became the Rhythm Bones Society. Within just a few years the community of bones players had
grown significantly. In 1999, Everett knew of about fifty players. Just a few years earlier, he wondered whether he and his family were the only bones players in America.

During my visit, Everett spoke a great deal, and in glowing terms, about one bones player in particular: Russ Myers. He told me how they had only recently become friends and that Russ was a virtuoso bones player who knew a great deal about the history of the bones. By the time I left the Cowett family home and drove to Virginia to meet Russ, I was excited at the prospect of meeting him and hearing him play. I wasn’t disappointed. In the short time I spent with him, Russ spoke at length about his love of the bones, his research into their history, and his own bones-playing story. That story is a rich and fascinating one. Russ shared a version of it with me in his own inimitable style: a mix of humility, humour and historical accuracy. He also played for me and I was amazed at his remarkable technique and musicality. The fine sense of form and rhythm evident in his bones arrangements, and the accurate performance of complex rhythms and ‘pitch-shifting’—his trademark technique—left me breathless.

Russ was born on March 27, 1934 in Baltimore, Maryland. His father worked for Shell Oil Company at that time and he and Russ’s mother lived in a suburb of Maryland. Russ was their only child. Within a year or two of Russ’ birth the family began to travel, as his father’s work required him to move from town to town setting up Shell Oil depots. The family finally settled down in a Silver Springs, Maryland, a suburb of Washington DC. Their travels had taken them through towns such as Portland, Maine, Spartanburg, South Carolina, and Clearwater, Florida. Russ’ father was born in 1899 and went to school in
Delta, Pennsylvania. As a teenager, and up until his early twenties he worked in an automotive parts store. He was a bones player and played the role of Mr. Bones with Lowe’s Minstrels. Russ never saw his father play in blackface or in a minstrel show. His father stopped playing with Lowe’s after he began working for Shell Oil Company and that was just before Russ was born.

One day, in 1942, when Russ was still a young boy, his father, who had not played the bones for many years, returned home from a Washington D.C. Board of Trade luncheon with a set of bones, which he had been given as a novelty gift at the luncheon. Russ watched his father play the instrument and he became intrigued as he told him about his experiences as a bones player with Lowe’s Minstrels. His father showed Russ how to hold the bones and Russ taught himself how to play. Because his father had demonstrated a two-handed technique, Russ considered this as the natural style of playing and began to practice with two hands almost immediately. Over time, he developed a sophisticated style and he continued to play the bones as he went through highschool and college. He played on and off after that.

Like Everett, he knew of no other bones players for most of his adult life. In the late 1970s, the Library of Congress interviewed Russ, along with Percy Danforth. Apart from Percy, Russ also told me about two other players he knew of—Brother Bones and Mr. Goon Bones—who had released popular records in the late 1940s and early 1950s that featured the bones. In the 1980s, Russ began playing at events organised by local civic organisations. On one such occasion, in the 1990s, Russ was invited to appear at a June
Jubilee event in Richmond, Virginia. His performance was written up in a local newspaper and Fred Edmunds saw this. Fred wrote to Russ and they began communicating, sharing stories about the bones and bones playing. Russ visited Fred in Lexington. By that time, Fred had made contact with Everett Cowett and several other bones players.

Through this meeting with Fred Edmunds, Russ joined the emerging community of American bones players. He was one of the eleven practitioners who attended the first Bones Fest in Everett Cowett’s home in Greensboro on Saturday, September 20, 1997. According to an account of that event in a special issue of the Rhythm Bones Player, the players came from four states: North Carolina, Virginia, Texas and Maine (Waite, 2006). In the course of the event, a sound system was set up and one-by-one the participants stood at the microphone and told their ‘bones story’ and played along to a recording which they had brought along themselves, or which Dan Cowett, the resident sound engineer, provided for them. The Cowett family also hosted Bones Fest II in Greensboro in 1998. On that occasion the event took place in a shelter at a local park from 1pm to 3pm on September 26 (Wixson 2006). The event took the same format, more or less, as in the previous year, with just a few more players in attendance.

It was clear from Everett and Russ that this recent development of a community of bones players was unforeseen by them. It was also clear that it had given them a new lease of life. I was surprised to discover that neither Everett nor Russ had ever belonged to a community of musicians before that time. Setting off on my journey to North Carolina
and Virginia, I presumed I was going to meet two bones players who were part of an American folk music milieu. I expected that I would find them performing, informally or otherwise, with, perhaps, old time fiddle players or bluegrass musicians\(^2\), but neither Everett nor Russ matched that profile. For most of their adult lives, Everett and Russ engaged primarily in domestic music making, in the company of music recorded on vinyl, cassette and CD. I have met many bones players since, at Bones Fest gatherings and elsewhere, who are active participants in a variety of American folk music communities but I have also met many, like Everett and Russ, who are not. Russ began playing along to recorded music on 78s, and as recording formats developed over the years he built up a collection of his preferred music on 45s, LPs, cassette tapes and CDs. His repertoire included ragtime, country music and Dixieland jazz. Everett, too, had built up a collection of recorded music that he liked to play along to, including country music, ragtime and bluegrass.

My time with Everett and Russ was fruitful, but brief. Some of my most basic assumptions about meaningful musical practices were confounded by what I discovered on the trip and my conversations with Everett and Russ raised many more questions than I had anticipated. I was intrigued by the domestic practice of playing the bones along to recorded music and I was more fascinated than ever by the two-handed style of bones playing. Both Everett and Russ encouraged me to attend the next Bones Fest event, which was scheduled to take place in Russ and Wilma’s home in Brightwood later that year. I

\(^2\) The contemporary bones players discussed in Lenz (1989) performed with other musicians in a variety of folk music styles, described variously as “American folk music” (p. 164), “traditional” bones playing (165), and “Anglo American folk songs and fiddle tunes” (p. 169). Percy Danforth did not limit himself to playing with folk musicians; he also enjoyed playing ragtime and minstrel show music (ibid., pp. 104-163).
looked forward to the opportunity to meet them both again and to meet with other members of the community and even as I left Virginia to return to Connecticut, I was planning my return.

**Bones Fest**

Bones Fest III was hosted by Russ and Wilma Myers at their home in Brightwood, Virginia, on September 25, 1999. Thirty-four bones players attended the event, a significant increase on the attendance at the two previous gatherings. The majority of the participants were North American amateur musicians playing in the two-handed style and this has continued to be the pattern since. During a business meeting at the event, the Rhythm Bones Society was formally established as a non-profit, educational society. By-laws of the Society were drawn up and the primary purpose of the Society was inscribed therein as “the continuation, promotion, and improvement of the rhythm bones (an ancient musical instrument) and other related musical instruments” ([http://www.rhythmbones.com/bonessociety.html](http://www.rhythmbones.com/bonessociety.html), 3 November). I was the only Irish bones player in attendance that year and I was elected on to the board of the Society. The Rhythm Bones Society has hosted a festival each year since 1999 and these events have become an important social nexus for an otherwise dispersed community of bones players. The Society also fosters this community through the hosting of a public website, Rhythm Bones Central ([http://www.rhythmbones.com](http://www.rhythmbones.com)), and the publication of its newsletter, *Rhythm Bones Player*, several times a year.
At Bones Fest III, I learned a great deal from the other participants about their own personal bones-playing stories and about the history of the rhythm bones in American music. One of the first things I noticed was the absence at the event of any other musicians, apart from bones players. The festival clearly had a participatory ethos, yet there were no tune-playing musicians to accompany. I discovered that the kind of domestic music practice, carried out in relative isolation from other musicians, which characterised Russ and Everett’s practice was common to many contemporary American bones players known to the Society at that time. Rather than playing with other folk musicians, for example, many of these bones players only played along to recorded music, typically recordings of American music chosen from the pre-rock ‘n’ roll catalogue. Those who came to Bones Fest III played along to recorded music in both the very informal, open, group ‘jamming’ sessions and in the relatively formal, individual presentation-demonstrations.

Over the years, as the Society has grown, Bones Fest has attracted a greater number of bones players who do participate in live music-making practice. Live music, as opposed to recorded music, has also become a common feature of Bones Fest events. Despite this, however, many members of the Society continue to engage in a predominantly domestic musical practice and still choose to make their presentations at Bones Fest in the company of recorded music, rather than live music. Because my research has been focused primarily on Mescher musical practice, which is predominantly domestic in nature and dependant on recorded music, my attention at Bones Fest events, from the start, has been concentrated on those bones players who, like the Meschers, engage in
performance with domestic phonography as their primary mode of musical expression. Jerry and Bernie did not attend Bones Fest III, and it would be another year before I met them. Everett Cowett and Russ Myers were there, however, as were several others, notably Joe Birl from Philadelphia and Steve Wixson from Chattanooga, who shared similar domestically-oriented bones playing histories and practices.

Sharing personal bones-playing histories and styles is at the heart of this gathering of the American bones community and it has been an intrinsic feature of every Bones Fest since 1997. The transmission of these individual stories has been framed by a gentle formality ever since the first Bones Fest gathering, when Everett Coweta was the first to step up to the microphone to make his opening remarks and share his story. At every Bones Fest since, participants are invited to make individual presentations to the assembled group. Everett Coweta’s son, Al, acts as compeer and introduces the participants. Typically, each individual player stands at the microphone and recounts the story of how they became bones players and this is usually followed by a demonstration of their style. At this point, many choose to play along to a recording, which they have either brought with them to the event or which they select when they arrive. I noted that participants at the event often referred to the recorded music as the ‘accompaniment’. Even as live music has replaced much of the recorded music at Bones Fest events in recent years, the bones players still often refer to the live music played as the accompaniment.
At Bones Fest III in Brightwood, these presentations were staged outside, on the deck of Russ and Wilma Myers’ house. A simple sound system, consisting of a domestic CD player, was set up to facilitate playback. One-by-one, the participants, myself included, shared their rhythm-bones-related stories with a very attentive audience. I noted many similarities in the narratives presented by the participants that day and I had a strong sense that I was witness to a dynamic, collective formation of an affinity group (Slobin 1992). I tuned in with particular interest to those personal narratives that I perceived to be similar in significant details to those of Everett and Russ. In such cases, participants revealed that they had had little or no contact with other bones players for most of their lives. They described their bones playing activities as a hobby, something they did at home to amuse themselves, family and friends. The more senior participants, who began playing as children in the 1930s and 40s, remembered bones playing as a popular pastime amongst children back then. By the time they were attending highschool and college, however, they noticed that there were few, if any, of their peers playing the bones. For a significant number of participants, Bones Fest ended decades of isolation from others who shared their interest in the instrument. Even those who knew other bones players were surprised to discover that there were so many other living exponents of the instrument.

In the narratives presented by some of the participants at Bones Fest III, and at subsequent festivals, nineteenth-century American minstrelsy figured prominently in the constructed genealogy of American two-handed bones playing. Most members of the Rhythm Bones Society display some knowledge of their American bones-playing
predecessor, Brother Bones (also known as Mister Bones), one of the ubiquitous ‘end men’ in nineteenth-century, American minstrelsy, and, arguably, the most popular minstrel character. The earliest minstrel show music bands consisted of four musicians: a fiddle player, a banjo player, a tambourine player, known as Brother Tambo, and a rhythm-bones player, known as Brother Bones. Brother Bones and Brother Tambo were the comedians in the group, and because they sat at either side of the group of musicians, they were known as the ‘end men’. They provided much of the comic banter between songs and instrumental pieces, which they also accompanied on bones and tambourine in flamboyant style.

With the formation in 1843 of the Virginia Minstrels, blackface minstrelsy began its fifty-year domination of American popular entertainment. A form of musical theatre from its inception, it claimed to represent the music, song, dance, and lifestyle of the black slaves on the Southern plantations. In these theatrical representations of the plantation, white men in blackface held centre stage. In reality, minstrelsy constructed an imaginary plantation; from behind the minstrel mask, white, male entertainers, in collusion with a largely white audience, played out the minstrel fiction on the public stage, spinning their racial narratives in song, dance, and humour. In the second half of the nineteenth century, hundreds of minstrel show groups sprang up throughout the United States. With the rapid growth in popularity, minstrel show groups expanded to include more musicians and dancers, more elaborate stage and costume design, and more variety in musical and dramatic material. Many groups in the 1880s had as many as twenty end men, ten playing bones and ten playing tambourine. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century,
minstrelsy’s popularity had waned. Through the 1920s, the genre lived on in the amateur productions of civic and church organisations before it faded, along with its most popular character, Brother Bones, into memory (Engle 1978: xiv).

A very tangible link to Brother Bones and the American minstrel show tradition is provided by several of the members of the Rhythm Bones Society whose fathers and grandfathers either took part in minstrel shows in the early decades of the twentieth century or were inspired to play the bones when they saw a minstrel show. Contemporary American bones players with this connection to minstrelsy include: Tom Callinan, whose father played bones in Minstrel Shows in 1930s Connecticut; Ed DeLong learned to play the bones when he was ten from his grandfather who was a minstrel show performer and circus clown; Dave Wilson from Chicago learned to play from his father who was a mummer and minstrel; Mitch Boss from North Carolina learned the spoons from his father when he was 7 years old, but converted to the bones when he saw them played in a minstrel show; and Russ Myers was introduced to the bones by his father who played with Loew’s Minstrels (http://rhythmbones.com/players.html, accessed 17 November 2010).

A few contemporary players have taken a particular interest in the bones in nineteenth-century minstrelsy. Some members specialise in the performance of music from nineteenth-century minstrel show repertoire, but to the extent that these performances are attempts at historical reconstructions of minstrel practice, they are never presented in blackface. Contemporary players who specialise in the performance of minstrel show
music include: John Cahill from Georgia has played his bones in Dr. Horsehairs Old Time Minstrels, a group that specialises in American music from the minstrel era, 1840 to 1870; Norm Conrad from Massachusetts performs a one-man show called Norm Conrad’s Mini Minstrel, in which he plays the tambourine and bones as part of his representation of the characters of Tambo and Bones; Tom James from Kansas plays his bones with The Free Staters, a group specialising in the performance of mid-nineteenth-century music from territorial Kansas, including minstrel tunes, Irish ballads and American folk songs; Tom Rice from Virginia, is interested in the minstrel bones, banjo and fiddle music; and Edwin Sims from California plays bones, banjo, tambourine, jawbone, and triangle with The Free and Accepted Minstrels of Old New Orleans, a group specialising in antebellum music of the minstrel stage (http://rhythmbones.com/players.html, accessed 17 November 2010).

Notwithstanding the activities of these bones players, and others who play nineteenth-century minstrel music, most of the American two-handed bones players that I have encountered over the last ten years at Bones Fest events do not actively share this interest. Given the historical prominence of Brother Bones and the evidence that bones playing was widely practiced on stage and off stage in towns and cities in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, and given the historical proximity of the tradition, I was initially surprised by the muted response to Brother Bones’ position in the genealogy of American bones playing. Most American bones players today do not align themselves, at least not overtly, with the tradition of Brother Bones and, in general, the tradition of minstrelsy seems to have limited meaning for them.
This relative indifference to the tradition amongst contemporary players can be explained by several factors. While the rhythm bones enjoyed unprecedented popularity in the hands of the end man, Brother Bones, and the evidence from nineteenth century playbills strongly suggests that there were many highly skilled, even virtuoso, exponents of the instrument, the tradition is a broken one. The Brother Bones tradition of bones playing came to a close when the Minstrel Show genre went into decline during the final decades of the nineteenth century. When the deconstruction of minstrelsy’s plantation mythology began in the early decades of the twentieth century, the critique revealed a new genealogy of minstrelsy’s racial constructs that located its roots, not in the soil of the South, but in the fertile imaginations of northern urban whites (Engle 1978, p.xv).

In the twentieth century, in the context of the widespread condemnation of the inherent racism of blackface minstrelsy, Brother Bones has been cast as a racist stereotype. For this reason, while most of the American bones players I have met in the last ten years are familiar with the Brother Bones character and acknowledge that bones playing blossomed on the minstrel stage, articulating a strong alignment with the minstrel bones tradition for many of them is problematic. In addition, while there is an extensive literature on American minstrelsy, and, within that literature, a significant focus on the dramatic roles played by the two end men, Brother Bones and Brother Tambo, most scholars have preferred to focus on song and joke texts rather than the music played as part of the
minstrel show. Where music is given some consideration in the literature, the bones are
dealt with in a superficial manner, with one or two exceptions. This, coupled with the
lack of notation and recordings of minstrel bones playing, makes it extremely difficult for
contemporary bones players to reconstruct the style, even if they wished to.

Two other bones players who figured prominently in the bones genealogy presented at
Bones Fest III, were the American recording artists known as Brother Bones and Mr.
Goon Bones. Each had several ‘hit’ records in the late 1940s and early 1950s, making
them, arguably, the most significant and influential bones players of the twentieth

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3 For an introduction to the critical discourse on blackface minstrelsy, see: Bean, A., J. V. Hatch,
and B. McNamara, eds., (1996) Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century
Blackface; Cockrell, D. (1997) Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World,
Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press; Epstein, D. J. P. (1977) Sinful Tunes and
Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War. Urbana: University of Illinois Press; Lhamon,
Paskman, D. (1928) “Gentlemen, be seated”: A Parade of the Old-Time Minstrels, Garden City,
NY: Doubleday, Doran; Rice, E. L. (1911) Monarchs of Minstrelsy: From ‘Daddy’ Rice to Date.
and Early Ethiopian Minstrelsy,” The Black perspective in Music 3, no.2: 77-99; Southern, E.
Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture, Urbana:
University of Illinois Press.

Minstrel Show guidebooks, produced in the early Twentieth Century for the amateur minstrel
market, provide a valuable source of general descriptive information on bones playing techniques
and style. See, for example, Dumont, F. (1899) The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt
Cork Encyclopedia, New York, Chicago, London: M.Witmark and Sons; Rossiter, H. (1921)
How to put on a Minstrel Show, Chicago: Harold Rossiter Company; Hare, W.B. (1921) The
century. In 1949, Freeman Davis (1902—1974) released his first recording as Brother Bones, on the Tempo label. The tune, a cover of ‘Sweet Georgia Brown’, was performed by Brother Bones and his Shadows and featured Freeman Davis playing two-handed bones and whistling. The 78 r.p.m. record sold more than a million copies and, in 1952, it was adopted as the theme song of the Harlem Globe Trotters. Brother Bones went on to release several other successful recordings on the Tempo label. While he became a minor celebrity as a result of his success, the fame of the Harlem Globe Trotters and his recording of ‘Sweet Georgia Brown’ record overshadowed him (Wixson, S. 2002).

In 1949, sometime after Tempo Records released ‘Sweet Georgia Brown’, Theodore Goon (1911—2004) released his first recording as Mr. Goon Bones on the Crystalette label (CR-601). The 78 r.p.m. recording included a cover of ‘The Sheik of Araby’ on the A-side and ‘Ain’t She Sweet’ on the B-side, both featuring Ted playing his carefully composed two-handed bones arrangements and Ralph Ford on Hammond organ. The record was a considerable nationwide success, selling 400,000 copies. Mr. Goon Bones went on to have several more ‘hit’ records in a brief career as a recording artist, including a recording of his version of ‘Ain’t She Sweet’, which subsequently outsold ‘The Sheik of Araby’, ‘Ain’t She Sweet’ achieved nationwide sales of more than a million copies and lifted Mr. Goon Bones to seventh place in the Billboard Juke Box charts in March 1950. Ted Goon also patented his own Rhythm Bones. His ‘Goon Bones’ were made from maple and sold in a set of four bones, along with an instruction book. 20,000 sets were sold during his career and bones enthusiasts across the country set up Goon Bones clubs (Wixson, S. 2000). In addition to the recordings released in the late 1940s and early
1950s by Brother Bones and Mr. Goon Bones, several other artists included the bones in their recorded covers of popular songs. As a consequence, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the bones entered the American popular consciousness for the first time since the demise of minstrelsy, this time through the medium of commercial recordings, especially those released by Theodore Goon, as Mr. Goon Bones, and Freeman Johnson, as Brother Bones. Due to their fame, bones playing flourished in the United States for a relatively short period in the 1950s, before quickly disappearing again as tastes in popular music changed.

Minstrelsy, Mr. Goon Bones, and Brother Bones all figured prominently in the presentations and discussions that took place at Bones Fest III. In addition, participants spoke about other bones players they knew and, over the course of the weekend an expanded picture of contemporary American bones playing emerged to complement the historical narrative. A name on the lips of many participants was Jerry Mescher, a bones player from Iowa. Of those in attendance at Bones Fest III, only Steve Wixson had actually met Jerry. Everyone else had to wait until Bones Fest IV for the pleasure, but Jerry’s reputation preceded him. Steve had met Jerry and his sister, Bernie, just three weeks earlier, when he attended the Old-Time Country Music Contest and Festival in Avoca, Iowa. Steve had heard that there was a bones playing competition at the event and he called Bob Everhart, president of the Iowa Traditional Country Music Association (ITCMA), to get more information about the festival and the competition. Everhart, in turn, recommended to Steve that he contact Jerry Mescher. After talking on the phone to
Jerry, Steve decided to travel to Iowa to meet Jerry and Bernie, in person, and to compete in the contest.

The event took place on Saturday, 4 September 1999. Before he left Chattanooga, Steve recorded three “songs” onto a cassette tape, which he intended to use as his “backup” music for the competition, When he arrived to sign up for the contest, however, he was informed “that the only backup music was acoustic”, and not knowing any musicians at the festival, he was unable to take part (Wixson 2006: personal correspondence). Steve stayed to watch the competition, which was hosted, as usual, by Jerry Mescher. Jerry welcomed the audience and the participants and opened the proceedings with a demonstration on the bones. This was followed by the competition itself, which was won by Jerry’s sister, Bernie Worrell. After the event, Steve introduced himself to Jerry, who took him “under his wing”.

Had I found him earlier, he would have introduced me to musicians that would have backed me up so I could have entered the contest. He introduced me to all of the bones players including Donnie DeCamp, many of whom I videoed. (Wixson 2006, personal correspondence)

Jerry and Bernie invited Steve to give a talk about the Rhythm Bones Society during their festival workshop and Steve invited Jerry to become a member of the board of the Rhythm Bones Society. It was clear to Steve that Jerry was “an important figure in bone playing” and in an email he sent to Everett Cowett, Director of the Rhythm Bones Society, soon after the event, he put forward the idea of nominating Jerry to the board of the Rhythm Bones Society.
Ev, The Avoca event is first class. The contest was only so-so, but the bones players who were there are great. In fact, I have a nomination for Bd of Directors: Jerry Mescher. He is the former Ted Mack winner and gave the Bones workshop. He makes and plays ebony bone, and they are the easiest bones I have ever played. I am sending you a video of Avoca including Jerry so you can get to know him ahead of time. He is a farmer by day. Steve (Wixson 2006, personal correspondence)

Just three weeks after the Avoca contest, Steve brought news and video footage from Avoca. During the formal proceedings to establish the Rhythm Bones Society, Steve nominated Jerry Mescher for election to the Board of Directors. The nomination was received enthusiastically and Jerry was elected onto the board, in absentia.

One year later, at Chattanooga, Tennessee, Jerry and Bernie attended Bones Fest for the first time. Many of those in attendance had heard about them from Steve Wixson at Bones Fest III, or they had read about them in the Rhythm Bones Player. The appearance of the brother and sister, two World Bones Playing Champions, was eagerly anticipated. Jerry and Bernie got their first taste of Bones Fest culture at the informal reception that took place at the home of Steve and Janet Wixson on the Friday evening of the festival. Here they met with other Rhythm Bones Society members for the first time and took part in an informal “jam” session which featured up to forty other bones players and a CD recording of ‘backup’ tracks which Steve had prepared for the event.

The following day, Jerry and Bernie took part in the more formal presentation sessions at the Walden Community Centre. During his presentation, Jerry told the story of the
Mescher bones players and the creation of their unique style by his father, Albert Mescher. He spoke about the transmission of the style from father to son, and from brother to sister. Steve Wixson played a videotape recording of Albert and Jerry performing ‘Under the Double Eagle’ on the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour in 1961. Jerry followed this with a performance of the bones arrangement his father made to accompany the Big Tiny Little recording of ‘Red Wing’. Bernie was next up and she also told her story before she performed her father’s bones arrangement of ‘San Antonio Rose’. Finally, brother and sister, in an extraordinary moment of artistic remembrance, performed Albert’s arrangement of ‘Golden Slippers’, as a duet. In the course of their afternoon display to the Bones Fest audience, Jerry and Bernie shared their stories and explicated the Mescher musical tradition, and in so doing they completed their initiation into the rhythm bones community.

For Jerry and Bernie, Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, Tennessee, was a homecoming, of sorts.

That fest was really an experience as far as meeting the people, the other bones players…The Rhythm Bones Society is like a family, [a] big family that meet once a year and you like to see all the members, you know. So, I’m proud to be a member of the bones society. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry enjoyed meeting with other bones players and watching them perform at the event. He listened intently as each one told his or her story about how they learned to play the instrument and how, in many cases, they had never met another bones player in all of their lives until they came to Bones Fest. Even though he had seen bones players every year at Avoca since 1987, Bones Fest was still a revelation to Jerry in this regard. Neither
he nor Bernie had ever imagined that there were so many people who shared their passion for the instrument.

It was amazing; everybody told their story of how they thought they were the only bone player ‘cause they never had seen another one. You know, ‘cause it’s something you don’t see like you do a singer or accordion player, fiddle player; it’s a rarity. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Bones Fest also gave Jerry and Bernie an opportunity to witness a great variety of other bones playing styles for the first time.

That’s what makes the Rhythm Bones Society [so] fantastic because you see…each one has a different style. I’m always out there to learn something from somebody, maybe pick it up, and you always can learn from somebody else, you know. And that’s what’s wonderful about the bone, cause it ain’t no singsong; everybody’s different. It’s all bone playing, but it is different. Everybody’s got a different style and the beats are different. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Apart from Steve Wixson, who they had met at Avoca, Jerry and Bernie knew none of the other people at Bones Fest when they first arrived. Jerry had, however, heard of one member who was in attendance: the eighty-four year old bones player from Philadelphia, Joe Birl. In his presentation to the Bones Fest audience, Joe Birl related the story of how he had patented and marketed black plastic, ‘Rhythm Bones’ and sold over 100,000 pairs of them. A set of Joe Birl’s ‘Rhythm Bones’ had made its way to Halbur, Iowa, in the 1950s, and into the hands of a young Jerry Mescher who used them to practice for a while before he made his own ebony bones. Jerry was delighted to make the connection with Joe, and he was amazed by the performance energy of the eighty-four year old.
Another highlight of Bones Fest IV for Jerry was meeting with Russ Myers and hearing him play. Jerry was impressed with his bones playing, especially his sense of timing.

When I first heard Russ Myers play…the rhythm caught my eye and my ear because his sense of timing was so good…and he had something different…I can’t even do it. That style he’s got is unique and I don’t think I heard anybody else play that way…I love his timing and his sense of playing…and his physique. I mean he stands up there like King Kong. Let’s put it that way. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry’s appreciation of Russ’s “sense of timing” and his “sense of playing” is a reflection of his own preoccupation with such aesthetic aspects of bones playing. Jerry values musical precision and a sense of style in his own playing and these facets of performance have exercised him for more than forty years. Also, in his appreciation of Russ’s stage presence, the way “he stands up there”, Jerry reflects the Mescher aesthetic concern with the visual dimensions of musical performance. In their individual routines Russ Myers and Jerry Mescher sound and look very different, but they share some fundamental musical sensibilities and an instinct for performance. Little wonder that Russ, for his part, recognises the artistic achievement of the Mescher bones players and returned the complement when I interviewed him in 2006.

With the exception of Bernie and Jerry, I’ve never seen any two bone players that can play note-for-note together. I don’t know how they do it and it must be mostly her, but note-for-note, they are the only two people I know that can play bones together and I don’t know how in the world they do it. It’s a marvel. (Myers, R. 2006)

Bones Fest has provided Jerry and Bernie with a particularly appreciative audience for their musical style. Jerry, who is very secure in his own musicianship and singularly
proud of his musical identity, admits that it was not until he became a member of the Rhythm Bones Society that he felt fully appreciated and understood as a musician (Mescher, J. 2006. personal correspondence).

Like Jerry Mescher, and many of the bones players I have met over the years at the annual Bones Fest events, I learned how to play the bones from my father when I was a boy. Like Jerry and Bernie, the foundations of my musicianship were built in the courses of my musical relationship with my father, Peadar Mercier. I was about ten years old when I began to imitate his bodhrán and bones playing and I have been playing the bones and the bodhrán ever since. My father played the bodhrán and bones with some style. He always seemed to me to be quite self-conscious in his playing, concerned as much with the visual communication of an aesthetic as he was with its sounding. I believe that he passed that appreciation for a combination of the visual and the sonic dimensions of performance style to me. His playing also gave me an appreciation of the importance of precision and groove, defining characteristics of his own playing which he developed in response to the challenge of integrating the bodhrán and bones into the new Irish traditional music ensemble aesthetic first formulated by the Chieftains and Ceoltóirí Chualann in the 1960s. For many years, and on many occasions, before my father passed away in 1991, I had the privilege of duetting with him. Making music together, we yielded to the same pulse and shared in the same groove. This shared entrainment to the communicative eloquence of musical sound had a profound influence on our relationship and was formative in the development of my musicianship and the emergence of my identity as a musician.
The typical American style of bones playing and the typical Irish style of bones playing are very different in several important respects. In Irish traditional music, with few exceptions, only one pair of bones is used. This one-handed technique is used by all of the prominent Irish bones players, including Tommy Hayes, Johnny ‘Ringo’ McDonagh, Cathy Jordan and Junior Davey. Irish bones players usually sit when playing, in sessions and even in concert performances, and they must negotiate the aesthetic of quietude and reserve that typically prevails in informal and formal music making. As a result, the inherent kinesthetic potential for extrovert display is typically muted. By contrast, American bones players typically play with two pairs of bones, one pair in each hand, and consequently they have the potential to produce more sound than their Irish counterparts. Most American two-handed bones players that I have seen stand when they play and the intrinsic physicality of bones playing is un-attenuated in their performances.

In general then, American two-handed bones playing is today characterised by the same extroversion in performance as that displayed on the minstrel stage by Brother Bones in the nineteenth century. Today, this relative freedom of individual musical expression is amplified when American bones players perform with recorded music rather than live music.

The otherness of American two-handed bones playing has drawn me to the style, especially in its exemplary realisation in the performances of the Mescher bones players. In addition, the key musical qualities of groove and precision, characteristic of Jerry and Bernie’s performances, resonate deeply with my own musicality. When I saw Jerry Mescher play for the first time at Bones Fest IV, I was captivated by the combination of
flamboyance and precision in his execution of complex rhythm patterns. I also took great
delight in the way that the inherent physicality of bones playing was mobilised to great
artistic effect in the choreographing of the duets he performed with Bernie. Overall, the
performance captured my imagination and has informed the trajectory of my research for
more than a decade since.

I continue my exposition in Chapter Two with a return to that event. I present a detailed,
first-hand, account of the performance of the Mescher Bones players at Bones Fest IV in
Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 2000. This is preceded by brief biographies of the three
principle exponents of the Mescher bones playing style, Albert Mescher, and his children,
Jerry and Bernie.

In Chapter 3, I present an account of the Mescher family history, beginning with the
migration of Jerry Mescher’s great-grandfather, Frederick Mescher, to the American
Midwest in the 1890s. I trace the settlement of the family in Iowa over four generations
and place it in the broader context of the settlement of the Midwest region and the
development of German-American agrarian and socio-economic life.

In Chapter 4, I present an account Albert Mescher’s development of the Mescher Bones
tradition and the transmission of the style to his son, Jerry Mescher. In the context of this
narrative of transmission, I contrast the relationship between father and son on the land
with their relationship in the parlour. In the second part of the chapter I present an
account of Jerry’s development as a farmer-musician and his transmission of the bones playing style to his sister, Bernie.

In Chapter 5, I present a discussion of Mescher spatiality. Mescher farming practices are analysed in the context of the inscription of the Midwestern landscape by the federal Land Ordinances of the late eighteenth century and the settlement patterns of the continent before and after the establishment of the Republic. I argue that Mescher spatiality is constructed in a dialogical engagement between the Mescher farmers and the midwestern landscape. What is revealed is an aesthetics of measure, which is at the heart of Mescher spatiality, and, I propose, also at the heart of Mescher musicality.

In Chapter 6, the discussion moves indoors, into the Mescher parlour. Here, I discuss the formation of the Mescher musicscape. The focus is on the technological mediation of Mescher musical practice, specifically the role played by the player piano, the phonograph and the radio in the construction of the domestic soundworld, which acted as the locus for the development of Mescher musicality. The development of this soundworld is located in the context of the socio-musical transformation of the American soundscape in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In Chapter 7, I present an exposition on the socio-musical roots of ragtime and an analysis of the bones arrangements composed by Albert Mescher, and latterly, by Jerry Mescher. My discussion concludes with an exploration of the role of music making in the
forging of a patrilineal bond between father and son and the re-embodiment of that alignment in the contemporary duetting practice of the siblings, Jerry and Bernie.
Chapter Two

The Mescher Bones Tradition

“Where he blossomed was in the familiar and habitual, which he never left willingly.” (McGahern 2002, p.36)

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two parts: Introduction and Performing the Mescher Tradition. In the first part, I outline the history and the primary characteristics of the Mescher bones playing style, and introduce its three exponents: Jerry and Bernie Mescher, and their father, Albert Mescher. In the second part, I present an ethnographic account of performances given by Jerry and Bernie at Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in September 2000.

Albert Mescher was born in Halbur, Iowa, in 1908. He was the eldest son of Fred and Cora Mescher who were both first generation German-Americans. Fred and Cora inherited a farm from Cora’s adoptive parents and Albert was born and raised there with his brother and two sisters. In the late 1920s Albert met Ann Schenkelberg at a dance in the local ballroom in Halbur and after dating for several years they married in 1935. They had four children: Darlene, Paul, Jerry, and Bernie. After he inherited the farm in 1943, Albert continued the family business of raising hogs and growing grain.

Albert first became interested in the bones when, at ten years of age, he heard them being played at a local county fair. He had never seen them before and didn’t even know what they were called. It was some time before he found anybody who knew how to make
them and play them. Eventually he got just enough information from a couple of visitors to the farm to be able to make a set and begin the process of teaching himself how to play them. His first set of bones was carved out of the handle of a broken pitchfork by a temporary seasonal farm labourer who knew what the instrument looked like but little else. Later, a local railway depot agent showed him how to hold them and play a basic beat. Albert was on his own after that. He began to develop a two-handed bones playing technique by playing along to the player piano in the parlour of the family home. He would sit on the piano stool and pump the pedals with his feet while his hands worked at creating rhythms patterns to fit the music. As he became more competent, he began to combine these patterns into distinct arrangements for each tune. He went on to originate a distinctive style, which he then transmitted, beat-for-beat, to his son, Jerry.

Jerry was born in 1941 and as a boy he began learning to play the bones by imitating his father. With a pair of wooden bones carved out of an old peach crate he practiced alone for several years, mostly by playing along to polka music on the radio in the kitchen. Eventually Albert and Jerry started to practice together in the parlour and by the time Jerry was in his late teens they had built a strong musical relationship. They developed a unique style of duet performance in which they accompanied the player piano or gramophone recordings with beat-for-beat, unison renditions of Albert’s bones arrangements. When he finished high school, Jerry decided to work on the farm with his father rather than go to college. They continued to play music together and farm together until Albert passed away in 1967. Jerry took over the farm after his father died and
worked it with his mother for almost twenty years before she died in 1985. In 1986 he married his wife, Sharon, and they continue to run the 160-acre family farm today.

Bernie, the youngest in the family, was born in 1943. Soon after she finished high school she moved away from home “to see the world” (Mescher, B. 2006). She has worked as a flight attendant with Northwest Airlines for nearly forty years and now lives in Miami, Florida, with her husband, Tom. Bernie recalls watching her father and brother play together when she was a child, but she herself didn’t start playing until a few years after Albert passed away. One day, in 1970, sensing the presence and encouragement of her father, she picked up the set of bones she kept in her house as a memento and, for the first time, she “got something out of them” (Mescher, B. 2006). Soon she was getting encouragement and tutoring from Jerry who began to pass on the techniques and arrangements he had learned from his father. By the late 1990s Bernie had become an accomplished exponent of the style and she and Jerry began working on the recreation of Jerry and Albert’s duet routines. Since 1999, and on just a few occasions each year, they have been presenting these duets to audiences at social and charity events in their local communities, at festivals such as the Old-Time Country Music Contest and Festival in Iowa, and at Bones Fest, the annual gathering of the Rhythm Bones Society. An increasingly important element in these performances has been Jerry and Bernie’s articulation of the concept of a Mescher bones playing tradition.
The Mescher repertoire is largely composed of the bones arrangements Albert made to accompany commercial recordings of ragtime, polka and dixieland music. These recorded versions of the tunes, from which the arrangements were originally moulded, have also been handed down as part of the transmission process. Most Mescher bones playing, domestic and public, is done to the accompaniment of these recordings. Albert, Jerry, and Bernie have all played with other musicians on occasion, but bones playing in the Mescher household developed in relative isolation from any musical community, and opportunities to play with other musicians were few and far between. When the opportunity to play with other musicians does arise, with a bluegrass or country band for instance, Jerry and Bernie are most comfortable when there is enough time to work out the bones arrangements and practice them. If the band plays pieces from the Mescher repertoire then Jerry and Bernie will use Albert’s bones arrangements, modifying them if necessary. If the music played is not in their repertoire already, then Jerry, who has the same ‘feel’ for the task as his father, will work out a bones arrangement.

The Mescher bones players have no great desire to improvise in performance. Rather, the exact reproduction in performance of a pre-arranged set of rhythm patterns for each tune is a primary aesthetic goal of the style. Furthermore, when playing as a duet, the Mescher practice is for both bones players to play identical rhythm patterns simultaneously. This unison style leads to the synchronisation of both the patterns of movement and the patterns of sound. The performance of these duets constitutes the quintessential expression of the style. There have only been two actual duet pairings in the tradition so far: Albert Mescher and his son, Jerry, and Jerry and his sister, Bernie. Jerry lost his musical
“partner” when his father passed away in 1967, and he played “alone” until the late 1990s when he began to play with Bernie. Brother and sister both acknowledge their desire to replicate the musical entity that was the double act of father and son. In stepping into Albert Mescher’s “place” as Jerry’s musical partner, Bernie not only restores the archetypal duet formation of the style, she also enters into an intense musical relationship with her father. For Jerry and Bernie this restoration of the duet formation also completes the process of patrilineal transmission and sees them take on the mantle of tradition bearers; in their duet performances they fulfill their desire to give full expression to the Mescher bones playing style and continue the tradition. The duet, then, is both the locus of the musical and familial tradition, and the ideal aesthetic playground of the style.

Performing the Mescher Tradition

Bones Fest IV took place over the weekend of September 22-24, 2000 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Jerry and Bernie were attending Bones Fest for the first time and, like many others at the festival, I had heard of them but had never actually seen them play. Their performances made a deep and lasting impression on me, and it was this more than anything else that inspired me to carry out further research into the Mescher tradition. The ethnographic account\(^5\) presented here serves as an introductory narrative – a means of focusing (Geertz 2000, p.84) on the musical, performative, social and psychological substance of the Mescher tradition. In choosing to write an ethnography of performance I privilege the “sensuous images and performative actions” (Baumann 1992, p.47) of Jerry, Bernie, and Albert (who appeared on a video recording), and my observations and

\(^5\) The account is based on my analysis of the video recordings I made of the performances, on my field notes, and on my reflections of what happened during the event.
analysis of the images and actions form the core of the narrative. Following Kisliuk (1997, p.24), I employ the ethnography of performance as a strategy for describing not just performative interaction, sound, and movement, but also “feeling”. In the case of the Mescher performance, we have already seen that the performative interaction between the two players in the duet, and between each player and the tradition are critical loci of meaning. The interactive space between performer(s) and the audience constitutes a third meaningful interface. Jerry and Bernie stress the communicative responsibility they feel towards their audience when they are in performance mode and both actively embrace their roles as entertainers. Entertainment is the “environment” (Barnouw and Kirkland 1992, p.51) in which they choose to pass on their story and perform their identity; it is part of the lifeforce of the Mescher tradition and I include a consideration of its dynamics in my account. Furthermore, because reading the Mescher style as music and movement is more rewarding than reading it as music alone, my account includes a consideration of both gesture and sound. Finally, through the ethnographic account of the performance event I hope to evoke some of its ineffable affective meaning and begin to understand the structures of emotion and sound that sustain the Mescher musical patrilineage.

**Bones Fest IV**

Steve Wixson and his wife, Janet, hosted Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Steve is the Secretary and Treasurer of the Rhythm Bones Society, and the editor of the society’s newsletter, *Rhythm Bones Player*. The weekend events took place in their home on Signal Mountain and in the Walden Community Center, located just a few miles away. Bones players, their friends, and members of their families, travel from all parts of the
United States to attend Bones Fest. Arriving throughout the day and into the evening, the participants tend to go in search of old (and new) bones-playing friends once they have settled into their accommodation. I, myself, had arrived from Ireland the previous day and was staying with Steve and Janet for the weekend. A Friday evening gathering at their home provided the ideal social environment for attendees to share stories and music with other members of the bones playing community. The activities were informal; snacks and drinks were served, and an impromptu bones playing session continued for several hours. Steve had prepared a compilation tape of music and most of those who could play joined in the communal bones playing at some point in the evening. Here is how Everett Cowett, the Executive Director of the Rhythm Bones Society at the time, remembers the event.

The wonderful reception given us on Friday night by Steve and Janet Wixson in their lovely home overlooking Chattanooga was a real bones ‘click-off’. The musical CD arranged by Steve that had something for everybody was great and don’t forget his BoneDrums (bones with sensors and switches that plug into a drum module). The pure sound of the bones will never be the same. Young rockers are sure to take up the bones now. (Cowett 2000, p.1)

Of the fifty-nine people who attended Bones Fest IV, forty-four were bones players and the rest were friends and family. Many people there knew each other already, having attended previous Bones Fests, but there were also those who were attending for the first time. Amongst them were Jerry and Bernie Mescher. Their reputation preceded them. Steve Wixson had met them and seen them perform at the Old-Time Country Music Contest and Festival in Avoca, Iowa, earlier that summer and had spoken very highly of them to me. While I caught a glimpse of them playing in the group session that evening it
was difficult to really focus on what they were doing and I was especially looking forward to hearing them play the following day in the relatively formal individual presentations.

On the Saturday of Bones Fest IV, the morning and afternoon sessions took place in the Walden Community Centre, about four miles from the Wixson home. The sessions were devoted to a series of short individual presentations by the bones players in attendance; this had become the norm in the Bones Fest schedule. The typical presentation consisted of a brief introduction during which the participant talked about how they first encountered the bones and how they learned to play them. This was usually followed by a description of their style and finally, a demonstration of their playing. There was no live music during these sessions so almost all of the bones players played along to recorded music on tape or CD. Most brought their own selections with them and others either borrowed recordings or, in some few cases, didn’t use any at all.

The presentations took place on a raised stage in front of an audience of about forty people, consisting of the other bones players in attendance, members of their families, and friends. Two microphones were set up on the stage, one at head height for speaking, and the other, pointing lower, for the bones. Dan Cowett sat behind the stage and operated the audio playback machines for most of the day while his brother, Al, acted as master of ceremonies for the event. As people gathered at the hall on the Saturday morning, Al took the names of those who wanted to take part in the presentations and
drew up a schedule for the first part of the day. I set up my video camera on a tripod, about twenty feet away from the front of the stage and prepared my blank videocassettes.

Steve Wixson was the first to address the audience. After some announcements regarding various aspects of the weekend activities, he turned his attention to the session that was about to begin.

Steve: The format will be like last year in which we will informally, you know, get up front, tell how we learnt how to play the bones...according to Al – he has the hook – up to a maximum of three minutes; that’s probably what he’s gonna tell you. And we’ll do that this morning, and since we’re starting later, into the afternoon as long as it takes.

He went on speak a little about the playback of tapes and CDs before handing over to the MC for the day, Al Cowett.

Steve: I’ll be runnin’ the sound equipment for a while and give me your tapes or cassettes right before you come up and I’ll put ‘em on and cue ‘em and try to look real professional...It needs to be cued to the right spot if it’s a tape or we’ll have to take time to do that.

With that Steve left the stage and Al come to the microphone for the first time.

Al: Ok, you guys, ah, good mornin’.

Audience members: Good mornin’.

Al: I’m Al Cowett, the second spawn of Everett Cowett and, em, welcome to Bones Fest eye vee.

Audience: [Loud cheers]

Al: Here at bones central, two thousand - here in beautiful Signal Mountain in Tennessee. And also let’s really thank Steve Wixson for bein’ such a fantastic host...Anyway, I’m gonna be the MC; I’m gonna call your name, bring ye up here. For the first ten people – I was only takin’ ten names at a time...Ok, guys,
em, to start Bones Fest two thousand we have a fella named John Davis from New Canton, Virginia. Come on up, John.

Audience: [Applause as John leaves his seat in the audience and walks on stage]

Al: His wife Sarah says she’s not comin’ up but she’s behind him. He’s been playin’ bones for fifty-six years and he’s gonna start off with a little rendition of Dixieland. Mornin’, John.

Twenty-nine bones players in all, including myself, took the stage in the course of the morning and afternoon. One-by-one, Al introduced us: Everett Cowett, Martha Cowett, Steve Brown, Jim Runners, Spike Bones Muhrer, Joe Birl, Vivian Cox, Jerry Barnet, Mel Mercier, Will Kear, Lee Tollinger, Walt Watkins, Bill Vits, Barry Patton, Tom Cowett, Russ Myers, Jerry Mescher, Bernie Worrell, Dave Black Bart Boyles, Micheal Ballard, Gil Hibbin, Steve Wixson, Matteo, John Cahill, Ida May Schmich, David Kimber, Sally Carroll, John Cowett, and Ann Hoffman. We each told our ‘bones story’ and played a number or two. An excerpt from Everett Cowett’s review of Bones Fest IV in the *Rhythm Bones Player* gives some idea of the variety of characters and styles on show.

Al Cowett (Greensboro, NC) our MC arranged the Saturday program on the spot and held it all together. Dan Cowett (Greensboro, NC) handled our CDs, tapes and sound system. We thank them. Steve Wixson playing with both hands in public for the first time was a shocker. What a year of practice can do. And what about that number *Tiger Rag* by Mr. Goon Bones. He challenged us to play it better than he did, but I’m not sure any of us did. *Spike Bones* Muhrer (Columbia, MO) will be remembered for his Riverboat performance and Bones 2000 light show with vegetarian bones. Jerry Dr Bones Barnett (West Des Moines, IA) was great with cowboy songs, the ‘Old Chasm Trail’ in particular. And I liked Bill Vits (Grand Rapids, MI) for what he did with Sweet Georgia Brown and a whistling audience participating. And don’t forget Jim Runner’s (Spring Mills, PA) bones sounds, Russ Myers’ (Brightwood, VA) ‘Hot Time in the Old Town’
and Dave Black Bart Boyles (Cedarburg, WI) wild performance playing the ‘Hilarity’ rag time music.

Everyone was impressed by our octogenarians Joe Birl’s (Philadelphia, PA) Sousa marches, Matteo (NY, NY) on castanets, Vivian Cox (Shelbyville, IN) playing Ragtime, and Ida May Schmich (St Louis) dancing and playing everything. If you want to stay young play the bones. (Cowett 2000, p.3)

Albert Mescher and Jerry Mescher

Jerry Mescher was the first up after lunch. Appearing in front of a Bones Fest audience for the first time, he too began by sharing a little about his musical background. As he did so, Steve Wixson was busy preparing to show some video footage on a large screen to Jerry’s right. Jerry told us how he had heard the bones throughout his childhood, played by his father, Albert Mescher, on the family farm in Halbur, Iowa. He himself began to play when he was about ten years old, and during his teens and twenties, he and his father played together often as a ‘team’, both at home and in public. He also farmed with his father, and when Albert Mescher died in 1967 Jerry took over the family farm.

Jerry Mescher: I’m a hog farmer, corn raiser and bean raiser. Ah, I just got outta the combine [harvester] when I left for Chattanooga here, for the bone fest. And I learnt to play the bones back when I was ten years old from my father who seen it at a county fair, and through a lot of enquiries he learnt to play at that time…As I got older I began to play with my father as a team. My father passed away at the age of fifty-nine, thirty-three years ago.

In 1961, Jerry and his father auditioned for the popular television programme, Ted Mack and the Original Amateur Hour. Their bones duet was successful at the regional auditions for the show in Denison, Iowa, and soon they were traveling by bus to New York City to take part in the final auditions for the show. Father and son were again successful in the
auditions, and after three days of rehearsals they recorded the television programme. Steve Wixson had located the original tapes of the show at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and he was about to show the Bones Fest audience a video copy of the Mescher duet.

Jerry: So, what we’re gonna do, we’re gonna play a segment. It’s just my dad and I - otherwise it takes too much time, here. It’s a half hour tape – Ted Mack - remember the old Geritol, the Sominex and all this. It’s all black and white. And what was really fantastic about this - me bein’ nineteen years old and bein’ with my father - this was on Father’s Day, nineteen sixty-one that we did this on TV. We had – we - we filmed it on a Wednesday and then we went back to the hotel. We seen ourselves in the hotel room. That was the last time I seen that tape in forty years until I seen it now, so I didn’t really remember – we played a number called – ok, this is Ted Mack.

Steve had already pressed ‘Play’ on the video projector and the appearance of Ted Mack on the large screen to Jerry’s right had taken the attention of the room, cutting across Jerry’s introduction. The sound faded up.

Ted Mack: Here’s a nice way to celebrate Father’s Day: a father and son team. They play the bones. They come from Halbur, Iowa. They won a talent contest in Denison, Iowa - Albert and Jerry Mescher.

A young, slim, and fresh-faced nineteen-year-old Jerry Mescher appeared on the screen dressed in a grey dinner jacket, complete with bow tie and a white handkerchief carefully protruding from his breast pocket. He stood with his arms held straight down on each side, his fists curled up around his ebony bones. To his right stood his father, Albert Mescher who, in height and general physique, was almost identical to his son. His formal suit was a little darker in colour but otherwise very similar to Jerry’s, and his stance
matched that of his son. Both men looked a little self-conscious for the first couple of moments until, taking their cue from the applause of the studio audience, they each broke into a broad smile. Ted Mack addressed them directly now.

Jerry Mescher: My father owns a hundred and sixty-acre farm and my brother and I help him with the general farming.
TM: I see. What do you think of New York?
JM: I like it.
TM: Maybe I’d better speak to your dad. You – you think it’s gonna be tough to get that young fellar back on the farm after he’s seen New York?
Albert: I’m not worried about Jerry but I’m worried about myself.

Everyone joined in with Albert’s laughter, and the audience’s appreciation of the humour brought a satisfying closure to the somewhat stilted introductory exchange. While it was obvious enough that this TV moment had been prepared and rehearsed beforehand, it did provide a valuable glimpse of the non-musical aspects of the Mescher’s performance style. Albert Mescher was the more animated and relaxed of the two. His brief verbal performance was openly playful, even mischievous, whereas Jerry was deferential in his responses to Ted Mack’s questions. Albert’s body language also suggested that he was quite relaxed, and when he spoke he made eye contact with Ted Mack and the studio audience. Jerry, by contrast, was generally more reserved and his body movements were more restricted. During his brief conversation with Ted Mack, Jerry turned his head to the side to address the host directly but kept his body facing out front towards the camera and the studio audience. He didn’t address the audience directly during the exchange and he
seemed to be a little more intimidated by the occasion than his father. Overall, however, there was an air of composure and preparedness about the father and son team.

Ted Mack: I guess we’d better put you both to work then. Alright, there they are - Albert and Jerry Mescher from Denison, Iowa.

This was the signal for the band to begin, and as they played the introductory measures of the music, Albert and Jerry checked the grip on their bones, lifted their arms up and out, and then moved simultaneously into performance. Their movements and rhythmic patterns were synchronised exactly, and both men smiled at each other and the audience and Ted Mack from beginning to end. At one point they each made a half turn to face each other and, still smiling at the audience, they launched into a different playing technique for one round of the tune. The new style was more complex and syncopated, and was characterised by rapid hocketing between the two hands. They stayed in this style for only a short period before they turned back to face the audience and reverted to the first style. This brief turn to face each other was the biggest choreographic gesture of the routine, but even when these men stood relatively still and played, they were dancing. Albert was the more flamboyant of the two; Jerry, more composed, kept his feet squarely on the floor throughout, whereas Albert made some sidesteps and generally allowed his body to move more freely during the performance. The father’s bones were held a little higher than the son’s, and his gesticulations were a little more flamboyant, but otherwise they matched each other to perfection. These differences contributed to the vitality of the performance and, overall, the act had an uncommon elegance.
Albert and Jerry ended their performance with a flourish, throwing four hands up to shoulder height to sound the last emphatic unison ‘click’. The cheers and applause of the Bones Fest audience immediately reinforced the enthusiastic ovations of the television audience. The sight, in glorious ‘black and white’ (a VHS copy of the original wire kinescope recording) of father and son in their choreographed unison of sound and gesture playing along to the house band’s version of ‘Under the Double Eagle’ was the most arresting bones-related image I had ever seen. As the applause died away, the voice of Russ Myers brought our attention back to the present, and to Jerry, who now stood alone on the stage. “Are you prepared to play the same piece today?” Russ asked, cajoling him.

Jerry Mescher: I don’t know where it’s at. That was done with live music, back there – no tapes – it had to be done with live music, see. We had to rehearse it three times. The number we were gonna do, Lawrence Welk’s ‘Jolly Polka’, you know, he wouldn’t release the royalty. We had a little dance routine with a little polka step with a little back-to-back act, you know. And they said we couldn’t play it – they couldn’t play it, and the guy asked my father, “What else do you do?” Well, he just blurted out, ‘Under the Double Eagle’. Well, that’s a march, you know; it’s hard to do a march with a polka step, you know. So, we had to substitute this number and learn it.

It seemed like this was the one and only time that Jerry and his father ever played ‘Under the Double Eagle’. Later, I discovered that he and his father only rarely had the opportunity to play with other ‘live’ musicians; instead, their practice was to play along to commercial recordings, even when performing in public; they had a repertoire of ‘numbers’ each with its own distinct bones arrangement. Jerry’s reference to the “dance routine” they had prepared for the ‘Jolly Polka’ hinted at the importance of movement in their bones arrangements, and in the Mescher style of bones playing in general.
Jerry intimated that he was surprised that his father had ‘blurted’ out ‘Under the Double Eagle’ when they had several other pieces in their repertoire that would have lent themselves more easily to a dance routine. One of the pieces Albert might have chosen was ‘Red Wing’. This was one of their favourite tunes and they especially liked to play along to a recording of it by the pianist, Big Tiny Little, one of the few musicians that Jerry and his father did get to perform with on a few occasions. Jerry chose to play it now for the Bones Fest audience, and as he introduced it he brought the audience back fully into the present as he himself moved into entertainment mode.

That was a little bit of, ah, forty years ago and this is, ah, the present. Without further a do I’m gonna get on here. I’m gonna do a number with another gentleman we had the opportunity of performing with, ah, back, also, almost forty years ago when he was thirty-one years old – Mr. Big Tiny Little, that came off the Laurence Welk Show. I’m gonna do one of his numbers. My father and I played with him in several engagements back in Iowa when he left the Laurence Welk Show… This is one of his numbers; we’ll take you way back with a little bit of Red Wing.

With a subtle (and very professional sounding) tonal inflection of the final phrase Jerry invoked ‘Red Wing’, and as he waited for Dan to start the tape he moved away from the microphone and clicked his bones to check their sound.

Snare drum and banjo played a short percussive introduction before the piano entered with the familiar first part of ‘Red Wing’. Jerry joins in on the downbeat. Throughout the first part he alternates between right hand and left hand, trading short, almost identical patterns in a call and response style that mirrors the melodic shape of the tune. When his right hand is playing, he shifts his body weight a little to the left; when his left hand is
playing, he shifts his weight a little to the right. His feet hardly move at all. In the second part of the tune he leaves this polite, conversational style, and brings both hands together to play in more emphatic, wholehearted unison. This is more like the style I had just seen him play with his father. With his hands now in perfect accord and his whole body balanced and centered, he begins to step from side to side in loose time with the music. His arms, like wings, are half-outstretched on either side of his upright torso, each mirroring the eccentric flight path of the other. When the first part of the tune returns Jerry reverts to the alternating, one-handed style and his body movements become restricted again. He repeats the change to the unison, two-handed style when the second part comes around and, again, he begins to move his body more freely.

What happened next startles me. At the beginning of the third round of the tune Jerry goes into the same syncopated hocketing style that he and his father had used half way through their performance of ‘Under the Double Eagle’. This time, Jerry doesn’t turn side-on as he had done with his father, but the change was still a dramatic one and the technique is recognisable enough to suggest a stylistic continuity over the forty years since he had appeared on the Ted Mack show. Now his hands are neither in a measured call and response pattern nor in unison with each other; instead, they are engaged in a rapid dialogue dominated by the right hand. With his ‘stronger’ hand dictating the conversation, the left hand can only make intermittent interjections. The speed of the resultant rhythmic pattern, and the almost identical sound of the two pairs of bones, makes it quite difficult to distinguish between the left and right hand contributions to the overall pattern. The right hand is in full, continuous flow, and it moves in the same way
as it had done in the first two rounds of the tune—a combination of wrist turns and flicks, and an over-arching cyclic sweep and return of the arm. The left hand gestures, by contrast, are staccato-like and curve-less, limited to an irregular flicking of the wrist.

Jerry’s posture is different, too. There is a relative complexity in the arrangement of his body. He continues to step from side to side but he is bent forward slightly now and his body leans a little to the left. He keeps his busy right hand in the same position, half-outstretched to the side of his body, and, as if to keep a closer eye on it, his left hand is drawn closer in so that it is almost directly in front of his body as it performs its irregular pizzicato. The technique looks difficult and the rhythms sound complex and intricate. Compared to the two previous styles this seems almost audacious, but Jerry’s execution of it is never less than eloquent. When he returns to the unison, two-handed style in the second part of the tune, his body visibly relaxes and he seems to play the familiar, and now rather prosaic, rhythm patterns with a renewed vigor. He stays in this style until the end of the number. The conclusion of the performance was met with rapturous applause and hoots of delight from the audience. Jerry took a modest bow and said a simple “Thank you’ before leaving the stage.

I was captivated. I had never before seen a bones playing style, in both form and content, so coherently drawn. Jerry’s execution of finely wrought rhythmic phrases were executed effortlessly and seemed to hug the contours of the Big Tiny Little recording of ‘Red Wing’. I had rarely witnessed such consummate musicianship and impeccable timing in a bones performance.
Bernie Worrel

My introduction to the Mescher bones tradition was not yet complete, however, as the next person to take the stage was Jerry’s sister, Bernie Worrell. Bernie had traveled from her home in Miami, Florida to attend Bones Fest for the first time. She introduced herself and told us how, as a child, she had watched her brother and father play the bones, and how she, herself, only started to play them a few years after her father died.

I grew up in the household watching my father and brother for years and I couldn’t get a thing outta the bones. So, em, Jerry went to bone-ing and I went to flying; I’m a flight attendant for Northwest Airlines. I’ve been there for thirty-three years and, em, so, it wasn’t until nineteen seventy, ah – my father died in sixty-seven – and, em - I don’t know - I kept two of them around just for a conversational piece and, ah, one day I really felt his presence, like him telling me to “go pick up those bones”, you know. I did, and I got something out of them - enough to encourage me to do something about it.

Bernie played on and off for the next twenty years. Jerry gave her guidance, tutoring and encouragement when he could, but Bernie didn’t become serious about bones playing until she bought a player piano which was similar to the one she had grown up with in the family home in Halbur. It was at the player piano that her father first learned to play the bones and Bernie hoped that it would become a source of inspiration for her.

I’d go along and go along and time passed by and then, about ten years ago, I got more serious about it and I got a player piano and I really got more serious because I felt I could really relate to my father…That’s how he started…When I got the piano it brought me closer and got me more inspired.

After this Bernie began to fulfill her desire to become a bones player in the Mescher tradition and with practice she became good enough to enter, and win the World Spoon and Bones Playing competition at the Avoca Old-Time Country Music Contest and
Festival in 1999. Again she looked to her father to give her the support she needed to take part in the competition.

It took a lot of courage…to get up there, believe me, and I said, “Dad, you’re gonna have to help me play”. Well, he was there again.

Bernie was visibly emotional when speaking about her father, and, as with Jerry, bones playing seemed to play a significant role in her relationship (both past and present) with him. After her introduction she took her turn at playing for the Bones Fest audience. She had chosen a recording of ‘San Antonio Rose’, and as soon as the first notes of the piano sounded, she began playing in the same unison, two-handed style as her father and brother. While her ‘rolls’ and ‘off-beats’ were not quite as well executed as theirs, all of the technical and musical aspects of her performance pointed to a shared, distinctive style. Her rhythm patterns, gestures, and overall gait were the same. In terms of the overall structure of the arrangement too, she remained true to form, inserting the hocketing pattern in one section before returning to the unison style to finish.

**Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrel**

The idea that shared music-making was somehow fundamental to the relationship between sibling and father, and, indeed between the siblings themselves, became more compelling when, after she had completed her number, Bernie brought Jerry back on stage to perform a duet with her, just as he had done with his father.

Well, ah, Jerry and I have been working on some things together; we tried to copy something that he had with my father. And, ah, you know, we started playin’ together actually at this last festival.
Jerry came back on stage and spoke about how he had played on his own since his father died and how he and Bernie were now working at recreating the ensemble routine he had developed with his father.

Jerry: We’re gonna try and recapture, ah, some of that feeling and some of that art that we had together as a duet. And we’re just gonna do this off the cuff and there might be some little errors, you know, but we’re gonna try and play this together. It’s called ‘Golden Slippers’.

What followed was extraordinary. Jerry and Bernie stood about six feet apart and faced each other. The music began, and after a few beats they joined in, playing in the now familiar unison two-handed style. They were slightly out of sync with each other for the first few phrases but they recovered quickly and soon settled into playing as one. They remained in this position, watching each other carefully for two rounds of the tune until Jerry, sensing stability in the ensemble, turned to face the audience. Bernie followed suit without hesitation. At the beginning of the next round of the tune they turned back to face each other and launched into what I was already beginning to think of as the hallmark of the Mescher style, the hocketing technique. The audience shouted their appreciation this time, sensing the extra complexity and the challenge facing brother and sister. They moved back into the unison style for one round of the tune, followed by another round in the hocket style, before finishing in the unison style. Overall, the performance did not have the finesse of Jerry’s duet with his father, but this did not diminish its emotional power and its significance. As Jerry and Bernie left the stage, Al came back to the microphone to introduce the next bones player, and the show continued for a few more hours.
The following day, I had the opportunity to interview Jerry. His eloquent account of Mescher musical practice was modulated by an underlying emotional narrative. He spoke about his bones playing style, his musical relationship with his father, and the recent development of the duetting practice with Bernie. The family farm figured prominently in Jerry’s exposition and the parlour emerged as the primary site for the invention of the Mescher bones playing style and a realignment of his relationship with his father. The seeds of my research into the Mescher Bones playing tradition were sown during the interview and Jerry and Bernie’s performance at Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga. I resolved to stay in touch with Jerry and Bernie and to return to America to spend time with them at future Bones Fest events and at the family homestead in Iowa.
In this chapter, I locate the Mescher family narrative within the history of German migration to the New World and the establishment of German-American rural communities in the Midwest in the decades after the American Civil War. My account also includes a discussion of the settlement, during the second half of the nineteenth-century, of the Midwest territory that has been home to four generations of the Mescher family since Frederick Mescher, Jerry’s great-grandfather, migrated to the United States, from Germany, in 1892. The chapter is divided into three parts: (i) Introduction: In the Field, (ii) Patrilineage, (iii) Ecology. In the first part, I foreground my research methodology and the primary source for the narrative that follows. In the second part, I trace the Mescher patrilineage from 1892, when Frederick Mescher first arrived in America. In the third part, I locate the Mescher narrative within the history of its physical and socio-cultural environment.

Introduction: In the Field

In January 2006, five and a half years after Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, I traveled to Jerry Mescher’s home in Halbur, Iowa, to continue our conversation about his life as a musician and a farmer. I was accompanied by my partner, Maura O’Keeffe, who acted as my informal fieldwork assistant on the trip. We spent a week in Iowa, staying at a guesthouse in the town of Carroll, about nine miles from Halbur. Each afternoon, from Monday to Friday, I interviewed Jerry for about an hour. On the final afternoon I also interviewed Jerry together with his wife, Sharon. These interview sessions were formal
and were recorded using a Canon XM 2 digital video camera. I also made video recordings of Jerry playing the bones and showing us around the farm. The interviews were carried out in the sitting room of Jerry and Sharon’s home. Jerry sat at the player piano for all of the one-to-one interviews and he and Sharon sat on the couch when I interviewed them together. On a couple of occasions Sharon and Maura were present during the interviews I conducted with Jerry. They were seated, as I was, behind the camera and when they were present Jerry would often address or refer to one or both of them in the course of the interview.

Jerry and I agreed that the best place for him to sit for the interviews was on the stool in front of the player piano, with his back to the instrument. This is the piano that sounded on the Sunday mornings of his childhood, after mass and before dinner, in the years before a gramophone or a radio came into house. It was at this piano, in what was then the parlour, that Jerry’s father, Albert Mescher, taught himself to play the bones.

Of course, this house has changed, but this piano has been in this position since I can remember. It always sat right here. There was two roller doors there. This was the parlour. There was a wall there. Anyway, when he was playing, he was sitting on this very stool...His feet were outstretched like this, you know, pumping them [pedals], and then, his arms were right here like this. (Mescher, J. 2006)

While the instrument is now in need of tuning, it remains a highly potent touchstone for Jerry’s connection with his father. It seemed like the ideal space for the interview, and Jerry and I gravitated towards it instinctively.
The player piano can also be played manually, and before we began the interview Jerry played a little bit of ‘You are my Sunshine for me’. I took the opportunity to try out my two-handed bones playing technique and afterwards we promised to have some piano and bones duets during the week. I moved back to the camera and made some final adjustments while Jerry gathered up his favourite set of bones and seated himself, once again, with his back to the keyboard. The preliminaries over with, I took my seat beside the camera and pressed ‘record’.

**Patrilineage**

Fred Mescher, Jerry’s paternal grandfather, was born in Oldenberg, Germany on September 2, 1879. He was the oldest of eleven children. In August 1892, after fourteen days at sea, he landed at New York Harbour with his four younger siblings and his parents, Frederick and Agnes Schnittker Mescher (*Memories of Yesterday – Dreams of Tomorrow, Halbur, Iowa, 1883-1983*, P.12). The family came in search of “a better life” (Mescher, S, personal correspondence). Frederick’s sister, Elizabeth, had already made the journey to America. She was married to a farmer, Joe Schweers, and they lived near Arcadia in Carroll County, Iowa. The Mescher family settled in Templeton, Iowa, a few miles away from the Schweers, and lived there for seven years. In 1899, they moved west to Nebraska, but it wasn’t long before Fred returned to work as a hired man on the Schweers farm. Elizabeth and Joe Schweers had three children: two boys, Herman and Alphonse, and a girl, Cora, who they had fostered off the ‘orphan train’ from New York.
Fred courted Cora and they married on 9 October, 1906. They went to live on a farm in Petersburg, Nebraska for three years before returning to Halbur in 1909 to live on the three hundred and twenty-acre farm that Cora received as part of her inheritance from the Schweers. The farm has been in the Mescher family ever since.

Fred and Cora had four children: Albert, Joe, Eleanor and Florence. Albert, the eldest, was born in 1907 in Nebraska. In 1935 he married Ann Schenkelberg and they also had four children: Paul, Jerome (Jerry), Darlene, and Bernice. In 1943, Fred Mescher willed equal portions of the farm to each of his four children. Albert bought his sister Eleanor’s portion, giving him a farm of one hundred and sixty acres. He worked the farm for the next twenty-four years until he passed away in 1967. When Albert died equal portions of the farm were willed to his four children. Jerry had been working fulltime on the farm with Albert since he left high school in 1960, and after Albert passed away, Jerry bought out each of his siblings in order to keep the family farm intact. Jerry and his wife Sharon continue to live and work on the 160-acre farm today. They have no children.

Actually, so this has been my home …since I was three years old. That’s sixty-one years, so that’s a long time to be in this same environment. It is home, because I don’t know anything other than, I haven’t lived in any other place, except when I was in the army for six months in the guard. (Mescher, J. 2006)

The farm borders the small town of Halbur, which is located in Roselle Township, one of the sixteen townships that comprise Carroll County in western Iowa. The farmland is situated on the northwest edge of the town in the adjacent township of Washington. By the time Fred and Cora took over the farm in 1909, the town of Halbur was well established. Incorporated in 1882, it was named for Bernard Anton Halbur, a German
immigrant who purchased a significant amount of land in the county in the 1870s and donated a portion for the site of the town (Setzler 2002, p.102). In the decades that followed, German Catholic immigrants settled the town and its rural hinterland and Halbur became the centre of a thriving German-American agricultural community. Carroll County is still predominantly agricultural today and the population of Halbur and its immediate hinterland remains largely German-American and Catholic.

The Meschers have farmed their quarter section of western Iowa prairie land for a hundred years and their relationship with the land constitutes a central theme in the historical narrative of the family. For three generations their hereditary portion of one hundred and sixty acres has provided an economic livelihood for the family, and has been the site of its social and cultural formation. For the principal figures in the patrilineal system—Fred, Albert, and Jerry Mescher—this ecological experience is especially meaningful. The land passed through them and it is their social and cultural lives that are configured most thoroughly by the proprietary obligations of the patrimony. The narrative of this ecological relationship is central to the Mescher story and the roots of that story are located in the history of the Midwest: the history of the land, and of the migrants who settled it during the “great westward migration” (Bonney, p.2) of the nineteenth century.

Ecology

The midwestern landscape has a history of interpretation. For the Native American the land was “sacred, bound up in an intricate web of meaning with all living things,
including mankind. The land could not be property” (Campbell and Kean 1997, p.128) because “the land is not really a place, separate from ourselves” (Gunn Allen 1992, p.119). A sea change in the ecological attitude to the land was carried by the first wave of Anglo-American ‘pioneers’ who settled there in the early decades of the nineteenth century. With them migrated the “capitalist ideology of ownership” (Campbell and Kean 1997, p.129) and, in Sitting Bull’s words, “a love of possession” (Turner 1977, p.255, quoted in Campbell and Kean 1997, p.129). The removal of the Native American Indian and the arrogation of the land were controlled by well-established Land Ordinances as part of a far-reaching colonial project. The Land Ordinance of 1785 introduced the methodology that would transform the ecology of the West; based on the premise that the land was ‘vacant’, ‘virgin’ and ‘free’, the Ordinance determined the manner in which it would be divided, distributed and registered (Campbell and Kean 1997, p.129).

The Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 [were] laws that provided for the transition from territorial status to statehood. The 1785 law determined how land should be purchased from the Indians, surveyed, divided, and sold. The 1787 law set down a pattern of government for territories and a plan for eventual statehood. (Bonney, p.2)

The process of remapping saw a “rectangular or grid survey system” (Davis 1988, p.133) superimposed upon the territories of the Midwest. As early as 1804, just one year after the Louisiana Purchase, federal surveyors reached the flat prairies of Illinois where they employed the grid survey system to rationalise the landscape. Davis outlines the far-reaching impact of the project.

This fateful gesture of human ingenuity was designed to efficiently transfer the public lands into private hands. It did this and more. The concept of six-mile-square townships and their sectional components arranged along principal
meridians and baselines facilitated settlement, created norms of land ownership, reduced the likelihood of property disputes, imposed geometric uniformity upon an uneven landscape, and established a precedent for public support of education. From it followed the development of townships as political subdivisions as well as survey units, along with county boundaries, roads, and other man-made adjustments to the landscape. (Davis 1988, p.133)

The remapping of the landscape had both physical and psychological meaning for the “migrating hordes” that came to settle the land in the following decades.

To the settlers who bought a section or a half section, plowed the land and erected hedgerows or fences, the rectangular survey system simply accentuated impressions of openness and easy access. Like the flat prairie, survey lines stretch unbroken and straight to the horizon…. Whatever sense of opportunity and welcome the prairie and rivers offered, the grid survey system reinforced. It is, as one observer noted, “a noncentrist and nonhierarchical organization…the ultimate expression of Cartesian rationality and Jeffersonian democracy”. (Davis 1988, pp.133-134)

The Ordinance determined a similar geometric patterning in towns and cities across the nation. Wolfgang Langewiesche called the artificial grid “a diagram of the idea of the Social Contract” (Kouwenhoven 1998, 126); Kouwenhoven describes it as “a blueprint for a future society in which men would live each in his own domain, free and equal, each man’s domain clearly divided from his neighbors” (Kouwenhoven 1998, 126).

However, as Limerick points out, in relation to the history of the West, “the gain of any individual or group in the West often rested on a corresponding loss for another individual or group” (Limerick 1994, p.43). The Ordinance was not only “imposed upon the land without regard to contours or any preconceived pattern of social zoning”
(Kouwenhoven 1998, 126); it was also imposed on the Native American peoples who lived there. The colonist believed that Native Americans were so much a part of nature that they were “incapable of the disembodied, aerial view implied by geometric measure” (Cosgrove 1996, p.7). Their maps, which were full of exact local detail, lacked the rational dimensions of measure, “the longitude and latitude of Places” (Captain John Smith, quoted in Cosgrove 1996, p.7).

In the states of the Midwest, the farming practices of the settlers underscored the geometric inscription of the land and transferred “the map from parchment or paper to the ground itself” (Cosgrove 1996, p.3). Today, the most widely grown crops in the region, corn and soybeans, mimic property lines as farmers “compete for the neatest and straightest crop rows, which reach as far toward the horizon as the eye can see” (Davis 1988, p.134). Farm buildings and farmsteads in themselves often display a similar aesthetic concern for order and symmetry, and the picture of the neatly ordered landscape is completed by the rectilineal roads and fences that run due north-south and east-west throughout the region. Corner sums up the transformation of the United States that was affected by the Land Ordinance of 1785, together with later National Land Acts.

Survey lines, roads, hedgerows, fences, farms, canals, levees, dams, bridges, buildings, and towns have been laid out as means of optimizing human settlement and opportunity. Embodied in the resultant spacings, tolerances, and limits of this national landscape are uniquely American values of democracy, freedom, accessibility, and social improvement. (Corner 1996, p.41)

For the settlers, the marking of the territory was the ‘natural’ habit, but it was also part of the over-arching narrative of “the progress of civilization across the continent”
(Trachtenberg 1982, p.13, quoted in Campbell and Kean 1997, p.128). For Native Americans, on the other hand, it signified an ecological violence. The white settlers, in the words of Sitting Bull, “claim this mother of ours, the earth, for their own and fence their neighbors away…[and] deface her with their building and their refuse” (Turner 1977, p.255, quoted in Campbell and Kean 1997, p.129).

**Settlement**

Westward migration across the continent began in earnest in the decades following the American victory in the War of Independence (1777-1781). In the Peace of Paris treaty (1783), Great Britain recognised the independence of the United States of America and ceded to the new republic the territories of the former thirteen colonies and the lands that stretched to the west of them, as far as the Mississippi. The new republic remained “psychologically and actually very much a matter of the Atlantic seaboard and the Ohio valley” (Roberts 1995, p.741) for the next few decades but a major shift of its “centre of gravity” (Ibid, p.744) westward was set in motion in 1803 with the acquisition from the French of the lands between the Mississippi and the Rockies, in the Louisiana Purchase. With the “largest sale of land of all time” (Ibid, p.743) the geographical size of the republic more than doubled.

On the modern map it includes Louisiana, Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, both the Dakotas, Minnesota west of the Mississippi, most of Kansas, Oklahoma, Montana, Wyoming and a big piece of Colorado. The price was $11,250,000. (Roberts 1995, p.743)
Over the next hundred years the Midwest fell into the embrace of the republic and the land was divided into thirteen states, beginning with Louisiana itself in 1812. On June 1, 1833, Iowa territory was opened to settlement for first time.

Federal surveyors, in the vanguard of the first wave of pioneers, moved from east to west across Iowa territory, dividing the land into “uniform sections and townships in preparation for the first land sales” (Schwieder 1988, p.281). Of all of the midwestern states, Iowa was the most uniformly ‘drawn’ at county level. Its “uniform terrain and its somewhat rectangular shape—324 miles long and 210 miles wide in its greatest distances” (Schwieder 1988, p.281) offered little resistance to the geometric inscription of the Ordinance. The first two counties were established in 1834, just one year after the territory was opened, and the need for new counties grew progressively with the rapid westward migration across the state. Forty-four counties had been established before 1847, the year that Iowa achieved statehood, and the remaining fifty-five counties were established by 1857 (Sage 1974, p.96).

The first settlers came from the Northeast and as they moved into the wooded river valleys of eastern Iowa they discovered an environment similar to what they had known in the Northeast, with ample supplies of timber for fuel, cabins and fences (Schwieder 1988, p.280). As they moved further west into the region the settlers encountered the more unfamiliar and challenging environment of the prairie where timber was scarce and they were forced to find substitute materials for houses, fences, and fuel. The richness of the prairie land promised great rewards, but disease, prairie fires, and isolation tested the
endurance of the early settlers as they moved further west and north into the state. As communities became more established, small towns developed and churches, schools, businesses, and banks were built to serve the inhabitants of the rural hinterland. By the late 1860s most of Iowa State had been settled and the isolation and loneliness experienced by the earliest settlers was replaced by strong family and church-centered community life (Schwieder Date, p.3).

Carroll County, Iowa

Carroll County, in the western part of Iowa State, was not established until January 1851, along with forty-three other counties, eighteen years after Iowa had been officially opened to settlers. Settlement of the region began after a treaty with the Sioux effectively completed the expropriation of the lands from the Native American Indians in Iowa State. The boundaries of the new Iowa counties were drawn up when the Third General Assembly of Iowa met in Iowa City on December 2, 1850. The Assembly located Carroll County “on the third tier of counties from the Missouri River and the fifth tier from both the north and south boundaries of the state lines, with an area of twenty-four square miles” (Setzler 2002, p. 15). In accordance with the Land Ordinance of 1785, surveyors used the grid survey system to divide the county itself into sixteen townships. Each township measured six miles square and was divided into thirty-six sections of 640 acres.

Carroll County was named after an Irish-American, Charles Carroll (1737-1832), of Carrolton, Maryland, the only catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence. The county is located in the western part of Iowa State and lies across two major landforms
that influence the soil composition of the land: the Des Moines Lobe and the Southern Iowa Drift Plain. The topography of the region, characterised by gently rolling prairie land, is consistent throughout (Setzler 2002, p.11) and the soil is amongst the most fertile in the Midwest. Pioneers did not begin to arrive in Carroll County in any numbers until the mid-1850s. Immigration to the county was slow at first and those who did come settled near the rivers where there was timber and shelter. The process of moving into the prairie lands that dominate the county did not begin in earnest until the early 1870s (Setzler 2002, p.15).

Amongst the first to come to the county was “Jumping” Dave Scott. Scott settled near the Middle Raccoon River but only stayed for two years. He had an affliction that “caused him to jump at loud noises” and this forced him to move on when more settlers arrived in the area (Setzler 2002, p.14). In August 1855, the first elections in the county were held and the first county officials elected. At that time, the small community of settlers was divided between the North Raccoon River and the South Raccoon River. Every eligible voter from both sections of the community was present at the election. In total there were twenty-eight men. The women didn’t have a vote (Setzler 2002, p.16).

By 1860, the population of Carroll County had grown to two hundred and eighty-one people and as was the pattern elsewhere on the frontier, small towns began to develop to serve the business, educational, religious, and social needs of the growing communities (Setzler 2002, p.16). Carrollton was the first important town in the county, and the only one to have a name in 1856. The first stagecoach route through Iowa stopped in
Carrolton, and the first school in Carroll County, “a sixteen foot rough frame structure”, was built there in 1856 (Setzler 2002, p.59). Located in the southeastern corner of the county, Carrolton was the county seat for eleven years, from 1856. In 1867, due to changes in the post-Civil War demographic of Carroll County, the county seat was transferred to Carroll City, which is located in the centre of the county.

Development of the county slowed during the Civil War years but picked up again in the latter part of the 1860s. The population grew rapidly in the post-war period and migrant families from Central and Northern Europe, including a majority of Germans, joined American settlers in Carroll County, for the first time. Most of the Germans who came to Carroll County were farmers and the process of moving into the “lush and fertile prairies” (Setzler 2002, p. 15) was accelerated by their land needs. The German-American farmstead soon dominated the agrarian landscape and as German migrants also moved into rural towns and set up a range of businesses from banks to grocery stores to barber shops, the German-American community became pre-eminent in the region.

The post-war years also saw the advent of the railroad in western Iowa. In Carroll County, as elsewhere in the Midwest, the railroad was extremely influential in determining the economic fate of agricultural towns and their rural hinterlands. By 1865, Congress had granted half of the land in the county to railroad companies for the building of a transcontinental railroad along the forty-second parallel, which runs through the heart of the county. The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad began construction of the first railroad line in the county in 1866. Within two years the first railway track traversed
the county boundaries, at Clinton in the east and Council Bluffs in the west (Setzler 2002, p.21). In the decades that followed, the frontier itself shifted further westwards and the rural communities of Carroll County, Iowa, entered a critical period in which the railroad played a defining role in their economic, social, and cultural formation.

By the turn of the century, three railroad companies were operating in Carroll County, and since that time the fortunes of almost every community in the region have been determined by it. By the mid-1890s, local businesses throughout the county were served by up to thirty-six freight trains and eighteen passenger trains that made daily stops along the Chicago and North Western line. No town enjoyed the economic and social benefits of the railroad more than Carroll City, which became the hub of railroad activity in the region with “over one hundred railroad men working and making their homes there” (Setzler 2002, p.23). Those towns, such as Carroll City, through which the railroad was routed, flourished, while those bypassed by the railroad often went into decline. The fate of Carrolton, the first important town in the county, was sealed in 1867 when it was bypassed by the Chicago and Northwestern railroad, which was routed instead through the neighbouring town of Coon Rapids. Carrollton became a ghost town and lost the county seat to Carroll City, which was platted by the railroad company in the same year. Coon Rapids flourished, and Carroll City (renamed Carroll in 1875) developed into the most important urban centre in the county with the railroad playing a central role in its economic and social life for the next hundred years (Setzler 2002, p.134).
Halbur

Positioned just nine miles southwest of Carroll, the town of Halbur, too, was especially well served by the expansion of the railroad. The economic and social vitality of the town was due in large part to the fact that two separate railroad companies, the Chicago Great Western Railroad and the Chicago and North Western Railroad, ran through it, connecting it to the cities of Carroll, Manning, Omaha and beyond. Both railroad companies built and maintained depots in the town. The first train service began in Halbur in December 1881 (Memories of Yesterday – Dreams of Tomorrow, Halbur, Iowa, 1883-1983, P.14), and in time, with eight trains running through it daily, the town developed into an important trade centre in the region (Setzler 2002, p.102) serving the business and social needs of the largely Catholic, German-American community in the region.

Business

By the turn of the century there were several successful businesses located in Halbur. The McLagan and Merchant Store was the first store in town and it traded in products produced by the local farmers and also sold farm machinery. It also acted as the first mail drop location for the railroad in 1881 and became the first post office in Halbur in 1882. Anton Hoelker established a second store in Halbur in 1881, and this business, a general store, continued to trade, under various proprietors, until the 1910s. In 1902 the store was developed with the addition of an icehouse and a saloon, and, in 1905, under new ownership, the business traded in “notions, shoes, and groceries” (Memories of Yesterday – Dreams of Tomorrow, Halbur, Iowa, 1883-1983, p.14). A shoemaker also had his
headquarters there. In 1882, a German immigrant, Charles Walterscheid opened a second general store, which sold groceries and dry goods. This became the local post office in 1883. There were also two banks in Halbur in the early 1900s: the Farmers Bank, which was owned by local farmers, and the German Savings Bank, which was incorporated in 1907. Halbur also had a hardware store during this period as well as a creamery, which was established in 1886, and various other businesses, such as livery stables, a blacksmith shop, taverns and a barbershop (Memories of Yesterday – Dreams of Tomorrow, Halbur, Iowa, 1883-1983, pp.14-24).

The Church

The spiritual needs of Halbur’s Catholic community were served by St Augustine Catholic Church which was established in 1889. Before this time, Halbur Catholics had to travel to churches in the neighbouring towns of Mount Carmel or Hillsdale for mass and other services (Memories of Yesterday – Dreams of Tomorrow, Halbur, Iowa, 1883-1983, p.60). Catholicism first came to Carroll County in the late 1860s. The first Catholic mass in Carroll County was celebrated on July 16th, 1869, in Mount Carmel, in Kniest Township, about twenty miles north of Halbur. The church was established by a group of seventy German families who migrated to the area from Dubuque County, in eastern Iowa, in search of “new land for German Catholics” (Setzler 2002, p.120). Even since then, the Catholic Church has been an important force for cultural cohesion in the rural communities of Carroll County, where religion and heritage are typically intertwined.
Catholics living in the Halbur area attended mass at Mount Carmel until the parish of Hillsdale was established in Roselle Township in 1874. In 1889, seven years after Halbur was incorporated, St. Augustine Catholic Church was established in the town and a brick church was built there in 1905 (Setzler 2002, p.103). A new Catholic school was also built on the same site as the church and instruction in the German language was provided in the early years by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration from La Crosse, Wisconsin” (Setzler 2002, p.102). The Catholic Church has been at the centre of Halbur spiritual and social life ever since.

**Homesteading**

By the time Fred and Cora Mescher settled on the farm on the outskirts of Halbur in 1909, the German-American community in and around the town was thriving. The Mescher land, located in Washington Township on the northwest edge of town, was first settled fifty years previously by Anglo-American pioneers. In 1858, Andrew Grimes purchased it from the Iowa Southwestern Railroad Company, who had received it in trust from the federal government. Five years later, in 1863, Grimes sold the land to Horace Wellington (Mescher, J. 2006: personal correspondence). Carroll County was still on the frontier at the time and had a population of less than three hundred people (Setzler 2002, p. 16). Grimes and Wellington were amongst the earliest Anglo-American pioneers from the Northeast to settle in Carroll County. Like most of the early pioneers, they stayed only a short time in the Midwest before selling up and continuing their migration westwards. A William Capron bought the land in 1873 and, thereafter, all of its owners were German-American: Marilla Minchen (1876), Thomas Guegel (1876), Fred Schroeder (1899), and Joseph Schweers (1907). Fred Mescher, Jerry’s grandfather,
married Joe Schweers’ adopted daughter, Cora, in 1906, and three years later, in 1909, they settled on the farm. The land remained in the Schweers name for a further ten years, until 1919, when Elizabeth Schweers willed it to Fred and Cora Mescher. The Halbur farm has been in the Mescher family ever since.

Roots

When Frederick Mescher, Jerry’s great-grandfather, migrated to the United States in 1891, he was following in the footsteps of almost five million Germans who had made the journey from the Old World to the New World in the nineteenth century. The majority came during the second half of the century. Between the 1830s and the 1880s Germans were never less than a quarter of all the immigrants that came to the United States and in 1860 they constituted almost a third of all foreign-born inhabitants of the country. In the late nineteenth century German immigration to the United States surpassed that of all other immigrant groups, reaching its peak in the 1880s when 1,452,152 German immigrants are known to have entered the United States (Tolzmann 2000, p.223). Germans consistently migrated in family groups and were drawn to the United States “largely by economic reasons” (Daniels 1991, p.146). Other factors that contributed to the dramatic increase in their numbers after the Civil War include the flight from the wars of German unification and from military conscription. During the last quarter of the century, patterns of chain migration were well established and these provided the bridge between the Old World and the New World (Tolzmann 2000, p.223).

[By] now so many Germans had come to America that there were numerous communities with direct connections to places in the Old country. Immigrants
wrote letters and maintained contacts with their friends and families, thus causing more people to come. (Tolzmann 2000, p.223)

As well as settling in large numbers in New York, Philadelphia, and other major cities on the eastern seaboard, German-Americans also developed major communities further west, in the ‘German triangle’. There, in the cities of St. Louise, Cincinnati and Milwaukee, they tended to cluster together in ethnic enclaves. While the majority of German-Americans settled in cities and worked at skilled trades and crafts, significant numbers also settled in rural areas and engaged in agriculture. One in four was involved in agriculture in 1870, a time when Germans accounted for more than one third of all foreign-born farmers living in the United States (Daniels 2002, pp.148-152).

In Iowa, the number of foreign-born inhabitants rose dramatically from 20,969 in 1850, to 204,692 in 1870. The majority came from Western and Northern Europe, with Germans being by far the most numerous (Sage 1974, p.94.). The early German-American settlers in Carroll County came during the post-Civil War wave of German migration to the Midwest. Most of the German immigrants who settled in the county were farmers. Many of them bought previously settled farms, and were more persistent in their settlement than the Anglo-American pioneers who preceded them (Bogue 1973, p.96). As elsewhere in the United States, the German migrants who settled in Carroll County formed strong, homogenous agricultural communities there. German farmers, noted for the pride they took in their work and the commitment to “doing a job right and carefully” (Tolzmann 2000, p.233), brought perseverance and a typical industriousness to the homesteading endeavor (Daniels 1991, pp.151-152, Tolzmann 2000, p. 85).
They also brought a new respect for the land. The earlier, land-rich pioneers were often guilty of over-cultivating the soil and of paying little attention to farm buildings or fences. By 1870, the Iowa soil was showing signs of exhaustion and decreased fertility after thirty years of non-sustainable farming (Throne [1951] 1973, p. 112). The “pioneer”, according to the more progressive farmer, was the worst offender in this regard.

With so much land almost for the taking, it was hard to convince the farmer that he should limit his acreage, that he should preserve the fertility of his soil, or that he should provide shelter for his stock. (Throne [1951] 1973, p.112)

The German-American farmer, in contrast, “planned for the future” (Tolzmann 2000, p.374) by employing more sustainable farming practices, engaging in mixed farming and crop rotation, and investing “more heavily in buildings and other improvements” (Daniels 1991, p.152).

German-American communities were also traditionally more closely-knit, with a stronger emphasis on the family, than their native-born neighbours. The traditional German-American family was patriarchal and “children and other members of the family were not on an equal footing with the father” (Tolzmann 2000, 232). German-American families were usually larger than non-German families and the whole family worked together in the family business in an effort to maximise labour. German-Americans tended to marry within their own communities and it was not unusual for businesses, land, or other property to stay in the family for several generations (Tolzmann 2000, pp. 232-233). Inhabitants of the old-stock American communities adhered to a distinctly different creed, however, one in which individual achievement was exalted and each generation
was expected to make its own way, whether in the family business or outside of it (Friedberger 1988, p. 128). In German-American communities it was a matter of pride to keep land and property in the family for several generation by passing it down through the patrilineal line. Here, the prevailing ideology emphasised the continuity of tradition.

**Agriculture**

Early agriculture in the region was dominated by wheat production. In the 1860s and 1870s, however, the wheat crop began to fail throughout the Midwest as locusts and the chinch bug proliferated due to ecological changes in the soil wrought by the “opening” of the land. Rust, too, which was caused by overuse and under-fertilisation of the soil, contributed to poorer yields in the fields (Gjerde 1997, p. 144). From the 1860s, Iowan farmers, encouraged by state agriculturalists, began to diversify into corn and hog farming, developing the corn-hog complex that still characterises most Iowan agriculture today (Schwieder 1988, p.288). The hog population in the state grew from 104,899 in 1840 to 2,409,679 in 1869 (Throne 1973, p.109). Many farmers also began to raise cattle and sheep, feeding them, too, with the less-vulnerable corn crop, and thus “converting it into pork, beef, and wool” (Schwieder, 1988, p.10).

Farmers responded to the collapse of the wheat monoculture by making a slow, uncertain conversion to mixed farming. Rather than continuing to rely solely on a capricious harvest of wheat, they diversified their operations. In the northern zones of the region, they focused their operations on dairying. To the south, they transformed the region into the corn belt, a zone that would become synonymous with the Middle West. Throughout the settled portions of the region, then, farmers devoted larger acreages to crops such as corn and to meadows, both of which they used to raise growing herds of cattle, hogs and sheep. (Gjerde 1997, pp. 144-145)
As towns such as Halbur, Carroll, Coon Rapids, Glidden, and Manning, all flourished with the advent of the railroad so too the local agricultural industry profited from the expansion of the railway system. Improved farming methods and farm machinery had begun to facilitate a shift in agriculture in the 1860s from subsistence farming to commercial production and the developing rail network provided Carroll County producers with greater access to the expanding markets in the eastern states (Bonney, p.4). The Iowan farming scene was further transformed by the gradual introduction of more scientific farming methods, more advanced machinery and a new cheap fencing material, barbed wire. Further technical advances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to a period of unprecedented prosperity in pre-war Iowan agriculture. However, as farming became more and more mechanized, the rural population began to decline as young Iowans left the land to join the growing industrial urban work force.

In the 1910s and 1920s, most Iowan farmers were still raising livestock and growing their own animal feed. Such practices were not only ecologically sustainable; they also made the farm business relatively independent of outside suppliers, as Friedberger points out.

The genius of the typical corn-belt farm of seventy years ago was the circularity of its operations. The farm grew its own feed, which was then fed to livestock which in turn helped to renew the soil with their manure...What economists call outside inputs—the feed, commercial fertilizer, pesticides, fuel, and even groceries that nowadays must be bought off the farm—were unheard of seventy years ago. (Friedberger 1988, p.16)
New technologies and mechanisation were beginning to transform agrarian life in rural America in the opening decades of the twentieth century, but most Midwestern farmers continued to engage in older agricultural practices up to the 1920s and 1930s. In northeast Iowa for example, in 1923, “only 17 percent of all farms had tractors” (Friedberger 1988, p.16). In the 1910s and 1920s the family farm dominated the midwestern agrarian landscape. The family itself supplied almost all of the labour, except during peak times when a labourer might be hired. Older children worked on the farm after school and at weekends and younger children carried out domestic chores. Family farms were relatively self-sufficient and “often all the cream, milk, eggs, poultry, and potatoes for the family were supplied directly from the farm, along with substantial amounts of meat” (Friedberger 1988, p.16).

When Fred and Cora Mescher moved to the Halbur farm in 1909 they engaged in the contemporary midwestern mode of mixed, independent, and pre-mechanised farming. They raised cattle and chickens, and they grew forty acres each of corn, oats and hay (Mescher, J. 2006). Fred Mescher would leave the modernisation of the farm to his son, Albert, when he took it over in 1943, but he himself engaged in an older, labour-intensive style of farming, where much of the work had to be done manually, by the whole family, using horses rather than tractors.

Old Fred Mescher...never really seen the real modern machinery like today...Everything was done physically...It was all horses: all the horse machinery...Thank God we missed that era because that was a lot of work: husking corn by hand, everything done by hand. You know, everybody was in physical condition. Everybody rode those cultivators, with the seat, and the reins
would be around here [neck] and steer that thing down the road with your hands.
(Mescher, J. 2006)

From the turn of the century and continuing through World War I, Iowan farmers enjoyed the “golden years” of agriculture and experienced unprecedented prosperity as exports increased and prices rose (Schwieder 1988, p.289).

**The Roaring Twenties**

After World War I, the forces of change that would later accelerate out of the depression of the 1930s and transform the American social and economic landscape in the 1940s began to gather momentum. In the 1920s, technological advances swept through the United States, and automobiles and commercial airlines, radios, telephones and motion pictures came to rural and urban Iowa in a technological revolution. The “acids of modernity”, as Walter Lippmann called them, had begun to eat into and transform the whole of American society (Levine, L.W. 1993, p.195). In rural Iowa, as elsewhere, the social and cultural changes were dramatic.

Economically, however, the post-war years were difficult ones for farmers in the Midwest. While urban America was enjoying the ‘roaring twenties’, many farmers were struggling in the aftermath of World War I. Agriculture was “amongst the nation’s sick industries in the 1920s” (Schwieder 1988, p.289) and states such as Iowa faced serious economic challenges during the period. During the war, demand for agricultural products was great and prices were high. Many farmers had borrowed money to buy more machinery and more land in order to keep up with the great demand.
“Food will win the war!” was the slogan now heard and seen on every hand. Government spokesmen urged the farmers in Iowa and other states to produce to the limit and bankers begged them to borrow money and buy more land for this purpose. Experts showed them how to increase low yields and urged them to plow up pasturelands and roadsides and put them into production. The government announced guaranteed minimum prices for wheat, corn, cotton, and other products needed for the war effort…Iowa farmers never had it so good. (Sage 1974, p. 253)

After the war, however, the price of corn dropped below pre-war levels, and when the government withdrew its price supports, farm incomes fell by more than 50 percent. Many farmers failed to make loan repayments and were forced to declare bankruptcy (Sage 1974, p. 254). Prices and wages were holding up in other parts of the economy, however, (Sage 1974, p. 254) and at the consumer end of the market, lower food prices resulted in more disposable income being available to spend on manufactured goods such as televisions and cars, and urban America enjoyed unprecedented prosperity. In Iowa, as elsewhere in rural America, the loss of purchasing power in the agricultural sector resulted in the loss of parity of income with the urban industrial worker (Sage 1974, p. 254). Farm life compared less favourably than ever before with town and city life.

In the 1920s many of Iowa’s rural residents seemed to have reservations about the advisability of remaining on the farm…Wallaces’ Farmer, the Midwest’s leading farm journal, ran advertisements galore proclaiming that farm people should rid themselves of the isolation, monotony, and dreariness of farm living by buying the modern products advertised in the journal. When farm people visited relatives and friends in nearby towns, they could not avoid contrasting their own unmodernized dwellings with town homes, often complete with electricity, indoor plumbing, and other comforts. Town residents, moreover, had a wide range of social activities to attend. (Schwieder 1988, p. 289)
Depression

Despite efforts throughout the twenties to tackle the crisis on the land, the agricultural economy failed to recover before the end of the decade. The New York Stock Exchange collapsed in October 1929, and in the decade that followed farmers were joined by their fellow Americans in “the worst depression the nation had experienced” (Bonney, p.10). By the early 1930s, the economic and social gains enjoyed by many Americans during the previous decade, had been wiped out (Roberts 1976, p. 880). In the early 1930s, the Depression compounded the economic difficulties farmers had experienced since World War I. Throughout the Midwest, including Iowa, the deteriorating conditions led to civil and political unrest amongst the farm population. Boycotts and protests were common as farm incomes fell dramatically and businesses and banks were forced to close. In Carroll County, reduced incomes forced farmers to curb their expenditure and engage in prudent financial management. The Mescher family suffered hardship along with their neighbours but, like others in the German-American agricultural community, their natural thriftiness had been exercised in the economically challenging 1920s, and they knew well how to cope with privation. Fred and Cora steered the family through the crisis. They grew their own food and kept their outgoings to a minimum.

Nobody had anything. I mean, farming, you at least ate. You could grow your own food and everything but gas was rationed, you know. You had…gas stamps, ‘course that was during the war too. One was added to another, you know. (Mescher, J. 2006)

By the mid-1930s, the farming sector began to recover. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office as President of the United States in 1933, the plight of the nation’s farmers received primary attention from Congress. The ensuing period proved to be a watershed
for agriculture as a “vast amount of legislation” was passed during the decade to benefit the agricultural sector (Friedberger 1988, p.5). Hog prices in Iowa began to improve by 1935, and farm incomes reached, and then surpassed, pre-war levels by the end of the decade (Friedberger 1988, p.131). The quality of farm life in the state improved, too, as country roads were upgraded and electricity came to rural communities after the passage of the Rural Electrification Act of 1935 (Schwieder 1988, p.290-291). The Great Depression, however, did not come to an end until World War II, when the enormous demand for agricultural and industrial products again lifted the economy and “the years of economic struggle faded into the past (Bonney, p.11).

Albert Mescher married Ann Schenkelberg in 1935, at the height of the Depression. When Fred Mescher retired and moved to live in Carroll in 1943, Albert took over the running of the family farm. Fred died on March 25, 1944, and was survived by Cora, who lived until 1957. Albert and Ann lived on a neighbouring farm for the first eight years of their marriage. They had their first child, Darlene, in 1937, and by the time they settled back on the Halbur homestead they had two more children: Paul and Jerome (Jerry). Bernice, the youngest, was born in 1943. During the prosperous post-war years Albert slowly modernised the farm and developed the business.

Change

In the 1940s, when Jerry Mescher was a boy, the town of Halbur was thriving. Jerry remembers it as a vibrant place with “two grocery stores, five taverns…two blacksmiths…and two banks” (Mescher, J. 2006). The town also had an icehouse,
creamery, barbershop, doctor’s office, dancehall and a hotel (Mescher J. 2006). Today, Halbur is still a good business town but much has changed in it since the 1940s. The population is greater than it was sixty years ago and the majority of the two hundred and fifty, or so, current inhabitants of the town belong to the local Catholic community and attend St Augustine’s Catholic Church. There is still a bank in town and a good agricultural co-op. There is also a garage, a post-office, and a hardware store. The social life of Halbur however has diminished over the last fifty years. Fourteen bars or taverns have existed in the town at one time or another but today there are only two. The bar has always been an important meeting place for local people and offered shelter and diversion in the form of card games, pool and conversation.

The tavern/bars were a vital part of the growing community. The local newspaper reporter found his news from these sites and the railroad workers found their relaxation at the local bar/tavern establishments. (Halbur Centennial, p.19)

The local grocery stores have also closed down, unable to compete with the bigger grocery outlets, such as Hi-V and K-Mart in the larger neighbouring towns of Carroll and Manning.

We’re lucky we have what we have; lucky we have a gas station here yet in the area. But the town sure has diminished…the two stores are gone. They had two banks, just one bank now. No grocery stores—get all your groceries in Carroll. No doctor’s office—some towns had a doctor’s office. Some had a dentist—we never did, that I know of…[And] the dancehall, we still have it, but it’s gone. Nineteen forty-seven was the last dance there, see. (Mescher, J. 2006)

**Halbur Hall**

The closure of the dancehall in Halbur in 1947 had a particularly enervating effect on the spirit of the town. The dancehall played a vital role in Halbur social life. The dance hall,
known as Halbur Hall, was erected in 1914 and for thirty-three years it was at the festive heart of Halbur social life. It was used for “dances, stage shows, wrestling, boxing matches, basketball games and roller skating” (Halbur Centennial 1983, p.31) as well as graduation ceremonies and wedding dances. For the Mescher family, it was especially meaningful, for it was here in the late 1920s that Albert Mescher and Ann Schenkelberg first met. Ann, a German-American Catholic, lived with her parents, Henry and Anna Schenkelberg in the small town of Templeton, in the rural township of Eden, seven miles south of Halbur. She traveled by horse and buggy to attend the dances in Halbur and to visit her cousins who ran several businesses in town. The couple “went together” for eight or nine years before they married in 1935 and during that time their courtship consisted almost solely of their monthly dance dates.

Music for the dances was provided by local bands such as the Band Boys, and by visiting bands such as the Lawrence Welk Band, Eppl’s Orchestra of Boone, the Bell brothers, the Jones Boys of Luverne, Minnesota, the Piersol orchestra of Carroll, and the Jacobsen Orchestra of Neola, Iowa (Halbur Centennial 1983, p.31). On one occasion, early in their relationship, Albert played the bones on the stage of the dancehall in a rare public appearance as a guest musician with a visiting band, The Omaha Nightowls. The band played ragtime music, waltzes, and polkas, and Albert was invited to play along with them on a few of their numbers.

Dad played with the Omaha Night Owls. It was an all-coloured orchestra. They came out of Omaha and dad played with them, behind the band with the bones… when he was a young twenty-seven, twenty-eight year old guy. (Mescher, J. 2006)
In the 1940s, as people became more mobile and spent more of their recreational time in the cinemas, bowling alleys, taverns, restaurants, and ballrooms of the larger urban centres, the local dance hall went into decline.

During the horse and buggy days, society stayed close to home; was not as mobile. So, all the small towns had their own dance halls, railroad lines, taverns, grocery stores, etc. When the cars came into being, society began to change drastically. Now, people had a means of traveling to larger cities for goods, entertainment. It became harder for small towns to hire bands to play in their dancehalls. The bands were playing in the bigger dancehalls, which meant more money. (Mescher, J. and S. 2006, Personal correspondence)

In Iowa, small town dance halls were replaced by larger urban ballrooms, such as the Surf Ballroom and the Cobblestone in Clear Lake, the Val Air in Des Moines, Peony Park in Omaha, and the Starline Ballroom in Carroll, which operated from the late 1940s until 1977 (Hayworth 2002, p.2). The last dance held in the Halbur Hall, a double wedding celebration, took place in 1947. The building was used for storage until 1975, and then purchased by the Halbur Hardware Company (Halbur Centennial, p.31). Jerry was just a six year-old boy when the Halbur Hall closed down—his own dance hall days still a long way off. His knowledge of “all that what happened” there comes to him through the recollections of his parents and others of their generation, such as Hip Kienapfel, a local musician who “played many a dance” there in its heyday (Mescher, J. 2006). Jerry, himself, never experienced the atmosphere and vitality of the Halbur dancehall directly, but he feels a deep connection to it nonetheless and he laments its loss.

Nobody dances…but it’s still here. I wish…they could of turned it into a museum, but it’s a warehouse. I walk in there just to feel…what happened yesterday; just to look around and see who sat on that stage…My dad played on that stage…He played with the Omaha Night Owls…It always has a little bit of a
sense of ‘Who was there?’ A lot of them that were there are now gone, but it’s there, the building is there. It kinda holds that within itself, protecting all that what happened. And I walk down into the old restrooms, which they walked down into under the floor, and there’s a kind of outhouse—one for the women and then one for the men: a one-holer or a two-holer. Then I happened to look up on the sidewall, and all of the names of the bands…was inscribed in the wall, that played at that dancehall…I said “Wow, that’s a lot of history”. So, that’s still sitting here in Halbur. It’s a warehouse now, all full of appliances, used by Halbur Hardware. (Mescher, J. 2006)

**Railroad Depots**

The spirit of the town was further undermined by the closure of the railway depots in Halbur. In the heyday of the railroads “everything and everyone came and went by train” (Setzler 2002, p.23) and the depot was a hub of social and business activity. Before the advent of radio, trains were “the principal source of information from the outside world”, bringing “news, gossip, and entertainment” to rural America (Butsch 2000, p.211). Two companies, the Chicago and North Western Railroad and the Chicago Great Western Railroad, maintained depots in Halbur for more than eighty years. Throughout that time they played a vital role in the economic and social life of the town.

[Halbur] had two depots within its city limits, which were the centers of activity in the town. Passengers came and went, freight was shipped in and out, and news came through the telegraph offices which were in the depots. (Setzler 2002, p.102)

Through the depot and the depot agents, Halbur was connected to other communities. The depot agent was an important member of the local community. Railroad workers, too, such as the Gandies, “a group who helped maintain the railroad tracks” (Halbur Centennial p.12) contributed to the growth of the town. As the trucking industry
developed in the second half of the twentieth century, more and more goods were transported by road and local railroad freight services were curtailed.

Trucks [and] semis took over as the main means of transporting goods—they are faster, more maneuverable. (Mescher, J., and S. 2006, personal correspondence)

No trains have stopped in Halbur for several decades; the last freight train passed through the town in 1983 (Halbur Centennial p.13), and passenger services throughout the county were discontinued in the 1960s. Up to sixty freight trains still roar through neighbouring Carroll every day, but very few have stopped there since the 1970s (Setzler p.30). The Halbur railroad depots were torn down after they closed, and like the ballroom, they exist only in Halbur folklore today.

**Demographics**

A more recent development in Halbur has been the construction of a new housing district in the town. This has had a significant impact on the demographic make-up of the local community. The population of the town has increased from two hundred and two in 2002 (Setzler 2002, p.102), to almost two hundred and fifty, today (Mescher, J. 2006). The majority of those that have settled the new district are young couples with families, and many of them commute the short distance to work in one of the larger towns in the region. For some of them, Halbur serves as a dormer town, a satellite of Carroll, or Coon Rapids, or Manning. Their social and business lives take place elsewhere. Some send their children to school in Halbur, or to play ball games there, and many attend mass in the local Catholic church, but, in general, their connection to the local community is somewhat attenuated. Increased mobility has everywhere changed the demographic
makeup of rural communities, depositing “strangers” with “different ideas about religion, social expectations, and aesthetic standards” into long-established, stable communities (Fink 1986, p.5).

Amongst the strong German-American Catholic population of Halbur, religion, in particular, has been a force for cultural and community cohesion since St Augustine’s Catholic Church was established in the late 1880s. St. Augustine Catholic Church and school have been at the centre of the Meschers’ spiritual lives since Fred and Cora first settled in Halbur in 1909. They brought their family to mass there every Sunday and they sent their children, including Albert, to St. Augustine School. In later years, Albert and his wife, Ann, also attended the church regularly with their family and they too sent their children, including Jerry, to St. Augustine School. Jerry attended the school for nine years from 1947 to 1956, before he went to Kuemper High School in neighbouring Carroll. Religion and education have been important throughout Jerry’s life.

Jerry and Sharon attend church regularly and they participate fully in church sponsored activities and events. They recognise the importance of the church in Halbur community life and they endorse its agency in the socio-cultural life of its congregation. They believe that active church membership is the key to community, and because so many of the new Halbur residents do not attend church regularly, the spirit is diluted.

If they don’t belong to the parish you never hardly get to know me because they don’t associate themselves with any function that we have in the parish here…a celebration’s about the only time because the town gets them all to help work, see. But if you don’t get em in the church you can’t get any support out of them either; you gotta get em in the door first, see. But that has changed considerably -
the going to church, you know, faithfully, every Sunday. They just don’t take it very serious, you know. (Mescher, J. 2006)

At one time, everybody knew everybody else in Halbur, but today many who live there are strangers to each other. Jerry and Sharon are concerned about the fragmentation of the community.

We go to church every Sunday, you know, and there’s a lot of…even Catholics I know that don’t go to church…I used to know everybody in the community but I bet I don’t know half of em now. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Halbur has “lost some of its luster” (Mecher, J. 2006). The demise of the local taverns and grocery stores, the closure of the dancehall and the railroad depots, and the enervation of its religious community have devitalised the spirit of the town. The social transformations that have taken place in Halbur since the 1940s are mirrored in small towns throughout the Midwest. In northeastern Iowa, in the rural towns of Centre and Farmtown, a similar pattern of change has been discerned.

In the early days of settlement, towns were spaced so that farmers could reach them by driving no more than five miles. With the coming of cars and better roads, businesses in the smallest towns died out, leaving empty stores, schools, and houses to be razed by farmers seeking more acres on which to plant. Center and Farmtown, both large enough to survive into the 1980s, are now primarily farm service centers, with grain elevators, farm implement dealerships, feed stores, and service stations dominating the business district…Farmtown…developed as a railroad town and has continued as a small retail center despite the closing of rail service in 1980. (Fink 1986, p.6)

Urbanisation

Iowan society, in general, has become more urbanised since World War II and there are now seven cities in the state with populations of over 100,000. In 1956, for the first time
in the history of Iowa State, population estimates showed that there were more urban than rural dwellers in the state (Sage 1974, p.314). The percentage gap between urban and rural populations in Iowa has continued to grow since that time, in line with (albeit, lagging behind) the national trend toward urbanisation. Iowa was once totally dominated by agriculture but today the industrial sector generates three times as much of the state revenue as the agricultural sector (Schwieder 1988, p.291). There has been no significant reduction in the amount of land under agricultural production since World War II, but the culture of land use has changed dramatically since then, resulting in a dramatic reduction in the number of individual farm units as “fewer, larger, and more costly farming operations” have supplanted the traditional family farm (Fink 1986, p. 4). A high density of small rural towns remains a feature of the state but Iowa’s rural society has been transformed since the 1940s and today it must share centre stage with an ever-growing urban society (Schwieder 1988, pp.291-292).
Chapter Four

Genesis and Transmission

In this chapter I present an account of the genesis and passing on of the Mescher bones playing style. My account is, perforce, biographical in nature, and while it is concerned with the interwoven musical, social, and psychological lives of all three Mescher bones players, it is Jerry, the second son, who is the central character in my representation. Without Jerry, there are no duets, and no story. Recipient and source, he is poised at the nexus of the tradition. He is also an exceptional bones player, as was his father. Bernie is not yet as accomplished as her brother or her father, but she is already, after a relatively short time, a competent exponent of the style. The style itself is also exceptional. I know of no other bones playing style that is so elegantly fashioned and so deftly performed.

My discussion begins with Albert’s story, and proceeds in a linear fashion from his initial development of a bones playing style, to his transmission of its materials to his son, Jerry; from the forging of a duet style between father and son, to the subsequent transposition of that style from the domestic setting of the parlour to the performance stage. The account continues with a discussion of Albert and Jerry’s musical relationship, on the one hand, and their farming relationship, on the other. The second half of the chapter is largely concerned with Jerry’s story: his inheritance of both a musical style and an agrarian vocation from his father, and his own, subsequent professional and artistic maturation. Bernie Mescher is present in this account of the transmission of the Mescher Style, but a fuller discussion of her place in the Mescher Tradition is presented in Chapter 6, where it serves as a frame for the textual analysis of the musical style.
Development of the Mescher Style

Albert Mescher played several musical instruments: the button accordion, the mouth organ, the piano, the drums, and the bones. He never received any formal music lessons, and apart from singing in the church choir, he wasn’t part of any local community of musicians. He did perform in public occasionally, but in general his music making was confined to the domestic domain. According to Jerry, his father was competent on all of the instruments he played.

As far as I know he got an accordion, a one-row, and he taught himself. There was no lessons…I asked him about it, you know: “How did you learn to play the accordion?”…In those days you made your own entertainment…You didn’t get to no movie show. You didn’t get to a minstrel or a music show, or anything, so all the music that…they had was in the home. He had the harmonica. He learnt to play the harmonica. I don’t know who showed him, but he could play it. He could play ‘Red Wing’, ‘Turkey in the Straw’, and he could do the same on that accordion. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Albert’s small, but eclectic repertoire consisted of American popular song standards of the day as well as ragtime tunes, waltzes, and polkas—the popular dance styles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to the old minstrel show favourite, ‘Turkey in the Straw’, and the popular ragtime tune, ‘Red Wing’, Albert played the Tin-Pan Alley standard, ‘Moonlight And Rose’, the popular ragtime song, ‘Moonlight Bay’, and several other well-known songs such as ‘Let Me Call You Sweetheart’, ‘I Can’t Give You Anything But Love, Baby’, and ‘Just Because’.

The provenance of Albert’s musicality is not clear. There is no obvious hereditary source of musical ability in his family of origin; neither of his parents, Fred and Cora, played
music; his brother, Joe, was not musically inclined, and while his sisters did take piano lessons, none of his siblings shared his passion for music. His daughter, Bernie, believes that her father’s musical “genius” was coded into his genes.

The thing is he could play so many different instruments, you know: it was the accordion, harmonica. No one taught him. It was just like within himself. So you figure, somewhere back in his genes he had the, you know, somewhere in there they gave him the ability to do what he did. (Mescher, B. 2006)

Albert was ten years old when he first heard the bones being played by a musician at the Carroll County Fair in 1917. The annual fair was in its thirtieth year and featured horse racing, a daily balloon ascension, exhibits of livestock and the produce of local merchants, and various entertainments such as live music in the bandstand and the grandstand (Times Herald, 1977). The Carroll County Fair was typical of county fairs throughout the Midwest.

The county fair was an important national socio-cultural institution in the early decades of the twentieth century. In addition to providing the community with an annual opportunity to celebrate “the rural economy and farmland” and to “showcase national consumer products”, the fair acted as a platform for rural and urban ‘play’ activities (Schlereth 1991, p.233). Horse racing was a standard feature of county fairs and various forms of entertainment were common, including “minstrels, band pavilions, circuses, games of chance, vaudeville shows, amusement rides and exotic food concessions” (Schlereth 1991, p.234). The Mescher family traveled the nine miles from Halbur to the Carroll fairground by horse and buggy. When they arrived two bands were playing. Albert was immediately drawn to the music, especially the ”peculiar” sound of the bones.
Of course, right away, dad was for the music and as they kinda ambled towards the bandstand they heard that band and then dad could hear something in the…grandstand. There was another band playing. And dad heard this peculiar sound—didn’t know what it was, and when he got down there he seen a gentleman behind the band doing something with his hands like this [makes bones playing motion]. And that was towards the end of the day and they had to leave and dad never got a chance to ask the person what it was he was playing. But the sound was…so fascinating to him that he never forgot that sound and the guy doing something like this [repeats hand gesture]. (Mescher, J. 2006)

The rhythm bones were an uncommon sight in Carroll County at the time and nobody amongst Albert’s family or friends knew anything about them. He was, however, immediately captivated by the sound of them, and he was determined that he would learn how to play them. With no knowledge of the bones available locally, he turned to visitors to the farm for information about the instrument.

He went home that day and that impression never left him. So, he started his little search on the farm here by the way of labourers that would come in, because kids those days never got no place. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Eventually, a visiting farm labourer from Kansas told him a little about the bones and carved him his first set out of an old pitchfork handle. Jerry still has the original set today.

This guy came from Kansas with a pair of Bay Ponies to help with the harvest. [He] picked corn by hand [and] stayed upstairs here in one of the rooms. So, dad asked this guy if he ever heard an instrument being played with the hands like this; my dad was trying to describe this instrument, and this person said, “I think you’re trying to describe the bones”. He vaguely knew what the bones looked like. So, there was a lot of pitchfork handles—because of the labour, they broke a lot of pitchfork handles. Ash was good wood, so he just made my dad four of em,
straight ones—just cut four out. They’re about that long. I got them yet, today, here. And, they’re an inch wide and he gave these four sticks to my father but couldn’t play them—didn’t know how they were held, didn’t have no idea. So, dad had four sticks and this guy left after the harvest. (Mescher, J. 2006)

It was several years before Albert found anybody else who could tell him anything more about the bones, and, again, it was a visitor to town, a railroad depot agent, who gave him his second bones ‘lesson’. The agent worked at the Great Western Railroad depot in Halbur and one day, while out walking, he heard music coming from the Mescher farmstead. The sound came from the player piano, the only source of music in the household at that time. On Sunday afternoons family members took turns playing the instrument in the parlour, and during the summer months the sound would spill out through the open windows into the yard and the surrounding fields. The depot agent, newly arrived in Halbur, was out strolling with his daughter when he heard Albert running the player piano. He wandered up to the house and introduced himself to Fred and Cora Mescher (Heman, B. 2001, p.2). Young Albert seized the opportunity to quiz him about the bones.

[Albert] said, “Wow, here’s another guy”. He got hold of these four sticks and asked him if he knew anything about this instrument, the bones. And this fella knew how to hold them; said they were placed in the third and fourth finger; that it was all done in the wrist, but he could not play em. He was the last instructor my father had. (Mescher J. 2006)

Now that he could at least hold the instrument correctly, Albert set about developing his technique. He practiced at the player piano, his feet pumping the pedals while his hands worked on creating rhythmic patterns. He worked on one hand at a time to begin with and as his technique improved he began to play two hands together. He played his
homemade, pitchfork handle ‘bones’ for several years until his father, Fred Mescher, bought him a set of ebony bones, which he ordered from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. Albert continued to play the bones throughout his teens and his twenties, practicing regularly at the player piano.

**In the Parlour**

When he was in his late twenties, Albert met Ann Schenkelberg who he dated for several years before they married in 1935. They went to live on a neighbouring farm for a few years before moving back to the family farmstead in 1943, by which time they had three young children, Paul, Jerry, and Darlene. Bernie was born soon afterwards. Albert and Ann kept up the weekly family ritual of Sunday mass followed by music making in the parlour.

> I remember on Sunday afternoons he played the old single row accordion—key of D. He could play a lot of the good old tunes like ‘Red Wing’ and ‘I Can’t Give You Anything But Love Baby’ and ‘Moonlight and Roses’; some of the good old tunes that they grew up with. (Mescher, J. 2000)

When Jerry was a young boy he would often watch his father while he sat at the player piano, playing the bones along to ‘Red Wing’, ‘General Pershing’s March’, ‘Turkey in the Straw’, ‘Snow Deer Rag’, ‘Spaghetti Rag’, ‘Under the Double Eagle’, and other music from the family’s collection of piano rolls. Jerry believes that the characteristic Mescher bones playing posture—arms held up and out, on either side of the body—was determined by Albert’s position on the piano stool as he sat and practiced at the player piano.
His feet were outstretched like this, you know, pumping them [pedals], and then his arms were right here like this. And when I think back—we always say, “Well, how did we develop that style?” Well…he couldn’t play any different than play off to the side like this, and when you stood up you played the same way, right at that same height. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry was intrigued by his father’s bones playing and he was keen to try it himself. The Mescher children were not allowed to use their dad’s bones (Heman, B. 2001, p.11), however, so Jerry carved a set out of a discarded peach crate, and began to imitate his father. He was ten years old at the time. For the first few years he received neither encouragement nor instruction on the bones from Albert.

If I remember back now; you know, my father learned the hard way, and it didn’t seem like he was going to make it any easier for me…This was his thing. He was going to keep it as long as he could to himself…and he didn’t really give me that encouragement…I can’t recollect that I heard it…I think he had to really struggle when he was a kid to learn this thing. And something that he learned by himself, he was gonna hang on to it, even though I was his son. (Mescher, J. 2000)

For several years, Jerry contented himself by playing his “peach crate bones” along to polka music he heard on the radio in the kitchen.

I made the bones, stood in front of that radio right there in the kitchen, you know. And then I played all through the fifth grade. I practiced, I say it took some years to get there – fifth, sixth, and when I got to the seventh and eight grade, well then I could play both hands pretty good really. (Mescher, J. 2000)

Albert disapproved of his son spending so much time playing the bones when he should have been cleaning out the hog pens or doing his other chores (Heman, B. 2001, p.11), but Jerry continued to take part in his radio ‘sessions’ every day for several years. He was in the fourth grade in school when he first started playing the bones, and by the time he was in the eighth grade he was able to play competently with both hands together. He still
remembers the moment when the sound and the rhythms he had been working on for several years finally began to flow.

I wasn’t doing very good. I guess I was doing normally until one day…I could feel something else happening, through the constant practice every day and every day. I can’t recall at this time how many years it took, but it took more than two or three or four years to get there, but it was every day for forty-five minutes a day through the summer. All of a sudden one day everything started—I had more there, I had more. More was coming. And that’s the greatest feeling…It’s just like anything else…When you hear that you just go after it, and you’re diggin for it, you find one little piece of gold, and you really dig for it. Just like this—you hear that other sound and, “Boy, I’m gettin it”. And that’s…determination and desire, I guess. When I look back, that’s what made me the bone player that I am today, is that desire. (Mescher, J. 2000)

“Entertaining With the Bones”

As well as watching his father in the parlour, Jerry had the occasional opportunity to see him play in public. During the 1940s and ‘50s, Albert gave some performances at local church and school events in the area. Typical of such occasions was his guest appearance at a banquet hosted by the Catholic Order of Foresters in Breda, Iowa. He is listed in the programme of the event as “Entertaining with the bones”, and playing two musical selections (Catholic Order of Foresters, Programme). There is also a brief mention in the local Times Herald newspaper of a performance given by Albert in the late 1950s at a meeting of the Marianists in Mount Carmel High School. Under the heading “Marianists Hear Wood Bones Played” the account notes the audience’s lack of familiarity with the instrument.

Entertainment was provided by Albert Mescher of Halbur. For his pastime and hobby, he plays his ebony wood bones. For most of the students it was a new
experience to hear someone get so many different tones out of the wood instruments. (‘Marianists Hear Wood Bones Played’, *Times Herald*)

Jerry recalls another occasion when his father played in St. Augustine’s Catholic Church in Halbur at a farewell ceremony for a local priest. Jerry was thirteen or fourteen at the time.

I can remember at our church here—nineteen fifty-five…I sat right behind him.

We had an old dictograph with an old seventy-eight hard record—one of the first machines that he got…and he had that number, *In the Mood* on there, see. And I sat right behind him and he played all by himself for the whole farewell for the priest here…We still play that number today, Bernie and I do. (Mescher, J. 2006)

It wasn’t until the summer of 1956 that Albert began to nurture his son’s musical talent. One day, as Jerry was playing his bones in the kitchen, he noticed his father sitting outside by a tree, watching him intently. Jerry believes that his father realised in that moment that his son’s desire to play the bones was matched by *determination* and *discipline*, and that he “was never going to give up” (Mescher, J. 2006). From then on Albert began to actively encourage his son and Jerry joined his father in bones playing sessions in the parlour. Jerry was fifteen years old that summer and had just finished grade school. In the fall he became a freshman at Kuemper Catholic High School in Carroll. Father and son played together regularly for the next few years, during which time they spent countless hours together in the parlour accompanying commercial recordings which they played on a recently acquired record player. Here, Albert passed on his bones technique and his bones arrangements to Jerry, and the two men developed their unique duet style.
“Jerome Mescher Playing the Bones”

Within months of joining Albert in the parlour, Jerry had become competent enough on the instrument to perform at high school functions and other local social events. Early in his freshman year, on October 26, 1956, he played the bones in a school talent contest, and beat the accordionist, Mary Ann Pickhinke, into second place, and the school vocal quartet, the Kuemper Chords, into third place (‘KHS Students Win Talent Contest Prizes’, *Times Herald* 1956). This was his first public performance. Just a few weeks later, on November 13, he was a guest performer at the Kuemper High School Football banquet. In the programme, his performance was described as, “Jerome Mescher playing the Bones”, and the tunes he was listed to play are *In the Morning* and *Daily Rag* (Kuemper High School Football Banquet: Programme). In December of the same year, Jerry performed at the annual Christmas party hosted by the youth department of the Diocese of Sioux City in Iowa (Tolan, 1956: Letter to J. Mescher). He also appeared as a guest performer at the American Legion Auxiliary Unit Christmas dinner in Carroll. Here he gave “a short musical program” and performed a duet with a fellow Kuemper student, “Miss Pickhinke”, who played the accordion (‘Dinner Precedes Meet Of legion Auxiliary Unit’, *Times Herald* 1956).

Also in December 1956, Jerry entered a local TV talent contest, Bill Riley’s Teen Time Talent Show. The preliminary round took place in Coon Rapids, Iowa, on December 12. There were fifteen contestants, including the Kuemper Chords. The vocal quartet beat Jerry into second place on this occasion, but both acts qualified to perform live on the TV show on December 16. As well as qualifying for the television contest, the Kuemper
Chords group received a prize of ten dollars and Jerry received five dollars (‘Teen Talent Winner’, *Times Herald* 1956). For his television debut, Jerry prepared his father’s bones arrangement of ‘In the Mood’, recorded by ragtime pianist, Crazy Otto. His father drove him to the television studio in Des Moines, Iowa, and helped him prepare for the performance. He set up the record for his son and lent him his set of ebony bones for the contest. Jerry won, and the Kuemper Chords were un-placed.

Dad took me down there and I played on the Bill Riley show, see, and so did the Kuemper Chords… I got notified I had won the show and the Kuemper Chords had lost, see, and that didn’t sit so good with the nun at Kuemper because she taught these barbershop quartet for four years. Here come a guy, freshman, with a pair of sticks in his pocket and beat em out, see. (Mescher, J. 2006)

As the winner, Jerry qualified to appear on a second show on December 30. For this he prepared the *Darktown Strutter’s Ball*, recorded by the pianist, Del Woods. On this occasion, however, he lost out to a couple of tap dancers. Three years later, when he was a senior in high school, Jerry was encouraged by one of the nuns to prepare a presentation about the bones for his speech and drama class.

The nun knew of us playing the bones together, dad and I, and she said, “Well, Jerry, why don’t you get an original oratory called ‘The Bones’? Give a speech about the bones”. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry did some research in the library and he developed a presentation in which he gave a demonstration of bones technique and spoke about the history of the instrument. He gave the speech at Kuemper High School before competing in the district speech competitions in Hartley, Iowa. He went on to take part in the state final in Clarion, Iowa, where he was awarded a number one rating (Mescher, J. June 15, 2006. personal correspondence). He also presented his bones ‘speech’ at several local social events including the annual May
breakfast of the Christian Mothers Society, which took place on Sunday morning, May 1, 1959. The following report on the event appeared in the local *Times Herald*.

The mothers were entertained by Jean Schweers, a junior at Kuemper who played two piano solos, “Liebestraum” and “Because.” Jerry Mescher, a Kuemper senior from Halbur, gave his speech on the “bones” which won him a No. 1 rating in the state and diocesan D.Y.O. speech contests. He also played several musical selections accompanied by the “bones.” Madonna planters were awarded to Mrs. Ed Lampman and Mrs. Bob Schmitz. Rosaries, handmade by Mrs. Herman Schrad, were won by Mrs. Leo Berning and Mrs. Anna Vonnahme. (‘Christian Mothers of St. John Church Hold May Breakfast’, *Times Herald* 1959)

In June 1960, he again gave his bones speech at a meeting of the County Legion Auxiliary at the American Legion Hall in Arcadia, Iowa. The *Times Herald* was on hand again to cover the event.

The program was introduced by Mrs. Ed Lampman, Arcadia unit president. A skit was given by the Arcadia Junior Auxiliary and a demonstration of the bones by Jerry Mescher of Halbur, Kuemper High School student, who played several selections on the bones with accompanying commentary. A song and dance number was presented by a Cub Scout Pack. (‘Final Meeting Held by County Auxiliary’, *Times Herald* 1960)

“*Albert Mescher and Son*”

As well as making appearances as a soloist, Jerry was also performing in public with Albert by this time. The duo began to receive invitations to perform at a variety of community events almost as soon as they started practicing together in the parlour. Jerry’s peach crate bones were no match for his father’s ebony bones so Albert tried to locate a better set for his son. Bones were no longer as readily available as they were when Fred Mescher bought Albert’s ebony set out of the Sears and Roebuck catalogue forty years previously. Albert did manage to locate a set of Joe Birl’s black plastic,
‘Rhythm Bones’ and a set of ebonised wooden bones for Jerry. He also went to Hospie’s music store in Omaha where he found a pair of Nick Driver bones. Jerry found none of these instruments to be ideal, however, and it wasn’t until he took a high school class in woodworking and mechanical drawing in his junior year, and made his own set of ebony bones, that he ‘found’ his instrument. He still plays the same set today.

In response to the invitations to perform at high school reunions, company Christmas parties and various church-sponsored events, father and son developed a series of short musical acts in which they combined performances of Albert’s bones arrangements and some bones-related dialogue.

When we started playing together, people started calling [They] wanted us to play for the Forrester’s Banquet, wanted us to play for a Christmas party…and we would play together and play a half-hour: play three or four numbers, do a little talking…I did all the talking ‘cause dad said, “Jerry, you do the talking. I’ll introduce you”. (Mescher, J. 2006)

They were guest performers, for example, at an alumni banquet in the Ar-We-Va High school in Westside, Iowa on May 26, 1957. The theme of the evening event was listed as, “Oriental”. “Albert Mescher and Son” performed a “Musical Selection” as part of a programme that also included several speeches, a piano duet, presentations, a trombone solo, and a group rendition of the school song, ‘Dear Old Westside High’ (Annual Westside Alumni Banquet and Senior Class Reception 1957: programme of event). On another occasion, the duo appeared in a “Minstrel and Home Talent Show”, again at the Ar-We-Va high school. For this appearance they developed a “skit” in the style of a minstrel show routine.
We’d dress up as darkies, you know. We did a black act at a high school. We were all black; we played as two coloured people…like Al Jolson. We did that at the high school over in West Lake. That was some of the early things. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Albert and Jerry brought their own recordings and record player with them when they played. They very rarely performed with live music but on one memorable occasion they did get the opportunity to accompany the well known ragtime pianist, Big Tiny Little, when he appeared with his band at the Starline Ballroom in Carroll in 1959. Albert was a fan of Big Tiny Little and he had made bones arrangements to accompany several of his recordings, including one of his favourites, Red Wing. Albert was especially enamored of piano music and he had recordings by several other “celebrity” piano players in his collection, including Jo-Ann Castle, Knuckles O’Toole, and Crazy Otto. Big Tiny Little, who also played honky-tonk, jazz, and Dixieland music, came to national prominence when he played for four years on the popular television programme, The Lawrence Welk Show, from 1955 to 1959. Albert and Jerry watched the show regularly and one evening as they sat in front of the television watching Big Tiny Little on the screen, Albert said, “Wouldn’t it be nice if we could play with that guy some day?” While they often played along to his recordings in the parlour, they could hardly have dreamed that they would ever get to play with him ‘live’. However, it happened that one day he came to play at the ballroom in Carroll.

Big Tiny Little left the Lawrence Welk Show in 1959 and toured the Midwest with his band for several years. On the night that he appeared at the Starline Ballroom in Carroll, the Meschers went along to see him play.
It just so happened to be that he left the Lawrence Welk Show in 1959 and went on tour with a band through the Midwest: Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and he came to our local ballroom in Carroll, Iowa. Well, so, dad and I, and mother and Bernie—she remembers that, she got his autograph—we went off and sat on the side of the stage and watched him play. (Mescher, J. 2000)

There was a large crowd at the ballroom that night. The Starline Ballroom was a popular venue for touring bands and many big names appeared there. Big Tiny Little drew an especially large audience. Local musician, Ron Hauser remembers the event.

There were “a lot of big names out there.” A rousing pianist called Big Tiny Little of Lawrence Welk fame drew the biggest crowd…with “cars parked on both sides of the highway” back forever in both directions. (Hauser, quoted in Hayworth 2002)

During a break in the show, Albert introduced himself to Tiny and told him how he and his son loved to play the bones along to his recordings. Tiny invited Albert and Jerry to join him on stage for a few numbers during his second show at eleven o clock that night. Their performance was a great success. The crowd stopped dancing and gathered around the stage giving the Mescher Bone Players their full attention.

He said, “We’ll give you a chance to play”. Just like that—a celebrity, see. So, by God, we had the numbers here and dad and I were dressed in, like, our black suits and bowties and up on the stage we went. He introduced us, and man, the people all of a sudden quit dancing and the whole ballroom…all came around the stage—just done engulfed us. We were playing them numbers; they were lookin; the crowd just roared. We played two or three numbers for em. The crowd finally went back out to dance after we quit, see. (Mescher, J.2000)

Playing with Big Tiny Little was one of the highlights of Albert’s musical life and the consummation of a love affair with the piano which began in the parlour as he sat at the family player piano while he taught himself how to play the bones. Tiny invited the
Meschers to perform with him again a few nights later at his show in the Cobblestone Ballroom in Clearlake, Iowa, about eighty miles north of Halbur. Again, the audience responded enthusiastically to the father and son team.

So, we went up there, and he announced he had some special guests in the audience that did this bone playing. [He] invited us up from the stage and I remember they did the same thing up there: the crowd all quit. And I can still see myself standing there and a lady was standing right in front of me with her mouth open this far. (Mescher, J. 2000)

In the spring of 1960, another opportunity to share the stage with some nationally renowned, professional entertainers presented itself when the Lawrence Welk troupe played a concert at the local Kuemper High School auditorium. Lawrence Welk himself was not touring with the troupe at that time, but the line up was impressive, nonetheless. It was led by Alladin Pallante on violin and also featured the singer and pianist, Joe Feeney, the bass and tuba player, Buddy Hayes, the singer, Larry Hooper, and the percussionist Jack Imel. The star of the show, however, was the young pianist, Jo Ann Castle, who, in 1959, replaced Big Tiny Little as the principal ragtime musician on the Lawrence Welk Show. When the troupe arrived to play their show in the Kuemper auditorium, one of the nuns, Sister Margaret Mary, suggested to Aladdin Pallante that the Meschers might make a guest appearance during the concert. Pallante agreed to audition them and Sister Margaret Mary passed on the good news to the Meschers.

“You guys are on, but you got to audition for him in the band room. Go home and get your stuff”. So we drove all the home to Halbur here, got our record player and everything, got it set up, and we played for him in the band room. The guy from Lawrence Welk, that old Mexican, he was standing there looking at us. (Mescher, J.2006)
Albert and Jerry were big fans of Lawrence Welk’s music and Albert had several recordings by the artist in his collection. Pallante was impressed with their performance of Welk’s own composition, ‘The Jolly Polka’, and he invited them to make a guest appearance during the second half of the show. That evening, while they were waiting to go on, Jerry visited with Jo-Ann Castle in the dressing room. He watched her as she exercised her fingers and limbered up for her performance. She was twenty years old at the time, just three years older than Jerry.

I was a young kid, you know. I didn’t really know what she was doing, and she was limbering her fingers up. We had a nice conversation her and I, forty years ago, you know. [I was] visiting with her and then she went on stage, ‘cause she had her show on, and we were right after that. They introduced us as “The Mescher Bones Players”. (Mescher, J.2000)

When Castle finished her performance, Albert and Jerry walked on stage to perform in front of their ‘home’ audience. They played along to several recorded numbers, including ‘The Jolly Polka’. The performance was enthusiastically received and it raised the profile of the local bones-playing farmers significantly. Jerry remembers it as one of the highlights of the Mescher Bones Players’ short career and he treasures a photograph of himself and his father taken while they were performing on the stage that night.

Jerry graduated from high school in 1960 and went to work on the farm with his father. For a while, he considered going to college but in the end he chose to stay on the farm. From 1960 to 1967, when Albert died, father and son farmed together and played music together. They raised hogs and grew corn, alfalfa, and oats, and they continued to play music in the evenings and at the weekends. They also continued to perform locally for
various church events, high school programmes, Christmas parties, and centennial celebrations in the surrounding towns (Mescher, J. 14 June, 2006: personal communication).

On the Land

Albert was happiest and most agreeable when playing music. His ‘indoor’ musical relationship with Jerry was creative, robust and rigourous. The parlour, or ‘music room’, was the principle site of their artistic relationship and the place of origin of the Mescher style, or baj. With Jerry playing the role of the disciple and Albert the master, creative energy flowed through the musical nexus of their relationship. Jerry acknowledged that Albert was the originator and the font of the style, and in their musical relationship he deferred to his father’s authority. Albert created the style and Jerry received its aesthetic materials through a process of oral transmission.

When he [Albert] came in here to play the bones…the relationship was so good because we would run through the numbers [and] we would put the arrangements where he thought they would go…’Course, he did all the arranging, ‘cause I couldn’t do that. I didn’t know where the rolls went. I didn’t know where the three-beats went, and I would just memorise every number…I couldn’t play it any different than him, ‘cause it was good. It was, it was good…I still play those arrangements today and I couldn’t change them cause I wouldn’t know how to change them any better. (Mescher, J. 2006)

In sharp contrast to the harmonious flow of their musical rapport, however, the farming relationship between the two men was discordant. Albert and Jerry could not get along on the farm. Despite this fact, Jerry chose to stay and work with his father after he left high
school in 1960. In the process, any ideas he may have had about a career outside of farming were put aside.

Always in the back of my [mind], “What’s dad goin to do? How’s he going to manage all that?” And we had this good relationship playing the bones at the time, and I guess it was decision time…I thought maybe I could go the next year. Well, the work just got fully loaded: we just had more and more, see. Well, there was no way he could do it all himself, you know. It took two people here, you know, and he even worked me into the partnership, which was good. But that only lasted a couple of years and then he…got this prostate cancer. (Mescher, J. 2006)

For the next seven years, until 1967 when Albert died, father and son shared an “outdoor” relationship on the land and an “indoor” relationship in the parlour. The outdoor relationship was fractious. According to Jerry, Albert was a very “particular” man, prone to intractability in matters relating to the farm.

Everything had to be done perfect. I mean the crop, everything. And I would shake my head at times, you know, “Let’s do it this way?” Well, that was out, you had to keep your mouth shut…We didn’t have the best working relationship. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry suggests that Albert may have inherited his imperious manner from his father, Fred Mescher, who was also “pretty stern” (Mescher, J. 2006). Bernie is of the same opinion.

He was kind of a product of how he grew up, cause his father was very strict, and I think that’s how he followed through with his perfection. (Mescher, B. 2006)

While Albert embraced his role as mentor in the parlour he seems to have been ill disposed to playing a similar role on the farm. In their musical relationship he invited Jerry to imitate him and work in unison with him; he led by example and created a space for his son alongside him. On the farm, however, he was more possessive of his trade and
Jerry was consigned to a more subservient role. As a result, Jerry was not as well trained in farming as he would like to have been when his father passed away.

It’s hard to believe that a person twenty-six years old had never changed oil in a tractor, because he would not let me. You couldn’t do it good enough. Nobody could touch that. That was really very specific work. Never planted a row of corn. He had to plant everything...He did all of the planting and so I did the getting the fields ready for the planting. I would do the other rough stuff—harrowing down. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry, for his part, aspired to a more symmetrical relationship with his father on the farm and he suggests that this, too, may have contributed to the contentious nature of the their relationship.

We had a good ‘playing the bones’ relationship but, a working relationship—I guess when you put two chiefs together outside, it doesn’t work. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Albert’s behavior as a farmer was so consistently at odds with his behavior as a musician, that Bernie has described him “as two different people; one person on the farm and one person with the music” (Mescher, B. 2006). Jerry talks about his father having “like a split personality”, often frustrated and in a bad mood when working on the farm, and “a totally different person” when he was inside playing music (Mescher, J. 2006).

He was two different people...When he’d have a bad day outside I couldn’t find him. He’d be in the house playing the bones, just like it was he took a pill that would settle him down and bring him back to normal. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Albert’s wife, Ann, told her children that their father was unhappy from the day that he took over the running of the family farm in 1943. Jerry and Bernie remember him, when they were young, as a very discontented farmer, constantly “irritated” by his work, and
often intractable and ill tempered. Bernie believes that his unfulfilled artistic aspirations were at the root of his unhappiness.

He always wanted to go off and make a life with the bones, but never finding the right avenue to take him there...He was the oldest son carryin on, and he did have respect for his father. So, I don’t think he ever was really happy, you know, because...the music was so much a part of him...He was respect[ful] to his parents. He became a farmer. (Mescher, B. 2006)

Bernie compares her father to the American bones player, Percy Danforth, who made a career out of teaching, performing and making bones. She believes that her father, with his "genius", could have had the same following as Danforth, and a successful career as a performer. Instead, Albert worked as a professional farmer from the day he left school to the day he died.

It’s a shame. He was a genius in his own right and he could a had the following like Percy Danforth. He just...wasn’t out there...and that’s what he would a loved to have done, and that’s why I don’t think he was real happy, you know. That’s why he was the happiest when he played. ‘Cause farming...it’s tough, you know. (Mescher, B. 2006)

Jerry also believes that his father had the ability and the desire to be a successful, professional performer. Albert never got the opportunity to pursue that ambition, however, because, as the eldest son he was obligated to take over the running of the family farm when Fred Mescher retired.

I think that was something he wanted to do all his life, was be an entertainer...I always said he could have been a second Lawrence Welk—what he knew, what he could do—but I don’t think he had the opportunity because he was kinda stuck. His dad kind of deeded this farm to him before anybody else had it. He stayed here, see. It just kinda tied him down. (Mescher, J. 2006)
The Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour

Only once, when the Mescher bones players appeared on the popular, national television show, the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour, did they reach an audience beyond the local and the regional. The journey that would eventually lead them to New York and CBS studios began on the day that Jerry received an invitation to audition for the Venita Rich Talent Review. It was 1960, the year after Jerry graduated from high school. Venita Rich was the midwestern talent scout for the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour, a television show that was popular throughout the United States from about 1950 to 1970. Rich’s job was “to go about the country staging amateur shows, picking the best for trips to New York and appearances with Mack” (Raffensperger, no date given). Jerry convinced his father to audition for the show with him. They prepared their bones arrangement of piano-player, Dell Wood’s recording of the *Dark Town Strutter’s Ball* and entered the contest with it.

So we went over to Denison and we took our records along, and the whole place was full of contestants. We waited ‘till our number came up and when you got on stage…they played the *Dark Town Strutter’s Ball* and we played our number and, by God, you could hear a pin fall; nobody said anything and we walked off and Venita Rich said, “Well, you’ll be notified if you’re gonna…perform at the Crawford County Fair”. (J. Mescher, 2006)

About one week later, they received a postcard from Venita Rich informing them that they had been successful in the audition. She instructed them to attend the Talent Review at the upcoming Crawford County Fair. At the fair, the duo again performed the *Dark Town Strutter’s Ball* and it was well received by the audience. Shortly after the final contestant had presented their act, the winners of the competition were announced. Albert
and Jerry were awarded first place and the prize of a trip to New York City to audition for the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour. The local Carroll newspaper, the *Times Herald*, picked up the story of the Mescher’s success and published the following announcement soon afterwards.

Albert Mescher and son Jerry who have appeared at a Talent Contest at the Crawford County Fair at Denison Tuesday night, were awarded a trip to New York to audition for the Ted Mack program. They played a bones number “The Dark Town Strutters Ball”. (‘Two Nuns in Halbur Visit Relatives’, *Times Herald* 1960)

Due to their success in qualifying for the Ted Mack show, Albert and Jerry were invited to tour with Venita Rich, and later that summer they left the farm for a week to travel throughout the Midwest as guest performers in the Venita Rich Talent Review. They played at fairs in Winterset (Iowa), Kankakee (Illinois), Primghar (Iowa), and Minden, (Nebraska). Even though it was an amateur show, the tour gave Albert and Jerry, “The Mescher Bone Players”, a valuable taste of the show-business lifestyle.

[It was] nothing real glamorous or anything; ride all night in the back seat of a car all the way from Winterset, Iowa to Kankakee, Illinois, right south of Chicago—five hundred miles. By the time we got into Chicago we were bushed, got a hotel and slept all day, got a taxi to the fairground. “This is different from farming, boy”, like that, dad would say. I mean it’s a dog’s life. I mean, if you were making great big money, yeah, but you got paid like fifty or seventy-five bucks a show. But you got all your expenses paid. That was a good thing. It was a good experience. (Mescher, J, 2006)

The more routine and unglamorous aspects of the experience were offset by the pleasure that Albert and Jerry took in presenting their act to a wide audience and the plaudits they drew from each performance. Father and son enjoyed the limelight, and the role of the
celebrity entertainer. Jerry remembers the pride and excitement he felt when they heard “The Mescher Bones Players” being announced over the public address system at the fairground in Kankakee, Illinois.

We were all dressed in our black suits and bowties and we were walking up through the fairgrounds to get to the stage. You know how they broadcast the upcoming events that night, and dad and I were walking up and pretty soon the loudspeaker said, “Appearing in front of the grandstand tonight in the Venita Rich Talent Review, see the famous Mescher Bone Players”. And dad and I would look at each other and then we would slowly go up and I never signed—after the show that night—I never signed more autographs in my world, that night…and we’re just a couple of hick farmers.” (Mescher, J. 2006)

When the tour ended, Albert and Jerry returned to Halbur and the familiar routines of farm life. The trip to New York, to appear on the Ted Mack show, was scheduled to take place in June 1961, and once there, the duo would have to pass another audition in order to qualify for the televised final. They decided to prepare a different number, *The Jolly Polka*, for the New York audition. Albert had made an arrangement of the Lawrence Welk recording of the tune and the two bones players started to concentrate on it in their practice sessions. They also decided to develop their act by adding some choreography to the routine. Both father and son loved to dance, and they worked at integrating the Lawrence Welk-style polka steps into their performance of the *Jolly Polka*. The Welk style had a “little bounce to it”, with a basic four-step pattern, including a hop, or a kick.

It was that kick-polka. You can dance the old one, two, three, you know, that polka in the round, but it had a little kick in the back. That’s what we used on that *Jolly Polka*. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Albert and Jerry integrated the polka steps into the overall choreography that was already a feature of their duet routine. This choreography saw them engaging in a sequence of
“little movements on stage” (Mescher, J. 2000) that complemented both the basic musical structure of the number they were playing and the upper-body movements which are constitutive of two-handed bones playing generally, and the Mescher technique, specifically. Rather than “just standing there like a stiff log” (Mescher, J. 2000), the pair developed a stylised gait which they syncronised in their duet performances to create one of the most distinctive and arresting aspects of their style. To help develop this aspect of their routine, and their overall presentation, the pair also turned to the nuns at Kuemper High School for advice.

They were very good critics. The…music orchestra leaders were nuns…They gave us a lot of those pointers, see. They were very instrumental in helping us to add to our routine. (Mescher, J. 2000)

By the time they set off on the long bus journey to New York on June 11, 1961, Albert and Jerry were well prepared for the contest ahead. Jerry’s mother, Ann, accompanied them to New York. They boarded the bus at Scranton, Iowa, and traveled with other regional qualifiers from Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. The following announcement appeared in the Times Herald newspaper a few days prior to their departure.

Audition For Show…Albert Mescher and his son, Jerry, who farm near Halbur, have entertained for private and public parties variously in this area by clapping the “bones,” and recently won a talent contest which is resulting in their leaving Sunday for New York City to appear on the Ted Mack show. Mescher has been doing this for many years and taught the trick to Jerry. They spend about an hour practicing each day, finding it good relaxation. Mrs. Mescher will go East with them. (‘Audition for Show’, Times Herald 1961)
The journalist’s lack of familiarity with the bones, not to mention the absence of any aesthetic appreciation of them, is evident in his reduction of the instrumental technique to the “trick” of “clapping” them. The innocuous, but none-the-less pejorative, representation of the instrument and the musicians continues in the short article that accompanied the announcement.

Meschers to Appear On Ted Mack Program. Practicing an hour a day to keep nimble-fingered—and making each practice session as good as if there were an audience—is resulting in a trip East for Albert and Jerry Mescher and their “bones” to audition for the Ted Mack Original Amateur show…Albert Mescher has practiced the little known art of clapping the bones for many years, and his fun has doubled since his son Jerry also developed the talent and entered the act. It isn’t something one picks up handily without effort, Mr. Mescher says…They enjoy this as relaxation, and have been well accepted because the act is different. (‘Meschers to Appear On Ted Mack Program’, *Times Herald* 1961)

While the Mescher’s success as amateur entertainers was newsworthy in rural Carroll County, their instrument, and their artistic practice were little more than curiosities for this newspaper columnist.

**New York**

The bus journey took them through Washington DC where they stayed overnight and had the opportunity to see some of the ‘sights’, including the White House, the State Capitol, the Smithsonian Institute and Arlington National Cemetery. In New York they stayed at the Times Square Hotel on Forty Third Street, west of Broadway. None of the Meschers had ever been in New York, or any other major eastern city, before. On Manhattan Island they discovered an America profoundly different in both sound and structure to the gently rolling prairie lands of western Iowa.
It was a great experience for me being in New York. I mean, all the tall buildings and the rat race at night and the sirens. I mean it was different from the open country of Iowa, you know. (Mescher, J. 2000)

On the Wednesday after they arrived, Albert and Jerry took part in the auditions for the show. They performed their ‘Jolly Polka’ routine, using the Lawrence Welk recording. The following day they were notified that they had been chosen to appear on the television show. The filming was scheduled to take place on the Friday evening and the broadcast the following Sunday. They immediately sent word of their success to family and friends at home. Albert sent a telegram to his daughter, Bernie, and she contacted the *Times Herald* with the news. The following item appeared in the newspaper the next day.

Meschers on TV Show Sunday, June 18. Albert and Jerry Mescher, Halbur, who are in New York City, passed their audition for the Ted Mack Original Amateur show, and expect to appear Sunday afternoon, June 18, according to a telegram received Thursday night by their daughter and sister, Bernice. The Meschers, father and son, and Mrs. Albert Mescher went to New York last Sunday to audition on the “bones” which they clap simultaneously. They have developed their talent from several years’ practice, the son learning from the father. The Mack hour is televised at 4p.m. Sunday over KRNT-TV, Des Moines; WOW-TV, Omaha, and KVTV, Sioux City. (‘Meschers on TV Show Sunday, June 18’, *Times Herald* 1961)

Because the outcome of the televised contest would be determined by the votes of the viewers, Albert contacted the local Carroll radio station, K.C.I.M. with the news of their success and a request for votes. He sent the following to the station on Thursday evening.

Albert Mescher and son Jerry made the audition for the Ted Mack T.V. show. Will be on the Ted Mack Television show Sunday June 18th. Look at your T.V. guide for time and station. Appreciate the votes. Address: Ted Mack Show Radio City station Box 191 New York New York. P.S. Would you put this news over
the air several times a day for next 2 days. I think many people would like to know. (Mescher, A. 1961)

Ann Mescher wrote a letter to her children, Paul and Bernice, who were at home on the farm. In the following extract from the letter, she tells them how Albert and Jerry, and three other acts, were chosen out of a group of sixteen contestants, to appear on the television show. She also asks them to send their votes in and to encourage others to do the same. She signs off with a playful reference to the elevation of her spouse and her son to professional status.

Tomorrow Friday 11 a.m. they (Albert and Jerry) have to go to C.B.S. Studio 52 on 229 West 53 St. and stay there all day and practice and so on till the evening show. We get to see it while being televised, to go on the air Sunday June 18th at 4 p.m. Write to Ted Mack Show Radio City Station Box 191 New York, N.Y. If anybody else calls you, you can give this information where to send to…I don’t know when I get [to] write to you again. Hope everything and everybody is O.K at home. From Mam (Dad and Jerry—professionals). (Mescher, A. 1961)

Albert and Jerry went to the television studios everyday to rehearse with the orchestra. Their arrangement of the ‘Jolly Polka’, complete with choreography, had been very successful and they were looking forward to performing it ‘live’ with the studio orchestra on national television. The producers of the show failed to secure the rights to use the Lawrence Welk composition, however, and Albert and Jerry were forced to come up with a substitute number at short notice. Albert suggested the march tune, ‘Under the Double Eagle’. Jerry was surprised by his father’s choice, especially because it meant that they had to discard the foot routine they had been using with the polka number.

We went down to the studio and we did our ‘Jolly Polka’. Boy, that was it. It was a great number to do. But it couldn’t be used on account of the royalty… Lawrence Welks…wouldn’t release the royalty so that the band could play
Albert took the lead in preparing the bones arrangement for ‘Under the Double Eagle’. It was a tune they had played before, but there wasn’t much time to rehearse it with the orchestra. To complicate matters, the arrangement of the tune that they were familiar with was cut to fit the short television-time allocation for each act. Jerry watched closely as his father reworked the number under some pressure. The years of practice in the parlour and the musical communication they had built up in that time served them well as they shaped and polished their performance with the orchestra.

We played it already but we picked it up in a matter of three rehearsals, us two together. Dad said, “We can do it”. With him you had to memorise the music as you went along. Kinda kept your eyes on him or one or the other, you know, so you stayed and got it syncronised, cause [it] was amazing how well it sounded. (Mescher, J. 2006)

The show was filmed on Friday night in front of a live studio audience. Their appearance began with a brief on-air exchange with the famous host of the show, Ted Mack. This went very smoothly and Albert and Jerry charmed both the host and the audience. Overall, they were very composed and they played their number, ‘Under the Double Eagle’, with great style.

The show was due for broadcast on Sunday and the Meschers would travel back to Iowa the following day. In the meantime, happy with their performance, Albert and Jerry spent Saturday sightseeing with Ann. Sharing the discovery of New York with his parents in
this way was almost as important for Jerry as appearing on the Ted Mack show. Their sight seeing schedule seems to have been characteristically exacting. They saw the Statue of Liberty, Yankee Stadium, the Rockefeller Centre, and the Empire State Building, before taking “a nice little ferry around Manhattan Island”. They also saw the Holland Tunnel and the George Washington Bridge, and took a trip “down to the waterfront and seen…where the soldiers all loaded out during World War Two” (Mescher, J. 2006). And, in the afternoon they went to a concert in Radio City Music Hall.

On Saturday evening, an exhausted Ann Mescher wrote a second letter home to her children, Bernie and Paul, in which she shared the events and experiences of the previous days. It is clear from the following extract that she was beginning to miss the open country of Iowa.

We are ready to go back home. Too much rush, rush. Streets are filled with people all the time. Got to watch so you don’t get run over. There [are] 11740 some taxi cabs in New York alone. Today we walked and walked. We went down to the pier where the big ships come in…Then this afternoon we went to Radio Music Hall. Saw the Rocketts Live Performance, and the Harmonicats…Albert got three telegrams sent to them here. Congratulations from the “Choir”, the “Doyles” and Herb Koenig family. The producer called to Hollywood for Lawrence Welk’s music. Lawrence was on tour so they didn’t get it. So they player “Under the Double Eagle” and every contestant had to cut their music down to 1 1/2 minutes. (Mescher, Ann, 2006)

On Sunday, June 18, Ann, Albert and Jerry watched the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour on the television in their hotel in Times Square. It was Father’s Day. Family and friends also tuned in, in western Iowa, and in California, home to Albert’s sister Eleanor, and his brother, Joe.
Everybody manned their TV on Father’s Day. Everybody gathered. It was Father’s Day we were on which was a nice treat because you spend the day with your dad—father and son on TV...Everyone seen you on TV. They can remember today, yet, when they seen us perform. (Mescher, J. 2006)

At home, the local newspaper and radio coverage had ensured that there was a large and expectant audience of neighbours and friends watching the show throughout Carroll County. Bernie Mescher was fourteen at the time. She sat, excited, in front of the television with her brother, Paul, and found it all “ kinda hard to believe” as Ted Mack introduced her father and brother.

Ted Mack: Here’s a nice way to celebrate Father’s Day: a father and son team. They play the bones. They come from Halbur, Iowa. They won a talent contest in Denison, Iowa – Albert and Jerry Mescher.

**On the Television**

The two local celebrities, Halbur farmers, Albert and Jerry Mescher appeared on the screen, standing proud and relaxed in their sharp black suits and bowties, and as the audience applauded they broke into two broad smiles.


Jerry Mescher: My father owns a hundred and sixty-acre farm and my brother and I help him with the general farming.

TM: I see. What do you think of New York?

JM: I like it.

TM: Maybe I’d better speak to your dad. You—you think it’s gonna be tough to get that young fellar back on the farm after he’s seen New York?

Albert: I’m not worried about Jerry but I’m worried about myself.
Everyone in the studio, Ted Mack and Ann Mescher included, joined in with Albert’s laughter.

Ted Mack: I guess we’d better put you both to work then. Alright, there they are—Albert and Jerry Mescher from Denison, Iowa.

This was the signal for the band to begin, and as they played the introductory measures of ‘Under the Double Eagle’, Albert and Jerry checked the grip on their bones, lifted their arms up and out, and then and moved simultaneously into performance.

**The Voting**

Each contestant received a guide to the voting system, which included the basic voting rules and the address to which postcards were to be sent. It also discouraged all forms of vote rigging.

Petitions; lists of names; printed, hand-written, rubber-stamp, or any other form of duplication of post-card votes; and all other forms of electioneering, organized campaigning and obvious attempts at group-voting, are all definitely unacceptable. If such methods or activities are resorted to in [sic] behalf of your act, the act may be disqualified. (‘Special Voting Instructions Governing All Original Amateur Hour TV Shows’, *The Original Amateur Hour* 1961)

More than anything, it would seem, the producers of the show wanted to avoid anything that would “turn this contest into a popularity contest”, and they were at pains to remind the contestants that the voting system was the same as that used in “all national Elections – i.e., it is similar in all respects to the Electoral College” (‘Special Voting Instructions Governing All Original Amateur Hour TV Shows’, *The Original Amateur Hour* 1961).

The document ends with an emphatic statement of the producer’s conviction.
We repeat, *The original Amateur Hour* is not a popularity contest. The only valid considerations in voting for any act are talent and performing skills and this method of counting votes is fair to all contestants. Our best wishes go to every person that appears on any of our programs. *The Original Amateur Hour.* (*The Original Amateur Hour*, 1961)

In the days following their television appearance, Albert and Jerry received many letters of congratulations and many promises of votes. Albert’s sister, Eleanor, wrote to her brother and his family from California on the Tuesday following the broadcast. She was at the beauty salon at the time of writing.

Dear Ann, Albert and Family,

I am writing this letter under the dryer in the beauty shop and I can’t write very well in this position.

Well, Albert and Jerry, I thought you were very very good. You both looked like a million dollars. Everybody who saw you out here sure thought you had an elegant smile. Albert looked exceptionally young and you sure televise terrific, I mean both. We all had a big kick out of the statement Albert made when he said he wasn’t worried about Jerry staying on the farm, he was more worried about himself…

Eleanor and her husband, Preston, were busy gathering postcard votes for the Mescher Bones Players. They were especially keen that Albert and Jerry would make another appearance on television and maybe even get to play in a show in Las Vegas.

I am here in the beauty shop getting all the votes I can! Preston typed up 160 cards and I am now getting about twenty more signatures right here in the beauty shop. Votes! Preston collected 138 votes from customers coming in the store and Joe got all that many from where he works. He did the same thing in fact. Joe will get all of 200 votes from all the people he contacts. We all want to see you win so you can be on again. Also hope you get some engagements at Las Vegas out of this. Boy! You sure would be in the money there and really live it up. If you get any engagements at Las Vegas out of this let me know and I will try to
get there too and see you in person. We all are going to watch next week’s
program to see if you won.
I will say this, you got the loudest applause of any contestant that Sunday
because it’s unusual to see Father and Son and therefore I am almost sure you
will win.

Eleanor was very proud to see her brother and her nephew on the television, especially
when they had given such a good account of themselves. She was impressed with their
performance and singled out Jerry’s “shining personality” for special mention. Anxious
to get the best possible view, and ensure that they missed nothing, she and Preston had
watched the television through a pair of binoculars.

Preston had some binoculars and we all had a look at you two really close up.
Jerry is a handsome guy and has a shining personality. This personality you got
Jerry also will get you places and counts as much as what you do. Also don’t let
down the education. No matter how hard it gets stick to it. That education is so
important in cities, you have no idea, plus common sense.
Well folks, I am like a proud chicken when I can say, Oh, my Brother and Son
were on the Ted Mack’s Program, and good old Farmers too, and what’s more
you never looked like you ever rode the corn plow. I sure am proud of you both
and no doubt to read or analyze Ann’s heart one will never know. No one can
really ever know the Mother’s love that went along with this honor you have
succeeded in.
Love for all of us, Eleanor. (Mescher, E. 1961)

Albert’s brother, Joe, also wrote to the Meschers after their television appearance. Joe
lived in California and, like Eleanor, he was enthusiastic about the performance,
especially the poise and “smiling personalities” displayed by Albert and Jerry. He also
suggested that they might employ a professional coach to help them “gain more
popularity”. In a letter written, on June 21, he offered the following critique of their Ted
Mack performance and gave Albert some pointers for any future television appearances
I wanted to tell you and Jerry that to play a snappy number with a faster tempo like for example “Sweet Georgia Brown”. Also insist having the microphone a little closer as the sound from the bones was very low.

You and Jerry were terrific, with plenty smiles and poise. My friend…who seen the show, remarked that you and Jerry had poise, and had smiling personalities. These big smiles on your faces showed you were happy and successful. These smiles brush off on the viewer and they couldn’t help smiling with you…People also felt that the Father and Son got the largest ovation from the studio crowd.

Joe also shared Eleanor’s vision of a post-Ted Mack blossoming of the Mescher Bone Players’ career.

One 3 minute appearance for $2000.00 on Ed Sullivan Show, Perry Como, Nat King Cole or Jack Parr wouldn’t be hard to take. Or two week engagement in Las Vegas with all expenses paid…would be allright too. Another T.V. appearance would do the trick. (Mescher, J. 1961)

It is clear that the West Coast contingent of the Mescher family were hoping that their rural Midwestern relations might hit the ‘big time’ after their Ted Mack appearance, and Albert and Jerry were themselves hopeful that something might come of it (Mescher, J. 2006. personal communication). A second appearance on the show, as winners, would certainly have increased their chances of receiving other prestigious engagements, but, in the end, it was not to be; the hastily mailed votes from Carroll and California were not enough to secure victory for the Mescher Bone Players. Instead, LaVelle McKinnie, a young opera singer from Kankakee, Illinois, who went on to have a successful career as a performer, won the contest. Albert and Jerry were disappointed that they didn’t win, but they were happy with their achievement in qualifying for the final of the competition, and they were grateful for the opportunity it afforded them to make the journey to New York.
For Jerry, the trip alone was “a great experience” and he is philosophical about the outcome of the contest.

Sure, it would have been nice but we had the biggest thrill, we had. It a been nice to have Radio City call us down to say, “Hell, we’ll put you on Radio City Music Hall”…not that we were feeling negative about it. No, it would have been nice but we did something that probably every other body would a liked to have done…I gained a lot by going to New York, being on Ted Mack…You’re still a winner in every sense; you just didn’t win the big one, you know. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Albert, Ann, and Jerry traveled back to Iowa on Monday, June 19. They stopped off in Philadelphia to break the journey and to do some final sightseeing. When they finally arrived home to Halbur, they were welcomed by proud family members, friends, and neighbours. For a while they enjoyed the glow of celebrity as they were feted throughout Carroll County, but father, mother, and son soon settled back into the more prosaic routines and rhythms of farm life in the open country, and their glory slowly faded. Their appearance on the Ted Mack show enhanced their reputation as notable local entertainers, but their status as amateur musicians was unaltered by it. Invitations to appear on other popular television shows did not materialise and the chimera of a career in the Nevada desert was grounded by the realities of an agrarian lifestyle. After they returned from New York, father and son picked up where they left off, farming the land together, playing music in the parlour, and appearing at local fairs, church functions, school and society events.

Their appearance on the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour, as well as their impromptu performances with Big Tiny Little and the Lawrence Welk troupe, and their tour with the
Venita Rich Talent Review, gave the Mescher Bone Players opportunities to present their routine to a large, ‘popular’ audience. The enthusiastic response of that audience, and the duo’s success in the auditions for the Ted Mack show, provided a popular endorsement of their uncommon musical act, the meaningfulness of which should not be underestimated. Albert and Jerry Mescher did not belong to either a genre-, or an instrument-specific community of musicians. Neither could they be identified as bearers of a particular musical tradition; they belonged to no musical lineage. They knew no other bones player and few other musicians. Albert and Jerry Mescher were not folk musicians; they were entertainers, and the entertainment environment was their habitus. In Carroll County there was neither a folk nor a popular audience of any size that could appreciate and acknowledge their artistic achievement. Through their parlour-made bones arrangements they entered into a heretical relationship with the sounds of ragtime and polka music, but in order for the expressive arc of performance to be completed, they also needed an audience, ideally one that was already invested in, and conductive of, the pleasures of ragtime and polka music. Only through the pleasure and the synergy of performance could father and son force a breach in their parlour-bound hermetic musical dialogue and fully realise their expressive potentialities. In their guest performances with the Lawrence Welk troupe in the Kuemper auditorium, and with Big Tiny Little in the Starline ballroom, they appeared within the interpretive frame of professional entertainment and their status as accomplished local musicians, who played ragtime and polka music, was confirmed. In these moments, more than any others, they transcended the parlour.
Patrimony

Albert Mescher died on August 31, 1967. He was fifty-nine years old. Jerry was best placed to take over the running of the farm: Paul, his older brother was already married and working as a clerk at West Central Coop; his sister, Darlene, was married to a farmer, and Bernie was working in the airline industry. Jerry was twenty-four years of age and he had spent the previous seven years working fulltime on the farm. Albert willed equal portions of forty acres to each of his children. Jerry decided to stay on the farm, and in order to sustain the viability of the business and keep the family farm intact he worked hard to buy out each of his siblings within five years. He immediately set about expanding and modernising the farm. He bought bigger and more efficient machinery and he increased the hog holdings from three hundred to five hundred head within a few years. His mother, Ann, supported his endeavors and worked closely with him to develop the business in the years after Albert died. Bernie reflects on the importance of the partnership for mother and son.

She lost her partner and, of course, she was there for my brother because he was on his own...She was there for him, always, and you know, the thing is...you can really succeed when somebody is always tellin you all the good you do, and she never ever told him anything bad he did, really. I mean you can really succeed and my brother did. He become a very successful farmer, you know, a very successful person, cause my mom was really there for him for everything and that’s how he survived and she survived to get through that whole situation. (Mescher, B. 2006)

On a small family farm of just one hundred and sixty acres, raising hogs was the most lucrative business option. It was also very labour intensive. During crop harvesting and hog farrowing, Jerry worked day and night between the cornfields and hog barns.
The hogs was the biggest part of our farming career here—our life here. The crops was secondary. You still needed those too but we used all the corn for the sows...We used the oats for the sows, the straw for the bedding and the alfalfa we used too...We used that for bedding too...So, everything that we raised on the farm was utilized into the hogs. (Mescher, J. 2006)

With the use of bigger farm machinery Jerry reduced his time in the fields, leaving him more time to work with the hogs, his primary source of income. He remodeled the hog pens to allow for further expansion and hired a high school student, the son of a local farmer, to help in the evenings and at the weekends. In the years after his father died, Jerry prospered in his role as proprietor of the thriving family business.

Dance Hall Days

Jerry continued to play the bones after Albert passed away, but he missed his duet partner.

Of course he passed away at a young age at fifty-nine years old, which was...you know, kinda losing half of yourself too. That was part of the act, you know. He was half of it. And when once you lost him, well now that takes a lifetime to build something back, you know? When I lost my dad that was part of me that was gone. He was something I grew up with all my life, had played with. It was—it was a team. And when you bust the team up, there you sit and the real impact of it is gone. And the impact of two people playing holds so much more weight than a single person because two people have to do it together. To be syncronised, it’s almost like a marriage. (Mescher, J. 2006)

In 1967, when Albert died, Bernie was not yet playing the bones. She began three years later, in 1970, but it would take almost thirty years before she was committed enough and competent enough to enter into a musical partnership with her brother. Jerry’s primary musical outlet for the first twenty years after Albert passed away was as a member of
several local polka bands. While he sometimes played the bones with these bands, he was first and foremost the drummer. Jerry had taught himself how to play basic two-beat music and waltz rhythms using a pair of sticks and a practice pad, which Albert kept in the parlour. He had never had any formal lessons on the drums.

We had a drum pad here. We had sticks and dad had the drum pad and I learned...It was no problem to play the snare, to play the two-beat music—the *boom chak boom chak boom chak*...You played good basic rhythm, and that’s how I learnt to play...Playing the bones made playing the drums so much easier ‘cause you had the rhythm and everything. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry first started drumming in a local polka band, Herb’s Polka Dots, two years before Albert died. For the next six years he played in taverns, nightclubs and dance halls throughout the state. The band was lead by Herb Riesselman, a button accordion player, and the repertoire consisted of polkas mostly, with some waltzes and marches—“good old beer-soppin music” (Mescher, J. 2006). He used Herb Riesselman’s drums for a couple of years until he bought his own set in 1967.

The regular weekend performances with the Polka Dots supplemented Jerry’s income and provided him a valuable social outlet. Albert was supportive of his son’s involvement with the group. On one occasion when the band was playing in a local dance hall, Albert stepped in to play the drums while Jerry played a couple of sets on the bones.

He could play drums, and he played for me before he died. I was playing in a dance band...He played for me over at a nightclub. I was at a wedding, see. He sat in for me. He could play pretty good drums. That was good rhythm...if you could play the bones, you know, the drum is almost played exactly like the...bones. (Mescher, J. 2006)
When the Polka Dots disbanded in 1971, Jerry joined another band, the Iowa Dutchmen. Their repertoire also included polkas and waltzes, and some country and western music. He played with them for six or seven years before they, too, disbanded in the late 1970s. After that, Jerry joined another dance band called Marlitta and Scheck. Marlitta played the accordion and Scheck played the clarinet and the alto saxophone. They played in the style of Guy Lombardo, which Jerry describes as “soothing dancehall music” or “clutch and hold music” (Mescher, J. 2000). As well as playing the drums in these groups, Jerry was regularly featured playing the bones during their performances.

They’d feature me, like one or two songs, every time we played, cause everybody had requests for it once they’d heard it. We’d always play the good old numbers like *Golden Slippers, Redwing*—something that was really nice and snappy. I knew em, cause they were standards. They were standard numbers. We’d play two or three numbers and that’d be the end of the bones for the night. You’d just give em a little bit and that satisfied everybody. That was every time we played. (Mescher, J. 2006)

When Scheck and Marlitta passed away within a few years of each other in the early 1980s, Jerry’s twenty-year part-time career as a dance band drummer came to an end. By that time, more rigorously enforced drink-driving laws had begun to have a sobering effect on late night entertainment venues in rural towns. Diminishing bar receipts forced many taverns and nightclubs to curtail their live entertainment activities, leaving local dance bands with fewer and fewer venues in which to perform. With the demise of Marlitta and Scheck, and the contraction of the local live music scene, Jerry decided to leave the dance band stage for good.
Dancing

For twenty years after his father died, Jerry combined his weekend music-making activities, and his flying, with his responsibilities on the farm. He remained single throughout this period. He had hoped that being in a band might give him the opportunity to meet people of his own age but the music played by all three groups appealed to an older generation.

I played every Friday and Saturday night. And I was single and I always thought playing in a band I would get to meet…people my age, but we played all this old music for the old ones and, hell, it was all old people that was there. I mean, older people there. It didn’t draw young people, see. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry had received a love of dancing from his parents, and, in his early forties, freed from his dance band commitments, he took to the dance floor. The former drummer, sometime pilot, and fulltime farmer, began traveling to ballrooms throughout the county several times a week to attend formal singles dances. He rarely went to nightclubs or bars because “nice gals never go to a bar”. He preferred instead to meet women at “a nice respectable dance” (Mescher, J. 2006) where he could dance to the “old-time” music of his parent’s generation—the music he himself inherited. Jerry didn’t get to meet too many women of his own age at these respectable dances either, but he appreciated the sophisticated style and movement of a more mature dance partner.

[We] went to three or four dances a week…Des Moines Wednesday night, Fort Dodge on Thursday night, Saturday night up the Lakewood ballroom, Sunday Lake Robbins down at Des Moines. I mean we wore out a pair of shoes, but I mean there was a lot of single women to dance with—good dancers. Everybody went there because…it was better than looking at four walls. There were widows,
Jerry met his wife, Sharon, at a singles dance at the Val Air Ballroom in Des Moines in 1983. Jerry had danced with some of Sharon’s roommates and they encouraged Sharon to come to a dance to meet him, telling her that there “there were some Carroll guys there, and the guys are single” (Mescher, J. 2006). Sharon, who is originally from Las Vegas, New Mexico, was completing a chaplain internship at Iowa Methodist Hospital in Des Moines at the time (Mescher, S. 2006: personal correspondence). She had just learned to dance herself and she agreed to come and meet the “good lookin” (Mescher, S. 2006) single farmer from Carroll. The first night they were introduced to each other they shared just one dance, but as time went on they spent more and more time together on the dance floor. Jerry continued to dance with other, older, ladies, too, but when he started to invite Sharon out for coffee she knew she “was the one” (Mescher, S. 2006). They “went together” for several years before they married in August 1986. At the time Jerry was forty-five and had the reputation of being a confirmed bachelor. People in Halbur suggested that he would never go through with the marriage and Jerry himself admits that he would have been happy to “go the distance” as a single man.

Well, you know, when you’re forty-five years old… I could a went the distance by myself but… you’re a one-horse team then. You’re always a fifth wheel wherever you go. And I said if I meet somebody, fine, and if I don’t, at least I have the exposure to all these dances… And I was havin fun dancing. I wasn’t thinking about marriage. But I said, if it happens it happens, you know, and my God, it did. It kinda struck me right in the face. (Mescher, J. 2006)
After they were married, Sharon gave up her studies and began working on the farm with Jerry. Jerry’s mother, Ann, did not live to see her son marry; she died just the year before, in 1985. She and Jerry had worked closely to develop the farm business in the years since Albert passed away. When Sharon married into the farm, she and Jerry built on the progress of the previous two decades and worked together to further increase the productivity of the business. In the peak years Jerry and Sharon raised two thousand hogs.

By the mid-1990s, radical changes in Midwestern farming culture finally caught up on the Mescher family farm. Factory farming of hogs and cattle had begun to supersede more traditional agricultural practices, and Jerry’s machinery, buildings and modes of production were fast becoming obsolete. Jerry was diagnosed with cancer of the colon in 1995 and he and Sharon decided to sell off the hogs and take a break from hog-farming for a year. After Jerry recovered from his illness, they decided not to go back into the hog business because the cost of modernisation would have forced them into debt, something Jerry had generally managed to avoid. Jerry also found the unnatural conditions imposed on the livestock under the new factory farming practices difficult accept. He is critical, too, of the impact that corporately owned factory farms have had on the small family farm.

The family farm that supports your community—the church, school, local businesses—they’re the ones that are the king-pins. They made this country. It wasn’t the big guy. He don’t buy nothin here. A lot of those big barns are owned by some big investor. You never see em. They don’t spend their money in the small real communities like all these real farmers did. (Mescher, J. 2006)
Jerry sold his last hog in 1996, and since that time he has concentrated on growing corn and soybeans. With just one hundred and sixty acres of grain-producing land, it is difficult to sustain the economic viability of the farm, especially when grain prices are low and seed and fertiliser prices are high. These days, Jerry admits that “it’s just nip and tuck, but you don’t have that extra like you had with the hogs” (Mescher, J. 2006). In the hundred years since Fred Mescher first began farming the Mescher portion on the northwest edge of Halbur there has been a gradual, yet dramatic, shift in the culture of farming in Western Iowa. The self-sufficient, family-owned farm engaging in diverse farming practices has almost completely disappeared and been replaced everywhere by corporation-owned factory farms and a market-dependence on money-crops.

When I had the hogs, I raised alfalfa and I raised oats because I needed all of those commodities for my hogs. I’d raise a little alfalfa because I needed the hay, and I pastured the hogs on that hay ground. Had a little oats; oats for the sows; all the straw for the bedding that you bedded the hogs with. The barn’s still got some straw in it, but as the hogs disappeared you plowed that up; that was gone, the oats was gone – nothing but corn and beans. Dad never raised a bean, and he died in sixty-seven. There was no beans raised on this farm until I raised them. Now it’s all money crops…all the milk cows are gone. They’re gone to confinements too where they have twenty-four hundred cows milked twenty-four hours a day, never stop. (Mescher, J. 2006)

**Avoca, Iowa**

In August 1987, a year after they were married, Jerry and Sharon attended the Old-Time Country Music Contest and Festival in Avoca, Iowa. Jerry had heard that there was a bones playing competition held at the festival each year and he decided to go down there and enter the contest. Apart from his vague recollection of seeing a bones player on television at one time, Jerry had never seen another bones player other than his father
before he went to Avoca. The contest gave him his first opportunity to meet other bones players and hear them play. At that time, Jerry knew of only one style of playing the instrument: the style his father had fashioned and passed on to him. Several bones players and spoon players took part in the competition, but overall Jerry was not very impressed with the standard of the bones playing. He had the impression that his own bones playing was more accomplished and his style more sophisticated than anything else he heard that day. He described many, though not all, of the bones players as “clackers”, with “no set patterns” or sense of “where the music was” (Mescher, J. 2000).

Live music, as opposed to recorded music, was the norm at the festival and Jerry was encouraged by a regular at the festival, bones player Donnie DeCamp to find some “backup” musicians to play with in the competition. Jerry knew no musicians at the festival so DeCamp introduced him to a fiddle player and a guitar player who agreed to play for him in the competition. Most musicians who came to the festival played Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Country music, styles that were unfamiliar to Jerry. Fortunately, his back-up musicians also knew many of the old ‘standards’.

You had to play three numbers and I think I played…‘Red Wing’, ‘Golden Slippers’, and, maybe, ‘Down Yonder’…because I knew they couldn’t change…too much the way the number was played. And we would rehearse before we went up, behind the tree, back of the stage—go through a few numbers quick and then on stage, see. You didn’t have much time. Then you played your three numbers [when] they announced you. I was in competition with Donnie DeCamp; they didn’t know me from Adam and Donnie had a kind of a standing down there. Everybody knew him. (Mescher, J. 2006)
Jerry was beaten into second place in the competition by the local favorite, Donnie DeCamp. DeCamp’s flamboyant and arresting performance style was popular with audiences and judges, alike. Jerry returned to compete in the contest the following year but again DeCamp beat him into second place. In 1989, at the third attempt, Jerry won the title of World’s Spoon and Bone Champion. The announcement of the competition winners was made on the final Sunday night of the festival, but Jerry had already returned home to look after his hogs.

The following year he returned to Avoca to adjudicate the contest, something that was expected of the winner of the previous year’s competition. Jerry has attended the event every year since. He never entered the competition again, deciding that once was enough to win the World Championship. Instead, he became more involved in promoting the bones through his role as master of ceremonies for the Spoons and Bones contest. He also became an established performer in his own right at the festival, and he appears in informal “jam” sessions and formal concerts every year. Jerry has also presented the bones workshop at the festival for many years. In 1990, he was featured on four shows filmed by Iowa Public Television and produced as part of the festival. Jerry is held in high regard by the organisers of the festival, and by fellow musicians and audiences alike.

**From Parlour to Stage**

The journey from the relative solitude of the parlour to the festival tent has been an especially meaningful one for Jerry. He has made many friends at Avoca and he has found musical kinship and an appreciative audience for his bones playing within the folk
music community that gathers there each year. He was honoured by the festival organisation in 2001, when at sixty years of age, he was inducted into the National Traditional Country Music Association Hall of Fame. He was given the award in recognition of his “50 years of playing, promoting and preserving the art of bones playing” (Heman, 2001, p.1).

At Avoca, Jerry discovered Bluegrass and Old-Time music and as a result his repertoire of bones arrangements has expanded beyond his father’s material.

My extent was right here [in the parlour] with ragtime piano, polka and Dixieland. Then I heard all this bluegrass music. [It] had that good beat, you know. And they played a lot of the old standards down there too…And all the instruments that you seen that you never seen before like the dobro, the mandolin, the dulcimers, you know, and then the bones. That’s where the bones were very prevalent. (Mescher, J. 2006)

**Playing ‘live’**

Performing live, in ensemble configurations with other musicians, rather than with recordings, has also been a significant feature of the Avoca experience for Jerry. Bringing the parlour-made style into the live performance environment has been an interesting challenge for him. It has never been the Mescher practice to improvise in performance and it is Jerry’s custom, learned from his father, to fix the bones arrangement for each individual tune and to rehearse it until he can play it flawlessly and smoothly. These structural and aesthetic goals are expedited in the parlour by control over the playback of the repeatable recording. There, the bones player is orchestrator, rehearsal conductor, and soloist. The socio-musical conditions that pertain on the festival ground, however, are not at all those of the rarefied culture of the parlour. Within the festival environment Jerry
discovered a more consensual mode of music making that would place some constraints on the musical practices fashioned in the music room. Two of the defining features of the Mescher performance practice were brought into sharp focus during the relocation of the style: the musical foregrounding of the bones within the ensemble configuration (bones with recorded musical “back-up”), and the fixed, composed nature of the musical material (and, therefore, the absence of improvisation). In order to adapt to the more traditional role of percussion instruments in the ensemble performance of folk music, Jerry drew on his extensive ensemble experience as a dance band drummer.

I played the bluegrass and that old county music, but a lot of the bluegrass I didn’t know. But they were good rhythm numbers and it was fun just to play with the [banjo]—a lot of banjo in that bluegrass, and it’s fast...And then there’s a lot of singing that’s goin on...When you're playin the bones with a group and somebody’s gonna sing...then you tune the bones down where you’re no louder than the loudest instrument in that whole group. They can barely hear you. You’re just like a drum in a band—dance band. The bones all blend in. And see, when they quit singing and the instruments take over then you can bring up the volume a little bit, and you can join in, and when they start singin again, bring the volume down and you’re just like another band. You’re like a dance band. The bones are just where you can just barely...It ain’t any louder than that violin or that banjo out there, cause they tune it down too see—the guy is singin. I learned to do that. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry believes that common sense is required of the bones player in ensemble performance and the success of his integration of the instrument into the bluegrass and old-time environment may be measured by the respect afforded him by his fellow musicians and the frequency with which he is invited to perform with them at the festival.
Rehearsals

Related to the challenge of assimilating the Mescher performance style into the live performance of the folk music ensemble, has been a second, arguably greater challenge, for Jerry. The Mescher predilection for thoroughly prepared musical materials would have to be reconciled with a more extempore attitude towards performance, common amongst folk musicians, and reinforced in the often ad hoc performance environment of the amateur folk festival. Jerry’s response to this natural mutability within folk music performance practice has been to encourage his fellow performers to rehearse the musical material thoroughly before each performance, and to fix the arrangements of each number. This allows Jerry to “know what’s all coming” and to put his “rhythm patterns where they go” (Mescher, J. 2006). He is especially concerned with the careful preparation of the music to be played when he is the featured entertainer in the show.

When we play here [in the parlour] we have records that we memorise but when we go to the festivals it’s all live music so we actually rehearse more than we play. Before we do the show we’re out there in the trees: guys got his keyboard hooked up and we’re goin through every number, gettin it all down. He knows what we’re gonna do, how we’re gonna play it, so we don’t have to look at him [and] wonder where he’s goin. So, that’s my biggest fear of playin on these festivals. I’m not worried about our playing. It’s just so the back up don’t screw you up and play something you’re not ready for. That has happened…They’ll play another verse that we’re not ready for but we have to ad lib it. We get through it pretty good. (Mescher, J. 2006)

This need to “know what’s all coming” has been intensified since 1999, when Jerry began to perform bones duets at the festival with his sister, Bernie. Bernie entered, and won, the Spoon and Bones contest at Avoca in 1998, and every year since then, she and Jerry have performed at the festival as the Mescher Bone Players. For more than thirty
years, Bernie had aspired to being a bones player like her father and her brother. Jerry encouraged her and tutored her in the techniques and repertoire of the style until she was competent enough to join him in the recreation of the duet routine he had shared with his father. In addition to the musical materials of the style, Bernie also inherited the distinctive modes of practice of the style, including the *sine qua non* of knowing “what’s all coming”. This need is compounded in the duet configuration where the synchronisation of rhythm patterns is an immutable aesthetic trait of the routine. The unison mode forces the Mescher bones players to chart every musical detail of their performance in advance. This basic tenet of the style rules out improvisation because the two bones players could not possibly make the same improvisational decisions in performance. When they do, on occasion, find themselves in uncharted musical territory, they just “hang in there”.

That’s why dad would always play with a record because he knew exactly what was going to come. And, of course we can’t do that at the festival and we’ve had to just play off the cuff sometimes, you know, because they may off on a little thing and then you just hang in there. (Mescher, B. 2006)

In the parlour, the use of recorded back-up music normalised the expectation of exact repeatability and created the conditions under which bones music could be pre-composed. However, as Bernie has discovered, this somewhat invariant characteristic of the Mescher style is not always easily exported from the parlour.

I feel more comfortable, I guess, playing with a cd or a tape because you know what’s goin to come and you can feel a little more relaxed. But then, you know, at the festivals when we’d have the live entertainment, if you practiced—well, that’s if you got a chance to practice a lot, you know—you feel a lot more at ease. They don’t seem to understand that though, why you need to practice, you know. Cause that’s important, you know…You know, one bone player can play
and you can, you know, make mistakes but you can’t do that when two people are playin. And that’s why you need to practice. If there was just one bone player, you know, you don’t have to worry so much about your number. (Mescher, B. 2006)

At Avoca, Jerry and Bernie relinquished their use of the repeatable recording in performance and, instead, embraced the challenge of adapting their approach and style to a more interactive mode of ensemble music making.

The Mescher Entertainers

Jerry and Bernie have built up a regular and enthusiastic following for their appearances at Avoca. As well as playing in informal sessions, they host their own shows, during which they feature the bones. The shows can last from fifteen minutes to one hour. Jerry and Bernie share the stage with other musicians, alternating with them throughout the show so as to provide variety for the audience. Jerry believes that this variety is important because audiences would otherwise get tired of the bones. In a one hour show the Mescher Bone Players will typically open the concert with a couple of numbers before they introduce some of their guest performers. At the beginning of the second half they perform two more numbers and, finally, they appear again at the end of the show.

If we stood there and played an hour with the bones they’d get tired. You’d wear it out in a minute…Anything you can change brings that spirit in the audience right back up. So, we featured all those guys…and then we closed it off, Bernie and I, in the last two numbers. Finished up, as it was our show. We thanked the people for coming and it made a nice show out of it. But you can’t, you cant play a whole hour with the bones…You got to have something in between there somehow to break it up—a little story. (Mescher, J.2006)
A concern with, and attention to, the “spirit” of the audience is a significant feature of the Mescher ethos, which sees Jerry and Bernie sharing a heightened sense of responsibility for the audience’s experience of the performance event. This ethos has been part of the Mescher style ever since Albert and Jerry first transposed their act from the relative isolation of the parlour to the stage, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Even before he left the parlour, however, Albert was playing to audiences in his mind’s eye. He dreamed of being a performer and later, with Jerry at his side, he became a consummate entertainer. Jerry learned the importance of “interacting” with the audience from his father, and from the nuns, who helped them shape their routine.

It’s a whole joint little venture you’re doin when you’re playin an act. It’s to capture the audience right away. (Mescher, J. 2006)

The most highly valued extra-musical device for capturing the audience’s attention in the Mescher performance style is choreographed movement. In Jerry’s experience, audiences are more engaged when he covers some ground and varies his stance while playing the bones.

I notice that with the audience when those movements take place and then the audience is right there…[It] changes the whole complexity of the act because you’re not just standing on a log doin this [he shakes his wrists]. You’re kinda interactin. And when I was alone and Bernie wasn’t with me and I didn’t had to worry about stayin together, then I would travel the whole twenty-five foot up the audience and play, and go back and forth and capture the audience as I was playin—not stay in one spot…You’re always in contact with the audience and you can see the smiles on their face. You’re not just up there playin and you’re glad to get this over with. You’re havin fun, the audience is havin fun with you. (Mescher, J. 2006)
In the course of recreating the Mescher duet routines, Jerry has taught Bernie the choreography for each number and the importance of conscious non-verbal interaction with the audience.

When you’re…interacting with the crowd, you’re interacting; you’re playing for them. I always tell Bernie, “What’s down there?” She’s always lookin down there at the ground, you know. She’s concentrating. I say, “Play for them out there. They’re your audience…Play it like you’re doin it for the first time, and not for yourself, because you’re playing for them, right out there”. And she has the tendency to concentrate to a point where she’s not got an eye contact with the audience. And you have to keep that one ear tuned to the music, keep both together. I mean, it’s a chore, but it can be done. Choreography is very important in our act. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Achieving a balance between attention to the music, playing with each other, and attention to the audience, “playing for them”, is a fundamental concern for the Mescher Bone Players. The goal in performance is to flow as musician and entertainer and the careful preparation of their musical and extra-musical materials in rehearsal expedites the successful realisation of this goal. Jerry and Bernie are generous performers and they enjoy an uncommon rapport and synergy with their audiences.

[We] enjoy what we’re doing, cause when you play you do be smiling, lookin back and sharin it together. That connection, we have to make it happen. And I think, you know how it is, the audience feeds you and you feed the audience…and it’s pretty exciting to do that…I only had a little glimpse of it at these festivals, you know, and it really does get you goin. It really does. It’s a good, good feeling in you. It’s pretty exciting that people like what you do. (Mescher, B. 2006)

Bernie has experienced a similar “back and forth” between performer and audience, when the “spirit” is with her and the congregation during her church readings.
It’s like you’re getting on stage playing; the scene is set and the people like what you do. Oh, my gosh, that back and forth. There’s a name, a word for that, but, wow, that’s pretty exciting. (Mescher, B. 2006)

The Mescher Celebrities

As well as enjoying the synergy of the performance event, itself, Jerry and Bernie take great pleasure in their status as local celebrities at the festival. Audiences follow the Mescher Bone Players from stage to stage at Avoca and support their shows year after year.

They come to see you every year. They’re there to see you: “There’s the bone guy”. And they get to be friends of yours—your followers. And they look forward to that...These people look forward to seein you and what gets me a lot of times is there’s so many people know you don’t know [them]...I just say hello and I don’t know who they are but they know you. You know we’ve been at that for how many years, you know, Bernie and I. They come to see the two bone players perform. (Mescher, J. 2006)

For Jerry, who conducts himself in a professional manner whenever he is on the festival ground, the obligations of his role “as a musician” extend beyond the performance event. The festival, itself, is his stage and Jerry considers it his duty to “enwelcome with open arms” those who attend the event, and to behave in a “cordial” manner at all times. According to Jerry, “it’s a relationship between the audience…and the musicians” that “makes a festival”. (Mescher, J. 2006) The relatively recent elevation of her own artistic status reminds Bernie of the stories she heard from her father and brother after they had experienced the glow of celebrity for the first time during their short tour with the Venita Rich Talent Review in 1960.

I think about how my dad felt, cause when they went to a festival back years ago and everybody came up to ask for their autograph and they were kind a known as

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the Mescher Brothers…I guess because they looked a lot alike. And they traveled the mid-West there with this talent scout for a while, after they went to New York I believe. And they went to all these different festivals and they were signing autographs and all this, you know. It was pretty exciting. (Mescher, B. 2006)

Throughout the brief entertainment career of father and son, the combination of the familial relationship and the musical kinship piqued audiences’ interest in the Mescher Bone Players and contributed to their celebrity. At Avoca, standing in her father’s “spot” performing duets with her brother, Bernie perceives a similar response to the combination of musical performance and the extra-musical narrative of familial musical transmission that she and Jerry weave together in their shows.

People are really touched by the fact of us carryin on this tradition—that my brother and I can share this together and that I can carry on this tradition… What we do as, together, brother and sister, I think people…really like that. (Mescher, B. 2006)

**Performing the Mescher Tradition**

The articulation of a narrative of tradition has become an elemental part of the Mescher siblings’ performance. It constitutes not just a contextual framing of the musical style, but expressive content itself. Jerry and Bernie have worked their stories *into* the act. The Mescher performance is a reflexive story-telling event that *includes* a rehearsed metanarrative dimension, ‘a story about a story’ (Babcock 1977). In the course of their routine, Jerry will relate a condensed history of the bones, followed by the story of “how [his] dad started this tradition”. This is usually followed by a couple of musical numbers after which Bernie might say, “Well Jerry, why don’t you tell your story—how you became interested in the bones?”
And so I used up another ten minutes telling my story, or fifteen; How I seen my father sit here play, and I had the desire; Didn’t have no bones but made them out of peach crates; Stood in front of a radio playing polka music forty-five minutes a day in fifteen-minute increments throughout the day. And as I got through with my story up to the present time—talked a little bout how dad passed away finally—and then we played another couple of numbers. And then, “Well”, I said, “Well Bernie, why don’t you tell the people how you became inspired?” So then she would start the whole process and people were just sittin there and eatin it all, but you could hear a pin drop. (Mescher, J. 2006)

The self-conscious talk about tradition that audiences hear at a Mescher show resonates within the wider discourse of tradition that circulates around the Old-Time Country Music Contest and Festival, and its “celebration of America’s musical heritage”. The festival is sponsored by the National Traditional Country Music Association, “a non-profit group dedicated to the preservation of America’s great musical heritage” (Mescher, J. 2000a). The association also publishes a magazine called Traditions, and it sponsors the Pioneer Music Instrument Museum and the Old Time Fiddler’s Hall of Fame. The festival has earned a commendation as the “number one festival most representative of traditional values, entertainment and education” by the National Geographic Society. And, according to Jerry, “what our forbears gave to this generation is passed on through this festival” (Mescher J. 2000a)

Heritage is staged at the Old-Time Country Music Festival and presented as entertainment, “the telling and passing on of stories” (Barnouw and Kirkland in Bauman, 1992:51). The Mescher siblings’ ‘act’ is a staged telling of their story. The narrative of musical patrilineage they present is variously inscribed in sound and gesture, and each
time they perform their ritual entertainment they connect with the lifeforce of their tradition and the shared soul of their patrilineage.
Chapter Five

Aesthetics of Measure: Mescher Spatiality

In this chapter, I present an exposition on Mescher spatiality. My discussion is located outdoors, on the land, where my attention to the agrarian vocation of the Mescher musician-farmers is underpinned by the hypothesis that there is a significant aesthetic concordance between Mescher spatiality, as developed and played out by Albert and Jerry Mescher on their 160-acre quarter section of Midwestern farmland, and Mescher musicality, as fashioned by Albert, and transmitted to his son, in the domestic parlour.

In her discussion of the ways in which space is made meaningful in our lives, Doreen Massey suggests that we “develop ways of incorporating a spatiality into our ways of being in the world” (Massey 2005, p.8). “Spatiality”, she argues, is produced “through and embedded in practices, from quotidian negotiations to global strategizing” (Massey 2005, p.8). Spatiality acts as a primary modality in the construction of Mescher subjectivity. Mescher spatiality is, as I will show, characterised by a taste for orderliness, symmetry and precision. This aesthetic sensibility is also evidenced in Mescher temporality. Mescher temporality, as expressed in Albert’s bones arrangements and in the performance practices of the Mescher bones players, is the subject of Chapter 6. Here, in Chapter 5, I concentrate on an explication of the aesthetic dimension of Albert and Jerry’s spatiality, as it is revealed in their farming practices. The principal artifact of Mescher spatiality is the landscape itself, and it is in this arena that my exposition is primarily located.
Measure

In his descriptive analysis of the formation of the modern American landscape, Corner identifies measure as the intrinsic component in the design and habitation of land; the measuring of land, he argues, “enables the spacing, marking, delineation, and occupation of a given terrain” (Corner 1996, p.41). The manner in which a society chooses to measure its terrain “reflects the values and judgments of the society” (Corner 1996, p.41). In addition to its utilitarian functionality, measure is, then, a “conceptual apparatus” (Corner 1996, p.41), employed by man and society in the imaginative construction of the cultural world. Corner highlights the intrinsic role played by measure in the formation of landscape, and he suggests that, whatever the purpose – “navigation, cultivation, protection, or security” – measure orients “a particular reality, guiding a society’s relationship to the land” (Corner 1996, p.41). I propose that Jerry Mescher, following in his father’s footsteps, is active, through his farming practices, in the construction of landscape and the production of social, cultural and aesthetic meanings. Specifically, I argue here, that an aesthetic sensitivity to the “measured” Midwestern landscape (Corner 1996, p.25) is evidenced in the farming practices, which were passed down from father to son.

Measure is also intrinsic to music, and, in particular, to the structuring of musical time. In the composition and performance of Albert’s bones arrangements, the exploitation of musical measure is the definitive expressive device. I propose that this primary aesthetic aspect of the Mescher musical style reflects other, broadly cultural, realities of their lives – the “values, patterns of action, and structures of [their familial and] social relations”
(Baumann 1992, p.47) – and that such reflections are clearly observable in the farming practices of father and son. The performance of an aesthetics of measure provides a meaningful point of intersection between Albert and Jerry’s creative relationship with the land and their creative relationship with music. Furthermore, I suggest that, in their farming and musical practices, Albert and Jerry reflect the negotiation of fundamental socio-cultural values that constitute the Mescher *habitus*. Playing with measure on the landscape, and in their music making in the parlour, Albert and Jerry Mescher construct their place in the world.

**Landscape**

Farmers, and their families, who have traditionally lived, worked and died on the land – “in the confines of their village and adjoining fields” (Tuan 1998, p.25) – may seem, to some people, to be “rooted in place” (Tuan 1998, p.25). To the outsider, nostalgic, perhaps, for a lost innocence, farm people may appear to inhabit a natural scene (Tuan 1998, p.25) and to be ‘at one with’, or, *of* nature. In such an idealised image, both the reality of life on the small family farm and the cultural dynamics of that lifestyle are bleached out, and the rural landscape is naturalised. In reality, the relationship between farmers and the land is cultural, and landscape is an artifact – a product of the *dynamic* relationship between the land and those who inhabit it. As an artifact, landscape can be read for its semantic content and its multiple meanings may be social, cultural or aesthetic in nature (Henderson 2003).
Reading the landscape as our “unwitting autobiography” – a reflection of “our tastes, our values, our aspiration, and even our fears” (Schein 2003, p.202) – is instructive. As an epistemological position, however, such a reading is limited, for landscape is not merely an “innocent” artifact – the passive result of human activity; it is, rather, as Groth and Wilson describe it, “an arena of agency and structure” that exerts “an active influence on social, economic and political processes” (2003, p.15). Landscape may be shaped by man, but, in a reflexive feedback loop, it is also constitutive of place and identity (Schein, R. H. 2003, p.202). Constituted by, and constitutive of socio-spatial relations (Henderson 2003), then, landscape can “tell us important things about who we are as a society and a culture” (Henderson 2003, p.189).

“Middle Landscape”

Tuan argues that socio-spatial organisation is a product of the human “desire and ability to escape from nature” (Tuan 1998, p. 19). The escape from nature, he proposes, is, at all times, an escape to culture (Tuan 1998, p.23). In Tuan’s formulation, landscape is the product of man’s negotiation of his environment, a negotiation that is impelled by a combination of the human need for environmental stability and a reflexive desire for cultural efficacy. Out of this relationship, landscape emerges in a variety of forms, from the “big artificial city at one extreme to wild nature at the other” (Tuan 1998, p. 24). In between, are the agricultural and suburban landscapes, which Tuan designates the “middle landscapes” (Tuan 1998, p. 24). Farmland exemplifies the idealised ecological balance of the “middle landscape”; compared with the extremes of the city and raw nature, the farmscape may seem “more real—more what life is, or ought to be like”
(Tuan 1998, p.25). Tuan points out that the farmscape, like all middle landscapes is unstable; its position in the “middle” is tenuous, maintained, only, by means of a continuous struggle against nature and urban artifice (Tuan 1998, p.25).

In the Midwest, the “middle landscape” is traditionally characterised by a patchwork of small family farms. Today, in the face of the radical economic and social changes that ‘threaten’ this agrarian ecology, traditional farming practices have become infused with heightened symbolic value, and yesterday’s vernacular landscape has become today’s ethnographic landscape. The creation of an ethnographic, agricultural landscape engages its inhabitants in the active and ongoing transformation of nature. Over time, as agriculture changes, the landscape reflects the shifting values, beliefs, and desires of its inhabitants, and, in this way, landscape acts as a site, or a locus, of world making. Ethnographic landscapes reflect “a distinctive way of transforming nature into culture” and their creation may affect, amongst other things, the spatial organisation of aspects of the man-made physical environment, including “roads, buildings, boundary markers, ditches, vegetation related to land use, and topographic features” (Hardesty 2000, pp.169-171).

The struggle to maintain the middle landscape is a struggle for a set of particular ecological values and for the achievement, by its custodians, of a balance between cycle and vector (Leppert 1998, p.298), and a psychological ease in the world (Tuan 1998, p. 26). Maintaining a small, independently owned, family farm through the employment of traditional farming practices today amounts to the expression of a particular cultural
disposition. The Mescher agricultural landscape is both vernacular, in its reflection of repetitive occupational activity, and ethnographic, in its expression of ideologies, beliefs, values and world-view (Hardesty 2000, p.169). Through their vernacular farming practices the Meschers are engaged in a vigorous and constant process of landscape formation. In their seasonal, and day-to-day, fashioning of a “middle landscape”, they embody an affective relationship with the land that is characteristic of, and nostalgic for, a traditional agrarian socio-spatial reality.

Grid

Drawing on the theoretical formulations of the epistemological discourse within landscape studies (Henderson 2003, pp.189-192), I present, here, an historical account of the formation of the Midwestern landscape and a critique of the ideological forces that have shaped it. In particular, I focus on the geometric inscription of the Midwestern landscape, which was first prescribed in the late eighteenth century land ordinances of the new Republic and subsequently applied systematically across the land by surveyors, settlers and civil authorities. The ordinances mapped a contiguous, rectangular grid onto sixty-nine percent of the continental forty-eight states (Carstensen 1988, p.31) and sculpted the armature of American agrarian culture for more than two hundred years. Thomas Jefferson – the principal proponent of the American agrarian ideal – along with fellow revolutionary, Hugh Williamson, first proposed the idea of the grid, in a report to Congress in 1784 (Pattison 1957, p.63-64). The idea subsequently formed the basis of the Land Ordinance of 1785, which legislation initiated the single most dramatic, profound
and semantically rich human intervention on the American landscape in the history of the Euro-American socio-spatial colonisation of the continent.

The grid is considered by many commentators to be emblematic of late eighteenth century republican ideals. In his discussion of the way that America was surveyed and settled under the National Land Survey of 1785, landscape architect, James Corner, for example, suggests that the grid embodies unique American values, such as “freedom, accessibility, and social improvement” (Corner 1996, p.41). The historian of American culture, John Kouwenhoven, includes the grid in his account of definitive American cultural artifacts, and describes the idea, in its original formulation, as “a blueprint for a future society in which men would live each in his own domain, free and equal, each man’s domain clearly divided from his neighbors” (1998, 126). Today, in the Midwest, grid lines live out a flat, rather prosaic existence and are as likely to be appreciated for their efficient delineation of property boundaries as for their ideological significance. They continue, however, to frame and animate the landscape and to figure in meaningful ways in the lives of those who inhabit it.

The Meschers have farmed their quarter section of Roselle Township – a symmetrical portion of the “carefully measured” (Corner 1996, p.25) Midwestern landscape – for one hundred years and their relationship with the land constitutes a central theme in the historical narrative of the family. The rectilinear boundaries of Carroll County were first established in 1850. In line with the prescriptive geometry of the Land Ordinance of 1785, the county was sub-divided into 16 square townships. Each township comprised of
thirty-six sections, and each section measured 640 acres, or one square mile. For three
generations the hereditary farm of one hundred and sixty acres – a quarter section – has
provided an economic livelihood for the Mescher family, and has been the site of its
social and cultural formation.

The grid was firmly etched onto the landscape of Carroll County by the time Jerry’s
grandparents, Fred and Cora Mescher, settled the family farm in 1909. Profound
economic and social changes in the region over the past one hundred years, including the
demise of the traditional family farm, the growth of agribusiness, and the development of
an urban-centered consumer culture, have contributed to a significant remaking of the
socio-spatial landscape of Carroll County, and the Midwest, in general. Throughout this
period of dramatic change, the manmade geometric structure of the physical landscape
has remained intact and the grid continues to provide the region with a formal cohesion.
Furthermore, the abstract inscription of the land still constitutes an important geo-
psychological template for the inhabitants of the Midwest, especially, I argue, for those
small farmers, such as Jerry Mescher, who endeavor to maintain something of a
traditional agrarian ethos within the boundaries of their property.

Civilisation/Wilderness

The contemporary landscape of the Midwest may be understood as the product of the
historical struggle between culture and nature, ‘civilisation’ and ‘wilderness’. Driven by
an ideology of civilisation, the transformation of the American ‘wilderness’ began in the
early years of the 16th century and was achieved over the course of three-and-a-half
centuries. Nash proposes that the concept of wilderness is a construct of civilisation. He asserts that this idea of wilderness was a basic ingredient of American culture and he contextualises the formation of the American landscape within a dialogue between the seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century American paradigms of civilisation and wilderness: “From the raw materials of the physical wilderness,” he writes, “Americans built a civilization” (Nash 2001 [1967] p.xiii). Wilderness provided both the pioneer and the architects of the colonial project with the antithesis of civilisation; each idea acted to illuminate the other.

From the beginning, the ‘taming’ of the wilderness was a central, ideologically driven, objective of Euro-American colonisation. The creation of a rural landscape, through the cultivation of nature, was the prevailing objective of the colonial settler (Nash 2001[1967], pp.32-33). In the Virginia, New England and Pennsylvania colonies, settlers established European socio-spatial patterning in the form of agricultural villages, plantations and towns. Metes and bounds, the traditional European system of lands survey, was used to measure land and to establish property rights and boundaries. External boundaries simultaneously marked the outer limits of the civilised, cultivated space of the settlements and the edge of the wilderness beyond. Uncultivated land – nature in its wilderness state – held very little appeal for the early settler, and even when it did it was because it reminded him of a “Garden or Orchard in England” (Nash 2001[1967], pp.32-33). The cultivated garden, as pastoral metaphor for a civilised environment and way of life, was popular in New World settlement narratives throughout
the colonial period, and into the republic era for as long as the frontier remained open (Nash 2001[1967], pp.32-33).

The frontier, itself a colonial construction premised on a naturalised opposition between the two ideas, became a shifting stage for the dramatic juxtaposition of wilderness and civilisation. As the frontier moved further and further west during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the wilderness continued to be a formidable adversary for the settler. Across the continent of America, in its forests, deserts, prairies and mountains, wilderness took on many forms, but, no matter where he encountered it, the pioneer adopted a utilitarian approach to the transformation of wild country into the “object of his affection” – a rural, garden-like landscape (Nash 2001[1967], p.31). The seventeenth-century New England farmer who transformed the “howling wilderness” into a “pleasant Land”, the late eighteenth-century settler whose “great primary objective” was “to cause the Wilderness to bloom and fructify”, and the mid-nineteenth-century Iowa farmer who “makes the wilderness blossom like a rose”, all these frontiersmen “looked through, rather than at, wilderness” (Nash 2001[1967], pp.32-33).

During the first fifty years of the Republican era, advocates of an agricultural society advanced this vision of a pastoral landscape through a program of land legislation that codified and enacted its agrarian ideology on a continental scale. Using both the land ordinance and mercantile capitalism as blueprints for colonial expansion, and driven by a somewhat impoverished Old World promise of an earthly paradise “somewhere to the west” (Nash 2001 [1967] p.25), surveyors, pioneers, and settlers transformed the
wilderness into civilisation. As a consequence, a patchwork of domesticated “controlled spaces: corrals, fields, and towns” (Nash 2001 [1967], p.xi) unfolded on the landscape as the frontier moved westwards across the continent.

Civilisation expressed itself through rational measure, and measure, in turn, facilitated the colonial appropriation and possession of America. The operative role played by measure in the creation of the New World can be adduced from a consideration of its inherent role in the mapping and settlement of the continent; measure has been intrinsic to graphical representations of the New World ever since Renaissance cartographers drew the first speculative maps of the continent. Measure is constitutive, too, of other powerful instruments of appropriation and colonisation: the navigational charts used by Portuguese, Spanish and English explorers; the land charters issued by European rulers; the socio-spatial design of colonial settlements; Euro-American cadastral surveys and maps; and, ultimately, the geometry of the Republican land ordinances. The mapping of the American landscape began with the speculative charts of 15th century European explorers and cartographers, and reached its apotheosis in the land ordinances of the Federal government. Today, the underlying structural design, imposed under the Land ordinance of 1785, continues to play an active role in the ongoing formation of landscape. Midwestern farmers, in particular, continue to interact with the measured dimension of landscape in the latter-day creation of habitat.

Applying his description of landscape as “a cultural expression of social relations with the land” to its American formation, Cosgrove argues that the United States of America
“is in some respects an articulation on a continental scale of the landscape idea” (Cosgrove 1998, p.162). The historical articulation of this explicit spatiality is clearly evidenced in the Euro-American colonial project and the critical “engagements of space” (Massey 2005, p.8) through which the New World was imagined and constructed; an applied spatiality was intrinsic to Euro-American cartography, colonial settlement patterns and Republican land ordinances.

The contemporary landscape of the Mescher farmstead, and Carroll County itself, is the product of a transformation of the American Midwest by the forces of Euro-American colonisation. The design of the contemporary midwestern landscape was fashioned by the geopolitical ideology and socio-spatial paradigms that determined the colonial relationship with the territories of the North American continent. In the process, the American wilderness was civilised, land was re-conceptualised as property and the continent was re-mapped using modern Euro-American cartographic concepts and methods. Just as measure was the primary instrument of macro-spatial politics of the New World, and the formation of the Midwestern landscape, so too it continues to constitute an important instrument in the local, micro-politics of habitation. Measure continues to inform, in a profound way, the socio-spatial reality of Mescher existence. In the face of dramatic socio-economic change, Jerry Mescher preserves the family farm through the day-to-day maintenance of real and imaginary boundaries. Albert and Jerry Mescher bring an aesthetic sensibility to their reflexive relationship with the land. Measure is operative in their farming practices and they exploit its aesthetic instrumentality to carve “a space out of nature” (Tuan 1998, p.10) and to create a coherent, stable, habitat.
I will return, in the final part of this chapter, to a consideration of the instrumental role played by an aesthetics of measure in the development of the Mescher spatiality. I will examine, in particular, the instrumental role played by an aesthetics of measure in their negotiation of space and their relationship with the midwestern landscape. In order to more fully contextualise Mescher spatiality, I will first explore the historical construction of the midwestern landscape of which the Mescher farmscape is a constituent part. The spatiality of the colonial and, later, federal projects of survey and settlement of the New World is the primary focus of the discussion that follows. The formation of the American rural landscape and the ideological derivation of its socio-spatial design are revealed through an examination of three primary instruments of Euro-American spatiality: cartography, colonial settlement patterns, and the Land Ordinance of 1785.

**Cartography: Discovery**

In his *Cosmographia*, Claudius Ptolemy (A.D. 90-168), the Greek astronomer and geographer, created a map of the world using, for the first time, a rectilinear grid that was based on lines of latitude and longitude. Employing principals of perspective and projection, Ptolemy’s map represented a spherical world by using a system of coordinates to locate geographical features on a grid that covered the globe. The rediscovery of Ptolemy’s *Cosmographia* by members of one of Florence’s humanist academies in 1400 initiated that city’s “rise to centrality in European cartography during the early fifteenth century” (Cosgrove 1998, p. 164). Harley describes the rediscovery of Ptolemaic coordinate geometry as a “critical cartographic event” that would structure subsequent European territorial control (Harley 1988, p.282). While Florentine cartographers
concerned themselves with the scientific mapping of the world, architects and painters, such as the Florentine, Filippo Brunellechi (1377-1446), and his contemporary, the humanist, Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), were exploring the representation of space in art. Brunellechi and Alberti, in particular, made definitive contributions to the science of perspective through their work on linear perspective in painting. Cosgrove notes, then, the co-existence in the Renaissance mind of “an interest reticulating picture space” and “an intellectual interest in mapping the world” (1998, p. 164).

The Florentine geographer, cartographer, and merchant, Paolo dal Toscanelli, inspired by the cartography of Ptolemy, wrote to Columbus to encourage him to undertake an Atlantic voyage in search of a new route to the Orient (Cosgrove 1998, p. 164). Toscanelli’s created a chart that “demonstrated that a sea voyage from Europe to Asia was relatively short and entirely feasible” (Ryden 1993, p.25). In 1492, with the chart and a letter from Toscanelli in his possession, Columbus set sail to the west on his first Atlantic voyage. He did not reach the Orient, but, after a five-week ocean crossing, his ships did ‘make land’ in the Americas; first in the Bahamas, and some weeks later in Cuba and Hispaniola.

The Spanish explorer and cartographer, Juan de la Cosa (1460-1510), sailed with Columbus on his first three voyages to the New World. He acted as master and cartographer on the second voyage of 1493-1494. De la Cosa’s Mappa Mundi, dated 1500, is the earliest extant map of the world to show the discoveries in the New World. His map is a composite of reports from several voyages undertaken in the previous
decade, including the discoveries of the Columban voyages and that of the English explorer, John Cabot, who made the transatlantic crossing in 1497 for King Henry VII (Cumming 1988, p.2). De la Cosa’s map includes a depiction of an unidentified landmass, with “a broken, vaguely formed coast with a long east-west line” situated to the north of Cuba, which he, himself, may have believed was Asia (Cumming 1988, p.2).

In the following two decades several cartographers produced maps depicting a similar landmass to the north of the West Indies. The most important of these is the *Universalis Cosmographia*, a world map produced in 1507 by the German humanist, cleric, and cartographer, Martin Waldseemüller (1470-1522). The full title of the map, *Universalis cosmographia secunda Ptholemei traditionem et Americi Vespucci aliorumque lustrationes* ("A drawing of the whole earth following the tradition of Ptolemy and the travels of Amerigo Vespucci and others") reveals Waldseemüller’s indebtedness to the Greek cartographer Ptolemy, and to the discoveries made by the Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci (Hébert 2007). Vespucci (1454-1512) explored the east coast of South America between 1499 and 1502, and reports of his discoveries inspired Waldseemüller to give the unknown continent the name America, (after Vespucci’s first name, Amerigo). In the introduction to his *Cosmographia*, the following words appear:

But now these parts [Europe, Asia and Africa] been extensively explored and a fourth part has been discovered by Americus Vespuccius, as will be seen in the appendix: I do not see what right any one would have to object to calling this part after Americus, who discovered it and who is a man of intelligence, [and so to name it] *Amerige*, that is, the Land of Americus, or *America*: since both Europa and Asia got their names from women (Cohen 2007, translated from the Latin)
Waldseemüller produced several editions of Ptolemy’s work during his lifetime, but in his depiction of a fourth continent, existing “between two huge bodies of water, the Atlantic and Pacific oceans”, he departed from the Ptolemaic geography, and transformed contemporary European knowledge of the world (Hébert 2007).

Renaissance cartographers were motivated by the desire to ‘know’ the world, and, in addition to their interest in summarising the contemporary state of geographical knowledge (Ryden 1993, p.20), their charts “[spurred] explorers on to ever-wider-ranging voyages of discovery” (Ibid. p.22), thus serving the European program of exploration, discovery and conquest. While map accuracy continued to improve throughout the renaissance period, thanks to the development of more scientific methods of representation and the gathering of experiential data, the cartographic projections of the unknown world continued, for some time, to be based, in varying degrees, on a mixture of scientific knowledge, conjecture and fancy. The Renaissance map, nonetheless, exerted a magnetic pull on the imagination and “took powerful hold on the minds of adventurous Europeans” (Ibid. p.24).

The Renaissance map often included extra-symbolic, decorative emblems, such as vignettes, cartouches, compass roses and borders, that both enhanced the aesthetic dimensions of the document and drew attention to its political meanings. In a similar fashion, the frontispieces and title pages of many atlases included portraits of kings and queens, and depictions of monumental arches and royal coats of arms, all of which “define by means of widely understood emblems both the ideological significance and
the practical scope of the maps they contain” (Harley 1988, p.298). Decoration served an important ideological function in the European cartography of overseas territories. Decoration was used to attach “a series of racial stereotypes and prejudices to the areas being represented” (Harley 1988, p.299), and the projection of symbols of European power, including ships, forts, standards, soldiers, surveyors, compass roses, astrolabes, legends and nomenclature, naturalised the European colonial presence, even before conquest had begun. Ribero’s planishere of 1529, for example, delineates the voyages of Ayallon and Gomez, and is elaborately decorated “with trees, buildings, birds, animals, ships and figures”, while the depiction of an astrolabe and the accompanying map legends “give a rich summary of contemporary navigational information” (Cumming 1988, p.101).

Harley argues that, even in the absence of decoration, the map stands “as a symbol of political authority”, at once a cartographic ‘fact’ and a cartographic symbol. As cartographic measurement and delineation became more ‘scientific’ over time, its symbolic power intensified, and “world maps, though increasingly drawn on mathematically defined projections, nevertheless gave a spiraling twist to the manifest destiny of European overseas conquest and colonization” (Harley 1988, p.299). On the influential Mercator map of 1569, the Flemish cartographer, Gerardus Mercator, placed Europe at the centre of the world. Mercator’s map proved invaluable for European navigators because it represented true compass directions. Harley argues that Mercator’s projection reinforced the Renaissance Europeans’ “view of their own world hegemony”, and can be interpreted as “a geopolitical prophecy” (Harley 1988, p.290).
Renaissance voyages of exploration to the New World were financed by wealthy European merchants and princes ‘who fantasized about a past utopia’ (Cosgrove 1998, p. 167). The Golden Age myth was in wide circulation amongst the wealthy literate classes throughout western Europe by the mid-sixteenth century, its invocation of timelessness and everlasting youth serving as a potent image of “stable authority which could be translated into the crude spectacles of gilded floats and gold-painted youths parading the streets of Florence in celebration of Medici power” (Cosgrove 1998, p. 167). The stories of the legendary island of Atlantis, first mentioned in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias*, and the Isles of the Blessed, a mythological Greek paradise, were rediscovered by the Humanists and these, too, were brought into the service of contemporary utopian projections. The humanistic study of classical texts had re-illuminated the myth of the Golden Age for Renaissance scholars, and, with discovery of gold in the Americas, the wealthy patriciate of Florence and Venice enthusiastically proclaimed its return (Cosgrove 1998, p. 166). In the Renaissance mind, gold was imbued with both symbolic and economic value. Columbus emphasised the moral capital of the metal, and Cosimi di Medici, prince of Florence, celebrated its allegorical attributes, finding in the precious metal “a suitable metaphor for his rule” (Cosgrove 1998, p. 166).

The discovery narratives written by the earliest European navigators were often tinted by the Golden Age myth. Nash highlights the stress on the “material and sensual attributes of the new land” in these early explorers’ reports, and the notion that a longed-for paradise had been found.

The discovery of the New World rekindled the traditional European notion that an earthly paradise lay somewhere to the west. As the reports of the first
explorers filtered back the Old World began to believe that America might be the place of which it had dreamed since antiquity (Nash 2001 [1967], p.25)

The endurance of the myth is attested in the discovery narratives of the late sixteenth century explorers and settlers of the New World. English navigators, Captains Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlow reached the coast of what is now North Carolina in 1584; having claimed the land for the Queen, they sent a letter to the financier of the expedition, Sir Walter Raleigh, in which they described the land as ‘a realm of “wonderful plenty,” its rich soil supporting an abundance of game and growing crops “plentiful, sweet, fruitful and wholesome,” with “divers other wholesome and medicinal herbs and trees’” (Kolodny 1975, p.10). The natives they encountered ‘greeted them with “all love and kindness and with as much bounty (after their manner) as they could possibly devise’”, inspiring Amadas and Barlow to describe them as “such as live after the manner of the golden age” (Kolodny 1975, p.10).

Kolodny presents a similarly effusive report from the early English soldier and courtier, Master Ralph Lane (Kolodny 1975, p.11), who was invited by Raleigh to lead an expedition to the New World in 1585. At the end of June in that year, the expedition arrived at Wococon (now Ocracoke Island), in North Carolina, and a month later a colony was established on Roanoke Island with Lane acting as governor. Master Lane’s experience in the new colony proved it to have “the goodliest soil under the cope of heaven,” with a “climate so wholesome, that we had not one sick since we touched the land there.” “So abounding with sweet trees,” “so many sorts of apothecary drugs, such several kinds of flax,” wheat, corn, and sugar cane, was it, in fact, that he “dar[ed] assure
[himself], being inhabited with English, no realm in Christendom were comparable to it”. (Kolodny 1975, p.11)

There is also evidence that these early portrayals of a Golden Age landscape in the New World were, in fact, at odds with the harsh reality of the early European encounter with the North American environment. A counter narrative of ‘wilderness’, that would challenge the Golden Age myth for centuries to come, began to appear in the earliest pioneer reports.

The alternative to the garden image of landscape which emerges from the Golden Age and pastoral myths is that of wilderness…For all the fancies of a primeval perfection and the occasional support offered them by tracer gold, Indian clearings or unpruned Muscat vines, the reality of the American seaboard as far inland as European settlers penetrated for two centuries was of forest, swamps, unexpected climatic extremes and, at least to their eyes, frighteningly savage natives and wild animals (Cosgrove 1998, p.169).

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the difficulties experienced by the first European inhabitants on the eastern seaboard of America are increasingly attested to in letters and reports from settlers; an overarching indigenous narrative of struggle against the ‘wilderness’ developed to trouble the utopian promise.

Soon after he arrived the seventeenth-century frontiersman realized that the New World was the antipode of paradise. Previous hopes intensified the disappointment…For Europeans wild country was a single peak or heath, and island of uninhabited land surrounded by settlement…but the seemingly boundless wilderness of the New World was something else (Nash 2001 [1967], p.26).

In the colonies, the Golden Age myth, with “its explicit evasion of the problems of human labour, production and authority” (Cosgrove 1998, p.169), gradually lost its
luster. Over time it was recast, and absorbed into the colonial project of civilisation, where its ancient, classical, and utopian resonances provided moral support in the unfolding battle against the wilderness.

**Mapping the Colonies**

During the first three decades of the sixteenth century, European cartographers profited greatly from the reports and maps generated by the voyages of discovery undertaken by the Florentine humanist, and mathematician, Giovanni da Verrazzano (1485? -1527), and the Spanish explorers, Estéban Gomez (1483-1538) and Licenciado Lucas Vasquez de Ayllón (1475-1526) (Cumming 1988, pp.4-19). By the time of the Elizabethan voyages, and the first successful European settlement of the New World in the 1580s, the Atlantic coast of America was mapped in some detail, albeit with limited accuracy. The Raleigh voyages mark the beginning of the British colonial project in New World. Those who planned and carried out the Raleigh voyages were familiar with the Italian and Spanish reports and maps of the first half of the century, and it is Cumming’s contention that they were “strongly influenced in their conception of the North American coast and in their actions” by the Spanish cartography in particular (1988, p.11). Specific knowledge gained from contemporary maps influenced the planners’ decision to choose the North Carolina coastal region as a potential site for settlement (Cumming 1988, p.1).

After an initial unsuccessful attempt to establish a permanent colony on Roanoke Island in 1585, Raleigh engaged the explorer and artist John White to lead a further expedition in 1587, with the purpose of establishing a colony in Chesapeake Bay, north of Roanoke.
The location of Chesapeake Bay was known from earlier European maps of the region. It first appears in European cartography as early as 1526, in the *Mappa Mundi* of Juan Vespucci, where it is named Baya de Santa Maria (Cumming 1988, p.14). In 1524, just two years before the appearance of Vespucci’s map, the Florentine mathematician and explorer, Giovanni da Verrazzano (1485-1528), sailing under the French flag, may have been referring to the tidewater area at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay when he described the landscape he encountered on his voyage as “beautiful”, and “full of great woods, green and of various types of trees” (Cosgrave 1984, p.168). Verrazzano “baptized” the area “Arcadia”, “on account of the beauty of the trees” he found there (Cumming 1988, p.7).

The attempt to establish a permanent colony in the Chesapeake Bay area also failed, but the influential cartographic output of White and the mathematician and surveyor, Thomas Harriot, advanced the colonial project and contributed to future, successful colonisation in the region. During the various stages of exploration and settlement, White and Harriot collaborated to produce several maps. The subjects of their maps ranged from “plats of a fortified encampment and of entrenchments on Puerto Rico and of Indian villages in Virginia”, to “maps of the North American coast” (Cumming 1988, p.51). White’s map of the Cape Hatteras area, made during the second Roanoke expedition, included watercolour images of the indigenous inhabitants and was published in Harriot’s *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, a representation of the New World that was influential in Europe at the time (Thrower 1999, p.116). Between them, White and Harriot “produced a body of information about the New World remarkable in its
scope and quality” (Cumming 1988, p.50). Their maps surpassed, in detail and accuracy, the Spanish cartography on which their own expeditions had relied, and, even before the end of the decade, British and continental cartographers were producing maps, which showed the English colony in the New World.

Within twenty years of the Raleigh expedition, the first permanent British colony in America was established in the Chesapeake region. In 1607 Captain John Smith led an expedition that resulted in the planting of Jamestown, Virginia. Smith governed the Colony from 1607 to 1609. After he left the colony he spent the years 1610 to 1617 exploring the Virginia and New England coastlines. His contribution to the cartography of the New World at the beginning of the colonial period is significant. While he was still the Governor of Jamestown, he explored Chesapeake Bay and produced an important map of the area that was published in several editions throughout the seventeenth century (Thrower 1999, p.117). His Map of Virginia with a Description of the Countrey, produced in 1612, was the most detailed of its time, and later, in A Description of New England, he included “a highly accurate chart of the coastline and harbors” of that region (Pettit 1975, p.440). Smith was now in the employ the Virginia Company of Plymouth, a second company chartered by James I with the purpose of establishing English settlements in Virginia for commercial gain. The Plymouth Company named him the “Admiral of New England” (Pettit 1975, p.440).

Smith’s attempts to establish a colony in New England on behalf of the Plymouth Company were unsuccessful, but his maps and his written descriptions were an
inspiration to many other would-be pioneers, and paved the way for the succeeding expeditions, including the successful plantation of Plymouth Colony in 1620. Smith was a “staunch imperialist” who “sought to inspire all Britons to join cause for the glory of the empire” (Pettit 1975, p.441-442), and through his maps and his accounts of the New World he made a singular contribution to the making of British America. His employer, the Plymouth Company, was forced by financial plight to give up its royal charter in 1620 and Smith, too, relinquished his role as “Admiral of New England”. After the demise of the Plymouth Company, the Council for New England was granted a new charter by James 1 to settle the area now known as New England.

Britain was not alone amongst European nations in making territorial claims in the New World. The formative history of the United States in the 17th and 18th centuries is framed by the imperial rivalry between England, France and Spain. Maps were used as a political weapon by all sides in the competition for the territorial control of the New World (Short 2003, p.13). The most dramatic cartographic battles took place between French and British mapmakers. In his discussion of the French cartography of the period, Short points out that the influential maps drawn by Nicholas Sanson in 1656 and Guillaume Delisle in 1718 compress British territorial claims along the eastern seaboard of America, while maximising French territorial claims to the interior (Short 2003, p.13). Counter claims were represented in the British-sponsored maps drawn by Herman Moll in 1720 and Henry Popple in 1733. Both Moll’s map, *This Map of North America According to ye Newest and most Exact Observations*, and Popple’s *America Septentrionalis: A Map of the British Empire in America with the French and Spanish Settlements Adjacent Thereto*
‘reclaim’ the territories appropriated by the French mapmakers (Short 2003, pp.136-139). Short describes all British Maps of North America in the period, as “part geographic description, part enticement to further settlement and part geopolitical claims to territory” (Short 2003, p.140).

By the middle of the eighteenth century tensions were high over conflicting claims between England, France and Spain along almost every border in North America. In the aftermath of the Seven Year’s War (1756-1763), which saw the three major imperial powers in bloody conflict across half of the world, the overseas empires of the European states were reordered. In the Treaty of Paris, in 1763, France ceded her claims to Canada and the Ohio Valley to England, and transferred all of Louisiana to Spain. Spain was forced to cede her claim to Florida to England. The dramatic redrawing of the boundaries left the mainland of North America partitioned between Spain and England along the line of the Mississippi River (Meinig 1986, p.269). Negotiators used a map made by the Virginia-born physician and cartographer, Dr. John Mitchell, to delineate the new territorial order (Knepper 1975, p.95). Mitchell’s ambitious Map of the French Dominions in North America was commissioned in 1750 by the British Board of Trade, with the political purpose of circumscribing French claims on the interior territories of the New World (Cumming 1975, p.100). Drawn first in 1750, and published in 1755 after several years of corrections and improvements, Mitchell’s map was subsequently produced in twenty-one editions or impressions in four languages (Thrower 1999, p.117). Mitchell’s commission came on foot of the official rejection of the previous commissioned map of British geopolitical claims on the North American territories,
Henry Popple’s *Map of the British Empire in North America*. Commissioned by the government and published in 1733, Popple’s map was disowned by the Lords Commissioners in 1755 after it had been criticised for many years for failing to advance British claims in North America far enough (Short 2003, p.140). Mitchell responded to the geopolitical ambitions of his sponsors by extending the boundaries of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia across the Mississippi River, and beyond those marked on Poppel’s map. This extension of British claims on Mitchell’s map denies both French and native American claims on the land, and erases any western limit to British possessions on the continent. It became the basic cartographic authority for an emerging United States of America in the second half of the eighteenth century (Harley 1977, p.97), and, according to historian Lawrence Wroth, it exemplifies the operation of the “map as political force” (Quoted in Harley, 1977, p.97).

The peace commissioners in the Treaty of Paris again used Mitchell’s map as a reference, in 1783. After the American victory in the War of Independence, much of Britain’s North American empire was dismantled and in the subsequent determination of the geo-political reality of the United States under the Peace of Paris treaty of 1783, cartography again played a central role. In the discussions which took place prior to the signing of the Treaty in 1783, the fourth edition of Mitchell’s map “lay across the negotiating table” and was marked with red lines to demark the borders between the United States and its neighbours, including Canada, which was then British (Short 2003, p.205). The map was also used to define the first southern boundary of the United States.

It ran straight east from a point in the middle of the Mississippi at latitude 31N to the middle of the Apalachicola River, along that river to its junction with the
Flint River, and “thence straight to the head of St. Mary’s River to the Atlantic Ocean” (Johnson 1976, p.34).

**Charter**

All British colonial lands derived from the crown (Cronon 1983, p.71), and settlement in the New World territories was authorised by royal charter. In 1606, James I granted the first royal charter to the Virginia Company to settle the lands along the eastern seaboard of America, between 34 and 45 degrees of latitude (The First Charter of Virginia; April 10, 1606), and, in 1607, Jamestown, Virginia was established under this charter. In 1629, under the Charter of Massachusetts Bay, Charles I granted to the Massachusetts Bay Company the rights to settle the land in “all that Parte of America, lyeing and being in Bredth, from Forty Degrees of Northerly Latitude…to forty eight Degrees Of the saide Northerly Latitude inclusively, and in Length, of and within all the Breadth aforesaid, throughout the Maine Landes from Sea to Sea” (Charter of Massachusetts Bay: 1629).

Under the terms of the royal charter, the King provided protection for the settlers, in return for receiving a share of the gold and silver found by the colonists, as well as a share of the profits from land sales. The Massachusetts Bay Charter determined that the land distributed to the settlers by the company should be held in “free and common Soccage” (The Charter of Massachusetts Bay: 1629). Free and common soccage was the least feudal of all the major land tenure types in use in medieval England. Compared to tenure ‘in capite’ or tenure ‘by knight’s service’, both of which carried with them civil and military obligations to the King, free and common soccage “conceived of land simply
as property carrying an economic rent, a rent which was often negligible” (Cronon 1983, p.71). As long as the landholder honoured his obligation to pay rent (the modern property tax) to the King (and later, the government), the land held was free to be bought and sold, and thus alienable.

This alienation of the land, under the terms of the charter, recast New England lands as property that could be bought and sold. In consequence, the Massachusetts Bay Charter determined the pattern of property rights in Colonial New England. Free and common socage underpinned this system of property rights and provided the model for the equivalent ‘fee simple’ tenure, which was adopted by the nascent Republic in the Land Ordinances of the late eighteenth century. In its influence on Republican land policy, free and common socage played a critical role in determining modern property rights in the United States.

The seventeenth century royal charters also prefigure another fundamental aspect of modern American land policy: the abstract division of land. In a manner which would be repeated often throughout the colonial period and beyond, The Charter of Massachusetts Bay projected boundaries on the American landscape that were defined by lines of latitude: “from Forty Degrees of Northerly Latitude…to forty eight Degrees Of the saide Northerly Latitude inclusively” (Charter of Massachusetts Bay: 1629). In a sweeping imperialistic gesture, the charter granted the Massachusetts Bay Company the rights to settle the land between these lines, from “Sea to Sea” (Charter of Massachusetts Bay: 1629). From the outset, the English claims on the territory of the New World were
formulated in a terms of a “transcontinental vision”; the royal charter was “a precursor of the image of manifest destiny” in the subsequent colonisation of the West (Johnson 1976, pp.33-34).

Cronon points out that this drawing of permanent abstract boundaries on the land emphasised “the land’s profits and commodities”, while displaying a total disregard for topography or the claims of any existing inhabitants (Cronon 1983, pp.71-72). Cartographers in London drew precise lines on maps of the New World with the purpose of designating land grants, however, as Johnson points out, their inscriptions were vague in reality, and the less the mapmakers knew about the land, the straighter were the lines they drew—right across river and mountain” (Johnson1976, p.36). The arbitrary nature of straight lines on the earliest colonial maps cannot, however, gainsay the fact that the partitioning of North America, as part of “an ongoing development of worldwide imperialism”, was first achieved on paper (Harley 1988, p.282). The royal charter marks the beginning of the colonial arrogation of the American continent through the abstract geometrical inscription of the land.

**Cadastral Surveying and Mapping**

For more than one hundred years before the first permanent European colony was established in North America, maps played a pivotal role in the construction of the New World idea in the Renaissance imagination. Cartography, as we have seen, continued to serve the imperialist project throughout the colonial period. From the time of the earliest European settlement in North America in the late sixteenth century, cadastral mapping,
that is, the “technique of representing landed properties on a map” (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.1), became the principal cartographic mode of representing the New World. Cadastral maps were used to represent the results of land surveys, the boundaries imposed on the land and the ownership of land (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.1). Throughout the colonial period cadastral maps were instrumental in projecting the colonial imperative further and further west into the interior of the continent. From the end of the eighteenth century they played a central role in the deconstruction of the British Empire in North America and the establishment of the United States of America.

Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, the primary shapers of the new nation, both engaged in surveying and were interested in cartography and geographical exploration. In the Land Ordinances of 1784 and 1785, cadastral survey and mapping became the official instrument of land division and distribution, and Jefferson’s agrarian ideology. Kain and Baigent view cadastral maps “as instruments for effecting state policies with respect to landed property and for exerting political and economic control over land” (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.xviii). Our understanding of the cartography the New World, as both a means of imagining, and of establishing title to, so-called, ‘empty’ territory, benefits from a consideration of the instrumental role it played in the political and economic struggles that lay at the heart of the colonial project, and the emergence of agrarian capitalism.

Kain and Baigent argue that cadastral cartography developed throughout the world “under a wide variety of physical, political, economic and social circumstances” (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.xviii). In their summary of the history, from antiquity through to the
modern period, of the cadastral map, Kain and Baigent note the archaeological evidence in Greek colonies of both survey work and the systematic division of urban and rural lands (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.1). Roman urban and rural spaces were even more systematically divided, but, in addition, the Romans also mapped their surveys, thus representing their land divisions in schematic form. Kain and Baigent argue that the Romans displayed a “well-developed sense of map consciousness” and realised the potential of the cadastral map as an instrument of imperial rule; Roman rulers saw “cadastral maps as a means by which they could exert and maintain control over the land resources of their far-flung dominions, especially for regulating the granting of land and accounting for its revenues” (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.1). After the fall of the Roman Empire, the use of cadastral maps was discontinued. Map consciousness was obliterated in the medieval world (Ibid, p.3), and, in feudal Europe, property came, instead, to be described by written descriptions of the land. These descriptions—or, terriers—included details of the “extent of land parcels and their topographical relationships” (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.3).

In Enlightenment Europe, cadastral mapping again emerged, first as a means of substantiating the private property rights of estate owners during the transition from feudal to capitalist conceptions of land ownership, and, later, as a state-sponsored activity. As feudalism gave way to capitalism, and new monetary and symbolic values were applied to land, private estate owners began to replace written terriers with graphic representations of boundaries and topography. Cartographic representations had the advantage of being more precise in the matter of property dimensions, more efficient for
land management, and more permanent as records of land division (Kain and Baigent 1992, pp.4-5). Harley highlights the embeddedness of maps in the “long-term structural changes of the transition from feudalism to capitalism”:

The world economy and its new geographical division of labour was produced with the aid of geographical documents including maps. Accurate, large-scale plans were a means by which land could be more efficiently exploited, by which rent rolls could be increased, and by which legal obligations could be enforced or tenures modified. Supplementing older, written surveys, the map served as graphic inventory, a codification of information about ownership, tenancy, rentable values, cropping practice, and agricultural potential, enabling capitalist landowners to see their estates as a whole and better to control them (Harley 1988, p.285).

In addition to reflecting the monetary and symbolic value of the property that they represented in graphical form, the cadastral map itself possessed symbolic capital. The relationship between the map and the land was dialectical.

The ownership of a landed estate with its fields, woods, mansion, farms, and cottages was the entrée to landed society; an estate was “a little commonwealth” in its own right. A map *pictured* this cosmology and was a *touchstone* to the rights and privileges which possession of land brought in train. (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.7, my italics).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, cadastral maps came to be used more and more by public and state authorities, and less by private landowners. Cadastral mapping became an important instrument of European expansionism and capitalism in the early modern period as state governments used it to ‘organize, control and record the settlement of “empty” lands’ (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.335). In the New World, cadastral mapping emerged as a necessary tool for government.
In the New World the cadastral map was the instrument that enabled the settlement ideals of colonial governments to be realized. These were of all varieties, from one of encouraging large plantations as on the southern seaboard of North America, through one of individual proprietorship of holdings disposed with the regularity of the grid as with the federal land disposals of the United States of America. (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.336)

The division and distribution of land was a concern from the beginning of European settlement in the Jamestown, Plymouth and Chesapeake colonies (Thrower 1999, p.116). Cadastral surveying and mapping was employed to a greater or lesser extent in all of the colonies along the eastern seaboard. In those regions, such as New England, where it was employed in a somewhat systematic manner, and survey preceded settlement, an ordered socio-spatial landscape emerged. Elsewhere, as in Virginia, where cadastral survey and mapping was more haphazard, and settlement usually preceded survey, property lines were ill defined and a less cohesive socio-spatial landscape emerged.

Cadastral survey and mapping was adopted as the principal instrument of Republican land policy at the end of the eighteenth century. The Land Ordinance of 1785 legislated for the rectangular survey of American lands on a continental scale. The federal project of applied cartography was well served at the time by the elevated status of cadastral surveying and mapping as scientific practice; by the late 18th century, as Harley points out, mapping had acquired “an aureole of science” and had contributed to the creation of “an ethic and virtue of ever more precise definition” (Harley 1988, p.285). Cartography is, however, never ‘innocent’; it is an instrument of power and participates in the performance of ideology. Harley describes maps as “weapons” used by colonial forces to reconnoiter, pacify, civilise and exploit coveted territories (1988, p.282). Like the
explorers charts that preceded them, cadastral maps “anticipated empire” (Harley 1988, p.282) and emerged as a “desideratum” (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.335) for the appropriation and plantation of colonial lands. In addition to its obvious utilitarian value, the symbolic excess of the map was exploited in the communication of imperial messages, and the creation of myths, that served to “legitimise the reality of conquest and empire” (Harley 1988, p.282). The abstract nature of the graphic representation gave the map an “arbitrary power that was easily divorced from the social responsibilities and consequences of its exercise” (Harley 1988, p.282). Meinig, too, stresses the instrumental nature of colonial mapping:

[The] very lines on the map exhibited this imperial power and process because they had been imposed on the continent with little reference to indigenous peoples, and indeed in many places with little reference to the land itself. The invaders parcelled the continent among themselves in designs reflective of their own complex rivalries and relative power (Meinig 1986, p.11).

Johnson implicates the U.S. rectangular land survey in the colonial project during the expansion of colonial control over the western territories. She highlights the relationship between the need to control the expropriated territory and the most efficient geographical modalities employed to achieve that control: regularity of land division and contiguity of settlement. Johnson highlights the important role played by “lines on paper” in the achievement of imperialistic goals.

In Western Societies the first step toward control of an environment usually is the assigning of tracts as grants of property—done by drawing lines on paper, although little is known about the tract that is to be colonized. The desire of governments to attain as complete an occupation of their territories as possible leads to assignments of land that are rectilinear and adjacent (Johnson 1976, p.24).
We will return to a more comprehensive discussion of the Republican rectangular land survey and the subsequent socio-spatial inscription of the American landscape later in this chapter. First, however, we will consider in more depth the socio-spatial development of colonial America in order to elucidate the ideological and methodological origins of the rectangular grid.

**Socio-spatial Settlement**

In the discussion that follows I focus on the ‘discovery’, arrogation, and settlement of the British colonies of Virginia, New England and Pennsylvania. I outline the development of the socio-spatial practices that characterised the typical settlement patterns in each of the colonies, and I suggest the ways in which these practices acted as a precedent for the Republican Land Ordinances.

Before the introduction of a federal policy, land legislation varied from state to state in colonial America. In Virginia, for instance, public lands were surveyed in a “haphazard” manner before settlement, resulting in frequent boundary disputes and overlapping claims, and the resultant landscape is characterised by “a patchwork of irregular fields” (Hurt 2002, p.39). Separate farmsteads were also dispersed in the middle colonies of New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware. Here settlers selected and bounded only the most desirable land resulting in an irregular distribution of fields and a total disregard for “systematic shapes and contiguity with neighboring properties” (Johnson 1976, p.25).
In New England, however, Puritan settlers adhered closely to the principles of a eunomic spatial order and the distribution and development of land was more carefully controlled by, and on behalf of, local communities. In preparation for settlement, the land was surveyed in a rectilinear fashion. A portion of each section of land was reserved to support the church and school. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the New England system created cohesive, and compact communities and a relatively well-ordered, geometric rural landscape animated by small family farms (Hurt 2002, p.39). Over the course of the seventeenth century, as religious control diminished and settlers became less fearful of the wilderness and the Indians, settlement in the region became less contiguous and more dispersed, resulting in what Johnson describes as an “uncertain rectangularity” of the landscape (Johnson 1976).

In reality, the New England landscape emerged out of a tension between the ideal of a communitarian and religiously inflected social-spatial organisation and the more secular and economically driven desire for greater independence and more land. In the end, the relationship with the soil rather than with God and neighbour determined the socio-spatial reality of the New England landscape. Nonetheless, Johnson concedes, the town proprietors in the region created the “most orderly and controlled settlement form along the eastern seaboard” (Johnson 1976, p.25), and it is this important aspect of New England settlement practice that makes it one of the primary antecedents of the United States rectangular survey.
An orderly, regular division of shared space was a common feature of other communitarian colonies, including the Moravian and Emmaus settlements, and William Penn’s colony in Pennsylvania, with its regularly laid out towns of Newton, Wrightstown and Philadelphia (Johnson 1976, p.27). While rectangular platting was successful in some of these places, in many cases the utopian planning was never successfully achieved (Johnson 1976, p.26). The ideal spatial order described in Penn’s plans for Philadelphia, for example, was only partially realised. Johnson points out that ‘groups of contiguous lots were not settled in an orderly way and that squatting by “discriminating” settlers became widespread’, resulting in widely dispersed farmsteads (Johnson 1976, p.27). Johnson concludes that many settlers in Pennsylvania and elsewhere in the colonies “preferred to live on their own farms rather than in compact villages” (Johnson 1976, p.27).

In the following accounts of the ‘discovery’, arrogation, and settlement of the Virginia, New England and Pennsylvania colonies, I will elucidate the relationship in each region between the individual desire for independent land ownership and the communitarian desire for socio-spatial cohesion, and I will consider the impact of the distinct approaches to socio-spatial patterning on the geo-social landscapes that emerged in each case.

**Roanoke**

English navigators, Captains Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlow, led the first Raleigh expedition in 1584. Their mission was to find a suitable location for Raleigh’s proposed colony in the New World territories granted to him in a charter by Queen Elizabeth I. No
attempt at establishing a colony was made during the first exploratory voyage in 1584. In the following year, however, a second voyage was made, “which included seven vessels carrying 500 people, of which 108 were colonists” (Cumming 1988, p.38). In the summer of 1585, a colony was established on Roanoke Island (off the coast of present-day North Carolina) under the governorship of Master Ralph Lane. Amongst the colonists were the artist, John White, and the mathematician and surveyor, Thomas Harriot, whose “skills were especially recommended to Sir Walter Ralegh in planning colonization” (Cumming 1988, p.48). Within months the colonists became disheartened, however, as their supplies began to run low and relations with the local Indians deteriorated. The colony came to a sudden end in 1586 when the settlers returned to England with Sir Francis Drake who visited the island during his return from his West Indian voyage.

During his brief tenure as governor on the island, Lane heard from a local Indian chief about a bay to the north, with a deep-water approach and surrounding fertile land. Lane sent an exploring expedition to survey the area and was “so favorably impressed with the reports of the bay to the north and the fertile soil there that he recommended moving from Roanoke Island…in the summer of 1586” (Cumming 1988, p.39). Lane and his fellow colonists returned to England before they could realise his ambition to relocate the settlement; however, his description of the bay, and that of the artist John White, encouraged Raleigh and his supporters to send a third voyage in 1587 with the intention of establishing a colony there.
Based on the narratives of sixteenth-century Spanish and Italian explorers, and the eyewitness accounts of his colonial agents, Lane and White, Raleigh sent his third expedition to America in 1587, with instructions to plant a colony in the Chesapeake area. John White led the voyage, on this occasion. After a brief visit to Roanoke Island, White planned to “returne again to the fleete, and passe along the coast, to the Baye of Chesepiok, where we intended to make our seate and forte, according to the charge given vs among other directions in writing, vnder the hande of Sir Walter Ralegh” (Cumming 1988, p.40). The chief pilot of the expedition, Simon Fernández, was more interested in privateering than in colonisation, however, and he refused to follow Raleigh’s orders. As a result, the proposed settlement of Chesapeake did not materialise. The colonists remained instead on Roanoke Island but this attempt at settlement was also ill fated and the colony ended within a few years (Cumming 1988, p.39).

**Jamestown, Virginia**

Lured by the possibility of discovering a northwest passage to Asia, and driven by the promise of finding mines there that would rival those of the Spanish Indies, the English had sought suitable places for plantations on the North American continent for decades. The failure of the Roanoke expeditions was a setback, but the colonial project would undergo a dramatic acceleration in the following century due to the development of English naval power and the growth of political support for colonisation (Roberts 1976, p.625). Twenty years after the failure to establish a colony on Roanoke Island, English colonists, with renewed vigour and determination, again attempted to establish a plantation in the Chesapeake region. In 1606, James 1, Queen Elizabeth’s nephew and
successor, chartered the Virginia Company of London with the purpose of establishing English settlements in America. The following year, in a venture considered by some to mark the beginning of United States history, the company’s agents, led by Captain John Smith, established the first permanent English colony in North America. The colony was founded in the Chesapeake region, in present-day Virginia, and given the name, Jamestown (Danbom 1995, p.25).

Settlement in Jamestown proved to be an almost insurmountable challenge for the early pioneers and it was several decades before the Chesapeake colony prospered (Danbom 1995, p.25). The town was located in a “swampy, malaria-infested area” of the Jamestown peninsula (Cochrane 1993, p. 13) and disease spread rapidly through the plantation, killing many of the settlers. The Virginia Company of London “hoped to profit from furs, precious metals, and rare plants and to control its employees from London”, but first they instructed the settlers to found an agricultural settlement before searching for gold and other riches (Stilgoe 1982, p.59). The marshy and heavily wooded terrain made farming very difficult, and the first planters, many of them “gentleman adventurers” (Stilgoe 1982, p.59), lacked agricultural experience and could not cultivate the land to feed themselves. The stability of the colony was also threatened, from the start, by the settlers’ preoccupation with finding gold, and the consequent failure to develop a productive agriculture (Cochrane 1993, p.13). Trade with the local Powhatan Indians, who grew corn and beans, was limited and the settlers were forced to rely on relief ships sent by the Virginia Company from England. When relief ships failed to arrive, and relations with the Powhatan Indians deteriorated, the colony barely survived.
Most of the original settlers died of disease, or starvation (Kolodny 1975, p.162, n. 17), or were killed by the Powhatan Indians.

In the winter of 1609-10, known as the “starving time,” the relief vessels failed to appear, and the colonists lived by eating cats, rats, dogs, and, eventually, the corpses of their fellow Virginians. While 1609-10 was the worst period in Jamestown, hunger, disease, and the Powhatans conspired to kill as many as three of every four colonists sent there between 1607 and 1622, usually within a year after their arrival (Danbom 1995, p.25).

The colony did manage to survive, however, and it achieved a moderate level of stability and prosperity over the following decades.

In the 1610s, the fortunes of the colony began to improve when settlers learned to feed themselves on corn, pork and beef (Danbom1995, p.25), and discovered that tobacco could be grown in the area and sold for profit (Stilgoe 1982, p.59). The Virginia Company attempted to organise its tobacco-growing in a feudal-like manner; the crop was grown in common fields after the English fashion, and “men lived in company-owned dwellings surrounded by company-owned fields, and worked for wages” (Stilgoe 1982, pp.59-60). Each colonist was also promised a freehold of 100 acres at the end of a seven-year joint stock period (Hurt 2002, p.40-41). Planters displayed little enthusiasm for the system, however, and the Company struggled to achieve the profits demanded by its investors. In 1616, the Company responded by leasing three acres of land to each worker on which they were free to grow what they wished. The incentive of private ownership, in addition to the communal cultivation of Company land, worked, and the production of tobacco, wheat, and maize increased (Hurt 2002, p.40-41). This proved to be a mixed blessing for the Company, however, as the increased output of tobacco from
the private plots competed with the Company’s own crop. In 1618, the Virginia Company was forced to introduce further measures to sustain profitability; in order to attract greater numbers of planters to the colony, the company introduced the headright system of land distribution, under which each settler would be granted a freehold plot of fifty acres.

A headright was a grant of fifty acres for each person whose way was paid to Virginia by someone other than the company. Under this system, an immigrant to Virginia who brought a wife, three children, and a servant would receive three hundred acres and another fifty acres every time he brought in another servant (Danbom 1995, p.26).

In addition, the original planters received the rights to the 100-acre freehold promised them under the original terms of their contract with the Company. The headright system of land grants became, thereafter, the principal basis for obtaining title to land in Virginia (Bain and Baigent 1992, p.269). The new land policy gave settlers the right to own land, plant what they wished, and work for themselves.

In the Virginia colony, land was settled before it was surveyed. Individuals were free to choose the best land, wherever it lay, and once a tract was claimed it was surveyed using the metes and bounds method (Bain and Baigent 1992, p.265). The English surveying method of metes and bounds relied on the compass or circumferentor, and the physical features of the landscape (and, later, Gunter’s Chain) to determine the boundaries of a parcel of land. In a succinct statement of the importance of the surveyor in the Virginia colony, Sarah Hughes writes:

Immigrant colonists gazing at a wilderness envisaged its taming and imagined new markets bounding the edges of their fields and meadows. The men who could measure the metes and bounds of those fields held the key to transforming
a worthless, uncultivated territory into individual farms (quoted in Kain and Baigent 1992, p.265).

After James I suppressed the production of tobacco in England, and granted the Virginia Company a monopoly on the production of the crop in the New World in 1617 (Danbom 1995, p.27), the commercial production of tobacco dominated the region and the colony began the transition from “nearly feudal to nearly modern agricultural enterprise” (Stilgoe 1982, p.60). Tobacco production became the *raison d'être* for the existence of Virginia (Roberts 2002, p.40), and tobacco culture continued to determine its economic, human and spatial organisation for more than a century (Danbom 1995, p.27). By 1620, tobacco exports reached about 100,000 pounds (Cochrane 1993, p.14), and, in 1624, the Crown, realising that it could make substantial profits from the taxation of tobacco, assumed control of the colony. The Colony continued to settle immigrant families using the headright system, and thousands of “ordinary English people” were attracted to the Chesapeake by the promise of landownership, and a level of wealth, status, security, and self-respect that was virtually unattainable in England at the time (Danbom 1995, p.29). New settlers also concentrated on tobacco production, and, by 1628, the colony was exporting 553,000 pounds of tobacco to England (Hurt 2002, p.41).

With the establishment of larger tobacco estates during the second half of the seventeenth century, a planter aristocracy emerged in Virginia (Daniels, R. 2002, p.40). Tobacco production was labor intensive and there was “a strong demand for indentured servants…and, later, for slaves” (Danbom 1995, p.27). Under the Virginia Land Law of 1705, the size of land grants to slave owners and heads of families was increased,
enabling “a citizen of the colony to obtain up to 500 acres of virgin land for himself plus an additional 200 acres on headrights for every slave or servant, up to a maximum of 4,000 acres” (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.273). The intensive production of tobacco in the region began the tradition of one-crop agriculture in the South that would provide “the basis for a social relationship between whites and blacks that would influence the course of American history” (Hurt 2002, p.41).

In Virginia, settlers themselves determined the location of their freehold. The size of the grant was regulated by land legislation but the shape was determined by the soil quality and topography, and left to the discretion of the individual settler. Settlement preceded survey in Virginia, and, as a result, a mosaic of irregular plats soon marked the landscape in the region (Stilgoe 1982, pp.60-61). As the market for tobacco grew, individual farm holdings expanded, settlement became more dispersed in the region, and the irregular patterning of the landscape proliferated (Stilgoe 1982, pp.60-61). The settlement, surveying and mapping of Virginia proceeded at a moderate pace during the seventeenth century with just five thousand square miles claimed by 1700. Settlement accelerated in the eighteenth century as the frontier moved further west and land grants increased under new legislation: up to sixty thousand square miles had been settled by the 1770s (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.273). As the colony underwent dramatic expansion, and new land legislation was introduced, surveying and mapping became more and more necessary for the management of boundaries and property rights. Improvements in surveying techniques and practices in the eighteenth century, notwithstanding, the metes and bounds system remained an inexact science, however, and its somewhat arbitrary
methods contributed to what Stilgoe describes as “the worn-out, scraggly appearance” of the Virginia landscape (Stilgoe 1982, p.61).

Massachusetts Bay Colony, New England

In 1620, as the Virginia Company of London began to consolidate the plantation of the Jamestown peninsula, Plymouth Colony, the second successful English colony in the New World, was founded in New England. Plymouth Colony was founded by a small group of Calvinists, Separatist Puritans who twelve years previously had moved to Holland, to escape religious persecution in England (Cochrane 1993, p. 15). In 1620, this group of Separatists, or Pilgrims, as they came to be known, migrated to the New World with the intention of creating “a model community based on Christian love” (Danbom 1995, p.30). For the next hundred years, religion, and Puritanism in particular, would play a central role in the settlement of New England.

In the early 1600s, at the height of the Reformation, religion in England was divided between Catholics, Anglicans, and a variety of Protestants, including Puritans and Separatists. The Puritans “constituted a movement within the Church of England (but were not a distinct sect or denomination)” whereas Separatists went “beyond Puritan thinking and wanted to be completely separate from the official church” (Stratton 1986, p.17). Groups of Separatists chose to form individual churches, which fell under the control of the congregation rather than a bishop. The government persecuted English Separatists and many were forced to flee to Europe (Stratton 1986, p.17). In 1608 a group of Separatists from Scrooby, Nottinghamshire, moved to Leiden, Holland, where
religious dissenters enjoyed considerable freedom. Economic opportunities in Holland were limited for non-citizens, however, and Dutch society eventually proved to be too licentious for the Separatists. After twelve years, they looked to the New World for a new place to settle and build a community (Stratton 1986, pp.17-19).

The Leiden Separatists, or Pilgrims as they became known, sailed for Virginia in autumn 1620. William Brewster, who owned a copy of Captain John Smith’s *A Description of New England*, led them. The Pilgrims, and future Puritan voyagers, too, found it cheaper to use Smith’s books rather than employ the Admiral himself (Pettit 1975, p.441).

The Pilgrims arrived off the coast of Cape Cod on November 9, 1620, after a nine-week Atlantic crossing aboard the *Mayflower* (Daniels 2002, p.44). Separatists made up a minority of the 101 colonists, while non-Puritans - “various and sundry indentured servants and London adventurers” (Cochrane 1993, p.15) - made up three-quarters of those on board. The enterprise was supported by a group of businessmen, called “Adventurers”, who financed the venture in the hope that the colony would generate a profitable return for their investment (Stratton 1986, p.19-20). The “Adventurers” secured a patent from the Virginia Company of London to colonise in the northern part of Virginia (Stratton 1986, p.20) and the *Mayflower* set a course for Hudson Bay.

Forced off course by bad weather, and beyond the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company, the *Mayflower* eventually found land in Massachusetts, New England. After surveying the area, the settlers decided to stay and establish a colony in the region. With no rights to
the land they were settling, and free to create their own rules, the Pilgrim members of the company drew up the Mayflower Compact ‘to govern themselves and to “control” the nonseparatists in the company’ (Cochrane 1993, p.15). The following year the “Adventurers” secured a patent for the colony from the Council of New England (Stratton 1986, p.141).

Soon after they arrived, the settlers began to build houses, including a communal meetinghouse, the centre of community and religious activities. Their small settlement was named New Plymouth, after the West County port of Plymouth in England, their Old World port of departure. During the first winter, half of the settlers died as a result of disease, poor nutrition and inadequate housing (Danbom 1995, p.30), and the first ten years were marginal for the Separatist colonisers (Hudson 2002, p.47). With help from the local Indians the settlers eventually mastered New World crops and agricultural methods, and the colony achieved greater stability (Danbom 1995, p.30). However, due to the relative poverty of the settlement and the unpopularity of its separatist leaders, the colony grew slowly, “from 124 persons in 1624, to 300 in 1630, and to 3,000 in 1660” (Cochrane 1993, p.15).

From 1629 the focus of colonisation in the New England territories shifted away from Plymouth, towards Massachusetts Bay. The Bay offered a better harbour, and the surrounding land was more suitable for settlement (Hudson 2002, p.47). The Massachusetts Bay Colony was first established in 1629 by a group of about 400 Puritan settlers. They were joined the following year by a group of 1000 English Puritans, led by
Governor John Winthrop. In April 1630, Winthrop sailed for the New World on the 
*Arbella*, as part of a fleet of an estimated 10 ships. The group landed in Salem but settled 
in what is now Boston, Massachusetts (Cochrane 1993, p.15). With Winthrop as the 
governor, Boston was soon established as the principal town of the Bay Colony (Payne 
2007). In the following decade, sixty-nine thousand Britons migrated to the New World 
in what is known as the Great Migration, and one third of these, about twenty-one 
thousand, settled in Massachusetts (Daniels 2002, p.42). By 1690, Plymouth Colony was 
absorbed into the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which had, by that time, a population of 
about fifty thousand (Daniels 2002, p.42).

The Massachusetts Bay settlers came from a variety of backgrounds, and while many 
were motivated by the promise of private profit, most were Puritans whose primary 
motivation was religious (Cochrane 1993, p.15). As post-Elizabethan Puritans, they “took 
religion seriously” and imposed a rigid theocracy (Lewis 1990, p.85). As a result, some 
more liberal settlers became “refugees” from the Bay Colony, and departed in order to set 
up their own settlements in other parts of the region (Lewis 1990, p.85). This resulted in a 
significant expansion of the colonial reach in the New England territories. In the 1630s, 
some of the earliest “refugees” from the Massachusetts Bay Colony established the first 
permanent European settlement in Narragansett Bay (Rhode Island) (Lewis 1990, p.85), 
and, in 1638, five hundred Puritans, led by the Reverend John Davenport, left the 
Massachusetts Bay Colony to settle in New Haven, Connecticut. From there, two years 
later, a group of Puritans moved to the eastern shores of Long Island to establish another 
settlement. By mid century, six “nodes” of English settlement had been established in the
region: “Massachusetts Bay, Providence and Rhode Island, coastal New Hampshire—
Maine, the Connecticut Valley, New Haven, and Plymouth” (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.285). Throughout the century, the colonisation of New England was advanced through this internal migration, and through the arrival of more settlers from England, who established towns throughout the region (Lewis 1990, p.85).

A General Court was elected to govern the Bay Colony. The colony had been pre-
planned in England, with Winthrop as the governor-designate of one central community. Several groups of settlers gathered around other ministers and leaders, however, and, assuming a certain power, they “expected to have towns of their own with boundary lines demarking the land, requiring a reasoned mapping” (Payne 2007). The Virginia practice of settlement before survey was reversed in the New England colony, and, from the beginning, it was determined that grants would only be made following cadastral survey (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.285). Foreseeing the need to ‘demark’ the land, the organisers of the colony employed the services of an engineer who was skilled in surveying and measuring land, and “in describing a country by map” (Payne 2007). In the first instance the Massachusetts Bay Company intended to follow the Virginia practice of granting land to individuals but soon after the colony was established this was replaced by the practice of granting land to groups of settlers (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.285).

Unlike many others who came to settle in America in the seventeenth century, the New England settlers typically migrated in family units, and often possessed agricultural and craft skills (Daniels 2002, pp.43-44). Furthermore, Puritan migrants often came to the
New World in groups that were “formed on the basis of kinship, neighborhood, church congregation, or parish association in England” (Allen 2007). In contrast to the young male pioneer who only settled for a short time before moving on to seek his fortune elsewhere, Puritan migrants quickly established family-based, socially stable settlements. The General Court organised these groups into towns, which usually consisted of between thirty and fifty families (Danbom 1995, p.31). The size of town grants varied, depending on size of the community and soil quality. While town grants of eight or ten square miles were not unusual, townships of six square miles were most common (Kain and Baigent 1992, p. 286). In addition to the requirement that the town grant be surveyed before settlement, the Court also determined that a portion of the land be reserved for a church and a school (Hurt 2002, p.39). The desire for continuity with the Old World was underlined by giving New England towns Old Country names, such as Worcester, Roxbury and Bristol (Danbom 1995, p.31).

**The Ordering of Towns**

In 1635, just six years after the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, an unknown author outlined an ideal design for future townships in the region in a treatise called “The Ordering of Towns”. The plan describes a compact, nucleated townscape, which sees six concentric zones, each serving a different function, and located around a central, communal space - the meetinghouse. In the ideal town, houses are situated in a square grid of 64 lots, which radiates out from the meetinghouse for a distance of one and a half miles. Beyond this, for a distance of 6 miles to the periphery of the town, lie
concentric rings of common land (Payne 2007). Stilgoe’s description brings out some of the author’s normative impulses:

[The] meetinghouse, “the center of the whole circumference,” is the point about which the ideal plantation is ordered. Around it is a zone of houses, “orderly placed to enjoy comfortable communion,” and beyond is a ring of common fields, where everyone works for the common welfare. Livestock is owned in common too and pastured beyond the common planting ground in a third ring of improved land. From the meetinghouse to the outer edge of the livestock pastures is only one and one-half miles, but that is the limit of initial colonization (Stilgoe 1982, p.43).

The eunomic spatial organisation outlined in the treatise imposes a socio-spatial regulation on the community which, Stilgoe suggests, acts to reinforce social hierarchy, community cohesion and distinctiveness (Stilgoe 1982, p.44). With the meetinghouse, the symbol of community authority, at its core, the concentric design exemplifies a centripetal spatial hierarchy and a bounded, inward-looking model of community (Stilgoe 1982, pp.44-45).

During the first few decades of colonisation, the socio-spatial design outlined in The Ordering of Towns served the demands of inward-, and backward-, looking New England Puritan communities who, from the beginning, sought to organise the landscape in ways that “would ensure the continuity of their ideas” (Lewis 1990, p.85). The community structure outlined in the treatise was not unlike that of many English rural towns; its familiar socio-spatial order “made the New World less frightening to people who wanted to leave England but had no desire to cease to be English” (Danbom 1995, p.31).
The town boundaries constituted an important physical, and psychological dimension of
the design. As well as contributing to the sense of community cohesion, they acted as a
deterrent to outsiders, and marked the threshold between the “tangled disorder” of the
“wilderness which lay beyond the fields” and the civilised space of the town (Ryden
1993, pp.26-27). In addition to cultivating many of the social and cultural practices of the
Old World, the New England settlers attempted to transplant English agricultural
methods to the American environment. Climate and soil moderated their efforts,
however, and forced the settlers to make changes in animal husbandry, planting
techniques and choice of crops. The New England town was, from the beginning,
therefore, never wholly English.

Its general form usually derived from old-country experience, but many of its
constituent features, livestock sheds and barns, fences, and carefully tended
meadows and pastures, represented hasty adjustments to a new place (Stilgoe

Many New England communities applied the English open-field agricultural system to
their towns. This was the preferred system for those settlers who came from open-field
regions in England. Under this system most of the land acquired by the community was
designated as common-field, thus placing “a premium on communal labor and
minimizing risk” (Danbom 1995, p.32). The open-field system emphasised the
interdependence of community members, mutual responsibility and relationships. A
modified version of the English class system was also reflected in the hierarchical spatial
organisation that characterised the New World Puritan town (Cronon 2003 [1983], p.73);
each settler received a grant of land, the size of which “depended on the social status of
the grantee, the importance of his occupation to the community, and the number of
people depending on him” (Danbom 1995, p.33). The spatial hierarchy, itself, was centripetal in nature and, therefore, those families with higher status received house lots near to the centre of town, while those of lower status lived in poorer housing on the edge of the settlement.

Common-field practices were not favoured by all settlers; those who came from closed-field systems in England had more experience of owning their lands in severalty and “proved from the start to be much interested in transferring lands from common to private property as rapidly as possible” (Cronon 2003 [1983], p.74). Under the open-field system, land was rarely bought and sold, and land deeds described it in terms of its topography and determined its use. With the spread of private land ownership, however, a market in real estate developed and land eventually came to be described in the abstract terms of the surveyor’s compass (Cronon 2003 [1983], p.74). The conception of land as property—“as private commodity rather than public commons”—eventually came to typify New England Towns (Cronon 2003 [1983], p.74). By the end of the century, feudal concepts of land tenure had been abandoned, town grants had been superseded by grants to individuals, and feudal vestiges “such as quitrents or feudal dues…had been transformed into land taxes or rents (Kulikoff 2000, p.125).

New England settlement patterns became more diversified as the century progressed. Dramatic population growth, an increasing dissatisfaction with common-field farming, and a growing desire for larger portions of freehold land – more “elbow room” (Stilgoe 1982, p.48) – all put pressure on the ideal nucleated town (Danbom 1995, p.55). By the
middle of the seventeenth century, “few towns remained nucleated around their meetinghouses…men no longer honored the ideal of “neighborly living”…and families built houses with no regard to centrality or overall pattern” (Stilgoe1982, p.44). Furthermore, until the closing decades of the century, when more sophisticated surveying techniques were introduced, New Englanders displayed a casual attitude towards the internal boundaries of their plantations. Town grants were surveyed using the somewhat imprecise traditional English system of metes and bounds, by which the boundaries of the property were defined by imaginary lines connecting trees, hills, streams, and other topographical features of the landscape.

Farmers relied on an earlier English practice of establishing boundaries, which was based on “the occasional perambulation of the land and even more on the collective memory of borders and ownership privileges” (Allen, 2007). Even after the practice of surveying before settlement was established, however, the division of land into the square lots and square townships prescribed in “The Ordering of Towns” was only partly achieved. The project was thwarted on several fronts. Very few competent English surveyors lived in the colonies, and most seventeenth century American surveyors were self-taught, and had a limited grasp of the rudiments of geometry and perspective. In addition, until the use of Gunter’s chain by surveyors to measure distance became more widespread in the late seventeenth century, errors in measurement of land were common. Didactic treatises on surveying were available in the New World in the seventeenth century and this, no doubt, improved matters where such texts were consulted. The widespread need for such instruction is attested to by Kain and Baigent, who report the common seventeenth-
century surveyors’ practice of estimating “angles by eye and distances by pacing, by counting the footsteps of their horse, or even from a slow-moving boat (Kain and Baigent 1992, 268).

In addition, many colonists distrusted and therefor, resisted surveying, “thinking of it as a sort of evil magic that trapped their land in a web of invisible lines drawn by a mysterious figure knowing things beyond common knowledge” (Stilgoe 1982, p.100). Settlers had long chosen plantation sites and distributed theirs lands by taking into the account the topography of the territory – “soil types, elevations, and water frontage” – a commonsense practice that the New England farmer was reluctant to forego in favour of the surveyor’s abstract division of the landscape into squares (Stilgoe 1982, p.100). The metes and bounds surveying method, the traditional English system of land measurement, was commonly applied in colonial New England and it remained the preferred system there even as new geometric surveying practices developed. The social, moral and aesthetic values of simple square lots and square townships had been mooted in “The Order of Towns”, but its author, writes Stilgoe, “underestimated men’s love of good soil” (1982, p.100), and its image of a geometrically ordered New England landscape was never fully realised.

**Pennsylvania**

The settlement of Pennsylvania did not begin until late in the seventeenth century, and, from the outset, it proceeded in a manner quite distinct from that of New England. During the last two decades of the seventeenth century, families from England, Ireland, Wales,
the German principalities, and France came to settle the lands that had been granted to the
English Quaker, William Penn, by King Charles II in 1681 (Stilgoe 1982, p.78). In lieu of
money owed by the Stuarts to his father, Admiral Penn, William received “all the land
west of the Delaware River between the fortieth and forty-third parallels” (Cochrane
1993, p.18) in a royal land charter.

Ever since the Religious Society of Friends began in England in 1648, as a breakaway
from Puritanism, Quakers had been branded as dissenters and were persecuted in
England, Ireland, Scotland, and in the New World, where they settled as part of the
Massachusetts Bay Colony in New England. Penn joined the Quakers at the age of 22 and
became a zealous proselytiser and preacher of Quaker teachings that “stressed the inward
life, spirituality as opposed to dogma, simplicity and purity of living, and opposition to
war and violence” (Tolzmann 2000, p.42-43). Soon after he was granted the
Pennsylvania lands, Penn there set about creating “a haven in the New World for his
persecuted religious brothers, the Quakers” (Cochrane 1993, p.18) and he published a
brief description of the province in which he pointed out the benefits of settling there
(Tolzmann 2000, p.43).

In contrast to the cultural and religious homogeneity of the New England colonists, the
migrant groups that settled Pennsylvania were culturally diverse and subscribed to a
variety of religious beliefs. Also unlike their New England counterparts, they came to the
New World with the intention of leaving behind the Old World and the limited future that
it offered them. In contrast to the community-oriented, inward-looking New England
planters, the Pennsylvania settlers were, typically, “upwardly mobile smallholders” who “distrusted community control of public and private resources because that control had slowly impoverished them as Europe moved closer to an agricultural economy dependent on markets dominated by large landowners” (Stilgoe 1982, p.78).

Several of the early migrant groups were attracted to Pennsylvania by Penn’s promise of religious freedom. While German settlers were amongst the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in New England in 1630, the first permanent German settlement in America was founded in 1683 at Germantown, Pennsylvania (Tolzmann 2000, p.42). During the previous decade, Penn had preached the Quaker message in the Rhine valley to various illegal sects in the region, amongst them Quakers, the Mennonites, Schwenkfelders, Dunkards, and Pietists. Penn was an effective preacher, and his liberal ideology and the promise of religious freedom in the New World inspired a group of Pietists to form a company with the purpose of emigration to Pennsylvania. The Frankfurt Company, as it was called, purchased “fifteen thousand acres of wilderness”, and its agent, the lawyer and Pietist, Franz Daniel Pastorius (1651 – 1720), arrived in Philadelphia on August 20, 1683, where he met Penn and secured the lands on behalf of the company (Tolzmann 2000, pp.42-43). None of the original members of the Frankfurt company joined Pastorius in Pennsylvania, but a group of thirteen Quaker and Mennonite families from Krefeld, Germany, arrived to settle the colony, under his leadership, in October of the same year (Daniels 2002, p.70).

Their arrival is considered the founding date of the first German settlement in America: Germantown, Pennsylvania, which the newcomers established six miles above the city. Originally called Deutschstadt, the name was soon changed
Penn advocated the New England practice of survey prior to settlement, and cadastral mapping was a “fundamental instrument” of his settlement plans for the regulation of rural Pennsylvania and the lay out of its urban spaces (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.287). In his regulation of rural land, Penn determined that square townships or villages, populated by at least ten families, would cover an area of 5,000 acres. He envisaged a regular pattern of contiguous townships advancing across the landscape in an orderly fashion as the colony grew (Kain and Baigent 1992, pp.287-288). His vision was partially achieved during the first two decades of settlement but, thereafter, the sale of land to groups became infrequent and, with more land being sold to individuals who were entitled to seek out the best land, settlement became more scattered and noncontiguous (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.288).

In 1682, Penn founded and named the city of Philadelphia: the first city in the colonies to be laid out systematically using a grid system. Penn’s use of the grid system illustrates an isonomic spatial and social order that reflected the Quaker ideology that all people are equal without regard to class. In contrast to the earlier tightly knit New England townships, Philadelphia welcomed people of all creeds and economic status. Penn’s urban grid established a rectilinear pattern of streets that ran north-south and east-west (Stilgoe 1982, p.87).
By the 1740s the city took its place alongside the larger urban centres that dotted the eastern seaboard: Boston, Newport, New York and Charleston. In contrast to the eunomic design of the ideal New England town, and exemplified in the city of Boston at the time, the isonomic spatial order of the geometric grid objectifies a type of social order that reflects enlightenment ideals of equality and independence; the grid exemplifies a decentralised social order, invites expansion in any direction, and symbolises scientific, rational and geometric order.

Dispersal

The Virginia, New England and Pennsylvania colonies expanded during the seventeenth century. Migration to the New World continued apace and pioneers continued to establish new settlements until the British eventually secured most of the territories along the Atlantic seaboard of what is today the United States. In the British colonies, the greatest challenge to the religiously inflected doctrines of tradition and community, and the paradigm of moral orderliness, came in the form of a counter-narrative of abundant land and bountiful soil. Propelled by the desire for land, many settlers moved out into the wilderness, beyond the boundaries of the utopian townships in Pennsylvania and New England, and further from their sacred centres. This secularisation of the colonial spatiality accelerated as the population of the colonial settlements along the eastern seaboard continued to grow and age throughout the seventeenth century and the amount of land available for sale to new settlers, or for inheritance by family members, diminished.
In the densely populated colonial settlements the pressure on land was reflected in increases in the price of land and the decline in farm size. The population of the British colonies multiplied ten times between 1700 and 1780 and, with most of the good land in the old settlements already improved by mid-century, colonial governments could not cope with the heavy demand for land (Kulikoff 2000, p.127). Those who could afford to purchased relatively cheap land on the frontier, while many others chose to remain close to home and family. Depending on the system of inheritance practiced, a father might bequeath all of the family holdings to just one son, forcing the others to seek out land elsewhere, or divide it amongst all of his sons, and thus reduce the viability of each smaller farm. As poverty grew in the older colonies, many settlers lacked the assets to take advantage of the opportunities on the frontier, with the result that tenancy increased and farm size reduced amongst small and middling landowners (Kulikoff 2000, p.127).

The promise of abundant, cheap lands to the west continued to sustain early marriages and high indigenous fertility rates, however, and with the colonies remaining attractive to European immigrants throughout the eighteenth century, the colonial population increased from about 1,300,000 in 1750 to somewhere between 2,350,000 and 2,600,00 in 1775 (Meinig 1986, pp.288-289). Most of the increase can be accounted for by internal growth, but immigration also increased sharply during the 1750s and 1760s. The demand for land grew dramatically in this period, and westward migration accelerated along a north-south axis. By 1775, and the beginning of the War of Independence, about 70,000 families had repopulated territories beyond the old mainland colonial settlements: in
northern New England, central Pennsylvania, the Maryland and Virginia Piedmont and mountain areas, and the Piedmont Carolinas (Kulikoff 2000, p.147).

The distinct ecology and demographic of each colonised region led to the establishment of a variety of Anglo-American landscape traditions. Conzen suggests that the landscape traditions that developed in colonial New England and Pennsylvania “carried the most influence nationwide in later landscape-forming trends” (Conzen 1990, p.7). The American geographical habits (Lewis 1990, p.80) that would later make the Midwest landscape were crystallised first in the British colonies of the Northeast (Conzen 1990, p.7).

**Constructing the U.S. Landscape: The West**

The Treaty of Paris in 1783 marks the formal completion of the struggle for American independence from Great Britain. Under Article 1 of the Treaty, the thirteen former colonies became free and sovereign and independent States. Under Article II, Great Britain ceded claims to the territories that ran to the west of the former colonies as far as the Mississippi River, lands that it had gained from France only two decades earlier in the Treaty of Paris in 1763. As a consequence, the territory of the United States was more than “doubled from that under effective occupation or jurisdiction of the seaboard colonies” (Meining 1986, p.341). After the signing of the Treaty, Congress was faced with the immense challenge of shaping the nation. Amongst its first major tasks was the development of legislation to govern the lands ceded to it by England in the “vast new West between the mountains and the Mississippi” (Meinig 1986, p. 341). The diverse
colonial experiences and knowledge of socio-spatial patterning underscored the debates that led to the formulation of United States land policy and the formal design of the American landscape.

The problems of dealing with the western lands had exercised Congress since the establishment of the Continental Congress in 1776. Before the war, the thirteen colonies held unequal claims and access to western territories (Meinig 1986, p.341). The colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia, for example, held proprietary rights, derived from their colonial charters, to “all the unsettled land in the old Northwest”, while New York had title to land west of the Delaware (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.289). The remaining six colonies, including Maryland, had no rights to the western lands. They argued that such lands as had been won from England, “by common expenditure of blood and treasure”, should be owned by the Confederation, a position that eventually was accepted by the Continental Congress (Carstensen 1988, p.33).

In 1780, after several years of debate, Congress stated that the territory would be “settled and formed into distinct republican states, which shall become members of the federal union, and have the same rights of sovereignty, freedom and independence, as the other states” (Meinig 1986, p.341). The Continental Congress requested that all colonial governments cease granting western lands, and following several years of negotiations the former colonies ceded most of their claims on the western territories to the Congress of the United States of America, and the first public domain, the Northwest Territory,
came into existence (Carstensen 1988, p.33). The Northwest Territory “embraced the vast region lying west of Pennsylvania, north of the Ohio River, east of the Mississippi, and south of the Great Lakes” (Carstensen 1988, p.33). The manner in which the lands would be settled and governed had yet to be established (Meinig 1986, p. 340).

Some vestiges of old European feudal relations survived in several of the colonial states in the 1770s, and soon after the War of Independence, the Continental Congress abolished all feudal relations with the land, and expropriated any remaining “manorial holdings such as those inherited from original proprietors in states like Maryland and Pennsylvania” (Cosgrove 1998, p. 175). The acquisition of land through “headright”, or “free and common socage” had freed the majority of colonial settlers from “feudal constraints”, and “signified the achievement of a human and social status unattainable in Europe” (Cosgrove 1998, p. 140). Land, reconfigured as property, had become a marketable commodity in the colonies and could be bought and sold for profit.

This commodification of the land itself, and the development of an agricultural economy that traded in the surplus product of the land, marks the transition in colonial America from feudalism to capitalism. The accumulation of land—“as private property to achieve status”—and the down-to-earth materiality and pragmatism of most colonial farmers characterises the American formation of yeoman capitalism in the period (Cosgrove 1998, p. 173-4). The immediate abolition of feudal vestiges in land relations was only the first move by Congress to underpin yeoman capitalism in the new republic. Further land
legislation, brought into law in the 1780s, reinforced the ideal of individual, independent land ownership.

**Government of the West**

On February 3, 1784, the Confederation Congress appointed Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) to chair the first federal committee charged with devising a scheme for “the government of the West” (McCormick 1992, p.112). As chair of the congressional committee of 1784, Jefferson was assigned responsibility for devising “a plan for the temporary government of the western territory” (Berkhofer 1972, p.241). Over the course of the next fifteen years, Jefferson played a central role in the shaping of Republican land policy and the American landscape.

On March 1, 1784, after just three and a half weeks of deliberations with his fellow committee members, David Howell of Rhode Island and Jeremiah T. Chase of Maryland, Jefferson presented a report to Congress (Berkhofer 1972, pp.240-241). In the report, Jefferson proposed the formation of fourteen new states, suggested names for them, and outlined the manner in which they would become members of the Union (Meinig 1986, p.341). In what Berkhofer describes as “a grand plan for the entire trans-Appalachian west according to Jefferson’s ideological geography”, the report proposed that the boundaries of the proposed new states be delineated in both the ceded and, as yet, unceded territories, north and west of the Ohio River (Berkhofer 1972, p.243-245). Settlers in each new state would form a temporary government by adopting the constitution and laws of the existing states, until such time as the population of the
territory reached twenty thousand inhabitants, when the state could draft its own constitution. When the population grew further, to match that of the least populous of the former colonies, the new state could become a full and equal member of the Confederation (McCormick 1993, p.113).

The report was amended through congressional debate and approved by Congress on April 23, 1784 (Berkhofer 1972, p.253). There is some debate amongst scholars as to the status of the proposal at this point. In his review of the literature on the subject, McCormick informs us that, since the late nineteenth century, ‘virtually all scholars who have dealt with this act have referred to it as the “Ordinance of 1784” or as “Jefferson’s Ordinance”’, whereas many earlier commentators were more ambiguous in their delineations, referring to it as a ‘resolve’, ‘plan’ or ‘measure’. In line with the former opinion, Berkhofer asserts that Congress “adopted” the plan as “a formal ordinance” (Berkhofer 1972, p.253), whereas the historian and revolutionary, Peter Force, writing in 1847, stated that the report “was agreed to” by Congress (Quoted in McCormick 1993, p.114). McCormick concludes that Jefferson’s 1784 proposal never actually achieved the status of ‘ordinance’. No new states were admitted into the Union under “Jefferson’s Ordinance”. Congress “approved” an amended version of the report, but did not implement it (McCormick 1993, p. 120). It took a further three years of debate before Congress agreed on a new plan for the government of the western territories. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 differed in several important ways from Jefferson’s 1784 proposals, but it also preserved several of the principles presented in Jefferson’s report (Berkhofer 1972, p. 261).
Jefferson-Williamson Land Ordinance 1784

In his proposed plan for the government of the West, Jefferson stipulated the boundaries of the new states and proposed the establishment of “counties or townships” as part of the formation of their governments, but the report does not address the question of survey and settlement of the western territory (Jefferson 1784). On April 30, a little more than a week after Congress approved his amended plan for government, Jefferson presented to Congress "An Ordinance for ascertaining the mode of locating and disposing of lands in the Western Territories" to Congress (McCormick 1993 p.116). This land ordinance was effectively a companion ordinance to Jefferson’s plan for government in the West. Devised by a committee chaired by Jefferson, and including Hugh Williamson, a doctor, mathematician, and revolutionary from North Carolina, the land ordinance was concerned with determining a method for the settlement of the public domain, specifically the division and disposal of the lands.

In an attempt to avoid boundary disputes, common in those colonies that previously employed the inaccurate metes and bounds surveying system, the committee proposed the idea of surveying the land in a grid-like fashion, with regular rectangular units, aligned to meridians and parallels. It was envisaged that geometrical survey and cadastral maps (or plats, as they were referred to in America) would be the principal instruments of land policy in the new republic, to be employed systematically to measure and illustrate the proposed regular patterning and distribution of the lands in the public domain (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.290). The committee proposed that the public domain be divided into regular townships, each of which
Shall be divided into Hundreds of ten geographical miles square, each mile containing 6086 feet and four tenths of a foot, by lines to be run and marked due North and South, and others crossing these at right angles, the first of which lines, each way, shall be at ten miles distance from one of the corners of the state within which they shall be…. These Hundreds shall be divided into lots one mile square each, or 850 acres and four tenths of an acre, by lines running in like manner due North and South, and others crossing these at right angles. (Quoted in Kain and Baigent 1992, p.290)

In addition to making provision for surveying and disposing of the public domain, the ordinance followed the New England practice of reserving a portion of land in each township for educational purposes, the remainder to be sold at public auction.

Several scholars acknowledge the important contribution to the formulation of the report by Hugh Williamson. Williamson was born in Pennsylvania, studied at the College of Philadelphia, and, later, at the University of Utrecht, in the Netherlands (Pattison 1957, Kain and Baigent 1992). According to Pattison, it was Williamson who first proposed the idea of a geometrical grid, which Jefferson then developed and systematised. Their design of a grid system was influenced by both American precedents, including the plats of New England towns and southern plantations, and Roman-derived Dutch examples of rectangular survey (Pattison 1957, p.63-64) The plan was part of Jefferson’s promotion of the “rational organisation of American Institutions” (Cosgrove 1998, p.177); his proposed decimalisation of land measurement fits into his scheme to decimalise coinage, weights and measures (D.L. 1959, p.302).
Meinig alludes to the manner in which Jefferson’s predilections influenced the geometric patterning proposed in the ordinance (Meinig 1986, p.341) and Pattison argues that “principles of Jeffersonian democracy” are implicit in the plan (Pattison, quoted in D.L. 1959, p.303). Kain and Baigent point out that the draft ordinance proposed a method of allocation of lands similar to, but more controlled than, the southern practice. The draft proposal would give warrant-holding settlers the freedom to choose the location of their claim, even far ahead of the frontier, but the size and shape of properties would be determined by the grid (Kain and Baigent 1992, p.290). As with colonial land policy in the south, under the terms of the draft ordinance, lands in the public domain were to be bought by the common man, and rectilinear land boundaries would empower him with the most rudimentary means of verifying the extent of his property (D.L. 1959, p.303). Employing cadastral surveying as its principal instrument, the proposed grid would result in the inscription of an isonomic spatial order on the lands of the public domain. The system would map a rational, scientific and common syntax onto the landscape, emphasising connections and interchange between independent parts. In contrast to the eunomic spatial order of the ideal New England township, for example, wherein the relationship between centre and margin determined the social order, the sharing of structure and syntax on the isonomic landscape would create a “neutral background” against which settlers might achieve “self-definition” (Clements 2007).

While Congress urgently needed the income from the sale of public lands, the Land Ordinance of 1784, like Jefferson’s plan for government, was never implemented. Nevertheless, as Meinig points out, the Jefferson and Williamson’s proposal “stood as a
statement of principles” and the basis of future debate (Meinig 1986, p.342). In April 1785, the Land Ordinance of 1784 was again discussed by Congress, and, after much debate and several amendments, it was adopted and passed into law on May 20, 1785 (McCormick 1992, p.116, Carstensen 1988, p.33, Kain and Baigent 1984, p.291). Several aspects of the original ordinance were modified in the process, but the basic pattern of its geography and the geometry of the proposed grid were only slightly amended (Meinig 1986, p. 341).

During the debate George Washington expressed his concern that the sale of land by warrant, as proposed in the 1784 ordinance, would perpetuate the scattered settlement patterns of the southern colonies. After some discussion, Congress agreed that land would be surveyed prior to settlement and sold outright, rather than by warrant, under the revised terms of the Ordinance of 1785. Congress replaced Jefferson’s division of land into hundredths with the New England unit of the township. Congress also agreed to Washington’s proposal for the sale of whole townships, after the New England practice. Under the terms of the revised ordinance, alternate townships would be sold entire, or wholesale (Kain and Baigent 1984, pp.290-291).

In the course of the debate, Congress also reduced the proposed size of townships, from ten miles square to six miles square, again after New England practice. A township would be divided into thirty-six sections, each measuring 640 acres, or one square mile, and Congress retained four sections “for future disposition”, including section 16 for the location of local schools, after New England practice (Hurt 2002, p.86). The size of the
township, thirty-six square miles, was inherited from medieval England, where, according to Johnson, the range of horse and wagon, and the capacity of non-mechanical agricultural technology determined it. Both factors were pertinent in America at the end of the eighteenth century, and would continue to be so for at least another century (Johnson 1976, p.36).

**Land Ordinance of 1785**

Congress passed the Land Ordinance Act on May 20, 1785. The ordinance applied only to the area of eastern Ohio now known as the Seven Ranges:

> The agreed Land Ordinance of 1785 provided that the survey should begin where the western boundary of Pennsylvania met the Ohio River some ten miles west of the Revolutionary War outpost of Fort McIntosh and near the confluence of the Ohio with the Little Beaver Creek. The federal surveyors were to start off westward from the north or right bank of the Ohio River and set out townships numbered from south to north in seven “ranges” numbered from east to west (Kain and Baigent 1984, p.291).

Under the legislation, the land in this small area could only be surveyed and sold after Indian title had been extinguished (Carstensen 1988, p.33). In accordance with the ordinance, the territory was to be surveyed into six-mile square townships, with alternate townships further divided into thirty-six one-mile square sections, each of 640 acres. The other half of the land would be offered for sale in township lots, measuring six miles square. The cadastral survey of this “slice of land only forty-two miles wide” marks the beginning of the rectangular survey of the United States of America (Carstensen 1988, p.34). Representing a compromise between the colonial settlement patterns of the South and the North, the Ordinance of 1785 was “the first attempt”, according to Meinig, “to
bring some order to the frenzied scramble among a welter of avaricious interests, large and small, local, national and international, to reap some profit out of this vast national domain” (Meinig 1986, p.342). Employing simple and accurate mechanisms, the Land Ordinance of 1795 secured property ownership and contained the “possessive individualism” of American settlers in the post-revolutionary period (Johnson 1976, p.36).

**Implementation**

Eight surveyors began to work on the mapping of the Seven Ranges in September 1785. For various reasons, including frequent skirmishes with Indians, the survey proceeded slowly and only four ranges of townships were prepared for sale by 1787 (Kain and Baigent 1984, p.291). With very few buyers for the surveyed lands, Congress offered large tracts of land in Ohio country to land speculators in order to raise much needed money (Carstensen 1988, p.34). With no immediate plans to extend the grid beyond the Seven Ranges, for several years it seemed like the rectangular survey would be dropped (Ibid, p.34). When the issue of land legislation was again discussed at the First Congress in Philadelphia on December 27, 1790, the debate remained polarised between those who favoured the New England system of “land sale in small parcels to individual settlers to create a landowning democracy” and those who advocated the sale of large grants at low prices to companies and wealthy individuals who would, in turn, organise the resale and settlement of the land (Kain and Baigent 1992, p. 289). Attempts to resuscitate the principal of rectangular survey before sale gathered pace with proposals for its reintroduction in 1792 (Carstensen 1988, p.34). It was finally reestablished in 1796, in the Act Providing for the Sale of Lands of the United States in the Territory Northwest of
the River Ohio, which legislated for a systematic survey of the public domain “in an east to west sequence” (Kain and Baigent 1984, p.291).

While the Ordinance of 1785 applied only to the Seven Ranges, it acted as a blueprint for the subsequent land policies of the new Republic and determined the basic form of the United States Public Land Survey System (Cosgrove 1998, pp. 178-179). Once Jefferson’s and Williamson’s principle of rectangular survey of the public domain was accepted in 1784, institutional and bureaucratic mechanisms were created, beginning with the Land Ordinance of 1785, “that pushed the straight lines of the survey west from Ohio with unswerving determination” (Carstensen 1988, p.31).

The territory of the United States of America expanded dramatically during the nineteenth century through the purchase of Louisiana from the French, and the cessation and acquisition of several states, including Georgia, East and West Florida, Mexico, Oregon, Texas and Alaska. Each area, in turn, “fell under” the rectangular survey system, “as the enlarging public domain acted as a magnet for one of the greatest mass migrations in human history” (Kain and Baigent 1984, p.293). The rectangular survey was eventually extended to cover three-fourths of the area of the continental United States, or 69 percent of the land in the forty-eight states (Carstensen 1988, p.31).

**Geography**

The grid of the American Land Ordinance of 1785 was more blueprint than map: a social rubric, expressed as geographical design, rather than a cartographic representation of the lay of the land. The mathematically formulated grid carved the land up into geometric portions and projected a systematic re-inscription of the landscape. The government of
the new republic legislated for a ritual re-inscription of the land that would mark the end of the colonial era and the birth of a nation. Inherent in its abstract geometry was a disregard for the complex topography of the land. Furthermore, as an instrument of imperial power, the grid acted to flatten the landscape, tame the wilderness and erase pre-colonial history and culture of the North American continent; the re-inscription of the American landscape under the land ordinance marked the beginning of a new history and culture.

The geography of the Land Ordinance of 1785 “viewed land as an abstract entity to be measured and divided impartially and impersonally” (Ryden 1993, p.33). By contrast, villagers and landowners in early colonial America had conceived of geography in experiential terms; like their forebears in medieval England, the early settlers in the New World engaged in “a geography of human experience” (Ryden 1993, p.25), with boundaries “established from the inside, pushed out by the daily round of life and work” (ibid. p.26). Under the land legislation of the new republic, abstract mathematical measurement, recorded on cadastral maps, rather than concrete human experience fixed the boundaries of private property. Harley argues that the cadastral map – or, property map – was “embedded in some of the long term structural changes of the transition from feudalism to capitalism” (1988, p.285). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, surveyors began to apply the geometry of the land ordinances to the physical landscape in a decidedly scientific fashion.

Disregarding physical nuance and detail in landscape, boundaries were mathematically predetermined and fixed before the distribution and settlement of public land was carried
out in a controlled manner. Americans could no longer “simply strike out for no man’s land and carve out a ragged piece of property for themselves” (Ryden 1993, p.32); henceforth, settlers would enter into a relationship with the landscape that was framed by a preordained geometrical marking of the land. The impersonal geometric geography of the land ordinances codified the ethnocentric, pastorally inflected agrarian ideals of the new republic. Predicated on the notion of a ‘virgin’ landscape in a pre-civilised ‘wilderness state’, and devoid of history and culture, the project constituted an applied cartography and the mapping of an idealised future – a geographically formulated invitation to experience.

Referring to the inherent inadequacies of a cartography that purports to represent the ‘lie of the land’ in the known world, Ryden highlights the limitations inherent in mapmaking; while cartography has been concerned with the scientific mapping of the physical world since the renaissance, Ryden argues that its ability to represent the ‘geography of place’ is limited; “maps”, he writes, “provide only the most partial reflection of geographical experience”, and they often compress topographical details, resulting in an “arbitrary and simplified flatness”, depopulation of land and the removal of “any vestige of life and movement and history” (Ryden 1993, p.21). Ryden goes on to propose that, “where the map fails, the imagination takes over” (Ryden 1993, p.22). The map of a known, lived-in, place may, then, be re-animated by the reader, through projections of experience and memory, while the cartographic representation of unknown space might draw into itself projections of longing or desire.
Following Ryden, I propose that the grid, like the Renaissance chart, served as a symbolic “expression of dream and desire” (Ryden 1993, p.24) and provided the nineteenth-century American surveyor, pioneer and settler, with real and imaginary bearings for continued westward expansion. The grid preceded the survey, settlement, and cultivation of the western territories, but in its projection of an image of control and order it objectified in graphical form the concept of a civilised landscape and expedited the ideological goal of a new agrarian-based social world.

In the context of the propositional, if not utopian, nature of much colonial cartography of the New World since the early sixteenth century, what makes the cadastral survey of the Jefferson-Williamson 1784 ordinance most remarkable is the fact that the abstract mapping it proposed transcended its graphical form and was inscribed systematically onto a vast landscape. The surveyor’s map was, from the outset, a fundamental instrument of land legislation in the new republic; the cadastral survey and mapping of the North American continent under the land ordinances facilitated the appropriation and efficient exploitation of vast tracts of land. The maps produced by surveyors “served as a graphic inventory, a codification of information about ownership, tenancy, rentable values, cropping practice, and agricultural potential” and their abstract, geometrical boundary lines acquired an “aureole of science” (Ibid, p.285). As in Roman society, then, the cadastral map was a “social apparatus” used for the control and management of land; in the emerging United States its abstract lines dictated a “new agrarian topography” (Ibid, pp.284-285).
**Agrarian Landscape**

The Ordinance of 1875 legislated for a profound re-inscription of the American landscape. It was conceived in the spirit of the Enlightenment (D.L. 1959, p.302), inspired by the cartography of Ptolemy and the spatial organisation of renaissance perspective (Cosgrove 1998, p. 177), and devised by men of the eighteenth century, the century of “rationalism and enlightenment” (Johnson 1976, p.20). Jefferson shaped the ideological substance of the Ordinance, to a significant extent. The square pattern of “townships and sections, quarter sections, and forties” that it imposed on the land framed the subsequent “economic, political and social life of the people who came to make their farms, villages, and cities” there (Carstensen 1988, p.31). Cosgrove argues that Jefferson’s scheme, first outlined in the draft Ordinance of 1784, was directed at the formation of an American pastoral landscape and a “yeoman society” (Cosgrove 1998, p. 177). In contrast to the traditional European representation of the pastoral landscape, and its prevailing system of social castes, in Jefferson’s ideal agricultural society, class distinctions would dissolve and, in the words of Crevecoeur, “individuals of all nations” would “[melt] into a new race of men” (2006, Letter III, p.40).

Jefferson was committed to an agricultural economy, and under his influence, agriculture would come to be seen as “the primary and indispensable foundation of both national prosperity and of political democracy” (Kolodny 1975, p.27). The small, independent, family-size farm was at the heart of his agrarian conception, and 'the farmer himself, called variously “husbandman,” “cultivator,” “freeman,” or—perhaps most
characteristically—“yeoman”’ was held up as the icon of Republican virtue (Kolodny 1975, p.27).

According to Hurt, Jefferson’s agrarianism implied a “moral economy”: the avoidance of commercial agriculture and a preference for subsistence farming (Hurt 2002, p.72). The concept of rural virtue, sustained through the cultivation of the land, underpinned his agrarian ideology and set it in opposition to emerging urban culture and an industrial economy. Kolodny suggests that the agrarianism of the new nation was an “expression of continuing pastoral impulses”; in its American formation, pastoralism would reconstitute “the harmonious primal family, with all men able to begin again in a land experienced as wholly beneficent”, and “the individual fantasies of an emigrant population” would be “organized into a cultural whole” (Kolodny 1975, p.26).

The Ordinance was the template for a systematic structuring of an agrarian landscape, and the surveyor and yeoman farmer were the primary agents entrusted with its formation. The controlled allocation of public lands in small lots at a low base price, in order to create a nation of small freehold farmers and an ordered, liberal, agrarian society, was central to Jefferson’s plan. Others, however, supported the idea that land should be sold for as high a price as possible and in a manner that facilitated the rapid development of an industrial economy. In the end, the Land Ordinance Act of 1785 “represented a compromise between industrial and speculative interests on one side and the farming and pioneering interests on the other”(Cochrane 1993, p.179).
In the 1785 Ordinance the price of land was set at $1 per acre, for a minimum purchase of a ‘section’, measuring 640 acres. Compared to wealthy speculators, cash-poor pioneers were disadvantaged under these conditions. Many bought smaller portions of land from speculators, but paid more for it. Others rented until they could build up enough cash to purchase land, and others, still, claimed squatting rights on un-surveyed lands. The liberals lost further ground in the Land Act of 1796, when the price of land was raised to $2 per acre, while the minimum purchase remained at 640 acres. In each subsequent act, however, land policy became more and more liberal; in the act of 1800, the minimum purchase dropped to 320 acres; in 1804 the minimum size of a parcel of land that could be purchased was reduced to 160 acres, or a quarter section (Carstensen 1988, p.36). In 1820, the minimum purchase dropped to 80 acres and the price dropped to $1.25 per acre (Cochrane 1993, p.44). Later still, the minimum purchase was reduced to 40 acres (Carstensen 1988, p.34). Over time, 160-acre plot came to be seen as the ideal size for the small family farm (Carstensen 1988, p.36).

Family farmers did not have the land market to themselves, however. Gates points out that the image of a land inhabited solely by small self-sufficient freeholders is an idealised one; as the frontier moved further west after the Paris Treaty and the Louisiana Purchase, capitalist land developers with “a seemingly endless appetite for power and for land” (Moore, quoted in Gates 1996 [1957], p.24) competed with the small family farmer for the acquisition of the land. Wealthy capitalist estate builders bought up vast tracts of land and developed cattle baronies and plantations, employing thousands of laborers (1996 [1957], p.24). In addition, Hurt highlights the powerful role played by
speculators, land companies and the railroad in the distribution of the western territories; often the first to claim large tracts of the land, these ‘new’ landlords sold some of it on to small farmers at a higher price per acre, thus forcing the family farmer to engage in “commercial agriculture as quickly as possible to pay their mortgages, meet their tax obligations, and purchase items of daily necessity that they could not produce” (2002, p.74). Finally, as in the colonial period, many pioneer settlers also bought and sold land. Cochrane describes these frontiersmen as pioneer-farmer-speculators who, although often cash-poor, acquired between 80 and 640 acres of land, which they ‘improved’ and sold at a profit before moving on to acquire a larger tract of land (Cochrane 1993, p.55).

Despite the potency of Jefferson’s concatenation of agrarianism and democracy, and the profound, and enduring, impact of his vision on both American thought and the American landscape, urbanisation continued apace, and manufacturing and industry continued to grow throughout the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. In the two hundred years since Jefferson first articulated his agrarian vision, corporate power and agribusiness have increasingly expropriated the American landscape, resulting in a shift of economic and political power from the countryside to the city, prompting Hurt to suggest that, in reality, American agrarianism turned out to be “more fiction than fact” (Hurt 2002, p.73).

In Iowa, and throughout the Midwest, agriculture continues to be a dominant economic and social force, but the dream of a pastoral existence on the land has been replaced by a more pragmatic, business-like approach to farming.

[By] the late twentieth century, independent subsistence agriculture had been left in the distant past. Farmers produced for a market economy, usually by
specializing or emphasizing a mix of one or two crops and livestock. They purchased their food in town at supermarkets like everyone else. Never truly independent yeomen, they were now businessmen who produced for sale and purchased a host of goods (Hurt 2002, p.75).

The Land Ordinance legislation of the late eighteenth century acted as a blueprint for the survey, allocation and distribution of American territory throughout the nineteenth century. Like the European Renaissance rulers, merchants, explorers and cartographers, before him, Jefferson, the imaginer, used the map as a ground for his ideas and as a symbolic representation of his ideological vision.

The grid lines of the rectangular survey dictated a new “agrarian topography” and introduced a dimension of “space discipline” (Harley 1988, p.285) to the American landscape. In the geometric inscription of the American rural and urban landscape we find the remains of Jefferson’s democratic, pastoral ideal. The rectilinear division of most of the continent achieved by the surveyors and settlers can still be witnessed quite clearly from the air today, and nowhere more dramatically so than over the Midwestern states of Nebraska and Iowa. As a form of social understanding that could be invoked as an alternative to an urban-centered, industrial capitalism, the concept of agrarianism and its symbolic inscription of the landscape retain some currency in the rural Midwest at beginning of the twenty-first century.
Carroll County, Iowa

After Iowa State was established in 1833, federal surveyors, in the vanguard of the first wave of pioneers, moved from east to west across Iowa territory, dividing the land into “uniform sections and townships in preparation for the first land sales” (Schwieder 1988, p.281). Of all of the midwestern states, Iowa was the most uniformly ‘drawn’ at county level. Its “uniform terrain and its somewhat rectangular shape—324 miles long and 210 miles wide in its greatest distances” (Schwieder 1988, p.281) offered little resistance to the geometric inscription of the land ordinance. The first two counties were established in 1834, just one year after the territory was opened, and the need for new counties grew progressively with the rapid westward migration across the state. Forty-four counties had been established before 1847, the year that Iowa achieved statehood, and the remaining fifty-five counties were established by 1857 (Sage 1974, p.96).

On the 2nd December 1850, at a meeting of the Third General Assembly of Iowa, the assembled senators and representatives passed an act “providing for the organization of forty-nine counties out of the heretofore unorganized section of the state” (Maclean, 1912, p.11). In 1850, just four years after the establishment of Iowa State, the area within its borders “known to geography” was limited to “the territory bordering upon the Mississippi on the east and stretching along the Missouri line on the South” (Maclean 1912, p.11). Settlement of the territories, which stretched to the west, away from the rivers, and into the prairies, would be managed under the legislation laid down in the land ordinance legislation of late 1780s which governed the transition from territorial status to statehood, the pattern of government, and the division and sale of lands. In Chapter IX,
section 18, of the session laws passed by the General Assembly in 1850, Carroll County was delineated as follows:

That the following shall be the boundaries of a new county called Carroll, to wit: Beginning at the northwest corner of Township eighty-five north, range thirty-two west; thence west on a line between eighty-five and eighty-six to the northwest corner of Township eighty-five, range thirty-six west; thence south on the line dividing Ranges thirty-six and thirty-seven to the southwest corner of Township eighty-two, range thirty-six; thence east on the line between Townships eighty-one and eighty-two to the southwest corner of Township eighty-two, Range thirty-two west; thence north on the line between Ranges thirty-two and thirty-three to the place of beginning. (Quoted in Maclean 1912, p.11)

Situated in the mid-western portion of Iowa State, between Greene County to the east, Crawford County to the west, Calhoun and Sac Counties, to the north, and Guthrie and Audubon Counties to the south, Carroll County is divided into sixteen townships. Thus, as Maclean points out, “did Carroll County come into sight and knowledge of civilization for the first time” (Maclean 1912, p.11).

The socio-spatial idea of the geometrically bounded township predates the contemporary fields and structures of the American landscape west of the Appalachians. In Carroll, Iowa, and across all the territories surveyed under the land ordinances, townships existed only as graphical images “in surveyors’ notebooks and on the rough maps carefully stored in land office drawers” (Stilgoe 1982, p.87) until settlers brought them into relief through the establishment of homesteads, farms and communities in the nineteenth century. The abstract – or “invisible” (Harley, 1988, p.285) – grid lines of the rectangular land survey were made concrete and visible as they were traced onto the physical
landscape by generations of settlers who marked the boundaries of their 640-acre sections, half, quarter, and quarter-quarter sections, disciplining the American wilderness through the erection of boundary fences, buildings and, later, roads, all, or most of which, were aligned with the section lines of the rectangular grid. The contemporary geometrical inscription of the American rural landscape was first realised by settlers as they carried out the imperative of the Ordinance through the creation of physical “boundaries and pathways”; later, as a network of roads developed “running along virtually every sectional line, north and south, east and west” (Bray 1982, p.14), the abstract patterning of the grid was etched more deeply onto the landscape.

In Carroll County, and throughout the states of the Midwest, the farming practices of the settlers underscored the geometric inscription of the land and transferred “the map from parchment or paper to the ground itself” (Cosgrove 1996, p.3). Today, the most widely grown crops in the region, corn and soybeans, mimic property lines, as farmers “compete for the neatest and straightest crop rows, which reach as far toward the horizon as the eye can see” (Davis 1988, p.134). Farm buildings and farmsteads in themselves often display a similar aesthetic concern for order and symmetry, and complete the picture of the neatly ordered landscape.

**Mescher Spatiality: Flight**

The contemporary midwestern landscape is still, today, marked by the unambiguous spatial rhythm imposed on it by the Land Ordinance of 1785. On the ideal agrarian landscape, the small rectangular family farm - the basic unit of socio-spatial measure -
symbolised both individual sovereignty and communal synchronisation with the world; in the alignment of section lines, farm boundaries and farm buildings with principal meridians and base lines, that rhythm was designed to be ‘in time’ with the physical, and I suggest, by extension, the metaphysical world.

The imposition of rational control and geometric spatial order on the American landscape, which followed the passing into law of the Land Ordinance of 1785, was part of a project of modern nation building. The subsequent socio-spatial inscription of the landscape is nowhere more evident today than in the Midwest of the United States. Flying over the contemporary midwestern landscape, the impress of Euro-American socio-political imperatives on the land is clearly visible. Aerial vision brings the rational geometry of the landscape design into sharp relief.

Cosgrove declares that the American landscape is most clearly revealed in the “distanced, synoptic perspective”, whereas the European locale is best appreciated in the intimate, fragmented view (Cosgrove in Corner and MacLean 1996, p.3). For this reason, he writes, the American landscape “makes sense from the air”, whereas European landscapes, or “locales”, reveal themselves “only as we enter them” (Cosgrove in Corner and MacLean 1996, p.3). Writing about the implications of the human conquest of the air in the twentieth century, Cogrove points out that, from above, the “earth’s topography flattens out to a canvas upon which the imagination can inscribe grandiose projects at an imperial scale” (Cosgrove in Corner and MacLean, 1996, p.4). Over the Midwest, the
aerial perspective affords the contemporary flyer a synoptic view of the landscape design, and a share in the vision of the Euro-American imperial cartographers.

In his discussion of the grid layout of the Midwest, the landscape scholar J.B. Jackson points out that it is only with the advent of commercial flying “that the rational, mathematical aspect of this landscape has been revealed to us” (Jackson 1979, p.158). In his airborne narration of the landscape of rural Illinois, the literary scholar Robert C. Bray weaves together the rational geometry of the grid and the natural topography of the land into an integrated poetic vision of the landscape below.

A mile above McLean County, descending to Bloomington, the land is a farmscape of rectangular geometry: square-mile sections of land enclosing soft modulations of hills, veined tracings of streams, and, early in April, dark brown fields furrowed to hypnotic effect. Receding parallels lead the idea toward a vanishing point on the distant horizon. Everything in the scene suggests a latitude, a limitless prospect of prosperity and pastoral loveliness (Bray 1982, p.14).

In this extract, Bray might well be describing the contemporary landscape of neighbouring Iowa. The template for the quilted landscape he describes, with its patchwork of orderly fields, neat farmsteads and gridded towns, was composed and replicated across the Midwest long before the advent of human flight. This aerial perspective of the landscape is well known to Jerry Mescher; as an amateur pilot for more than thirty years, he has flown over the Midwest countless times and he understands what many before, and since, have realised – that the regular spatial rhythm of the Midwestern landscape is best appreciated from the air. The aerial perspective reveals the design of
geometrically ordered landscape, which was formulated in the federal Land Ordinance of 1785.

The German-American aviation writer, Wolfgang Langewiesche, was an early advocate of the aerial view of the landscape. In the late 1930s, in the course of one of his many flights across the United States, he discovered the dramatic perspective of the geometrically inscribed landscape of the Midwest, and he went on to describe it in vivid terms in his extensive writings (Stilgoe 1982, p.87). Born in Dusseldorf in 1907, Langewiesche immigrated to America in 1929, arriving in New York just a few months before the stock market collapse that year. He trained as a pilot for several years at Chicago airport before beginning a love affair with flying and the American landscape that would last for more than fifty years. In the words of his son William, he made his home in America “on the scale of the whole continent” (Langewiesche 2004, p.ix).

Langewiesche was a prolific author; he contributed many articles on his airborne experiences to newspapers and magazines, and wrote five popular books. Stilgoe highlights Langewiesche’s particular fascination with the geometric regularity of the countryside of the Midwest (1982, p.87). As an amateur pilot, Langewiesche valued the orderly rectangular grid as a navigational aid, its section lines running north-south and east-west (Stilgoe 1982, p.87). His relationship with the landscape went beyond the utilitarian, however, and his writings articulate an appreciation for the scene below which exceeds the merely descriptive and prosaic; fellow pilot-author, Drake Hokanson, emphasises Langewiesche’s gift for “analyzing what he sees of the earth” and his way of “explicating the land as seen from his chair in the air” (2004, p.xiv). Kratz considers
Langewiesche’s descriptions of the section lines that mark the midwestern landscape to have the character of sociological analysis.

Long before cultural geographers and folklife scholars turned their attention to the subject, Langewiesche was writing about the common landscapes of America. Hokanson suggests that Langewiesche’s outsider perspective gave him an appreciation for common things, which might be taken for granted and consider ordinary by the “locals” (2004, p.xvi).

For most square-minded Americans, it is hard to imagine the section line as something novel enough to be scrutinized and analyzed, but for Langewiesche, such straight lines running to the four points of the compass were spectacular examples of American pragmatism (Hokanson 2004, p.xvi).

In A Flier’s World (1951) Langewiesche reveals a particular penchant for flying east to west, away from the urban “jumble” of the eastern seaboard, across the Appalachian Mountain Range, towards the “ease and plenty of the Middle West” (Langewiesche [1951] 2004, p.199). “Presently”, he writes, “you pick up the section lines”.

Now that is something. It is really one of the odd sights of the world, and it is strictly an air sight: a whole country laid out in a mathematical gridwork, in sections one mile square each: exact, straight-sided, lined up in endless lanes that run precisely – and I mean precisely – North-South and East-West. It make the country look like a giant real-estate development; which it is. One section has 640 acres. A quarter section, 160 acres, is the historical Homestead (Langewiesche [1951] 2004, p.199).

Langewiesch is writing here about the experience of flying in an era when aircraft flew “low and slow” (Hokanson 2004, p.xiv) across the land: a time – before the advent of
modern, space-destroying, high altitude flight across whole continents and oceans – when “looking down on the ground from an airplane held great novelty” for pilot and passengers (Ibid, p.xiv). According to Langewiesche, in those early days of slower flight, “you could float away to points west”, and be close enough to the ground to experience the magnetic field – “a field of ideas” – sent out by the places you passed over ([1951] 2004, p.198).

Over the course of thirty years, Jerry Mescher, too, often flew low and slow over the landscape of Carroll County in his 1947 Piper Cruiser - low enough to experience the affective pull of his home place below, yet elevated enough to achieve the synoptic perspective, the grasp of the whole (Sopher, D.E. 1979, p.148), that a view from the air provides. From the time he was a young boy, he dreamed of flying an airplane. Albert had opposed his son’s wishes, however, because he, himself, was averse to flying, ever since he witnessed a plane crash in Carroll, in which three people died.

I was always saying someday I’m going to fly over this family farm in my own airplane. Course dad would never [agree] to anything like that cause he seen three people burned to death in an airplane crash over here by Carroll...He was right up there and the plane was burning and he seen them burn to death. They couldn’t do anything about it. So, he wasn’t too interested. (Mescher, J. 2006)

After Albert passed away, Jerry was at liberty to pursue his dream. His interest in aviation was evident from an early age. As a young boy he carved model airplanes out of the wood he collected from the old peach crates discarded by his mother after she had canned the fruit which they held. This was the same wood from which Jerry carved his first set of bones.
I kept making models in the basement, you know…I’d take mom’s peach crates—I saved all her peach crates—and make the wings all out of them nice little boards…I still got a bunch of that stuff down there yet. I’d be down there every night, looking in a book and I’d make this here bi-plane. I’d make this other bomber. (Mescher, J. 2006)

In grade school, Jerry began to read more about aviation and about airplane construction. He wanted to build a plane that he could fly. He continued to make his model planes throughout his teens and twenties, becoming more ambitious as the years went by.

I’d go to the grove and search for the fuselage: one big solid piece. And I’d take that old spoke shave and I would be gouging that fuselage outta there. Then I made another big one outside. That was all cut out of dad’s boards, you know…just a framework—had the wheels on it. Didn’t have no fabric on it…I made the prop and I’d wind that old prop till the airplane almost spun over, and then it would go ahead about twelve foot. Dad got mad one day and threw it on the brush pile for me so that was the end of that. (Mescher, J. 2006)

After his father died, Jerry bought a gyro-copter, which he assembled from a kit. He hoped that this would finally get him off the ground. It did, but only briefly. After a couple of minor aviation incidents, Jerry got rid of the “suicide machine” and bought a second-hand, 1947 Piper Super Cruiser aircraft instead. He paid two thousand dollars for it.

So, I bought the airplane, went to ground school, learned to fly it, took lessons, got my pilot’s license in it, flew it into three states one day, come all the way back, been flyin’ it for thirty-three years, that airplane, see. It’s in Carroll in a hangar. Perfect running condition. I put all new fabric on the wings, redone the engine, got all nice new disc brakes on it…It’s a beautiful hundred mile an hour airplane. Mom rode in it once (Mescher, J. 2006)
Jerry got his pilots license in 1972 and since then he has flown over the family farm many times. Flying was “like an addiction” for him. He loved the total concentration it required, the “full mind” focused on the task at hand. He loved, too, the feeling of “cruising through the air like a bird”, and the thrill of flying at a hundred miles an hour, a thousand feet above the land. Whenever he could, in the evenings after work, he would drive out to the airfield and take the plane out onto the runway. After he taxied out, and before take-off, Jerry checked his instruments, methodically: “check the magnetos, check the carb heat, check all your controls, make sure everything is running right, turn around, look at the end of the runway, and first thing you’d pour the power in, take the foot on the rudder, sock the stick ahead, the tail comes up on the tail-dragger, level it off, and pretty soon you’re gone into the blue yonder for an hour” (Mescher, J. 2006). Climbing overhead the outskirts of Carroll, the geometric landscape of the county comes into panoramic view. Within minutes, Jerry is approaching Halbur, and as he flies over the town he dips his wings and banks to the right.

As the Piper Cruiser levels out, Jerry watches the survey lines stretch out for miles over the rolling prairie only to vanish on the horizon, and down below, nestled into the neat patchwork of rectangular fields on the edge of town, is the Mescher farmstead, the homeplace of his family for three generations. As the drama of repetition unfolds below, the abstract design of the rectangular grid, articulated by fences, roads, farm buildings and, at times, crops themselves, reveals its geometric eloquence. Jerry loves the airborne perspective; from the air, he can see all the rectangular sections at once, and he can appreciate more clearly the archetypical shape of the Mescher farmscape and the
reiteration of its geometric socio-spatial patterning across the midwestern landscape. Flying overhead the scene, Jerry reflects upon his place in the Mescher narrative and takes measure of his portion and the Mescher family’s collective cultural inheritance. The elevated vantage point allows him to appreciate the geo-social alignment of his family’s heritage with that of his neighbours, near and far.

**Common Builders**

Cosgrove argues that the American landscape “embodies the different sets of experiences of practical shapers and theoretical designers” (Cosgrove 1998, p.162). Stilgoe proposes that there is a dichotomy implicit in the resultant landscape, “between common and professional designer”. He argues that, while “well-read men who understood the theories of geography” may have directed the colonial project, “people much less literate and far more traditional actually shaped the land” (Stilgoe 1982, p.4). Describing the situation during the colonial period, Stilgoe writes:

> Very few cartographers and surveyors and spatial theorists migrated to the New World…. Although the wilderness was occasionally mapped and platted and otherwise ordered by literate professionals familiar with innovative ideas, almost invariably it was shaped by tradition, by old-country husbandmen eager to plant old country crops in fields shaped by old-country standards (Stilgoe 1982, pp. 4-5).

Under the federal government of the new United States, land policy continued to be moulded by a mixture of common practice - Stilgoe’s “little tradition” – and the “great tradition” of “the literate, innovative minority of scholars, rulers and merchants, and of professional surveyors and architects” (Stilgoe 1982, p.4). Cosgrove also attributes the
formation of the American landscape to twin traditions: the “direct labour” of settlers who were “drawn dominantly from the middling classes of England, the Rhineland, the Low Countries and northern France”, on the one hand, and those who discovered, mapped, and controlled the settlement of America, on the other. This latter group was heavily influenced by Italian Renaissance ideas, and latterly, French classicism and rationalism, and was composed of “Italian and Iberian merchants and navigators, Elizabethan and Jacobean courtiers and gentlemen, [and] American patricians…such as Thomas Jefferson” (Cosgrove 1984, p.162). The inscription of the American landscape was achieved by both “common” designers (Stilgoe 1982, p.4), who shaped the land “with axe and plough” (Cosgrove 1984, p.162), and professional designers, who shaped the land “in their minds or on paper” (Cosgrove 1984, p.162).

As Stilgoe points out, the grid may have imposed an abstract uniform order on the land but “it was the individual farm families who settled the spaces defined by the rectilinear survey and created the distinct landscape” (Stilgoe 1982, p.107). Notwithstanding its abstract modern geometry, the grid embodied important aspects of traditional measure, such as the statute mile and the square 640-acre allotment. It encouraged common enterprise and was embraced by Americans because it was easy to know and easy to build within (Stilgoe 1982, p.133). Today, even as the rural landscape begins to reflect more and more the demise of the agrarian ideal, “traditional, local forms”, such as the family farmstead with its rectilinear fences and folk architecture, coexist with the rectangular grid, the creation of “innovative nationalism” (Stilgoe 1982, p.133).
Over three generations, Fred, Albert and Jerry Mescher have husbanded their portion of Midwestern land in Carroll County, Iowa. As common builders and designers, engaged in the construction of farmscape and habitat, each, in his turn, has contributed in a modest but significant way to the creation of the local landscape of the region. In order to approach an appreciation of the meaningfulness of their engagement with the land, it is necessary to consider their farming practices as common builders and designers within the national context of the historical formation of the American geo-social landscape.

**Square with the World**

Despite the uniformity of the surrounding landscape of Carroll County, it is clear that Jerry Mescher does not experience the farm itself as a single homogenous space. His stories about growing up there reveal a significant distinction between his experiences of, and affective relationships with, the indoor and outdoor spaces that constitute the farmscape. Indoors, the parlour is the most highly charged domestic space and the focal point of the Mescher social and musical narrative. It was here that Albert Mescher developed his bone-playing style, under the gaze of his son, Jerry. Over time, Jerry took his place alongside Albert in the parlour, and father and son developed a harmonious relationship there. The transmission of the Mescher musical style took place indoors, where Albert and Jerry worked together to synchronise sound and gesture, movement and intention.

Outdoors, on the land, the relationship was more dissonant, and father and son found it hard to pull together. Despite the fraught nature of his outdoor, working relationship with
Albert, Jerry acknowledges that, in his own farm work, he now practices a style of husbandry, which, notwithstanding technological and agricultural developments, is similar in significant ways to his father’s. In addition to skills in animal husbandry, crop cultivation, machine operation and maintenance, and general farm management practices, which he transmitted, directly and indirectly, to Jerry, Albert also passed on a set of values pertaining to work ethic and agrarian ideals, and a socio-spatial sensibility that is determined by both utilitarian and aesthetic imperatives. All told, Jerry inherited a relationship with space, which was prefigured in profound ways by his father’s.

Jerry is very much his father’s son; “I am”, as he put it, “built like my father” (Mescher, J. 2006). Jerry’s farming practices, style of husbandry and agrarian worldview are, by and large, inherited from Albert. When Jerry worked alongside his father on the farm, it was Albert who determined the division of labour. Father and son may have performed as a duet in the parlour, sharing in the same groove, but when they worked together on the land, even after Jerry began to work fulltime as a farmer in 1960, his subservience to his father’s authority was irrefutable. According to Jerry, his father’s distribution of the various farming tasks was clear-cut; Albert carried out all of the planting and the maintenance of the farm machinery—tasks which Jerry was clearly interested in undertaking but from which he was precluded. Albert delegated the “rough stuff” to his son: support tasks, such as the preparation—or, “harrowing down”—of the fields before planting (Mescher, J 2006). Certain jobs, especially those requiring a high level of expertise, were never delegated to Jerry. He suggests that Albert believed that nobody
else could do these jobs as well as he could. Not until his father passed away in 1967, therefore, did Jerry plant a row of corn himself, or change the oil in a tractor.

As a result of Albert’s reluctance to instruct his son directly in some aspects of the farm work, Jerry learned many of his farming skills indirectly, through watching his father carry out certain tasks over and over again, year after year. Although he regrets the lack of “physical entanglement” with important aspects of farm work while he was working for his father, Jerry acknowledges the good overall training he received from him (Mescher, J. 2006).

According to Jerry, his father was “really particular” in his work; every row of corn, for example, had to be so straight that it was “like you shot a bullet over every stalk” (Mescher, J. 2006). Albert applied similar meticulous standards to all aspects of farm work, including animal husbandry. At a time when they were raising three hundred hogs, all by hand, not only did they clean every hog pen every night, they also “wiped their butts from the day they were born until they went to market”. That, as Jerry wryly points out, is “where you talk about the perfection” (Mescher, J. 2006). Jerry’s sister, Bernie, describes her father as “a very particular person” and a hardworking man of principle: “very hardworking in what he believed in” (Mescher, B. 2006). Brother and sister both suggest that Albert inherited his perfectionism, and a stern nature, from his own father, Fred Mescher. Fred was first generation German-American and Bernie suggests that he practiced a strict code of behavior which was, to some extent, culturally inflected. She also believes that Fred passed on to his children a certain reluctance to “express themselves” or to “let on the very things they were sensitive to” (Mescher, B. 2006).
Bernie believes that Albert was “a product of how he grew up”, and that as a result of his own father being very strict, he “followed through with his perfection” (Mescher, B. 2006).

Bernie is in no doubt, either, about the provenance of her brother’s perfectionism: “He is”, she says, “like my dad in that way” (Mescher, B. 2006). Jerry, himself, concedes that he is heir to his father’s meticulous nature and dedication to precision and orderliness. He also recognises that he inherited aspects of his father’s temper and fastidiousness. Jerry acknowledges that his spatial sensibilities, including his appreciation for straight lines of corn, well-maintained machinery and buildings, a clean and tidy farm, and symmetry of design, all come directly to him from his father. He hints at the underlying ethical and aesthetic dimensions of this inherited spatial ethos when he talks of his own need to create “an environment that you love to work in” (Mescher, J. 2006). Clutter and asymmetry, above all else, are antithetical to the Mescher spatial ethos and Jerry, like his father before him, is resolute in his efforts to prevent them from spoiling the farmscape.

If you keep it up gradually and keep everything cleaned up, it’s no problem to keep a farm place and get rid of the clutter; pick something up if something’s awry or something. Don’t let it lay, otherwise it accumulates and then pretty soon everything is trash and then you don’t know where to start…I always believed in havin’ a nice lookin’ farm and have a place where you had the trees and everything, and it was wonderful working. And then keep it nice; put some gravel roads in, keep the grass so you don’t chew it all up.

This particular spatial sensibility was not inherited by all of Albert’s children. Jerry’s brother, Paul, for example, has not displayed the same fastidiousness about orderliness or
tidiness. On the contrary, his brother, according to Jerry, is “just the opposite” to him in that regard. Jerry puts the difference down to genetics, claiming that his brother took after his mother, that he “had too much Shankleburg” in his genes. Paul went to work for Jurgen’s Produce and Feed Company in Carroll after high school because there wasn’t enough work for the two sons on the farm. He went on, later, to work as a clerk for West Central Cooperative, in nearby Ralston. For a period of time after Albert passed away, Paul also ran his own farm. Jerry helped him out with ploughing and raising hogs, and he experienced, at close quarters, his brother’s indifference to the aesthetic dimensions of spatial organisation.

“His emphases were probably not as material out here as mine were. I mean he didn’t care about the buildings or how things looked…I always felt good when I could…see a nice place, all the buildings nice - I enjoyed working there. You know, some people, I don’t know how they can work with the trash, the junk.”

Jerry admits to being so disturbed by the clutter on his brother’s farm that he would sometimes bribe Paul’s children to tidy it up.

“I would bribe his kids when I went down there…I’d give ‘em an airplane ride if they clean up the farm. They would, and get the bicycles all put away, and everything laying around, junky…I don’t even look…He don’t have the care.”

Bernie, on the other hand, keeps a very tidy homeplace in Miami, Florida, and she admits that she is also a perfectionist. Jerry confirms that his sister is very “particular”, and he notes the co-incidence of this personality trait with their shared desire and ability to learn to play Albert’s bones arrangements: “I like it perfect” he admits, and “it rubs off on Bernie because it makes her a better bones player too. We do it with such ease” (Mescher, J. 2006). Jerry points out that for all three Mescher bones players, this shared perfectionism manifests itself in both spatial and musical practices; it “spills over in your
work environment, in your hobbies; you like everything to be to the penny, or precision—’cause you know if you’re particular out there...yeah, you’re goin’ to be particular in the way you play a number or how you arrange it and how it will sound” (Mescher, J. 2006).

The performance of Albert’s bones compositions requires a commitment to the detail of their musical geometry. Successful expression of the Mescher musical style requires both an intimate understanding of the geometric structures of Albert’s bones arrangements and the technical competence to articulate them with accuracy and precision. Intrinsic to the Mescher bones tradition is a commitment to beat-for-beat oral transmission and a precision of articulation that requires great attention to detail and a desire for perfection. The detail is already sculpted into the bones compositions themselves and it is Mescher practice to reproduce the arrangements precisely in every performance. As Jerry explains it, the Mescher style of bones playing “is all kinda precision, laid out, memorized, played exact the same way; if you played it once you’d play it ten times the same, every time played the same way” (Mescher, J. 2006).

Albert and Jerry carried out this practice of memorising and repeating for years, as they played together in the parlour, working towards the perfection of a synchronised performance of Albert’s bones arrangements. In the process, they developed a musicality that was expressed in both the bones arrangements themselves and in their performance of them. Mescher musicality, like Mescher spatiality, was, and continues to be,
determined by a taste for orderliness, symmetry and precision, and the avoidance of ‘clutter’ in both performance and design.

In recent years Jerry has had the opportunity to share the experience of this musicality with Bernie. After several years of instruction and practice, Bernie has developed the same “feeling” (Mescher, B. 2006) for the style that Jerry shared with his father.

I propose that this is a ‘feeling’ for the orderliness and symmetry in both musical design and articulation that characterise the Mescher musical style, or musicality. Bernie, as we have seen, inherited important aspects of her father’s spatiality, and, in more recent years, she has developed a musicality that allows her to give temporal expression to her inherited aesthetic sensibilities. Jerry concedes that when he plays with his sister, despite their shared perfectionism, it is not – indeed, cannot be – “perfect all the time”, and “mistakes” do occur (Mescher, J. 2006). When mistakes occur during the performance of a ‘number’ – due to inaccurate or imprecise articulation of a rhythm pattern, for example – they are perceived by Jerry and Bernie to ”clutter” up the music (Mescher, J. 2006). Clutter, then, spoils the Mescher desire for perfection in musical performance and is revealed as antithetical to the practice of Mescher musicality and Mescher spatiality.

Clutter is also proscribed by the Mescher aesthetic because it effectively mars the geometric symmetry that constitutes the primary aesthetic imperative of Mescher spatial and musical design. Mescher spatiality and musicality are reflexive of a singular aesthetics of geometric measure. As we have seen, this aesthetic sensibility is expressed
in both spatial and musical performance practices. This aesthetic sensibility is also expressed in the formal design, or composition, of Mescher space and music. I propose that Mescher musicality is constituted by and constitutive of a “sense of order” (Noble and Cleek 1996, p.135)—or aesthetics of measure—which is inscribed in Albert’s symmetrical bones compositions and given absolute expression in the unison duet performances of father and son, and latterly, of brother and sister. I propose, also, that an analogous aesthetics of symmetrical measure informs the design of Mescher space and that this aesthetic is most clearly expressed in the formal construction of the Mescher farmscape: in particular, in the symmetrical spatial configuration of the barns and various other buildings on the farm.

The symmetrical design of Albert’s bones arrangements, and the aesthetics of measure inscribed therein, will be discussed and analysed in chapter 7. Here we continue our discussion of Mescher spatiality with a brief exposition on the design of the Mescher farmstead. The wider context for this dimension of Mescher spatiality is the geometrically inscribed landscape of which the Halbur farm is a constituent part. As Noble and Cleek point out, there is a pattern to the “basic arrangements” of farm building in those areas of the United States that were surveyed using a rectangular grid system which sees all buildings aligned to the cardinal points of the compass (Noble and Cleek 1996, p.135). All of the buildings on the Mescher farm are so aligned, in the same manner as are the annual crop rows that celebrate the symmetrical aesthetic, and the fences which mark the rectangular seam around the property and stitch it into the surrounding patchwork of farms which forms the landscape of Carroll County. The
Meschers share in a regional spatiality, the style of which is prefigured in the (historically) constructed midwestern landscape. This careful positioning and configuration of their local built environment aligns the Mescher practice of habitat making with a meta-spatiality that has a rich ideological history.

While farmers build barns and other structures because they need them to satisfy a variety of agricultural demands - primarily the storage of crops or machinery and the shelter of livestock – scholars have subjected them to a wide variety of interpretations: as aesthetic structures, symbols of traditional rural values, artifacts of ethnic architecture, engineering achievements, and so on (Hart 1996, pp.296-297). Barns – “the most imposing structures on the rural landscape” (Hart 1996, p.296) – have perhaps received more scholarly attention than any other aspect of rural architecture. For cultural geographers, barns and other buildings on the farmstead are primary physical expressions of vernacular culture (Groth and Wilson, pp. 1-22). For Stilgoe, the farmstead is an intrinsic part of the vernacular, or “common”, landscape of America: a “space of daily activity”, which has remained “locally controlled and shaped chiefly by tradition”, as opposed to national space which is shaped and controlled by innovative professional designers (Stilgoe1982, p.134). Stilgoe’s distinction between common and professional landscapes is reflected in the literature on vernacular landscapes; based on his survey of the literature published before the mid-1980s, Riley offers the following definition of the such built environments: “a human-made outdoor setting not of a type usually attributed to design professionals” (Alanen, A.R. 2000, p.114).
Since the 1960s, the study of vernacular culture has become a hallmark of a wide range of disciplines from art history to women’s studies (Alanen 2000, p.114). Along with cultural geographers, folklorists, in particular, have given special attention to the impress of human habitation on the landscape. In folklore scholarship, farmsteads are considered amongst those “forms and artifacts” which are “sequentially placed on the natural environment by folk occupants” to create the “folk cultural landscape” (Carney 1998, pp.11-12). For folklife scholars, farmstead buildings belong to the category of ‘material culture’, or ‘artifacts’: such physical expressions of human beings as are “tangible, physical objects that we can see, touch, or smell, such as buildings or food” (Carney 1998, p.2). Alanen points out that the term ‘folk’ usually refers only to those “traditional facets” of vernacular culture that “do not change in light of popular taste or practice” (Alanen 2000, p.114). Similarly, Carney states that all folk culture, including folk landscapes and architecture, “must demonstrate stability and continuity” and are the products of an “informal, personal, everyday lifestyle…rather than the formal, impersonal, and institutionalized way of life” (Carney 1998, p.2). Folklorist Henry Glassie, too, highlights the diachronic conservatism of folk materials, while at the same time acknowledging the great regional diversity in folk cultural expression; Glassie notes that folk material “exhibits major variation over space and minor variation through time, while the products of popular or academic culture exhibit minor variation over space and major variation through time” (Alanen 2000, p.114).

In this discussion of the Mescher farmscape, I am not, however, concerned with an assessment of the farm buildings themselves as examples of folk cultural architecture. In
the context of my exploration of the Mescher spatial aesthetic, and, in particular, the
defining role of symmetrical measure in that aesthetic, I am, rather, more concerned with
the orientation of the buildings in space. This orientation in space is directed by a
constructed human (regionally-inflected) spatiality and, as such, it too may be considered
a cultural artifact. The orientation of the individual farm buildings and the overall
configuration, or ensemble, of the built environment of the farmstead is determined by a
spatial sensibility, which, itself, correlates to a particular worldview - a concept which
Geertz defines as “a community's picture of the way things are, their concept of nature, of
self, and of society” and “a comprehensive idea of how the world is ordered” (Curry,
J.M. 2000, p.694). It is through an assessment of the orientation of the buildings in space –
read as an expression of Mescher spatiality, and, in particular, the aesthetics of symmetrical
measure which regulates it – that the connection between the meta-spatiality of the grid and
Mescher worldview may be revealed.

On the Mescher farm, the house, barns, corncrib, grain bins, tool shop, and machine shed
are all aligned due north and south, and with each other. The Mescher farmstead is, as
Jerry describes it, “all lined up and looks square with the world” (Mescher, J. 2006). In
his design and construction over time of the various buildings, which still, today, largely
constitute the Mescher built farmscape, Albert gave expression to his appreciation for
spatial order and uniformity. Jerry inherited his own receptivity to the geometric
configuration of the buildings on the farm directly from his father.

I knew dad; he'd always line something up when he built it 'cause he had started
building the cow barn and the corn crib, [and] the two hog barns, and, as I
noticed, it was always lined up with another building. It had a position. It kept
everything uniform...He said he wanted to make a farm place where everything
was uniform and where every building was set either straight north or south or
east or west so they wasn’t caddy-corned, tucked in here. So, everything had a
nice alignment…When he built the building he would line it up, like the hog barn
down there; then it came across over here to the cow barn, and the cow barn was
lined up; he lined that cow barn right up, front of it with the side of that building
way over here. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry acknowledges that there are other ways to design and build a farmstead, but he is
nonetheless critical of those farms that display no sense of order in the arrangement of
buildings; where there is no uniformity in the built environment of the farm, the
farmscape is diminished.

A lot of farm places that I see the buildings are never really true north or true
south; they’re always a little kiddywapis or they’re put in at an angle like
somebody just said, ‘Well drop it here’. Didn’t really…take a lot of time to look
it over. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry has added several buildings to the farm since his father passed away. The aesthetic
imperatives of symmetry, uniformity, and alignment with the world have had a profound
impact on formation of the spatial design in each case and Jerry has taken great care to
follow his father’s practice of aligning any new structure with the existing buildings on
the farm.

In addition to his affective relationship with the geometry of the farmscape, Jerry’s
spatiality also includes a sensitive to spatial density. When, for example, he was
considering building some grain bins, several years ago, he first imagined placing them in
the yard but changed his mind when he realised that “that would be such congestion”
(Mescher, J. 2006). In the end he put them in the pasture where there was space “to work
with”; as a result, the yard was kept “nice and everything was lined up” (Mescher, J. 2006). Congestion, like clutter, clearly impinges on the Mescher spatial ideal; careful positioning of new buildings in order to avoid the space becoming “clogged up” (Mescher, J. 2006) is an important aesthetic consideration in the overall design of the farmscape.

One of the largest structures on the farm is the machine shed, which Jerry built several years ago. The narrative of its design and construction reveals clearly the essential correlation between Mescher habitat making and the meta-geometry of the grid. The extra-large dimensions of the shed – it measures 153 feet long and 45 feet wide – presented the builders with the difficult task of orienting it accurately to the cardinal points of the compass. Anxious that it would sit “straight with the world”, Jerry took his plane and flew over the farm to check that the foundations of the building were correctly positioned. From the air he could take a visual measure of the position of the staked-out shed on the landscape and compare its orientation with the boundary fences that ran along the 80-acre section boundaries of the property. When they were erected, these fences were aligned with the grid and Jerry was confident that they were “pretty well lined with the world” and would act, therefore, as a reliable visual guide (Mescher, J. 2006).

And so I went up, took the airplane up and kinda flew over the farm, flew away out and then come up on it so I could look at it from the air, see how it was positioned in there, but it was positioned right, straight down the fence line; it was perfect, that I could see from the air.

Jerry also built a corncrib, a horse barn and grain bins and in each case he followed his father’s practice of aligning them with each other. Jerry lined up all of the buildings on
the south side, so that “if you look at one you can look all the way across and everything is in alignment; there’s not one sittin’ this way, but they’re all straight with the world” (Mescher, J. 2006).

In the careful alignment of barns and fences, and ploughed furrows and crops, Albert and Jerry Mescher have sculpted their “corner of the world” (Bachelard [1958] 1994, p.4), and contrived to make a virtue of the prosaic symmetry of the grid. There is a ludic quality to their habitation of the measured landscape: they play along with its orderliness in a performance that elucidates the poetics of humanly bounded space. This is serious play; in a dialectical game, in which “the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter” (Bachelard [1958] 1994, p.5), the Meschers create a sense of home. Through their performance on the rationalised landscape of Carroll County, Albert and Jerry align themselves with the world and illuminate an aesthetic sense of beauty, which is derived from symmetry, precision of measure, regularity and repetition.
Chapter Six

The Machine in the Parlour

“When the piano player jangles the keys, that’s where the bones come in”.

(Jerry Mescher, quoted in Bixby 1988)

Adopting the premise, argued by Feld, and shared by many anthropologists of sound, that “[soundscapes], no less than landscapes…are perceived and interpreted by human actors who attend to them as a way of making their place in and through the world” (Feld 2003, p.226), in this chapter, I tune in to the dialogical relationship between the musical materials and music making practices of the Mescher bones players and the historical formation of the Mescher domestic soundscape, and present a socio-cultural context for the development of Mescher musicality.

I construct an historical context for Albert Mescher’s parlour-bound, socio-musical activities, which began in the late 1910s, when he was still a young boy. My discussion includes an examination of the role of music in the production of Victorian and post-Victorian parlour culture between 1880 and 1930. I am primarily interested in explicating the historical role played by the mechanical player piano, the phonograph, and, to a lesser extent, the radio, in the construction of the musical aesthetics and socio-musical practices of the period. These primary “technologies of sound” (Bull 2003, p.361), which became widely disseminated between 1890 and 1930, have had a profound effect on the habitation and auditory experience of social spaces and they carry keynote status in the Mescher soundscape.
The advent of recorded music and playback technology gave birth to a culture of private domestic music consumption. Home-listening to recorded music emerged as an alternative to the public, communal engagement with music and “gave a powerful boost to the “privatization” of experience, which may be held to be a fundamental aspect of twentieth-century culture’ (Bull 2003, p.360). My representation of the socio-acoustic formation of the early twentieth century Mescher domestic soundscape is, itself, framed by an historical account of the wider acoustic transformation of an increasingly technologised American soundscape in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is to this consideration of the macro-acoustics of the Victorian and immediate post-Victorian era that we now turn.

**The Sound of Progress**

Throughout the nineteenth century in America, the taming of the wilderness produced its own ‘sound’; as settlers moved westward, the “sporadic, unpredictable noise of the frontier” was quashed by the “ordered sound of progress” (Smith 2003 [2000], p.139). The taming of the American wilderness and the recreation of the American landscape was achieved through the mechanism of the federal land ordinances. Denying natural topographical contours, the ordinances mapped a symmetrical order onto the land and regularised the rhythm of the landscape in the name of civilisation and Jefferson’s pastoral ideal. The mapping of an isonomic spatial order onto American lands created the template for an agrarian society and the blueprint for a man-made landscape. In the early years of the Republic, government surveyors and settlers set about transforming what they imagined as a disorderly, noisy wilderness into an ordered and harmonious, civilised
landscape. Progress, and the virtue of human endeavor could be ‘heard’ in the sounds of industriousness, whether in the “rattling of urban hammers”, “the sounds of rural trowels”, the “aural dimension” of emerging markets or the revolution in transport (Smith 2003 [2000], p.139). Smith stresses the predictable and rhythmic nature of the sound of progress, and its power to regulate, control and silence the “visceral and undisciplined” wilderness (Smith 2003 [2000], p.139). The rational geometry of the rectangular grid expedited the advance of the forces of civilisation and the transformation of both rural and urban spatiality in the first half of the nineteenth century. Jefferson’s geometry quietened the landscape and noise came to be associated with wilderness. Sound—the herald of progress—was signified by cadence (Smith 2003 [2000], p.139).

Marx points out that Jefferson (1743-1826) did not foresee the threat to the agrarian way of life posed by the developments of machine technology and urban industrialism; on the eve of industrialisation in America, Jefferson promoted the importation of the powerful steam technology he saw on his visit to England in 1776. Jefferson was confident that the availability of vast tracts of land in America and the wide dispersal of the population would secure the appeal of agriculture and present a formidable obstacle to the spread into the countryside of urban-based industrialism and militate against the insidious effects of the machine on the landscape; believing that “industry, as compared to agriculture, would be of trivial significance”, Jefferson celebrated the advances in steam power and manufacturing (Marx 2000 [1964], p.147). Marx proposes that Jefferson believed that the machine would “blend harmoniously into the open countryside of his native land” once it was “removed from the dark grimy cities of Europe” (Marx 2000 [1964], p.150).
Jefferson imagined that the machine would be assimilated into agrarian life where its power would be harnessed to advance the transformation of the wilderness “into a society of the middle landscape” (Marx 2000 [1964], p.150).

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century the machine captured the imagination of the American public; its power affirmed the “unceasing progress of mankind” (Marx 2000 [1964], p.191) and in its inherent physicality it embodied the “rising tempo of life” (Marx 2000 [1964], p.193). Of all the machines of the age, the locomotive provided the paradigm of progress with its most potent symbol; the sight of this “powerful efficient machine in the landscape” was read by many as a confirmation of “the superiority of the present to the past” (Marx 2000 [1964], p.192). From the 1840s, railroads began to spread out in all directions, connecting city to country and binding the entire socio-spatial landscape “within a tight net of iron nerves” (Loesser 1990, p.481). Marx argues that the locomotive dramatically reconfigured the sense of American space in the second half of the nineteenth century (Marx 2000 [1964], p.31). As each new territory was opened and settled, railroad companies procured vast tracts of land for the construction of railway lines and depots. The train destroyed the physical and metaphorical distance, which, hitherto, had separated urban and rural places; before the invention of the locomotive, city and country had each “been assumed to occupy a more or less fixed location in space” (Marx 2000 [1964], p.31). The locomotive emerged as both symbol and agent of industrial progress and socio-cultural change.
The railroad played a seminal role in the spread of the forces of industrialism throughout America in the second half of the nineteenth century. The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 consolidated the reach of commerce and stimulated production and industrialism further. As the socio-economic reach of the locomotive extended inexorably westwards, the “sensory texture” of American rural life was transformed (Marx 2000 [1964], p.32). The locomotive, often celebrated as the herald of progress, was also “associated with fire, smoke, speed, iron, and noise” and with an aggressive masculinity that penetrated the “tender, feminine, and submissive” rural idyll and disturbed the quietude of the landscape (Marx 2000 [1964], pp.27-29).

The railroad also played a primary role in the spread of modern clock time. Modern time, which was “invented for the railroad schedule—so that raw materials could be transported to the factories, to keep them running, ostinato fashion, and get goods to the towns, cities, and ports, for consumption” (Leppert 1995, p.195), increasingly arrogated traditional agrarian time in order to synchronise rural temporality with the rhythms of commerce. Tension between the sublunary rhythms of traditional agricultural life, wherein farm work cast time in a task-oriented mould (Lipsitz 1990, p.11), and modern clock time, which, regulated industrialised society generally, and the urban factory floor specifically, gradually increased.

The pulse of American life quickened and intensified as the nineteenth century progressed and the proposition that “history becomes louder as society modernizes and industrializes” (Smith 2003 [2000], p.138) takes on a convincing tone in the context of
the accelerated urbanisation and industrialisation of America. Urbanisation and industrialisation were concentrated in the North where the incessant sound of industry was a source of pride for many. By contrast, in the rural south, where the hum of industriousness, rather than the din of industrialism, was celebrated, the quiet plantation soundscape “acted as a counterpoint to the noise of urbanism and industrialism” (Smith 2003 [2000], p.143). Plantation owners cultivated an “ideal of quietude” and a socio-acoustic decorum in order “to regulate the sounds of slaves”, “establish plantation harmony” and “promote a particular vision of social order” (Smith 2003 [2000], p.144). When they turned their ears to the industrial North, plantation owners heard the sound of “industrialism, democratic capitalism, and the unmistakable keynote of reckless modernity” (Smith 2003 [2000], p.144).

As the pulse of progress quickened, many Americans, who otherwise accepted urbanisation and industrialisation as necessary evils, heard the amplified sound of the industrial age to be increasingly dissonant and disagreeable. In the cities of the North, enthusiasm for the increased level of industrialisation in the decades after the Civil War was moderated by concerns over its social and environmental consequences (Wright 1983, p.93). As the steam engine increased the efficiency and capacity of factories, mechanisation accelerated the rhythms of production and amplified the sound of progress. With the advent of assembly-line production systems the machine took control of the tempo of work.

Now the job was brought to man. In order to keep up production it was essential that each man’s task be timed so that the line could be kept flowing and not a moment would be wasted. The speed of the assembly line, which now meant the
speed of production, depended on the speed with which the slowest task could be
done. All this meant timing. (Boorstin 1974, p.363)

Members of the industrial workforce became increasingly anxious about the regulation of
their bodies by the unrelenting rhythms of the machine. The mechanisation of production
on the factory floor had a profound effect on the worker’s relationship to time; Leppert
goes as far as to suggest that the human body itself was regulated in the Victorian\footnote{Leppert is writing about Victorian England but the observation is pertinent to Victorian America.} factory, and “the worker’s body came to be defined by time” (Leppert 1995, p.195).

As the nineteenth century progressed, the noise of industrialism could not be contained in
the city; the encroachment of the dissonant tones of industrialism into more
traditional acoustic environments in rural America was met with great resistance by those
concerned with the preservation of an agrarian lifestyle. Machine technology jarred with
“the bucolic image of America” (Marx 2000 [1964], p.26) and the forces of industrialism
were considered by many to be a threat to the pastoral ideal of rural life and a challenge
to traditional lifestyles. In a manner unforeseen by its architects, the isonomic spatial
design of the American landscape served as an efficient conduit for the centrifugal forces
of an urban-centred industrialism that refused to “remain confined to the traditional
boundaries of the city” (Marx 2000 [1964], p.32); the man-made symmetrical rhythm of
the landscape was synchronous with the pulse of industrial progress that began its gradual
crescendo in the decades before the American civil war. The urban grid, designed to run
“in all directions”, efficiently served the “westward expansion of the sound of the
modern” (Smith 2003 [2000], p.149). One northern advocate of modernisation described
how, in 1850, the city of New York “is stretching forth her restless hands, converting silent fields into crowded streets, and invading all the old peaceful retreats with thousands of her fast-growing population” (Smith 2003 [2000], p.149).

**The Sound of Commerce**

The late nineteenth century surge of industrialisation in America fueled commercialism; manufacturing output increased and “more, better, and cheaper consumer goods” were available for all Americans who could afford them, including farmers (Danbon 1995, p.149). Retailers targeted the rural market and developed effective forms of advertising to make their products “alluring and seductive” (Danbon 1995, p.149). In 1880, 75% of Americans lived outside of major cities in local rural communities that still enjoyed relative economic and cultural autonomy (Clark 1986, p.139). However, as the century came to a close, the sensibilities, socio-cultural patterns and ideals of rural Americans were increasingly reconfigured in response to urban-centred industrialism; by 1900, only 60% of Americans lived outside of the major cities and the relative autonomy of rural life had been “significantly eroded by the rise of professions, the transformation of communications, and, most important, by the emergence of a new culture of consumption” (Clark 1986, p.139).

By the end of the nineteenth century the dissemination throughout America of a rapidly expanding array of consumer products was secured by the vast territorial coverage of the American railroad network.

In the years just after the Civil War, railroads covered the West with spectacular speed. In 1865, when there were 35,085 miles of railroad in the whole United
States, only 3,272 miles were west of the Mississippi. By 1890, when the total national mileage had reached 199,876, the mileage west of the Mississippi came to 72,473, over twice that of the whole nation twenty-five years before. (Boorstin 1974, p.120)

Mail order companies, Sears, Roebuck and Company, and Montgomery Ward built retail empires by exploiting the advances in the transport network to extend their market reach into communities throughout the nation. Together, the railroad and the mail order companies drew “the remote farmer and his family into the new consumption communities” (Boorstin 1974, p.118). Consumption communities were nurtured by the national-brand advertising of products, which was developed as part of the late nineteenth century revolution in marketing; such ‘communities’ were formed of people who were connected by buying and using the same products, rather than “by political persuasion, or by racial or ethnic identity” (Schlereth 1990, p.162). American farmers had always been active in the economic marketplace to some extent, but they became relatively more commercialised during the final decades of the nineteenth century, “partly because they chose to and partly because they had to” (Danbon 1995, p.149). As economic growth led to increased market demand for agricultural goods, farming became more lucrative and farmers and their families had more disposable income to spend on consumer goods.

A rapidly “expanding world of consumption” was revealed to rural people through advertisements in newspapers, farm periodicals and lifestyle magazines, and through the mail-order catalogues of Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck and Company (Danbon 1995, p.149). Established in Chicago in 1872 and 1886, respectively, Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck and Company were the primary catalysts in the spread of consumer
culture in rural America: by 1910, approximately 10 million Americans shopped by mail each year (Schlereth 1991, p.154). Mail-order catalogues—often called ‘Farmer’s Bibles’—“compressed a city’s shopping district into a five-hundred-page volume” for the convenience of farmers and their families (Schlereth 1991, p.154). Danbon proposes that national merchants did not just respond to farmers’ tastes but actually helped to define taste through sophisticated advertising; while the influence on taste was subtle and fell short of determining the needs of farmers, it was indicative of a growing urban hegemony in America, which increasingly cast simple, ‘natural’ agrarian lifestyle in sharp opposition to the cultured life of educated, professional, city people (Danbon 1995, p.150).

The forces of consumer culture showed little regard for the traditional socio-cultural boundaries separating urban and rural life, and, by the turn of the century, small-town regional identity had been significantly influenced by national economics and communications: 60 percent of Americans lived outside major cities in 1900, but the spread of consumer culture ensured that most rural dwellers experienced the influence of urban life (Clark 1986, pp.139-140). Boorstin describes the shift from “cluster communities” to “everywhere communities of consumers and national-brand buyers who would never meet” that was precipitated by the spread of consumer culture into rural life.

This was a movement from the general store, with its gathering of a half-dozen local pundits around the cracker barrel, to the mail-order firm, with its dispersed customer-millions hungering through the half-thousand pages of vivid advertising copy, or waiting at their mailboxes: customer-millions who would never see each other but who still somehow leaned on one another. (Boorstin 1974, p.119)
Products of all kinds, including a wide range of domestic goods, farm machinery, automobiles, bicycles, cosmetics, and health care products, fed a new “culture of consumption” which developed in the late nineteenth century (Clark 1986, pp.139-140).

In order to sell their mass-produced products and open up national markets, manufacturers exploited contemporaneous improvements in communications. The revolution in communications, which began in the final decades of the nineteenth century, was led by several technological innovations, including the invention of the typewriter, linotype, photoengraving, and the sextuplet printing press (Clark 1986, p.139). Circulation of magazines and newspapers was no longer limited to local, specialised audiences and distribution figures rose dramatically. By 1900, the number of daily newspaper titles reached two thousand and the magazine market burgeoned. The American magazine, in general, was transformed in style and contents in the late nineteenth century: formerly “a cultural arbiter of the elite” that shunned crass advertising, it became a “vehicle for middle-class identity and consumerism” (Schlereth 1991, p.160). Dozens of new lower-cost publications “flooded homes and newsstands” and achieved unprecedented levels of circulation (Schlereth 1991, p.160). National corporations used the dramatic increase in subscriptions to magazines and newspapers to extend the reach of their marketing; targeting a national audience, corporations developed aggressive advertising campaigns to build markets for their mass-produced goods. Spending on advertising grew exponentially in the period—from less than $10 million a year in 1865 to $95 million in 1900 (Schlereth 1991, p.157).
The advertising industry, itself, underwent a major transformation in this period (Schlereth 1991, p.157). In the 1880s and 1890s, standard advertising style changed from the relatively timid, testimonial-type endorsement of products, to bolder, more aggressive brand-name promotion; advertising agencies moved away from small classified advertisements which used standard newspaper agate type, towards new formats, including large display advertisements for department stores and manufacturers (Schlereth 1991, p.157). The new breed of professional advertising executives also applied psychological theories to advertising practice and, mindful of the increasingly visual nature of an emerging American popular culture, employed an “ever-expanding iconographic inventory” in their efforts to entice consumers (Schlereth 1991, p.158). Manufacturing companies and retail businesses throughout America developed regional and national markets for their products using these new tactics. Significant increases in product sales were achieved as a result and newspaper and magazine advertising income rose dramatically.

The Sound of Leisure

Industrialisation brought about a gradual separation of work and leisure. The monotony of much industrial work and the crowding of urban spaces led to a growing desire for leisure time. Middle class and working class people had more money to spend on an increasing variety of consumer goods and entertainments; new forms of institutionalised leisure, including amusement parks, vaudeville, cinema, and spectator sports, commercialised leisure activity itself (Schlereth 1991, p.141). Leisure time became more plentiful during the period, as average industrial working hours reduced significantly:
factory workers’ weekly hours decreased from approximately sixty-six hours in 1850, to sixty hours by 1890, and to fifty-five hours by 1914 (Schlereth 1991, p.141). In the cities, the domains of work and leisure gradually became spatially and temporally distinct, and the new forms of public entertainment provided a distraction from work and an alternative site for the expression of new, modern identities.

Commercial recreations, which originated in the cities, were also exported to the countryside, where they presented a challenge to traditional agrarian socio-cultural patterns. Danbon cautions against overstating the impact of Victorian, urban-born socio-cultural practices on rural America; while many rural people embraced consumer culture and aspired to urban standards, agrarian sensibilities and agricultural practices continued to be a dynamic socio-cultural force in the lives of most farmers and their families (Danbon 1995, p.90). The strict separation of work and leisure, which was realised by the urban middle and working classes, was rarely as fully achieved in rural farming communities. Nonetheless, as the nineteenth century progressed, rural people did subscribe more and more to the new forms of entertainment, just as they consumed the ever-expanding array of consumer products, which emanated from the city (Schlereth 1991, p.209). Despite the slower encroachment of commodified entertainment into rural life, the constructed spatiality and temporality of public commercialised leisure was well established all across America by the end of the nineteenth century.
The Sound of Music

The late nineteenth century also marks the beginning of music’s industrialisation and commodification. The market for musical instruments and sounds expanded dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century, and between 1890 and 1930 the commodification of music was fully achieved. By the end of this period the music industry was flourishing and the modern technologised soundscape of America was established. The commodification of the piano and the emergence of the sheet music industry constitute important aspects of the late nineteenth century industrialisation of music that marks the rise of popular culture (Taylor, 2007, p.284). Scott argues that “the production, promotion, and marketing” of the sheet music to parlour songs, and of the pianos that provided musical accompaniment to them, marks the beginning of the modern music industry: ‘the bourgeois “popular song” was the first product which showed how music might be profitably incorporated into a system of capitalist enterprise’ (quoted in Leppert 1993, p.206). In what might be considered a triumph of consumerism and highbrow Victorian culture, piano manufacturers and retailers competed successfully with a vast array of mass-produced consumer items, including “the motor car, phonograph, radio, movies, and countless consumer goods” (Roell 1994, p.101).

In a prelude to the late nineteenth century commodification of music in America, the Massachusetts’ carpenter and businessman, Joseph Hale, entered the New York piano trade in the 1860s, not as an artisan or musician, but strictly out of commercial interest; Hale boldly declared that he wanted to democratise the piano market by reducing the price of pianos in order to make them as procurable as “a cooking stove or a sewing
“machine” by the “middle and industrial classes” (Hoover 2002, p.52). Hale went on to produce several thousand pianos, which retailed for about one third of the price of the established ‘name’ brands. Other manufacturers and traders followed Hale’s lead and the market for low-priced pianos expanded dramatically. Piano manufacturers and retailers invented hire-purchase schemes and installment plans, and developed innovative and aggressive marketing strategies in order to increase sales of their products. The piano industry extended its reach beyond the cities and targeted consumers in rural America, selling its products through retailers and mail order companies, including Sears, Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward (Roell 1994, p.96). Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck and Company sold low-priced pianos to families with modest incomes; in 1896, Sears, Roebuck and Company listed four upright pianos ranging in price from $125 to $178 (Hoover 2002, p.55). The development of major new markets for the piano and piano sheet music in the Midwestern region during the final decades of the century attests to the spread of consumer culture across rural America; as the piano moved west, several new firms opened in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Iowa and elsewhere, and markets in the region of the Great Lakes and the Mississippi Valley grew most rapidly, accounting for much of the increased production of the instrument (Loesser 1990, p.549).

In the Midwest, W.W. Kimball of Chicago was inspired by Hale to open a piano factory in the 1880s, in order to produce affordable pianos and reed organs for a target market which included “the farmer on the prairie, the miner in his cabin, the fisherman in his hut, the cultivated mechanic in his neat cottage in the thriving town” (Hoover 2002, p.52).
Leading American piano manufacturers, such as Steinway and Sons, were threatened by the emergence of a mass market for cheaper pianos. Steinway traded on tradition, quality, artisanship, and prestige and relied on elitist advertising of its highbrow credentials to cultivate the market for its products (Hoover 2002, p.52). Steinway and other manufacturers, such as Chickering, promoted the association of their instruments with highbrow culture through their sponsorship of concerts and tours by famous European pianists, such as Anton Rubenstein, Paderewski, Rosenthal, Bauer and Carreno (Ehrlich 1990, p. 132). In addition, piano makers and retailers appealed to middle-class values and emphasised the associations of the piano with the Victorian ideal; the extra-musical symbolic freight of the instrument—“a blend of the work ethic, the ideology of domesticity, the moral value of music, and…middle-class life” (Roell 1994, p.101)—was promoted as a critical aspect of the overall marketing of the instrument. The emphasis on the cultural coefficient of their products as a critical facet of their marketing campaigns sets the piano trade apart from their competitors in the consumer market: “Piano makers pioneered strategies of advertising and selling that were characterised by a sense of cultural mission, strategies that imbued their products with notions of therapeutic fulfillment and Victorian morality” (Roell 1994, p.101).

**Upright Piano**

Advertisers continued to sell the cultural affiliations of the piano even after the price of mass-produced domestic upright pianos fell significantly (Roell 1994, p.96). The reduction in the price of mass-produced upright pianos, which used less of materials in production, and therefore cost less to produce, contributed to the dramatic growth in the
domestic market for the instrument (Loesser 1990, p.549). In the process, the piano trade contributed to the development of consumer culture and to the dissemination of the Victorian mythology of “the piano in the American home” (Roell 1994, p.102). The efflorescence of the piano trade in the decades after the Civil War reflects the enormous and sustained growth in demand for domestic upright pianos, demand which was also served by the contemporaneous emergence of the modern sheet music industry; in the 1890s, piano sheet music production doubled with hundreds of publishers operating in cities and towns across America producing easy-to-play piano pieces for the domestic market (Erhlich 1990, p.132).

The development of the upright piano precipitated a dramatic shift in piano culture in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In the 1850s, most of the annual output in America of some 9,000 pianos was accounted for by square pianos, with just a few uprights and a handful of grand pianos produced by the Chickering firm (Ehrlich 1990, p.48). In the 1860s, the square piano remained the most popular instrument on the American market, even though European makers had discontinued the production of the square-shaped model by that time (Loesser 1990, p.462; Good 2002c, p.51). The upright model did not begin to challenge the dominance of the square until Steinway introduced innovations in upright piano design in the 1860s.

The earliest known upright piano was made in 1739 by the Italian Domenico del Mela and similar instruments were made in Germany in the mid-eighteenth century (Good 2002a, pp.30-31). During the final decade of the eighteenth century, the English piano
maker, William Stodart patented an “upright grand Pianoforte in the form of a bookcase”, while his German and Austrian piano-making counterparts made an instrument called the “giraffé” (Good 2002b, p.44). These early uprights were based on the principal of turning the body of the grand piano upright into a vertical plane, thus reducing the floor space needed for the instrument. In each case the piano maker faced the creative challenge of designing an instrument that satisfied the somewhat incompatible demands of sonority and restricted domestic space (Good 2002d, pp.57-58). Despite their space-saving qualities, upright grand pianos could not satisfy the demand for smaller and cheaper pianos that emerged as the market for domestic pianos increased in the nineteenth century. The “cottage piano” was one of the earliest uprights to appeal to a growing middle-class market eager to emulate the cultural practices of the wealthy upper class; produced by Robert Wornum of London in the second decade of the nineteenth century, the instrument, which was smaller than most modern uprights, was suitable for modest homes and budgets (Good 2002b, p.45). In America, John R. Parker of the Franklin Music Manufactory produced the first indigenous ‘upright’ piano in 1813 but the instrument failed to compete in any major way with the square piano (Loesser 1990, p.462).

Fifty years later, in 1863, the first upright piano to achieve market success in America was built by Steinway and Sons; the design included several of the critical innovations which characterised the Steinway grand pianos, including the one-piece iron frame, cross-stringing and heavier felt-covered hammers (Ehrlich 1990, pp. 50-51). The Steinway upright piano became the model for other manufacturers of the instrument and
its development marks a watershed in the history of domestic music making in America and Europe (Ehrlich 1990, p. 50). While continuing to improve the concert grand and square pianos, Steinway turned to the mass production of upright pianos and revolutionised the piano market. In 1866, uprights accounted for less than 3% of the total American piano output: by 1896, the proportion had risen to 97% of total output (Ehrlich 1990, p. 52). In the same period, the American piano business expanded dramatically: by 1900, indigenous production of pianos had increased sevenfold and was growing 5.6 times faster than the population (Roell 1989, p.32), and half of the pianos produced in the world were manufactured in America (Ehrlich 1990, p. 128). The density of piano distribution in America continued to increase during the opening decades of the twentieth century (Loesser 1990, p.520). Between 1890 and 1910, pianos multiplied more than six times as fast as the population (Loesser 1990, p.549). Production peaked in 1909, when 364,545 pianos were produced with a total value of $58.5 million (Roell 1989, p.32).

The mass production of domestic upright pianos and the intensive use of modern advertising techniques by piano manufacturers and retailers at the turn of the century implicated the instrument in the consumer culture of the era. The development of consumption communities around music was an echo of the dramatic changes that were occurring in all aspects of American cultural life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Roell 1989, p.45). The acceleration in piano production was part of the wider phenomenon of modernisation and consumer culture that was overtaking Victorian America (Roell 1989, p.32). Population growth, increased levels of prosperity and the growing “desire for home music and social emulation” acted as fundamental economic
determinants of the expansion of the piano trade (Ehrlich 1990, p. 128). The piano industry, and the music industry in general, were caught up in the late nineteenth century revolution in American culture, when “people sought to be identified, and were identified, not by who they were or what they made, but by what they purchased and what they consumed” (Roell 1989, p.45).

Several scholars describe the period from 1890 to 1910 as the “American heyday of the piano”: the years when “young people were most likely to gather around it and sing” (Roell 1989, p.32), and the instrument “gave the most substantial pleasure of which it was capable to the greatest number of people” (Loesser 1990, pp.548-549). The Victorian home in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century was commonly considered to be “incomplete without a piano” (Roell 1994, p.85). Music played an important role in Victorian parlour activities, and like the home, music, itself, was considered as a ‘place’ of repose: “an oasis of calm amid the upheavals associated with industrialization and urbanization” (Roell 1994, p.87); a place of quiet consonance away from the noisy incessant rhythms of the industrial soundscape (Smith 2003 [2000], p.150). In order to achieve the Victorian ideological imperatives of quietude, comfort, cosmopolitanism and cultural edification, it was necessary to import products of the commercial world into the parlour. More than any other domestic consumer product, the upright piano came to signify middle-class cultural values and it emerged as “the ubiquitous and unrivalled instrument of the bourgeois home” in the late nineteenth century (Leppert 1992, p. 111). The domestic parlour was the locus of Victorian socio-spatial and socio-musical practices and parlour making acted as the driving force for Victorian consumer culture, including
the commodification of music. In order to develop my exposition on the role of music in the production of the Victorian and post-Victorian parlour culture between 1880 and 1930, I turn now to discuss the socio-acoustic formation of the American Victorian parlour and the central role that was played by the piano, therein. I begin the discussion with a focus on the socio-spatial formation of the Victorian parlour.

**Parlour**

My discussion of the formation of the early twentieth-century American parlour follows the orientation of the socio-historical scholarship on American domestic spaces, through which prism the parlour might be understood as both a “collective artifact”, constituted by an “assemblage of separate objects” (Schlereth 1992, p.17), and “a complicated environment of social behavior” in which meaningful social interaction took place “between genders, classes, and generations” (Schlereth 1992, p.3). Home ownership and parlour making, while not necessarily defining one as a Victorian, did potentially serve as a means of participating in Victorian culture – “the most important culture-defining group in nineteenth-century America” (Grier 1988, p.65). The prevalence of parlour making in prosperous working-class homes by the 1890s, reflects the “powerful urge on the part of ordinary families to give social ceremony its due” (Grier 1992, p.51), and the aspirations of a growing number of working-class families to “belong to” Victorian culture, (Grier 1988, p.65). In making parlours for themselves, families in the lower social classes claimed the cultural power of their superiors in genteel society and in government (Bushman 1992, p.273).
Victorians believed that the values appropriate to “a well-ordered, prosperous, capitalist society” could best be cultivated within the moral climate of the home (Griswold 1982, p.171). Church and school were additional loci of family morality, where the values of hard, honest work, frugality and morality were reinforced (Roell 1994, p.86); family, however, was “the chief agent of socialization” in Victorian culture (Griswold 1982, p.171). The family moulded the personal morality and social responsibility of Victorians in order to maintain social harmony and assuage anxieties about urbanisation, industrialisation and “the disintegrating effects of rapid social change” (Griswold 1982, p.172). Victorians constructed the home as both a metaphorical and a physical refuge from the industrial world of work: “a shelter from the anxieties of industrial society and a shelter for the moral and spiritual values that the commercial spirit was threatening” (Roell 1989, p.13). The function of home as refuge—a place of retreat away from commercialism and industry—intensified after the Civil War, and, in late 19th century Victorian America, the home was considered the “cornerstone of society” (Roell 1989, p.3). This function of the family was not restricted to the middle class: Victorian values were based on traditional rural and small town values, “where home, church, and school were treasured centers of family life” and this outlook, therefore, resonated with the majority of rural Americans (Roell 1994, p.86). In addition, the hegemony of Victorian culture in nineteenth century America ensured that families from all class backgrounds “translated the didactic moralism of the middle class into the moral code of common Americans” (Griswold 1982, p.172). Throughout rural and urban America, Victorian domestic culture provided stability in the face of commercial culture and industrial upheaval (Roell 1994, p.86).
Grier describes the home, and its “web of ideas, objects and images”, as one of Victorian culture’s “most important and complicated symbols” (Grier 1988, p.3). In the American Victorian era, the house emerged as a key site for the performance of socio-spatial culture. Its division into separate special-use rooms, including the parlour, kitchen, and library, satisfied a middle-class desire for a clear delineation between the private and public in the socio-spatial construction of domestic spaces (Moran 2006, p. 29).7 Influential nineteenth century commentators on women’s roles in society, such as poet Lydia Sigourney and the author and educator Catharine Beecher, advocated strongly for “separate areas for family life, personal privacy, and household production” (Wright 1981, p.77).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the parlour had become the “quintessential Victorian room”, and its formal, often ceremonial, function as a semi-public, non-utilitarian space was well established. The parlour was used for a range of social activities including “formal calling and theatricals”, weddings, funerals, and family celebrations (Grier 1992, p.53), and, more than any other room in the Victorian house, it expressed the dynamics of Victorian culture (Grier 1992, p.50).

The parlour was common in rural homes by the end of the nineteenth century. With the development of consumer culture and the commercialisation of society in the latter part of the century, urban America increasingly set cultural standards for the whole of

7 Special-use rooms began to replace the multifunctional space of the pre-industrial European house in the seventeenth-century democratic society of Holland, in response to new social ideals of comfort and privacy (Moran 2006, p. 29).
America (Danbon 1995, p.89). Access to the “popular ideas, tastes and goods of middle-
class consumer culture” facilitated the expression of cosmopolitanism amongst ordinary rural people and tastes in parlour design and furnishings, which originated in the cities, spread rapidly into the countryside (Grier 1988, p.74). While the domestic ideal filtered down to rural America, the fundamental socio-spatial ideals of the urban middle class could not, however, be fully realised on the family farm because the home was the centre of the family business. In addition, women and children played an active role in working life of the farm, making the strict separation of men’s and women’s spheres impossible; farm women, by and large, remained attentive to urban social standards, but the construction of the home as a sphere, separate from the male world of work, could not be achieved to the same degree on the farm (Danbon 1995, p.90). The practice of parlour making was, nonetheless, common in rural America and, as Scherleth’s research shows, the socio-spatial construction of the rural parlour, or “best room”, was similar, in most important respects, to parlours in urban America (Schlereth 1991, pp.119-121).

In the distinctly gendered domestic culture of Victorian America, women were responsible for the creation of home as “a private, womanly haven, away from the burdens of male professional work” (Moran 2006, p.29). In the Victorian era, the home was a place where the woman “was more fully realized than the man” (Hildebrandt 1985, p.124). The parlour was imagined as a refuge from the outside ‘male’ world of industry, commerce, and business, as “a moral haven for the proper nurturing of children and the transmission of cultural values” (Grier 1992, p.33), and “the source of spiritual education” (Wright 1983, p.109). Ironically, parlour making required that the middle-
class Victorian housewife become “a diligent consumer” who filled the parlour with “worldly goods, industrial products, and fashionable details” (Wright 1983, p.111). Schlereth points out that advertisements in magazines and periodicals for domestic goods in magazines were invariably targeted at women. According to one New York-based consumer magazine in 1915, women were responsible for 90% of all consumer spending in America (Schlereth 1991, p.141). Certain furnishings and consumer items, such as a centre table, artificial lighting, photo albums, and needlework, became symbolic of the feminine expression of the “domestic ideal” (Grier 1992, p.53). The parlour was often furnished with “plush furniture, oil paintings, artificial flowers, bric-a-brac, [and] heavy curtains”, all of which served to construct the parlour as a sanctuary, “carefully shielded from the miseries of the world” (Hildebrandt 1985, p.123).

Grier argues that women had to balance the imperatives of comfort and culture when creating the parlour (Grier 1988, p.ix). In addition to framing the self-presentation of the domestic ideal, the parlour also served as the domestic stage for the display of cosmopolitanism; in Victorian culture the parlour was constructed as “a space within the private household where families could present their public faces” (Grier 1988, p.64). Cosmopolitanism, or urbane sophistication, in the Victorian sense, was primarily denoted by gentility, which was represented through “individual cultivation and social display” (Grier 1992, p.54). In the parlour, “being at home in the world” was communicated symbolically through certain furnishings, such as ornate formal parlour suites, which were designed for this purpose, and pianos, which signaled a knowledge and appreciation of high culture (Grier 1992, p.54). The concept of “culture” itself – assumed to mean
high-culture – was “lifted out of the surrounding world into the universe of gentility” and became conflated with the idea of refinement (Levine 1993, p.174). Refinement came to mean “more, and more elaborate, possessions, reflecting as much accomplishment and artifice as their owners could buy or assemble” (Grier 1992, p.62). As entrepreneurs responded to the demand for consumer goods, the impulse to achieve the status of refinement was “put into the service of commerce” and industrial capitalism:

Industrial capitalism could not come into existence in America until workers willingly spent all they earned to purchase the products of the factories. Gentility served the vital role of turning producers into consumers, helping to form the national market on which industrialization rested. Gentility and capitalism collaborated in the formation of consumer culture, gentility creating demand and capitalism manufacturing supply. (Bushman 1993, p.407)

Refinement was visually communicated in the parlour; the ability to see and appreciate intricate detail was a sign of cultivation and learning; the “refined eye” appreciated the “rich pattern, visually complex design, naturalistic ornament, and room compositions whose multiple layers had equivalent levels of visual details” (Grier 1988, pp. 216-217). Schlereth emphasises the visuality of the Victorian parlour in his description of it as “a family museum” (after Grier 1992), and the domestic site of a “complex artifact assemblage” (Schlereth 1992, p.8). In the Victorian parlour, spatial construction and furnishing were considered more significant than the social activities that took place there; parlour making, and especially the visual construction of a “cultural façade” (Grier 1988, p.99), more than parlour habitation, expressed Victorian ideals (Grier 1992, p.51). Parlour décor connoted both Victorian domestic norms and the cosmopolitanism of the parlour makers and their families. Family possessions displayed in the parlour, and the
designation of the room, itself, made rhetorical statements about the parlour makers’ position in the Victorian “web of values” (Grier 1992, p.54).

**Music in the Parlour**

In his discussion of the “historical soundscape” of Antebellum America, Smith notes that, despite the hegemony of the visual as a marker of “economic, political, and cultural authority” in the nineteenth century, members of the middle-classes appealed also “to the heard world when defining and reaffirming some of the core values of their class” (Smith 2003 [2000], p.138). Smith argues that the middle-classes exploited the heard world to construct representations of class and mark identity: the lower orders of society, like the ‘savages’ in the wilderness, were distinguished by the production of noise – the noise of chaos; the middle-class, on the other hand, cultivated a more refined sound – the sound of order. The socio-economic superiority of the middle class was confirmed by the ordered sound of progress.

In addition, members of the middle-classes performed their aesthetic pre-eminence through the cultivation of domestic quietude; quietude was “tied to gentility and Godliness” and became a signature of middle class aural sensibility (Smith 2003 [2000], p.142). Women were responsible for the construction of the parlour as an acoustic sanctuary for the family; heavy carpets and drapery dampened the sound of feet and voices, and insulated the family from “the noisy bustle of everyday life” and harsh sound of industry (Grier 1988, p.97). Middle-class women were subject to a more inhibiting aural etiquette than men and were expected to be “quiet and submissive”; Victorian
socio-acoustic etiquette was also performed through the female body itself; the “quiet industry of wives” was designed to provide a counterpoint to the louder masculine world of work (Smith 2003 [2000], p.140). In this way, the feminisation of the Victorian parlour was achieved through the gendering of its aural, as well as its visual habitation.

The quiet consumption of ‘good’ music in the home was an important cultural practice in Victorian middle class society. Music in the Victorian domestic sphere was associated almost exclusively with women: women played the piano and the organ, and both “music making and music appreciation were distinctly feminized” (Roell 1994, p.87). The piano first began its move into the domestic middle-class parlour during the eighteen fifties; in the parlour, at the heart of the middle-class household, the instrument provided “musical refuge in a routine day of work” (Hildebrandt 1985, p.123). The parlour piano provided musical accompaniment for the informal dancing and group singing activities of family members and visitors (Grier 1988, p.79).

The piano was preceded by the reed organ in many American rural homes, especially those of recent immigrants (Ehrlich 1990, p. 131). The parlour organ, or melodeon (as an earlier version of the instrument was called in America), was the piano’s chief rival as a keyboard for domestic use in the nineteenth century; production figures for the late 1860s reveal that melodeon output was at about 40% of piano output, with American factories producing about 15,000 organs per year (Loesser 1990, p.520). The rate of production continued to grow until 1890, which marks the high point of the instrument’s popularity
Ames 1992, p.150). Production figures for the instrument show a marked increase by this time with an annual output of 107,000 instruments (Ehrlich 1990, p. 131).

The reed organ first appeared in New England before 1820, where religious liberals used it to provide “amiable, harmonious music” in church (Loesser 1990, pp.518-519). The instrument’s small size also made it suitable for use in the home, where its domestic function was similar to that of the piano. The parlour organ was common in rural and worker’s homes in the 1890s and was considered especially suitable for the accompaniment of the hymns and sentimental ballads that were popular during the period (Schlereth1991, p.209). By contrast with the worldly air of “fashion” and “showiness” that hovered around a piano, a pious aura surrounded the organ in the parlour, the instrument provoking “an informal religiosity among family and friends” (Loesser 1990, p.519). The domestic counterpart of the church organ, parlour organs served the nineteenth-century Protestant “quest to provide a spiritual home on earth and to prepare families for a future home in heaven” (Foy 1994, p.66). From mid-century, housing reformers advocated for the purchase of domestic parlour reed organs on which could be played the family’s favourite hymns (Clark 1986, p.25).

The parlour organ emerged as an significant material artifact of “the religion of domesticity” and represents the “intrusion of the church into the Victorian home” (Ames 1992, p.157). Whereas the parlour organ “combined the sacred and the profane”, the piano was “an instrument for secular music in secular contexts” (Ames 1992, p.157), and as American society became increasingly secularised, the popularity of the parlour organ
declined and the piano gradually replaced it in the American parlour by the end of the nineteenth century. By this time, the mass production of upright pianos, the wide dissemination of simple parlour songs in easy-to-read piano sheet music form and the desacralisation of domestic space had secured the primacy of the piano in home-based musical culture (Braden 1992, 155).

Aggressive marketing of the piano from the 1890s stressed the advantages of the instrument over the traditional parlour organ, including the greater suitability of the instrument for the performance of the new popular styles of music, including ragtime. The new popular music was more informal than the traditional sentimental songs and hymns, and livelier, more spirited tempi and rhythms were more suited to the range, clarity of tone and action of the piano (Foy 1994, p.70). The reed organ was well suited to the playing of chords and melodies, but it lacked the “rapid response and easy dynamics” of the piano and could not match that virtuoso instrument’s dramatic range (Ames 1992, p.151). The replacement of the organ by the upright piano and the concurrent shift in domestic musical repertoire contributed to the gradual retuning of the parlour soundscape at the turn of the century, a socio-acoustic transposition that reflected the more general decline of the Victorian ideal of the home as “sacred space” (Foy 1994, p.66). The social status of the piano had risen above that of the organ by the turn of the century and as the instrument leaned “its mahogany weight against the wall of the best room” in more and more American homes (Hildebrandt 1985, p.4), it became synonymous with the expression of the middle class aesthetics and cultivation.
The piano played an important role in the formation of cultural identity in turn-of-the-century America. The instrument acted as a complex sign in the cultural politics of class; Parakilas argues that the piano served as the primary instrument for the promotion of middle class music and cultural values during this period (Parakilas 2002, p.226). The domestic piano was associated with the virtues attributed to music in Victorian society: “cultural refinement, self-expression and creativity, medicine for the soul” (Roell 1994, p.85). In addition to the effective role it played in the spread of music appreciation, the piano “added to the prestige of the home” (Roell 1989, p.xii). Playing the piano was also symbolic of the work ethic, because to play the instrument “demanded toil, sacrifice, and perseverance” (Roell 1994, p.85). Idleness was considered to be a vice in Victorian culture and hard work, even in leisure pursuits, was a virtue (Roell 1994, p.91). Middle class domestic music making was simultaneously constructed as recreation and work, pleasure and toil (Leppert 1993, p.164).

The piano shared the Victorian domestic space with a range of objects, including the sewing machine, embroidery, paintings, medicines and various items of furniture; along with furnishings and accessories, the piano signaled progress, which was “associated with the proliferation of material goods” (Foy 1994, p.69). The piano was a visual symbol of Victorian middle class socio-cultural aspirations and a referent “to social harmony and domestic order” (Leppert 1992, pp. 115-116). Tokens of family togetherness—“family keepsakes, pictures, and photographs: a visual correlative to the instrument’s function as the musical nexus of family life”—were often displayed on the top board of upright piano (Roell 1994, p.95), which itself was often draped with textiles (Foy 1994, p.69). Leppert
argues that the instrument was valued primarily as “an object of beauty”, which was “intended to be looked at—to be visually consumed” (Leppert 1995, p.154-155). This looking “was insistently gendered, driven by the instrument’s extramusical function within the home as the visual-sonoric simulacrum of family, wife, and mother” (Leppert 1992, p. 105).

The piano was commonly perceived and marketed as a piece of furniture; often the most prominent and most expensive piece in the parlour, the piano symbolised the family’s ability to pay for it and for lessons (Roell 1994, p.96). The piano and the parlour organ were associated closely with another emblematic domestic item, the sewing machine; the two household commodities were “habitually thought of together—in a harmonious bracket” (Loesser 1990, pp.560-561). Both machines were often sold in the same town and city salesrooms and carried by door-to-door salesmen on their wagons throughout rural America. The Wheeler and Wilson Co. of Bridgeport, Connecticut, went so far as to design and manufacture a combination melodeon and sewing machine in the form of a parlour sideboard, proclaiming that the woman could now toil, sing and provide her own accompaniment, all at the same time (Loesser 1990, p.561).

When opened, it presented a set of keys; whereas the sewing machine was revealed after the top was turned back. There were side doors below, containing two pedals—one for the musical and one for the sewing apparatus and by changing her foot from one to the other, the fair operator could play at tones or at stitches as she felt inclined (Loesser 1990, p.562).

The relationship between the piano and the sewing machine was enshrined in 1880 with the publication in New York of a trade paper called the Musical and Sewing Machine
Gazette, which included news items, features and advertisements for both products (Loesser 1990, p.562).

It was the woman’s role to maintain the Victorian value system in the domestic sphere. Because she was expected to “bring beauty and cultural connectedness into the home”, the women played the piano in the parlour, almost exclusively (Waring 2002, p.57). The instrument came to symbolise “hard-won, usually feminine accomplishment and the family’s appreciation of music” (Grier 1988, p.97). Playing the piano in the home was a highly valued attribute of the “genteel Victorian lady” and an important part of the “cultivation of refined sensibilities considered appropriate to the female role” (Ames 1992, p.161). The practice became associated with the display of “aesthetic and cultural accomplishments” (Waring 2002, p.57). Women were responsible for maintaining family musical rituals, including the widespread tradition of group singing or piano playing in the parlour after Sunday mass (Roell 1994, p.97). A close association of music, woman and the piano became firmly established in Victorian America and, as a result, the instrument itself came to symbolise the synthesis of three essential Victorian values: the “treasured canon” of the work ethic, the ideology of domesticity and the morality of music (Roell 1989, p.xii).

In Europe and America, domestic music making was constructed as an appropriate pastime for women and the ability to play the piano was considered an investment in a young woman’s future—“a non-material dowry” (Hildebrandt 1985, p.124). This explicit
gendering of domestic piano playing is evidenced in the following excerpt from ‘advice for “musical misses”’, in the American Harpers’s Magazine of September 1851:

Sit in a simple, graceful, unconstrained posture. Never turn up the eyes or swing the body; the expression you mean to give...will never be understood by those foolish motions which are rarely resorted to but by those who do not really feel what they play...However loud you wish to be, never thump...Aim more at pleasing than astonishing (Hildebrandt 1985, p.124).

While the piano was almost a universal feature of the middle-class and working-class American home by the early twentieth century, the instrument was played well by few—this despite the premium placed on hard work, even for girls at play in the parlour (Roell 1994, p.89). It is widely acknowledged that much of the music produced on the parlour piano was both “discordant” (Foy 1994, p.67) and not always “the highest class” (Katz 2004, p.54). A woman’s ability to play well was valued but not essential; women who played the piano or the organ were expected to entertain family members and visitors (Waring 2002, p.57) but the primary socio-musical function of such domestic performances was the projection of a woman’s accomplishment as a positive reflection on her husband (Leppert 1993, p.70). A woman’s competence at the keyboard was appreciated but “excessive talent might undermine her domestic virtue” (Waring 2002, p.57). Piano playing, and music making in general, “kept women in the place that men had assigned them” and, therefore, the woman who took music too seriously threatened important social boundaries (Leppert 1993, p.70).

Accordingly, most courtesy and conduct literature charged women to view music as but a trivial pursuit, like virtually everything else they did apart from bearing and raising children. The trivialization of women’s activities, to men and women
alike, was essential to maintaining a status quo based on gender hierarchy.

(Leppert 1993, p.70)

Artistic accomplishment, as Roell points out, “was secondary to the dignity, graceful manner, and moral replenishment inherent in learning music” (Roell 1989, p.35). Music lessons and practising were rooted in the work ethic but served the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ more than the music itself (Roell 1994, p.91). Lessons and diligent practising served several important aspects of the Victorian ideal of womanhood: lessons provided a method of “discipline training” and “a systematic approach to mastering musical skills” for young girls, and regular practising created the “illusion” of order and control over an unstable world (Foy 1994, p.67).

The piano played an important role in Victorian courtship culture; it was common practice for girls to play the piano and sing sentimental songs and hymns for gentlemen callers. The formality of the ritual and the morality of music framed the courtship and provided the ‘proper’ socio-acoustic space for the romantic encounter (Roell 1994, p.99). A respectable level of flirtatious behaviour between the sexes was licensed during the courtship rituals; music making at the keyboard sanctioned a level of display of the female body and of emotions, which was otherwise disapproved of in Victorian society (Roell 1994, p.99). Some keyboard ability was also deemed to be an asset in courtship for men and the performance of sentimental songs arranged as four-hand duets contrived to bring couples physically closer than would otherwise be considered appropriate; duets that required that the players cross hands—often for no obvious musical reason—created an opportunity for “euphonious fun and flirting” (Waring 2002, p.57).
Many immigrant families exploited the piano’s association with gentility and bought pianos and arranged music lessons for the daughters. Tawa points out that Italian immigrants, for example, purchased player pianos as “status symbols, to cut a bella figura among their friends” (Tawa 1982, p.44). Parakilas points out that the meaning of the piano for European immigrants, was complex: on the one hand, the piano was emblematic of the culture of the old world – a reminder “of the land they left behind” – and a symbolic point of connection with other immigrants in the new world, while, on the other hand, the piano came to represent American middle-class ideas of modernity and opportunity (Parakilas 2002, p.229). The instrument emerged as a multivalent symbol that could be employed in the negotiation of the hyphenated identity of European-Americans. Tawa’s retelling of Italian immigrant Angelo Bertocci’s account of the purchase of a player piano by his mother in Boston in 1923 evokes the multivalent nature of piano ownership amongst early twentieth century immigrants.

Bertocci says he hardly ever saw his father, who worked long hours for meager pay. Though money was scarce, his mother decided one day that no matter the cost she wanted a player-piano in the home. Towing the young Angelo along to serve as translator, she proceeded to a piano store. An astonished proprietor surveyed this foreign customer in the “obviously cheap serge dress and the Filene’s basement hat.” His surprise increased when she insisted on purchasing not the low-priced but the $600 piano: “It cost six hundred dollars, more than half a year’s wages and obviously an extravagance. And we bought with it several dozen Italian popular rolls including ‘O Sole Mio,’ Funiculi Funicula,’ ‘Santa Lucia,’ but also ‘I Pagliacci,’ ‘La Traviata,’ ‘Aida,’ and ‘Rigoletto.’ After delivery to the house, the piano lived in a newly designated “parlor room,” where it served to entertain the family and give the Bertoccis standing among the neighbors. (Tawa 1982, pp.38-39)
Among immigrants to America during the Victorian period, daughters were more likely to receive piano lessons than their brothers. As part of a wider process of acculturation, playing the piano was symbolic of a family’s aspirations to cross national and social boundaries in order to resonate with the dominant ideologies of Victorian culture (Parakilas 2002, p.229). Many immigrant parents recognised the positive role music making might play in the successful integration of their children into an American world and encouraged them to take lessons in classical music; parents often balanced this desire to see their children learn to play “American” music by providing ethnic compositions which were “purchased or written out for the student by some family member” (Tawa 1982, p.61). While it was not uncommon for boys to receive piano lessons, they were more often taught to play more “authentic” instruments – often the violin – on which they could better express “the music of their native land” (Parakilas 2002, p.226).

The role of the piano in white Victorian culture was mirrored in the developing socio-musical culture of the Northern black middle-class communities that emerged during the final decades of the nineteenth century; like their white fellow citizens, middle-class blacks cultivated Victorian gentility and engaged in Victorian consumer culture, furnishing “their houses with stuffed furniture and bric-a-brac and their cultural life with musical soirées and parlor parties” (Southern 1983, p.101). The pursuit of respectability by the black middle class “reflected itself in their cultural activities”:

Blacks struggled not only to improve their economic condition, but also to gain a measure of respect from a hostile white society convinced of their inferiority…For those…[blacks] who managed to attain various levels of affluence, the most acceptable modes of social diversion were literary-society meetings, concerts, and musical evenings at home. (Southern 1983, p.100)
Keyboard instruments, including the domestic organ and piano, were popular in the homes of black middle-class families. The purchase of an organ or piano for the home may be understood as both a post-emancipation marker of independence through participation in wider consumer culture (Southern 1983, p.309) and as evidence of acculturation. In the homes of middle-class blacks, daughters learned to play the same organ and piano repertoires favoured everywhere in Victorian white society and families subscribed to “music in the genteel tradition” (Southern 1983, p.101). Some middle class African American men also learned to play the organ or the piano, but the keyboard was generally considered to be a woman’s instrument (Southern 1983, p.310). Jelly Roll Morton’s account of his early formative experiences of witnessing a “gentleman” playing the piano at a recital in the French Opera House in New Orleans, and a second “gentleman” playing ragtime at a party, reveals the almost pervasive gender coding of piano playing at the turn of the century:

There was a gentleman who rendered a selection on the piano, very marvelous music that made me want to play the piano very, very much. The only trouble was that this gentleman had long bushy hair, and, because the piano was known in our circle as an instrument for a lady, this confirmed me in my idea that if I played the piano I would be misunderstood. I didn’t want to be called a sissy. I wanted to marry and raise a family and be known as a man among men when I became of age. So I studied various other instruments, such as violin, drums and guitar, until one day at a party I saw a gentleman sit down at the piano and play a very good piece of ragtime. This particular gentleman had short hair and I decided then that the instrument was good for a gentleman same as it was for a lady. I must have been about ten years old at the time. (Morton in Walser 1999, pp.16-17)
Black piano players were restricted in their career options: even accomplished, musically literate black piano players were denied access to the institutions of nineteenth-century classical music. Only a few African-American musicians became concert pianists in the decades after the Civil War. Thomas ‘Blind Tom’ Wiggins (1849-1908) and John William ‘Blind’ Boone (1864-1927) were perhaps the most successful and influential African-American concert pianists in postbellum America (Jasen and Jones 2000, pp.8-11). Both drew on material from a wide range of styles in their performances, including classical music, spirituals, folk songs, improvised and composed rags. Blind Boone made a significant contribution to the development and dissemination of piano ragtime. Boone never composed a rag but he did record two important rag medleys; in 1912, he became one of the first African-American musicians to record piano rolls when he authored six hand-played rolls for the QRS Piano Roll Company, including “Rag Medley” and “Southern Rag Medley No.2” (Jasen and Jones 2000, p.10). The renditions of the two rag medleys are in an earlier pre-‘classic’ piano ragtime style of piano ‘ragging’.

The “Rag Medley” has a rough, eerie sound, and it seems to be rhythmically erratic and full of wrong notes until it is realized that Boone is playing in 5/4 with one hand and in 4/4 with the other. Trebor Tichenor, who owns all of the Boone rolls, thinks the two medleys sound “like what ragtime must have been at first”—which is to say, unlike any piano playing that had ever been heard before. (Jasen and Jones 2000, pp.10-11)

Most black piano-players were self-taught and did not read music notation, and this, Southern argues, stimulated rather than diminished their musical creativity and led to the development of novel styles of music (Southern 1983, p.309). African-American musicians who did not belong to the emerging black middle class were generally more concerned with developing styles of music and of performance practice that were, for the
most part, distinct from the classical and popular music culture prevalent in white America. Shehan highlights the essential role played in the development of ragtime by itinerant black pianists who traveled from city to city in the Midwest, ‘playing cafes and red light “sporting districts”’ (Shehan 1986, p.22). Under the hands of black musicians in “saloons, brothels, and casinos” (Roell 1989, p.33) the piano proved itself to be as well suited to the articulation of ragtime’s syncopated rhythms as it was to the sentimental songs, hymns and classical music played on it in the Victorian parlour (Roell 1994, p.94).

When Tin Pan Alley publishing houses appropriated the style and produced thousands of simple ragtime tunes, the demand for ragtime piano sheet music grew dramatically (Roell 1989, p.35); the style “spread like a contagion” and “infected American parlors” throughout the United States (Roell 1989, p.32). As middle-class Americans and the institutions of consumer culture embraced ragtime, its distinctive African-American musical flavour was diluted and its socio-musical origins obscured; at the same time as white Americans adopted a “watered down” form of African American ragtime, black America was experiencing one of the worst periods of racist persecution in its history (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.38).

Despite the appropriation and domestication of ragtime by white American consumer culture, and the rigid racial segregation during the period, ragtime’s influence on the listening and dancing experiences of white Americans, and on popular culture in general, was significant (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.40). While the socio-musical values and practices of Victorian and post-Victorian America exerted little influence on the relatively
autonomous culture of black America (Southern 1983, p.308), mass-produced, affordable upright pianos—the musical fulcrum of Victorian domestic culture—emerged, somewhat ironically, as the primary vehicle for the spread of ragtime music.

The Parlour Remodeled and Retuned

By the end of the nineteenth century, the formal parlour was a compressed space, animated by refined social practices and crammed with visual and sonic representations of Victorian ideology. Scholars propose that a gradual decline of the Victorian parlour began in the 1890s and was complete by the late 1920s. The demise of the parlour reflects the general transformation in American domestic culture between 1880 and 1930. Grier interprets the dramatic changes in house habitation to be an expression of “the profound changes which reordered American life” during the period (Grier 1992, p.46). A wide range of inter-related, socio-cultural factors precipitated the demise of the parlour: the emergence of the new socio-spatial culture of the ‘living-room’; developments in house architecture and patterns of house habitation; the challenge to home-based leisure pursuits brought by the automobile and new forms of public entertainment; the professionalisation out of the home of certain parlour rituals; and the advent of the new domestic technologies of sound – the player piano, phonograph and radio.

The transition from the late Victorian interior style of the parlour to the new twentieth-century design of the living room was part of a wider aesthetic shift, which saw “complexity and intricacy” replaced by “a renewed emphasis on symmetry, formal
balance, restrained harmony, and subdued coloring” (Ames 1994, p.xvii). Beginning in the ‘Gay Nineties’, traditional Victorian parlour décor and practices gave way to the new socio-spatial style of the living room, which emphasised functionality over rhetoric; the “stiff and formal restraints” imposed by the traditional parlour were replaced by the “easy and graceful atmosphere” of the living room, with its less formal and less artificial spatiality (Sidney Morse, quoted in Grier 1988, p.211). Natural woods and simpler furniture challenged the “elaborate, upholstered and multilayered look” of the Victorian parlour (Schlereth 1991, p.122). The décor of the living room was deliberately lighter, simpler and less rhetorical than the parlour, reflecting a shift in the expression of domesticity and cosmopolitanism (Grier 1992, p. 67).

The shift from parlour to living-room was also precipitated by more general changes in house architecture and patterns of house habitation which saw increasing numbers of people living in the more restricted spaces of apartments and split residences, and in newly fashionable, open-plan bungalows (Grier 1992, p. 64) with their new “sanitary, efficient, and simple” furnishing aesthetic (Schlereth 1991, p.122). The traditional parlour was just one of the “special-use” rooms in the Victorian household: by contrast, the living room brought about a “return to multipurpose space” (Grier 1992, p. 64). On the one hand, the shift to less formal house habitation practices and simpler, multi-use room arrangements was motivated by the growing desire to “draw the family together”; on the other hand, open floor plans made the house easier to clean—an important consideration in an era when health and sanitation issues were prominent, domestic servants were increasingly uncommon and more women worked outside of the home (Foy 1994, p.78).
Whereas the parlour was designed to “mold character”, the living room facilitated the expression of personality (Grier 1992, p.31). Cultural historians argue that this shift in the residential context from “a culture of character to a cult of personality” mirrors a wider reorientation of the collective American psyche (Schlereth 1991, p.124).

The demise of the parlour was also precipitated by the decline of parlour rituals; this was due, in part, to the professionalisation out of the home of family rites of passage, such as weddings and funerals (Grier 1992, p.67). The parlour as locus of family entertainment was also challenged by the development of new, public and commercial forms of entertainment, including motion pictures, and other “new diversions”, such as “faster, more intimate forms of dancing” and visits to amusement parks, all of which were part of the emerging culture of leisure that developed in response to the growing urbanisation and industrialisation of America in the 1890s (Braden 1992, p.146). Greater participation in public entertainments was also facilitated by shorter working hours and the growth in automobile ownership (Grier 1992, p.66). Beginning in the so-called ‘Gay Nineties’, commercial entertainment activities began to displace more traditional, community and home-based entertainment pursuits in urban and rural communities across America. The automobile “lured people from their homes in search of entertainment”, and movie theatres, concerts and theatrical presentations, and newly popular outdoor activities, such as bicycle riding and golf, satisfied the growing appetite for public entertainment (Foy 1994, p.70).
While the changes were welcomed by some, others held the view that the “sensuality and frivolity, thrill and impulse” of the new forms of leisure challenged the “genteel ideal of recreation that stressed the activities of the mind over the pleasures of the body” (Schlereth 1991, p.209). Americans everywhere continued to engage in a restricted range of leisure activities at home, including “card-playing and dancing to recorded music” (Grier 1992, p.66). Domestic reformers urged families to use the parlour for ‘living’ during leisure time rather than as a place for display (Bushman 1993, p.270) The emphasis on “instruction and uplift”, which provided the moral underpinning for Victorian domestic leisure practices, began to give way to more home play in the early decades of the new century (Schlereth 1992, p.11).

In rural areas, where home-centered, shared community rituals, including funerals and other rites of passage, retained their cultural relevance, traditional functions of the parlour endured for longer than in urban areas (Grier 1988, p.220). Similarly, while the transformation of the parlour into the sitting room was effectively complete in middle-class urban America by the second decade of the twentieth century, the domestic ideals of most farm families remained relatively unchanged for some time (Schlereth 1991, p.124). Immigrant families were more likely to ignore the advice of housing reformers and maintain the parlour as a memory palace where mementoes of their cultural backgrounds could be displayed (Wright 1983, p.94).

Music was at the heart of the turn-of-the-century transformation in American public and domestic culture. The soundscape of the domestic parlour was dramatically transformed
during the opening decades of the twentieth century and the seeds of that transformation were sown during the final decade of the nineteenth century. The sonorities of the piano dominated the soundscape of the Victorian parlour during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the mechanisation of the instrument in the form of the player piano secured its centrality in domestic culture until the 1920s. In the 1920s, as the traditional canons of the work ethic and the moral value of hand-played music were increasingly threatened by the unprecedented access to music on the phonograph and radio, sales of pianos and player pianos declined dramatically (Roell 1989, p.221) and the instrument lost its exalted place in the home (Roell 1994, p.106). Piano sheet-music sales also fell significantly by the mid-1920s, as radio provided more immediate access to new songs and accelerated audience familiarisation with each new hit.

Formerly, a sheet-music hit would sell for months, as fascination with it slowly swept across the country. The radio, although stimulating sheet-music sales for a time, familiarized the public with a song in only a few weeks, by which time most had grown tired of the ever-present strains. (Roell 1989, p.215)

The player piano, gramophone and radio had a profound effect on patterns of musical consumption in early twentieth century America; each acted as a powerful instrument of the socio-musical changes that were made audible in the soundscape of post-Victorian America. In the following sections, I will outline the development of the new technologies of sound and consider their impact on the culture of domestic musicking in the early twentieth century.
**Player piano**

If the piano was the most potent symbol of Victorian socio-musicality, the player piano emerged laterally as an equally potent agent of socio-musical change and a symbol of progress. The invention of the player piano revolutionised the experience of music in the Victorian twentieth century and provided the piano trade with the means to respond to significant shifts in social trends during the early decades of the twentieth century. The player piano was in the vanguard of the modern mechanisation of music and played a significant role in the dramatic reconfiguration of American musical experience: on the one hand, the advent of the player piano marked the general shift from active production to more passive consumption of musical sound (Roell 1989, p.45); on the other hand, the player piano emerged as the first machine to erode the economic barriers that distanced most Americans from well-performed music (Foy 1994, p.70). Increased automobile ownership and the growing popularity of public entertainments threatened the survival of traditional domestic pastimes, including piano playing; despite the gradual decline of the home as the centre of social life and the erosion of traditional values by the culture of consumerism (Roell 1994, p.106), the player piano was marketed with unprecedented success throughout the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth century: in 1905, only six percent of pianos were manufactured with player mechanisms; in 1909, the year in which piano production reached its peak in America, one-eight of the total of 365,000 piano manufactured were players (Hoover 2002, pp.55-56); in 1915, one in four pianos was a self-player, and by 1919, player pianos outnumbered “straight pianos” (Loesser 1990, p.583).
In 1897, when the first American automated piano-playing device was patented, Americans were already familiar with mechanised music through music boxes and a variety of mechanical musical novelties (Foy 1994, p.72). Several decades earlier, in 1863, Monsieur Fourneaux of Paris made the world’s “first complete pneumatic player-piano”; independent of the piano itself, Fourneaux’s crank-operated machine was wheeled up to the piano where its artificial fingers ‘played’ the keys of the instrument (Loesser 1990, p.549). The ‘pianista’, as Fourneaux named his device, was exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 along with several other early mechanical piano players (Loesser 1990, p.581). New pneumatic piano-playing devices appeared regularly in England, Germany and America in the decades that followed (Loesser 1990, p.581). In 1887, a patent was awarded to M. Welte and Sohne of Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Germany, for the first pneumatic action piano successfully activated by a perforated paper roll (Roell 1989, p.39). Ten years later, in 1897, an American engineer, E.S. Votey, developed a piano-player, which took the form of “a cabinet-enclosed ‘push up’ device whose fingers rested upon the keys of a traditional piano” (Roell 1989, pp.39-40). The Aeolian Company patented Votey’s device in 1900 (Loesser 1990, p.582), and its name, ‘Pianola’, subsequently became the generic term for all piano-players and player pianos (Chanan 2002, p.59).

Piano makers were reluctant at first to build the player mechanism into the piano, fearing that it would make the internal working of the instrument too complicated. The prosaic associations of the wheel-up, crank-operated machine limited the cultural appeal of the piano player, however, and it eventually fell out of favour (Loesser 1990, p.581). By
1910, in America, the ‘push-up’ piano was superseded by the more aesthetically acceptable, self-contained, foot-pumped, pneumatic player piano. With the “playing” mechanism now built into the body of the piano, the separate piano-player machine and its mechanical fingers were redundant. Music was mechanically reproduced by the pneumatic player piano through the controlled activation of the piano hammers by means of air being admitted through perforations in a roll of paper. As manufacturers developed a foot treadle to drive the pneumatic system and levers to control tempo and loudness, player action and player roll manufacture soon became standardised (Chanan 2002, p.58-59). At first, the industry resisted the machine and its automation of music making but, before long, manufacturers began to produce player pianos in great numbers. Over time, improvements in the technology of the player piano led to a growing acceptance of the instrument as a music reproduction device. By 1914, there were more than forty-two companies in America producing player pianos and an enormous amount of music was available on piano rolls (Loesser 1990, p.582). In the post-War years the player piano continued to beguile the American public; by 1918, up to 800,000 player pianos had been sold in the eastern states, alone, and consequently, the demand for piano rolls was great (Roell 1989, p.52).

As player piano technology improved, more and more accomplished pianists exploited the potential of the instrument for the reproduction of performance. The first “reproducing player-piano” was developed and manufactured in Germany by M. Welte and Co., in 1904, and American companies, including Aeolian, designed and produced their own models soon, thereafter (Loesser 1990, p.584). As the instrument technology
developed it became more capable of recording and reproducing the exact playing of professional performing artists. On a specially built instrument, each key completed an electrical circuit when struck, and activated a lead pencil, which inscribed the details of each stroke on a player-piano paper roll as it revolved at the standard speed; in this way the nuances of rhythm and phrasing, as well as the noted played, could be ‘recorded’ on the paper roll reproduced for playback (Loesser 1990, p.583). Many of the leading musicians of the time, including Claude Debussy, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Arthur Rubenstein, and George Gershwin, endorsed the instrument by recording piano rolls (Chanan 2002, p. 60).

The invention of the player piano provided the industry with a mechanism for the accelerated democratisation of the instrument; “the difficulty of learning the piano was simply an obstacle to sales…and the technology of the player piano could obliterate that obstacle” (Parakilas 2002, p.231). Sophisticated and comprehensive advertising campaigns played a critical role in the success of the player piano; while the industry continued to trade on the traditional mythology of the piano in Victorian culture, manufacturers and retailers also exploited the increased access to domestic music making, which was precipitated by the introduction of the mechanical instrument; marketers concentrated on the fact that the player piano allowed the musically untrained to participate more actively in the musical experience than had hitherto been possible (Roell 1994, p.102).

To widen sales and extend the moral and cultural benefits of music, to make music making and listening universally accessible—to establish a musical democracy—the industry adopted and helped develop business strategies that
reinforced the emerging consumer culture. It achieved mass-marketing success through the sale of the player piano, revolutionary in that this machine allowed anyone to “play” music skillfully without effort. (Roell 1994, p.102)

The player piano was at the centre of a revolution in American education, which saw a shift away from music making as the ideal, towards music appreciation, which was generally understood to mean “the intelligent enjoyment” of classical music, as listeners (Katz 2004, p.61). As Katz points out, this marks a concurrent shift in the conception of musicality: being musical was increasingly signified by one’s ability to listen carefully and intelligently, rather than on one’s ability to play or perform music (Katz 2004, p.61).

Roell singles out the mechanical player piano as the primary agent in the democratisation of music, describing it as the single “most powerful force toward establishing a musical democracy in the Victorian twentieth century” (Roell 1989, p.32). The player piano contributed to a degree of homogenisation and democratisation of music that was unprecedented in Western culture. The player piano industry traded on the idea of a musical democracy, which offered all consumers access to “the virtues of music” (Roell 1989, p.28), including its potential to “counteract the evils of industrialization” (Roell 1989, p.31). For non-musicians, especially, the player piano was a boon. Some enthusiasts expressed the view that the player piano would allow non-musicians to come into closer contact with the art of music and, thereafter, develop a greater appreciation for music (Roell 1989, p.47). From the 1890s, the mechanical piano was in the vanguard of this democratisation of music in America.
The Aeolian Company of New York was the first to advertise the player piano as “easy to play” (Roell 1994, p.102). The Aeolian Company, and all other manufacturers of the player piano, successfully marketed the “easy to play” instrument by importing it into their projections of the traditional idealised image of domestic music making. In their advertisements for the player piano, manufacturers and retailers located the instrument at the centre of the ideal family; at the same time, they flew in the face of the Victorian work ethic when they simultaneously made a virtue of the fact that automation obviated the need for practice (Waring 2002, p.p.178). Manufacturers also touted the musical self-sufficiency afforded by the player piano; for example, according to the Aeolian Company, to own one of its devices was to be “independent of concert and opera, of musical seasons, of city opportunities, and of the whims of players and of the whole tribe of stumbling amateurs” (quoted in Foy 1994, p.76). Manufacturers also created a market for a player mechanism that could be installed in regular pianos: targeting the innumerable unused pianos in parlours throughout America—instruments that had become “practically nothing more than a article of furniture”—advertisers promised that the automation device would resuscitate the ‘silent’ piano and, in turn, reanimate domestic life (Foy 1994, p.76).

The manufacture of upright pianos and player pianos peaked in 1909 and 1923, respectively, but, thereafter, the market for the instrument contracted rapidly. The market for player pianos was “stagnant” by 1925 and collapsed by the end of the decade; in 1929, American Piano Company, the largest manufacturer and distributor of mechanical pianos in the world, went into voluntary receivership (Roell 1989, p.218). In the
economic depression of the 1930s, as part of a general resurgence of Victorian values, the piano moved back into the centre of family life, but the era of the player piano was over. “Fabulously popular” for more than three decades, the demise of the player piano after 1925 was precipitated by the greater subscription to phonorecordings and radio as sources of recorded music (Hitchcock1969, p119).

The reproduction technology of the player piano remained superior to the phonograph until after the Great War. Many popular and classical musicians chose to make piano rolls rather than phonograph recordings, which were limited to four minutes duration and offered relatively poor sound fidelity in playback (Roell 199, p.48). Nonetheless, even as piano manufacturers produced unprecedented numbers of instruments in the 1910s, the popularity of the phonograph continued to grow dramatically amongst consumers and sales of the machine had outstripped sales of the piano by 1914: in a year that saw a record 323,000 pianos produced, with a total value of $56 million, more than 500,000 phonographs were produced, with a value of $27 million (Roell 199, p.48). Just one year later, in 1915, phonograph and record sales in America amounted to $60 million (Foy 1994, p.73); by 1916 there were 46 phonograph companies operating in America and by 1919 production value rose to $158 million (Frith 1988, p.14). After the war, the fortunes of the piano diminished further as the price of phonographs fell and the gap between the cost of buying a piano and a phonograph widened considerably (Ehrlich 1990 [1976] p.186). The player piano could no longer compete with the phonograph, which was also marketed as a passive “easy to play” technology (Roell 1994, p.104). In 1925, a survey of
thirty-six cities in the Midwest revealed “that more families owned phonographs than pianos” (Katz 2004, p.69).

**Phonograph**

In 1878, just two years after Alexander Graham Bell patented his first telephone (Chanan 1995, p.1), Thomas Alva Edison patented the phonograph—a device that could record and reproduce sound by means of a tinfoil recording process (Morton 2000, p.17). Edison invented the technology in 1877, in the same year as the French inventor Charles Cros made a similar invention, the *paléophon* (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.36). Edison’s phonograph and Cros’s *paléophon* worked on the same principal: both machines “transformed the energy of sound waves into physical impressions on a foil- or wax-coated cylinder, which could then be used to reproduce the original sounds (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.36). In January 1878, Edison sold the manufacturing and sales rights of the machine to the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company for $10,000 and 20% of the future profits; the company operated by exhibiting the machine and by leasing out demonstration rights for promotional purposes. Interest in the invention was great and the phonograph was an instant success. The weaknesses in Edison’s early phonograph design were immediately apparent, however; his machine could only be operated by experts and the tinfoil could only be played a few times before it had to be discarded (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/edhtml/edcyldr.html). At this time, Edison returned to work on the development of the incandescent light bulb, which he perfected in 1879; it was almost ten years before he again turned his attention to phonographic technology (Chanan 1995, p.5).
In 1880, with prize money awarded to him from the French government for this invention of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell opened a laboratory to further his acoustical research (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/edhtml/edcyldr.html). In 1886, Bell and his colleague, the chemical engineer, Charles Sumner Tainter, were awarded a patent for the graphophone, a device that was based on Edison’s phonograph; in their design, they replaced the unreliable tinfoil-covered cylinder with the more durable wax-covered cylinder (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/edhtml/edcyldr.html). The improved technology worked on the same basic principal as its predecessor: the audio signal was etched into the outside surface of the wax-covered, rotating metal cylinder, which, in turn, could be ‘played’ on the phonograph to reproduce the original signal. In 1887, Edison resumed his work on the phonograph; adopting some of the developments introduced by Bell and Tainter, he produced his New Phonograph, which also abandoned tinfoil in favour of wax. In 1888, after further development work, he produced the Improved Phonograph and, soon afterwards, his Perfected Phonograph, which he licensed to the North American Phonograph Company.

The phonograph was originally promoted by the North American Phonograph Company as a business dictation machine, not an instrument for the reproduction of music (Morton 2000, p.17); in 1888, the company began to market and lease phonographs to businesses across America via a network of regional franchises (Frith 1988, p.13). The venture failed, however, with just one licensee—the Columbia Phonograph Company in Washington DC—achieving commercial success (Frith 1988, p.13). Meanwhile, the success of coin-operated phonograph “talking machines”, or “nickelodeons”—“machines
that played the latest musical hit for a nickel” (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.36)—indicated that there was a large market for the phonograph as a source of mass musical entertainment (Foy 1994, p.73). Nickelodeons first appeared in public places in the 1890s and were soon widely distributed in restaurants and hotels (Morton 2000, p.17), and at “fairs and medicine shows and on the vaudeville circuit” (Frith 1988, p.14). The Columbia Phonograph Company were the first and primary producer of commercial cylinder recordings for these ‘entertaining phonographs’; their catalogue of pre-recorded cylinders included “‘Sentimental’, Topical’, ‘Comic’, ‘Irish’ and ‘Negro’ songs” (Frith 1988, p.14). In June 1878, in an article for the *North American Review*, Edison predicted a musical future for the phonogram, but due to the limited sound reproduction capabilities of the device at that time, his ambition for the phonograph as a musical instrument was circumscribed (Chanan 1995, p.3). When the potential of the ‘entertaining’ cylinders became apparent, Edison and his competitors belatedly focused on the entertainment market; Edison designed a less expensive domestic phonograph model and went into the “business of selling recorded cylinders”, and by the turn of the century the business dictation machine and the entertainment phonograph had “diverged technically and commercially” (Morton 2000, p.17).

While improvements were made to the design of the cylinder phonograph throughout the 1890s, the commercial potential of the instrument remained limited by a number of factors: recorded wax cylinders had a short life span, were easily broken, wore out after multiple plays on the phonograph and could not be stored easily; more important was the fact that, not withstanding Edison’s development of a cylinder moulding process which
could be used to produce numerous exact copies of the original cylinder recording (Morton 2000, p.19), there was no means of mass replication of the original recording (Chanan 1995, p.4). While cylinder phonographs continued to sell, the record industry only took off when the cylinder was replaced by the 78 r.p.m. shellac discs around the turn of the century (Chanan 1995, p.4). The disc satisfied the commercial need to produce permanent records for high-volume duplication and sale (Morton 2000, p.18); unlike the cylinder recording, disc recording promised the repeatable recording and mass replication, which was demanded by the consumer market (Chanan 1995, p.5).

Emile Berliner invented disc recording and playback technology in 1887-88. Berliner developed the domestic ‘gramophone’, a playback machine which could reproduce the pre-recorded sounds stored on a disc. Unlike Edison, Berliner regarded the gramophone as a music reproduction technology from the outset; he also envisaged mass-production and dissemination of both the machine itself, and the pre-recorded discs of “prominent singers, speakers or performers” that would be played on it (Frith 1988, p.14). Berliner formed the United States Gramophone Company in 1893, and the gramophone was placed on the market the following year. In 1895, Berliner abandoned hard rubber discs in favour of the more durable shellac disc (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/berlhtml/berlgramo.html), and in 1897 he and Fred Gaisberg, his “recording director and talent scout” (Frith 1988, p.14), opened the first commercial recording studio, in Philadelphia (Frith 1988, p.14, Morton 2000, p.19). The shellac disc developed by Berliner had several advantages over the cylinder: discs were easily stored and had a blank center area where the recording details could be inscribed;
discs were stamped out of a harder material than Edison’s cylinder thus allowing the stylus to press harder into the groove and, as a result, to produce a stronger signal; the ‘lateral’ disc recording method—in which the stylus was pulled through a deep groove of constant depth—was more robust and practical than the relatively fragile and unstable, vertical ‘hill-and-dale’ recording method developed by Edison; and, critically, the shellac disc was suitable for mass-replication (Morton 2000, p.19).

In the final years of the century, several other companies began to produce imitations of Berliner’s disc player and the intense legal struggle over patents that ensued was only resolved in 1902 when two of the most powerful companies, the Victor Talking Machine Company and the Columbia Graphophone Company, pooled their respective patents and took control of the manufacture of disc machines and disc records in America (Frith 1988, p.14). Low-priced phonographs entered the domestic consumer market by the turn of the century and thereafter the commercial market for disc playback machines and for disc recordings of music expanded dramatically market expanded rapidly. Prices began to fall in the 1890s: while the Edison “Home” phonograph retailed at $40 in 1896, the “wonderful Home Gramophone” could be ordered from the Sears, Roebuck catalogue for just $5 in 1900 (Katz 2004, p.52). Of the many new companies that entered the industry during the first two decades of the twentieth century, almost all chose to produce discs and disc-playing machines, rather than cylinders. By 1910, disc phonographs were standard in American homes, their appeal enhanced by their ease of operation and their ability to record more complex dance music (Braden 1992, p.156).
Phonograph and disc sales rose dramatically in the second decade of the twentieth century and by 1919 “some two hundred phonograph companies were producing about two million phonographs a year” (Braden 1992, p.156). By the early 1920s, only the Thomas A. Edison Company was supplying cylinders to the American market (Morton 2000, p.22). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, however, the term ‘phonograph’—which Edison first used to describe his original invention—became the generic term for all music playback machines. I will use the term to refer to disc playback machines in the remainder of this discussion.

The phonograph was marketed as a fashionable, entertaining and user-friendly consumer item (Roell 199, p.47). The purchase of a phonograph, like the purchase of many other domestic items, including an organ or piano, became a symbol of upward mobility and cosmopolitanism (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.36). In order to make the phonograph look less like a machine, early models were designed as both fine pieces of furniture and musical instruments (Katz 2004, p.54). As Kenney points out, “the phonograph industry steadily disguised the machine that made the sounds” by replacing the trumpets and horns of the early machines “with record players made to look like furniture, pianos, overnight bags, and suitcases” (Kenney 1999, p.xii). The Victrola machine, for example, was marketed as “a musical instrument like a piano” in “piano-finished mahogany” (Roell 1989, p.47). The internal-horn Victrola was first developed in 1906 in response to the demand for a less intrusive domestic phonograph; the instrument was designed so that the horn was concealed within a cabinet, thus allowing the phonograph to blend into the domestic environment (Katz 2004, p.54).
Advertisers imbued the phonograph with much the same socio-musical associations as the piano: “Advertisements...often pictured family members, young and old together, clustered around their phonograph”, the implication being that the machine “could bridge the generation gap and bring families together in happiness” (Foy 1994, p.73). Advertisers also promised that the phonograph would entertain friends and neighbours and keep the family up to date with the latest music (Foy 1994, p.74).

In the 1920s in America, enthusiasm for the phonograph was great; teachers, musicians, cultural critics and activists, and phonograph owners, themselves, championed the instrument (Katz 2004, p.49). The phonograph took its place alongside other technological tools and systems in the “technological utopianism” of American thought at that time (Katz 2004, p.51). Technological utopians promoted the idea that technological advances, generally, would solve the “pervasive problems in late-nineteenth- and twentieth century America” (Segal 2005, p.xi). Technological utopianism originated “as middle class reformers and political radicals proposed alternatives to the problems surrounding the industrial revolution” (Jenkins 2009). In the utopian vision of the domestic arena, the phonograph was just one of many labour-saving devices, including “clothes washers and dryers, refrigerators, ranges, vacuum cleaners, garbage disposals, air conditioners...and haircutters” that would ensure comfort, efficiency and convenience (Segal 2005, p.xi).

In addition, the phonograph was heavily freighted with the hope that it would “elevate American musical life (and improve life more generally) through the dissemination of
recorded classical music” (Katz 2004, p.6). Technological utopians believed that the phonograph would “liberate music” and bring “the art of the elite to the masses” (Ross 2005, p.1). This optimism pervaded middle-class society, where many shared the belief that the domestic phonograph would promote the consumption of Western European classical music and “help America become a truly musical nation”; recording technology would affect the spread of “good music” throughout America and act “as a civilizing influence and an agent of moral uplift” (Katz 2004, pp.49-50). It was widely believed that the repeatability of classical music recordings would serve the development of musical appreciation and refinement, and, in turn, reduce the appeal of inferior popular music, “particularly ragtime and jazz” (Katz 2004, p. 50), music, which would, critics claimed, pall upon repetition (Katz 2005, p.53).

Morton points to the ‘special status of classical, opera and related types of “highbrow” music’ in the pre-1945 history of the phonograph; “numerous published histories and reminiscences of the early years of the phonograph”, he writes, make it clear that, despite the fact that ‘lowbrow’ popular music was of paramount economic importance to the industry, technological innovation in the record and phonograph industry was driven primarily by the desire to produce “better- sounding” highbrow music (Morton 2000, p.23). Morton argues that the bias in the industry toward highbrow music was a product of the combined technical and social goals of engineers and musicians, who “considered orchestral and operatic recordings to be the highest form of their art”, and of record companies, who wished to reflect the middle-class ideology of high culture, specifically the high socio-musical value attributed to cultivated, “serious” music (Morton 2000,
p.24). He attributes the symbiotic relationship between high culture and technological innovation to the influence of powerful individuals in the record industry whose highbrow taste in music drove the developments and shaped “the practices that favored these type of recordings” (Morton 2000, p.29).

According to Frith, the record industry “has always sold itself by what it could do for ‘serious’ music”; this emphasis on recording and promoting classical music records during the opening decades of the twentieth century was necessary, he argues, in order to make the phonograph conform to middle-class ideals of respectability and culture and, thus, to increase its consumer appeal among relatively affluent middle-class families (Frith 1988, p.16). The social status of the phonograph amongst the middle class was gradually raised as the early repertoire of novelty and popular song recordings widened to include ‘serious’ music; recordings of arias and songs by some of the leading opera singers of the day, such as Edouard De Reszke (for Columbia Records in 1903), Emma Calvé (for the Victor Talking Machine Company between 1907 and 1916), and, most significantly, Enrico Caruso (for Victor Talking Machine Company between 1904 and 1920) promoted both singer and the machine (Ehrlich 1990 [1976] p.185). The success of Caruso’s recordings revealed the commercial potential of recorded music for the first time. The Victor Company bought the rights to a series of opera arias recorded by the singer in London in 1902 and released them after Caruso’s American debut two years later. The unprecedented success of the records helped to establish the popularity of classical music in America and to dramatically increase the market for sound recordings generally (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.36).
Despite the historical foregrounding of the symbiotic relationship between classical music and recording technology, the recording business sold significantly more popular music recordings than classical music recordings, including those by the stars of opera; as Kenney points out, the recording business was “far more populist and pluralistic“ than the official discourse would suggest (Kenney 1999, p.xiv). Starr and Waterman divide the hit records of the pre-World War I era into two categories: sentimental songs and ragtime songs (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.36). They suggest that the enduring popularity of sentimental ballads and nostalgic songs may be understood as an appeal to the stability of the past in the face of the “unsettling effects of change—immigration, social and geographical mobility, and technological innovation”; consumption of such nineteenth-century compositions as “Old Folks at Home” (1851) and “After the Ball” (1892) and the newly composed nostalgic songs “In the Good Old Summer Time” (1902) and “Down by the Old Mill Stream” (1910) reflect the cultural theme of “reverence for home, family, and the “good old days”; on the other hand, the huge popularity of ragtime songs represented “the progressive, stimulating side of change” (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.36). Kenney argues that the phonograph and the recording business expressed a “diverse set of cultural sensibilities in which various sorts of people found pleasure”; “[t]he phonograph”, he writes, “spread a taste for operatic and symphonic music to those who could never have heard them in performance, but it also spread different sorts of jazz, blues, country, and a variety of ethnic musical styles to a large number of groups who could not have otherwise heard them” (Kenney 1999, p.xiv).
From 1890 until the 1930s, the phonograph competed only with the player piano and music boxes in the mechanised music market (Kenney, p.xiii). From the mid-1920s, radio began to play a more dominant role in the dissemination of music in America (Kenney, p.xiii). In a period when pianos were “literally pushed from the parlor to the bedroom, the basement or the garage” (Hoover 2002, p.56), radio production and sales increased dramatically: from 190,000 units in 1923 to almost five million in 1929 (Roell 1989, p.219). Over the same period, the value of musical instrument production fell from $175 million in 1923 to $80 million, and piano sales dropped from $111 million to $42 million (Butsch 2000, p.221). By the 1930s, the radio was established alongside the phonograph at the socio-musical centre of American domestic space.

Radio

The first radio programme in America was broadcast in 1906 from an experimental station in Massachusetts (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.41) and, in 1920, KDKA in Pittsburg became the first station to make regular radio broadcasts (Kline 2000, p.113); in the same year stations were launched in Detroit and Newark (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.41) and within three years “nearly six hundred stations were on the air throughout the country, broadcasting church services and live music, playing phonograph records, reading the news, and covering sporting events” (Kline 2000, p.113). Network radio became a reality in 1926 when the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) became “the first nationwide commercial station” (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.41). By 1927 there were more than one thousand radio stations in operation in America (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.41).
Radio initially presented a significant threat to the phonograph industry: after the inauguration of network radio in the mid-1920s, the availability of “comparatively free entertainment provided by radio” (Braden 1992, p.156), and the rapid spread of the technology and the greater variety of uses it offered (Butsch 2000, p.17), precipitated a dramatic decline in the sales of popular music records and phonographs (Morton 2000, p.26); more than 100 million record discs and almost 1 million phonographs were sold in 1927, however, within five years, the numbers had dropped to 6 million and 40,000, respectively (Katz 2004, p.68). As phonograph and piano sales declined during the Depression, radio offered a cheaper source of a wide variety of music and entertainment and became the most popular of all the new technologies in urban and rural homes (Kline 2000, p.113); more than the piano or the phonograph, radio “pioneered the new home entertainments of the twentieth century” (Butsch 2000, p.17).

In the 1920s and 1930s, a variety of entertainment materials were broadcast on the radio, including music, drama and comedy (Braden 1992, p.158). Radio had a profound effect on music in American life; the medium “helped make music one of the most significant, meaningful, sought after, and defining elements of day-to-day life, of generational identity, and of personal and public memory” (Douglas 2004 [1999], p.83). Music shows were the most popular forms of radio broadcasting and radio listeners did not have to leave the comfort of home, or purchase piano rolls, sheet music, phonograph records or concert tickets in order to enjoy the broadcasts of a wide variety of 'free' music (Foy 1994, p.77). As with the player piano and the phonograph, many advocates of the radio believed that it could be used to raise the cultural and educational levels of the general
population; classical music elites promoted the potential of the medium “to elevate the musical taste of the nation”, and assumed that those who were unfamiliar with it would naturally prefer it over popular music once they heard it broadcast on the domestic radio set (Butsch 2000, p.223). Jazz, which “referred to many popular music forms of alleged black origin”, represented the antithesis of highbrow culture and radio ‘uplifters’ believed that classical music broadcasts were necessary to counterbalance its insidious, commercially-driven degradation of the moral and aesthetic values of the listening public (Butsch 2000, p.229). Radio manufacturers and retailers promoted the “aura of cultural uplift” in their advertisements by associating radio with highbrow culture and society.

Magazine ads featured luxurious interiors and wealthy men and women in formal attire listening to opera and orchestra. The trade magazines Advertising and Selling and Judicious Advertising claimed radio elevated popular tastes. Radio Retailing said that “the average listener wants good music. The magazine recommended illustrations of orchestral music to sell radios. Advertisers in radio magazines hailed their equipment as educational tools and musical instruments. (Butsch 2000, p.224)

Support for classical music broadcasts fell off towards the end of the 1920s, however, as radio stations, patrons and advertisers were forced to heed audience demands for a wider range of music.

Before the advent of radio, the phonograph was primarily responsible for the wider dissemination of a broad range of musical genres to the American public. By the late 1920s, however, an unprecedented range of music styles were broadcast over the airwaves and radio supplanted the phonograph in this role (Butsch 2000, p.211). Radio owners could chose to listen to what they liked from a ‘musical pastiche of “high” and
“popular” culture’ (Douglas 2004 [1999], p.88) that included classical music, opera, and jazz, as well as “hymns, waltzes, male quartets, brass bands, light opera, hillbilly music, and song and patter groups” (Douglas 2004 [1999], p.85). Popular music was an integral part of radio broadcasts from the start; Starr and Waterman summarise the methodology of early music broadcasting:

Stations carried live broadcasts of dance bands and singers, and the establishment of the national networks allowed the listener in Chicago or in San Francisco to hear celebrities live from New York. The music stars created by radio were the Happiness Boys…who began presenting their vaudeville-style act over WJZ in 1921. Increasingly, radio broadcasters went to the scene of musical performances, rather than bringing the performers into studio. The first such “remote” broadcast, in 1921, featured a ballroom dance orchestra performing at the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York City. (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.42)

Radio transmitted the rhythms and sonorities of popular music across the American airwaves and into homes everywhere, and, more than any other sound technology, radio controlled the pulse and texture of the domestic soundscape.

The popularity of phonograph recordings of ragtime, jazz and blues music in the opening decades of the twentieth century paved the way for radio broadcasts of African-American music from the mid-1920s. The first “hot jazz” music, performed by African-Americans, was broadcast in the mid-1920s by stations in Chicago and New York (Douglas 2004 [1999], p.84) and, in the years that followed, as the white audience for African-American music grew, radio accelerated the dissemination of jazz and blues and hastened their acceptance amongst a wider American population (Douglas 2004 [1999], p.87).
In the 1920s, radio (along with phonograph records) opened a small crack between white and black culture, and Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, and a few others slipped through. By the end of the decade most would agree that the newly founded radio networks and the white bands they rewarded had co-opted, domesticated, and often bastardized black jazz, but African-American music crept into white culture and white subjectivity, and this was critically important for the enlivening of American music…. (Douglas 2004 [1999], pp.84-85)

The typical sonorities of jazz instruments were more suited to the limited sound fidelity of early radio transmitters and receivers; early radio technology could not cope with instruments that produced either very high or very low frequencies and thus music played on the piano, clarinet and saxophone was more effective on the radio than symphonic music. The more introverted expression of much popular and folk music suited the radio more than the orchestras and singers—especially sopranos—who were accustomed to projecting music into large concert halls (Douglas 2004 [1999] p.88). By the late 1920s, radio had made some performers of popular music nationally known (Douglas 2004 [1999] p.88), including crooners, such as Vaughn de Leath, Rudy Vallee and Bing Crosby, who “exploited radio’s technical limitations” by employing a less stage-oriented and more intimate approach to singing (Douglas 2004 [1999] p.87), which was made possible by the development of electric recording, and, specifically, the invention of the microphone (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.41). This “new generation of performers” secured the mass appeal of popular music and gave rise to the first music superstars (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.41). In a composite of ten surveys of radio listening patterns from 1928 to 1932, popular music was the first preference, with classical music the fifth preference after comedy (Butsch 2000, p.227).
In time, radio and records “fell upon each other rapaciously” (Chanan 1995, p.8) and phonograph recordings “became the staple of radio broadcasting while the radio became a primary medium of publicity for the phonograph record” (Kenney 1999, p.x111). Radio provided the phonograph industry with the electrical technology that precipitated the important transition from acoustic to electrical recording and from mechanical to motor-driven playback (Morton 2000, pp.23-24). The technical demands of radio broadcasting precipitated improvements in microphone technology and the development of amplifier and loudspeaker technology; these technologies were employed, in turn, by record industry engineers in the development of electrical recording, resulting in a significant improvement in recorded sound (Chanan 1995, p.6). The production of higher quality records and the development and successful marketing of the domestic combination radio-phonograph contributed in significant measure to the recovery of the phonograph industry beginning in the late 1930s (Braden 1992, p.156). By the end of the 1930s, two companies, RCA and Decca, controlled three-quarters of the record market (Frith 1988, p.17). In the same period the music business merged with the movie industry to create vast business conglomerates, or “empires of sound” (Kenney 1999, p.xiii). In 1924, about 5 million American families owned a radio receiver (Braden 1992, p.158) and by 1935, 21 million American families owned at least one radio (Foy 1994, p.77).

Foy cites evidence to support the claim that the radio precipitated the move away from hands-on music making to a more passive engagement with music in the home: studies of radio listening patterns in the 1920s reveal a shift from “music as a primary event to music as background entertainment”, with two-thirds of radio listeners engaged in
another activity while listening (Foy 1994, p.77). The portability of the radio meant that music was no longer confined to one or two rooms in the house; as the special-function rooms of the traditional Victorian house were replaced by the open floor plans and multi-functional spaces of early twentieth-century houses, the radio facilitated the flow of music out of the formal parlour and into the more informal living rooms and kitchens of the modern American home (Foy 1994, pp.77-78).

People engaged with music on the radio in a variety of ways, and tuned in at all times of the day: at times listeners danced to it; at other times they used it as background sound; and often they concentrated totally on the auditory experience of it (Douglas 2004 [1999], p.84). The dissemination of player piano rolls and the gramophone records had earlier seen the emergence of communities of taste across America as people separated by distance shared in the consumption of the same music products; radio advanced this democratisation of music culture and reconfiguration of collective spatiality, but it also brought a new dimension to the shared experience: for the first time radio broadcasts meant that people dispersed over great distances could choose to tune in simultaneously to the same music (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.40).

Radio profoundly reconstructed the soundscape of American home life; music became entwined in domestic rituals and experience to an unprecedented extent. Music broadcasting precipitated a dramatic extension of the commonality of the experience of listening to music: more than the piano or the gramophone, radio structured socio-musical experience, as more people listened to the same musicians and music than ever
before (Douglas 2004 [1999], p.84). Through multiple modes of audiencing, some more
dialogical than others, listeners to music on the radio constituted their “emotions, sense of
time and place, sense of history, and…their autobiographies” (Douglas 2004 [1999],
p.84).

Radio offered people a variety of listening experiences, including the phenomena of
solitary listening and communal listening. Braden stresses the important social role
played by the radio during the Depression, when it encouraged family togetherness,
especially in the evening times when programming was geared to general family listening
(Braden 1992, p.158). Radio also promoted the phenomenon of listening as an individual
experience, “each person attuned to the radio and insulated from every other” (Butsch
2000, p.207). Butsch describes the manner in which radio announcers “fostered a one-to-
one intimacy between individual listeners and themselves”, leading some critics to decry
the “‘hypnotic,” “narcotic” effects of broadcasting’ (Butsch 2000, p.207). Butsch cites
testimony from radio listeners that counters this charge of technological determinism;
correspondence from early radio listeners in the 1920s reveals their sense that the person
on the radio inhabited their home for the duration of the broadcast; these listeners did not
experience themselves as passive eavesdroppers but as active participants in
“imaginative, yet real, interaction” (Butsch 2000, p.186: italics in original).

Radio had a profound impact on life in rural America, reducing the feeling of isolation
and connecting rural communities to the wider world. As Butsch points out, almost half
of the population of America lived in rural areas in the mid-1920s and many had little regular contact with the “outside world”.

Most had no telephone or newspaper. News mostly came from neighbors and mail. They did not have daily weather forecasts that would enable them to prepare their crops and animals for a frost or storms. They sold their crops with no knowledge of current prices on commodities markets, the prices at which the buyer could sell them. In bad weather they were often isolated even from their neighbors. Paved roads were rare; dirt roads turned into muddy quagmires whenever it rained. Snow made them impassable. Often farmers could not get to town for weeks, sometimes not even to their own mailbox (Butsch 2000, p.207).

Radio “linked the smallest towns to the biggest cities” (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.43) and was especially popular in those rural regions where farmers were widely dispersed away from towns and neighbours (Danbom 1995, p.193). Rural people purchased radios as soon as they could afford them; less than 5 percent of farm families reported owning a radio in 1923, but this figure had risen to 21 percent in 1930 and 60 percent in 1940; by 1940, “the percentage of farm households owning radios surpassed that of those having a telephone…those with electricity and running water…and—just barely—those owning an automobile” (Kline 2000, pp.114-115). The dissemination of radio sets was uneven in rural America in the 1920s and 1930s, with “poor southern states far behind the rest of the country” (Kline 2000, p.114).

Agricultural leaders in the 1920s promoted the contribution of the radio to the modernization of rural life; reformers proclaimed “the radio’s ability to relieve isolation, bring the city’s culture of highbrow music and higher education to the country, and keep youth on the farm” (Kline 2000, p.116).

Federal government promoted the radio to rural people through the Federal Radio Commission and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Extension Service; reformers
hoped that radio would ‘eliminate differences between urban and rural life by connecting farm people directly to the “civilizing aspects of the city and transmit modernizing messages directly to farm people in an efficient and effective manner’ (Kline 2000, p.114). As early as 1924, the radio correspondent for the Rural New Yorker wrote that the radio “connects you with the whole world and breaks down the invisible but real barriers that separate the country from the city” (Kline 2000, p.117). While radio was an effective medium for the penetration of urban cultural standards into country life, regional programming was a popular feature of network radio broadcasting and served as a medium for the expression of more local tastes and identities (Danbom 1995, p.193).

While radio served the utilitarian function of broadcasting weather and market reports, and farm and household hints to rural dwellers, it also provided a medium of escape for rural listeners (Danbom 1995, p.193). Despite the efforts and hopes of the country life reformers, surveys of radio listening patterns conducted in the 1920s found that farm people preferred to use the radio for entertainment rather than uplift (Kline 2000, p.123). In “radioland” (Butsch 2000, p.207), farm families could choose to “lose themselves in soap operas, adventures, and comedies”, and “forget the tedium of the day with an evening of dance music” (Danbom 1995, p.193). Rural people, just like urban listeners, preferred music over anything else broadcast on the radio; and whereas daily market and weather reports were also popular amongst farm men, those broadcasts intended to modernise, educate and provide cultural uplift to farm families were relatively unpopular (Kline 2000, p.123).
The surveys also revealed some resistance amongst farm people to the music programming favoured by reformists, including the broadcasts of classical music and grand opera, which were more popular in the cities in the 1920s; farm people displayed a preference for broadcasts that featured a wide range of popular and traditional musics, including hillbilly music, old-time music and various forms of jazz (Kline 2000, p124). Butsch cites the findings of a 1930s survey of radio listening patterns that reveals a preference for old-time music, Tin Pan Alley songs, and sentimental ballads amongst small-town and rural listeners (Butsch 2000, pp.227-228). From the mid-1920s urban stations began to program “barn dance” programs in response to the growing demands of the surrounding rural market for country music (Butsch 2000, pp.210-211).

Radio consolidated the acoustic transformation of the American domestic scene that began with the dissemination of the mechanical piano in the 1890s and accelerated with the development of phonography in the early decades of the twentieth century. All three technologies of sound disturbed the socio-musical culture of Victorian America in profound ways and ushered in irrevocable changes to the sound of American life. In the final part of this exposition on the formation of the early twentieth century soundscape, I consider the impact these technologies had on the democratisation of music appreciation and domestic music making, and on the repeatability of experience and re-gendering of domestic musicking.
Musical Democracy

New technologies such as the player piano and, later, the phonograph and the radio played an essential role in the establishment of music’s status as commodity. The domestic machines in the parlour, and the musical materials ‘played’ on them, were implicated in the early twentieth-century matrix of industrial capital, a socio-economic paradigm, which required individuals “detachable from tradition, family, and ascription” (Jarvie in Lipsitz, 1990, p.10). Many Americans considered the new music technologies to be progressive. Some commentators saw the player piano, phonograph and radio as agents for the spread of musical democracy. Amongst the many who celebrated the advent of the new technologies were those who wished to have more access to music, especially art music and popular music. The player piano, phonograph, and radio brought music into the “homes and lives of millions who had never enjoyed it because they lacked the ability or desire to work at learning to produce tunes by hand” (Roell 1989, p.xiii). Between 1890 and 1930, music technologies played a central role in the rapid dissemination of a wide range of music, which otherwise would not have been accessible to most Americans; the player piano, phonograph and radio brought classical music and complex popular music, such as ragtime, which were beyond the technical abilities of most amateur musicians, into the homes of Americans of all classes (Foy 1994, p.72).

Roell proposes that the musical revolution in American society in the 1890s was brought about by the convergence of the invention of the player piano, the phonograph and motion pictures, and the “contagion of ragtime music” (Roell 1989, p.31). All, he writes, “contributed in an unprecedented way toward the formation of a musical democracy by
making music a consumable object available to all, without the need for painstaking cultivation” (Roell 1989, p.32). Foy agrees that technology democratised the consumption of music in the home (Foy 1994, p.72), but she points out that it simultaneously reduced the individuality of domestic music production and consumption (Foy 1994, p.76). The player piano, phonograph, and radio were instrumental in the construction of a communal repertoire of classical music and popular music. All played significant roles in the dissemination of a great variety of musical genres, including ragtime. Kenney proposes that new forms of collective aural knowledge developed through the sounding and resounding, “upon demand”, of the “musical grammar, syntax, and vocabulary” of recorded music (Kenney 1999, p.xii). Record producers and consumers interacted to create a communal repertoire of popular musical narratives and these, in turn, generated collective memories (Kenney 1999, p.xix). In this way, recorded music emerged as a medium of communication amongst otherwise widely dispersed communities and individuals, and, in the process, provided “an important basis for the creation (and constant reinvention) of a distinctively American culture” (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.38).

While it was widely acknowledged that the player piano, phonograph and radio provided wider access to music than ever before, many critics of the new technologies denounced the experiences they offered as superficial. Many in American Victorian society condemned the mechanisation of culture in general, and of music in particular. Critics claimed that sound recording dehumanised music by separating the musical artifact from its original source, thus severing music’s “connection to community and individual
identity” and thereby devaluing its meaning (Starr and Waterman 2003, p.37). Many critics condemned the phonograph for its dissemination of “popular noise” (Kenney 1999, p.xiv), while the struggle between the mechanical player piano and the “art of pianoforte playing” was often compared to that between the automobile and the horse (Roell 1989, p.58). In an attempt to halt the spread of “insidious, mechanical music”, musicians, composers and music educators extolled the virtues of live music and spoke out against the new technologies of the player piano and the phonograph (Roell 1989, p.53). In “The Menace of Mechanical Music”, published in 1906, John Philip Sousa described the new technologies as a “vice” which would lead to “deterioration in American music and musical taste” (Roell 199, p.54). Elsewhere in the same article, Sousa asserted that mechanisation reduced music—“an expression of the soul”—to a “mathematical system of megaphones, wheels, cogs, disks, cylinders, and all manner of revolving things” and would lead to the decline of amateur music making (quoted by Foy 1994, p.75). In 1908, Dr. Charles W. Needham, president of George Washington University, highlighted what he believed to be the expressive limitations of the phonograph and player piano when he declared, “you can copy the sound, but not the interpretation” (Roell 1989, p.53).

Roell suggests that, more than sound or interpretation, what was fundamentally at stake in the conflict between mechanisation and art was, in fact, entrée to the musical experience. The Victorian piano had become a symbol of middle-class respectability and cultural values; the new technologies of the phonograph and the player piano presented a challenge to the elite status of Victorian musical experience and the perceived moral
value invested in the cultivation of musical appreciation and practice. For some, the mechanisation of music diminished the musical experience by removing the need for painstaking cultivation of the art. Furthermore, the repeatability of the phonograph recording and the piano roll, and their mass dissemination as consumer products, undermined Victorian socio-musical practice and threatened to trivialise musical experience (Roell 1989, pp.57-58). The democratisation of the availability of well-performed music meant that ‘good’ music “was no longer an exclusive commodity” which could be used by the elite to delineate cultural boundaries between the classes (Foy 1994, p.73).

The “guardians of musical culture” expressed the fear that the democratisation of music would lead to the spread of “bad musical influences”, and the rapid dissemination of ragtime across the American musical landscape only confirmed those fears (Parakilas 2002, p.232). Sheet music, piano rolls and disc recordings brought ‘classic’ ragtime into the parlours of America and established this African-American music as the first important popular music of the recording era, and the first and primary musical adversary of Victorian culture at the turn of the century. Refined sections of the American musical establishment condemned ragtime at first; in 1901, for example, the American Federation of Musicians “forbade its members from playing ragtime”, and, in addition, many composers spoke out against the style (Roell 1989, p.33). Despite its characteristic asymmetrical inflections, ragtime was condemned by many in middle class America as mechanistic. Irvine Berlin remarked that the “speed and snap” of ragtime was influenced directly by the movement of the automobile; the motor car, he claimed, destroyed the
“old rhythm” and as the country speeded up, the “new age demanded new music for new action” (Berlin in Roell 1989, p.33). Roell proposes that popular music, in general, speeded up as America modernised and became faster-paced during the late nineteenth-century (Roell 1989, p.32). When its strong rhythmic accent was compared unfavourably with the more refined melodic strains of most parlour music of the time, ragtime was adjudged a mere musical reflection of modern urban industrialism, and therefore, as noise: the socio-musical antithesis of Victorian culture (Levine 1993, p.174). Ragtime syncopation occurs in the melody line and the displacement of the beat here changes the rhythmical relationship between melody and underlying pulse. In the resulting internal musical dialogue, pulse achieves the elevated status of independent voice. In the interplay of asymmetrical melodic rhythm and underlying pulse, motion is foregrounded and agitates the muted sensoriality of the Victorian parlour.

Ragtime’s rhythmic and racial accents secured its lowbrow status. In his discussion of the “adjectival categories” employed to classify expressive culture in early twentieth century America, Levine argues that new African-American-derived popular musics, including ragtime and, later, jazz, were consistently identified as “lowbrow” and distinct from “culture” which had come to be equated with gentility and refinement, stability and tradition; when the word “culture” was used by itself ‘it was assumed to carry the adjective “high” with it’ (1993, p.174). Where “culture” was the complex and harmonious “creation of centuries” that embodied “order and reason”, jazz and ragtime were considered to be spontaneous and discordant products of “a new age” (Levine 1993, p.174). Accessible, sometimes improvisatory, and often participatory, ragtime and jazz
music breached the sacred boundaries between performer, composer and audience, and threatened to undermine the “purity” of music and the exclusive nature of artistic practice and appreciation. Furthermore, the foregrounding of rhythm in ragtime acted as a compelling sign of its partial derivation from African-American “plantation melodies” and confirmed its lowbrow status for those who subscribed to the stereotype of “rhythmic, pulsating uninhibited Blacks” and an evolutionary history of music culture; for the upholders of “culture”, the “savage crash and bang” of rhythm in the form of ragtime and jazz signified the soundscape of pre-civilised society and, as such, was regressive and “an atrocity in polite society” (Levine 1993, pp.176-179).

**Repeatable Experience**

Mechanisation, in general, according to Roell, replaced the Victorian ideal of the unique and irreplaceable experience with the commonplace “reproduction and duplication of experience” (Roell 1989, p.46). From the mid-nineteenth century, photography, the first “technology of memory” (Poulos 2008), provided access to the repeatable experience through the recorded snapshot image; before the advent of amateur photography, Victorians purchased studio-produced carte de visite and cabinet portrait photographs to display in the parlour; the great quantity of portrait photographs found in the Victorian parlour reveals a noteworthy interest in the acquisition and display of “likenesses”; the smaller carte de visite was especially popular because it was duplicable, allowing friends and relatives to “give or send their likenesses to others both near and far” (Wajda 1994, p.168). The introduction of the hand-held box-form Detective Camera in the 1880s and George Eastman’s roll film in 1888 (Wajda 1994, p.168) paved the way for the
development of the simple and inexpensive Kodak “Brownie” box camera in 1900, a technology that enabled anyone to be a photographer, just as the Aeolian player piano had made anyone a ‘pianist’ (Roell 1989, p.46).

The “Brownie” box camera and the Pianolo promised accessibility, ease of operation, instant gratification and the possibility of the repeatable experience (Roell 1989, p.46). Before the “miracle of sound reproduction” music was always humanly embodied and live, and the “ideology of the entire musical experience was derived from the producer culture” (Roell 1989, p.45). Piano rolls were the primary source of recorded music before the advent of the high-fidelity phonograph. Control over the repeatability of the sound object, already achieved in principle through the mechanism of the piano roll and player piano, was greatly enhanced with the invention of the phonograph; disc recordings, in particular, could be replayed over and over again with ease and were more durable and more replaceable than piano rolls.

**Playing with the Machine**

The development of music playback technology at the end of the nineteenth century was a boon to many amateur performers. There is much evidence to support the view that the player piano, phonograph and, later, the radio were brought into the service of active music making in the home to a greater extent than the rhetoric of technological determinism would have us believe. Tawa, for example, points out that the desire to participate in music making through the practice of playing along with the player piano or phonograph motivated some ethnic Americans to purchase these music machines in the
first place. He mentions the case of a Czechoslovakian-American, George Hardick, who "treasured his phonograph because he could play his clarinet along with recordings" and he notes that other "instrumentalists mention doing likewise to the backing of the player piano" (Tawa 1982, p.118). Katz, too, points out that for many phonograph users "there was nothing mutually exclusive about music appreciation and musical activity": many instrumentalists played along with recordings, and many music teachers employed the phonograph as a pedagogical tool (Katz 2004, pp.70-71). The phonograph also gave many non-musicians the opportunity for self-expression through ‘shadow conducting’; described by the Minneapolis Phonograph Society as a “phonographic indoor sport”, Katz points out that the practice of ‘conducting’ recorded performances of classical music was widespread amongst American men (Katz 2004, p.59). Radio broadcasts of music, too, stimulated musical activity and creativity amongst listeners in the early days of the medium. Listening to the radio not only improved musical knowledge but also contributed directly to the performance of modern popular music amongst young instrumentalists and singers: Butsch highlights the impact of radio listening on young rural musicians who improved their instrumental and vocal renditions of music “as a result of hearing radio music”, and he cites the testimony of white and black musicians who “mentioned listening to and borrowing ideas from music on the radio” (Butsch 2000, p.211).

The advent of music playback machines, including the player piano, phonograph and radio, also precipitated a profound shift in the gendering of domestic music making during the opening decades of the twentieth century. Playback machines of all kinds,
“ancient” and “modern”, Eisenberg points out, “want a good deal of attention to their levers and knobs” (Eisenberg 1997 [1985], p.248). Eisenberg’s observation of the often ritualistic nature of the physical act of playing a record illuminates the active physicality of record consumption and points to the agency of the operator-listener within a dialogical relationship between man and music reproduction technology (Eisenberg 1997 [1985], p.248).

The gendering of the new music technologies began with the dissemination of the player piano at the turn of the century, and was consolidated and amplified as new technologies of sound were increasingly coupled with masculinity and patriarchy (Moy 2006, p.199). By reducing piano playing to a “mechanical process”, the player piano had affected “a demise of piano-playing as a symbol of accomplishment, particularly for females, in the home” and simultaneously provided access to domestic music making for men (Braden 1992, p.156). The feminisation of Victorian domestic music making as part of the creation of a separate sphere to that of the male world of work had distanced most men from the performance of music. Music making was seen as edifying for a woman but inconsistent with the ideal of the “rational, aggressive, competitive, businesslike” man (Roell 1994, p.92). Even in the professional music sphere, where most concert pianists were men, male musicians were often considered to be unmanly (Roell 1994, p.92). Victorian men, themselves, generally considered domestic music making to be unmanly and inconsistent with Roosevelt’s gendered prescription for the “strenuous life” (Roell 1994, p.92). Roell points out that the term piano was sometimes used in Victorian times to refer, in a disparaging manner, to men who were deemed to be “gentle, mild, or weak”
(Roell 1994, p.91). The sight of a man playing the piano was a cause of anxiety to many in Victorian society; music making by men was consistently depreciated because it compromised a man’s sexuality, a central component of his identity (Leppert 1995, p.68).

The player piano was the first technology of sound to offer Victorian men the opportunity to participate in domestic music making, through direct engagement with the music machine. The mechanisation of the instrument presented a challenge to the gender casting of domestic piano playing as effeminate (Hoover 2002, p.55). Mechanisation contributed to the de-feminisation of domestic music production; the player piano gave men leave to engage directly with musical sound and to assume the role of ‘performer’ via the operation of the machine (Roell 1989, p.40).

The player piano precipitated a dramatic change in the ‘sight’ of sound: the instrument allowed men to inhabit one of the traditional domains of female activity and to engage in the construction of gender there; the player piano, and eventually the traditional piano itself, emerged as legitimate sites for the embodied consumption and production of masculine identities. The confusion felt by many Victorians in response to the de-feminisation of domestic piano playing, and the sight of the new socio-musical configuration of manliness, is humourously portrayed in a cartoon which appeared in Appleton’s magazine in 1906, in which a boy, shocked by what he has seen in the drawing room, calls to his mother, yelling, “There is a man in there playing the piano with his hands!” (reproduced in Foy 1994, p.76).
The de-feminisation of the domestic piano proved to be a boon to the piano trade; marketers recognised the commercial potential in the new relationship between man and music and reified it in their advertisements for the instrument (Taylor 2007, p. 287). The music machine “brought men into the picture” and advertisers began to include men in their images of idealised domestic music making: men were often pictured with player pianos in the advertisements that appeared in newspapers, magazines, trade papers and catalogues in this era; “some drawings show a group of men around the instrument; some show it as a high-class machine in the background being enjoyed by the man of the house” (Taylor 2007, pp.287-288). In this way, advertisers contributed to the radical restructuring of the traditional gender patterns characteristic of Victorian domestic music making.

Domestic radio, too, was often consumed in different ways by men and women; as a Radio Broadcast article indicated: “A wife demanded a radio, but the husband was expected to buy the parts, set it up, and make it work” (Butsch 2000, p.186). The phonograph machine also offered men a way to engage more intimately with music without seeming to be unmanly; the machine opened up “opportunities for tinkering and shop talk, traditional man’s activities”, and enabled men to indulge in the private consumption of classical music “without the self-consciousness that might follow them into public forums such as concert halls and opera houses” (Katz 2004, pp.58-59). In keeping with their traditional role in the domestic arena, women, however, still remained the primary decision makers when it came to the purchase of phonographs. High-fidelity, as metaphorical private masculine space, offered an anti-social alternative to the “familial
togetherness” of post-War, open-plan, feminised domestic spaces (Moy 2006, p.202). With the wider dissemination of high-fidelity recordings and playback machines after World War II, the conception of home audio as “masculinist” technology hardened and men increasingly used audio technology to gender domestic space as masculine (Keightley 1996, p. 150).

**Music in the Mescher Parlour**

By the time Albert Mescher began to sit at the piano in the 1910s, mechanisation of the instrument in the form of the player piano had, since the late nineteenth century, initiated a new, more egalitarian socio-musical role for the instrument. The player piano disturbed the traditional gender patterns of parlour music making and opened a new musical space in the domestic setting for the man of the house as the ‘operator’ of the machine. Sitting at the player piano, Albert inhabited a space and an attitude that had been the traditional prerogative of the female in Victorian society. In time, the phonograph, too, would offer a similar mechanism for the expression of male musicality (Katz 2004, p.58). Taking his place at the player piano, and, later, standing beside the phonograph, Albert crafted his dipterous musical style and took flight to the syncopated sounds and rhythms of piano ragtime.

Albert’s father, Fred Mescher purchased the New York-made, mechanical *Pianista* piano in the early 1900s, at a time when ragtime was enjoying its heyday and the player piano was still the most popular music playback machine on the market. In time, the phonograph superseded the piano as the primary source of music in the Mescher parlour.
and, today, the old Pianista is little used and in need of maintenance. The Mescher family home was remodeled in 1992 and the wooden sliding doors that separated the living room from the parlour were removed in order to create one large 30-foot room, which runs the length of the house. Despite the reorientation of the physical space, the parlour is still the primary repository of the collective family memory, a latter day “memory palace” (Grier 1992). Throughout the remodeling of the house, the player piano remained fixed on the spot where it has stood since the day it arrived into the Mescher parlour more than 90 years ago (Mescher, S. 2008). Like countless pianos in homes throughout America, the Mescher pianista “symbolizes a past age” (Roell 1994, p.97); despite its loss of deportment, the Mescher parlour piano retains an aura of its former grace.

The player piano is a highly potent touchstone for Jerry Mescher’s connection with his father. It was at this piano that Jerry’s father, Albert Mescher, created his first bones arrangements, and it is this, along with the instrument’s fundamental resonance in the historical soundscape of the family, which has secured its totemic status in the Mescher family memory. This is the piano that sounded on the Sunday mornings of Jerry’s childhood, in the years before a phonograph or a radio came into house; after mass and before dinner, the player piano filled the room with music, spilling out in summer time through open windows into the fields and the hog barns. When the phonograph replaced the player piano as the primary source of music in the parlour, Albert sustained his creative relationship with the sonorities of the instrument through his bones arrangements of recordings by pianists Big Tiny Little, Jo Ann Castle, Knuckles O’ Toole, and others. Throughout his adult life nothing gave him more pleasure than playing the bones along to
piano music. The instrument had beguiled him since he was a young boy and his relationship with it continued to be a sensuous and creative one for the rest of his life. Albert discovered the temporal design of music through the percussive tones of the piano, and the metrical geometry of his bones arrangements maps his affair with the instrument.

When he was a boy, Albert’s son, Jerry, sat in the parlour and watched his father play the bones along with the player piano. Jerry remembers seeing his father sitting trance-like, his feet pumping the music machine and his ebony bones held out to the sides, as he divined for the rhythmic cadences of the music.

I can remember him sitting there and looking at the roll just like he was in a deep trance, see. I mean he was entranced in the music. He was listening for every different move that piano made: the tingling of the keys. I never paid much attention to it. I didn’t really know what he was doing, but he was actually forming those rhythm patterns; I found out later, see. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Inspired by his father’s bones playing, but not yet invited to join him in his music making in the parlour, Jerry took every opportunity he could to practice his own bones technique by playing along to music on the kitchen radio, often under the watchful eye of his mother. He kept his “peach crate bones”, as he called them, in a kitchen drawer and practiced regularly by playing along to the music on ‘Tony’s Polka Time’, a fifteen-minute show that aired on the local Carroll radio station three times a day. Jerry set his watch by the show and made sure that he was by the radio, bones in hand, at seven forty-five in the morning, at noon, and, again, at six thirty in the evening, every day, except school days when he missed the midday show.

And every day I would get to have them bones in that drawer, and as soon as that polka music started—I had a watch—I’d play those fifteen minutes, everything
that came on: waltzes, polkas mostly...I’d wait always at noon until that fifteen minutes, here they came again, see. And then at night—we was always doing chores from four-o-clock—and I’d always watch that clock and when it got six thirty, I’d be up to the house here and I’d play them fifteen minutes ‘till quarter to seven. (Mescher, J. 2006)

When Albert realised that Jerry was serious about playing the bones he invited his son into the parlour and began to share with him in his relationship with music. Albert introduced him to the pairing of piano and bones, and as Jerry absorbed his father’s bones arrangements for the instrumental combination, he too developed a deep relationship with the piano. By the time Jerry joined his father in music making, the phonograph had taken over from the player piano as the primary source of music in the Mescher parlour. The first phonograph machine Albert owned was an early home-recording and playback device called the Wilcox Gay Recorder - 1C10, which he purchased from Hospe-Anton Music Warehouse in Omaha, Nebraska. The portable machine used 78s only and Jerry too used it for a time when he was a freshman in highschool. By the time Jerry joined his father in his parlour, Albert was using a Dictograph record player, which he also purchased from the Hospe-Anton Warehouse in about 1955. The machine played 78s, 33s, and 45s and was used exclusively by Albert and Jerry thereafter in their parlour sessions and public performances (Mescher S. 2009)

The repeatability of the player piano roll and the phonograph record facilitated Albert’s interpretation of the rhythmic structure of the recorded music and the composition of his bones arrangements. Albert interpreted the composition of the music on the roll or disc in a gradual fashion, through repeated listening. For each piece of music in the Mescher
repertoire, Albert created a unique linear ordering of the characteristic rhythmic motifs that form the building blocks of all of his compositions. In addition to serving the compositional process, the repeatability of the phonograph recording facilitated the transmission of Albert’s bones composition. Albert transmitted his compositions beat-for-beat to Jerry, who, in turn, passed them on to Bernie. Jerry learned the arrangements during his regular practice sessions with his father in the parlour. In this process of critical engagement, the Mescher bones players accessed the pleasure of shared musical entrainment and subverted the deterministic potential of the technologies.

Unlike many rural folk or popular musicians, Albert and Jerry Mescher did not develop their musicianship within the context of a local music-making community. In the absence of such a community, the player piano, phonograph and radio provided the musical context for the development of Mescher musical creativity and the domestic parlour provided the socio-spatial site for its expression. Rather than engage passively with the technologically mediated musical sounds that entered their home, Albert and Jerry Mescher developed a dialogical relationship with them. Negotiating the “diverse set of cultural sensibilities” (Kenney 1999, p.xiii), which they accessed through the player piano, phonograph, and radio, Albert and Jerry constructed their own syncretic soundscape and their own performative practice. In their performances of Albert’s bones arrangements they shared the groove with the technologically mediated sounds of American popular music.
Music making in the parlour provided a counterpoint to farm work for Albert and Jerry. Albert and Jerry created their sonoric landscape in the parlour and enveloped themselves in sound there. In the parlour, rooted in their cherished “corner of the world” (Bachelard [1958] 1994, p.4), the Mescher farmer-musicians experienced the freedom of musical play. The Mescher construction of the technologically mediated, domestic soundscape illuminates the multisensory nature and the liminal potentialities of domestic auditory habitation. In the sacred space that was the Mescher parlour, father and son were lifted up in the sensuous embrace of the combined sounds of recorded music and the sparkling ideophony of ebony bones, and “transported to another world” (Tuan 2004, p.39).
Chapter Seven

Into the Groove

In this chapter, I present an analysis of the bones playing style that was first created by Albert Mescher, and, later, passed on to his son, Jerry. My exposition is focused on two of the principal ‘soundmarks’ (Schafer [1977] 1993) of the Mescher soundworld: the syncopated rhythms of recorded, ‘classic’ ragtime and the Mescher bones arrangements. Syncopation is one of the principal aesthetic features of the Mescher bones playing style and I propose that it was derived from ragtime music. Albert’s bones arrangements fuse the Mescher proclivity for order and repetition—primary characteristics of Mescher spatiality and musicality—with the post-Victorian musical syncopation heralded on the American musical landscape by ragtime music. In order to highlight the historical provenance of the pervasive syncopations that characterise Mescher bones arrangements, I begin by locating the roots of classic piano ragtime and its syncopated rhythms in minstrel music and later African-American piano styles. In so doing, I illuminate a lineal connection between African-American music, and its white American aberration, minstrel show music, and Mescher musical style.

Albert played several instruments, including the accordion and harmonica, on which he performed a small but eclectic repertoire that included ragtime tunes, waltzes, minstrel music and Tin-Pan Alley standards. The family piano roll collection is similarly composed of ragtime tunes, marches and minstrel favourites, and is further evidence of Albert’s catholic taste in music. I propose, nonetheless, that ragtime played on the piano is the most significant music in the Mescher bones playing tradition. Albert was clearly
moved by the asymmetrical rhythms of piano ragtime, the originary source of the syncopation that is a defining feature of his bones arrangements, and of those composed in later years by Jerry.

Most of the tunes in the Mescher bones playing repertoire, ragtime and non-ragtime, are in duple or quadruple time and my analysis shows that syncopation, achieved through the articulation of various linear combinations of three-beat and two-beat patterns over the underlying regular symmetrical pulse of the music being accompanied, is characteristic of Mescher bones style. My discussion is supported, in the second part of the chapter, by an analysis of the syncopated rhythms that compose the Mescher bones arrangements, and by the formulation of a lexicon of Mescher rhythm motifs and patterns.

In the third part of the chapter, I present a descriptive account and analysis of Mescher duetting practice and I examine the effect of making music together on Mescher familial relationships. I propose that making music together provided Albert and Jerry with a means of reinventing their relationship. More than fifty years ago, Jerry Mescher succeeded in convincing his father of his passion for bones playing. Had his father not invited him into the parlour to share in his soundworld, the unison, synchronised style that defines Mescher bones playing would not have developed, and the musical symbiosis between father and son that emerged through the practice of Mescher duetting would not have been realised.
I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of the contemporary practice of the Mescher bones players. Today, Jerry and his sister, Bernie, resound the rhythm patterns of their father’s bones arrangements in a ceremonial act of embodied remembering. In private practice and public display, they enact a ritual repetition of their inherited musical style.

**Ragtime**

Albert Mescher first encountered musical syncopation in the stylised ‘ragging’ of piano ragtime. In the late 1910s, sitting at the mechanical player piano in the parlour of the Mescher homestead in Halbur, Iowa, he discovered the asymmetrical order of ragtime rhythm. Just two decades earlier, at the end of the nineteenth century, the development of new technologies of sound, including the player piano and the phonograph, coincided with a general shift in the culture of leisure in America. The new ‘sounds of progress’ presented some challenges to the traditional socio-musical sensibilities of the Victorian parlour. Amongst the most provocative of the technologically mediated sounds to shimmy into the parlour in the slipstream of the player piano and the phonograph was ragtime music. During the early decades of the twentieth century the piano roll carried ragtime’s intercultural, urban rhythms across the gridded midwestern landscape and into the American parlour, where its African-American accent and sensuous syncopations disturbed the measured cadences of Victorian, middle-class, socio-musical culture.

There were many in American society who welcomed the ‘noise’ of ragtime and its disturbance of Victorian sensibilities. Ragtime became accepted by white, middle-class
Americans, providing them with an escape from the “innocuous and cloying sentimentality” of much late nineteenth-century music (Foy 1994, p.72). A precursor to jazz, with its uninhibited celebration of musical individuality and, its correlative, cultural freedom, ragtime sounded the opening strains of a radically new twentieth century musical soundscape and offered an alternative to “the accepted, the proper and the old” (Hoagy Carmichael, in Levine 1993, p.182-183). Many progressive Americans perceived the fast, syncopated pace of ragtime to be ‘in time’ with the rhythm of modern life (Roell 1989, p.36), and, in ‘classic’ piano ragtime, millions of Americans found “both their popular and their classical music” (Parakilas 2002, p.239).

Roell argues that ragtime “contributed to and resulted from the revolutionary change occurring in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century America”; ragtime was implicated “in the business of piano manufacturing, Tin Pan Alley songwriting, sheet music publication, and not least, the emerging consumer mentality, with its emphasis on recreation rather than work” (Roell 1989, p.34). Ragtime was the first music of modern America, and Hitchcock identifies piano players, player pianos, dance bands, and commercial sheet music as the primary media for its transmission (Hitchcock 1969, p120). The shift in American values which occurred around the turn of the century is reflected in the changing attitude to ragtime, which saw a shift away from a widespread perception of it as “immoral and sinful” towards its “unprecedented national popularity” (Roell 1989, p.36). With the mass production of ragtime tunes and songs, the modern American music industry was born (Roell 1989, p.36). Ragtime’s origins in the cultural expression of nineteenth-century black Americans remained encoded in its rhythms for as
long as syncopation remained a distinctive feature of ragtime composition and performance, and its emergence and wide dissemination across America marks a watershed in the history of African American influence on white American culture.

The popularity of ragtime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was largely due to its status as piano music, the “socially and morally accepted form of musical expression for the American middle class” (Roell 1989, p.32). Today, ragtime is generally thought of as piano music, and associated especially with the ragtime composers, Scott Joplin, James Scott and Joseph Lamb (Berlin 1980, p.1). However, during the ragtime era—generally considered to span the period from 1896 to 1920—evidence suggests that, in addition to ragtime played on the piano, ragtime songs and instrumental ensemble renditions were also popular (Berlin 1980, p.1). Ragtime songs were often played as instrumental music by dance, marching and concert bands. Sousa included ragtime ballads in his concerts, and New Orleans marching bands played popular ragtime songs; dance bands in ballrooms throughout America played ragtime melodies during the ragtime era (Berlin 1980, p.8).

The earlier roots of the genre are difficult to trace because they belong to an unwritten Afro-American musical tradition. It is widely accepted, however, that what came to be termed “ragtime” in the 1890s was played earlier in minstrel shows and by traveling banjo players (Harer 1997, p.409). Roell locates the roots of the style in “folk songs and plantation banjo tunes” (Roell 1989, p.33). Hitchcock cites the rhythms of African drumming, Afro-Caribbean music, and the black slave practice of ‘patting’, which “involved intricate rhythmic patterns played off against a regular beat”, as the origins of
ragtime’s characteristic syncopation (Hitchcock 1969, p. 120). Hitchcock also points out that the common rhythmic syncope—short long short, which emerged as characteristic of ragtime music, is found in the songs and banjo dances of the early minstrel show, and in the cake walk dances of later minstrel shows (Hitchcock 1969, p121). Shehan, too, locates the roots of ragtime in minstrelsly; she suggests, specifically, that the percussive style of banjo playing and the use of bones and tambourine by minstrel performers laid the rhythmic foundations for ragtime syncopation (Shehan 1986, p.22).

Berlin supports the connection between ragtime and minstrelsy and cites the “coon song” as the antecedent of the ragtime song (Berlin 1980, p.5). The coon song was made popular by American minstrel performers during the second half of the nineteenth century. Krehbiel suggests that the term “rag time” refers to the “broken rhythmic features” of the coon songs (Krehbiel quoted in Berlin 1980, p.5). In the 1890s some coon songs became known as “rag time” songs (Berlin 1980, p.5), and, in addition, ragtime sheet music and early piano rolls often bore the labels of particular minstrel dance and song forms, such as the “cakewalk” and the “two-step” (Harer 1997, p.409). Coon songs became less popular in the 1910s and a de-racialised form of ragtime song emerged (Berlin 1980, p.5). While the elimination of the racial texts and dialects in later ragtime songs partially conceals the musical roots of the style, ragtime scholars argue, convincingly, for the genre’s musical derivation from the coon song (Berlin 1980, p.5-6).

Writing in 1900, the song composer R. M. Stults alludes to the “seemingly insatiable thirst for that peculiar rhythmic effect produced by successive irregular accent” that is
found in “coon” songs and ragtime songs (quoted in Berlin 1980, p.8). Stults infers that ragtime songs are characterised by a syncopated rhythmic style that is often applied to marches and dance music in contemporaneous performance (quoted in Berlin 1980, p.8). Contemporaneous definitions of ragtime invariably cite syncopation as a defining musical feature of the style; to “rag” is to syncopate. Harer points out that early twentieth century reflections on the character of ragtime always centered on its rhythmic characteristics (Harer 1997, p.411). Some commentators go as far as to conflate the terms “ragtime” and “syncopation” and attribute to it a dual definition, as both genre and process (Berlin 1980, pp.11-12). The dance styles considered most suitable for the ragtime treatment were the cakewalk, two-step, and the march (Berlin 1980, p.13). The cakewalk, like the coon song, has its origins in the American minstrel show, and it too began to disappear from the ballrooms in the early 1900s (Berlin 1980, p.14). Hitchcock observes that the popular embrace of ragtime’s cross-cultural complexion echoed America’s earlier fascination with “the intricate racial cross-currents of the minstrel show” (Hitchcock1969, p123).

In addition to the formal application of the syncopated ragtime rhythm to marches and dance music, improvised syncopation, or “ragging”, of existing pieces was popular amongst piano players and bands (Berlin 1980, p.9). The first distinctive style of African-American piano music to emerge was ragtime; black piano players created piano-rag music by adapting various elements of African-American dance music onto the keyboard: the right hand played syncopated motives redolent of fiddle and banjo music while the left hand took over the task of representing the traditional foot stomping of the musician and the “patting” of the onlookers (Southern 1983, p.309). The most immediate origins
of the style are traced to the practice of “jig piano” amongst black musicians in the urban centers of the Northeast before the Civil War (Southern 1983, p.310). Before the terms “rag” or “ragtime” became popular in the late 1890s, tunes played in ragtime style were commonly known as “jigs”, after the designation generally applied to early minstrel show banjo dance tunes in simple duple or simple quadruple time (Hitchcock 1969, p.121). During the 1860s and 1870s, the piano was first incorporated into the dance combos that played in black dance houses in the Midwest and the East, and the instrument eventually replaced many of the fiddle-led instrumental bands, to become the primary source of music in black social venues in the East, Midwest and South; in the “cheap eating places, honky-tonk spots, saloons, and riverside dives” (Southern 1983, p.309), behind the cultivated façade of respectability in towns across Victorian America, piano players extemporised their individualistic, syncopated grooves for an African-American audience of listeners and dancers (Jasen and Jones 2000, p.21).

Almost contemporaneously, in a process that amounted to a “cross-fertilization of cultural identities”, middle-class Americans transformed the keyboard improvisations into a composed form, which became known as ‘classic’ ragtime (Parakilas 2002, p.226). The ‘classic’ piano ragtime of Scott Joplin, James Scott, Joe Lamb and others, which emerged in the opening decade of the 20th century, developed as a fully composed form. While some piano players took interpretive licence with these pre-composed ragtime pieces, the style was essentially non-improvisatory (Harer 1997, p.411). The piano maintained the percussive character of black American music while, at the same time, marking ragtime as “a musical style of technical mastery, velocity, and virtuosity”
By 1910, this “peculiar and distinctly American style”, which developed first in the 1890s in the “hands of black musicians in saloons, brothels, and casinos (Roell 1989, p.33), had been adopted by the American middle classes, and many white composers were writing in the popular idiom of ‘classic’ ragtime.

Ragtime was consumed in the dancehalls and parlours of America and disseminated via sheet music and piano rolls on a national scale before the emergence of the domestic phonograph market and before the advent of radio. The earliest known piano sheet music to use the term “rag-time” is William Krell’s ‘Mississippi Rag’ (1897) which is described on its title page as “The First Rag-Time Two Step Ever Written, and First Played by Krell’s Orchestra, Chicago” (Berlin 1980, p.9). From 1898, advertisements for ragtime music in magazines were commonplace and the domestic market for ragtime sheet music expanded dramatically in the decades that followed. Scott Joplin’s ‘Maple Leaf Rag’ was published in 1899 and sold more than one million copies in sheet music form by 1900 (Roell 1989, p.35). Commercially successful sheet music was also used in the generation of piano rolls, which emerged as “earliest sound documents of the ragtime era” (Harer 1997, p.410), and the earliest recordings of American music (Hitchcock 1969, p. 123). Published piano versions of ensemble ragtime were also popular and piano ragtime was played widely, in saloons, “sporting houses”, ballrooms, and the domestic parlour (Harer 1997, p.410). In homes where there were no hands trained to realise the sheet music transcriptions of ragtime, the player piano satisfied the appetite for the new rhythm. The development of the player piano mechanism was concurrent with the rise of ragtime, and,
in Roell’s words, the dissemination and popularity of the form was driven “as much by pumping feet or electric motors as by hand” (Roell 1989, p.34).

By the time Albert Mescher began to develop his bones playing style in the late 1910s, the relationship between the player piano and ragtime was well established. The syncretic, ‘new’ music of ragtime provided him with a groove, which he first accessed through the modern technological medium of the player piano. The ragtime grooves he pumped out of the family Pianola had a formative influence on the development of his bones playing style. His musicality was inscribed by the syncopated rhythms of ragtime, and, in response, he developed the set of syncopated bones patterns that form the basis of his arrangements. These arrangements are the primary artifacts of the Mescher musical style.

**Arrangements**

The following analysis of the Mescher bones arrangements is based on transcriptions of Jerry and Bernie’s performances of them. Just as Jerry learned to play exactly what Albert played, so, too, Bernie learned to play exactly what Jerry plays, and brother and sister now perform all of Albert’s arrangements exactly as Jerry and his father played them. Of the four bones arrangements discussed here, Albert composed two and Jerry composed two. The majority of the arrangements in the Mescher repertoire were composed by Albert, but the inclusion, here, of two by Jerry testifies to the coherence of the style and shows that, in addition to passing on the arrangements to his son, Albert also transmitted his compositional style to him. In each case, the bones part and the piano part
have been transcribed. Each of the transcriptions is based on two or more performances of the same piece, on different occasions, sometimes several years apart. The performances considered here include solo and duet renditions of the arrangements. In each, and every, performance of the same piece, the bones arrangements performed were identical.

I begin by constructing a lexicon of Mescher rhythm motifs—the basic musical vocabulary of the style. This description is based on Jerry and Bernie’s own delineation of the basic rhythmic components that constitute the musical materials of the style. I follow this with an account of the syntactic construction of the rhythm patterns that characterise Mescher bones arrangements. Finally, I discuss the various ways in which these motifs and patterns are employed in a variety of combinations in the composition of the Mescher bones arrangements.

Lexicon

I have witnessed Jerry’s exposition on the musical materials of the Mescher bones playing style many times since we first met in 2000 and I have noted a remarkable consistency in the content of his representation of it. Jerry’s descriptions of the musical materials of the style are fluent, systematic and precise. His descriptions of the playing technique and the rhythm patterns that characterise the style are especially lucid. Bernie’s

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8 The transcriptions are presented in Appendix A, along with details of author, performer and performance. The four tunes transcribed are: ‘In the Mood’ (bones arrangement by Albert Mescher); ‘Twelfth Street Rag’ (bones arrangement by Albert Mescher); ‘Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight’ (bones arrangement by Jerry Mescher); ‘Maple Leaf Rag’ (bones arrangement by Jerry Mescher).
exposition on the subject is less practiced than Jerry’s but it is almost identical in descriptive detail. In the analysis of the style presented here, I employ the terminology that is used by Jerry and Bernie in their expositions on the subject. This terminology was formulated during the oral transmission of the style from brother and sister. During this process they developed a specific terminology—a folk lexicon—of the Mescher bones style.

Jerry learned to replicate his father’s arrangements by rote. Albert transmitted the musical materials of the style to his son through a process of demonstration and imitation. Sound and gesture were transmitted and absorbed through repetition. The repeatability made possible by recording technology, and the easy availability of replica copies of recorded music, served Mescher praxis well. Albert and Jerry exploited these defining features of the technology in the development, transmission and performance of their musical style. Bernie witnessed the process at close quarters. She remembers, as a young girl, seeing her father and her brother practicing “for hours on end” in the parlour. She often sat in the rocking chair and watched as Albert made Jerry “play it over and over and over until he got it right” (Mescher, B. 2006). With no other models of musical transmission available to either father or son, the imitative method was born of necessity. The method served Albert and Jerry well, and through it they forged their unique musical synchronism and honed the Mescher style.

At times, however, Jerry found the process frustrating, especially when he was struggling to understand the more complex aspects of the style, especially the offset—a rapid,
hocketing rhythm played between the hands. The only way that Jerry could “catch” the difficult technique was by watching his father repeat it over and over again.

I remember I used to ask him, “Dad, my bone playing don’t sound like yours”, because he was doing something different, and I couldn’t catch it. That offset, I was playing that offset a little different than he was…I said, “Dad, what are you doing?” and, by God, you know, he couldn’t tell me. “Hell”, I said. I kept looking at him and looking at him…Finally I figured out what he was doing, but he didn’t know himself. (Mescher J. 2006)

Jerry eventually mastered the offset, and all of the other technical aspects of the style, and, over time, he learned all of Albert’s bones arrangements and committed them in precise detail to his body memory.

Years later, when he began to share the technique and arrangements with Bernie, Jerry discovered that he himself couldn’t ‘tell’ her what he was doing. As Bernie became more competent, brother and sister determined to recreate the duets that Jerry had shared with his father. Employing the only teaching technique he knew—the imitative method—Jerry began to pass on his father’s arrangements to his sister. Echoing his father’s approach, he urged Bernie to watch and listen to what he was doing and to imitate it. Bernie struggled with the method, however, and she pressed Jerry to describe to her in words what he was playing. In order to satisfy her demands, Jerry was compelled, for the first time, to disassemble what he was playing and to develop a language to describe it.

Jerry struggled with the task of analysis at first, finding it difficult to deconstruct the style. The challenge he faced was compounded by a certain complexity in the ergonomics of bones playing: in bones playing, generally, certain multi-beat motifs are produced by a
single wrist and arm motion, which makes it difficult to isolation the individual beats that make up the motif. This elusiveness makes it is difficult to analyse the structure of some bones motifs. The pattern of three beats that constitutes the Mescher roll motif, for example, is ‘drawn’ in a single motion of the wrist and arm. Similarly, the pattern of two beats that constitutes the Mescher double tap motif is ‘drawn’ by its own distinctive physical gesture. The arc and speed of particular wrist and arm motions cause the bones to strike together to sound these distinct patterns of beats. Because each of these motifs is produced by a single movement, the individual sounds that make up the patterns of beats are difficult to perform in isolation from each other. The roll, double tap, and other multi-beat motifs are circumscribed by single, flowing gestures, and the individual beats that make up the motifs can be only be demonstrated within the flow of the gesture. The gesture may be slowed down for demonstration purposes, but if too slow the energy required to propel the bones to strike together in the required manner will not be generated. Thus, some of the individual beats of these multi-beat motifs (the second beat of the roll, for example) are ‘trapped’ within the flow of the physical gestures required to produce them. Because it is difficult to deconstruct the roll to reveal its parts, this rhythmic motif can be difficult to analyse.

Jerry was strongly motivated by a desire to pass on the family bones playing style to his sister. He was determined to overcome his lack of preparedness for the task of analysis. He realised a significant breakthrough in the task when he discovered that he could

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9 Multi-beat bones motifs are also difficult to teach. Teachers often revert to the imitative approach when faced with the challenge of instructing students how to play motifs such as the roll, and instead of trying to teach students how to play the individual beats which make up the motif, teachers encourage their students to imitate and master the physical gesture which will produce the correct pattern of beats.
transpose the bones patterns onto the drums; drawing on the knowledge of drumming he gained through years of playing in dance bands, Jerry realised that he could ‘break down’ the bones patterns by tapping them out slowly. In the basement, Jerry transferred the bones patterns onto the drums by imitating the sequences of sounds in each rhythm pattern, and this allowed him to deconstruct the patterns and see how they were formed. The analysis was facilitated by tapping out the patterns on a drum using two sticks, one in each hand. By contrast with bones technique, when tapped out on a drum with two sticks, each beat in the rhythm pattern is produced by a single gesture, in this instance, a stroke of the drumstick.

Tapping out the rhythms on a drum liberated Jerry from bones playing technique and allowed him to break down each motif and isolate the individual beats. ‘Sticking’ the patterns in this way allowed him to play the motifs slowly enough that he could isolate the constituent beats and ‘measure’ each one. This was an especially effective aid in the analysis of two of the most idiomatic Mescher bones motifs: the multi-beat *roll* and *double tap*. The transposition from concussion instrument to percussion instrument helped to illuminate the structure of the motifs and facilitate their deconstruction. This reckoning of the individual motifs was central to Jerry’s analysis. In the process, Jerry “found” (Mescher, J. 2006) a repertoire of short rhythm motifs, which, when played together to form longer patterns, compose the Mescher bones arrangements.

Bernie worked closely with Jerry throughout this process and as each individual motif came into focus, she and Jerry named it. Over time they developed a specific terminology for the Mescher bones style. The terminology they invented identifies a set of short
motifs, including the *three-beat*, *four-beat* and *offset*. This set of motifs may be interpreted as the basic building blocks of Albert’s arrangements. Furthermore, as Jerry and Bernie analysed the relationships between these parts the structure of the each of Albert’s arrangements was revealed. What had been “just formed” (Mescher, B. 2006) as a result of the imitative method employed by father and son, was now divided into its constituent parts in the course of the transmission from brother to sister.

**Motifs**

According to Jerry, the Mescher bones arrangements are composed of a limited number of rhythm motifs. He believes that there are “just only so many that we have” (Mescher, J. 2006). These rhythm motifs are presented in table 8.1. All of these motifs can be played with one pair of bones held in either hand. However, in the Mescher style, these motifs (apart from the *offset*) are almost always sounded in unison by two pairs of bones, with one pair held in the player’s right hand and the other pair held in the player’s left hand. In my transcriptions of Mescher bones playing, notes with stems facing upwards refer to the sounds produced by the bones held in the right hand, and notes with stems facing downwards refer to the sounds produced by the bones held in the left hand.

The *single tap* is the simplest of the Mescher bones motifs; the *single tap* (see Table 8.1: a) is a one-beat motif produced by a single snap of the wrist away from the body (Mescher, J. 2006). The *double tap*, or *two-beat* (see Table 8.1: b) is produced by a double snap of the wrist: a snap inwards towards the body followed, in a flowing, unbroken motion, by a single snap of the wrist away from the body. A *double tap* followed by a *single tap* is known as a *three beat* (see Table 8.1: c).
The four beat is a combination of a triplet and a single tap (see Table 8.1: d). I interpret the four beat to be a variation of the three beat: the three beat and the four beat are equal in duration and the three beat becomes the four beat when a triplet rhythm replaces the double tap. It is important to note that the triplet itself is not identified as an independent motif in the Mescher lexicon, but, rather, it is always a constituent part of a motif. The triplet is the basic building block of the roll, another important motif in the Mescher repertoire. When two or more triplets are played in succession the result is a roll, a name derived from the rolling motion of this particular rhythm (see Table 8.1: g).

The three beat with an accent beat motif (also referred to by Jerry and Bernie as the three beat with a timing beat) is composed of a three beat motif followed by a single tap motif (see Table 8.1: e). The four beat with an accent beat motif (also referred to by Jerry and Bernie as the four beat with a timing beat) is composed of a four beat motif, followed by a single tap motif (see Table 8.1: f). Just as the four beat motif is a variation of the three beat motif, so, too, the four beat with an accent beat motif is a variation of the three beat with an accent beat motif. The four beat with an accent beat motif and the three beat with an accent beat motif are the dominant motifs in the Mescher style. My analysis reveals that they are the basic building blocks of Albert’s arrangements.
Table 8.1. Mescher Rhythm Motifs

a. Single tap

b. Double tap

c. Three beat

d. Four beat

e. Three beat with an accent beat

f. Four beat with an accent beat

g. Roll
The final motif in the Mescher lexicon is the *offset*. In contrast to all of the other motifs, the two hands working together in an interlocking fashion, rather than in unison produce the *offset* motif. The *offset* is a hocket and its constituent parts are parsed out between the hands. The *offset* is created when the left hand sounds the offbeat of every *single tap* played in the right hand. The *offset* motif is most commonly derived from the *four beat with an accent beat* motif (see Table 8.2: c), the *three beat* motif (see Table 8.2: a), and the *three beat with an accent beat* motif (see Table 8.2: b).

Bernie highlights the independence of the hands and the parsing out of the constituent beats of the *offset* when she compares the sound produced to that which might be produced by a drummer (Mescher, B. 2006). She also points out that Jerry compares the sound of the offset to the “chikechickechickechik‘ckechicke” sound produced by a sewing machine (Mescher, B. 2006).

You know it’s the same thing—the left hand fits in with the right hand when they’re drumming, you know. ‘Cause Jerry was a drummer that’s the only way I can say. But he often used the description of…a sewing machine—‘chikechikechikechike’—you know and it has to all fit into there. (Mescher, B. 2006)

The *offset* is the most difficult Mescher motif to execute. Its syncopated structure, combined with the division of the rhythm between the hands, accounts for the singular challenge it presents to the bones player.
### Table 8.2. Offset patterns

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<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>Three beat</td>
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<td>b.</td>
<td>Three beat offset</td>
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<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>Three beat with an accent beat</td>
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<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>Three beat with an accent beat offset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>Four beat with an accent beat</td>
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<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>Four beat with an accent beat offset</td>
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Bernie struggled with the *offset* when she began playing. She describes Jerry’s playing of the *offset* as “smooth”, something that developed into “a natural thing” for him after years of playing with his father. By contrast, she admits that she needs to “work a lot harder to keep it in there” (Mescher, B. 2006).

You know I have to work real hard at that offset myself because I had to do it myself and if we were together more I’d be much further ahead. If I had the hours that he had with dad and we had together, ‘oh my gosh’. […] You know, what happens when you do the offset, if you’re a right-hander, no problem with the right hand, but the left hand wants to drag sometimes. But he [Jerry] never has that because, see, I think because he learned it so young, that’s why. You know, I came along a lot later, I feel, and so I have to work a lot harder at it. (Mescher, B. 2006)

Compared to the challenge of performing the *offset*, all of the other motifs are relatively easy to execute. The *single tap* motif is the easiest to play, and the performance of consecutive *single taps* is only slightly more challenging. In order of increasing difficulty, the *roll* is the next most challenging rhythm to play. The successful execution of the *roll* is contingent on an effective combination of grip and wrist motion. The *roll* rhythm, as we have seen, can be understood as a linear series of consecutive triplets. If the grip on the bones is too tight or too loose, or the motion of the wrist is not correct, the triplet may not sound. The *double tap* presents an even greater technical challenge. The wrist movement required to correctly produce the *double tap* is more difficult to master than the wrist motion required to produce the *roll*. Because the *double tap* is more difficult to execute than the *roll*, the *three beat* motif is more difficult to execute then the *four beat* motif. It follows that the *three beat with an accent beat* motif is more difficult to execute than the *four beat with an accent beat* motif.
Patterns
In the Mescher style the basic rhythm motifs described above are combined together in linear sequences to form longer patterns. There is a limited number of these longer rhythm patterns in the Mescher repertoire. The most common rhythm patterns found in the Mescher bones arrangements are presented in Table 8.3.

Table 8.3. Mescher Rhythm Patterns

a. four, *four beat with an accent beat* motifs followed by a *three beat* motif

b. two, *three beat with an accent beat* motifs followed by a *three beat* motif

c. *offset* version of the four, *four beat and an accent beat* motifs, followed by a *three beat* motif

d. *offset* version of the two, *four beat with an accent beat* motifs, followed by a *three beat* motif
Jerry and Bernie agree that the most basic rhythm pattern in the Mescher style is composed of a linear sequence of the *four beat with an accent beat* motifs (see Table 8.3: a). Bernie describes this as “the most basic rhythm pattern we have” (Mescher, B. 2006) and Jerry suggests “a whole number could be played using…the *four beat with an accent beat*” (Mescher J. 2006). In reality, however, none of the arrangements played by Jerry and Bernie are composed only of sequences of this motif. As we will see, however, sequences of two or four of these motifs are used extensively in Mescher arrangements.

I suggest that this repetitive sequence of *four beat with an accent beat* motifs is the Mescher *motor rhythm*. Relatively easy to execute, the heavy reliance on this motif may be explained by the fact that it serves very well the Mescher predilection for syncopated rhythm. The majority of tunes in the Mescher repertoire are in duple or quadruple time and my analysis reveals that the *four beat with an accent beat* is one of the most frequently employed motifs in Albert’s arrangements. The articulation of the *four beat with an accent beat* motif over the regular symmetrical pulse of the tunes in the Mescher repertoire results in syncopation. When Jerry and Bernie learned to play Albert’s arrangements they learned the feel of syncopation. In situations where Jerry and Bernie are playing along with unfamiliar music and, thus, required to improvise, they do often play extended patterns constructed largely of linear combinations of this motif. I propose that their identification of the *four beat with an accent beat* as their ‘basic rhythm’, and their heavy reliance on it when improvising, points to the essential, underlying syncopated nature of Mescher rhythmic feel.
A common Mescher rhythm pattern, which does employ this sustained syncopation, is composed of four, *four beat and an accent beat* motifs, followed by a *three beat* motif (see Table 8.3: a). For examples of this pattern, see bars 17-21, 33-36, and 65-68 in ‘Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight’. The *three-beat* motif acts as cadential figure, or ‘pickup’, at the end of the sustained syncopated pattern, and marks the cadence as a point of repose and return. When this motif is used in this way, Bernie describes it as ‘repeating back’, and she considers this rhythmic gesture to be a particularly strong marker of the style (Mescher, B. 2006).

Another common, medium-length rhythm pattern in the Mescher repertoire is composed of two, *four beat with an accent beat* motifs, followed by a *three beat* motif (see Table 8.3: b). The pattern might also be interpreted as a three-beat phrase, followed by a three-beat phrase, followed by a two-beat phrase, to create the syncopated pattern of 3 3 2. In Mescher practice, the pattern begins, almost always, on an upbeat. The pattern is composed invariably of two, *four beat with an accent beat* motifs, followed by a *three beat* motif, and not any other combinations of these motifs. The resulting syncopated pattern of 3 3 2 remains constant, even as the configuration of the rhythmic syncopes being accompanied varies. This pattern of eight beats ensures that the predominant rhythmic feel in the style is one of syncopation, achieved through the use of consecutive three-beat phrases over a duple pulse. In this pattern, the three-beat rhythmic cell is dominant and creates an almost constant feeling of syncopation in the playing. It is this syncopation in the Mescher style that complements the rhythmic character of ragtime so effectively.
This pattern is used effectively in bars 8-10 and bars 10-12, in the ‘A’ theme of Maple Leaf Rag\textsuperscript{10}, where it complements the syncopation in the piano part. The bones pattern begins on the final beat of bar 5 and ends on the third beat of bar 10, coinciding with the beginning and end of the 8-beat, syncopated piano phrase. The same piano phrase and bones pattern are then repeated from the fourth beat of bar 8 to the third beat of bar 12. The same bones pattern is again used in the same relationship to the piano part when the ‘A’ theme returns at bar 41 (beginning with the final beat of bar 40), and on the return of ‘A’ in bars 97-100 (beginning with the final beat in bar 96). The pattern is used even more extensively in the ‘C’ theme (Trio), where it is repeated throughout the section between bar 56 and bar 67. For other examples of the use of the pattern, see bars 4 to 12 (where, in an untypical fashion, the pattern is divided between the hands), bars 21 to 28 and bars 36 to 44, and elsewhere, in ‘Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight’; and bar 96 to bar 111, in ‘In The Mood’.

The offset version of the ‘four, four beat and an accent beat motifs, followed by a three beat motif’ (see Table 8.3: c), and the offset version of the ‘two, four beat with an accent beat motifs, followed by a three beat motif’ (see Table 8.3: d) are also very characteristic of the style. See bars 49 to 52 in Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight for an example of

\textsuperscript{10} If the gait of ragtime is African-American in origin, its formal tonal structure, meter and tempo are derived from Euro-American dance styles, including the quadrille, polka and schottische, with their “several strains, each repeated and one or two dipping into the subdominant key, and their heavy two-beat meter” (Hitchcock 1969, p123). The structure of most ragtime tunes is based on the repetition of three or four distinct 16-bar sections, as in the following common form: AABBACCDD (Shehan 1986, p.24). Each 16-bar section consists of four 4-bar phrases (Harer 1997, p.411). Maple Leaf Rag has four themes, which typically follow the ‘classic’ form: ABBACCDD. Each theme is 16 bars long and the ‘C’ theme is known as the Trio. In the Jo Ann Castle recording, which is used by Jerry Mescher and transcribed here, the form is quite different, however. Castle’s version begins with the second half of the ‘A’ theme (which I designate as A\textsuperscript{*}) and follows the following form: A\textsuperscript{*}ABACDA\textsuperscript{*}AB
the first of these offset patterns. The second of the two offset patterns can be seen in bars 53 to 60 in Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight. Other versions of the offset are found throughout the Mescher arrangements. The offset is always a hocket version of a two-handed unison pattern that is usually found elsewhere in the arrangement. The precise rhythm of each offset, then, is based on the pattern it is derived from. Offset patterns are used to create variety in the arrangements and they are often used in the repeat of a section, or theme. An excellent example of this can be seen in Albert’s arrangement of ‘In the Mood’. The twelve-bar piano theme that begins in bar 9 and ends in bar 20 is accompanied on the bones by unison combinations of short rolls and single taps. When the piano theme is repeated at bar 21, the bones change to an almost identical offset version of what was played in the first iteration of the theme.

Short, medium and long roll motifs are also used often. An unusually long, accented roll is a distinctive feature of Albert’s bones arrangement for ‘In the Mood’. In this instance the roll is played constantly for ten measures, from bar 73 to bar 83, inclusive. With an accent on the first beat of each bar, the steady roll complements the ‘straight’ feel of the repetitive falling melodic patterns in the piano part. The bones then mark the return of the ‘swing’ feel in the piano part by changing from the steady roll to an offset pattern. Another example, in the same piece, of an effective use of the steady roll, this time over two measures, can be seen in bars 38 and 39 (and repeated in bars 46 and 47), where the roll acts to support the bridge pattern in the piano part.
Single taps are also employed to great effect in the Mescher arrangements. They are, of course, intrinsic to many of the basic Mescher motifs, but they are also used often in patterns of three or four single beats to punctuate the piano part. Perhaps the best example of this in the arrangements is the pattern of five single taps that punctuate the well-known phrase in the ‘A’ section of ‘Maple Leaf Rag’ (see bars 1, 5, 17, 21, 49, 53, 89, 93, 105, and 109). Another effective use of consecutive single taps can be seen in the transcription of ‘In the Mood’, where sequences of two or three of them are combined with short, steady rolls, as in bars 9-20, 31-48, and 69-71.

The arrangements composed by Albert and Jerry are full of rhythmic invention. The reliance on a limited number of motifs and patterns—several of them syncopated in nature—combined in the various ways described above, and the beat-for-beat repetition of the arrangements in performance over many years, gives the style a consistent musical flavour. In addition, the Mescher style is distinguished by a compositional coherence that is derived from the exceptional manner in which the arrangements are inflected by the music they accompany. The arrangements follow the musical grammar and syntax inscribed in the recorded music to a degree that is unusual amongst bones players. Each of the Mescher arrangements bears the impression of the recording on which it is patterned; equally, however, they are interpretive musical responses to the chosen recordings and, consequently, they bear Albert’s and Jerry’s signatures. Overall, the arrangements reveal a defining feature of Mescher musicality: the urge to fashion ensemble. In Mescher practice this ensemble is forged between bones player and
recording. In Mescher duetting, the musicality inscribed in Albert and Jerry’s bones arrangements is amplified and realises its fullest expression.

Recordings are primary artifacts of Mescher musical practice. While part of their significance is located in the material objects themselves—the piano rolls, vinyl discs, cassette tapes and CDs, and their respective playback machines—their real value is in the sound image imprinted on them. When Albert was a boy, the piano roll and the phonograph record carried new sounds into the Mescher parlour. Today, much of the same music, now old and familiar, is re-sounded by the CD player as part of Jerry and Bernie’s ritual reconstruction of the Mescher tradition. Two interrelated antecedents doubly-determine the contemporary duet performances of the Mescher bones players: the phonographic phenomenon of exact repeatability and the prescriptive force of Albert’s arrangements. Bones players and recorded music are *obligato* in Mescher ensemble performance. The same piece of recorded music does not vary from one instance of playback to the next; all aspects of the sonic artifact, including tempo, musical structure and dynamics, remain unchanged as playback sets in motion an identical sonic prescription on each successive sounding. The Mescher bones players can start or stop the recording or exert control over the playback volume of the recorded music, but the musical structure and flow of the recorded music is otherwise impervious to Mescher influence in the course of performance. In every successful instance of playback, the resounding of the recorded music is definitive.
In the parlour, Albert coupled his musical voice to recorded music. Jerry, subsequently, has developed a similar symbiotic relationship with phonography. Each Mescher bones arrangement is made to ‘fit’ with a particular piece of recorded music. Although separable from the recordings, the arrangements bears the imprint of the recordings and the qualities of those arrangements can only be fully appreciated when understood in their relationship to them. The recordings determine several significant aspects of the Mescher arrangements and their performance, including duration and tempo. The tempo of each recorded piece of music determines the tempo at which the corresponding bones arrangement is played. The start and end points of the recorded music determine the start and end of the corresponding bones arrangement. The recording frames the flow of inner and outer time; Mescher bones performances unfold within the parameters of the outer time of the recording.

Mescher practice over a half century demonstrates that the aurally transmitted musical materials of Albert’s arrangements have the prescriptive authority of the composer’s score; this prescriptive force is matched by the singular determination of the Mescher musicians to replicate those musical materials in each and every performance. This tenacity is itself driven by an inherited, aesthetic imperative of perfection; through intensive practice, and a meticulous attention to every detail of the style, the Mescher bones players achieve a level of fidelity in their reproduction of Albert’s compositions that emulates phonographic repeatability. Mescher performance can be considered as a process of intersemiotic translation, from prescriptive arrangement to action. Albert never wrote down the arrangements that he composed and transmitted orally to Jerry. In the
Mescher tradition they have been available in the memory, in a form that is ready to flow through performance.

Although unwritten, Albert’s bones arrangements have prescriptive force in the Mescher tradition. They are amongst the defining artifacts of the Mescher cultural patrilineage. Inscribed in them is the DNA of the style, determining shape, feel, and gait. Each of Albert’s bones arrangements is paired with a particular recorded piece of music and the Mescher bones players choose, where possible, to perform with these recordings of music and thus exploit the exact repeatability afforded by phonography. In as much as each arrangement is itself bound to the musical structure of the recorded music that it corresponds to, the Mescher reproduction in performance of each ‘number’ in the repertoire is doubly determined. Repetition is an especially salient feature of the Mescher bones playing style, in terms of performance practice and musical content. As pointed out above, repetition is a primary condition of Mescher musical practice, in which the exact reproduction of the Albert’s prescribed patterns is an aesthetic imperative. In addition, Albert’s bones arrangements are replete with phrasal redundancy and largely constituted by repetitions of a small number of short rhythmic ideas. In their presentations of the style, Albert, Jerry and Bernie engage in the ritual of repetition that maintains the Mescher tradition.

**Perfection**
Albert was a perfectionist and once he had constructed the bones arrangement for a particular ‘number’ it remained fixed and he and Jerry worked hard to reproduce the prescriptive arrangement of beats in perfect synchronisation. Repeated listening to the
repeatable recording facilitates the achievement of the aesthetic imperative of perfection in the performance of Albert’s bones compositions. Just as clutter is proscribed by Mescher spatiality, so, too, any imprecision, or ‘mistake’, in the articulation of Albert’s rhythm patterns is heard as noise and, therefore, censured by Mescher musicality. In order to perfect the clarity of their unison articulation of Albert’s compositions, Albert and Jerry exploited the repeatability of recordings to the point of erasure during their practice routines in the parlour. Their intention, always, was to sound as one. During their practice sessions they were unrelenting in their pursuit of this perfection. It was not unusual for the record needle to be worn out as they played through each number over and over and over again. The records themselves became worn and Albert kept two copies of each disc: one for practice and one for performance.

I would memorise as we went along. As soon as we made a mistake, it was stop right there…He had two sets of records, one for practice…You could buy the big old thirty-three and a thirds, like Tiny Little, Jo-Ann Castle, all them…could just see the grooves in them…and we would change needles and take a new record for when we played in public, see. But it was back over everything until it was perfect, see…and he would tape-record it and make sure it sounded like one person. (Mescher, J. 2006)

Jerry and Bernie Mescher both suggest that Albert inherited his perfectionism from his father, Fred Mescher, and it is likely that Fred was the patrimonial source of Albert’s strong Germanic work ethic (Mescher, J. and Mescher, B. 2006). It is also reasonable to assume that Albert inherited this strong work ethic, more generally, from his German forebears, who were typically industrious in their farming practices (See Salamon 1992, Daniels 1991, Tolzmann 2000).
German immigrants have also been recognised in America for their assiduous application to artistic endeavours; historians of German-American culture emphasise the artistic achievements of German immigrants in nineteenth and early-twentieth century America and note the singular seriousness with which German ‘classical’ musicians approached the practice of their art. German musicians and their supporters who came to America in the post-bellum period made “strong, permanent focuses of German musicality in the country” and ensured that “the highest reaches of instrumental music were to take on, for generations, a predominantly German physiognomy” (Loesser 1954, p. 491). In addition to an unparalleled contribution to the American orchestral tradition, German-Americans played an immeasurable role in the pianistic development of America (Parakilas 2002, p.228).

Albert’s affinity with the sonorities of the piano may, therefore, have been ethnically pre-figured to some degree. This hypothesis is undermined, however, by the fact that Albert was tuned in to vernacular music rather than art music; Albert developed his relationship with the sonorities of the piano as they were inflected in the strains of popular music, including ragtime, rather than classical music. I propose that Albert did, nevertheless, inherit an important quality of German musical praxis: rigour. Underpinning the German mission to “teach the Americans what good music is, what it means, and how it should be performed” (Theodore Mullenmeister, quoted in Conzen 2002, p.37) was a strong work ethic, considered to be a prerequisite to the achievement of high levels of technical mastery and musicality. Bohlman’s observation that the performance of vernacular music of the homeland approached similar levels of technical achievement suggests that
Assiduousness is not the prerogative of German classical musicians alone (Conzen 2002, p.38), and it is this facet of his German heritage that is most evident in Albert’s own musical practice.

I propose that Albert’s work ethic was also shaped by a Victorian ideology of gender; in his farm work and music making practices, Albert exhibited some of the principal character traits associated with the Victorian ideal of “manliness”: self-restraint, independence, and a commitment to a strong work ethic. Victorians glorified work as a supreme virtue and men and women shared in the belief that hard work was morally purifying and “built character, patience, fortitude, self-control and perseverance” (Roell 1994, p.87). Manly character was built, like a muscle, through repetitive exercise of self-restraint (Bederman 1995, p.11). Gender was central to the Victorian construction of identity, in terms of which, “true women” were “pious, maternal guardians of virtue and domesticity”, whereas “true manhood” was based on a synthesis of strong character, powerful will, gentility and respectability; a recipe for “manliness” that “mingled honor, high-mindedness, and strength stemming from […] powerful self-mastery” (Bederman 1995, pp.12-13). This concept of ‘manliness’ became synonymous with nineteenth century middle-class Victorian formulations of ideal manhood, a formulation that “grew shaky” as Victorianism itself began to collapse in the later nineteenth century (Bederman 1995, p.18). Despite the reformulation of the concept of manhood in the early twentieth century, aspects of the Victorian paradigm of “manliness” prevailed for some time and were still influential when Albert was a boy in the 1910s. In 1900, just seven years before Albert was born, Theodore Roosevelt, “the most energetic symbol of the Victorian work
“ethic” (Roell 1994, p.89), addressed his doctrine of the strenuous life—“the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife” (Roosevelt 2008 [1900], p.7)—directly to the “American boy”, saying that “he must work hard and play hard” and “be clean-minded and clean-lived” if he is to “grow into the kind of American man of whom America can be really proud” (Roosevelt 2008 [1900], p.7). Roosevelt’s statement belongs to the energetic, turn-of-the-century discourse on American manhood, through which a transition from Victorian “manliness” to post-Victorian “masculinity” was arbitrated and articulated (Bederman 1995, p.19).

It is impossible to measure the extent to which Victorian or post-Victorian constructs of gender and morality were inscribed in Albert’s character, or to trace transformations in that inscription over his lifetime. It is also difficult to gauge the extent to which Victorian ideologies and his German ethnicity influenced the formation of his moral character. I propose, however, that Albert’s morality was hyphenated in a manner that was typical of second-generation German-American identity formation in the first half of the twentieth century. Albert worked seriously at crafting his bones playing skills and his bones compositions. His engagement with the music that emanated from the player piano and the phonograph was not only dynamically dialogical, it was also strenuous. Albert embodied the work ethic in his farming practices and his music-making practices, and he worked hard on the land and played hard in the parlour.
Duetting

The human body is centrally implicated in the auditory habitation of the Mescher soundscape and Mescher bones playing style is singularly eye-catching. The emphasis on extrovert display in the Mescher style is typical of American two-handed bones playing, in general, and evokes images of the flamboyant performance of Brother Bones, the nineteenth century minstrel show end man. The comparison with Brother Bones illuminates an essential dimension of intentionality in Mescher performance and a critical aspect of the performance ethic transmitted from father to son: the will to entertain. At first glance, the image of a young Albert playing alone in the parlour in the company of the player piano or the phonograph might be construed as a state of “accompanied solitude” (Adorno, quoted in Bull 2004, p.176), rather than a performance of “responsibility to an audience” (Baumann [1977] 1984, p.11). Albert’s children, however, speak of their father’s longing to be a professional entertainer, and their testimonies reveal a latent sociability in his early musical practice. Engaging in a sonoric experience that was always more than a “ceremony of the solitary”, Albert displayed his performing body in front of an imaginary audience in the parlour.

Schutz’s concept of the “mutual tuning-in relationship”, an element of the social relations that pertains among participants in the music making process, is particularly salient in the context of Mescher bones-playing practice. I propose that the concept of mutual tuning-in illuminates important aspects of the communicative dimension of Mescher performance. In his analysis of the structure of social relations among the participants in the music making process, Schutz proposes the existence of what he calls a “mutual tuning-in
relationship”, which acts to transform the experience of the “I” and the “Thou” into the experience of a “We” when co-performers simultaneously experience the “ongoing flux of the musical process”, and, through this sharing, live through a vivid presence in common (Schutz 1964). This mutual tuning-in relationship is, he argues, presupposed in all semantic systems, and all communication is founded on it, including “language, speech, symbols and significant gestures”; it is a form of pre-communicative social interaction which “does not enter the communicative process and is not capable of being grasped by it”, a feature that the experience of ‘music making together’ shares with marching together, and dancing together (Schutz 1964, p.161).

The concept of “inner time”, based on Bergson’s durée, is key to Schutz’s analysis. Schutz makes an important distinction between outer time and inner time; musical events, such as playing an instrument or listening to a record, occur in outer time; outer time can be measured, and it equates to ‘the time that the musician “counts” in order to assure the correct tempo’ (Schutz 1964, p.171). Inner time, on the other hand, is not commensurate with outer time and constitutes the “very form of existence of music”; it is “the very medium within which the musical flow occurs” (Schutz 1964, p.170). In music, the “meaningful arrangement of tones” and the flux of the musical process are experienced in inner time (Schutz 1964, p.173). Schutz proposes that when a musician performs pre-composed music, the performer and composer of the music share “each other’s flux of experiences in inner time” and that this amounts to a “mutual tuning-in” relationship (Schutz 1964, p.173).

[Two] series of events in inner time, one belonging to the stream of consciousness of the composer, the other to the stream of consciousness of
the beholder [performer], are lived through in simultaneity, which simultaneity is created by the ongoing flux of the musical process. It is [...] this sharing of the other’s flux of experiences in inner time, this living through a vivid present in common, [that] constitutes [...] the mutual tuning-in relationship, the experience of the “We,” which is at the foundation of all possible communication (Schutz 1964, p.173).

Schutz goes on to argue that the same situation “occurs in the relationship between two or more individuals making music together” (Schutz 1964, p.175).

In the Mescher duets, “oneness”, or the experience of Schutz’s “We”, is encoded in, and displayed through, the choreographed synchronisation of the performers’ bodies. The inherent physicality of Mescher bones playing constitutes an important dimension of the performance knowledge that was developed by Albert, transmitted to Jerry, and subsequently shared by father and son. In Mescher bones playing, the sounding of each rhythmic motif in Albert’s arrangements is realised through the activation of a specific combination of hand and arm musculature; consequently, the sounding of each rhythmic motif results in the simultaneous performance of a distinctive bodily gesture. As motifs combine to form rhythm patterns, and patterns combine to create whole compositions, the inherent ‘dance’ of the Mescher style takes form. The transmission of Mescher musical expressivity and competence was facilitated by the player piano and phonography; through the constant repetition of musical materials, Mescher performance knowledge was encoded in the performer’s body, creating a “performative, permanent body-consciousness” (Zarrilli 1990, p.133), ready to be re-activated in performance.
The physicality of two-handed bones playing is further dramatised in Mescher duetting through the performance of a series of ‘moves’ that amounts to a conscious choreographic alignment and synchronisation of the performers’ bodies. Mescher choreography is composed of soft arcs, turns, shuffles and glides, that simultaneously frame, magnify and complement both the articulation of musculature intrinsic to the Mescher style of two-handed bones playing and the precision of Mescher bones playing. The structure and aesthetic of the choreography is shaped by both sonic and visual determinants; in Mescher performance, sound and gesture are constitutive of each other. This heightened choreographic display contributes to the visual appeal of Mescher performance and amplifies its performative presence; cut by the hand, and dressed by the eye, the overall shape and contour of Mescher choreographed bones playing is marked by Albert’s aural and visual signature. Perfection in the execution of the prescribed rhythm patterns of Albert’s arrangements by each individual bones player is a prerequisite for the synchronisation of the musical utterance and the alignment of the choreographed bodies that releases the flow of ‘oneness’, which is the deep music of Mescher duetting.

Dissanayake proposes that music has synaesthetic features; its potential to conjoin individuals makes music “iconic of accord” and the physical synchrony that may be realised through a shared experience of music “both instills and demonstrates emotional concord” (Dissanayake 2001, pp.170-171). Darwin, she points out, noted that the emotions aroused by music in ritual events have a tendency to be affiliative rather than divisive; Dissanayake, in turn, proposes that emotions generated by music in the context of ritual, such as confidence, pride, joyfulness and unification, are even more likely to be
experienced collectively than individually (Dissanayake 2001, pp.173). Cognitive neuroscientist, Steven Brown, proposes that entrainment to an external timekeeper is “the domain of simultaneity”; the capacity for synchronised performance, or simultaneity, of musical or non-musical rhythm is, he writes, unique amongst humans (Brown 2007, pp.14-15). Brown highlights the human ability to perform precise vertical integration – to align beats temporally – in monophony, homophony or polyphony, and contrasts this capacity with the “contagious heterophony”, or non-synchronised vocalisations, of other animals, such as wolves (Brown 2007, p.15).

The Mescher bones players have discovered the affiliative power of “making music together” (Schutz 1964). Through shared participation in music making, father and son, and brother and sister, learned to move together. In their unison performances they strive to match and to reflect the other’s achievement. In the conscious synchronisation of hands, bodies and sonorities, Mescher duetting may be understood as a practice of mutual ‘tuning in’ through the shared embodiment of an aesthetics of measure. The temporal matching achieved in the Mescher duets is dependent on the simultaneous execution of the patterns of repetitive, and syncopated rhythms that make up the Mescher arrangements. The achievement of precise temporal symmetry in performance consummatesthe shared desires of the Mescher bones players, and the sonic and physical synchrony that results captures Mescher aesthetic practice and ‘feel’. Duet performances of the Mescher arrangements, by Albert and Jerry, or Jerry and Bernie, produce a precisely aligned monophony, within which sonic space the Mescher bones players are held, entrained to the same external timekeeper. This shared musical entrainment and
commitment to the “coordination of acoustic output” (Brown 2007, pp.16) during Mescher duetting effects an emotional and physical conjoining of the Mescher bones players and cultivates a patrilineal synaesthesia. Music making forges an embodied connection that unites the Mescher bones players in a deep familial bond.

Leppert proposes that music offers the experience of “a momentary peace” through the ‘temporary “realignment” of the body with the mind’; in the case of dance music, he argues, “the body’s relation to music over that of the mind by itself” is privileged (Leppert 1993, p.87). The repetitive patterns of dance music offers an embodied experience of “aestheticized order” that is at once a state of “physical-emotional sensing”, consciousness and intentionality (Leppert 1993, p.86). Leppert argues that repetition—of a piece of music replayed, or the internal repetitions of a piece of music—is one of music’s most persuasive operants. Whatever a piece of music “might mean”, he argues, “it means repeatedly” (Leppett 1993, p.86). Repetition also inscribes “a stylized and aestheticized order” that is “visually and sonorically enacted” in the moment of simultaneous production and consumption. Where repetition is an especially salient structural feature of the form itself, as in dance music, order is overdetermined and the music may be valorised for the “reassurance and predictability” it offers and the aesthetic patterning it constructs as an alternative it to “its abundant opposite, chaos or disorder: noise” (Leppert 1993, p.86).
Comparing music (song, specifically) to speech, Brown (after Lomax, 1986, and Richman, 2000) describes music as “a simple system based on extensive repetition” (Brown 2007, pp.16). Repetition in music yields phrasal redundancy and Brown proposes that the combination of phrasal redundancy and metric entrainment in the synchronised performance of repetitive music, in the context of group music making, promotes social integration through the creation of “a common and coordinated acoustic output” (Brown 2007, pp.16). Furthermore, Brown argues that the egalitarian nature of the process “permits all participants to have equivalent roles, thereby fostering role symmetry”, yielding optimal conditions for the achievement of “group cohesion, cooperation and catharsis” (Brown 2007, pp.16).

Walter Ong emphasises the role played by orally transmitted, metrically structured verbal and musical repetition in the construction of group spirit. Ong argues that “heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns” facilitate memory, especially when repeated (Kenney 1999, p.xviii). Victor Turner notes how, in many African rituals, the “sonic driving” of repetitive percussion music facilitates “right hemisphere dominance, resulting in Gestalt, timeless non-verbal experiences” (Turner 1990, p.13).

The performances by Jerry and Bernie that I have witnessed are reflexively framed by them as performances of the Mescher tradition. In their performances of the Mescher duets, the primary aesthetic goal of the tradition is achieved: the double synchronisation of sound and gesture and the exact replication of Albert Mescher’s arrangements. Jerry and Bernie make it clear to their audience that they are carrying on and keeping alive their
inherited tradition through their performance. An intrinsic part of that inheritance is the desire to entertain. Barnouw and Kirkland point out that the word ‘entertainment’ is derived from the root word ‘entertain’ (from the Latin tenere), “meaning to hold or to keep steady, busy, or amused” (1992:50). They propose that entertainment “constitutes a storytelling environment” (Ibid: 51), whereby ”cultures speak to their members and thereby maintain a sense of coherence, indeed of history” (Ibid: 52). In September 2000 at Bones Fest IV, when I first saw the video recording of Albert and Jerry performing on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour, I was intrigued by the choreography of their routine. From the beginning, choreography has been a defining feature of Mescher performance practice. Over time, this conscious shaping of the expression has come to be enacted on all levels of Mescher performance, from dancing hands to dancing bodies, and from rhythmic phrasing to verbal framing. The Mescher bones players are entertainers, and through their performances they tell stories that engage their audiences, and themselves, in the construction and maintenance of the Mescher tradition.

In addition to the phonographic and aesthetic determinants of latter-day Mescher musical practice, I propose that a profound autobiographical force is at also work in Jerry and Bernie’s duet performances; moved by their longing to return ‘home’ through the medium of music making, Jerry and Bernie follow the aesthetic trajectory mapped out in their father’s bones arrangements in order to experience what Schutz describes as the “quasi simultaneity” that is established between composer and performer when the “inner time” of a musical work is accessed in the act of performance (Schutz 1964, p.172). In addition, in the course of their musical duetting, Jerry and Bernie live through “a vivid
presence in common” as they share in “the other’s flux of experiences in inner time” (Schutz 1964, p.173). As Bernie takes her place alongside Jerry in the performance of their bones duets, brother and sister reanimate the collective “liaison” of their bodies, with the body of their father, in the “unforgettable” soundscape of the parlour\(^\text{11}\).

\(^{11}\) Writing about the relationship between memory and the house we were born in, Bachelard describes the “passionate liaison of our bodies […] with an unforgettable house” (Bachelard quoted in Moran 2006, p.40).
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Appendix A: Transcriptions

1. In the Mood

Performed by:
Jerry Mescher and Bernie Worrell, July 30 2006, New Bedford, Bones Fest X
Jerry Mescher, July 8 - 10, 2005, Signal Mountain, Chattanooga, TN, Bones Fest IX
Jerry and Bernie Mescher, July 8 - 10, 2005, Signal Mountain, Chattanooga, TN Bones Fest IX
Bones transcribed by Mel Mercier
Piano transcribed by Jean-Claude Aylestock
2. Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight

Performed by:
Jerry Mescher, 10 January 2006, Halbur, Iowa.
Jerry Mescher, Bernie Worrell, July 29, 2006, New Bedford, Bones Fest X.
Jerry Mescher, Bernie Worrell and Mel Mercier July 30, 2006, New Bedford,
Bones Fest X.
Bones transcribed by Mel Mercier
Piano transcribed by Andy Pope
Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight

Comp. Theodore August Metz
Bones arr. Jerry Mescher
Piano arr. Jo Ann Castle

\( \frac{1}{4} = 120 \)

Vigorously

\( \text{Piano} \)

\( \text{Bones} \)

\( \text{Pno.} \)

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3. Maple Leaf Rag

Performed by:
Jerry Mescher, July 8 - 10, 2005 Signal Mountain and Chattanooga, TN, Bones Fest IX
Jerry Mescher, 10 January 2006, Halbur, Iowa
Bones transcribed by Mel Mercier
Piano transcribed by Andy Pope
Maple Leaf Rag

Comp. Scott Joplin
Bones arr. Jerry Mescher
Piano arr. Jo Ann Castle

Fast \( \text{\textit{Moderately loud}} \)

Piano

Bones
4. Twelfth Street Rag

Performed by:
Jerry Mescher, 10 January, 2006 Halbur, Iowa
Jerry Mescher, 26 July 2003, Louiseville Kentucky, Bones Fest VII
Jerry Mescher, 3 August 2002, Greensboro, North Carolina, Bones Fest VI
Bones transcribed by Mel Mercier
Piano transcribed by Jean-Claude Aylestock