

2008

# The Pickin' Parlor: Bringin' the Front Porch Inside

Saddler Taylor

University of South Carolina - Columbia, [taylor7@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:taylor7@mailbox.sc.edu)

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## Publication Info

Published in *Bill Wells: Bluegrass Ambassador*, 2008, pages 2-2.

[http://patahrens.com/Book\\_Information.html](http://patahrens.com/Book_Information.html)

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### THE PICKIN' PARLOR – BRINGIN' THE FRONT PORCH INSIDE

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the music of the rural south was played exclusively for the local crowd – family, friends, and neighbors. Other than an occasional traveler, the audience was limited to those in the immediate area. Tunes were passed down from generation to generation; lyrics were committed to memory, yet reshaped by each respective performer. By the 1850's, the railroad slowly began to change the relative isolation of communities throughout the South. Itinerate musicians could now travel much farther, much faster. However, not until the early 1930's did change become momentous. Radio stations like WSB in Atlanta and WIS in Columbia began airing performances by local musicians. Broadcast live, this widely varied, regional music could now be heard by listeners across the country. The radio became the focal point of many a family room and musicians now had the ability to influence thousands of people without traveling down a rutted horse path or a long train ride. While unprecedented, this change did not replace the most popular place to socialize and play – the front porch.

The “front porch” should be taken metaphorically. While folks certainly played there, the front porch represents the shade tree, the open shed, the parlor, the church, or the street corner. The front porch was a place for communal interaction – storytelling, news-gathering, singing, dancing, and picking. Folks of all skill levels learned to pick, fiddle, and strum. New tunes were introduced, learned from the radio program aired the day before or from the cousin visiting from the Blue Ridge. New arrangements were played – some were rejected, dying a quick death on the spot, while others remain in the fiddler's repertoire today.

Folks still meet on front porches throughout the South – traditional music is as fluid and vibrant today as it was one hundred years ago. From Berkeley County on the coast to Pickens County in the upstate, a good front porch pickin' session can always be found. Bill's Pickin' Parlor and Music Shop in West Columbia is no exception. For over twenty years, on any given Friday evening, over one hundred women and men, young and old, carpenters and teachers, machinists and dentists, travel from all across the region to jam with other musicians or simply listen to the music. Much more than simply a place to strum a guitar or pick a banjo, gathering spots like Bill's are vibrant continuation of the front porch tradition – tall tales are spun, business relationships are developed (or broken), the problems and joys of life are discussed, and most of all, the dynamic nature of traditional music is celebrated and strengthened.

Saddler Taylor  
Curator of Research and Folklife  
McKissick Museum  
The University of South Carolina  
Columbia, South Carolina