



It All Happened in Renfro Valley

Pete Stamper

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For sixty years, Renfro Valley has highlighted some of the biggest and most influential names in country and folk music. The show began in the 1930s as a combination radio broadcast and stage performance, and today it has grown into an array of shows and headliner concerts featuring old-time country music, country gospel, modern country, bluegrass, and comedy acts. John Lair, the ambitious and deeply committed founder of Renfro Valley, was fascinated with the past. He created the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* to give radio listeners the experience of an old-fashioned rural hoe-down. He resisted the encroachment of popular "cowboy songs" and kept the stage and the airwaves filled with authentic Kentucky mountain music. Lair's vision struck a chord with music fans: on some Saturday nights, more than ten thousand people arrived at Renfro Valley and performances went on all night to accommodate the audiences. Pete Stamper, a forty-seven year veteran of Renfro Valley, traces the show's history from its early radio days in Cincinnati and Chicago, through the glory years in the 1940s, the lean times in the 1960s when rock and roll seemed to take over the music scene, to its renewed popularity in the 1990s. Once known as "the valley where time stands still," Renfro Valley has updated its programming while maintaining the feel of the folk culture on which it was founded. Red Foley, the Coon Creek Girls, Slim Miller, Pee Wee King, Old Joe Clark, and a host of other musicians and performers helped shape the development of Renfro Valley. Stamper describes the role of the Valley in the commercial history of country music and highlights John Lair's invaluable contribution to country music as a talent scout, businessman, and collector of traditional music of the South.

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