

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Ryan's Mammoth Collection, Part III

Tripping the Light Fantastic

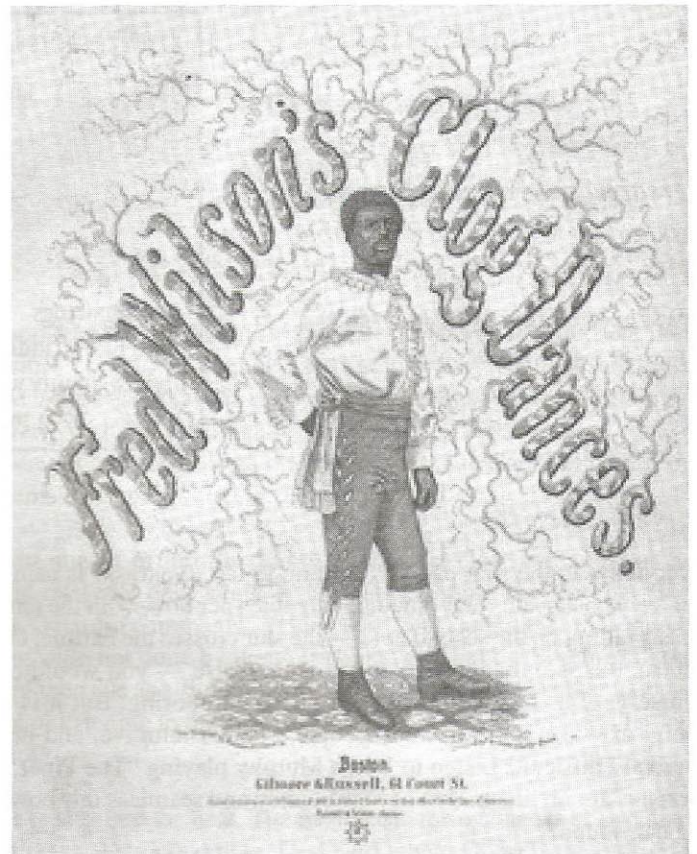
*Come, and trip it, as you go,
On the light fantastic toe.*

John Milton, *L'Allegro* (1645)

The popular stage had a terrible reputation in much of 19th century America. True enough, most stage performances were low entertainments for often unruly crowds, frequently stimulated by drink and other vices, and theaters were dismissed by many as a repository of social evils, to be avoided rather than patronized. Moreover, the distinction between high and low forms of stage entertainment was largely non-existent — especially so in the frontier towns and cities of the westward expansion, but also in the more urban cities of the East — so that all stage productions including legitimate theater were looked upon suspiciously by “respectable” folk. Although a number of different kinds, quality and levels of performance on the stage were offered the public, legitimate theaters were few and far between, and most entertainments were held in far less respectable venues.

What were these performances? The relative popularity of different entertainments varied, as might be assumed, with public taste and the course of events of the century. Most popular was minstrelsy, which emerged in the northeastern United States during the 1840s and remained an enduring show business force through and until (and, in some places, well past) the turn of the century. Certainly up to and during the period of the Civil War minstrelsy was undisputed king of the popular stage, and stationary and touring shows were ubiquitous throughout the country and even across the Atlantic. Constantly touring companies hammered the shape of the minstrel show into a standard format of blackface acts at the beginning (the “first part”) and the end (the “afterpiece”), surrounding a middle part — called the “olio” — that might include comic songs, acrobatics, dancing, and skits or parodies. However, after the Civil War minstrelsy began to have greater competition from other forms of entertainment, such as burlesque, variety, musical comedy, and even the newly-reconstituted circuses of P.T. Barnum, Buffalo Bill Cody, and others. In fact, more and more frequently the entertainment forms blended into one another, so that variety acts and burlesques were incorporated into increasingly sophisticated minstrel shows, while minstrel acts were frequently part of the bill at variety shows. Burlesque pervaded all forms.

Variety theater was described as “an offshoot of early minstrelsy” in the 1912 memoir of veteran burlesque and variety producer Michael Bennett Leavitt, who is sometimes credited with “inventing” burlesque in 1866 by designing an evening’s entertainment that included singers, dancers, acrobats, and comedians, sometimes whose performances were risqué or suggestive. Burlesque originally referred simply to satirical comedy or a parody: John Gay’s



hugely successful *Beggar's Opera* of 1728, for example, is a burlesque in the original sense, as it is a satire of 18th century opera. The new 19th century burlesque contained less satire (although that was an element), and considerably more variety. By its nature, a variety show could consist of any act or novelty that might entertain (and draw a paying crowd); performing animals, acrobats, singers, comedians, dancers, and one-act plays were all staples of the variety stage. No narrative structure held together the evening, each act stood alone, and the concluding piece was a play, either a melodrama, or a burlesque. The shows were long, as well, often beginning at 7:30 and lasting until midnight. At the time *Ryan's Mammoth* was published in the early 1880s, vaudeville had yet to develop as an entertainment form, although the varieties and burlesques were certainly precursors, the whole rapidly developing toward the true vaudeville of the next decade.

As early as the 1870s New York impresario Tony Pastor had thought to make the variety theater a legitimate attraction aimed at the middle class, and sought to increase his gate by courting an audience comprised of both sexes. His innovation was to sponsor matinees, “Ladies’ Invitation Nights,” in which women were admitted free, enticed with prizes attractive to housewives. He toned down the content of his acts at such performances and gradually helped make variety shows more respectable. Social forces also played a part in the refining process, for reformers targeted stage venues with agendas such as the Concert Saloon Bill, passed by the New York State legislature to curb the immoral excesses of the Broadway music halls. It wasn’t until the decade after *Ryan's*, however, that mixed middle-class audiences recognized through their attendance that the popular stage — then vaudeville — had achieved a measure of respectable status. Similar developments occurred across the Atlantic. The music hall was born in 1844, when a

London tavern keeper extended his public house, the Eagle Tavern, with the addition of a "Grecian Saloon," wherein he promised "dancing, singing, music and other delightful amusements." By 1875 there were an estimated three hundred music halls across England.

It was not simply that the entertainments themselves (be they minstrel, variety, or burlesque) were generally considered "low" that kept upper-scale audiences suspicious and at a distance. Vice had long been associated with the venues for evening entertainments. Like the Eagle Tavern in London, publicans and innkeepers had long recognized that the more they kept audiences engaged and present in their establishments, the more spirits they consumed and the more profit was generated. Sex in many forms had long been part of the tavern trade, for, of course, customers were invariably male, but it was institutionalized in many urban drinking establishments in the mid-19th century by the addition of "waiter-girls" whose functions often included more than serving drinks. In America the parallel to the early British music hall began in the 1850s in what was known as the "concert-saloon"; basically a tavern with a stage at one end upon which variety performances of various qualities were offered, while waiter-girls pushed drink and other vices. Eventually these establishments ranged from the very small to the very large; squalid to opulent; frightening to almost-respectable. Men did not patronize such places to quietly sit and take in the performance, but rather to converse, socialize, drink, and smoke (and, yes, sometimes to fight, gamble, and engage in criminal behavior). Stage performances were often incidental to the experience, but helped enliven the atmosphere. Audiences were

also more interactive with performers, with praise or scorn vocally and sometimes materially transferred to the stage. And vice-versa: The *Chicago American* complained, for example, that performers appealed to rowdy audiences by ad-libbing "obscene witticisms which, while they catch the laugh of some, are very offensive to ladies and gentlemen in their attendance." Pastor's and similar-minded theater operators' challenge was to contain and diminish the rowdiness of their establishments, and to divorce themselves of drinking and vice in order to woo a more respectable, steady and moneyed crowd.

It was a process for theater managers to develop and refine an audience, and sex in some form continued, even as the establishments became gradually less focused around drinking. Leavitt's first show, for example, was called *Mme. Rentz's Female Minstrels* — an all-woman troupe — and the prurient association with madams and houses of ill-repute was not lost on audiences of the time. The "legitimate" stage was not always helpful in this process, having also long recognized that sex sold seats. In 1861 actress Adah Isaac Menken scandalized audiences by appearing on the New York stage wearing skin-tights and a blouse, strapped to the back of a horse in the play *Mazeppa*. Lydia Thompson's troupe the *British Blondes* featured voluptuous dancers dressed in cuirasse bodice and tights, which toured the country in the 1860s and 1870s, appearing in such burlesques as *The Black Crook*, *Ixion*, *The Man in the Moon*, and others. Sex in some form, although presented with more sophistication as time went on, stayed through the vaudeville era — and then transitioned to the early moving picture industry.

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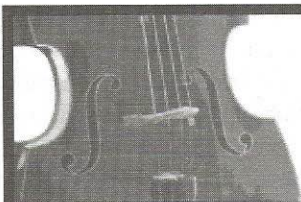
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What relationship does all the above have to do with fiddling, and with *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*? It turns out quite a bit, in particular with regard to much of the music, tune titles, and named tune composers that we have suggested were William Bradbury Ryan's contribution to the collection. As we have seen in previous Fiddle Tune History articles, *Ryan's Mammoth* was a bifurcated collection, with older material included alongside then-topical material. We have explored some of that topical material and its associations to the physical characteristics of the larger cities and venues of the northeastern seaboard (particularly Boston and New York), and with events and politics of the era. Now let us investigate the realm of popular stage entertainment in *Ryan's*.

Just as there were associations to New York and Boston in other areas, there are considerable references to then-current entertainment and entertainers in *Ryan's Mammoth*, nearly all of whom had connections with the cities, particularly the latter. As mentioned in previous installments, Boston regional bandleaders from the 1840s to the 1880s are represented by such names as Ned Kendall, P.S. Gilmore, Louis Ostinelli, Abram Pushee, the Densmores, and others. Journeyman composers of light music, such as G.L. Tracy, Edwin Christie, Harry Carleton, and Frank Livingston are also frequent contributors of melodies. Likewise, popular stage entertainers of the 1860s through the early 1880s are well-represented in *Ryan's Mammoth*. New York researcher, musician, and writer Don Meade started us off with his article on Kitty O'Neil, a popular New York-based singer and dancer of the 1870s and 1880s, for whom is named *Ryan's* "Kitty O'Neill's Champion Jig" (*Fiddler Magazine*, Spring 2001 — see also Don's expanded article referenced at the end of the article). There are many others, for, as mentioned at the beginning of the article, popular entertainment —

Fagan and Fenton's

“high” to “low” — was not nearly as separated in the mid-19th century as it later became, and, rather than *Ryan's Mammoth* being filled with the idiosyncratic compositions of rustic fiddlers, much of it is rather a snapshot of urban pop culture of the northeastern seaboard of the era.

Take dancing (since *Ryan's Mammoth* is, after all, a collection of dance tunes). Numerous tunes in *Ryan's* are printed with dance instructions, not as a relic but because social dancing in much of the United States was still actively group dancing, alongside couple dances such as the waltz, polka, and schottische. The dance figures were included because they were meant to be used, not simply recorded as a curiosity, for dancing was a prime social activity enjoyed by most. In fact, *Ryan's* period in history was a dancer's dream, for it was enjoyed everywhere, and skilled amateurs and professionals were held in high esteem no matter what their social class. Dancing was also quite popular as a spectator sport. It was, for example, a part of minstrel shows nearly from the beginning, often featured in early shows, but spotlighted even more as time went on. These were the “jig” and “buck” dances, parodies of plantation “frolicking” mixed with British Isles step and clog dancing. The hornpipe as well had been a popular stage dance since the mid-18th century, and experienced a revival along with clogging. New hybrids were constantly being invented and the envelopes of older dances pushed. Examples are *Ryan's* “Skip Rope Clog” (perhaps named for a specific variety act), and the “waltz clog,” a late 19th century variety stage dance form that, according to (a rather irascible veteran songwriter and music publisher) Edward B. Marks (*They All Sang*, 1934, pgs. 64-65), grew out of American clog dancing:

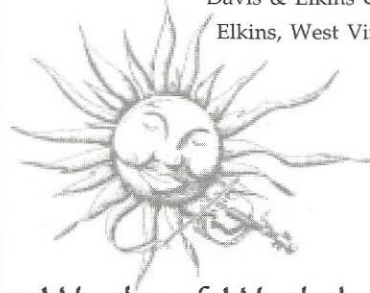
Minstrel men had conventions, traditions. All passed through the same species of apprenticeship. They went with the minstrels as boys, for eight or ten dollars a week. Under the unrelenting taskmastership of the Gormans, or Fagan himself, they learned the minstrel dance technique. A man danced clog or “song-and-dance” (soft shoe). If clog, he specialized in either Lancashire, American, or trick. Waltz clog grew out of American clog, statue out of the Lancashire style. “Buck and wing,” says old Tom Barrett, as he reclines on the N.V.A. club mezzanine, “started all the trouble. Buck-and-wing is a bastard dance, made of clogs and jigs and song-and-dance together, and it makes for faking. In a clog, or a sand jig like the one Paddy Hughes did you can spot faking in a minute. Well, now they've got no dancing at all, only acrobatics.”

Many of the best dancers and stage entertainers of the period are referenced in *Ryan's Mammoth*, most frequently in the hornpipe and clog sections (and, note the Boston connections). Fagan (referred to in the above quote) is Boston-born Barney Fagan (1850-1937), credited with being a progenitor of both music and dance genres, and named in *Ryan's* in the clog melody “Fagan and Fenton's.” Fagan's varied career was remarkable. Sigmund Spaeth (1948) says: “Fagan was an Irishman, but familiar with minstrel technique and one of the great buck-and-wing dancers of his day. He was famous also as a stage director, creating many elaborate acts for Primrose and West [a famous minstrel show], with a feeling for color and lighting far in advance of his time.” Dancers sometimes credit him with being the “Father of Tap” (dancing), although that title has also been applied to others. He was early connected with the Boston's Howard Athenaeum theatre, where at age ten he was cast as the cabin boy in *Pilot of Brest*, among other shows. At

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JNO.—QUEEN & WEST—WM.
(Portraits reversed)



Eddie Fox

fifteen he was a regular in professional minstrel shows in the city, and by the 1870s he was an accomplished performer with Buckley's Serenaders, where he met his first stage partner, Joe Parks. They called their act the American Lads and plied the variety houses. In 1876 he was with Richard Golden in the play *Evangeline*, where they did "the famous Heifer dance," after which he partnered with John Fenton in a dancing specialty act and continued with him for two years before returning to the minstrel stage. "Fagan and Fenton's" might have been their theme music, and was composed by J. Braham, whom Don Meade believes was John Braham, an English-born violinist who led the orchestra at the Howard Athenaeum in Boston, and who composed numerous popular songs and dance tunes in the 1870s and 1880s. Braham came from a musical family. Don notes, "His father Joseph led [New York variety theatre impresario] Tony Pastor's orchestra, while his uncle David Braham was (New York musical theatre playwright and actor) Ned Harrigan's father-in-law, musical director and songwriting collaborator."

In the 1880s Fagan moved from performing in minstrel and variety shows to organizing and producing them. In 1887 he organized the largest minstrel company ever to perform, Seatnam, Bill Rice and Fagan's Minstrels ("105 persons on parade; 88 in the regular company"). Minstrelsy was so pervasive an entertainment that all performers of the era were at one time connected with troupes, but they were as likely to do variety another season or a play in-between. Fagan acted in such plays as *Paradise Alley*, and, in 1890, in his own *A High Roller*. At the same time, Fagan was composing songs. His compositions were important in the development of ragtime, in the opinion of Sigmund Spaeth (*A History of Popular Music in America*, 1948). "...Fagan's lively song *My Gal Is a High Born Lady*, [1886, was] definitely above the average in both words and music. There is a story (probably started by Fagan himself) that he wrote his great hit in Chicago one morning, when he found himself down to his last twenty-five cents, and on his wife's birthday at that. He took a bicycle ride along the Lake, broke a pedal and suddenly became conscious of a persistent rhythm as the dangling piece clicked against the wheel. The words 'My gal is a high born lady' fitted into the rhythm and suggested a rag-time melody. He stopped long enough to write down the main theme, then hurried home to complete the song, taking it immediately to a publisher and collecting \$100.00 in cash, which he promptly spent on a birthday dress and a big party..."

Dancers contemporary with Fagan in *Ryan's Mammoth* include English-born Dick Sands (1840-1900, see *Fiddler Magazine*, "Tune History," Summer 2004), called "one of the world's greatest clog dancers," Johnny Queen, John Jennings, Dick Carroll, and Dickie Rogers. The latter was the most famous progenitor of the pedestal dance, also known as a "statue clog," a feature of the 1870s variety stage. When the curtains parted, Rogers was presented — entirely whitewashed — motionless in a classic Grecian pose. He came to life when the music started, dancing a clog on a pedestal like a statue in motion, only moving his feet and legs, the rest of his body still. He is remembered in *Ryan's* with "Dickie Rogers' Pedestal Clog" (there is also another clog tune in the volume called "The Statue"). John Jennings (1857-1888) was born and died in Erie, Pennsylvania, and was deemed "an especially clever dancer... Mr. Jennings is reputed to have been the original skate dancer, in which he was marvellously adept." Jennings was another child performer,

starting at the age of nine on the stage of Erie's Farrar Hall. A year later he was touring with minstrel shows, eventually pairing with Queen and a man named Collins in an act called the Alabama Triplets. In 1870 he paired with Bobby Manchester, and together they were a featured act with successive minstrel companies (including one of their own) for eighteen years. In fact, their partnership ended only upon Jennings's death. He is honored in *Ryan's* with "Jennings' Champion Clog."

Johnny Queen (1843-1884) was a versatile entertainer like many of the performers in the clog section of *Ryan's Mammoth*. He made his first appearance as a clog dancer in Boston with Morris Bros., Pell and Trowbridge's Minstrels, and while with that company, he performed the first double-clog dance on the stage, in conjunction with the aforementioned Dick Carroll, "the first ever seen in minstrelsy." He was paired for much of his adult career with William West, a veteran of blackface and circus troupes, and they played for various minstrel troupes before finding a permanent home with Harrigan and Hart theatricals in New York. Queen was "an exceptionally clever blackface comedian" in addition to being a dancer of stunning ability. Douglas Gilbert writes about the various and numerous contests between performers in the mid-latter 19th century; competitions for status prizes like silver cups or trophies. The prize was incidental to the advertising factor, which served to increase the winner's bookings:

Most popular and most numerous were the clog-dancing contests: Lancashire clog, American clog, hornpipe clog, trick clog, pedestal clog, and statue clog. Dancing was judged according to time, style, and execution, and separate judges checked each feature. It was the habit of some judges to go beneath the stage and listen to the beat. Sand jig dancing was judged in the same manner. Possibly clog did not originate in America, but America made it its own, and our performers were unbeatable. A clog dancer named Queen electrified the English music halls when he went abroad for a tour in the eighties. They found his triples, rolls, and nerve steps uncanny, refused to believe he accomplished them unaided by tricks, and caused him no end of embarrassment by demanding to see his shoes. Queen stopped all that by making his entrance in slippers and passing around his shoes for the audience to examine, as proof that he used no clappers or other Yankee gadgets. When the shoes were returned he put them on in full view of the audience and went into his act. (pg. 24).

He's given a nod in *Ryan's* with "Johnnie Queen's Clog."

Other versatile performers were Harry Bloodgood and Eddie Fox. The latter was the composer of a few tunes in *Ryan's*, including "Annie Hughes' Jig" and "Tidal Wave," both "sand jigs" — duple time, syncopated melodies to which a kind of brushing step was performed (the stage was often sanded to facilitate this, hence "sand" jig). In fact, Fox and Barney Fagan collaborated on a song, published just before *Ryan's Mammoth* came out, entitled "A Mother's Blessing" (Boston, 1882). Edward Le Roy Rice (1911) said of him:

Eddie Fox is known wherever minstrelsy is spoken. Mr. Fox's career began at the tender age of five years, and continued up until about 1897, when he "laid down the fiddle and the bow" ... When Simmons and Slocum opened their minstrel house in Philadelphia in 1870, Eddie Fox was leader, and remained there several seasons. Likewise was he identified with Barlow, Wilson, Primrose and West's Minstrels at their inception in 1877, and continued with them during

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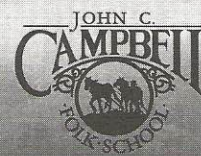
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their existence as an organization, terminating in June, 1882...Mr. Fox composed some of the most popular music in minstrelsy, notably the "Big Sunflower," immortalized by Billy Emmerson; "Kaiser, Don't You Want to Buy a Dog?" for Gus Williams; "Noreen Moreen," "Goodbye, Liza Jane," "Carry the News to Mary" and scores of others. As a jig and reel player he is without a peer. Mr. Fox likewise enjoys the distinction of having been always the highest salaried "leader" in minstrelsy...a letter addressed care of any minstrel show playing in Philadelphia will always reach him.

"Goodbye Liza Jane," published in 1871 with arrangement credited to Fox, will be recognized by many old time and bluegrass musicians, for it was absorbed into early country music repertoire and has been often recorded since the 1920s. Texas fiddler Bob Wills said it was the first tune he learned to fiddle.

Harry Bloodgood (1845-1886) is remembered in *Ryan's* with the inclusion of "Harry Bloodgood's Famous Jig," again referring to a sand jig. Bloodgood, according to Rice, was "good in everything he undertook; he could sing, dance and act." He began his career in New York at the end of the Civil War, performing in minstrel shows and variety entertainments, and at one point had his own show, "with which he travelled intermittently for several seasons." He was, Rice goes on, "without exception the most pronounced favourite that ever played the old Howard Athenaeum in Boston," where he appeared in stock productions over many years. By 1881 Bloodgood was writing and staging his own plays, but found time to "make a distinct hit playing Uncle Tom at the Boston Theatre, with an all-star cast." Don Meade finds that Bloodgood also composed songs, one of which, "Poor Old Rufe" (or "Rube"), was a blackface minstrel song appearing in *Minstrel Songs Old and New*, a collection published in Boston in 1883, the same year as *Ryan's Mammoth*.

The clog melody in *Ryan's Mammoth* that will be most familiar to fiddlers, however, is "Fred Wilson's," a variant of the "Cliff Hornpipe" among others of a very large hornpipe family. It is sometimes called "Billy Wilson's Clog" or "Fred Wilson's Hornpipe." The tune that bears Wilson's name has been absorbed into several fiddling traditions. Sam Bayard collected it from Pennsylvania fiddlers as a traditional tune, where it was a "well-known favorite." Henry Ford's champion fiddler, Mellie Dunham, from Maine, played "Fred Wilson's," as did champion Vermont fiddler Clem Myers. According to Richard Nevins, the melody was popular around the Margaree, Cape Breton, area — renowned fiddler Angus Chisholm, who recorded the tune, was born in Margaree Forks.

Who was Fred Wilson? Another native of Boston! Wilson was born in 1827 and lived to see the second decade of the 20th century, making his career in show business one of the longest of his generation. He certainly outlived most of his contemporaries, and was active through the days of the concert-saloon, to the variety and burlesque shows, and finally vaudeville. Frank Dumont in an article in the *New York Clipper* (March 27, 1915 — "The Younger Generation in Minstrelsy and Reminiscences of the Past"), credits Wilson with introducing the clog dance on the minstrel stage several years before the Civil War. Wilson began his minstrel career at age sixteen in the early 1840s, just as the genre was beginning to take the country by storm. He toured with various minstrel troupes for the next fifteen years or so, based in both Boston and New York, and when the Civil War started he "went to China in a government capacity, but not liking the cooking in the Celestial Empire, returned to the United States, arriving January 25, 1864." Upon his return home he formed his own minstrel shows with partners and on his own, but later left the country for extended periods at least twice in the 1870s, each time taking to the stage for his livelihood. In 1880 he returned from his last trip abroad and joined Haverly's Minstrels. "Subsequently Mr. Wilson, whose specialty for many years had been clog dancing, except in 1852 when he was a clown in a circus, took up executive duties with many minstrel and other organizations," wrote Rice, who called Wilson "the oldest living minstrel" in 1911. Wilson also tried his hand at songwriting, publishing at least one piece, a song called "Ridin' in the Street Cars" (1870).

[To be continued in the summer issue.]

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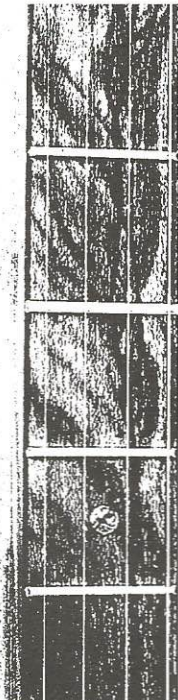
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[The author wishes to thank Don Meade for use of his extensive notes and bibliography, generously contributed.]

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