

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Tune Sleuthing: “Old Voile”

Field researchers Bruce Greene, Gus Meade, and John Harrod performed an inestimable service to the trad community in the 1970s and 1980s through their efforts to record in the field older musicians, primarily fiddlers, in the state of Kentucky. They tracked down leads painstakingly gleaned from old recording company ledgers, from newspaper accounts, and word-of-mouth, but particularly took the initiative to talk with older musicians themselves to find out their local musical contacts. In doing so, they amassed a truly remarkable collection of field recordings, oral histories, and lore that would have been lost in just a few years, as generations of elderly players gradually expired. Just as remarkably, they were extremely generous with their work, making it available to the public through commercial recordings, distributed tapes, their own performances, and, latterly, through such websites as Berea Sound Archives [libraryguides.berea.edu/bsaresearchguides] and the Digital Library of Appalachia [dla.acaweb.org (select “music,” then “fiddle music”)]. Their body of work is a national treasure.

Meade, Harrod, and Richard Nevins were researching Kentucky fiddlers in the 1970s for their grand project of sampling tunes from traditional fiddlers from different regions in the state, illustrating the various styles encountered and showcasing the fiddlers themselves. They chose the most representative stylistic performances and sought regional tunes in each fiddler’s repertory, eschewing the standard or common ones for their particular recording project. Among the many performances captured were those by a cadre of fiddlers from north-central Kentucky, who resided in the triangle area between the Ohio and Indiana borders, outlined on its northern edge by the Ohio River. These fiddlers were in some cases native to the region, and sometimes transplanted from other parts of the state, but their music had a commonality that featured “notey” playing, deemphasized slurs, and temperate use of syncopation. There was even some speculation that there might have been some Canadian influence in their collective playing, a hypothesis that they concluded was unsupported by the evidence available to them at the time.

Harrod’s acquaintance with Clarence Skirvin of Glencoe, Kentucky, which began in J.B. Miller’s fiddle shop in Lexington, proved serendipitous (more about J.B. later). Harrod was impressed with his fast “notey” playing and his unfamiliar style, and he and Meade went to Glencoe to visit as part of their research. Skirvin suggested they look up Jarvie Hall, and they made a “cold-call” at his house. His wife answered the door, and once she understood what the two were after, she became hospitable and poured forth a wealth of information on regional fiddling. Jarvie himself had just been released from the hospital and was not feeling well, but joined the group and provided more details on a tune the researchers were eager to know more about – “Old Flannigan,” recorded in 1929 on a Gennett 78 RPM by an obscure group named The Blue Ridge Mountaineers, one of only two sides they ever recorded. Nevins called their record “one of the rarest and best solo recordings ever produced commercially” in the 78 RPM era.

Skirvin and Hall both played “Old Flannigan,” which was performed on the Gennett recording by the Mountaineers’ fiddler, Frank Miller, who also played the reel on the B side of the recording, “Old Voile.” Miller was a cousin of Jarvie’s, and both of them had the tune from Jarvie’s father, John Hall, who in turn had learned it from a transplanted Texas fiddler named Brock Flannigan. Not having a name for the reel, they called it after their source, “Old Flannigan.” The other reel, “Old Voile,” was named after a mail carrier in Grant County, Voile Franks, who played the tune but who had no name for it. Harrod and Meade also found out more about Miller, born May 22, 1895, at Mt. Zion in Grant County. He spent his entire life in that area south of the Ohio River below Cincinnati.

Miller was a performer on the “Top o’ the Morning Show” broadcast from WLW, Cincinnati, hosted by Clarence and Alice (Pa and Ma) McCormick, both born in the 1870s near Latonia, Pennsylvania. Clarence played the harmonica and Alice the piano, and their show was a country-variety show, which later became the Boone County Jamboree, and, in a later iteration, the Midwestern Hayride, credited as the first country music program regularly broadcast by a national network. All these programs featured live music, and in the early days Miller and the McCormicks, along with banjo player Homer “Big Foot” Castleman, performed regularly. Two photographs in the booklet accompanying Morning Star 45003¹ show Frank Miller in suit and tie playing the violin, and the Blue Ridge Mountaineers posing with

Old Voile

The image displays the musical notation for the fiddle tune "Old Voile". It consists of four staves of music, all in the key of D major (indicated by two sharps) and 2/4 time. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The melody is written in a single line. The second staff starts at measure 5, the third at measure 9, and the fourth at measure 14. Each staff ends with a double bar line and repeat dots. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

their instruments; there is no hint of “hillbilly hokum” here – they are serious musicians who expected to be taken as serious entertainers, and they dress and pose accordingly.

Some months after the “Top o’ the Morning Show” had been on the air, in April, 1929, the four travelled to Richmond, Indiana, home of Gennett Records to record their two sides as the Blue Ridge Mountaineers (a name adopted despite the fact that none of them was from the Blue Ridge, and they lived in the relatively flat Ohio River valley). Unfortunately, they did not record again. The McCormicks continued their affiliation with WLM, and Frank Miller seems to have continued to perform locally. There are 1940s references to The Kentucky Fiddlers (Frank Miller, Jimmy Keeley, Freddie Fields, and Bernie Delps) playing on WXIP, Covington, Kentucky, and working country fairs and country clubs, and roadhouses², and “entertainment by Frank Miller and the Kentucky Fiddlers” at an auction in Walton³. A final notice records that “Frank Miller and his Hillbilly Band” were expected to be on the grounds at the Old Kentucky Home Farm, Nicholson, to entertain at noon⁴. After that, Frank then drops from sight.

His cousin Jarvie still played “Old Voile,” though, and Harrod was able to record him, accompanied by L.C. Martin and Clarence Skirvin, in Gallatin County, in June 1978. Another Kentucky connection with the tune has surfaced in a modern recording by Tricia Spencer and Howard Rains under the title “J.B. Miller’s Hornpipe.” The tune is a variant of the Blue Ridge Mountaineers’ “Old Voile,” but the title refers to J.B. Miller (no relation to Frank Miller), a fiddler and self-taught luthier who ran an instrument-making and repair shop from his garage in Lexington. Miller had been a barber for 40 years, but when he retired, he devoted the remainder of his long life to making instruments, producing some 40 finished violins along with a few other stringed instruments. Roy Acuff purchased one of his fiddles.

Miller was a character and a storyteller, but regional musicians gravitated to his shop, and one can well imagine any number of tunes were transmitted through this nexus. “J.B. Miller’s Hornpipe” was transmitted in just this way. Fiddler Bill Meyer stopped into his shop one day, heard him playing the tune and took the time to learn it from the luthier, noting particularly the distinctive double stop variation pattern in the first and fifth measures of the second strain. Meyer in turn taught it to Tricia Spencer. Tricia said, “When Bill taught me the tune, he was very clear that he had learned it from Miller with those double

stops and carefully showed me how to play them.” Her recording of the tune, accompanied by Howard Rains, can be heard at the Slippery Hill website [slippery-hill.com/recording/jb-millers-hornpipe].

Tricia and Howard linked the tune with a version Howard had earlier learned from an obscure Texas fiddler by the name of Ervie Marcyes (1891-1972). Marcyes, from San Antonio, was recorded by John A. Lomax, who was on a Library of Congress field collecting trip in January 1935. Marcyes had no name for the tune, but introduced it on the field recording⁵: “This is an old quadrille piece composed by Mr. Edward Marcyes, played by Ervie Eldritch Marcyes⁶. This piece was originated in Canada, played as square dance music.” Ervie was referring to his father Edward, not as the “composer” of the tune but as the person he learned it from, while assigning it a Canadian provenance. Spencer and Rains recorded the tune as “Marcy’s Quadrille” on their CD/DVD *The Spotted Pony* (Old-Time Tiki Parlour, 2016). The importance of the connection with Ervie’s father is that it would place the tune in Texas at a time that predates the Blue Ridge Mountaineers’ 1929 recording of “Old Voile.” Marcyes makes no mention of hearing it on record, but validates that it was a family tune, probably dating to the early 20th century.

Another Library of Congress field recording trip, this time by Herbert Halpert in 1939, turned up yet another variant of the “Old Voile” tune in the playing of W.A. Bledsoe of Meridan, Lauderdale County, Mississippi, who came from a line of family fiddlers (his father was a fiddler, born before the Civil War). Bledsoe’s variant was called “Farewell Mary Anne”⁷ and was learned from an uncle in Lincoln County, Tennessee, where Bledsoe grew up before the turn of the century. This places the tune in south-central Tennessee around the turn of the 20th century. A final version of the tune in old time tradition was collected by R.P. Christeson from Missouri fiddler Jack Croy, who lived in a “holler” near Gravois Mills on the Lake of the Ozarks, near Jefferson City. Croy’s title for the tune was “Ned Kendall’s Hornpipe.” It completes a great circle of locations where the reel can be traced in place (from north-central Kentucky, to south-central Tennessee, to east-central Mississippi, to central Texas, to Missouri), and located in time – the first half of the 20th century. However, this placement, while demonstrating the widespread dissemination of the tune across a wide swath of the South, does not indicate where the tune originated; to find that, we must pick up on Jack Croy’s title, “Ned Kendall’s,” and travel north and east, and back in time.

J.B. Miller’s Hornpipe

The musical score for "J.B. Miller's Hornpipe" is written in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody starts with a quarter note G4, followed by eighth notes A4, B4, and C5. A triplet of eighth notes (D5, E5, F#5) is marked with a '3' below it. The second staff continues the melody, ending with a double bar line and repeat dots. The third staff begins with a repeat sign and continues the melody. The fourth staff concludes the piece with a final double bar line and repeat dots.

The precursor to the “Old Voile” family of old time tunes can be easily found as “Ned Kendall’s Hornpipe” in William Bradbury Ryan’s widely disseminated compendium *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*, published in 1883 (which morphed into *Cole’s 1000 Fiddle Tunes*). Ryan’s was a publication of the Elias Howe music company in Boston and relied on a variety of sources for its contents. Many tunes were contributed by journeymen composers, but the mainstay of the tunes in the compendium were from the stable of earlier Howe publications, such as *Musician’s Omnibus* and *Musician’s Companion* and the many instrument tutors Howe had published since the 1840s. Howe collected many tunes locally from working musicians, and was developing his music-publishing business in the hey-day of the brass band. Boston sported several quasi-military brass bands, but the first and most famous was that of keyed-bugle player Ned Kendall (1808-1861), founded in 1835, featuring the virtuostic Kendall as soloist. It was a 15-piece band known initially as the Boston Brass Band. Kendall also travelled for years as the leader of the band for the Spaulding & Rogers Circus and Nixon’s Great American Circus before returning to Boston, where he took up the reins of the reformed Boston Brigade Band. A story, undoubtedly apocryphal, goes that he travelled to England and played before the queen, receiving a silver bugle from her. Unfortunately, by 1859 Kendall’s health was in decline and he died in 1861, mourned throughout the region.

Also unfortunate is the lack of context for “Ned Kendall’s Hornpipe” in *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*, the first time it appears in print with that title. We don’t know how it was associated with Kendall, and whether it was played by him, popularized by him, or named after him later. The best guess, however, is that it was a piece that provided a platform for his solo performances on the bugle. The musician was known for his rapid triplet passages and ornamentation, and the second strain of the tune provides much room for virtuoso extemporizing. Boston was proud of Kendall, and it’s not surprising to find it in the Ryan publication with his name attached to it. We know the hornpipe was associated with Kendall, which puts it in a time period of roughly 1830-1855, but where, exactly did it come from?

Another clue to the tune’s origins comes from a music manuscript collection of M.E. Eames, which has a date of August 22, 1859, in the frontispiece. Eames entered the melody under the title “Reefer’s Hornpipe.” We don’t know very much about Eames, save that there

are titles in his manuscript that suggest he was from Philadelphia, and that he was involved with music socially. His manuscript contains parlor songs of the era, and much dance music, including polkas, waltzes, cotillions, schottisches, and contra and country dances. The Reefer’s Hornpipe was a contra dance popular from the 1850s through the rest of the century and into the 20th. The dance was published in various dance manuals beginning in the mid-19th century, such as H.G. Washburn’s *The Ball-Room Manual of Contra Dances and Social Cotillions* (1856), issued in several editions for decades. New England musician and dance caller Ralph Page was teaching Reefer’s Hornpipe in contra dances in the mid-20th century and beyond, and Ontario fiddling master Graham Townsend recorded “Reefer’s Hornpipe” on a 1963 LP⁸. Washburn’s manual did not include music, but many of the dances have “indicated tunes,” i.e. tunes especially paired with the dance. Reefer’s Hornpipe is one of Washburn’s dances without an indicated tune, which means that either musicians were already expected to know the music for Reefer’s, or that any hornpipe tune would suffice as the vehicle. The music’s appearance with the “Reefer’s Hornpipe” title is strong evidence that the same “Ned Kendall’s Hornpipe” tune was being contemporaneously played as “Reefer’s Hornpipe,” and suggests that Kendall’s name became associated with the tune later on in the 19th century, when it appeared in *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*.

Is “Reefer’s Hornpipe” the original name of the tune? Probably not. Like so many popular contra and country dances, many tunes could be used to propel the dancers through the steps. The fact that there is no indicated tune for Reefers in Washburn’s dance manual suggests this is the case. Evidence for an earlier New England provenance can be found in the 1847 violin tutor of George Saunders, a Rhode Island dance fiddler, violin teacher, and music store owner based in Providence. The historical strength of Saunders’ publication, for our purposes, is that he was a bona-fide dance fiddler and tunes included in his tutor were tunes that he himself undoubtedly played for dances. Among them is a hornpipe, simply called “A Favorite Hornpipe,” and it is the earliest version found of the tune known as “Ned Kendall’s,” “Reefer’s,” “Old Voile,” and so on. There the trail ends, with an un-named hornpipe that was probably used for New England contra dancing. Whose favorite was it? Perhaps it was one Saunders liked – he must have, to include it in his tutor. Perhaps it was a local favorite, and perhaps it had a name that was just out of memory’s reach for the author.

A Favorite Hornpipe



Chronicling American string band music of yesterday and today, with an eye to tomorrow.



Phil Blank

WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG

Bolick and Steve Austin's *Mississippi Fiddle Tunes and Songs from the 1930s*, 2015, p. 220.
 8 Graham Townsend, *International Fiddling Championship 1963—Introducing Graham Townsend*, Banff/Rodeo RBS 1164, 1963.

[Andrew Kuntz maintains two on-line databases, *The Fiddler's Companion* (ibiblio.org/fiddlers) and his current project *The Traditional Tune Archive* (tunearch.org). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in a variety of old time, Irish, and French-Canadian music sessions.]

As mentioned previously in this article, several musicians have linked the tune with Canadian fiddling. It does not have a Canadian provenance, but there is small branch of the tune that established itself there, although the pathway is speculative. Québec fiddler Joseph Allard (1873-1947) moved to the U.S. at the age of 16 and remained a resident for over two decades before returning to settle near Montreal. During that time he entered the musical life of New England and participated in numerous fiddle contests, winning top honors in competitions in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, and establishing a regional reputation in New England and eastern Canada (besides working as a fisherman). Allard began a prolific recording career in the 78 RPM recording era in Québec, producing over 75 records, often bearing the titles of occupations. He recorded his version of our hornpipe twice (with parts reversed from "Ned Kendall's," as printed in *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*); for Victor in 1930 as "Reel du chauffeur" and again in 1937 for Bluebird Records as "Reel des chantiers" (Logging-camp Reel). It seems likely that Allard picked this tune up during his time in the United States, adapting it for audiences in Québec. However, Allard's recordings postdate the 1929 "Old Voile" recording, and are not the source for the American version.

One final appearance of the hornpipe should be mentioned. It appears under the title "Swinging around the Circle" in the second of Francis O'Neill's (1848-1936) great Irish music compendiums, *The Dance Music of Ireland* (1907). Unfortunately, the only thing O'Neill said of it was "This is one of my old-time hornpipes," which is an unhelpful

description in determining how he came by it, except to place it sometime in the latter 19th century. Stylistically, there is nothing to suggest an Irish provenance for the tune, and it has not been found in older collections. Where did it come to O'Neill's attention? Speculatively, O'Neill may have learned it in his early days in America. Before he moved to Chicago, O'Neill worked briefly as a shepherd at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains, and then worked for a year as a schoolteacher in Edina, Missouri. He mentions briefly attending dances in Missouri, and perhaps he picked up the tune during his short stay there. His "Swinging around the Circle" places the tune in a dance context, and the title is probably one O'Neill himself gave to the tune. At any rate, it does not seem to have been in circulation among his Irish music circles during his time in Chicago, and his "old time" hornpipe has been summarily ignored by Irish musical tradition for the last 111 years.

[Grateful thanks to Harold Rains and Tricia Spencer for information used in this article.]

¹ Richard Nevins, with research by John Harrod and Gus Meade. Booklet entitled "Old Time Fiddle Band Music from Kentucky" accompanying Morning Star 45003, *Wink the Other Eye*, 1980.
² Billboard, August 21, 1948, Johnny Sippel – "Fold Talent and Tunes."
³ *Walton Advertiser*, 1949
⁴ *Boone County Recorder*, Feb. 6, 1947, Burlington, Ky.
⁵ Library of Congress AFS 556B.
⁶ Erie's last name is listed in the LOC records as "Marayes," but Howard Rains says he clearly enunciates "Marcyes" on the recording.
⁷ "Farewell Mary Anne" is transcribed from Bledsoe's LOC AFS 030039 A02 recording in Harry

Reefer's Hornpipe