

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

The Wampus Cat

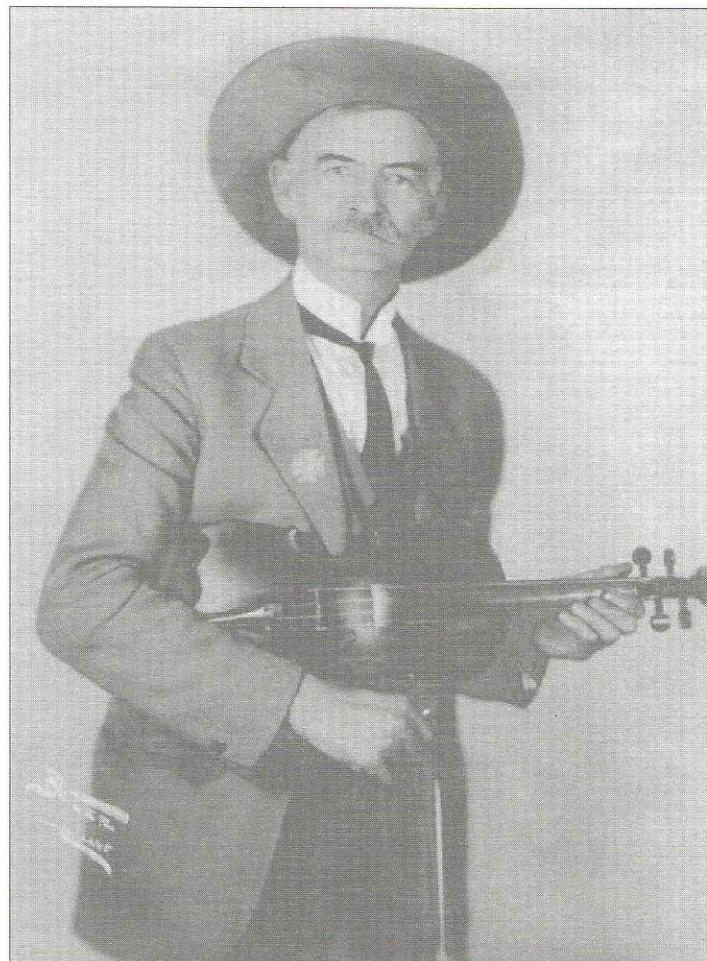
*“My treatment by the wise, smart, educated ignorant fool—
is a scream.”*

— W.B. Chenoweth, *“Foolin’ with Gasoline,
Electricity and Wind”* (n.d.)

Dallas businessman Will J. Schnelle wanted to stimulate sales in his store and promote his city at the same time. As manager of the Texas Radio Sales Company and local distributor for Okeh records, he knew that the recording company had a surprise success in the past year with recordings of rural music—soon to be labeled “hillbilly” music—marketed to regional audiences. Okeh recordings by Georgia’s Fiddlin’ John Carson, Victor’s pressing of Texas fiddlers Eck Robertson and Henry Gilliland, and Okeh’s sides from Virginian Henry Whitter had found success beyond expectations, transcending their regional base. He also knew that Okeh records, the first company to effectively mine “hillbilly” talent, had announced that they would be making more recordings of regional country music with an important innovation—the traveling sound studio. Okeh pioneered the mobile studio with a truck laden with recording equipment dispatched to regional centers to record local musicians, and, when Schnelle contacted them with an offer to gather some of his region’s most popular musicians, the company agreed to a first-ever recording trip to the state of Texas. It was in Dallas, in 1924, that Okeh recording engineers met W.B. Chenoweth, the self-styled “Fiddlin’ Texas Wampus Cat,” the self-proclaimed “Director” of the Chenoweth Cornfield Symphony Orchestra, and recorded two sides, “Last Shot Got Him” and “Hot Foot Step and Fetch It.”

A “wampus cat” is a cougar-like folklore creature, sometimes described as a kind of shapeshifter, and sometimes said to be a banshee-like harbinger of death, but most often known simply as a “fearsome critter.” What was it that led Chenoweth to adopt this sobriquet? What aspect did he identify with? Certainly he was a remarkable individual, and, reviewing the newspaper clippings, billboard notices, and his semi-autobiographical pamphlet (preserved and cherished by the family), one is impressed with his innate drive and creativity. One cannot help but also notice the dichotomy of his avocation, music, and his vocation, an inventor—for, even as he achieved a measure of success with the former, he ultimately failed in his efforts at the latter.

W.B. Chenoweth was born on a farm in White Rock, Dallas County, Texas, in 1868, just after the Civil War, the eldest of twelve children. Ancestors of the family, originally of Welsh extraction, settled in America in the early 18th century, landing in Maryland. W.B.’s grandfather, Benjamin, was born in Kentucky, but moved around the Midwest. Benjamin’s son Joseph was born in Illinois, and traveled via wagon train from Taney Co., Missouri (near present-day Branson), to Peter’s Colony, (Dallas & Collin County), Texas, around 1855, following two brothers who had previously migrated there around 1848 (the year the Anglo-Mexican War ended). The town of Dallas had already been laid out within the



environs of Peter’s Colony in 1844, and had a newspaper by 1849, but by the time Joe’s son W.B. was born, the county was largely rural. In the year that he was born, 1868, freed blacks voted for the first time in Dallas.

W.B.—William Benjamin, leading to nicknames of both “Bill” and “Ben”—grew up on the farm, although farming was not in his future (as the eldest boy, this may have engendered some consternation in the family). Despite a fairly basic formal education (he never finished high school), W.B. nevertheless grew to be an intelligent, articulate, curious, and creative individual, who disciplined himself in the skills that would serve him well in his lifetime. W.B. early demonstrated several other qualities in abundance; he had a large and robust ego, a talent for self-promotion, and a determination to succeed. That he was able to exercise these qualities well into old age (he lived to age seventy-eight) was remarkable, considering that nearly every vocational endeavor that W.B. valued most was doomed to failure, for, as he acknowledged, he was no businessman. He seemed unable to parlay his creativity and inventiveness into financial success. Yet it is a measure of W.B.’s personality that he consistently reframed failure into a virtue, proclaiming himself proudly “the State’s wealthiest pauper,” boasting that he had made two fortunes and lost two fortunes, but still considered himself wealthy in his wife and five children. Not that he wasn’t bitter or discouraged as well, but he seemed to be able to draw on reserves of personality to manage adversity, leaving his self-confidence and large personality intact. As he wrote in a semi-autobiographical pamphlet self-published in 1934 (when he was age fifty-six), “I have been asked hundreds



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of times how I could possibly stand up under such reverses and calamities [through] 25 years of struggle for a bare existence, yet perfecting some of the world's greatest inventions. It takes an iron will and a steel frame to carry such a load so long." Excessive modesty was not one of his faults.

We know little of his actual music, save for a total of three 78 RPM sides he recorded. He apparently did not learn his music from his family—at least there is no surviving record, nor does family lore provide any clues—rather, as he told an interviewer in 1935, he learned to fiddle as a child from attending camp meetings and other rallies in the county. However, he also told an interviewer that he played a fiddle which had passed from one member of the family to the other since 1792, a fact he claimed to be confirmed by "duly recorded deeds"¹. Perhaps one or the other statement was hyperbole, although they both could be true—one would have thought that if he learned from family members he would have boasted of it. By 1920 Chenoweth appears to have gained a reputation for his music in Dallas County. "I was one of the first musicians to go on the air when [Dallas radio station] WFAA started," he recalled. "The studios were in the Dallas News Building. After my first broadcast I received a cablegram from Brazil, postcards from three other countries, fifty-six telegrams and 2,100 letters and postcards"². He continued to broadcast on WFAA, playing by himself and with his group, variously called Chenoweth's Cornfield Symphony Orchestra, or The Fiddlin' Wampus Cat and His Kittens.

The "Kittens" were aptly named, for it reveals that all of Chenoweth's groups consisted of family members. Those assembled for the Okeh recordings consisted of W.B. on fiddle, his sons Thomas and Joe on guitar and tenor banjo, and son-in-law Edward Hayes on tenor banjo. At other times Chenoweth enlisted his married daughters, Mrs. T. E. McGraw, pianist, and Mrs. E.J. Hayes, banjoist, as part of the Orchestra. Capitalizing on the strength of his radio broadcasts and Okeh recordings, W.B. sought engagements in and outside of the Dallas area. A playbill from 1926 advertises the family group as "Champions of the South on Fiddle and Banjo" and, in what was a tag-line that appeared in most of the advertising: "They will make you forget all you owe, what you owe it for and to whom you owe it too." The flier further proclaimed "It's good to laugh or cry. They will make you do both." Another playbill from 1924 advertises a nearby Palo Pinto

gig, sponsored in part by WFAA, with the Cornfield Symphony assisted by Sam Wheat and Bill Anderson, playing variously banjo, guitar, and violin, "Champion of the South on Old Time Melodies." W.B.'s daughter, Vivian Chenoweth Hayes was featured, a "violinist and piano concerto of international note" as was her husband, Edward J. Hayes (who had played with Chenoweth on the Okeh recordings), "a character comedian and humorist." They promised "a refined and up-to-date program of musical entertainment, vocal and instrumental, by the funniest bunch in the world."

A year after the initial Okeh recordings, the Chenoweth Cornfield Symphony Orchestra was back in the studio, where they recorded two tunes in September, 1925. There is some discrepancy about this recording. One side was called "The Big White Rooster and the Little Brown Hen" and was issued as Okeh 45025, with vocalist son-in-law Ed Hayes getting first billing along "with Chenoweth's Cornfield Symphony Orchestra." Personnel listed on that recording were W.B. Chenoweth, fiddle, Ed Hayes, vocal, and possibly Bill Anderson and D.F. Hyle on guitar and banjo. The second side appears in some records to have been an unreleased title, but in others is listed as Okeh 45025, issued under the title "Arkansas Wampus Cat" by Chenoweth's Cornfield Symphony Orchestra.

When the extended family band did not venture out, W.B. played venues further afield by himself and with his son, Joe, traveling up and down the Mississippi as far as Chicago and Detroit. A handbill preserved by the family announces that the "Texas Fiddler and the Boy Banjoist in Old Time Melodies" would be playing at the Opera House (city unknown), and were "direct from the State Theater, Detroit." They were the "Added Attraction" to a screening of Hollywood cowboy star Ken Maynard's film "The Overland Stage" (1927). The Princess Theatre, a vaudeville venue in Opelousas, Louisiana, booked the "Texas Wampus Cat and His Kitten," and touted:

The Champion Fiddlin' Texan, who holds the championship of ten states, and his ten-year-old son, who is Boy Champion Banjoist of the world. They are better known over the radio as the Cornfield Symphony Orchestra. They make records for Paramount and Okeh. Widely broadcasted over Radio Station WFAA, Dallas. You have heard them on the radio, Now Hear Them in Person!

Chenoweth claimed to have been a several-time contest champion, and while there is little to corroborate this, it may indeed be true. He told an interviewer² that he won his first championship at the Confederate reunion in Memphis in 1924, and won again at the Birmingham, Alabama, reunion. He said he won a string of blue ribbons in the decade following the Okeh recording, including the old fiddlers' contest held by the Century of Progress in Chicago in 1934. He did win the State Champion Fiddle Contest at the Texas Centennial Celebration in Dallas in 1934 and the medal for that accomplishment is still in the family. The following year, at age sixty-five, it is recorded that W.B. returned to Dallas to compete in the Texas Centennial fiddlers' contest, in order to "defend his championship," although whether he did compete or what the outcome was is unknown. In addition to these activities, he broadcast on WLS radio out of Chicago, the city in which he resided in later life.

What was Chenoweth's fiddle repertoire like? We know very little, save from the recordings, and one mention in a playbill. What can be gleaned from that is that he at the least played common, standard fiddle tunes easily recognizable to a wide rural audience. He was advertised in a playbill for his version of "Turkey in the Straw"³ ("See if you can keep your feet still when 'Fiddlin' Bill plays..."). The intriguingly-titled "Arkansas Wampus Cat" (OKeh 45025) turns out to be a member of the distinctive "Mason's Apron" tune family, while "Hot Foot Step and Fetch It" is none other than a re-titling of the venerable "Sailor's Hornpipe." There are no repertoire lists in surviving family records, nor other written or oral record of his music.

Music, however important to Chenoweth—gusting with momentum from the recording sessions—was an avocation, for his life's passion and heartbreak was in inventing. While he claimed to have perfected some seventeen inventions in his lifetime, he identified his four greatest as:

- 1) The six-cylinder automobile, 1898
- 2) First successful flying machine, 1908
- 3) Big Ben farm tractor, 1918
- 4) Atmosphere-produced electricity, 1920.

These inventions were no idle boasts, for Chenoweth had a demonstrated mechanical aptitude and an adaptive mind, honed by working nearly forty years as Chief Mechanic (or, as he said, Chief Draftsman) for the I & G N Railroad, for whom he invented "a locomotive valve gear, helped develop the 'monkey motion' of present locomotive drives, and turned out an automatic coupler, and a locomotive headlight." He was awarded numerous patents, and Chenoweth family members who have seen the originals marvel at the precision of his mechanical drawings.

It was the six-cylinder automobile engine that consumed Chenoweth in mid-life, for it was his vision to employ a powerful engine in the service of carrying passengers and freight at the then-unheard of speed of 25 MPH. He got the idea while working for the railroad in the 1890s, and by the end of the decade he had perfected it and worked up the mechanical drawings he would need to build it. Before he could find someone to build it, however, he needed to have them reviewed by the National Engineering Laboratory in Philadelphia, for, if they gave the drawings their approval as based in sound engineering, then securing investors and companies to build the machine would follow. W.B. submitted the blueprints on October 14, 1899, and waited months, only to receive a terse and devastating letter in return.

In reply beg to say—You must have been kicked on the head by a mule when you were a small boy which left you laboring under the hallucination or delusion that ice could be frozen on a red hot stove by thinking of driving a self-propelled vehicle over a public road at 25 miles per hour. In our opinion it's an idle dream of a feeble-minded person, especially so with a gasoline engine. Our opinions are only given on mechanical affairs of known factors. We do not act on theories of what might happen.

While this extreme rejection by an authority may have deterred some, Chenoweth bounced back to pursue his dream of realizing his engine without the engineering stamp of approval. He not only



wanted to build a six-cylinder engine, but his vision included installing it in a conveyance for carrying passengers and freight—a bus line. In the next several years he corresponded with Henry Ford (whom he greatly admired) and R.E. Olds, among other automobile pioneers, and managed to line up investors. He finally found a factory in Logansport, Indiana, to build him two six-cylinder engines at \$735 apiece (far below the \$2,500.00 price Ford quoted). The Western Motor Company shipped the completed engines to Colorado City, Texas, where Chenoweth fitted them into a special-built wagon with seats for passengers—the first ever bus. His excitement and anticipation as he assembled his vehicle can only be imagined.

Chenoweth's intention was to run his bus between Colorado City and Snyder, a distance of some twenty-eight miles. However, just as he was poised to start, problems grew. Alarmed by the noise and untrusting of the safety of the new machines (a widespread fear was that the machines would blow up, or be uncontrollable, causing lethal havoc as they ran amok), local preachers warned their congregations to stay away from the contraptions. The populace was further warned to keep their horses off the roads, as the roaring of the engine (mufflers had not been invented at that time) might spook them. Yet Chenoweth and his partner Bill Jones (who lived in Snyder) persisted and made their maiden run on October 29, 1907, arriving at Snyder at 10:30 pm the next day, the vehicle having become stuck in a creek overnight. The whole town turned

out for the event, but no one would agree to make the return trip to Colorado City until, in exasperation, free passage was offered, upon which five daring souls accepted.

Soon afterward the citizens of Snyder adopted a resolution banning the noisy bus from returning to their town limits. Chenoweth was forced to re-route to Big Spring and then operated to Lamesa,

Last Shot Got Him

Transcribed by Andrew Kuntz as played by W.B. Chenoweth

The musical score is written in a single system on a grand staff (treble clef). The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The piece consists of ten staves of music, with measure numbers 6, 12, 17, 23, 29, 35, 42, 49, 55, and 60 indicated at the beginning of their respective staves. The music is characterized by a driving, rhythmic melody with frequent eighth and sixteenth notes, and a consistent accompaniment pattern. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots at the end of the final staff.

where they achieved some success. Success, however, attracted competition, and a well-heeled rancher bought four Model F Buicks and went into competition. Even though the cars were slower, had smaller engines and carried fewer passengers, they were stylish and modern, and the competition drove an undercapitalized Chenoweth off the route. A new route from Snyder to Rosco (the Snyder citizens having lifted their ban) was implemented, but it too attracted a competitor who purchased two five-passenger, two-cylinder REO touring cars. Chenoweth went out of business.

One of the busses was sold to a Fort Worth dairyman who employed W.B. to convert it into a truck (the first one in Texas). Unfortunately, the machine met its demise due to the lack of maintenance, when the driver failed to realize that he needed to periodically add water to the radiator and oil to the engine. Predictably, the bearings burned out and the pistons seized. It was towed away by a mule team and ended up as a chicken coop on a local farm. Chenoweth traded the other bus for a piano, which his daughter played for many years.

Years later, in 1921, the American Society of Automotive Engineers adopted the six-cylinder engine motor as the most practical motor for automobiles.

Chenoweth also perfected a wind motor. W.B.'s grandson, Mr. Joe Chenoweth of Texas, relates:

In 1920 he invented a wind motor (not a windmill) that would operate at fairly constant velocity regardless of wind speed. He figured a way to hook it to storage batteries so they could have electric lights on the farm in Arlington, Texas, before they had them in town. In fact he even figured how to have all the blades turn into the wind when the wind got above 15mph to keep from burning up the storage batteries—then when the wind subsided, the blades would start turning again. He patented this invention in 1922. Then he figured that he could hook the storage batteries to the hot plate of the wood stove and cook with electricity. That obviously wasn't too efficient a heat source because the next thing you knew he figured out how to use the wind motor to pump air through kerosene and run that pipe to the stove and cook with gas. At that point the whole family decided he was going to blow the house up with that thing and gave him the ultimatum that he unhook that pipe or they were leaving! That idea of wind energy was only fifty years ahead of its time because it wasn't until the 1970s when learned people started talk of using wind as an alternate energy source.

W.B.'s "first successful flying machine" claim seems to stem from his idea for a heavier-than-air machine, that he devised in 1908, but "perfected" later in life. Instead of wings and a propeller, it was, in theory more like a helicopter. An "improved plan" of his first plane invention, employing "cycloidal propulsion," was debuted on a sabbatical to an inventor's showcase in Dallas, sponsored by local manufacturers. According to an article in a Dallas paper⁴, "to the layman the propelling device for the plane appears to be large paddle wheels operated on either side of the motor." Said Chenoweth, "Well, that is about all you could call them, but the idea is sound and inventors know it. It is practical and I'm

sure it will work." The "propellers" were mounted on an automobile "which [was] easily propelled about the building," and W.B. promised to construct an actual plane soon to give it a "real test."

Somehow Dad Chenoweth wound up living in Chicago in the '30s and invented his flying machine. Although it was not a helicopter, it could take off vertically, fly straight and land vertically (does that make anyone think Osprey?). That invention had a short life as well, because he actually flew it over Chicago around "rush hour" one day and caused such a traffic jam that he was arrested when he finally landed and told not to EVER fly that thing in Chicago again. That also ended his inventing "career." [Joe Chenoweth]

Although the Chenoweth Cornfield Symphony Orchestra does not seem to have lasted beyond the 1920s, perhaps coinciding with the death of Annie, W.B.'s wife and mother of the "Symphony," the Wampus Cat played on at occasional radio dates, fiddlers' contests and gatherings, even at the 1936 inventors' convention in New Orleans¹. Although he lived in Chicago in later life, he died, in 1946, in Terrell, Kaufman Co., Texas.

Some of the Chenoweth children and members of the "Symphony" had enough of performing, while others had subsequent musical careers. W.B.'s daughter, Frances, could, according to grandson Joe, "play anything with strings," while his other daughter, Vivian, "played five or six instruments." They, along with guitar player Thomas Chenoweth, played vaudeville venues for several years as a result of the training they received from W.B., recalls Joe. Later, Vivian played the mandocello with the Westchester Mandolin Orchestra in New York.

There is a final story of interest in the tale of the Orchestra, eloquently related by Joe Chenoweth:

My Aunt Frances and Aunt Vivian, accompanied by Vivian's husband, Ed Hayes, had a group called Ed Hayes and His Banjo Girls. Sometime during the 1930s Vivian and Frances had the Gibson Banjo Company make them a matched pair of tenor banjos with Mother of Pearl inlaid into the fret boards, beautiful maple and rosewood marquetry inlaid into the walnut backs of the resonators, and corded electric lights inside – very rare for the time. After the two sisters died, Frances' banjo went to her daughter [Frances] in New York and Vivian's went to her son [Ed] in Texas. Since the Gibson Banjo Company was located in [son Ed's] sales territory, he dropped in on their museum one day in the 1990s with his mother's banjo and asked what they could tell him about it. The museum director left for a few minutes and returned with some yellowed old papers, and immediately asked, "Where is the other one?" He showed Ed the original order for both banjos and told him everything about each of them. The museum director said they had never had such a unique order before or since and that they would surely like to have both of them for their museum. The museum was willing to purchase both banjos and make a permanent display for them so everyone touring the museum would see them. So Ed contacted Fran about the exciting prospects of their offer. Fran thought that if one museum wanted them that maybe

(Continued on page 52.)

Why Fiddle? (Continued from page 33):

When they seem to lean toward favoring one style over the others, hone in and let them hear more. Give out iTunes cards as practice rewards so they can go and purchase some of this great music that they've just discovered. Help them be better musicians by teaching them to appreciate music, and not just have them show up and play, pack up and go home, dropping their fiddle case on the floor, only to be picked up again in seven days.

Here are a few of the fiddlers who influenced me at a very young age:

- Don Messer
- Andy DeJarlis
- Graham Townsend
- Ned Landry

Look them up on YouTube and enjoy!

[Patti Lamoureux, of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, is a member of the Manitoba Fiddle Association Hall of Fame. She is a three-time Grand North American Champion, and a three-time winner of the prestigious Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Championship in Ottawa, Ontario. Patti was the first woman and the first Western Canadian in the history of Canada to ever win. Residing in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Patti spends her time teaching private lessons in her home and online via Skype. Summer is jam-packed with fiddle camps, workshops, and performances. Patti has recently launched her first fiddle book, coinciding with her latest recording, "100% Danceable." Visit her web site at www.pattilamoureux.com for more information.]

Fiddle Tune History (Continued from page 39):

a more prominent museum would want them as well. So she contacted The Smithsonian Institution about the banjos. The Smithsonian wanted the family to donate the instruments and made no promises about ever displaying them. So a quiet duel between the two cousins ensued — Ed's argument was for the permanence of the display and Fran's was, "but it's The Smithsonian." After several months Ed gave in, and both banjos reside somewhere in The Smithsonian Institution's archives.

[I wish to acknowledge the invaluable and generous assistance of Mr. Joseph Thomas Chenoweth, Allen, Texas, who provided a wealth of material and who was kind enough to be interviewed for this article; and of Mr. Jon Egge, proprietor of the Chenoweth family website.]

¹ *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, April 1, 1936

² *Dallas Morning News*, Dallas Texas, July 23, 1935.

³ Playbill 11/4/1924, Palo Pinto School Auditorium.

⁴ *Times-Herald*, Dallas, Texas, c. 1930s, clipping, n.d., entitled "Dallas Corporation Giving Inventors Chance to Prove Practicality of New Ideas."

[Andrew Kuntz is the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called *Ragged But Right* (1987) as well as the on-line tune encyclopedia "The Fiddlers' Companion" (www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in Irish music sessions.]

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