

# *Fiddle Tune History*

By Andrew Kuntz

## Nuggets

*One good analogy is worth three hours' discussion.*

– Dudley Field Malone

*(advocate for women's suffrage, 1918)*

I confess, I find pleasure in a good analogy, especially one that is successful in reframing a situation, endeavor, or argument so as to help elevate understanding. Recently I've had occasion to ponder a couple of analogies applied to tune history, one of which can sustain just a little bit of extension for this article. We'll start with a definition: when we find similarity in some respects between things that are otherwise dissimilar, we call that an analogy. When I wrote about "Tune History in Context" in the Spring 2013 issue of *Fiddler Magazine*, my thinking on applying a bio-psycho-social model of investigation to tune history could be considered a practical application of an analogy. Recently, I have heard investigations of tune history called "tune archeology," which is both an analogy and a reference to the budding discipline of music archeology, and, yes! there is such a thing, although it can mean different things. Music archeology encompasses the "hard" science of the recovery and study of artifacts of music, notably musical instruments or fragments of them, as well as their use and purpose in the culture they were embedded in. Music archeology can also mean the research of old texts, including Roman and Medieval notation. Used as an analogy applied to traditional music, the term "tune archeology" would mean the examination of a tune in texts and manuscripts of the past 300 years or so, or, in the history of sound recordings, to try to establish its place, use, and meaning in the culture the fiddle tune was embedded in. What I like about characterizing tune history investigations as a type of archeology is the emphasis on what underlies all scientific investigation: deriving and analyzing data.

This brings me to the second analogy I've been thinking about, "data-mining." This concept came out of computer science, and, according to Wikipedia, has the "overall goal [of extracting] information from a data set and transforming it into an understandable structure for further use." I think that's pretty close to my thoughts about contextualizing fiddle tunes. Investigating the history of tunes and tune families, and finding out as much as possible provides one with a data set that can transform one's understanding and can enhance the "further use" of the tune, if only to play a melody with "value added" enjoyment. The result of mining is a transformed product; from the rock we derive resources that can be shaped, molded, valued, and enjoyed. The analogy of those interested in tune history as "data-miners" is one that can sustain a bit of expansion as well. Apart from the labor involved in mining, there is the reward of uncovering a "vein" of information that can be traced and extracted from its surroundings. We need only venture the effort. Of course, a lot of mines end up bust when a promising prospect ends up a waste of time and effort, but that's part of the analogy, too! Finally, it seems that luck is not an inconsiderable factor in successful earth and data mining, no matter how sophisticated the tools and the preparation. One could go on

with this analogy to talk about the depth of the vein, the quality, the assay process, etc., but I've already tested the elasticity of the analogy, and fear to go too much further before making my point.

In past times, miners detected mineral wealth by prospecting—"panning for gold," and that has an analogy in tune history as well. When minerals (substitute the word "information") are found seemingly serendipitously in a stream bed (substitute the words "published/recorded material" or "internet") it represents an exposure. The mineral has been subject to weathering, and gravity and water funnel it downhill, where it can be found. Trace mineral elements are common in all streams, and some have considerable value. However these traces have become detached from the main source of the mineral exposure, which remains hidden.

Finally! we come to the theme of this article, for haven't all of us gone looking for something—panning for information—to discover a real "nugget." A nugget is more than a trace, more than a flake; its has considerable value to us in its own right, but it has been detached from its larger context, like a nugget of gold that leaves us searching for the lode. Tune history is like that sometimes, too, for me. Every once in a while when I'm information-prospecting, I'll find things I consider to be "perfect nuggets." I'll continue to look around for more information—the lode—but often don't find it, but I've got that beautiful nugget. That's not inconsiderable, and a bag full of nuggets can make one feel rich in tradition.

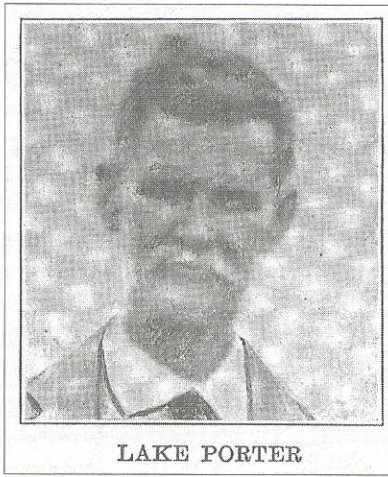
I've selected two out of many "nuggets" I'd like to share with you. Picked up from the information streams I prospect, these are some examples of nuggets of tune history I've found in my sluice pan.

### **The Fiddling Sheriff**

A few months ago I started to investigate several tunes called "Black Jack" or "Black Jack Grove" (also as "Blackjack Grove"), wondering if they could be somehow related, even though collected from sources geographically far apart. Musical similarities between all the tunes were non-existent and moreover, the name "Blackjack Grove" was surprisingly common, applied to many towns, villages, and places throughout the United States, all presumably derived from proximity to groves of blackjack oak trees—a smallish, rather gnarled tree that grows in sandy, thin soil in a range from southern Texas to New Jersey, and all over the South and Midwest. There were no common "musical genetics" or tune family characteristics, nor traceable social connections between the Blackjack tunes, and I concluded they were isolated idiosyncratic performances by local musicians. Kentucky fiddler Walter McNew's "Black Jack Grove" is the one most often played by modern fiddlers, but it was another "Black Jack Grove" tune that proved to be the "nugget," because of the rich story that unfolded.

In 1939 John and Ruby Lomax toured the South with recording equipment, capturing a variety of folk music performances for the Library of Congress. Their travels eventually took them to southern Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, where they were guests at the ranch of Mrs. Lasater, who had been a college friend of John's. During the visit, knowing of the Lomaxes' collecting efforts,

Mrs. Lasater informed them of a local fiddler named Lake N. Porter, who had a reputation as a champion fiddler. The folklorists made contact with Porter and his wife (née Cornelia Williams), who allowed them to come to their “comfortable cottage, with their own garden and chickens,” and they recorded L.N. Porter (as he preferred to be called) playing several pieces, including his favorite tune, “Black Jack Grove.” Following this, the Lomaxes took the fiddler and his wife out to dinner, where they learned more about the life of this interesting man.



L.N. Porter was born in Mississippi around 1854, but moved to Texas, where he lived in McMullen County and became a cowhand, herding cattle on several trips on the great trails leading north, “often sawing his fiddle as he rode along,” recorded the Lomaxes in their field notes. In later life he became a charter member of the Texas Old Trail Drivers’ Association. Mr. Porter was for fifteen years sheriff in Goliad County (near McMullen County, south Texas), “during some exciting days of that country.” The Porters had just celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary, and, although he had put the fiddle away and stopped singing for many years, Mrs. Porter said that he had recently taken it back up, and (as his wife reported) “he doesn’t do anything else all day long.” Porter’s children later wrote to thank the folklorists for recording their father, saying that their visit had given him much pleasure. Porter survived well into his nineties, dying in 1947.

The cowhand-fiddler-turned-sheriff’s story was fleshed out many years later, in 1983, by his grandson, who had come to donate a portrait of his father to the Library of Congress, painted by a prominent artist of Western Americana. The LOC accepted the picture for their collection, and, in the process recorded some of L.N. Porter’s adventures (hinted at by John Lomax’s dubbing of his time as sheriff “during some exciting days”). In fact, Porter’s adventures began considerably before his service as a Texas lawman.

Porter’s reputation began at the age of nine. L.N.’s father, Stark P. Porter, was a physician, and a man respected and capable enough

that the citizens of Goliad County pressed him to serve as sheriff. According to the grandson, outlaws ambushed and killed Stark Porter when L.N. was aged nine. Family lore has it that the young boy took his father’s rifle down from the wall and left home. He was gone a year, and when he returned he replaced the firearm in its customary spot, and told his mother, “The debt’s been paid.” While it seems incredible that a nine year old boy should have undertaken such an act of revenge, some parts of the story are true. Stark P. Porter was elected sheriff in 1862 and served through 1864. This was during the Civil War, and Porter was a Unionist in Confederate territory. His death in 1865 was not at the hands of “outlaws” but

rather an assassination in Gonzales, Texas, by person or persons unknown, who shot him in the back. The *Galveston Daily News* of May 2nd, 1865, recorded:

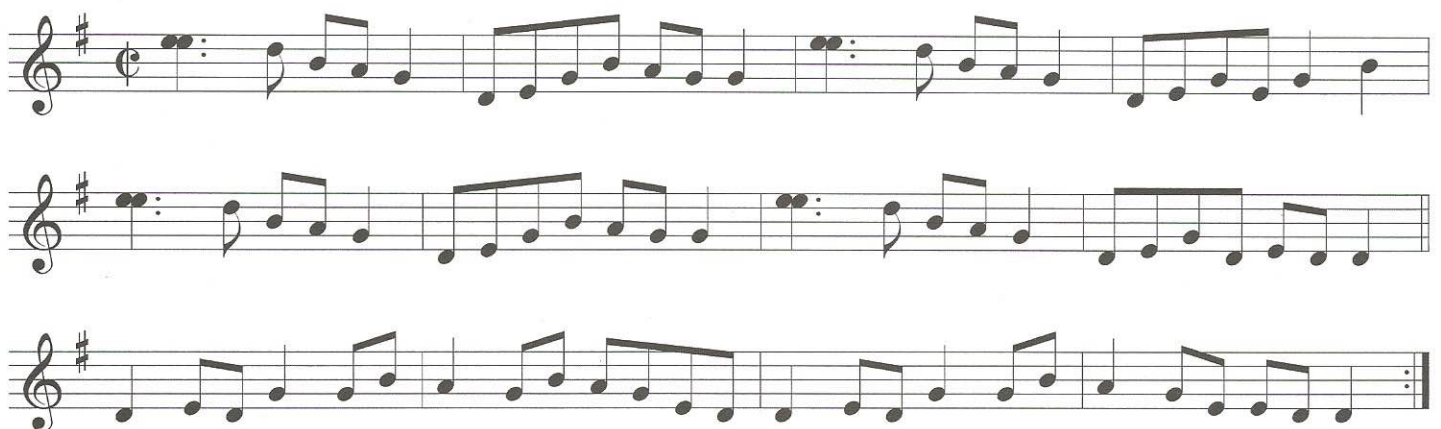
*We learn that Dr. Porter, sheriff of Goliad county, was killed the other day. The cause of the affair was the utterance by him of expressions against the Southern Confederacy. He had recently been a state prisoner.*

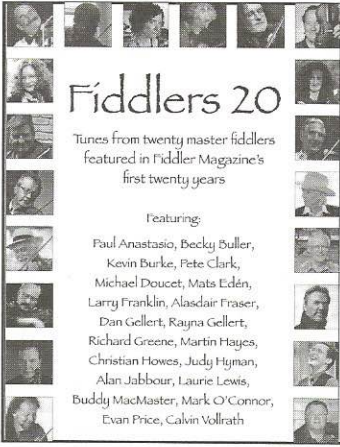
Stark Porter had evidently been a political prisoner for a time because of his views.

When he was seventeen, in 1871, L.N. Porter found employment as part of a trail crew working for One-armed Jim Reed, a Civil War veteran. They drove cattle up the Chisholm trail to Kansas, and Porter gained a reputation for the soothing effect his fiddle playing had on the herds. L.N. himself wrote:

*When I was growing up I learned to play the fiddle, but there were only two tunes that I could play to perfection, one of which was “Seesaw,” and the other was “Sawsee.” Often I have taken my old fiddle on herd at night when on the trail, and while some of my companions would lead my horse around the herd I agitated the catguts, reeling off such old time selections as “Black Jack Grove,” “Dinah Had a Wooden Leg,” “Shake That Wooden Leg, Dolly Oh,” “Give the Fiddler a Dram,” “Arkansaw Traveler,” and “The Unfortunate Pup.” And*

## Black Jack Grove





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say, brothers, those old long-horned Texas steers actually enjoyed that old time music.

It was even said that his playing would stop stampedes. By 1878 L.N. ceased trail-driving, and settled into life as a ranch-hand, where he continued to fiddle. He married and began raising a family. In the first decade of the 20th century he served as sheriff of McMullen County, followed by two terms as sheriff in Brooks County.

His grandson, who grew up in the home, recalled: "Every morning of the world he greeted the morning with his violin." He still fiddled into his nineties.

### Painting the Town

A number of hornpipes have been attributed to Tyneside fiddler-composer James Hill, a publican, musician, and "sporting man," who was born in Dundonia, Scotland, but who lived most of his life in Newcastle and Gateshead, northwest England. Since he did not publish a collection, his tunes are known through the publications of others, and through the music manuscripts of his contemporary northeast fiddlers. He was an innovator whose excellence in crafting duple-time hornpipe melodies was renowned in his time, and he was known as the "Newcastle Paganini." Hill was a prime exponent of the Newcastle style of hornpipe, a model for hornpipe compositions throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, he was so well known that many hornpipes were mistakenly attributed to him (like "Blaydon Flats"), although it is doubtful that he composed all the ones that bear his name. His known output amounts to between forty and fifty compositions, and speculation on whether a particular hornpipe is a Hill composition has been the subject of articles, internet newsgroups, scholarly works, and extensive session-talk.

Although not a lot is known about Hill's life, he was known to have been fond of horse racing and race horses, and of pubs, which pursuits provided titles for many of his tunes. He died of consumption (tuberculosis) in Newcastle in 1853, at the age of forty-two, leaving a wife, Sarah.

Several hornpipes were attributed to him in *Köhler's Violin Repository*, a set of three volumes published in Edinburgh between 1881 and 1885 by the music publishing firm of Ernst Köhler, but

edited by a violinist named W.B. Laybourn (who is identified in the "Repositories" only as "A Professional Player," although his name appears on several tunes in the volume, either as composer or arranger). Laybourn was a late transplant to Scotland, and had lived in England most of his life, and, prior to moving to Edinburgh, he lived in Newcastle for some years. It is thought that he came into contact with Hill's compositions when he dwelt in the city, although details of how and where he acquired them are wanting. He thought enough of Hill's hornpipes to include several in the Köhler volumes he edited, and to include the composer's name with them.

One of the Hill hornpipes (which appears in *Köhler's Violin Repository*, Book 2 (c. 1883) was entitled "The Marquis of Waterford's Hornpipe." It was the kind of title one would usually associate with the late 18th century Scottish fiddler-composers, who often named tunes for a patron or a patron's family member, or in hopes of acquiring patronage. Hill was not of that ilk. He did not seem to have sought a patron, nor did he pander to the gentry in other compositions. So, why did he name this one after a Marquis?

More curious, the Marquis of Waterford was not even English, but rather an Irish peer named Henry de La Poer Beresford, 3rd Marquess of Waterford. However, the Marquis did have a probable connection with Hill in their mutual passion of horse racing. In fact, Beresford himself had a prodigious reputation of his own in England and Ireland as a sportsman and was a member of the Newmarket Jockey Club. He even occasionally competed himself, although he was unsuccessful in winning any major races. Still, in his role of the gentleman-enthusiast, he gathered about him likeminded "sporting gentlemen."

In early adulthood Waterford "was frequently in the news in the late 1830s for drunken brawling, brutal jokes, and vandalism, and was said to do anything for a bet; his irregular behavior and his contempt for women earned him the moniker "the Mad Marquis," according to Wikipedia. Beresford also had a reputation as a practical joker and once filled the first class carriage of a train bound for one race meeting with chimney sweeps, simply to see the looks on the faces of the other first class passengers.

He is chiefly remembered for two unseemly events, one of which has the ring of truth, and one of which was more an accusation that stuck due to his reputation. In 1837 Beresford was returning home from a racing outing at the Croxton Park Races, "a most enjoyable termination to the hunting season, in the grass country around Leicestershire" in central England. The races were generally held on the Thursday after Easter, lasting for one day only. The racetrack was long, and there were several races, after which Beresford and his entourage of fellow sportsmen mounted up for the journey home. Reaching the Leicestershire village of Melton Malbray, the rather drunken party were halted by a toll booth, a not uncommon convention to raise money to maintain the roads. The toll booth attendant, doing his job, barred the way and demanded the price. An altercation ensued, which resulted in the toll keeper being nailed shut in his home, after which the wild party turned its attention loose on the town, where the "gentlemen" did their best to wreak havoc. When a member of the party discovered buckets of red paint, the group took up brushes and proceeded

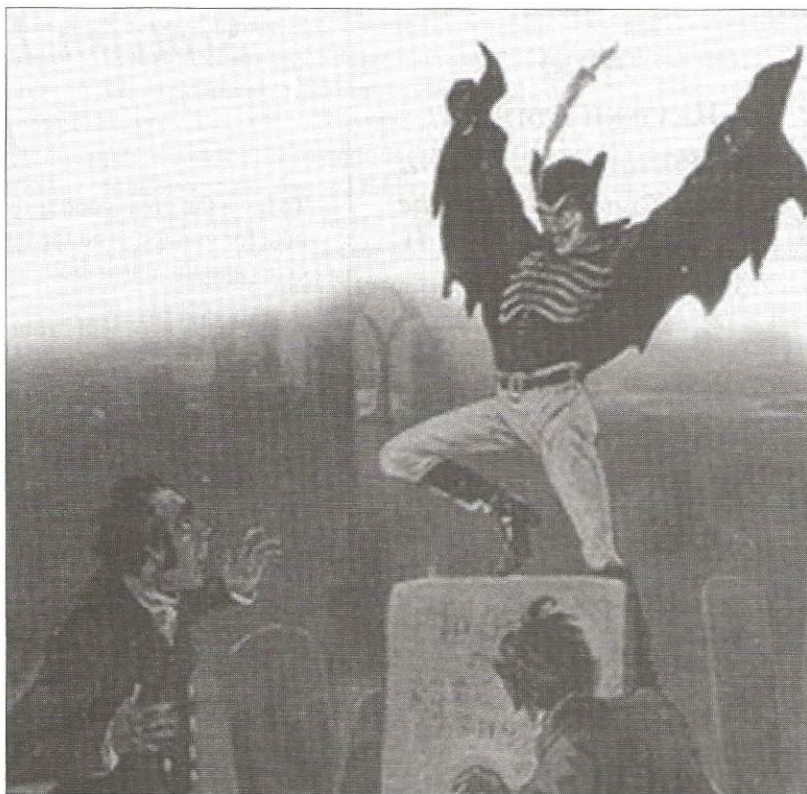
to deface the toll booth and village houses with what we would now call graffiti. Thus one of the supposed origins for the expression "painting the town red."

The second event in which Beresford's name was associated is the curious and sinister Spring Heeled Jack series of incidents (or supposed incidents) that frightened London women, beginning in 1837. Spring Heeled Jack was more urban legend than a real-life figure, who was said to have accosted women out walking, tearing at their clothes with his claw-like hands, attempting to forcibly kiss them, and acting in other uncouth ways. His sobriquet stemmed from his supposed ability to make fantastical leaps, explained as if he had boots with powerful springs attached to the soles. He was said to have had the guise of a devil, a bear, and a ghost, and sightings of him increased as the rumors of his depredations spread, and more people reported seeing him in various parts of the country.

Beresford had paid a price for his reputation as a practical joker and undisciplined behavior, for it was openly speculated that he might be involved, if not Spring Heeled Jack himself. That he was in London at the time the "sightings" began was proof enough for some, and even today he is sometimes associated with the events. There was no proof, of course, and no charges were ever brought.

The rumors of Spring Heeled Jack eventually collapsed when no evidence could be found, and the demon entered urban folklore, to be revived periodically as a kind of bogey-man.

The dissolute proved to be tamable, however. When he married Louisa Stuart, daughter of the 1st Baron Stuart de Rosethay, in 1842, Beresford settled down to the life of a country gentleman in



*Spring Heeled Jack*

the family estate of Curraghmore House in Ireland, where he lived an exemplary life until his death in 1859 from a riding accident.

*[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.]*

## The Marquis of Waterford's Hornpipe