

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Rustic Dance, Part II

In the last issue of *Fiddler Magazine* (Fall 2014) we saw how one strain of music, melodically powerful and memorable (Ex. 1), became detached from a printed 19th century schottische called “Nightingale Clog,” and was transformed into a Midwest dance tune called “The Rustic Dance” or “Evening Pleasures Schottische.” In this Tune History column, I would like to explore some more of the remarkable twists and turns of this durable eight-bar strain, the basic outline of which is given below. In fact, the strain is widespread in North American music and is hardly confined to the Midwest or other geographical regions, and can be heard played by Piedmont, Appalachian, or northern musicians as well. It even has variants in Canadian music.

One of the southernmost instances of our widespread melody was “Limber Neck Blues,” by the old time duo of Willie Narmour (1889-1991) and Shell Smith (1895-1968), who recorded the instrumental for Okeh Records in 1930 (Okeh 45548). Unlike the Midwest variants, which tended to be in the key of Bb, Narmour and Smith played it in the key of C, a familiar and comfortable key for the duo, employed over and over for their many “blues” tunes. “Blues” was a nomen they used to describe their popular country-ragtime pieces, not “blues” in the strict structural sense, but which often incorporated blues stylings (although not “Limber Neck Blues,” which is a straight-forward schottische). Their recordings “Carroll County Blues” (No. 1 and No. 2) sold so well that there is assumed to have been a decided commercial advantage for the duo to add “Blues” to the name of the tune on the record label. The first section of “Limber Neck” is our familiar “Nightingale Clog” strain, with its I-IV-V progression in the first

three measures, its compelling stepwise motion on the downbeat of those measures, pulling you into the melody, and its characteristic jump of the interval of a sixth. The second strain of “Limber Neck” is uncharted territory, however, and feels grafted to the more familiar strain, a not uncommon circumstance in widely-disseminated music. Penn State Professor Samuel Bayard called these kinds of non sequitur attachments “floating strains,” and, while the second strain of “Limber Neck” has not been identified, it has a familiar-sounding simplicity.

Of equal interest is the title, for “Limber Neck Blues” is thought to refer to a particular and tragic historical American phenomenon. Like that of another of Narmour and Smith recording, “Jake Leg Blues,” the title refers to the visible symptoms incurred by drinking a product called Jamaica Ginger. The tonic was marketed as a medicinal aid after the Civil War and could be legally purchased during Prohibition in the 1920s. Its high alcohol content (60-80% ethanol) made it popular, with the thinnest veneer of respectability obscuring its underlying attraction. Unfortunately, in the spring of 1930 the manufacturers added another ingredient, triethyl phosphate. Immediately those who imbibed quantities of Jamaica Ginger began to have physiologic symptoms such as loss of muscle control in the hands and feet, producing the “Jake Leg Wobble,” when sufferers would have to pick up their feet higher than usual when walking to compensate for loss of muscular function in the toes. “Limber Neck” is thought to refer to the head movements that accompanied such locomotion.

Willie Narmour was not the only Mississippi fiddler to play the tune, for it was recorded in Memphis, Tenn., by Mississippi fiddler Gene Clardy (with guitarist Stan Clements) in 1930 as “Moonlight Clog” (Vocalion 5418). Clardy (pronounced “Clair-Dee”) was one of the older Mississippi fiddlers to record in the 78 RPM era, although his career was cut short when he was killed by a dancer at a soiree who demanded that he continue playing. Clardy, who was aged forty-three when he recorded “Moonlight Clog”

Limber Neck Blues

The musical score for "Limber Neck Blues" is presented in four staves. The first two staves show the main melody with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is in 4/4 time and consists of eight measures. The notes are: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. Above the notes, the chords C, F, G, and C are indicated. The last two staves show a simplified version of the melody, with the notes: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. Above the notes, the chords C, G, and C are indicated.

was, like Narmour, from Carroll County, and was a neighbor of the younger fiddler (and also an influence on bluesman Mississippi John Hurt). While there is no record that Narmour learned the tune from Clardy (and they both recorded it in the same year), it suggests that the tune was in dissemination among musicians from the county. We'll return to "Moonlight Clog" later.

The schottische (in three parts) was known to Glen Lyn, western Virginia, fiddle player Henry Reed (1884-1968), although he had no title for it. Alan Jabbour suggests that, in the South at least, such tunes were often played as instrumental set pieces rather than for dancing. Reed, like Narmour, played it in the key of C and, recorded Jabbour, used an extended fourth finger twice in the third strain, both for a high C on the E string and for an F on the A string. Jabbour's field recording of Henry Reed playing the tune can be heard at the Library of Congress American Memory website at www.loc.gov/item/afcreed000075. Fiddler John Watts "Babe" Spangler (1882-1970), born in Meadows of Dan in Patrick County, Virginia, recorded the schottische as an untitled piece. Spangler was a popular performer in the 1920s, broadcasting on WRVA, Richmond, where he was known, with his cousin, as the Old Virginia Fiddlers.

Jabbour also found an unpublished set in the American Folklife Center's collections as "German Waltz" by Bev Baker of Hazard, Kentucky (AFS 1538b3). Although it is neither German nor a waltz, Baker's title does point out the potential for rhythmic ambiguity in schottisches, discussed in "Tune History" in the last issue of *Fiddler Magazine*. Fiddler Lauchlin Shaw, from the North Carolina Piedmont region, had the tune in his repertoire, learned from Virgil Craven, as did Lonnie Austin of the Spray/Eden area of North Carolina.

Elderly Virginia banjo player Moran Lee "Dock" Boggs (1898-1971, Wise, Virginia) recorded the primary strain of our tune on his 1965 Folkways album (FA 2392) and clearly remembered

learning it at a music session near Dorchester from a blacksmith named Jim Begley, from Tennessee:

... he showed me that "Schottische Time." He told me it was "Schottische Time" and he gave me the time and how it was played. After he showed me, why I tried it and learnt kind of how to play it very near the way he played it... He never picked no 'knock-down', he just picked it...

A Tennessee version is also represented in the playing of Fiddlin' Arthur Smith (1898-1971), Grand Ole Opry and recording star, and a transitional figure in American fiddle music. Smith recorded the tune for Bluebird Records in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1940, transforming it, in typical Smith fashion from its dotted rhythms to a straight-ahead breakdown. The fiddle virtuoso's usual playing partners, the Delmore Brothers, were unavailable, but he arranged to travel with Bill Monroe and his band, who were making their first recording in the same studio, and Monroe allowed members of the Bluegrass Boys – Clyde Moody (guitar), Bill Westbrook (bass), and Tommy Magness (second fiddle) – to accompany Smith. According to a story told by Jim Nelson (Fiddle-L 4-1-10) a cousin of Smith's, a fiddler by the name of Clay Smith (from Fairview Heights, Illinois, although originally from middle Tennessee), learned the tune from the playing of Wade Ray, a popular radio fiddler on KMOX in St. Louis in the 1930s and '40s. Clay told Nelson that he played the tune for Arthur Smith at a family get-together back in Tennessee, and that soon after that Smith recorded it for Bluebird.

The recording proved popular, re-entered old time music and was absorbed into bluegrass repertoire as "Peacock Rag," whose composition was often attributed to Arthur Smith. It is interesting to note (from one of our starting places in tracing this strain, with Missouri fiddler Bob Walters' "Rustic Dance") that it came full circle back to Missouri, often shed of its schottische syncopations, to be played as "Peacock Rag." In fact, one of the early published

Peacock Rag

sources of Missouri fiddling, R.P. Christeson's two-volume *Old Time Fiddler's Repertory*, gives the tune twice: as "Rustic Dance" in vol. 2 (from Bob Walters), and, in vol. 1, as "Peacock Rag" (from Gus Vandergriff, "who played it frequently during 1934" – note that Christeson's date precedes Smith's 1940 recording, an anomaly yet to be explained). Arnold Walter "Buck" Ryan, a Virginia native, and multi-champion fiddler, recorded a bluegrass version ("Ryan's Scottische") in the 1960s for Rural Rhythm records.

Farther north, renowned Eastern Kentucky fiddler Ed Haley (1885-1951) played a version of our schottische that he called "Parkersburg Landing" to which he attached another, unrelated third strain, different from the one Henry Reed played. It was reportedly a favorite tune of his, and the title may possibly reflect the locale in which Haley learned it, i.e. around Parkersburg, West Virginia. Haley was originally from Harts Creek, Logan County, West Virginia, but lived in the Catlettsburg-Ashland area of Boyd County, Kentucky, from at least 1920 until his death in 1951. He toured extensively over the tri-state region of Ohio, northeastern Kentucky, and West Virginia. Pocahontas County, West Virginia, fiddler and banjo player Burl Hammons (1908-1993) played a version of the schottische called "Wilson's Clog," and said he learned it from a guitar player named Tom Christian, who used to play at a barbershop at Tea Creek, where local men gathered to make music in the early 20th century. Northeastern Kentucky fiddler J.P. Fraley knew the schottische melody and, while he remembered that a lot of the old-timers in his area played it, he did not recall anyone dancing to it.

A variant was recorded for Edison Records in 1928 by Mount Vernon, Ohio, fiddler John Baltzell (1860-1940) as "Kenion Clog," named for the town in that state near where Baltzell lived. Baltzell, who recorded numerous times in the 1920s, was taught to play by an elderly neighbor, Dan Emmett, of blackface minstrel fame, to whom the song "Dixie" is usually credited. "Mason-Dixon Schottische" is a mirror of "Rustic Dance"—not exactly,

but with a slight distortion in the glass. Harmonically it is the same, and the melody parallels as well, with the second strain differing just noticeably. It can be found in Samuel Bayard's compendium *Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife* (1981), in a couple of mid-20th century versions collected from southwestern Pennsylvania fiddlers. Musicologist Jim Kimball recorded the tune with New York's Southern Tier fiddler March Hamilton (1919-2000, Black Creek, Allegheny County, New York), who called it "Humpty-Dumpty Schottische"; a two-part version in the key of C. Hamilton "inherited" the tune and believed his father learned it when visiting the Toronto World's Fair in 1902. It was reportedly a popular schottische tune for community dances in western New York. Fiddler Les Raber (1911-2000) of Hastings, Michigan, also played the tune in the key of C Major, and musicologist Paul Gifford has several other versions from musicians in that state, who generally called it "Wilson's Clog" (as did Burl Hammons).

"Starlight Clog" is the name given to a tune in one of the later derivatives of the Elias Howe publishing concerns in Boston, Massachusetts, published in *White's Excelsior Collection* and *White's Unique Collection* in the 1890s and the early 20th century. It uses our familiar primary strain, but couples it with a new strain that modulates to the relative minor key.

Where did famed Canadian radio and TV fiddler Don Messer (1909-1973) pick up the tune? We don't know, but it was one of the first tunes that Messer recorded with his group the Lumberjacks in 1937, under the title "Billy Wilson's Clog." It follows "Rustic Dance" versions quite closely, and retains the walking tempo and rhythms of a schottische. When Messer's first tune book was published in 1942, the melody inexplicably appears only as the generic "Clog in C Major." While there is evidence that "Wilson's Clog" was a title for the schottische in several geographic areas, there is no evidence of a printed source for it. It may be that the popular schottische melody was associated with another widespread and very popular tune that was called

Starlight Clog

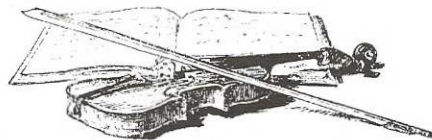
“Wilson’s Clog” or “Fred Wilson’s Clog,” which derives its name from its use as a favorite vehicle for blackface minstrel and dancer Fred Wilson, born in 1823, who lived well into the first decade of the 20th century. Transfer of a title or partial title from one similar tune to another, similar but different one, is a characteristic of oral tradition, and may well have been what happened with the Wilson titles.

Canadian music wasn’t finished with the tune yet, though. It reappeared in another guise when it was used as the melody for Canadian folksinger Wade Hemsworth’s (1915-2002) song “Log Driver’s Waltz.” The song has become a classic of Canadian folk music, popularized again in the latter 20th century through the singing of Kate and Anna McGarrigle and the accompanying

1979 animated short by John Weldon (which can be seen at www.nfb.ca/film/log_drivers_waltz/). It is not a waltz, of course, but mirrors the schottische tune recorded by Don Messer, from which presumably Hemsworth borrowed it.

◀ These tunes can be heard at www.fiddle.com (click on “Tune sound/video files”).

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



Original Tune: Kelly Reel

“I have written around 70 tunes on fiddle or banjo, and some have lots of chords. I decided to try to write a tune that would be more straightforward, both in melody and chords. I think ‘Kelly Reel’ is reminiscent of hoedowns played by fiddlers I heard when I first became interested in fiddling: Amos Chase (Kansas), Dwight Lamb (Iowa), and Cyril Stinnett (Missouri). It was named for Jay Kelly from Nebraska, my friend and fellow fiddler. Jay was the first person to play this with me, and so ‘Kelly Reel’ seemed like the perfect title.”

Dave Brinkman is from Laramie, Wyoming, and has played fiddle and banjo in a variety of old time, bluegrass, and country bands. He recently retired from the University of Wyoming, and is looking forward to spending the winter in Arizona and some new musical adventures.

◀ You can listen to Dave play this great tune on YouTube at <http://youtu.be/a-ZKpL5cjx0>. He is joined by Warrie Means on guitar.

David Brinkman
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$\text{♩} = 108$

D A

5 D A D

9 D A G D

13 D A D