

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Chance Meetings

Luck sometimes visits a fool, but it never sits down with him.
— German Proverb

If one surveys the vast amount of traditional music that has survived over the past few centuries, it seems as if little in the way of human endeavour, noble and ignoble, healthful and unhealthful, transcendent or mundane, seems to have escaped notice by tune composers, who celebrate what they have found interesting and personally important through their music and names of their compositions. More often than not it seems that various recreations are topics for fiddle tunes. One of the oldest of human recreations is, no surprise, gambling.

There are many old and new “traditional” tunes titles that we instantly recognize as referring to aspects of gambling. To mention just a few, there is the jig “Father Tom’s Wager” (AKA “Close to the Floor” or “Frog in the Well”) in Irish repertory, American stage fiddler Jimmy Hand’s reel “You Bet” (from the late 19th century *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*), the Irish set dance “Ace and Deuce of Piping,” the old time “Ace of Spades” (another name for the reel many call “Little Billy Wilson”), the Cajun “Crap Shooter’s Hop,” Texas fiddler Junior Dougherty’s “Crapshooter’s Rag,” or Frankie McWhorter’s ode to the dice, “Seven Come Eleven.” Some tune titles are not so recognizably aspects of gambling — they may have hidden meanings or double entendres, or simply have become so obscured by time or folk process as to be nearly meaningless to us today. The latter are lurking there, waiting to be found and unveiled; so, for fun, let’s revive a half-dozen forgotten melodies and titles that celebrate the gambling pastime, and banish their obscurity (if only temporarily).

English country dance repertory provides interesting material for exploration. London was the epicenter of the music publishing

business of the British Empire for centuries, and the several 18th century publishing houses competed fiercely for the trade in dance collections that fed the social recreation of the dance assembly. Copyright was nearly unheard of and poorly (if at all) enforced, and thus the same tune often appears in numerous collections by various publishers. Often wholesale copying of whole sections of one another’s volumes took place. The titles of dances and tunes in these collections were full of topical references, and thus military victories, political situations, explorations, new technology, the stage and other entertainments, and other aspects of the times were well represented. These titles would be instantly recognizable to dancers at period balls and assemblies, and helped to mark which dances and tunes were current and fashionable. In fact, many publishers went out of the way to identify their music and dance forms as “The Newest and Most Celebrated” or “The Most Fashionable Country Dances,” and to assure purchasers that their volumes represented the latest in court fashion — “as performed at Court, Bath, Tunbridge & all Public Assemblies,” or the like is often included in the title pages.

The 18th century was a time of relatively relaxed morals, compared with the 19th century, for example. References to sex, direct or double entendre, gambling, drinking, and other vices are found in 18th century volumes that would not be acceptable in the next century. Sometimes, if a tune with an unacceptable title was popular, the name would be altered or changed to reflect 19th century mores, while the melody lived on intact. Sometimes language would simply move on, so that, for example, what was once a well known euphemism would become an obscure one, and finally an incomprehensible reference. Slang would go in and out of fashion, to be replaced by fresh popular phrases. Recreational activities also went in and out of fashion; bear and bull baiting, for example, once a staple entertainment of country fairs and similar venues was extinguished by the 19th century as a popular entertainment. Dog and cock fighting survived longer, but were finally replaced by organized and legitimate sporting activities. One does still find tune titles that reference these activities, however. Gambling followed similar Darwinian patterns.

Starting with the earliest first, we find in the last editions of the *Dancing Master* a melody for a longways dance called “High

High Ginks



Ginks.” This long-running series of publications originated with London music seller John Playford in 1651, who eventually passed the upkeep of the series to his son Henry. When Henry died it fell to employee John Young to carry on the *Dancing Master* editions. “High Ginks” appears in Young’s collections of 1718 and 1729 and can also be found in rival John Walsh’s *Second Book of the Compleat Country Dancing Master* (1719). We would spell it as High Jinks today, meaning a frolic, or a noisy party with pranks. No one knows exactly where the word Ginks/Jinks came from or what it originally meant, although there is some speculation that it was originally a Scottish word. The 18th century meaning of the term, however, is a bit darker than the high jinks of today, for it referred to a gambler who drinks to intoxicate his adversary i.e., one who feigns drinking, or drinks little, while encouraging other players to consume copiously (see Partridge’s *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 1961). A bit later “high jinks” in England was a dicing game for drinks — guests threw dice to select a member of the group to perform some deft task for the amusement of the others; failure resulted in the necessity of downing a large drink, and if that was not accomplished, a forfeit of some kind ensued. Only later, in the mid-19th century, did it take its modern meaning.

John Johnson and the Thompson family (father Peter, and sons Charles and Samuel, later with daughter (?) Ann) were later

and rival London music publishers who competed year after year for the popular country dance market. One of each of their publications, issued at about the same time (since dates of printing were not always included it is sometimes difficult to determine with exactitude the year of publication) is of interest to us here. Charles and Samuel Thompson, of St. Paul’s Churchyard, issued the first volume (of four) of their *Compleat Collection of 200 Favourite Country Dances* in 1757, when England was engaged in the Seven Years War (or, in North America, the French and Indian War). Cheapside publisher Johnson issued his *200 Favourite Country Dances, volume 8*, in 1758. Both included a duple-time country dance melody along with dance instructions called “Twenty May Play as Well as One,” which on first glance seems like it might refer to music and musicians — i.e., one can play solo or up to a large ensemble. However, a little research reveals that the title references a very popular attraction at country fairs, the Wheel of Fortune, of which the popular modern casino game of roulette is a variant. The Wheel of Fortune had its origins in ancient times with the goddess Fortuna, who spun her wheel at random, changing the circumstances of mortals as the wheel changed position, so that some would suffer calamity and misfortune, others gain windfalls. A popular modern TV game show with the same name is a direct aspect of this ancient belief in the capriciousness of fate and the wheel image. The link between the device of the wheel and the title of the Johnson/Thompson tune is established in this excerpt

Twenty May Play as Well as One



Lamb Skinnet



from a book published in England in 1815 called *Merry Andrew, of Humours of a Fair* (a Merry-Andrew was a clown or buffoon):

A little further we saw one [stall manager] with the Wheel of Fortune before him, playing with children for oranges. What do you say? Twenty may play as well as one. Ay, and all may lose I suppose. Go away, sirrah, what, do you teach children to game! Gaming is a scandalous practice. The gamester, the liar, the thief, and the pickpocket are all first cousins, and ought to be turned out of company.

The title is thus revealed not as an invitation to a musical ensemble, but rather a barker's call for a game-of-chance. Only occasionally do country dance tunes seem programmatic or imitative in nature, but it is not too far a stretch to imagine a spinning wheel and bettors' anticipatory faces in the eighth note patterns of the second strain of this tune.

"Lamb Skinnet" is a jig long popular among musicians in England's North Country and the Borders region, traditional enough to have spawned variants — "The Elterwater Quickstep," from Cumbrian fiddler Henry Stables' late 19th century manuscript, for example, employs the first strain. It was picked up by Scottish musicians and popularised in the mid-20th century by such outfits as fiddler Jim Cameron's Scottish Dance Band and accordion great Jimmy Shand and his ensemble, so that it has become a staple of Scottish Country Dancing, despite the fact that "Lamb Skinnet" appears in none of the older Scottish collections. It does, however, appear in older English country dance collections. Curiously, it was originally published not in a volume of music, but rather in an early periodical, R. Baldwin's *London Magazine*, or *The Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer* (London, 1753). Baldwin's magazine, along with others such as Hinton's *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, included a wide variety of items of interest to upper crust society, including country dances and music. Many of these pieces subsequently were appropriated by our friends from the previous tune, John Johnson in *200 Favourite Country Dances, vol. 7* (London, 1756), and Charles and Samuel Thompson in their *Compleat Collection of 200 Favourite Country Dances* (London, 1757).

"Lamb Skinnet" — such a curious title, is it not — is the name of the tune in most publications. What did it refer to? Some have speculated that it's a variation or misprint of "lamb skinner" or "lamb skin"; something having to do with animal husbandry. George S. Emmerson, writing in *Scotland Through Her Country Dances* (1967), remarked that the name may have stemmed from the practice of tying the skin of a dead lamb to a live one in order to have it accepted by the bereaved ewe as a replacement. As an explanation it is creative, but erroneous. The derivation of "Lamb Skinnet" is to be found in the Thompsons' collection of 1757, where the title is given as "Lanquenet" — say it fast (or in a noisy session after a first beer), and you get "lamb skinnet." Lanquenet is a word that has its own curious origins, for it is a variant spelling of Lansquenet (with an "s") which was a French corruption of the German Landsknecht, meaning a mercenary soldier of the 16th century from that country. Lansquenet was once a very popular card game that involved a dealer trying to match an upturned card, while the players ("punters") place bets at each turn. The game was played by D'Artagnan in Alexander Dumas's novel *Twenty Years After* (1845), a sequel to his very popular *The Three Musketeers*. Lansquenet fell out of fashion as a game of chance because it proved relatively easy to defeat by card sharks adept at hiding and substituting cards.

The old time reel called "Old Sledge" is known as a West Virginia standard, played cross-tuned, albeit in various formats; Burl Hammons played it in AEad, blind Ed Haley in ADad, and Harvey Sampson in DGdg. Not only is "Old Sledge" played in different cross-tunings, but there is wide musical variation among regional fiddlers. West Virginia fiddler Ernie Carpenter learned the tune from locally legendary fiddler Lewis Johnson "Uncle" Jack McElwain (1856-1938) of White Oak, a tributary of Laurel Creek, near the unusually-named village of Erbacon, Webster County, West Virginia. Gerry Milnes in his book *Play of a Fiddle* (1999) relates the wonderful tale that the name Erbacon came about by the habit of the cook at the local hotel, who invariably asked, "Do you want ham 'r bacon?" Investigating further, Milnes found that the town was actually named for E.R. Bacon, an official with the B & O railroad. Milnes also learned that Ed Haley, like Ernie



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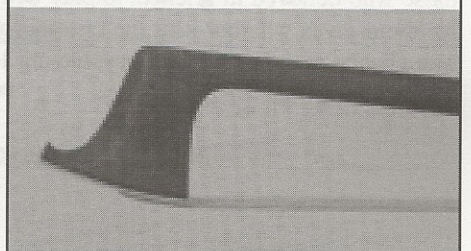
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Carpenter, learned “Old Sledge” from Uncle Jack, whom he met in the course of his itinerant circuit playing. Another Erbacon fiddler, Harry Scott (d. 1986), told Milnes that he seemed to rise three feet up off the ground upon hearing McElwain playing “Old Sledge,” it was so good. The piece was a favourite of fiddler Melvin Wine, who likewise learned it from the playing of McElwain along with that of his father. Melvin would often play this tune in the early 1970s for the fiddle contest at Glenville. All of the above fiddlers, with the exception of McElwain, can be heard playing their versions on various recordings.

Where does the name come from? Old Sledge was sometimes an appellation employed for dogs (in Kentucky, according to the *Devil’s Box*, March, 1974), but the naming of pets seems more a consequence of using a culturally established term as a name, and it’s doubtful in this case that the fiddle tune was named after a favorite dog. Not surprisingly, we find that Old Sledge is the 19th century Southern and Western American name for a popular game of cards that also goes by various other names, such as Seven Up, High-Low-Jack, Pitch, Setback and Cinch; Pitch being the term that has generally survived in modern American usage. It derives from an English game called All Fours (or All-Fools), and, in the early 1700s migrated to America along with the people who played it. It can be played with either two or four players, and involves playing tricks in which four cards score; High — the highest trump out, Low — the lowest trump out, Jack — the knave of trumps, and the Game. Hence the name All-Fours. Old Sledge is the game that the “Duke” and “Dauphin” play in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, for five cents a hand, and that great novel was not the only Twain story in which the game appears. It was integral to Twain’s short story “Science vs. Luck” (1870), set in Kentucky, in which a group of a dozen boys had been arrested for playing Old Sledge and betting, “as the law was very strict against what is termed ‘games of chance.’” Their spirited legal defense involved challenging a jury, deliberately selected and evenly divided between those who believed in chance and those who believed in science, to play Old Sledge and determine for themselves whether it fit the criteria for a “game of chance.” The chance members of the jury, having lost their shirts in play

to the exponents of science, were forced to declare “that the ‘chance’ theory concerning seven-up is a pernicious doctrine, and calculated to inflict untold suffering and pecuniary loss upon any community that takes stock in it.” So, in Kentucky, no one could be punished for playing Old Sledge.

“Old Sledge” is not the only fiddle tune devoted to the game. Boston publisher Elias Howe’s *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* (1883) contains two reels, variants of one another, one in G major called “Seven Up” and the other in A, titled “Cale Smith’s Pastime.” We can reasonably guess that Cale loved to play cards! Seven Up takes its name from the two-hand variant of All-Fours, in which a total of seven points was a game. Violinist and fiddler Marion Thede, collecting in Oklahoma, found the tune played in tradition in Jefferson County in the first half of the 20th century with a racist title and couplet sung to it.

The “Seven Up” melody was imported nearly intact into Irish tradition, in one of the relatively few cases of “reverse migration.” Usually British Isles tunes have been imported into North American tradition, but occasionally the opposite occurs. A relatively modern example of this is the export of the Maritime-composed “St. Anne’s Reel” to Irish fiddle tradition, where it’s sometimes mistaken as an indigenous reel. “Seven Up” entered Irish repertoire courtesy of Captain Francis O’Neill. The good Captain likely appropriated the tune from *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* (as he did several others), and, perhaps thinking that a title celebrating a game of chance was too vulgar, changed the name to “Fair and Forty.” Musically, however, it’s nearly identical to “Seven Up.” In Irish playing the melody is rendered both as a hornpipe and a reel. It was collected in Ireland by Brendan Breathnach from a Dublin accordion player, and was recorded by fiddler Sean Ryan (who called it “Charlie Mulvihill’s,” after the New York accordion player).

Finally we come to the Southern breakdown “Chuckaluck” (Chuck-a-Luck), in the repertory of fiddlers Carthy Sisco (born in 1921, and raised in Carroll County, northwest Arkansas), who had the tune from Kenny Baker (born 1926, Kentucky), who in

Old Sledge

turn had visited Sam McCracken (1888-1972, Elkmont, Alabama) and learned several pieces. "Chuck-a-Luck" was McCracken's signature tune. Chuckaluck (also "Chuck" or "Chucker Luck") is a game of chance, derived from the medieval game of Hazard (as is modern Craps). It's also known as Bird Cage due to the mechanism of play in which an operator twirls three standard dice in an hourglass-shaped wire cage. In England it was known as Sweat Cloth and the variant Crown and Anchor (which employs dice with symbols — the four card suits plus a crown and anchor — in the place of dots). It was a favourite game in speakeasies in the 1920s, as the odds are well in favour of the operator (house) even without loaded dice, and for this reason it is mostly found today in carnivals and charity events. Interestingly, a cone-shaped chute was sometimes employed as an alternate to the wire hourglass, especially in small stakes, hastily improvised games. The chute was made of leather, or sometimes of the cheaper tin, giving rise to the phrase "tinhorn gambler" from the shape and material of the device.

[The author wishes to thank Stacy Phillips for permission to use his transcription of "Old Sledge," one of two transcriptions of the tune in his *Phillips Collection of Traditional American Fiddle Tunes, vol. 1*, available from Stacy at www.stacyphillips.com/fiddlebooks.html.]



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[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.]

Seven Up

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