

# Fiddler Reprieved

By Andrew Kuntz

In the last issue of *Fiddler* (Fall 2001), I explored the music and legends of condemned fiddlers, ending with the observation that there was another selection of tunes that had to do with fiddlers who managed to escape their dire circumstances. It is altogether a smaller group of tunes, and the attached stories are often rather sketchy and unspecific. This contrasts with the comparative richness of legend surrounding those condemned fiddlers who met their fate, suggesting that, in popular imagination at least, the untimely end fixes pathos more surely than does the lucky escape.

The first tune in this group is the most widely known melody in the fiddler's repertoire, the ubiquitous "Soldier's Joy." This tune has had a long and illustrious history, and was called by Prof. Samuel Bayard an "immensely popular international tune" found in variants throughout much of Europe and North America. In North America it is usually referred to by the "Soldier's Joy" title, but it has also been collected as "French Four," "I Am My Mamma's Darlin' Child" "The King's Hornpipe," "(I) Love Somebody," "Payday in the Army," "Rock the Cradle Lucy" and "The King's Head." It is the latter title that particularly concerns us here. Bayard collected fiddle and fife tunes from the southwestern Pennsylvania region near the West Virginia border, and heard from several regional sources that the "King's Head" title had to do with a condemned man who managed to win a pardon by playing the tune before the king. Unfortunately, his sources could provide no further details. North Carolina fiddler Tommy Jarrell said "Soldier's Joy" was originally called "Love Somebody" in the Round Peak area, but was later also known by the titles "Soldier's Joy" and "Payday in the Army." He was, however, familiar with the alternate title "King's Head," and also with the story, and repeated it during a 1982 interview with Peter Anick. It is possible that Jarrell heard the title and story from one of the younger visiting fiddlers who frequented his home in the last decades of his life.

There have been several attempts to define what is meant by the title "Soldier's Joy," including that it refers to liquor, women, morphine, or even pay day. One informant, however, insisted on a curious condensation of the "Soldier's Joy" and "King's Head" title by maintaining that "Soldier's Joy" described the feelings of the condemned prisoner upon learning of his reprieve.

A similar anecdote is attached to the Québécois melody "Reel du Pendu," or "Hanged Man's Reel," popularised by Montreal fiddler Jean Carignon, Vermont Québécois fiddler Louis Beaudoin and Québec fiddlers Louis Boudreault and Isidore Soucy. The tune is often performed with the fiddle cross-tuned AEAC# (see *Fiddler Magazine*, Spring 2001, Vol. 8, No. 1, for a version by Louise Arseneault in the key of G). Beaudoin related a story that "Hanged Man's Reel" was played by a condemned man, a non-musician, who was promised freedom on the gallows if he could play a tune, and that, being innocent, he was miraculously able to produce music from a fiddle with this reel being the result. Interestingly, a distanced version of this tune became an old-time "revival" fiddlers' favorite



*An old photograph of Clair Cline holding the fiddle he made in a German POW camp in 1944.*

and festival tune, albeit the story became detached from the tune and is seldom repeated. Mistakenly, "Hangman's Reel" continues to be thought by many to be an old Appalachian tune. Traditional fiddler Albert Hash, from Whitetop or Rugby, Virginia, identified the piece as having originally been a British Isles tune, despite the fact that it is a doubtful provenance based on stylistic reasons. It has been suggested (by fiddler Judy Hyman of the Horseflies, for one) that "Hangman's Reel" entered old-time repertoire through the playing of younger upstate New York fiddlers, who reprocessed the Québécois tune, retaining the cross tuning and emphasising its driving rhythm.

Warner Waton relates a story about a man named Flannery who was supposedly a fiddler not in the Civil War, but in the earlier Revolutionary War, who was under a sentence of death. Details are sketchy, but it seems the commanding officer of the British or Loyalist forces who held Flannery was a man who prided himself on his knowledge of fiddle tunes. Knowing Flannery could play, he agreed to set him free if the condemned man could play a tune the officer hadn't heard. Flannery dreamt this tune the night before his scheduled execution, and played it the next day, winning his freedom. The tune is remembered as "Flannery's Dream" (sometimes given as "Flandery's Dream") and appears to have a Kentucky provenance. John Hartford (who recorded the piece on his 1996 Rounder album *Wild Hog in the Red Brush and a Bunch of Others You Might Not Have Heard*) notes the Flannery family is a large and old one from Elliott County, Kentucky.

A final tune can be included in this family of related tales. The

most elaborate version of the reprieved fiddler tale is attached to the West Virginia version of "Camp Chase." Similar to "Hangman's Reel" it is often played in cross tuning (AEAE). "Camp Chase" was in the repertoire of West Virginia's musical Carpenter family, one of whose members, French Carpenter, was an elderly fiddler with an archaic style who received quite a bit of attention during the folk "revival" of the 1960s and early 1970s. It was French's grandfather Solly, however, who has been called the most influential fiddler in West Virginia history. Family lore has it that Solly, a Confederate soldier, was captured during the Civil War and imprisoned at a Union prison called Camp Chase.

The story goes that while he was incarcerated, the commandant held a fiddlers' contest to give the best player a chance to fiddle his way to freedom, or, as some versions go, to win a reprieve from a death sentence. "The best fiddler," family lore has him saying, "that's in this camp — I'm a-gonna set him free." Solly was later supposed to have said that there were five awful good fiddlers in there, so he decided to play the tune now called "Camp Chase" to try and win his freedom. Some versions of the story suggest that all the fiddlers played the same tune, although Solly triumphed by adding some unusual new notes according to his fancy (or perhaps, as one writer suggests, in desperation). West Virginia fiddler Wilson Douglas, a protégé of French Carpenter, relates:

*There was quite a few who played in the contest; but Saul (sic) put these two high notes in. That tune, he called it "Camp Chase." It was some kind of a tune before but they hadn't named it yet. And when he got out of there he called it "Camp Chase," and it's gone by that name ever since.*

Although Sol gained his freedom in the contest he was required to sign a parole, pledging not to take up arms against the Union; however, according to the family he ignored this constraint and headed South to join another Confederate unit.

Folklorist and fiddler Alan Jabbour notes a similarity between one of the versions of "Camp Chase" and the tune "George Booker," and suspects it may be the latter that was played in the contest. It is possible the name "Camp Chase" may have been applied to the tune by West Virginia fiddlers who were familiar with the legend and Solly Carpenter's music. The "George Booker" tune seems related, notes Jabbour, to the 18th century Scottish strathspey "The Marquis of Huntly's Farewell."

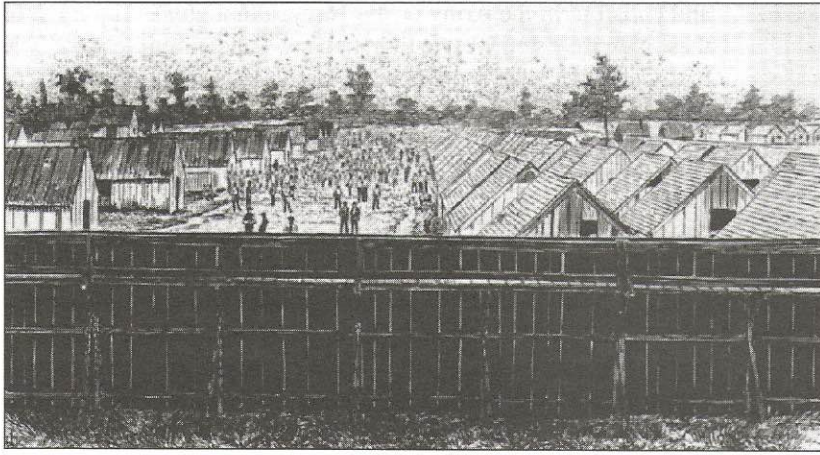
The Carpenters' tale of the reprieve of a fiddler is the most complete and detailed account in the sub-genre. Unfortunately, there are no corroborating accounts to indicate the veracity of the central core of the story — the fiddle contest — or to determine if it is other than apocryphal. There are details, however, that can be ascertained as true. First, there was, in fact, an infamous Union prison camp called Camp Chase, located near the then west side of Columbus, Ohio, where the present-day Fort Hayes is situated. Little remains of the prison camp today save for a cemetery on West Sullivan Avenue and a small stone retaining wall on West Broad Street, in Columbus (which has enveloped the site), but it is historically well-documented. Also well-documented is the fact that a great number of soldiers did get released from the camp through prisoner exchanges and paroles. Another way of relieving overcrowding in the prison was to offer amnesty by taking up allegiance to the Union

and enlisting in the Army or the Navy, although cannily most of these men were sent West to fight Indians. Thus it is entirely possible that Carpenter was a prisoner in Camp Chase and that he was paroled, as the family asserts.

While there is no record of a fiddle contest in the camp, there was certainly music in prison camps in general and Camp Chase in particular. That there were musicians and fiddlers in Civil War prison camps is a matter of record, and it is no wonder, for the soldiers of that era had to rely on their own resources for entertainment and music-making was a welcome skill. One Camp Chase prisoner's account tells of passing a stick among a circle of men, with each stick-holder in turn having to come up with something to provide for the group's entertainment. A 19th Massachusetts Regiment man, formerly imprisoned in a southern camp, wrote: "We had had some fun mixed with our misery. Our band had retained their instruments, and while they had not played at Camp Sorghum for want of strings, with the money we received (from home) they bought new ones, and our glee club was as good as ever. The citizens often came from the city to hear them sing." Fiddle playing was a particular pastime of a surprising number of men in the Civil War era. For example, *Confederate Veteran* magazine reported that in a regiment of Barksdale's Mississippians, there was one company of ninety men, seventy-five of whom were good fiddlers. Prisoners could be very resourceful, and homemade instruments were common in prison camps. H. E. Purdee of the 7th Florida Infantry built a fiddle while imprisoned at the Rock Island (Illinois) Prison Camp that survives to the present day and is on display in the Rock Island Arsenal Browning Museum. In Camp Chase, according to W.H. Duff's reminiscence called *Six Months of Prison Life at Camp Chase, Ohio*, "Some prisoners made money (in checks) by making things and selling them to the Yanks. A pair of fine boots was made and sold for \$25.00, a beautiful sailing vessel, was sold for \$25.00, a fiddle was made and sold for \$25.00, all material being bought at the sutler's store."

Even in more modern times such instruments were fashioned by prisoners of war. In early 1944 Captain Clair Cline of Tacoma, Washington, a U.S. Air Corps bomber pilot, was shot down and captured; eventually he was sent to Stalag Luft 1, a German POW camp for captured Allied airmen. In the fall of that year, to stave off boredom in the dismal surroundings, he traded some Red Cross rations for a penknife and constructed a fiddle out of bed slats and glue scraped from chairs and reheated. After bartering with a guard for some cat-gut strings, Cline, who had been a self-taught dance fiddler in rural Minnesota, was able to regain some of his skills and played for the entertainment of his fellow prisoners. He brought the fiddle home with him, and, as he writes in his article for *Guidepost Magazine* (January, 1997), donated it to the World War II exhibit housed in aircraft carrier *Intrepid*, a floating museum in New York. It was played by Glenn Dicterow of the New York Philharmonic during a ceremony at the museum, who judged it a surprisingly good instrument and its making a remarkable feat.

Finally, while there is no record of a Camp Chase commandant who had a particular liking for music, much less one who liked fiddling enough to offer freedom as the reward for accomplishment, there were precedents for capricious events. Prison commandants had wide latitude over the way their camps were run, and over details of punishment and reward, as evidenced by the many



Union Civil War prison Camp Chase

surviving prison camp records. Higher authority could also be influenced. Even well into the 20th century there is evidence of imprisoned musicians gaining favor through the exercise of their skill. Most famous, perhaps, is the case of Huddle Ledbetter, better

known as Leadbelly, who found himself for a second time arrested, tried, and convicted of assault with intent to murder. He was sentenced from six to ten years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary of Angola, infamous for cruelty even to this day, but at Angola he became the camp musician (Huddle had been taught music by an uncle, and by age fifteen he could play the concertina, guitar, and fiddle, and was in demand as a performer at dances). Leadbelly had the fortune to compose a song that was recorded by folklorist John A. Lomax, who was collecting among the prison population. It was a song pleading for a pardon, and after Lomax brought it to Governor O.K. Allen, a pardon was indeed obtained.

Using the power of one's musical art to escape a dire predicament is a time-honored theme, stemming from the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus. That it finds resonance in fiddle lore can be attributed to the many, many individuals who found a reprieve from the dire and dismal, if not by achieving personal freedom then by finding a mental reprieve from tormenting

## Flannery's Dream

AABBA'BB

Transcribed by Andrew Kuntz based on the playing of John Hartford.

Musical score for "Flannery's Dream" in 2/4 time. The score is divided into sections A, B, and A'. Section A consists of two staves of music. Section B consists of two staves of music, with a 'sl' (slide) marking above the second staff. Section A' consists of two staves of music, with a 'sl' (slide) marking above the first staff. The score uses a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

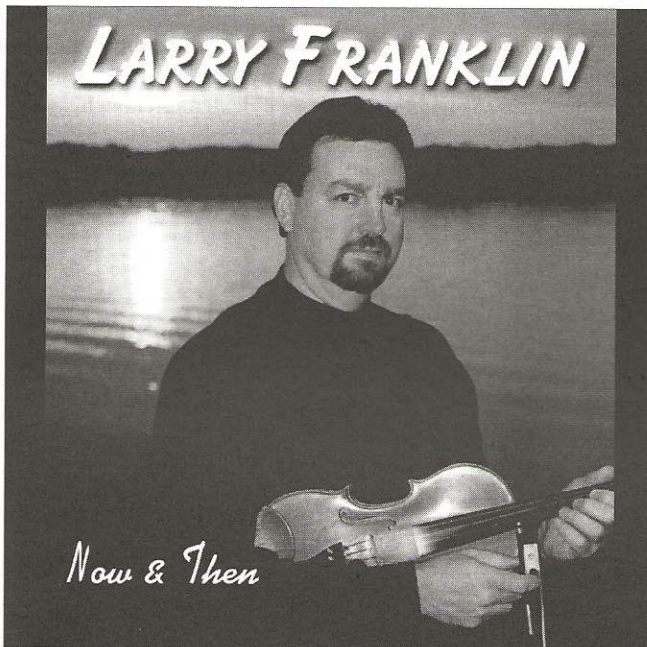
circumstances. In that sense, the fiddlers who quietly fashioned home-made instruments while incarcerated found a reprieve as well, whether or not they “won their freedom.”

[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 Fiddler’s Companion*” (<http://www.ceolas.org/tunes/fc>). Currently he spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions, when not researching fiddle tunes.]

## Camp Chase

Transcribed by Andrew Kuntz from the playing of Gerry Milnes. Other versions of Camp Chase are in A Major, crossstuned.

AA' B, irregular parts



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