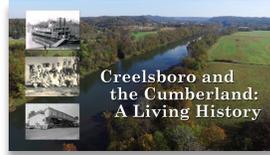


January 10, 2020
Voyageur Media Group, Inc.
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The Kentucky Archaeology & Heritage Series
"Creelsboro and the Cumberland: A Living History"

Song Profiles

by Eli Bedel

5 Miles From Town

An old-time breakdown from the Wayne County area of Kentucky's south-central region, "Five Miles From Town" may refer to the proper distance for engaging in drunken revelry and dancing to avoid the scrutiny of more respectable townsfolk. The sole-source musician for this tune is noted traditional fiddler Clyde Davenport from Monticello, Kentucky. Davenport is widely recognized for his smooth bowing and for a repertoire of tunes learned from older men born before the Civil War. This tune is characteristic of the rhythmic fiddle and banjo traditions heavily influenced by African-American musicians in this region of the state. Tunes of this type would primarily accompany dances and social gatherings.

Bonaparte's Retreat

An archaic fiddle tune known by many variants throughout the Appalachian region and Southern United States. Characteristic of this tune is the unique tuning, often called "Dead Man's Tuning," in which the G string is tuned an octave below the D string to imitate the drones of a bagpipe or other similar types of instruments. The early English and Scots-Irish settlers of the Appalachian region likely brought this tune or a related predecessor with them to the New World. Unlike most fiddle tunes, this piece is more a performance or listening piece than a dancing reel. This version comes from William Stepp of Magoffin County, Kentucky and differs from more common interpretations of the tune as it has been turned into a hoedown. It was later famously incorporated into classical composer Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring."

Bowling Green

A clawhammer banjo song usually accompanying several verses describing the singer's desire to return to a sweetheart in Bowling Green, Kentucky. This tune was first recorded by country musician Cousin Emmy in 1947. Cousin Emmy was raised in Barren County and learned the song from an African-American banjo player who worked for her father. It is likely a traditional tune, but Emmy's performance has led to its rise in popularity among a variety of artists and performers.

Coleman's March

The name of this archaic fiddle air is rooted in the tales of the hanged fiddler. Several stories dating as far back as 18th century Ireland tell of fiddlers accused of crimes and sent to the gallows. Before a sentence is carried out, they often ask or are requested to play a final piece, ensuring their legend among those in attendance. In this instance, a fiddler and cobbler by the name of Joe Coleman from Adair County, Kentucky was accused of murdering his wife. According to a local newspaper, this happened in 1899 and he was subsequently sentenced to death. On the way to the execution, he was noted to have played this piece on the back of an ox cart. It was also thought that he offered his fiddle to anyone who could play it better than himself. Coleman maintained his innocence to the end and rumors abound that relatives revived his body and sent him on a steamboat down the Cumberland River to safety.

Cumberland Gap

This popular tune has been around for at least two centuries and is well known throughout the Appalachian region by old-time and bluegrass musicians alike. This particular version is played in a unique tuning likely predating more standard versions of the tune played today. Lee Sexton, a well-respected banjo player from Letcher County, Kentucky, is the inspiration behind this tune, and it reflects the eastern Kentucky style of two-finger banjo picking. Cumberland Gap itself is an important historical landmark bordering Bell County, Kentucky and Claiborne County, Tennessee. It served as a crucial transportation route for early settlers into Kentucky.

Darling Cora

This bluesy banjo piece is played throughout the central Appalachian region and shares floating verses and melodies with related tunes like "Little Maggie" and "Country Blues." Legendary traditional musician Doc Boggs from southwestern Virginia is responsible for this odd banjo tuning. He learned much of his tunes from local African American musicians. The contribution of African-American culture to Appalachian music can be heard in tunes like this one where syncopated playing and blues scales are prominent.

Girl I Left Behind Me

An old English and Irish folk song with a long history and many interpretations in the United States and British Isles. This song was likely brought to America by early English and Scots-Irish settlers as far back as the 1700s. It has enjoyed popularity as a fiddle tune as well as a marching fife tune, particularly during the Civil War. The tune is widespread in the United States, having been played in both Northern and Southern musical traditions.

Lazy John

Another fiddle tune specific to Wayne County fiddler Clyde Davenport. This tune is an example of the influence that radio had on traditional musicians early in its introduction to south-central Kentucky. Davenport, hearing snatches of the song on the radio as recorded by the western swing musician Johnny Lee Wills, transformed it into an old-time tune. It has since gained immense popularity in the contemporary old-time music scene worldwide.

Mouthbow Transitions

The mouthbow is one of the oldest primitive stringed instruments in the world. Adapted from a hunting bow, the instrument is played by placing one end next to the mouth, which acts as a sound chamber, and strumming the string with a pick. The result is a very interesting, ancient sound. In the Appalachian region, mouthbows have likely been played since Native Americans settled the region. Europeans soon copied the practice into their own musical traditions. African-Americans also may have had their own version of the mouthbow, based on tribal instruments from Africa.

Rebels Raid

This fiddle tune comes from William Stepp of Magoffin County, Kentucky. Several tunes go by the same name, but this version is unique to Stepp. It is thought that the name originated from the Civil War when Confederate general John Hunt Morgan engaged in a diversionary raid through Kentucky and into southern Indiana and Ohio.

Rock Creek Girls

From the "Buck Creek Girls" family of fiddle tunes, this version is inspired from the playing of south-central Kentucky fiddler Isham Monday from Monroe County. Monday was noted for his very archaic style of playing the fiddle. He employed multiple open tunings that were often several octaves below the standard 440 pitch, which gave his recordings a very distinct tonality. As such, the fiddle in the recording is tuned to low F to mimic this effect. This type of sound is likely reminiscent of early Kentucky dance music when it may have been difficult for backcountry people to find more than one musician to play for a dance. Open tunings and drones amplified the instrument, achieving a larger sound for the dancers.

Rocky Island

Another southeastern Kentucky old-time banjo standard. This song has been around for over a hundred years and is played in an up-picking style similar to clawhammer but utilizing the pad of the first finger instead of the nail. Clawhammer and up-picking were both styles inherited from the old African way of playing folk lutes and proto-banjo ancestors.

Roll On Buddy

This song from central Appalachia, particularly Kentucky, is often sung as an unaccompanied ballad. It may have been composed by railroad workers building the L & N Railroad. Recorded here as a fiddle air, this song may have been adapted into the bluegrass standard "Nine Pound Hammer."

Shall We Gather at The River?

A Christian hymn first composed by Robert Lowry in 1864 and now within the public domain. This song is popular with many Christian evangelical denominations, including the many Baptist faiths of Kentucky. Here it is played on a mountain dulcimer, a peculiar instrument which at one time was isolated to very distinct pockets in Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina. The dulcimer is a lap instrument tuned to a single key, usually D, and strummed with a pick. It is a descendent of the German scheitholt which was brought to Pennsylvania by colonial German immigrants. Scots-Irish settlers who moved through Pennsylvania and down the Great Wagon Road into the southern uplands and Appalachia likely adopted the instrument into their own traditions.

Short Life of Trouble

This old song is usually accompanied by several verses describing the unrequited love of the singer. Recorded by many turn-of-the-20th century country artists, it was played by the south-central Kentucky duo Burnett and Rutherford who hailed from the Monticello area. Leonard Rutherford was an accomplished fiddler who recorded with blind banjo and guitar player Dick Burnett during the late 1920's. Burnett and Rutherford were some of the first rural musicians to take their music to a professional level. However, their experience with the early recording industry was troubled like so many other Southern performers at the time. Despite one single selling an unprecedented 37,600 copies, Columbia Records only paid sixty dollars per side to the musicians. Disappointed with Columbia, they left for another label, but eventually began to record separately before stopping altogether. The window for commercial success of old-time music in America was very short, but Burnett and Rutherford left their mark on the genre. Many of their tunes are still being performed by contemporary old-time musicians.

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