

*Grub Springs* is the first tune in the compilation of Mississippi fiddle tunes known as “Great Big Yam Potatoes,” which IMO deserves more attention. In recent years some has been given this collection, especially by Harry Bolick and Stephen T. Austin, who included songs and tunes in a fairly new book called Mississippi Fiddle Tunes and Songs from the 1930’s. There is another tune with the same title, recorded at the same time by fiddler John Hatcher, but we’ll save that for another TOTW.

In 1939 Herbert Halpert traveled to the South from New York and gained the assistance of Abbott Ferriss of Mississippi. With the motto “folksong is American folklore,” they took an army ambulance christened the “Sound Wagon” and transformed it into a recording vehicle. It carried the cumbersome recording equipment, as well as a cot and cabinets for food and supplies. The two men traveled and collected a great many tunes and songs, which eventually made their way to the Library of Congress. Earnest Claunch gave them five tunes.

William Earnest Claunch is our featured fiddler for *Grub Springs*, our Tune of the Week. He was born near Guntown, Lee County, Mississippi in 1894, living on the land worked by his grandfather who immigrated from England. All the Claunches were musical and both Earnest’s father and grandfather played fiddle. A family story tells of the older men and brothers working together to clear land while young Earnest played fiddle on a tree stump. Earnest also played banjo, mandolin, piano and French harp, often at dances and fiddle contests and at regular family gatherings.

Harry Bolick’s book, on pages 248 – 249, quotes Claunch from the May 10, 1939 field notes of Abbott Ferrisse: “Don’t know one note from another.” “I followed shows and carnivals all my life, ‘till I got murdered – married I mean.” He visited seven states while playing music.

From the liner notes of “Great Big Yam Potatoes”, by Tom Rankin and Gary Stanton: 1. "*Grub Springs*." *The fiddle is cross-tuned [AEAE], played in the key of A. The guitar is clamped [with capo] at the second fret and flat-picked. This particular tune has never been reported elsewhere, although John Hatcher of Burnsville, Mississippi, played a different tune under the same title. The tune is typical of a large number of two-part Southern dance tunes in which one part [the fine] is played primarily on the higher strings of the fiddle and the other part [the coarse] is played principally on the middle strings. The two-part tune is played AABB. The coarse consists of a short phrase repeated three times contrasting with a fourth phrase that brings the melody back to A. The fine is ... musically equaling the wisdom "two steps forward and one step back" [D-F#-E-A-F#-E-D]. An exciting effect is created by ending the fine on the dominant chord [E] instead of returning to the original chord [A], which leads our attention back to the beginning of the tune, in order to resolve the melody. Claunch also hollers in unison with the fiddle at points in the performance, another way of adding excitement.*

*At most dances where music was played there was a caller, who sang out the calls for the couples to execute. However, it was not unusual for fiddlers to know calls and even call house dances, if no caller was present. Claunch gives us just a taste of the calls he associated with the tune, but not the entire dance: ‘Up Four, All Sides Circle, All of them swing.’*

I personally don't actually hear the "subdominant" ending of the B, or "fine", part, in the original recording, which would be an E chord if played in the key of A, but it sounds equally good and gives a different sound between the ending of the A and B parts. Claunch, however, plays (and sings in the last round of the B part) just one note and the guitar accompaniment doesn't seem to go to that V chord.

What I really like about the tune is the melody and movement in the B part, which the liner notes above describe musically, but not emotionally. For lack of better words, it is "poignant and happily expectant and then conclusive, but not over." Here's what grabs me about so many old-time tunes: they're short little concertos that move our spirits!

Recordings found so far:

[William Earnest Claunch](#)

[George Mert Reves](#) (Recorded in Arkansas on a 1960's recording, though Mr. Reves lived in the Oklahoma Ozark region. It's slightly different, but you can hear an embedded Claunch version)

[Pat Lyons](#)