

Tune of the Week, 9/4/15

Brushy Run

Brushy Run is this week's TOTW. I was inspired to learn by listening to Bruce Molsky – the awesome engineer-turned-fiddler-who-never-looked-back. He, as well as Art Stamper, listened to Ed Haley's fiddle recordings – the talented blind fiddler from West Virginia (and later from eastern Kentucky) whose scratchy recordings are rough diamonds. Surprisingly, there was only one other recording of Brushy Run on BHO besides mine.

Titles of old-time tunes can have personal meanings. When I learned Brushy Run I was reminded of the prickly Ceanothus bushes (called buck brush) that outlie our home, of the poison oak very nearby that is worse than bee stings when I get it, and also of hound hunts I'd been on where you had to gingerly make your way through prickly, thorny berry branches. The tune meanders and then jumps up, just as if you'd been poked by something sharp, especially in the B part.

The actual place called Brushy Run is both a small community and the name of a creek in eastern West Virginia's Pendleton County. The tune was named, according to Wilson Douglas, for the locale where an unknown fiddler lived and composed the piece. Brushy Run is located on U.S. Highway 220 in Pendleton County, WV, lying where Stony Creek and Brushy Run Creek meet to form North Mill Creek.

The oldest recording of Brushy Run (1945) appears to be from West Virginian fiddler Ed Haley (1883 – 1951). Wilson Douglas knew him personally, as well as the tune's origins, but doesn't cite how Haley learned the tune. Wilson states that this was also a Carpenter family tune which was composed around the time of the Civil War. The locale of this tune was "over beyond Widen. It was just a big holler, with so much underbrush – some old fiddler was bacheloring there and he just composed this and he called it the Brushy Run." French Carpenter played it well (recorded in 1963) and perhaps taught Haley much earlier.

Because of its importance as the oldest source recording I choose to focus the TOTW on Ed Haley. The blind fiddler with his blind mandolin-playing wife made a living by performing and raised a family as well. If you are curious about Haley's life, delve into the current long-running blog by Brandon Ray Kirk, who along with John Hartford, sought out and interviewed everyone they could related to Ed Haley. There are over 300 posts here, some of them written by Hartford in these [blog journals called "In Search of Ed Haley"](#). If you scroll down you'll read Hartford's words about the book they were together writing which he entitled The Search for Ed Haley, Vol. 1. By using the "previous or next" tab arrow you'll find more blog entries. You get a feel for the lifestyle and fiddling techniques of the great fiddler – one centered on music which included busking, drinking, fighting, and lots of late-into-the-night house performances. For just a coin or a greenback he was known to play requested tunes for an hour. Memories of Haley range from a polite, serious and good-humored man to a forceful one who wasn't timid about speaking his mind, cursing, or punishing his children.



Johnny Hager and Ed Haley, 1914
(photo from Brandon Kirk collection)

Upon my inquiry, here's what Brandon said about Brushy Run: "Ed Haley frequently visited as far north as Parkersburg, WV, and over into Roane, Calhoun, and Clay counties. He may have learned Brushy Run from one of the many fiddlers he met along the way. For what it's worth, we did not find any reference to him visiting Pendleton County."

It's said that Ed Haley had an incredible ear for music all his life and began playing as a child with a cornstalk fiddle from his Uncle Peter and then with his father's fiddle. Tradition has it that his father, Milt Haley (also an incredible fiddler) may have caused Ed's blindness by dipping him in ice cold water when he was a baby, either for a self-styled baptism, a health tonic, or perhaps to bring down the high fever from measles (which definitely can cause blindness). Milt was lynched by a mob in Lincoln County, WV when Ed was three years old, along with one of the McCoy relations (a fiddler from the infamous family of the Hatfields and McCoys feud) after allegedly shooting two people for pay, including a woman – a gruesome episode in the complex Lincoln County feud in the late 1880's.

I've learned more by reading [Blood in West Virginia](#) written by Brandon after 25 years of research. His family is related to the feudists. One relative (Mervin Kirk) actually helped bury Milt Haley after the lynching in spite of threats.

These are Brandon's comments about how Ed Haley's unfortunate childhood affected his future: "Ed Haley, of course, appears as a child in the book. Knowing what we know about his biography, we realize that great things are waiting for him in life, at least musically speaking. Ed Haley's life during the feud, however, is a bit bleak. Without question, for those who are interested in Ed's music, the story of his family background leads to a better understanding of his music. John and I believed that Milt's life and demise had a profound influence on Ed's life and music. When you play Ed's tunes or hear his tunes

being played, knowing the tragedy and hardship in his early life, in light of his father's long shadow (and other things not revealed in the book), the music becomes almost unbearably powerful and deep."

Back to the TOTW music, here's a bit of information on-line: [Fiddler's Companion description of Brushy Run](#). There are several YouTube videos of the tune. Choose your favorite for sharing, or please post your own recording.

Source fiddle recordings include: [Ed Haley](#), [French Carpenter](#), [Art Stamper](#), and [Bruce Molsky](#).

Recently posted on BHO you can listen to [J-Walk John and friends](#) performing as a great band ensemble.