

TUNE OF THE WEEK – 2/26/16

NANCY BLEVINS

My interest in Nancy Blevins perked when I discovered its source recording is of a fiddler well-known along Virginia's Crooked Road. My husband and I had driven this scenic and musical region in 2009, but little did I know how much it would continue to inspire me (if you haven't heard about it check out: [The Crooked Road website](#)).



Albert Hash (photo by Martin Fox)



Nancy Blevins, left (photo courtesy of Kilby Spencer)

The namesake for the tune came from neighboring North Carolina, another region rich in good music. Nancy Blevins began as an original little dance tune in the 1800's, named for the North Carolina fiddler who composed and fiddled it. The real person Nancy Blevins was still an active fiddler in the 1920's.

The tune was later popularized by the fiddler Albert Hash (1917 – 1983), who lived in Grayson County, Virginia along the Crooked Road. Albert learned the tune from his step-uncle, Jim Reedy, realizing that his family was related to the fiddler Nancy Blevins.

Through Fiddle Hangout I located Albert Hash's nephew, Kilby Spencer. His parents, Thornton and Emily, were original members of Albert Hash's Whitetop Mountain Band and still perform today. Kilby provided this quote by his uncle Albert: ***"...my granddad's cousin was a young lady, I guess getting to be about grown and she played the fiddle. Her name was Nancy Blevins and she had made up this tune and called it Nancy Blevins. And she would play it and he was wearing a dress. The little boys wore dresses, maybe til four years old sometimes....it was back just after the Civil War for he said he could remember dancing to that tune with a dress on, and boys wore a dress for a couple years like little girls did back then....She was a great fiddler....My grandfather could remember one verse that went into the tune. 'I've played this fiddle till it cramps my hand, nary another tune till I get another dram.'"***

Albert Hash's life story is described in depth here: [Mountain Music Magazine article with recordings and videos](#). One learns that that he began fiddling at a young age guided by his uncle George Finley, Corbett Stamper and G.B. Grayson. He made his first fiddle age 10 since his family couldn't afford to buy one. Albert as a teenager actually replaced Grayson for a while when his famous partner, Henry Whitter, needed a fiddler.

Albert became a luthier and performer, as well as a mechanic who served in the army, and was well-liked and respected in his community. He mentored several instrument makers, such as Wayne Henderson. His most popular fiddle tune is Hangman's Reel.

The Whitetop Mountain Band continued to perform after Albert's death, led by Kilby's parents, Thornton and Emily Spencer, along with Tom Barr of Barr's Fiddle Shop (a place we visited along the Crooked Road) and others. Learn more here: [Whitetop Mountain Band](#). A memorial festival is held in Albert's honor, and also for his daughter, Audrey Spencer Ham, who became a luthier and fiddler, but sadly died recently. Kilby Spencer carries on the legacy with the band the Crooked Road Ramblers, who recently recorded their first CD (see [The Crooked Road Ramblers](#)).

Here's a touching story as told by Albert's daughter Audrey: "When I was born, my daddy paid my hospital bill with a fiddle. He walked twenty miles to do that, Fees Ridge to West Jefferson, to sell the fiddle to pay for it. And the fiddle was absolutely beautiful. It had an Indian head and a cornucopia of flowers on it. He always teased me, as to how he could have traded a fine fiddle like that for a scrawny little runt like me. Anyway, when I made my first fiddle, it was along about dad's birthday, and I gave it to him for his birthday. And he said, 'I would rather have had that than a brand new Cadillac.' It was a good thing because I never could have afforded one."

Wade Ward also recorded a tune called Nancy Blevins, but I found that tune to be misnamed. It's actually the same as Charleston #1, written by Narmour and Smith of Mississippi.

On a sorrowful note I learned that one of the important creators of Virginia's Crooked Road – Joe Wilson -- died last May. I'm grateful for the book he wrote, which includes two CDs with historic and modern recordings, [A Guide to the Crooked Road, Virginia's Heritage Music Trail](#).

For those who read in the Traditional Tune Archive that Hawks and Eagles resembles the first part of Nancy Blevins, you can hear the similarity in the A part here: [Norman Edmonds playing Hawks and Eagles on Slippery Hill site](#).

The tune Nancy Blevins is quite short and in less than a minute I play it three times. Its cheerful melody and steady rhythm make a good dance tune. Here are examples, including a source recording:

[Albert Hash recording on Slippery Hill site](#)

[Jason Sypher and Nancy Sluys at Mt. Airy, 2011](#)

[Ken Elkington playing along with Jason Sypher](#) (This is where I first heard the tune. You can also enjoy VancePants' creative slide show.)

[The Stairwell Sisters at 5:05 minutes into the video](#)

[Black Twig Pickers](#)

[Field Recorder Collective Albert Hash CD](#)

Hope you enjoy Nancy Blevins and give her a try this week.