

## TUNE OF THE WEEK – 5/13/16

### WAGONER

This TOTW may go by more names than any tune I've come across. I first heard it as Tennessee Wagoner. Recently I heard it as Wild Wagoner, as played by Edden Hammons. Then you can find Wagoner preceded by these other states: Georgia, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kentucky. There's also Wagoneer, Waggoner, Wagonner, Wag'ner, Johnny Wagoner, Johnny Walker, and Reel Marie. And on top of this is the distinguishing of a related tune, Wagoner One-Step, which has enough similarities to not leave it out and is also called Wagner's Hornpipe.

A popular fiddler from Missouri, Vesta Johnson (born in 1922), remembered playing Tennessee Wagoner as a 9 year-old for a neighbor's square dance. The well-known fiddler and collector, R.P. Christeson heard, "If one arrived at a dance and did not hear 'the Tennessee Wagoner' ringing out that the event would not be enjoyable."



Vesta Johnson

Samuel Bayard, the thorough researcher from Pennsylvania, traced the tune to a Scottish tune, "The Belle of Claremont Hornpipe," but stated its roots went back farther. A tune similar in musical structure called The Hero was in George Knauf's 1839 publication of Virginia Reels.

Wagoner appears to be an old enough tune that its beginnings are untraceable. My traditional image of the tune is that of a person who drives a wagon – a difficult and important job before the advent of motorized vehicles, but an alternate story takes it to a horse race in 1839.

It was said that one of President Jefferson's favorite fiddle tunes was Grey Eagle, named for a beautiful and successful racing stallion. Twelve years after the president's death Grey Eagle

raced again a horse from Louisiana named Wagner and lost. For the winner there was a gigantic purse, as well as the release from slavery of the jockey, Cato. The defeat was so momentous a re-match was demanded, upon which Grey Eagle lost again and injured himself as well. And so the tune is also associated with a racehorse.



Documenting the many, many recordings of this tune would need more links than most of us want to hear, but the bottom line for me is that I can hear two major variations of Wagoner. One is commonly known as Tennessee Wagoner and the other is Wagoner One-Step. Though related, you can easily hear the melodic differences. Check out these two recordings to hear that difference: [Arthur Smith's Tennessee Wagoner](#) and [Rayna Gellert fiddling Wagoner One-Step from Earl Collins' version](#). Other historic recordings are from the fiddling of Uncle Am Stewart, Jilson Setters (JW Day), Eck Robertson, John Salyer, Red Williams, and Tony Gilmore.

Here are just some of the videos and recordings out there: [Eck Robertson's Texas Wagoner](#), [John Salyer's Wagoner](#), [Walter McNew's Wagoner](#), [Charlie Walden's Tennessee Wagoner](#), [Jilson Setter's Wild Wagoner in the Harry Smith Anthology](#) (like Tennessee Wagoner), [Norman Blake's Tennessee Wagoner](#), [Tony Gilmore's Wagner](#) (in RP Christeson collection), [Greg Brooks Kentucky Wagoner on Allen Sisson's historic fiddle](#), [Earl Collin's Wagoner One-Step](#), [Tom Sauber's Wagoner One-Step](#), [Jesse Milne and friends' Tennessee Wagoner](#) (actually Wagoner One-Step), [Red William's Wagner's Hornpipe](#), and my favorite -- [Steve Arkin's Tennessee Wagoner](#).

[MP3 link to my site](#) and [Tabs on my site](#)

One thing I'll remember is what Rayna Gellert said: "It must be one of the world's happiest tunes." I'm with you, Rayna, and hope to hear some of your own good versions.