

TUNE OF THE WEEK – 7/6/12

INDIAN NATION

Indian Nation is this week's TOTW. Its history goes back to the Hammons family of West Virginia, but it was after hearing Adam Hurt's gourd banjo version on his *Earthtones* CD that I became interested. When I viewed 12-year old Victor Furtado's post on BHO I knew somebody else was equally inspired.

The Tune of the Week forum encourages research, so I sought the sources of Indian Nation through contact with Dwight Diller, Alan Jabbour, Bruce Molsky, Adam Hurt, Dan Gellert, and David Hyatt. BHO member Yigal Zan located the three older fiddle versions, with #400 from Burl Hammons being the subject of this discussion: <http://slippery-hill.com/M-K/> The Slippery Hill site is an independent site from the Milliner-Koken fiddle tunes collection and is most helpful in providing easy access to listening to the tune sources. Numbers 398 and 399 are also called Indian Nation, played by the great fiddlers Ernie Carpenter and Ed Haley, but differ in one part, discussed below in the Fiddlers Companion.



Dwight Diller and Alan Jabbour credit the song to West Virginian Burl Hammons. A story of an "Indian Nation" is told at the beginning of a 77 page on-line article/interview with Dwight Diller, Alan Jabbour and Carl Fleischhauer: [The Hammons Family, A Study of a West Virginia Family's Traditions](#) In it Maggie Hammons (1899 – 1987) and her brother, Burl, relate how their great-grandfather's family was in Kentucky, but had to escape the "Indian Nation" around Whitley, Kentucky. There were only two white families and they'd been befriended by an old Indian and his grandson. During one of his many visits, the old Indian shared a dream about receiving the white man's gun and said that Indian dreams always came true. Out of fear Mr. Hammons gave him the gun, but later concocted a dream of his own that he was to receive back his gun, as well as a pony. So the old Indian had to give it back along with a pony. When the Indian continued visiting, his troubling silence finally became a confession that the Indian tribe was going to plan a massacre against them. The two families rapidly left Kentucky and went to Virginia. Whether this story is the source for the song title is an interesting question.

Alan Jabbour's album *Sandy's Fancy* with his Hollow Rock String Band in the 70' credits Indian Nation to Burl Hammons. Here's what Alan says on the tune: "I've said for years that I learned 'Indian Nation' from Burl Hammons... I learned it directly from him...You're probably aware that it's in a special tuning

of the fiddle, where the E-string is tuned down to D, and I sometimes teach it in fiddle classes as a simple but lovely example of retuning the fiddle for special effect. The tune, as you know, is in the key of G, and the lowered string gives the fiddler the opportunity to double the D on two strings at once (this is called a 'unison') to emphasize it more."

Dwight Diller, who spent a lot of quality time with the Hammons, as well as recording them, made a 1983 cassette recording called 'Fiddle Tunes of Burl Hammons' with Indian Nation on it, though it appears to be out of print. He believes that tunes should be learned from their original source and has strong feelings about how the music should sound. He wrote, "Our old mountain music is drawing its last breaths and it is hard to see such beautiful, powerful, but fragile music dying such a slow death." For him the Hammons Family music represents an entire culture and way of life.

There are two Indian Nations in Stacy Phillips' book [Traditional American Fiddle Tunes, Volume 1](#). I'm focusing on Indian Nation 2, but because of the following references to Dan Gellert's version and Walt Koken's reference to the Hammons family recordings, here's information from the Fiddlers Companion on both versions:

INDIAN NATION [1]. Old-Time, Breakdown. A Major. Standard. AABB. The melody is similar to "Paddy on the Turnpike." Source for notated version: Owen "Snake" Chapman [Phillips]. Phillips (Traditional American Fiddle Tunes), Vol. 1, 1994; pg. 118. June Appal 0067, Roan Mountain Hilltoppers - "Seedtime on the Cumberland" (1992). Marimac 9038, Dan Gellert & Brad Leftwich - "A Moment in Time." Rounder CD 0397, Scott Nygaard - "Dreamer's Waltz" (1996). Rounder CD 0371, Mac Bendord and the Woodshed All-Stars - "Willow" (1996. Learned from Walt Koken, who claimed to have had it from West Virginia's Hammons Family).

INDIAN NATION [2]. Old-Time, Breakdown. G Major. GDAD. AA'BB'. A vague resemblance in the 'A' part to version #1. Source for notated version: Bruce Molsky [Phillips]. Phillips (Traditional American Fiddle Tunes), Vol. 1, 1994; pg. 118.

Bruce Molsky is credited with Indian Nation 2, above, and says: "I never recorded Indian Nation, but have played it for years. My version is kind of an evolution of others played by old Kentucky fiddlers, but mostly it's how we played it around Rockbridge County, VA when I lived there in the 1970's. Plank Road Stringband did record it that way on their first LP, re-released a few years back on FRC label."

Dan Gellert and Brad Leftwich's recording of Indian Nation, also noted above, is downloadable on an on-line source for their 1993 cassette with Linda Higginbotham titled [A Moment in Time](#). According to the liner notes, Brad learned this tune from Walt Koken of the Highwoods String Band, and Walt recorded it solo on his Hei-Wa Hoedown CD. Dan's source was Martha Burns. Dan and Brad's version sounds like Indian Nation 2, resembling the original Burl Hammons recording found in the Milliner-Koken collection.

Adam Hurt's Indian Nation in *Earthtones* on a gourd banjo is, in my opinion, a true work of art, so I asked him about it. He says: "To tell you the truth, I cannot recall my precise source for this tune; rather, it feels like one that I have just always known. Burl Hammons' setting is the primary-source version that sounds the most familiar to me, but I did not learn the tune straight from his recording. Similarly, I have enjoyed the more modern recordings of this version by Brad Leftwich & Dan Gellert (on their 'Moment in Time' album) as well as by Walt Koken (on one of his solo banjo CDs), but I likewise was already familiar with the tune before hearing either of these takes on it. Sorry to be so vague; a handful of tunes are simply like this for me, just a part of my consciousness for as long as I can remember!"

You can hear him on an Eastman Whyte Laydie banjo: [Adam Hurt video playing Indian Nation](#) In addition, he says, "A minute-and-a-half preview of the CD track on *Earthtones* can be heard through the iTunes store, along with a considerably shorter preview on CD Baby." He graciously would have made a video with the gourd banjo, but doesn't have the banjo with him at the present time.

David Hyatt, who made the gourd banjo Adam plays, says: "Adam's rendition of Indian Nation draws sounds from that banjo I never thought possible. It's often set to 'repeat' on my iPod! Adam takes the gourd banjo to new levels...The strings were nylgut. The head is goat skin. This banjo was made from a Bottle Gourd grown in a mold - it is flat on the top and bottom,...grown by Don Mellon in Mountain View, Arkansas. This is a special banjo made with a tiger wood neck and snakewood overlay. The 26 inch scale neck separates from the dowel stick to form a 'travel banjo' about 27" long." David says that he's a "promoter" of gourd banjos and doesn't sell them. Here's a picture of it and more information is on his website: www.dhyatt.com (Did you catch Mr. Mellon's name as it relates to the gourds he grows?!)



The gourd banjo used to record Indian Nations in *Earthtones*

Here's an Indian Nation video with a good Buckbee banjo view:

[Banjo and fiddle split screen video](#)

This is Victor Furtado's BHO clawhammer post and discussion:

[Victor's Sound Off discussion forum](#)

Next, from the French Village Chavignot (famous for its cheese) with Bob Willoughby calling and fiddling:

[Square dance to Indian Nation](#)

Ken Perlman included a clawhammer tab in the July, 1991 issue of Banjo Newsletter, but had no information in his article other than it was a "very interesting southern tune." (The article was called "Nail Wars" and was about his strengthening process for his clawhammer nail.)

My versions are clawhammer, based on Burl Hammons, and 3-finger picking, based on Adam Hurt's clawhammer in the *Earthtones* CD, played in the key of G: Here are my MP3s, free on my site,

<https://www.mybanjoworld.com/free-downloads> and here are tab, also free

<https://www.mybanjoworld.com/free-downloads>.

If you have further information about Indian Nation, please pass it on. If you have a version or tab, please post it. And if you haven't listened to Adam Hurt's version on *Earthtones* with the David Hyatt gourd banjo and produced by BHO member Paul Roberts, I highly recommend it.