

TUNE OF THE WEEK – 5/11/12

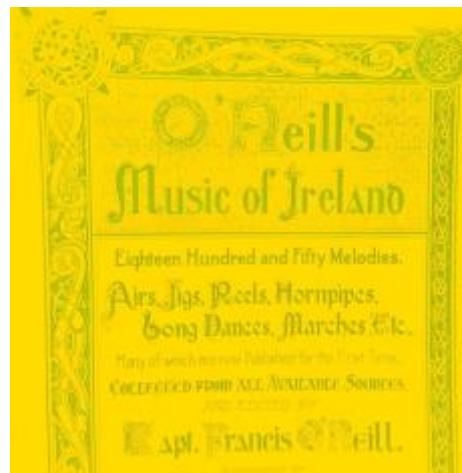
OFF TO CALIFORNIA

My first Tune of the Week—here goes. As a native Californian, the Irish hornpipe title “Off to California” piqued my curiosity. Its happy, hopeful melody and Celtic lilt made it an irresistible piece for me to learn with the Old Time Fiddlers Association of Santa Barbara in the 70’s. Their source was O’Neill’s Music of Ireland, 1850 Selections, published in 1903. Here’s how O’Neill came by the tune he made popular:

Francis O’Neill (1848 - 1934) of County Cork, Ireland became a seaman when lean years failed to offer hope for employment, though his education qualified him to be a teacher. As a 19-year old without work, he sailed for four years on various ships and then came to realize the futility of getting ahead in that trade.

O’Neill liked to credit his musical skill with his destiny and survival at sea. When rescued from a shipwreck O’Neill was befriended by a Hawaiian seaman with a flute who could only play one tune, whereas O’Neill knew many an Irish tune, having taken lessons when a boy. The meals shared by that delighted sailor prevented the near-starvation experienced by the other shipmates. Upon landing in San Francisco O’Neill was again faced with unemployment and went to the San Joaquin Valley, finding work as a shepherd. He learned two tunes during his California stay in 1868 and Off to California was one of them.

O’Neill moved back east and eventually became a police captain and chief of Chicago from 1878 – 1905. His hobby of collecting fiddle tunes from the local Irish fiddlers led to the momentous publication of 1,850 selections in 1903. It includes tunes such as Off to California, Bantry Bay, Blackberry Blossom, Boys of Blue Hill, Drowsy Maggie, Haste to the Wedding, Banish Misfortune, Happy Days of Youth, Fisher’s Hornpipe, Devil’s Dream, Sailor’s Hornpipe, Swallowtail Reel, 75 O’Carolan pieces, and many, many others. He wrote his memoirs in Chief O’Neill’s Sketchy Recollections of an Eventful Life in Chicago, with some details of his interest in collecting Irish music at the end of the book. O’Neill also wrote Irish Folk Music, A Fascinating Hobby with over 300 pages of anecdotal notes about numerous tunes. I recommend both of these interesting, well-written books.



Back to the song itself, Off to California appears to be related to melodies with various titles such as Bound for California, Fireman's Reel, The Juggler, and Whiskey Hornpipe. There are two settings in the key of G in the O'Neill book. The Piney Creek Weasels recorded OtC in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, using it as the title song of the CD. My first MP3 includes 3-finger picking of both the waltz time and the hornpipe version, played in open C on a mini travel banjo. My second MP3 is frailed in the key of G. See my tab for the frailed version. Other available tabs are in [The Banjo Picker's Fakebook](#) and [Mel Bay's Complete Clawhammer Book](#).

Check out the following links for more information and examples of Off to California.

[Light House Reel minstrel banjo video from Converse's 1893 "Banjo Made Easy"](#) includes a video for Light House Reel on fretless minstrel banjo, learned from Frank Converse's minstrel banjo book "Banjo Made Easy" of 1893, and sounding just like OtC, especially the A part.

<http://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers/off.htm> detailed historic research

[Fiddler's Companion description of OtC](#) gives names of related songs and ABC notation

[Off to California](#). Piney Creek Weasels $\frac{3}{4}$ time version, track #19

From Banjo Hangout we have:

[Off to California](#) Posted by [JanetB](#)

[Off To California](#) Posted by [banjobill53](#)

[Off To California](#) Posted by [Banjowen](#)

[Off to California](#) Posted by [banjukebox](#)

[Off to California](#) Posted by [tofte32](#)

[Off To California \(Irish Hornpipe\)](#) Posted by [tigerwuds](#)

[Off to California / The Cherokee Shuffle](#) Posted by [Leon Hunt](#)

<http://www.banjohangout.org/myhangout/videos.asp?id=10652> David Hum

<http://www.banjohangout.org/myhangout/videos.asp?id=676> Old Cremona

<http://www.banjohangout.org/myhangout/videos.asp?id=4177> Lukas Poole & Trent Freeman (Berklee School of Music)

I'm looking forward to your posts and other versions of Off to California. Hope you enjoy this TOTW as much as I've enjoyed participating in it!