

TOTW Across the Plains (Jake Phelps)

My turn has come sooner than expected. Hope you enjoy this TOTW as much as Gold Rush. It's less well-known.

Across the Plains is an appealing tune that fits its title. It's one of those tunes that brings to mind covered wagons ambling over dirt roads, precariously rolling through flowing water, and struggling up and down hills and mountains. There may be hardships, but the tune expresses optimism with time to stop for rest and even to relax. The pioneers take turns watching at night for possible problems (that's the B part). At least, so goes my way-out-west imagination.

I'm a fan of its fiddler source, Kentuckian W.L. "Jake" Phelps, known to me because of Bruce Greene's recordings and Jeff Titon's published notation plus a short bio at the end of his book [Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes](#). Phelps lived between 1885 - 1977. He "lived in Pea Ridge, Todd County, near Elkton. He had a large repertoire of unusual tunes. He was first recorded by folklorist D.K. Wilgus and later by Bruce Greene." Searching the archives for the work of [D.K. Wilgus](#) didn't pan out as far as learning more about Phelps.

Titon wrote in his book on page 32 "Phelps played this at a moderate tempo, not as a dance breakdown. He learned from Will Stegall (b.ca. 1869), a local fiddler who had learned his tunes in the Purchase section of western Kentucky as well as from Todd County fiddlers, including African American fiddler George Holland." Apparently Across the Plains was the title in the western part of Kentucky and Old Red Rooster was its title in the south-central part of the state. In liner notes for "Five Miles from Ellum Woods" Greene noted that Jake's neighbors called him "Mr. Jake, because he was greatly respected for his age and his knowledge of early music and the old ways."

If you look at the index in the [Milliner-Koken American Fiddle Tunes](#) book, you'll see that every tune attributed to Jake Phelps is in the key of G. I've tried it in a few other tunings besides standard G for fingering ease, but open G seems to work the best. When Jake Phelps recorded it, his fiddling was a bit rough and not totally consistent, which gave me a bit of leeway in working out the meter and pattern, especially in the B part.

There's something about Phelps's tunes that speaks pure mountain music to me. I couldn't find too many recordings of Across the Plains. We've covered some Jake Phelps tunes in past TOTWs and other known tunes that were part of his repertoire, such as: [Durang's Hornpipe](#) and [Horses in the Canebrake](#). I'd also suggest one day we cover other of his worthy tunes, such as Meriweather, Big Mule, Gal on a Log, George Holland's Tune, and Sail Away Huldry.

I'll record a video soon to add to what is on-line to hear:

[Jake Phelps](#)

[Phil Lederer](#)

[Five Miles of Ellum Wood CD order info](#)

