

TOTW is an opportunity to search through my large mp3 library and Bruce Molsky's CD "Poor Man's Troubles" is rich in tune treasures. After listening to Grigsby's Hornpipe in the past, I have finally given it a try. Its multiple parts and variations seemed daunting to learn (think of fiddler Ed Haley), but was doable.

I learned from this 1929 [recording on Slippery Hill](#) of Texas fiddler Eck Robertson (1887-1975). He said that he learned Grigsby's Hornpipe from a fiddler named "old man" Walker Hooker and claimed he was the only person playing it at the time.

It may be that the tune commemorates a well-known U.S. Calvary commander, Colonel Melvin Grigsby. Perhaps Robertson had heard of Grigsby's Cowboys -- the 3rd United States Voluntary Cavalry. In the book [Eck Robertson at the Crossroads of American Fiddling](#), by Chris Goertzen, he writes that the "Texas Panhandle's frontier days were fresh in memory when fiddler Eck Robertson arrived....Robertson pursued a continually evolving strategy to profit from the feverish transformation of living history into marketable nostalgia. He adopted cowboy dress clothes for his first recording session in New York in 1922 and became known as a 'Famous Cowboy Fiddler.' His stubborn vision spawned traditional-yet-transformed Texas fiddling.

"Robertson criticized other fiddlers because their playing was 'just the same thing over and over.' Robertson insisted that his fiddling—his balance of cleaving to tradition while adding new content—was the way of the future." His insistence on variety within a tune plays out in Grigsby's Hornpipe.

Robertson played the tune with eight distinct parts, inserting the A part again half-way through. The first four parts have an appealing pitch ascent and I'd have been happy if the tune ended there. But then, after a repeat of the A part, four more parts are added. In my mind, the last half doesn't create a cohesive whole, as does the first half. If one just played the first four parts and repeated only those, it would be a perfect tune.

Searching for the tune's history leads to speculation. So here I am amongst others who speculate that a young Eck Robertson may have known of the proud reputation of the U.S. Calvary. Grigsby's Cowboys was a hornpipe perhaps named for one of their commanders, Colonel Melvin Grigsby. The Grigsby family had come to Virginia in the 1600's and spread "from Virginia to Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and California, with significant historical presence in early Texas and pioneer history."

As South Dakotan attorney general in 1898, Melvin Grigsby became inspired by observing cowboys in Pierre, South Dakota with the idea they would be ideal for the military. Grigsby appealed to the federal government, who passed an act to form three calvary units to fight in the imminent Spanish American War. A quote from this 364-page book published in 1900 called [Grigsby's Cowboys, Third United States Volunteer Cavalry, Spanish-American War](#), quotes Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and then speculates regarding Grigsby's contribution: " 'Our doubts were finally dissolved and our way made plain by congress passing an act providing for three regiments of men of special qualifications as to horsemanship and marksmanship.'...It is to Colonel Melvin Grigsby, of Sioux Falls, S. D., that the nation is indebted for the skill and judgment in legislative matters that secured the law providing for the Cowboys, or Rough Riders..."

Colonel Grigsby expected model behavior from his cavalry and these are the words of his General Order of May 12, 1898, printed on page 15-16 of the book: "This regiment now having assumed the semblance of a military organization, the colonel commanding wishes to impress upon all officers, especially troop commanders, the necessity of maintaining the dignity, bearing, courtesy and demeanor commensurate with the position they have been called to fill. They should not only by example discourage drinking, gambling, and other demoralizing conduct, but should also encourage friendly rivalry in horsemanship and general military qualities, that will make them both good citizens and efficient soldiers...."

As fate turned out, only Teddy's Rough Riders saw actual battle and received acclamation, leading towards his eventual election to the presidency. Grigsby's Cowboys had a different fate. Though they served in an orderly and respectable manner under their colonel, it was the enemy of malaria-ridden swamps which they confronted -- not the Spanish. They endured miserable conditions and some, unfortunately, succumbing to typhoid.

Regarding Robertson's inclination to add new content to a tune, I don't personally enjoy seeking multiple variations to a tune. I like it best when an "essential melody" is played, though some musicians know how to embellish a tune well. In Grigsby's Hornpipe the melody's essence for me is the first four parts, though in my recording you'll hear all eight parts. I play ABCDAEFGHCD. The ending felt right with the third and fourth parts.

You can hear many part variations in these examples of Grigsby's Hornpipe:

[Eck Robertson](#)

[Eck Robertson's Famous Cowboy Fiddler album](#) (you can download it)

[Bruce Molsky](#)

[George Jackson and Brad Kolodner](#) (practice session where Brad adds banjo embellishment)

[George Jackson and Brad Kolodner](#) (performance at 2025 IBMA)

[Foghorn Stringband](#) (a favorite performance!)

[Adam Hurt and Megan Lynch Chowning](#) (a relaxed hornpipe tempo)

[Seth Swingle](#) (2015 Clifftop 2nd place on banjo)

[Brittany Haas, Joe Walsh, Owen Marshall](#) (unique artistic interpretation)

Additional written resources:

- [Traditional Tune Archive](#)
- [Who rush to glory : The Cowboy Volunteers of 1898: Grigsby's Cowboys, Roosevelt's Rough Riders, Torrey's Rocky Mountain Riders](#)
- [Grigsby's Cowboys and Roosevelt's Rough Riders of 1898](#)

TOTWs with Eck Robertson tunes:

- [Sallie Gooden](#)
- [Stumptown Stomp](#)
- [Texas Wagoner](#)

A discussion of fiddlers' variations by Clare Milliner and Walt Koken, who transcribed Robertson's Grigsby's Hornpipe on page 276 in their book [Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes](#), is at the beginning of this podcast: [PA Book Podcast](#). In their book, Eck Robertson's short biography states that his given name was Alexander Campbell Robertson and that he is "usually credited with being the first commercial recordings of 'country music.'"