

TOTW Indian War Whoop / Indian Whoop

Did you know Indian War Whoop and Indian Whoop are the titles of several distinct tunes? [The Traditional Tune Archive](#) lists seven. Finding this many, and even more, was a revelation and since choosing just one for TOTW wasn't easy, I'll present them all.

My favorite may be Louisiana-born fiddler Hiter Colvin's [1929 Indian War Whoop](#) recording, which includes a vocal "whoop" and has a drum-like rhythm. Included in the link is this brief history: "Colvin, born in 1900, was raised on Boardtree Creek near the community of Fellowship, northeast of Dubach. This song is one of six sides he recorded with Herbert Sherrell for Victor Records. While the records sold well for Victor, Colvin saw little of the money and refused to record for them again. The six Victor sides, in addition to one 1966 home recording made by his brother, remain the only known audio records of this master fiddler." More information about Hiter's life is in this [Word Press Party article](#). Here's a modern duet of Indian War Whoop by [Judy and Dean Robinson](#) and a recording by [Kenny Hall](#), including an autobiographical anecdote.

Harry Smith included the recording of Indian War Whoop by [Hoyt Ming and his Pep Steppers](#) in 1928 by Ralph Peer in his [Anthology of American Folk Music](#). In an accompanying booklet you read: "The Pep-Steppers were a family band who played at dances in the Tupelo, MS area. Their name refers to the energetic foot stomping of Rozelle Ming, which was heard on their recordings. Rozelle felt the stomping got in the way of the sound, but producer Ralph Peer encouraged its inclusion. The band auditioned for Peer at a local drug store and eventually recorded four songs for him. Fiddler Hoyt Ming (b. 1902), erroneously listed as Floyd on the original release, worked most of his life as a potato farmer, playing local fairs and dances with the family band. By 1957 he had given up playing, but public interest generated by the *Anthology* eventually led him to re-form the band. The Mings eventually played the National Folk Festival in 1973 and were part of a Mississippi contingent of the 1974 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. This group also appeared in the film *Ode to Billy Joe*. 'Indian War Whoop' is their most famous recording: it combines Ming's wild fiddling with foot stomping and vocal whoops." This link has a thorough article about [Hoyt Ming & his Pep-Steppers](#). A version of Indian War Whoop recorded in Texas in 1936 by [Lewis Propps](#) has one similar part. Much later, in 2000, John Hartford performed [Indian War Whoop](#) for the successful movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Here's a modern clawhammer version by [Gadaya](#).

Another Mississippi fiddler, Frank Kittrell, recorded a different version of Indian War Whoop in 1939 for Herbert Halpert in the Mississippi compilation "Great Big Yam Potatoes." In the extensive liner notes describing the tunes by Tom Rankin and Gary Stanton, we read: "'Indian War Whoop' is a floating title, probably suggested by the sounds of the tune rather than by any rhythm associated with the piece. Hoyt Ming of Lee County recorded a different tune with the same title in 1928 for Victor Records [Vi 21294], as did Hiter Colvin of Union County, Arkansas, in 1929 [Vi 23815]. The tune the Kittrells are playing is a close relative to 'Dusty Miller,' as played by John A. Brown. Mr. and Mrs. Kittrell are the smallest band possible, two musicians playing together, each molding their playing to fit the total sound. It just happens

that they are playing the same instrument. Beating straws on the fiddle limits the strings available to play the melody and also means that the bass and counter should harmonize with the principal key of the tune. Fortunately, 'Indian War Whoop' is only in one key. Mrs. Kittrell's accompaniment with straws is not so simple as one might think. She is very familiar with the tune and frequently varies the rhythmic figure she is creating. The basic rhythm is two unaccented beats followed by an accented beat. Within the tune Mrs. Kittrell changes this basic rhythm by hitting every beat (instead of three out of four) in a measure, or knocking every other beat for two measures. When mixed together, these techniques strengthen and accentuate the rhythm of the tune, but no two tunes are beat exactly the same." I have the Great Big Yam Potatoes collection, but can't find a sample on-line to share here. My clawhammer arrangement is included in the mp3 recording below.

James Bryan fiddled a 3-part [Indian Whoop](#) more recently in his "Two Pictures" CD, sourced to G.P. Knauff's [Virginia Reels](#), one of the first collections of Southern fiddle music, published in 1839, very much older than the 1920's recordings of Hoyt Ming and Hiter Colvin. Perhaps James used this [notation](#) as you can see here on the Traditional Tunes Archives website. The B part, as played by James, has some tricky syncopation.

A 1941 Arkansas recording of [Lon Jordan's Indian Whoop](#) is included on the Slippery Hill site as recorded by Vance Randolph. It has a dance reel feel.

Garry Harrison of Dear Old Illinois Fame recorded a version of Indian War Whoop he attributed to Alvie Miller. It was on a field recording compilation called Fiddle Tunes '98. Miller was from Oblong, Illinois. I have the recording and share my clawhammer arrangement below, but can't find it on-line to share here.

Following are two more unique versions of Indian War Whoop: Texan [Lewis Propps in 1936](#) and Missourian [Ed Sutherland in 1985](#).

So you see, Indian War Whoop and Indian Whoop are indeed floater titles. In some you can hear Native American flavors in their rhythm and melody and sometimes the vocal "war whoop" is included.

With a googled search of the term "war whoop", we read: "Definition of war whoop: a yell intended to rally a group of soldiers in battle. Synonyms: battle cry, rallying cry, war cry. Type of: call, cry, outcry, shout, vociferation, yell. A loud utterance; often in protest or opposition."

Interestingly, both "banjo" and "war whoop" were first used in print in 1739, according to this website called [Time Traveler](#).

Also interestingly, I was able to arrange six of these versions of Indian War Whoop in open G tuning and include the tabs below in one pdf file. I didn't work on the other two versions. In my mp3 recording each title is announced first. I hope you're not disappointed when you hear no war whoop from me.

The purpose of this research effort has been to listen to and learn these traditional tunes with their varying melodies and flavor. Being sensitive to American Indian history and current situations is important, but is not the subject of this TOTW.