

TUNE OF THE WEEK – 5/26/17

OLD SLEDGE

Here's a fiddle tune played by so many in the old-time world, but – in my mind – requiring a special dedication to “catch.” I first paid attention to **Old Sledge** when the Macrae Sisters of Portland, Oregon performed it, surprised at how the fiddle and banjo synchronized so well in this close musical family. They traced their version to Ernie Carpenter who in turn learned it from Lewis Johnson “Jack” McElwain, both from West Virginia.

I looked for other Old Sledge recordings. Next was a version by West Virginian fiddler Melvin Wine, plus a story of meeting Jack McElwain as a teenager. Another West Virginian, Burl Hammons, recorded yet a different version, learned from his uncle, Edden Hammons. I found Ed Haley's energetic recording and learned that when Haley visited with Jack McElwain they would “trade tunes.” Emory Bailey is another noted fiddler of Old Sledge and is a source for the B part of the Fuzzy Mountain String Band's recording. Tom Dillon and Harvey Sampson are yet other West Virginia fiddler who played the tune.

Back to their source: “Uncle Jack” McElwain was born in 1856 and lived in one community all his life on the White Oak tributary of Laurel Creek near Erbacon in Webster County, West Virginia. His passing in 1938 just missed the era of historic West Virginia recordings of Lewis Watson Chappell in 1939 and there are no known recordings of Uncle Jack. Those who knew him claimed he was the very best fiddler around and Old Sledge was his best tune.

Melvin Wine tells of meeting Jack when Melvin was a teenager and was offered a \$20 gold coin by Jack if he would just enter a fiddling contest. Jack was familiar with Melvin's father, Robert Wine, and complimented his fiddling. Unfortunately, Melvin didn't enter the contest, but he was so impressed with Jack's fiddling that he visited him many years later to listen and learn. For more information see: <http://www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/1634> and <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/1503950>.

In a 1988 interview of Ernie Carpenter by BHO member Brendan Doyle, Carpenter said Uncle Jack was the greatest fiddler he ever heard. Considering the Carpenters were a prominent fiddling family themselves, his comment speaks loudly.

Jack McElwain took one of his many “fiddlin' trips” to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago when he was 37 years old, where he entered and won their fiddle contest playing Old Sledge. One fiddler named Harry Scott from the same community of Erbacon as Jack, is quoted by Gerald Milnes as saying “when Uncle Jack played Old Sledge you seemed to rise three feet up off the ground.” It was a winning tune for Jack McElwain in many fiddling contests and Melvin Wine tells how it beat out his own father playing Arkansas Traveler.

The term “old sledge” can refer to a colonial card game (also called High Fours, 7-Up, or High-Low-Jack), a fiddler, sled, sleigh, mule, or dog. It’s the oldest extant card game in England and is still played today. Here’s how to play: <https://www.pagat.com/allfours/allfours.html>. I got through half the directions and gave up! The fact is we’ll probably never know what Uncle Jack was referring to when he played the tune.

Old Sledge reminds me of Bonaparte’s Retreat as played by William Stepp – full of movement and energy. Linking it to Bonaparte’s Retreat was coincidentally mentioned in this Fiddle Hangout discussion in 2009 of Old Sledge: <http://www.fiddlehangout.com/archive/7895>.

Listen to the phenomenal Macrae Sisters: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEzSKegQ9xg>

BHO member Chris Yohn learned from them: <http://www.banjohangout.org/song/38722>

Here are other recordings to check out:

Burl Hammons: <https://www.slippery-hill.com/recording/old-sledge>

Melvin Wine: <https://www.slippery-hill.com/recording/old-sledge-0>

Ed Haley (a bit hard to hear and very rapid): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAxxM1IUBcl>

Cliffhangers (with BHO member Brendan Doyles): <http://www.allmusic.com/song/old-sledge-mt0015955040>

Dan Gellert: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3D-tS7dHYg>

Bob Carlin with Judy Hyman and Jeff Claus:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nKWvx3OFzk>

Fuzzy Mountain String Band playing from Burl Hammons and Emory Bailey (B part):
https://smile.amazon.com/dp/B0010VWM00/ref=dm_ws_tlw_trk3

Kay Van (Burl Hammons version): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WITApDK8rz4>

Ralph Roberts (playing a tune he calls Old Sledge or Seven Up):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkzaHK8zfpM>

I’m thankful to BHO members Carl Baron and Brendan Doyle who shared their files and their experiences with Melvin Wine and Ernie Carpenter, respectively, whose music we gratefully still play. I hope Carl and Brendan will share some of those good memories and music.