

Foot-oriented fiddling among the Mississippi Choctaw:  
R. J. Willis and the house dance

Chris Goertzen

Excerpted from:

Ón gCos go Cluas

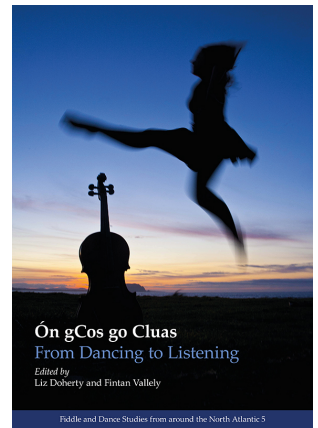
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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## Archaic fiddling among the Mississippi Choctaw: R. J. Willis and the 'house dance'

CHRIS GOERTZEN

The theme for this volume is right on the money: fiddling throughout the countries bordering the North Atlantic has been shifting for some time towards more melodic, listening-based styles and performances.<sup>1</sup> But the present essay concerns an instructive eddy within that international trend, an adamantly dance-linked fiddle style in which rhythm and sheer sound remain paramount, fiddling employed to accompany the Mississippi Choctaw Indian House Dance. It is the proverbial exception that at least reinforces the rule: this non-listening-based style is barely surviving, with just one fluent fiddler, Choctaw elder R. J. Willis. In this essay, I will explore the origins of the dance and its music, describe the aesthetic complex's current nature and employment, and examine R. J. Willis's repertoire of tunes.

I must begin with some background. The Choctaw were uprooted and partially dispersed during the removal era.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1830s, most members of the tribe were taken from their homes in and near Mississippi to Oklahoma in the earliest of the several tragic forced displacements collectively called the 'Trail of Tears'. Most of today's Choctaw live in Oklahoma or have further dispersed from that secondary centre. About 10,000 live in Mississippi now, less than a twentieth of the total Choctaw population. A majority of those 10,000 live west of Philadelphia, Mississippi. There is a legal reservation, but not with marked borders. Instead, one may gradually notice a preponderance of Indian faces, and then encounter a core of tribal offices, schools, and two casinos. Pervasive and profound poverty in the area finally loosened up during the last few decades, with the first healthy businesses developing beginning in the late 1960s (this belated growth aided by not imposing federal taxes), and the first casino opening in 1992.

In one consequence of how recent this change has been, modern options for entertainment arrived slowly. The silver lining around the dark cloud of centuries of miserable poverty is that many valuable Choctaw traditions were not sapped by creeping modernisation. About twenty venerable Choctaw social dances were remembered and could be revived when tribal members now in their fifties were kids. Nowadays, all Mississippi Choctaw in majority Choctaw schools learn those dances in school – in fact, in Head Start

– and many keep dancing later. They perform at the annual Choctaw Fair, at the Spring Festival in the schools, and on certain additional ceremonial occasions.

At about the same time that the Choctaw social dances were being revived, white-derived dances done to fiddle in people's houses (more-or-less square dances) were falling out of use. Some Choctaw whom I have interviewed feel that this happened simply because alternative non-Choctaw dances and dance venues burgeoned. Others told me that the tribal government frowned on the bad behaviour occasionally surfacing at the all-night dances. In any case, what was now formally called the 'house dance' did not disappear. Instead, it acquired a small, enduring niche within the officially-sponsored revival of Choctaw social dance: the house dance took its place alongside the duck dance, walk dance, and raccoon dance.



**Figure 1** A Choctaw social dance ensemble performing on the tribal dance grounds.

Today's Choctaw mark layers of identity with types of music. Working from the most general layer inward: Country music and classic rock blaring from countless pickup truck radios on the reservation show that these are rural Americans, powwow music says that they are Indians (a handful of plains-style powwows occur on the reservation annually), and their social dances demonstrate that they are Choctaw. Of course, this most intimate of the three layers of culture receives the most financial and administrative support from the tribal government. Between fifteen and twenty different social dance groups perform for about

twenty-five minutes each day every July during the massive Choctaw Fair. Figure 1 shows one social dance ensemble performing on the tribal dance grounds during the 2008 Fair. The dance groups represent neighbourhoods and/or schools; many ensembles are mostly kids (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Many Choctaw social dance ensembles are dominated by children.

A majority of the Mississippi Choctaw social dances performed with any frequency today are what are called animal dances: three are war dances, and a few are specifically social dances.<sup>3</sup> Most have a modest, undramatic aesthetic content and a similar quotient of excitement. In each dance, the troupe proceeds at a deliberate pace in lines or circles or in pairs, while a chanter traces a non-lexical melody and taps sticks together; one or several dancers may sing along in unison or in antiphony. These are dances designed for participation rather than for show; they reinforce Choctaw identity and pride, feelings that are deliberately on display for outsiders on public occasions. But the most common dances are those that are lively and crowd-pleasing. Of the animal dances, the ‘snake dance’ is an athletic and humorous hit, with lines of dancers coiling and snapping. And one of the social dances, the one called ‘Stealing Partners’, has become especially common because it is the most entertaining for both dancers and observers, with lots of competitive grabbing of partners from among the dancers and, later in the dance, from the audience. The ‘house dance’ has a contradictory position, although its distinctive character and excitement make it stand out; it is acknowledged by the Choctaw to have been adapted from Euro-American models, and because the music can’t be provided by a group’s chanter, not many troupes attempt it. R. J. Willis fiddles for a club aptly named the Elderly Social Dancers, while other dance

groups that want to perform the ‘house dance’ carry a boom-box and deploy one of several much-circulated cassette tapes. No one knows how old the ‘house dance’ is. In 1822, a Euro-American settler and blue-collar polymath named Gideon Lincecum, who then lived with his extended family near Columbus, Mississippi, sought regular contact with the Choctaw to learn more about botanic medicine. He wrote about having arranged a dance to which the local Indians were invited:

During the first year of my residence in the Chahta country I finished a large and very excellent building. When it was completed the white people solicited me, for the novelty of having it in the Chahta nation, to give them a ball in the new house. I did so and invited all three of the chiefs, the old national interpreter, John Pitchlynn, and a good many of the head men. The party was a very full one, well conducted, and it passed off in good style. The mingos [subchiefs] and chiefs had, according to my request, come early and were all seated in their places, dressed in full Choctaw costume, with their broad silver headbands, long series of diminishing crescents hanging on their breasts, armlets and wristbands, all solid silver, and beads ornamented with three white tail feathers of their own big bald eagle. Their moccasins and leggings were of fine dressed deer skins, ornamented with finely cut fringe of the same, and very small white beads sewed on in curious figures. In their native costume and by their modest deportment, they attracted considerable attention from the civil, well-bred participants of the delighted company. Notwithstanding that they were often invited, none of the Chahtas, except for a few of the educated half breeds, participated in the dance. They kept their seats, behaving very orderly, and were doubtless highly amused and deeply interested. To them it was a great performance, or a show, the like of which they had never before witnessed.<sup>4</sup>

Did the Choctaw learn some ancestor(s) of the ‘House Dance’ through Gideon Lincecum’s agency? Lincecum noted that ‘a few of the educated halfbreeds’ danced. Perhaps those individuals became cultural intermediaries for dance, as they were for other aspects of culture. But whether or not that happened, Lincecum, an avid fiddler, continued to be involved in music interchanges with the Choctaw. Yes, his writing tended to be extravagant in both style and assertiveness, as was then typical, but his memory was impressive, and he was considered a good witness by scientists with whom he corresponded, including Charles Darwin.<sup>5</sup>

Another of Lincecum’s florid anecdotes illustrates his having learned a Choctaw dance and melody. In 1835, during an extended trip to the future Texas, he fell among a group of Indians who weren’t sure what to do with him. He managed to gain their trust partly by teaching them the Choctaw ‘tick dance’. His narration of the dance didn’t correspond exactly with today’s ‘tick dance’, but the separate figures he mentioned are all typical of contemporary Choctaw social dance. It demonstrates, however, that he had paid close attention to Choctaw music and dance.<sup>6</sup> Could the traffic in information have been one way, or did some Choctaw learn Euro-American social dances from him after the ball described above? On another day during that trip to Texas, Lincecum met with two friendly Indians, tribal affiliation unknown. Then, in an initially unconnected encounter, he ran

into some local planters and their house slaves, one of whom was instructed to fetch a fiddle to the picnic that resulted from the serendipitous assembly. Lincecum borrowed the fiddle, and played ‘Washington’s Grand March’, ‘General Harrison’s March’, ‘Hail Columbia’, and, bearing the most interesting connection with the topic at hand, ‘No. 1 in the Beggar Sett’.<sup>7</sup> ‘Washington’s’ and ‘Columbia’ were both in wide circulation in America during the early nineteenth century, and the less common ‘Harrison’s’ was in print by 1817; such patriotic songs and melodies constituted the first substantial, distinctively-American group of additions to the British tunes copiously reprinted in the young USA.<sup>8</sup> I haven’t located a ‘Beggar Sett’, but the term ‘Sett’ must refer to a set of cotillions, of figure dances. Thus, we know that Lincecum played fiddle tunes linked to figure dances by 1835. Might he have already known such tunes and associated dances during his interactions with the Choctaw in the early 1820s?

Cotillions are also part of the legacy of fiddler Samuel W. Watkins, born in the Mississippi Territory c. 1794, that is, in the generation right before Lincecum. This early Mississippi musician reached public view quite recently. The featured item in the April 2012 Recent Acquisitions catalogue of J. & J. Lubrano Music Antiquarians was a Mississippi music commonplace book (meaning a manuscript in which an individual – often a teenager learning an instrument – wrote down tunes they intend to learn, probably copying these from published sources s/he did not own). The third page of the catalogue includes this paragraph; the quotes and brackets were present in the catalogue:

Versos of a number of pages consist of a printed Army enlistment form, including one on the verso of the final page of musical notation completed in manuscript with the name ‘Samuel W. Watkins’ born in ‘the Mississippi Territory’ aged ‘nineteen’ years, ‘five’ feet ‘ten’ inches high, of ‘dark’ complexion, ‘dark’ eyes, ‘dark’ hair, and by profession a ‘Schoolmaster’ [stating that he does] hereby acknowledge to have this day voluntarily enlisted as a soldier in the Volunteer Military Corps in the Army of the United States of America ...’ dated March 12, 1813 in manuscript, and another partially completed with the name ‘John Watkins’ born in ‘the Mississippi’ in manuscript.<sup>9</sup>

We know little more about Watkins. His papers hint that he may have been raised in Jefferson County, in the Delta and he was in the ‘Jefferson Troop’ of the U. S. Army during the War of 1812. Also, many individuals surnamed Watkins are buried in that county<sup>10</sup> (though Samuel moved to New Orleans at some point). This evidence places him across the state from the centre of current Choctaw territory during his youth. However, a Watkins genealogy locates many of his probable relatives in the eastern part of the state early in the nineteenth century,<sup>11</sup> in the general area where Gideon Lincecum and his family lived. Watkins peppered his manuscript with dates ranging from 1805 through 1813. He includes a ‘President’s March’, ‘Washington’s March’, religious tunes, plenty of popular secular songs, and dance melodies ranging from pan-British-world hits such as ‘The Flowers of Edinburgh’ and ‘Money Musk’, and a half-dozen cotillions. Thus, there were cotillions – dances with a half-dozen or so figures – being played and danced in Mississippi early in the nineteenth century. I believe that we can infer that when Gideon Lincecum reported playing a cotillion in 1835 in Texas, that timing reflected only the date of the event upon which the anecdote in

question centred; the cotillion was certainly a genre he would have known in the early 1820s, when he was interacting continually and vigorously with the Choctaw. The likely conclusion is that the Choctaw 'house dance' was born during or around the 1820s and it is possible, even likely, that Gideon Lincecum was the first to teach Euro-American figure dances to these Indians. But if he did not do so, something similar happened, for if Lincecum was not a literal or unique channel for such a cultural transfer, his interaction with the Choctaw can symbolise one or several undocumented contacts that brought Euro-American figure dances into Choctaw culture.

Precisely what happened to the Choctaw's new figure dances – or, for that matter, to their Euro-American models or inspirations – in Mississippi during the next few decades remains unknown. But we can presume that Mississippi whites continued to hold fiddle-accompanied dances including something like cotillions in their homes throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, and that their Choctaw neighbours did likewise. Early Hillbilly recordings from Mississippi reveal a vigorous and wildly varied body of fiddle tunes, many associated with fiddler Hoyt Ming. While discussing this odd corner of American fiddling is beyond the scope of this article, I will note that the eccentricity of version after version of tunes and the loose linkage of titles and tunes seem indicative of an antiquated practice that is at some distance from music literacy and from national and even regional currents.

The next body of information concerning Mississippi fiddling – in fact the first substantial body of information on this topic – surfaced as a result of WPA activity in Mississippi in the late 1930s. Folklorist Herbert Halpert drove the 'soundwagon' (an old U. S. Army ambulance fitted out with recording equipment) around eastern Mississippi in the summer of 1939, documenting community-respected fiddlers who had been identified during years of careful work by school teachers and other helpers. Some of the fiddlers were old; all were old-fashioned. Documenting them produced more representative evidence than had the early Hillbilly recordings, and reached back in time to at least the beginning of the twentieth century. A nice sample of these recordings finally became publicly available in 1985, in a state-produced album named for one of the tunes, *Great Big Yam Potatoes*.<sup>12</sup> The collective style of those long-departed fiddlers actually matches rather well with the contemporary playing of R. J. Willis. Folklorist Tom Rankin, the main voice in co-authored notes for the album, meshed documentation from the 1939 trip with fresh research in order to produce helpful conclusions about dances in white Mississippians' homes:

The dances were directed by a caller, and although they used many of the same figures, they were not the square dances of today. A dance usually included as many couples as could fit in a circle in a room, and if more were in attendance, some would sit while others danced. Taking turns, each couple went around the circle counter-clockwise, and danced the same figure with each other couple. Sometimes a chorus was danced by the entire circle at the end of each couple's round. Because a set could be large, each dance might last as long as twenty minutes, and the fiddler and his accompanist would play the same tune until the dance ended.<sup>13</sup>

Such dances from the early twentieth century seem much like the longer-surviving Choctaw 'house dance'. Anthropologist James H. Howard visited the Choctaw community of Bogue

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Chitto for ‘a few days’ in 1965, and attended the Choctaw Fair in 1974. He noted that on one occasion, the Bogue Chitto dance troupe performed:

Three sets of what are called ‘house dances’, the Choctaw version of the French quadrille or the Anglo-American square dance. These were accompanied by a violin. [Prentiss] Jackson [chanter for the group] as ‘caller’ for the house dances, did not actually shout or call the names of the various figures, seven to a set, but merely whooped ‘Weeeheea!’ to signal the change from one to another. The dancers, through long familiarity, knew exactly which figure in the sequence to perform next in each set, each of which was different, and no dancer showed the slightest hesitation in his or her movements.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 3** R. J. Willis playing for the ‘House Dance’ at the tribal Dance Grounds.

My interviewing of older Mississippi Choctaw suggests that ‘three sets’ sounds about right. For instance, in a 2010 interview Mrs Thallis Lewis, a noted authority on Choctaw social dance, remembered the general house dance performing situation during her youth also including a ‘buffalo dance’, and a ‘sixteen hats dance’. But when a ‘house dance’ is announced today, knowledgeable audiences expect one particular dance. The steps include an entering promenade, followed by the men and women circling in opposite directions, then dancing in place, then swinging with a new partner, then yelling, plus repetitions of the dancing in place, swing, and yell until original partners are reunited. While most social dances done in big public settings have the music amplified by the chanter wearing a cordless microphone



(as in Figure 2), the fiddle and guitar producing the music for the ‘house dance’, when it is done outdoors, need a microphone or two on stands – a small logistical challenge (see Figure 3).

Whether the fiddle and guitar are amplified or not, the sound is dominated by roughly-strummed G and D chords (since the instruments are tuned about a major third low, these chords sound as E<sup>b</sup> and B<sup>b</sup>, but with the guitarist employing the G and D fingerings). The fiddle peeks through the texture in a barely-audible pulsation of higher- and lower-pitched gestures, but it has really been reduced to a visual symbol. The blast of sound is what matters. And with that we have the broadest lesson of this essay: the minimally-melodic music for the ‘house dance’ is never intended for passive listening and is not performed independent of the rare dance it accompanies. Viewed in the context of the thriving world of American fiddling, this is a shrunken tradition, surviving only due to its having been moved to and protected within a tightly-circumscribed niche in the officially-supported environment of Choctaw social dance.

The ‘house dance’ fiddle is at most only faintly heard, and its rhythms are only dubiously coordinated with that of the strummed guitar, the pace of which, in turn, may or may not be heeded by the dancers. Thus, only R. J. Willis is in a position to testify that multiple distinct fiddle tunes survive. He learned fiddling from his father with whom he used to play for dances that lasted all night, twenty-five tunes of the repertoire of which he still recalls. One afternoon during June 2011, we got together and recorded. He remembered as many tunes as he could away from the context of the dance: twenty-one that day. He has forgotten the tunes’ names. Getting melodies from him is a matter of getting his ‘fiddle motor’ going so that he can churn out tunes as if at one of those literal house dances of long ago. He plays in two tunings, one like standard tuning – all fifths (but with the fiddle tuned low) – and the other proportioned like the common AEAE. Surprisingly, to change tunings, he lowers the top two strings by another whole step, so that the guitarist need never venture beyond the G and D chord formations. R. J.’s repertoire is split between the tunings, each of which is home to one specific tight-knit clan of tunes plus a few sports. The AEAE tunes include one shaped like the South-Eastern standard ‘Sail Away Ladies’ plus ones similar to that, a cognate of the South-Eastern ‘Sally Goodin’, and, surprisingly, Bob Wills’ ‘Take Me Back to Tulsa’.<sup>15</sup> The main group among those that he plays in regular tuning also centres on a tune close to the old, G major ‘Sally Goodin’ (that is, the South-Eastern frolic tune, not the fancy Texas version in A). I give a transcription of this tune that I will call ‘Sally Goodin’ for convenience in Figure 4.

Performances of given tunes are three or four minutes long, with little or no variation once R. J. settles into that tune. Reinforcing this lack of variation within a performance, the contents of the various tunes are extraordinarily similar. This high redundancy quotient is striking even in the context of South-Eastern dance-oriented fiddling, indeed, even more extreme than in the old tunes in old styles collected in *Great Big Yam Potatoes*. There is lots of antecedent/consequent action, lots of overlap in the contents of measures of a given tune – indeed, lots of overlap between tunes. After all, everything he plays is in G major, and the formula of high strain vs. low strain vs. (sometimes) in-between strain produces similar melodic shapes within the tunes’ near-identical tessituras. In fact, the tune that R. J. played

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right after ‘Sally Goodin’ that afternoon was so similar that he eased back into the first tune unconsciously, then shook his head ruefully (see Figure 4b; this second tune might be a cognate of the uncommon ‘Barlow Knife’<sup>16</sup>).

Figure 4a: ("Sally Goodin"?), this section played second      This section played first



Figure 4b: ("Barlow Knife"?), first      Second, perhaps a mistake, but takes over      Third



Figure 4c. Played second; varied a bit      Third      First



ends on g second time      ends on g second time

Figure 4d. Played first; varied slightly      Second, seldom repeated immediately



Figure 4e.



**Figure 4** The first five tunes that R. J. Willis played in standard tuning during the interview in 2011.

Next, I invite the reader to compare the transcription of the apparently fragile second tune with that of the third tune, given in Figure 4c. The fourth and fifth tunes R. J. played in lowered standard tuning loosen the group’s collective identity up somewhat, but similarities with the neighbouring melodies remain obvious (Figures 4d and 4e). In the end, the most compelling aspect of Willis’ repertoire is how alike the tunes sound in performance, even when different ancestors seem plausible.

The ‘novelty quotient’ (how different a tune must be to have a stable separate identity, to be a distinctive member of an individual fiddler’s repertoire) is smaller than is normal in the American South – or in any other fiddle repertoire with which I am acquainted. Why? Could this be evidence of repertorial decay, of one elderly fiddler’s fading acuity? I think not. That R. J. plays ‘Take Me Back to Tulsa’ – a much younger tune than the other recognisable ones in his repertoire – in a lucid replication of the conventional shape of that melody, suggests that he is choosing pitches purposefully and precisely. He learned most of his repertoire from his father; I have seen no evidence that he did not learn his tunes in or near the shapes in which he plays them fluently today.

Might there be an alternative explanation for these performances' mutual resemblances? Interestingly, many of the sung melodies for Choctaw social dances are just about this similar to each other.<sup>17</sup> This suggests an intriguing possibility – that these borrowed dance tunes have been reshaped, or rather restyled in an Indian aesthetic. If that is so, then these originally Euro-American melodies were not simply adopted, but rather assimilated. In any case, if, in a performance of a 'house dance', a miracle occurred, and there were two microphones balanced so that audiences could hear the melodies clearly, the results would still offer slim rewards to ears pampered by North Atlantic concert-oriented fiddling. This style remains unapologetically dance-linked and is now just as aesthetically compact as is the 'house dance's' function. How much longer will this last fluent 'house dance' fiddler continue to play?

When I attended the 2008 Choctaw Fair, I overheard emcees agree that it was fitting that R. J. Willis would 'retire' on his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday (see Figure 5). During a pause between dance groups' performances, I asked what such a retirement would entail, and was informed that R. J. was relinquishing just one of his public music activities. A highlight of each annual Choctaw Fair is the World Series of Stickball (a form of lacrosse, and the most important specifically Choctaw sport). During a game, drummers race along the sidelines to play loudly for a member of their team who has the ball; this is a putatively magical encouragement. R. J. had long been one of those drummers, and this activity was all that he was giving up. And I am happy to report that an apprentice fiddler has finally surfaced, a Choctaw college student violinist who visits Willis when he can and also has copies of my video recordings of Willis. The fiddled 'house dance', while destined to remain a minor presence in the repertoire of Choctaw Social Dance, is in little danger of dying out. But no one should ever just *listen* to the music of the 'House dance' – the style was never designed for that.



**Figure 5** R. J. Willis being presented with a birthday cake at the Choctaw Fair.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I certainly believe that this sea change has become central in the cultivation of most North Atlantic fiddle styles. See Chris Goertzen, ‘The Transformation of American Contest Fiddling’, *The Journal of Musicology*, 6, no. 1 (1988), 107–129.

<sup>2</sup> For information about the Choctaw people that is endorsed by the tribe, see their website, <http://www.choctaw.org/> [accessed June 2015]. My general remarks on the tribe and on their social dances issue either from that website or from personal observation.

<sup>3</sup> The best published discussion of the figures employed in the different Choctaw social dances remains James H. Howard, and Victoria Lindsay Levine, *Choctaw Music and Dance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), even though this book focuses on the Oklahoma Choctaw.

<sup>4</sup> See Jerry Bryan Lincecum and Edward Hake Phillips, eds, *Adventures of a Frontier Naturalist: The Life and Times of Dr Gideon Lincecum* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1994), pp. 89–90.

<sup>5</sup> Lincecum and Phillips, pp. 38–39.

<sup>6</sup> Lincecum and Phillips, pp. 221–22.

<sup>7</sup> Lincecum and Phillips, pp. 173–80.

<sup>8</sup> See the appropriate entries in Robert M. Keller, Raoul F. Camus, Kate Van Winkle Keller and Susan Cifaldi, *Early American Secular Music and Its European Sources 1589–1839: An Index* (Annapolis, MD: The Colonial Music Institute, 2002). This was consulted in its incarnation as a website: <https://www.cdss.org/elibrary/Easmes/index.html> [accessed June 2015].

<sup>9</sup> Samuel W. Watkins, *Untitled Music Manuscript Commonplace Book*, plus miscellaneous papers (as of this writing, newly purchased by and not yet cataloged at the library of the University of Colorado).

<sup>10</sup> Ann Beckerson Brown, *Jefferson County, Mississippi: Cemeteries, etc., volume I* (Shreveport, LA: J & W Enterprises, for Anebec & Co., 1995).

<sup>11</sup> William B. Watkins, ‘The Watkins Family of North Carolina, Particularly Enumerating Those Descendants of Levin Watkins of Duplin County, N. C. Who Emigrated to Alabama and Mississippi Early in the Nineteenth Century’ (Charleston, SC: Bibliolife, printed on demand, 2012 [1923]).

<sup>12</sup> *Great Big Yam Potatoes*, AH 002, 33rpm LP, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1985.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Rankin, notes to *Great Big Yam Potatoes*, LP.

<sup>14</sup> Howard and Levine, p. 18. The fiddler for this and similar occasions was most likely Bogue Chitto’s own Wagonner Amos. Amos lamented that Choctaw Social Dance had been largely supplanted as popular weekend entertainment by television and movies: ‘So many things have changed. Only time we have our social dances is go out at some schools and performing, or Choctaw Fair. Stickball game, you see that. But that’s the only time. The rest of ’em, when the fair is over, they done forgot about it. Then the next year time, will be month of time, and here they’re trying practicing dancing or stickball. But at least we got culture, a little. Some other state, I don’t think they have their culture.’ Billy Amos, ‘Electricity, Plumbing, and Social Dancing’, in Tom Mould, *Choctaw Tales* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), p. 167. Amos is the performer on some of the tapes used for the ‘House Dance’ today in the absence of a live fiddler. His son is a chanter, but not a fiddler (Mould, p. 4).

<sup>15</sup> Written by Bob Wills and Tommy Duncan in 1940; first recorded in 1941 by Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys (OKeh 6101). There are dozens of commercial versions, and many or most American fiddlers know the tune.

<sup>16</sup> Immediately after I presented the paper, that is the short form of this essay, Gregory Hansen suggested this possibility, and Alan Jabbour – who plays ‘Barlow Knife’ – tentatively agreed. Several versions of ‘Barlow Knife’ are available on YouTube, as are versions of all of the tunes mentioned in the essay (to hear the version of ‘Sally Goodin’ in the key of G major that I believe R. J. Willis is at

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least partially emulating, search 'Sally Goodin G'). I also thank fiddle tune authority Paul F. Wells and contemporary Mississippi fiddler Bill Rogers for listening to R. J. Willis tunes and helping me to identify them.

<sup>17</sup> See Victoria Lindsay Levine's transcriptions in Howard and Levine, pp. 84–134.