

CLINT KILGORE: FIDDLER FROM THE SEQUATCHIE VALLEY

By Joseph Decosimo



Photo by Joseph Decosimo

I was always out into everything. Once a year, the coal miners used to have these big conventions. And this one was out at Palmer, Tennessee. It was at the ball field and they built a stand to play—it was like a boxing ring, up about three or four feet off the ground with banisters around it and steps up it. That's where the musicians played. It was in the middle '30s, somewhere along in there. Jess Young was playing. He was my idol, just about. Anyway, I kind of stayed hid. He didn't know me, never had seen me before or nothing at that time. And some nut kept after me and said, "You go up there and play with him. He'll let you play." I said, "No, I don't want to play. I can't play as good as he does." I was backwards. Some nut went up there and told him who I was and pointed me out. And Jess Young come out there in the crowd and got me. Just got me by the arm and said, "Come up here." I said, "Listen, I can't play the fiddle—not like you can." He said, "It don't make no difference, I want you to play. What do you wanna play?" I said, "Well, what do you want me to play?" He said, "Can you play 'Sweet Bunch of Daisies'?" I said, "Yes, I can play 'Sweet Bunch of Daisies.'" And so I played "Sweet Bunch of Daisies" and he just had a fit. I had it note for note, just like he played it. And from then on, why, I was with him everywhere. We got really acquainted. He thought it was it was out of this world that I could play this. He never did forget me, I can tell you.

— Clint Kilgore remembering how he met Fiddling Jess Young

Clint Kilgore turned 87 this year. He continues to fiddle with incredible control and a delicate and deliberate bow. As a teenager, Clint performed alongside Jess Young, Lowe Stokes, and Bob Douglas. He has not forgotten how it felt to share the stage with these legends. He lives in Victoria, Tennessee, tucked in the beautifully green Sequatchie Valley. His house sits on a hill a few hundred yards away from Jess Young's grave. Creating a wall of green and sandstone brown in the horizon above his house, the Cumberland Plateau stretches as far as the eye can

see, punctuated by the gulches and tumbling creeks that slice into the plateau and drain into the Sequatchie River. During Clint's childhood a number of coal mines bore deep into the Plateau, bringing with them thriving little communities such as Victoria. Like a number of other towns in East Tennessee, once the mines shut down, the towns followed suit, becoming little more than memories. The mines around Victoria ran their course long ago and the hotel, stores, and depot have long since rotted or been turned into something else.



From space, the Sequatchie Valley appears as a stark knife-slash in the earth's crust. Its deep rift, which geologists call a "breached anticline," exposes coal and other minerals, spawning a flurry of mining and industrial activity in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. Many legendary string band musicians grew up in the deep, narrow valley in small towns that run down its axis like beads on a string.

JESS YOUNG



Courtesy of Ben Hartman

Coal mining fiddler Jess Young and his fiddle "Old Rat" put a teenage Clint Kilgore through his musical paces, enlisting him to fiddle at numerous appearances and dances during the mid '30s. Jess Young worked in the Whitwell coalmines until 1924, when he moved to Chattanooga to pursue a career as a professional musician. Young and his band recorded for Gennet and Columbia during the '20s and '30s. He competed against and occasionally beat the likes of A. A. Gray, Lowe Stokes, and Clayton McMichen at fiddler's conventions around Southeast Tennessee. Young's "Maybelle Rag" and "Sweet Bunch of Daisies" continue to be played by fiddlers today. He passed away at the age of 45 on New Year's Eve of 1938.

BOB AND TOM DOUGLAS



Courtesy of Jubilee Community Arts

l-r Unknown guitar player, Tom Douglas, Bob Douglas

Two generations of Sequatchie Valley fiddling: Tom Douglas (center) and his son Bob Douglas (right) shaped the musical landscape that fostered Clint Kilgore's own fiddling. The train that Clint's father drove up the valley inspired the Douglasses to compose the twisty train piece they called "Sequatchie Valley." Born in 1868, Tom Douglas was a legendary fiddler along the Cumberland Plateau. He scratched out a living by farming, hunting, trapping, working in sawmills, and playing fiddle for square dances. By 1917, he enlisted his son Bob's help. Tom, Bob, and a banjo-playing cousin, Ab Ferguson, played their way around all the coal towns along the Plateau and Sequatchie Valley, playing dances for room and board or a bit of money. In 1928, Tom passed his fiddle on to his son, and later that year Bob beat out McMichen, Stokes, and Young at the "All-Southern Fiddling Convention." That same year, he joined the Allen Brothers at a Victor recording session in Atlanta. By the mid '30s, Bob and Clint were sharing air on WDOD and occasionally competed against each other. In the early '40s Bob gave two brothers, Charlie and Ira Loudermilk (later Louvin) their first radio gig. Bob graced the Chattanooga area with his fiddling up until his death at the age of 101 in 2001.

Clint's story begins further southwest down the Pikeville Branch line of the NC and Saint L, in Bridgeport, Alabama. Clint Kilgore was born in Bridgeport in 1919, the youngest of three—he had a brother and sister a few years older than he. Clint's father worked as a coal runner, an engineer on the NC and Saint L branch line running 60 miles up the Sequatchie Valley to Pikeville, Tennessee. He made daily "coal runs" up the valley, heading from Bridgeport up to Pikeville and back. He spent over 50 years working for the railroad, most of that time as an engineer on a coal driven engine carrying both passengers and coal. A few years after coal engines were replaced by diesel engines, Mr. Kilgore retired from the railroad. Interestingly, the same line that Clint's father worked on as an engineer inspired fiddler Bob Douglas and his father, Tom, to compose a train tune in C that grinds and puffs like the old coal engine—"Sequatchie Valley." Charles Wolfe hypothesizes that the tune may have preceded the Douglas' version and was actually recorded by Jess Young and the Tennessee Band in a Gennett session in April 1925 under the misspelled title "Sequethic (Hornpipe)." Whatever the case, Clint plays a version of "Sequatchie Valley" that differs from Douglas' and that he attributes to Jess Young's fiddling. Clint keeps his father's engineer hat and proudly shows visitors the pin his father received for 50 years of service on the NC and Saint L.

Around 1929, when Clint turned 10 years old, his father became an engineer on a passenger train that followed the same "coal run" route up the valley between Bridgeport and Pikeville. Because the passenger train laid over in Pikeville, the Kilgores moved to Pikeville, living there for about two years. Clint remembers getting his first fiddle at the age of 12. His father bought it from a neighbor named John Duke back in Bridgeport. He tells about his first fiddle, "At that time, there was a guy lived up on the hill from us that made fiddles. And he didn't make the best in the world. He made them look good, but they didn't sound worth a nickel. But daddy bought me one of them and that's where I started out." Thus began 70-odd years of music for Clint Kilgore.

Although Clint's sister and mother played the piano from time to time at church, Clint does not recall hearing traditional dance music in his family. His maternal grandfather Elick Doss played the fiddle, but Clint is only aware of his playing through his mother's memory.

However, Clint remembers a friend of his father's who played Hawaiian guitar and would stay with the family for weeks at a time when Clint was 17 or so, "It was about that time that I took up Hawaiian guitar. Well, there was another Kilgore that lived in South Pittsburg. He wasn't no relation to us, but he was a Kilgore. And he'd come up and stay a week at a time with my daddy. You know, he just lived by himself, I think. I'm not sure. He played professionally and he played on a steamboat most of the time on the rivers. Made entertainment. And so I really liked that so I picked that up about that time." As Clint dabbled in the Hawaiian guitar he also fiddled in a region with a rich tradition.

The Sequatchie Valley of the '20s and '30s must have been remarkable place for a young fiddler to mature. In the 60-or-so mile range in which Clint's family lived, there was a thriving tradition of fiddling among whites and blacks. Victor recording artists Theron Hale and his daughters called Pikeville home for a number of years. Contemporary bluesman Earl Thomas' father lived around Pikeville and was a noted African American fiddler. Tom and Bob Douglas would have likely made appearances all through the valley on their romps through the coal mining towns and camps that peppered the Cumberland Plateau. Undoubtedly, there were a number of well-known fiddlers playing around the communities that Clint grew up in. Aside from Bob Douglas, Clint doesn't recall hearing any of these specific musicians. However, his early musical endeavors grew most under Fiddling Jess Young. There is no telling what other fiddlers may have inspired Clint as a teenager, because as Clint is quick to point out, "that's a lot of water under the bridge." Additionally, Clint recalls that his father had a number of recordings in the house including several sides by Jess Young. He also had an Edison cylinder of fiddler Robert Allen Sisson of Copper Hill, Tennessee. Perhaps these recordings and experiences around some forgotten fiddlers encouraged Clint's early musical efforts.

Two years after Clint started to learn fiddle tunes from old recordings; his father traded a double-barreled shotgun for the fiddle that Clint plays to this day. Clint believes that the fiddle was once owned and played by Curly Fox's father. He tells a story about his father's trade, "He traded a double-barrel L.C. Smith shotgun for it. And there was two guys at Jasper, one of them played the fiddle. They're two brothers. And the other one played the guitar. And the one that played the guitar had traded for this fiddle, and his brother didn't like it. He



Clint Kilgore circa 1935. Photo courtesy of Clint Kilgore

had his own fiddle, you know. He played his own fiddle. He didn't pay no attention to it. So my daddy traded for it. And I've had it ever since."

Clint remembers taking violin lessons for two years. Given that there were two years before his father traded for this new fiddle, it would follow that during his first two years playing, as he was trying to learn how to play like Jess Young, Clint would have also received classical instruction. During an interview, he discussed his use of vibrato in some older waltzes. A portion of an interview I conducted proves helpful:

Clint Kilgore: *Well, I don't know if that's (vibrato) necessary or not, but I was taught that. See, I went to school. I mean I went to a teacher two years and that's how come me to know the vibrato. I*

didn't like the type music she played.

Decosimo: *Was it classical?*

Clint Kilgore: *It was classical music, but I'd go and practice enough to satisfy her when I went down there, and I'd come back home and play breakdowns all week with someone else. And then I'd go practice enough and go back there. But I was getting everything else out of her, how to hold the bow, how to play, how to use the bow and how to tremolo and how to do this and do that. And there was a lot to it. More than you think there would be. That's what I really got out of it. I didn't like the classical music. I could read music when I got through, but it went out the window. I didn't care nothing about it.*

Between his close listening to records and his brief stint as a classical student, Clint became a fine fiddler. At the age of 17, after a mere 7 years of fiddling, he impressed Jess Young, who by that time had become one of the most respected fiddlers around Chattanooga. Jess had become close friends with members of the Skillet Lickers: Clayton McMichen, Bert Layne, and Lowe Stokes. All three were regular visitors to Jess' house at the foot of Lookout Mountain and had regularly competed against Jess in fiddle contests around Chattanooga in the late '20s and early '30s. Also by 1935, when Jess called Clint up to play with him at the coal miners' convention in Palmer, Jess had been playing as a professional musician for 11 years. As a performer, Jess was known for his professionalism, stopping a tune midstream if he sensed a band mate was out of tune and insisting that he tune up or step aside. Apparently, Clint's fiddling impressed Young enough to invite Clint to play with him at the regular square dances he hosted in Chattanooga.

At first Clint's father felt that it would be unhealthy and unwise for his impressionable son to be hanging around the dance halls in Chattanooga. He told Jess that Clint couldn't go. Eventually, Jess came to Clint's father and promised him that there'd be no drinking and the behavior in the dance hall was of a high moral standard. Clint tells it this way, "He had a dance hall. It was on Chestnut St., up-

Photo courtesy of Clint Kilgore

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stairs in a building. And he couldn't hold out to play. I was underage, about 16 or 17, somewhere along in there. He come down there and talked my daddy into letting me go. He said, 'There ain't no wild stuff that goes on.' He said, 'Absolutely no drinking at all.' Which there wasn't." Clint recalls fiddling alongside Jess at the dances held in the Odd Fellows Hall "He had it once a week. I played with him for nearly three years. He would play 'Sweet Bunch of Daisies.' That was what made him famous. He played maybe a half a dozen tunes just to satisfy the people and that's all that he could hold out playing. He had emphysema real bad." At 17, Clint absorbed the musical and performance style and repertoire of an early fiddling champion and recording artist.

Around the time that Clint began making trips into Chattanooga to help an ailing Jess Young finish out square dances, he also signed a contract with Clark Brothers Furniture in Chattanooga to play a sponsored spot on the radio. Clint teamed up with two brothers from Jasper, mandolin and guitar players whose names he has forgotten. The three played 15 minutes of music over station WDOD on Friday evenings. Around 1935, the Rialto Theater in Chattanooga had hour-long Friday evening shows that featured some of the finest musicians from around Southeast Tennessee, Northeast Alabama, and Northwest Georgia. During one such show, Clint remembers competing against Bob Douglas on the stage at the Rialto:

I played with Bob a lot. We played at the Rialto Theater. It was between Market St. and Cherry St. It's been gone a long time. But they had fiddling contests there. I played there with him. And we—I had two boys down here—one played the mandolin and one played the guitar and they both sang. And they played with me. And we went and played at that same time he (Bob Douglas) played the fiddle for the contest, I played at the same time. I don't remember who got first. I don't believe he got first. We got second or third. We were just kids, boys. But they could sing. They harmonized real good—brothers. Usually brothers and sisters got the best harmony of anybody.

Clint's other musical partner, Jess Young, and his regular Tennessee Band which in 1936 consisted of Jess's guitar playing wife, Bunny, and her banjo playing brother, Buster, opened and closed the Rialto's programs. Incidentally, Jess'

career as an early country fiddler could have taken a dramatic turn in 1937 and 1938 when Jess received two letters from Grand Ole Opry Manager, Harry Stone, inviting him to come and fiddle and possibly replace Arthur Smith at WSM. Sadly, Jess' condition had turned very serious by then and claimed his life on New Year's Eve of 1938.

By the mid-'30s, after Clint had begun playing with Jess and making forays onto radio waves, he found himself sharing the stage with yet another great early recording artist, Lowe Stokes. Stokes (who lived in Chattanooga at the time) and Clint both found their way to the Jack Savage Texas Ranch, just over the Georgia line in Ringgold. Clint remembers his summer alongside Stokes:

We played together there all summer, about two or three months—summer months. Played every Saturday and Sunday. Lowe Stokes . . . come in just after I was there. They had a stage built like a boxing ring, you know, high all the way around. It had steps up in the middle and that's where we played. It was out in the woods—that's where we played. I met him and we got to playing together. I played with him the whole time I was there. We swapped about. And he had lost his arm. I got his picture over here when he played with the Skillet Lickers. That's who he played with. They began their band in 1925, with Clayton McMichen and all that bunch. In 1931 they broke up. And it was 1935 or 6 or 7 when we was playing when I run into him over there. And after he had quit playing for them he had a wreck and lost his arm about right in here. But he had a thing made to hold that bow and son, it didn't make a bit of difference to him, he could play anything.


Clint describes the Jack Savage Texas Ranch, just south of Chattanooga. "It was a park. And they had music there on Saturdays and Sundays, all day. It was just entertainment. Entertainment mostly. It was in the woodland. They had picnic tables—they'd all bring their lunches and dinners and they'd have parties like that." He also remembers a left-handed fiddler named Maud Hammons performing at the ranch. He speaks highly of her playing, "She could really play, don't ever let them kid you. She was as good a fiddler as you'd ever hear."

In 1940, Clint married his wife, Josephine, and not long afterward began to work in the mines as an electrician. He bought a 16-acre plot of land from his parents,

and he and Josephine settled down in Victoria. Clint recalls his job in the mines, "They had coal machines, mine locomotives, drills, everything to get the coal out of the mines. Had substations outside, generating their own power. Had 2,300 volts coming into it. And I was in charge of all that. I worked 23 years at the coal mines till Whitwell shut down. The old big mine shut down." With a family to support, Clint found a job at TVA's Hale Bar Dam as a regular laborer. By the time Clint retired in 1983, his technical skills had led him from a job as a temporary worker to the lockmaster at Nickajack Lake. At one point in his career, he oversaw the operation and maintenance of two different locks. Clint's successful career and his efforts to create CDs with his own cover designs show his continued interest in and knack for things technical. Over the last few years he's run off several batches of recordings, placing them at shops around Whitwell for anyone interested to listen to and enjoy.

One of the CDs Clint made features his wife Josephine's fine guitar playing and singing on a rendition of Merle Haggard's "Swinging Doors." This disc gives listeners a sense of the enjoyment the two gained from life and music together as well Clint's broad interest in music. After their marriage, Clint began showing Josephine how to make chords and keep rhythm with a fiddle tune. He remembers their music, "Now my wife, we married in 1940 and by '45 she could play a guitar as good as anybody. I'd taught her. She always had one, but she didn't know how to do anything with it. And she played with me then for the rest of her life. Long as she lived she played for me." Clint gave Josephine a beautiful shiny National Resonator guitar that she played alongside him for many square dances throughout the Sequatchie Valley. He and Josephine also played for parties, businesses, and recreational events. However, their music together was a matter of fun and enjoyment, rather than as a professional money-making endeavor. Clint describes the nature of their music, "We didn't take on no contracts or nothing. If they just called and wanted us to come play, we'd go and play. Some of it was businesses and some of it was recreation and some of it was where they were having parties and all that kind of stuff." Josephine passed away in 1990 after 50 years of marriage. Clint and Josephine's son, Larry, is a successful surgeon and is a champion Travis style guitar picker.

Like so many fiddlers in the South who weren't swept into the old-time revival, Clint does not necessarily identify himself as an "old-time musician." He thinks of himself as a fiddler, but doesn't make the distinction of "old-time" fiddling. Alongside his repertoire of more modern and popular fiddle music, as well as a country backup repertoire, he plays a number of tunes unique to Southeast Tennessee and can conjure up a few tunes that he used to play with Jess Young in the mid-'30s. Clint's renditions of pieces like "Smoke Behind the Clouds," "Whistling Rufus," "Sequatchie Valley," "Sweet Bunch of Daisies" and "Maybelle Rag" evidence a much earlier era of music and attest to the time he spent with Jess. For Clint, a fiddle tune is a fiddle tune, whether it's one he learned from a Jess Young 78 or one he learned off of a program he recently saw on the television. Although Clint's repertoire spans musical topography of the last century, his early musical acquaintances, and his friendships with fiddlers Oscar Overturf and Lum Thomas root him in a tradition that is thoroughly in the old-time camp.

At 87, Clint has maintained incredible technical ability on the fiddle. He continues to play with a group called the Sequatchie Valley Ramblers. They've played around Whitwell for various community groups like the Masons and for a few businesses. Clint also jams regularly with local musicians including Bob Townsend and Charles Higgins, who introduced me to Clint a couple years ago. It's fascinating to think that folks like Clint Kilgore, who shared the stage with the likes of Lowe Stokes and Jess Young, can still be found playing music. To hear Clint kick into an old fiddle number takes us back to some of the earliest and finest recordings of old-time music and links us with the beautiful tradition of old-time fiddle music in the Sequatchie Valley. 

A Chattanooga native, Joseph Decosimo recently graduated from UNC Chapel Hill and has returned to Chattanooga where he teaches English. This article is the result of fieldwork he conducted while working for Tennessee State Parks' Bob Fulcher on the Cumberland Trail State Park Musical Heritage Project. For several years, he played banjo and mandolin with fiddler Charlie Acuff and the Lantana Drifters.



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HIGH ON THE HOG: FISHER HENDLEY AND THE ARISTOCRATIC PIGS

By Bob Carlin



Courtesy Bob Carlin

The Aristocratic Pigs appear in their finest bib and tucker in this 1938 promotional shot, taken in their third year broadcasting over WFBC, Greenville, South Carolina. l-r, "Cousin" Ezra Roper, "Little Boy Blue" (Hampton Bradley), Fisher Hendley, Sam Poplin, and "Baby Ray" (Dixon Stuart/Stewart).

My interest in Fisher Hendley began many years ago with a fascination with the band name, "Fisher Hendley and the Aristocratic Pigs." As it turned out, the name came straight from the radio show's sponsor's contention that their pork products came from high-class hogs. Other than this, I learned little more about Fisher Hendley and his group until the late 1990s, when I was assembling the two-CD set, *The North Carolina Banjo Collection*, for Rounder Records. On this set, I included a cut of Fisher's banjo playing ("Shuffle, Feet,

Shuffle") and I began my first research into his life for the album's booklet. A deeper investigation of Hendley's early life followed when, simultaneously, I was researching my book *String Bands in the North Carolina Piedmont* and Gail Gillespie uncovered some pictures of Fisher Hendley from his time at Trinity College (now Duke University) in 1914-15.

Frustrated by my inability at locating either Fisher's children or other family members, my research dead-ended at that point. It was only when the banjoist Jim Mills included Hendley in a *Blue-*

grass Unlimited article that I found out that Fisher's daughter Hellen Hendley Permar was still alive. Mills graciously provided Mrs. Permar's contact information and she gave me access to two scrapbooks that provided a wealth of primary information and opened the door to further research into Fisher Hendley's interesting life.

When most of us think about old-time country music recording and radio performers of the 1920s-1940s, we imagine overall-clad musicians with blacked-out teeth, fresh out of some mountain hol-