HUMANITIES KANSAS
A Movement of Ideas

Black Banjo & Violin

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Originally aired July 2021

The Black banjo and violin tradition in Kansas dates back to the earliest days of Kansas history and it was also not uncommon to find musicians who were proficient on both instruments. A year after the Kansas Nebraska Act, the Kansas Herald of Freedom from Wakarusa carried a fiery editorial which accused “pro slavery myrmidons of promenading in the territory with their symbols, negro servants and negro fiddlers.” Black and white fiddlers took turns playing music and dancing in Auburn.

But by 1915 when the folks in Whiting had their Grange picnic and the entertainment was a” colored banjo quartet,” it was a letdown for those who wanted a brass band. It’s reminiscent of the line in the song, Georgia Camp Meeting, *“The young folks were tired and they wanted to be inspired so they hired a big brass band.”*

In many small towns in Kansas, you could find black banjo players on the street, stage and hired out for private events. They would either “get off the train or be put off of the train.” Some came from as far away as Kentucky. The “attractive banjo trio” who performed at the Hub Saloon in 1879 in Dodge City played music that was described as “luxuriant.” Places like Waterville, Clay Center, Sabetha, Hartland, Seneca, Wellington, Glen Elder, Arlington, Almena, Minneapolis, Axtell, Columbus, Russell, Fairview, Osborne, Summerfield, Rush Center, and Miltonvale were all typical stops for a black banjoist to collect nickels and dimes.

The northeast corner of the state seemed to be uniquely populated with musicians and some of the oldest banjo and violin traditions survived there much longer than elsewhere. It was commonly held that Doniphan County had slaves in 1855 and when Doc Mills of Atchison traveled to “call a dance” in 1889, he said the Missouri Bottoms were full of fiddlers. The areas proximity to the Missouri Bottoms and the Topeka-Atchison and Santa Fe Rail line would make the area well-traveled by local and itinerant musicians from the earliest days.

Richard Walker lived in Atchison in 1894 had a 100-year-old Banjo his father made during slavery days. Rolla Isam, a Leavenworth fiddler, died in 1897 at the age of 67 was known to play the “old style” of violin playing before people danced to orchestras or ensembles. This is probably closer to a 18th century style where dancers danced to one instrument or just a melody. He performed “Hoe-Downs” and Virginia Reels. He may have been one of the very fiddlers that the Kansas Herald of Freedom spoke about. Isam was brought to Kansas in 1859 by his master.

“Ole Napper” of Salina once said he could remember when his master told him that George Washington had just died and his banjo helped to get Garfield elected. He also lived in Lawrence and was sometimes called Col. Hancock but his given name was David Taylor and he was born in North Carolina in the late 1770s. They said he made good money when the James brothers were in town because they would toss him silver dollars in the saloons to play their favorite songs. Napper lived to be at least 117 and was a fixture in Kansas still playing on the street up until his death in 1903 in Salina.

Someone named Doc Napper performed *“A stump tailed dog is as good a dog as any"* on violin in 1889 in Atchison. Doc Mills of Atchison was sometimes called Doc Napper. Mills could perform on both instruments but it’s not likely that someone would confuse them as black musicians held an esteemed place in the community. Many times their instrument of choice was part of their name. In Sedan there was

an unfortunate wagon fire in 1889 which caused the loss of the wagon, the hay and one horse. The individual who was driving the wagon was named “Mr. Gilbreath, the colored banjo player.”

“Mac” McKanlass who was born in Manhattan KS in 1879 was the son of Will McKanlass who was a graduate of the Cincinnati Conservatory and a well-known musician in his own right and banjo teacher. Both father and son were multi-instrumentalist and performed with many of the traveling shows. Will McKanlass performed in Nebraska and Sam Lucas was a member of his troupe. Professor L D Fuller Sr. who was born in Troy, Alabama, in 1875 was still playing in 1920 was always billed as a multi-instrumentalist. Professor Fuller’s father-in-law was an old settler in Kansas and his son was the Kansas legend Lorenzo Dow Fuller, who was born in 1919 in Stockton, Kansas. Lorenzo was a Juilliard graduate and made quite a name for himself on the radio and stage and was a voice coach to the stars.

The banjo saw somewhat of a resurgence in around 1884 but like “Ole Napper," the original players were dying off. By the time Doc Mills of Atchison died, it was said his music wasn’t as popular because people did less of the country dancing and were going with more of a “two step style of dancing”. The “renowned” Major Walfscale of Sabetha, the “celebrated’ John Wright of Independence, Percy Kersands of Smith Center, Banjo Bill around Newton were a few that seemed to keep busy as the instrument was losing popularity.

A New York music dealer said he was selling more guitar strings to black banjo players than banjo strings. He said it was 10 to 1, and the only reason black string musicians carried banjos was for “business purposes.” Most retail stores would hire banjo players to play in their stores. Perhaps that's what the New York music dealer meant by business purposes. Politicians, shop keepers, and medicine men or “Fakirs” as they were called put a lot of faith in a black banjo players' ability to gather a crowd.

Probably no other name tells this history of Kansas better than the name Lowry. Vance Lowry was known as the “Banjo King" of Emporia. He spent many years performing in Europe while living in France during the jazz age. In 1942 he escaped the Nazis while in Stockholm. His father was guitarist Lincoln Lowry. When they performed in Salina in 1904, he was considered a child prodigy at 15. The Lowry name is quite prominent in Greenwood Co. and associated with world class cornetist PG Lowery who performed with Barnum and Bailey. From the same musical family was a cattleman and ranch foreman, Gene Lowry, who died in 1922 at the age of 43 after 25 years in the saddle. It was said that the entire range mourned the death of this well-respected cowboy.

This transcript of “Black Banjo & Violin” is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.