The Saturday Fish Fry and Square Dance in Dogtown

by Linda L. Henry, June 2020

"The Saturday Night Fish Fry"

Jackie (Mabley): Well, as I Live and breathe, look who's here!
Now, here's somebody I really didn't expect to meet.
Pearl, what you doin' down here on Rampart Street?
Pearl (Bailey): Well, Jackie, I am down here to try to have me
A ball at one of these Saturday fish fries.
Jackie: What's that?
Pearl: Ain't you ever been in New Orleans?
Jackie: Yeah!
Pearl: Well, you can understand what I mean.
All through the week it's quiet as a mouse
But on Saturday night they go from house to house
And they're rockin'.[1]

Introduction

By the time they were recorded by the Library of Congress in the 1940s, the black string band that is known today as Gribble, Lusk, and York was considered the best square dance band in Warren County, Tennessee.[2] The band members were lifelong residents of the rural black communities in Campaign and Rock Island, located about ten miles northeast of the city of McMinnville, along the southwest corner of the Cumberland Plateau. John Lusk and Albert York lived in sharecropper shacks; Murph Gribble owned his own land. Murph's place on Dogtown Road in Rock Island was the center of the

[1] Ellis Walsh and Louis Jordan, a portion of "Saturday Night Fish Fry," as sung by Pearl Bailey and Jackie Mabley, in *The Book of Negro Folklore,* edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1958), 524-525.

[2] Robert S. Jamieson, "Gribble, Lusk and York: Recording a Black Tennessee Stringband," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, 53 (1987): 45.

Saturday festivities until he died in 1950. The only remaining first-hand accounts of the music, the square dances and the fish fries are provided by two ninety-year-olds, Theresa Wood-Smith (Fig. 1) and Robert "Bub" Bonner (Fig. 2). Their accounts show the extent to which dancing was intertwined with the Saturday fish fry.

Fig. 1

Theresa Wood-Smith: Ninety-year-old Theresa is a life-long resident of the rural black community of Shady Rest in McMinnville, Warren County, Tennessee. She was a cafeteria worker, raised three children, and lives in the house her father built. Her mother Gertrude Wood, a city girl from Nashville, started going to the Saturday fish fry and square dance when Theresa and her two sisters were old enough to come along, sometime in the early 1940s.[3]

[3] Theresa Wood-Smith, interviews by Linda L. Henry, *Family Friend of Murph Gribble.* November 29, 2017; January 4, 2018; May 4, 2019; May 20, 2020.

Fig. 2

Robert "Bub" Bonner: Ninety-year-old Robert, a grave digger by trade, is also a life-long resident of McMinnville. His father was a butcher, so they lived in the city. Later on, he moved out to his father's farmland, still within the city limits, and built the house where he lives today. His grandmother, Ida Ramsey-Bonner-Gribble, was married to Lucius "Coon" Gribble, the brother of Murph and Jess. He started going to square dances with his older sister during WWII.[4]

[4] Robert Bonner, interviews by Linda L. Henry, *Step-grandson of Lucius "Coon" Gribble*, January 6, 2018; May 3, 2019; May 20, 2020.

Using Theresa and Robert's first-hand recollections, along with other primary and secondary sources, I will show the historical connection between the fish fry and the "frolic" that dates back to the 1800s, as well as the implied historical connection of the circle formation of their square dance that dates back to pre-enslavement Africa. I argue that the traditions of this rural black community were both a continuation of the traditions of the past, and an ongoing adaptation of social activities that signified the present. The fish fry will be the point of initial discussion; and Dogtown, the African American community in Rock Island, is the place where the story begins.

The Saturday Fish Fry

According to historian Paul A. Cimbala, during the 1800s the "frolic" in the rural south was a safe space for the enslaved to gather for music, dancing, and socializing, usually on Saturdays. It was "the secular counterpart of the Sunday prayer meeting."[5] Mountain South historian Wilma Dunaway draws from a collection of slave narratives: "Throughout the Appalachians, slaves 'was 'lowed to git together and frolic' on Saturday nights. Masters would 'have to tell the padderollers…so they wouldn't bother' the slaves who were on the roads."[6] She found, "In Warren County, Tennessee, the black

[5] Paul A. Cimbala, "Black Musicians From Slavery to Freedom: An Exploration of an African-American Folk Elite and Cultural Continuity in the Nineteenth-Century Rural South." *The Journal of Negro History* 80 (1985), 15.

[6] Wilma A. Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 213, 293, 314.

community had 'some kind of doin's every Saturday night.'"[7] Cimbala writes, "The frolic became the fish fry, house party, or picnic."[8]

According to Murph's granddaughter, Bertha Gribble-Simpson, her mother Millie told her that Murph raised chickens and pigs, hung meat in his smokehouse, farmed grapes and apples, and was a purveyor of moonshine as well as muscadine and apple wine. According to Bertha, Millie's mother Dovie said Murph started preparing for the fish fry every Friday (Fig. 3).[9]

Fig. 3

Murph's land on Dogtown Road as it stood in 2018.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Cimbala, "Black Musicians from Slavery to Freedom" 15; For further contextualization regarding the "frolic," see Cimbala, "Black Musicians from Slavery to Freedom" 15-29; Phil Jamison, *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015) 10, 24, 43; Linda L. Henry, "*Some Real American Music": John Lusk and His Rural Black String Band* (http://www.gribbleluskandyork.org/: 2020), 13-17.

[9] Bertha Gribble-Simpson, interview by Linda L. Henry, *Granddaughter of Murphy Gribble*, January 28, 2018.

Theresa on the Fish Fry:

> White folks came; there was lots of 'shine.' Whoever needed money, that's where they had the dance and fish fry. They'd sell fish sandwiches, shine, and pies, the same at Murph's. Murph was a bootlegger.[10]

Robert on the Fish Fry:

> They'd play and dance all night long at the fish fries; dance outside on the grass. Sometimes the dance and fish fry would be at the old Pleasant Hill School. The money they made paid for a new school. Sometimes they'd go to Arthur Lee Martin's in Dogtown, on the old Looper property.[11]

Theresa on the Fish Fry after Murph died: Theresa's sister Maggie Wood-Lock and her husband Fred Lock would have fish fries and dances at their new house in Smartt Station:

> Fred would pay the band, then collect money from the pies, the fish sandwiches (30 lbs of whiting purchased for $5.00, along with day-old bread purchased at The Bread House), and the shine. Fred was a bootlegger. The shine was in water buckets with a big dipper. One time, someone turned them into Sheriff Youngblood. Youngblood showed up at the fish

[10] Wood-Smith, *Family Friend of Murph Gribble.*

[11] Bonner, *Step-grandson of Lucius "Coon" Gribble.*

fry and arrested Fred. Fred was charged with bootlegging, then got out on bail. That was the last fish fry at Maggie's.[12]

The Saturday Square Dance

Theresa on the Square Dance:

> We wore big skirts, can-cans. There was a big circle - couples around - with one person in the middle. A man, then a woman would 'strut' around in the middle. The man or woman would dance with each of the opposite sex around the circle, then a new couple would be in the center. All would dance in one direction, then switch direction – turn to the left, then turn to the right. Sometimes as many as fifty came to dance. Whites came."[13] Theresa demonstrated with her daughter, also present during the interview, how couples would hook arms and dance around.

Robert on the Square Dance:

> Whites came, but they didn't dance. Sometimes the dance would take place in the old one-room schoolhouse on Mud Creek Road, other times there would be fifty or sixty and they would dance outside. All three Gribble brothers played: Murph on fiddle and banjo with Coon and Jess on guitar.

[12] Wood-Smith, *Family Friend of Murph Gribble.*

[13] Ibid.

> John and Duncan played. Beau Worthington was the caller and wouldn't miss a beat. They got a dime each as payment. Dance all night long, one big circle, and hook arms. "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain." "Swing your partner," [the only call he remembered, but did say they didn't use the "French" names]. Folks would just know what came next. The couple in the middle would "cowboy" dance. Sometimes they would swing dance, sometimes waltz to "The Tennessee Waltz." Mostly women at the dances in the 1940s due to the war. Whites stopped coming in the late 40s and 50s. They had their own square dances."[14]

In her book on black dance, historian Lynne Fauley Emery explains the practice of whites imitating blacks, "Wherever black people gathered to dance, white people came to be entertained. Soon white performers were imitating the black dancers."[15] Regarding blacks imitating whites, music educator Willis James argues that in the late 1800s to the early 1900s, blacks "adopted the square dance of the white man, more in principle than in policy."[16]

---

[14] Bonner, *Step-grandson of Lucius "Coon" Gribble.*

[15] Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970* (Palo Alto: National Press Books, 1972) 326.

[16] Willis Laurence James, "The Romance of the Negro Folk Cry in America," *Phylon* 16 (1955) 18.

Historical Influences on the Circle Square Dance

Warren County was a melting pot of cultures. The "ring" or "circle" square dance is a tradition that reflects these cultures. Historian and curator of the new Black History Museum of Warren County, Wayne R. Wolford, Sr. wrote:

> Blacks were brought into the McMinnville area from all over the world in the 1800's as slaves, approximately 1809, but tracing the roots of one's past is almost impossible. Everybody was related in some form or fashion, Blacks, Whites, Indians, and other nationalities, even though none of the groups wanted to claim the other.[17].

Portuguese influences: Beginning around 1445, the Portuguese were among the first Europeans to explore Africa and enslave the Africans.[18] They were also responsible for bringing the Portuguese culture and Catholicism not only to West-Central Africa and Brazil, but also to North America through the transatlantic slave trade.[19] Librarian and musicologist Dena Epstein provides a 1721 account of local dancing by English traveler John Atkins, who disembarked in Sierra Leone, "'Dancing is the Diversion of their

---

[17] The Warren County Heritage Book Committee, *The Heritage of Warren County, TN.* (Waynesville, NC: Walsworth Publishing Company and County Heritage, Inc. 2005) 27.

[18] Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977) 3.

[19] Jeroen Dewulf, *The Pinkster King and the King of Kongo: The Forgotton History of America's Dutch-Owned Slaves*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) 97-152, 187.

Evenings: Men and Women make a ring in an open part of the Town, and one at a time shews his Skill in antick Motions and Gesticulations, yet with a great deal of Agility, the Company making the Musick by clapping their hands together…'"[20] Referring to Atkins' account, square dance historian Phil Jamison writes, "African ring dances such as these came to the New World with enslaved Africans."[21] Jamison then quotes a portion of "The Sugar Cane," penned by Scottish physician and poet James Grainger in 1764 while living in the West Indies:

> On festal days; or when their work is done;
> Permit thy slaves to lead the choral dance,
> To the wild banshaw's melancholy sound.
> Responsive to the sound, head, feet and frame,
> Move aukwardly harmonious; hand in hand,
> Now lock'd the gay troop circularly wheels,
> And frisks and capers with intemperate joy.
> Halts the vast circle, all clap hands and sing;
> While those distinguish'd for their heels and air,
> Bound in the center, and fantastic twine.[22]

Epstein notes a 1799 description of a dance in New Orleans described by Fortescue Cuming who had voyaged down the Mississippi River, "'…we saw vast numbers of negro slaves, men, women, and children, assembled together on the levee, druming [sic], fifing, and dancing, in large rings.'"[23] Epstein writes, "African musics were transplanted to the

[20] Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, 5.

[21] Jamison, 39.

[22] Ibid., 39-40.

[23] Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, 84.

New World with the first Africans to arrive there. These musics sustained themselves and persisted, not unchanged, but unquestionably distinctive and recognizable for over 150 years in the West Indies and for a lesser time on the mainland."[24]

Dutch Influences: The Portuguese supplied the slaves to work the sugar plantations in the Dutch West Indies. The Dutch had their own version of ring-dances; they danced to the sound of a bagpipe and a "three-stringed violin."[25] The Dutch also brought the Pinkster festival to New York. Jamison writes, "With the proliferation of the slave trade during the eighteenth century, African ring dances became known throughout North America. By the late 1700s, 'the original Congo dances,' as danced in Africa, were part of Pinkster (Pentecost) Day celebrations in Albany, New York."[26]

Native American influences: Jamison notes a passage from *A New Voyage to Carolina*, written by the British explorer John Lawson, who in 1701 encountered Native Americans dancing in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, "'They made a circular Dance, like a Ring, representing the Shape of the Fire they danced about.'"[27]

The two Warren County nonagenarians recall that there was no specific name for the formation that placed one or two dancers in the middle of a circle of dancers. Phil

---

[24] Dena J. Epstein, "African Music in British and French America," *The Musical Quarterly* 59 (1973), 91.

[25] Dewulf, 16.

[26] Jamison, 40.

[27] Ibid., 37.

Jamison calls a similar figure with one dancer in the middle, "Bird in the Cage,"[28] and makes the case, "This Southern figure does not come from the European tradition, and it cannot be found in any of the nineteenth-century dance manuals. Instead, it appears to have come from the African tradition."[29] Ethno-organologist Shlomo Pestcoe, in his contextualization of a 1780s' South Carolina watercolor, seems to concur:

> The early African American dance that [John] Rose portrayed in *The Old Plantation* is a communal social dance gathering that is reminiscent of those seen throughout West Africa. West African dance gatherings typically involve the participants forming a ring wherein the dancers take turns in the center to express themselves through the medium of dance, as well as to perform a solo exhibition of their dancing skills. The dance ring formation came across the Atlantic with the millions of enslaved West Africans and has been a principle feature of communal social dancing throughout the African diaspora in the New World ever since.[30]

[28] Ibid., 204.

[29] Ibid., 41.

[30] Shlomo Pestcoe, "The Banjar Pictured: The Depiction of the African American Early Gourd Banjo in *The Old Planation*, South Carolina, 1780s," in *Banjo Roots and Branches*, ed. Robert B. Winans (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 183-184.

British architect Benjamin Latrobe, described a similar scene at Congo Square in New Orleans, as noted in his journal on February 21, 1819:

> All those who were engaged in the business seemed to be *blacks*. I did not see a dozen yellow faces. They were formed into circular groupes [sic] in the midst of four of which, which I examined (but there were more of them), was a ring, the largest not 10 feet in diameter. In the first were two women dancing.[31]

In 1823, while living in Jamaica, a Scottish man named J. Stewart described an unnamed dance by Jamaican slaves: "This is an assemblage of both sexes dressed out for the occasion who form a ring around a male and female dancer, who perform to the music of drums and the songs…"[32] And in 1886, New Orleans native George Washington Cable in his essay, "The Dance in Place Congo," describes the "Bamboula": "He moves off to the farther edge of the circle, still singing, takes the prompt hand of an unsmiling Congo girl, leads her into the ring, and leaving the chant to the throng, stands her before him for the dance."[33]

---

[31] Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary & Sketches 1818-1820* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951. 49.

[32] J. Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (Edinburgh & London: Oliver & Boyd, Tweeddale-House, and G. & W. B. Whittaker,1823) 269-270.

[33] George Washington Cable, "The Dance in Place Congo and Creole Slave Songs," in *The Social Implication of Early Negro Music in the United States*, ed. Bernartd Katz (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969) 38.

Conclusion

Tradition is a dynamic process, and the music and dance tradition in Dogtown is no exception. Curtis Lusk, the youngest son of Frank Duncan Lusk, recalls that by the early 1960s, only the white folks square danced. The black community still had pie suppers and dances at the new Pleasant Hill School in Dogtown (Fig 4), but the fish fries and moonshine of the past were gone. John Lusk, almost eighty years old, still played fiddle for the new dances with his son Duncan on guitar. The type of dancing changed, but the music continued. Curtis remembers that his "daddy used to tap dance and he wouldn't miss a beat."[34]

Fig. 4: The New Pleasant Hill School and Community Center as it looked in 2018.

[34] Curtis Lusk, interview by Linda L. Henry, *Son of Duncan Lusk, Grandson of John Lusk*, May 25, 2020.

Primary Sources

Bonner, Robert, interviews by Linda L. Henry. *Step-grandson of Lucius "Coon" Gribble* (January 6, 2018; May 3, 2019; May 20, 2020).

Cable, George Washington. 1969. "The Dance in Place Congo and Creole Slave Songs." In *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States*, by Bernard Katz, 31-68. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times.

Gribble-Simpson, Bertha, interview by Linda L. Henry. 2018. *Granddaughter of Murphy Gribble* (January 28).

Jamieson, Robert S. "Gribble, Lusk and York: Recording a Black Tennessee Stringband." *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 53 (1987): 45.

Latrobe, Benjamin Henry Boneval. 1951. *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary & Sketches 1818-1820.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Lusk, Curtis, interview by Linda L. Henry. 2010. *Son of Frank Duncan Lusk, Grandson of John Lusk* (May 25).

Stewart, J. 1823. *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica; with Remarks on the Moral and Physical Condition of the Slaves and on the Abolition of Slavery in the Colonies.* Edinburgh & London: Oliver & Boyd, Tweeddale-House and G. & W. B, Whittaker.

Wood-Smith, Theresa, interviews by Linda L. Henry. *Family Friend of Murph Gribble* (November 28, 2017; January 4, 2018; May 4, 2019; May 20, 2020).

Secondary Sources

Cimbala, Paul A. 1995. "Black Musicians from Slavery to Freedom: An Exploration of an African-American Folk Elite and Cultural Continuity in the Nineteenth-Century Rural South." *The Journal of Negro History* 80 (No. 1): 15-29.

Dunaway, Wilma A. 2003. *Slavery in the American Mountain South.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Emery, Lynne Fauley. 1972. *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970.* Palo Alto: National Press Books.

Epstein, Dena J. 1977. *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Epstein, Dena J. 1973. "African Music in British and French America." *The Musical Quarterly* 59 (No. 1): 61-91.

Henry, Linda L. 2020. "*Some Real American Music" John Lusk and His Rural Black String Band.* http://www.gribbleluskandyork.org/.

James, Willis Laurence. 1955. "The Romance of the Negro Folk Cry in America." *Phylon* 16 (No. 1): 15-30.

Jamison, Phil. 2015. *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance.* Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.

Pestcoe, Shlomo. 2018. "The Banjar Pictured: The Depiction of the African American Early Gourd Banjo in the Old Plantation, South Carolina, 1780s." In *Banjo Roots and Branches*, by Robert B. Winans, 172-193. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.

The Warren County Heritage Book Committee. 2005. *The Heritage of Warren County, TN.* Waynesville, NC: Walsworth Publishing Company and County Heritage, Inc.

Walsh, Ellis, and Louis Jordan. 1958. "Saturday Night Fish Fry, as sung by Pearl Bailey and Jackie Mabley." In *The Book of Negro Folklore*, by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, 524-525. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.