

Hello banjo friends,

What a treat it is to have all of you “there” with me, playing along, whether in the Zoom peanut gallery or in my imagination at a time convenient in your lives! I love these large-group online workshops so very much, and I really appreciate you all spending this upcoming month of learning with me.

The fiddle tunes of Southwest Virginia have become some of my favorite material to teach, in part because this is among the most “local” old-time music to my adopted home, but also because it is criminally underrated and deserves to be better known. These are compelling tunes played by skilled historical musicians, and they are fairly accessible (in terms of the tunes themselves being learnable with reasonable effort and the historical recordings being mostly available online for convenient listening and learning). Too often, though, this music gets overshadowed by the admittedly outstanding Round Peak music from just over the North Carolina border from the counties where our case-study fiddlers lived and played. The Virginia musicians were just enough older than the best-known Round Peak musicians when younger people from outside of the tradition began traveling to the region to learn from the masters that the opportunity for earlier and broader spreading of the Virginians’ music was somewhat missed. Now that recordings of those original players have become easier to find, we have a new opportunity to learn from them and share their music with our friends and playmates—so let’s take advantage of it!

If you enjoy maps as I do, you might have fun tracking our source fiddlers with a county-level map of Virginia. We will be learning music from the mountain counties along the very bottom of the state, from Patrick County west through Carroll County, the independent city of Galax, and Grayson County. Compare the locations of these places to that of Surry County and Mount Airy, North Carolina just a small distance south, the home of Round Peak music. So very close as the crow flies, and yet so musically distinct from each other! A large part of the reason, I believe: the Blue Ridge separates these communities, and before I-77 was constructed, north-south travel in particular was not easy. Entirely different fiddle and banjo styles and repertoires developed between the regions, such that they might as well have been several states apart.

I hope that you will treat the two settings of “Callahan” that we covered today as two distinct tunes that happen to share a title and a key as well as a very small amount of melody. They both are well worth learning, and I love the Shelor setting in particular so much that I would be delighted to hear it in broader circulation. Consider utilizing the various resources that are available to you after the fact: the Zoom video replay for rhythmic looping of whole parts, phrases, and smaller segments of music to your heart’s content, the separate audio play-throughs for your slowdowner apps, the tablature, and the source recordings that I used to learn and arrange the material in the first place; this latter resource will really help my unusual rhythmic and mechanical choices make better sense. If the second setting of “Callahan” felt too glossed-over while we were together, we can start next week’s class with a brief play-through; just let me know via email between now and then if this would prove useful.

Here are some recordings to enhance your learning of tonight’s material:

-fiddler Norman Edmonds, born in 1889, from Hillsville in Carroll County. This recording dates from 1958: <https://www.slippery-hill.com/content/callahan-0>

-contemporary old-time fiddle icon Bruce Molsky, with Paul Brown on clawhammer banjo, plays Norman Edmonds' setting of the tune on his "Poor Man's Troubles" album from 2000: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gimuGMGRNQU>

-fiddler Jesse Shelor, born in 1894, from Meadows of Dan in Patrick County, with his wife Clarice providing incredible piano accompaniment. This recording dates from 1979, and I would be grateful to play with half as much musicality and vigor if I make it to my mid-80s! <https://www.slippery-hill.com/content/callahan-1>

Please keep in touch this week and over the month ahead (and beyond!) if I can help your learning in any way. Enjoy the new tunes and see you next Monday!

Cheers,  
Adam