

An Interview With Tip Mckinney from the original

**Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers**

By Julia Hager and Jim Olin

Conducted in the spring of 1973 and originally  
printed in the **Missouri Friends of the Folk Arts  
Newsletter.**

POPE'S ARKANSAS MOUNTAINEERS DISCOGRAPHY

Memphis, TN      Monday, February 6, 1928

John H. Chism - fiddle  
J.W. (Joe) McKinney - banjo and vocal  
John Sparrow - guitar and high vocal  
Wallace Chism - guitar low vocal  
Lee F. "Tip" McKinney - vocal

41852-2	Cotton-Eyed Joe	Vi 21469
41853-2	Get Along Home, Miss Cindy	Vi 21577
41854-1	George Washington	Vi 21469

Memphis, TN      Monday, February 6, 1928

Tip McKinney - speech  
John Chism - fiddle

41855-1;2	Arkansas Stump Speech (Marry A Widow)	Vi unissued
41856-1;2	Arkansas Stump Speech (Bring Me A Load Of Corn In The Fall)	Vi unissued

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John H. Chism - fiddle  
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41857-2	Birmingham	Vi 21295
41858-2	Hog Eye	Vi 21295
41859-1	Jaw Bone	Vi 21577

## **Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers**

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In 1971, David Freeman of County Records produced a three-volume series of LPs entitled "Echoes Of The Ozarks" (County 518, 819, 520). The music presented in this series was originally recorded and released on 78rpm records between 1926-1932, by the major commercial recording companies of the day. At this time, the 'country' music recording industry was in its earliest stages of development, the first "hillbilly" record having been cut by Eck Robertson, a country fiddler from Texas, in 1922.

Although the rapid advances being made in mass communication during this period were exposing relatively isolated country folk to a variety of popular music styles, the homogenizing influences of mass media had not yet enervated the distinct regional traditional styles of music existing throughout the country. Ironically, the recording industry, which was destined to contribute to the demise of traditional music forms, was, in its early days, serving inadvertently as the only vehicle providing aural documentation of our traditional musical heritage. Having not yet realized or extensively exercised its potential for manipulating musical products, and musical audiences, the industry's recordings of "hillbilly" music made in its early years often provide delightful examples of traditional music in relatively pure form.

In an interview with Mike Seeger (Anthology of American Folk Music, Oak Publications) Frank Walker, the Columbia artists and repertoire man who pioneered in the recording of country music, describes what the recording of country musicians was like in the early days: "... as the business grew, we made periodical trips to the South and at least two trips a year. In those days, recordings were done on solid wax and you had to bring containers of the waxes you used. So you were very careful and very choosy."

"We recorded in dozens and dozens of different places, all the way from San Antonio to Houston and Dallas, and Johnson City, Tennessee, and Memphis, and Little Rock and New Orleans and Atlanta and everywhere. But that's the way we built it up in advance -- getting word around that a certain time of the year we were going to be there. And these people would show up sometimes from eight or nine hundred miles away.'

They never asked you for money. They didn't question anything at all. They were just happy to sing and play, and we were happy to have them. Most of them we saw had something to go back with."

'... in so many cases they hadn't the slightest idea of what it was all about... You brought in a little of the mountain dew to take care of colds or any hoarseness that might happen, and also to remove a little of their fears of strangers doing this sort of work. You try to make them feel at home, and we felt the only way we could ever get that was in their own native habitat. You couldn't have done it in New York."

Although many settlers came to the Ozarks from the Appalachian region, it would be an oversimplification to consider Ozark culture or music as merely transplants from Appalachia. Migration and settlement patterns were more complex than this. Many of those who settled in the Ozarks came as well from the Midwest, the Deep South, or directly from Europe.

Most of the groups heard on the "Echoes of the Ozarks" series had only one recording session, and then faded back into obscurity. Little or nothing was known about them at the time these albums were released, and little, in fact, is yet known about them, although some information about various groups has recently come to light. It has been discovered that two of the bands thought to be from the Ozarks (and included in the series the Weems String Band and The Perry County Music Makers, were actually from Tennessee.

One of the most popular of the groups included in the series, and definitely, at least, known to be from Arkansas, was Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers. It was known that they were from Searcy, Arkansas (in White County), and that they had been organized by J.D. Pope, a local music store owner. They made only one trip to Memphis, Tennessee in February of 1928, where they recorded eight sides for Victor. Although their 78rpm recordings sold well throughout the South, Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers were never heard from again.

Intrigued by both their music and the mystery surrounding this fine Arkansas string band, we, while already in Arkansas visiting friends, decided on an impulse to drive to Searcy to see what we could see. We had nothing really definite in mind; we thought perhaps we might take some photographs of the area, or find some old 78s, or maybe even find someone to talk to who remembered Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers or any of the other bands from the area.

It was a cold and rainy day in the spring of 1973; we found no Pope's music store -- there were no Pope's listed in the phone book, and there were no old records in the junk or antique shops. Finally we wandered into the Quattlebaum Music Center and spoke to the proprietor Colonel Ivan Quattlebaum (who is also the local bail bondsman, owner of a furniture store, president of the Kiwanis Club, and auctioneer.

As it turned out, Mr. Quattlebaum was a former employee of J.D. Pope and took over his business when Pope passed away. He was familiar with Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers and to our surprise related to us that one of the original members of the band was still alive in Searcy. He was kind enough to place a few phone calls for us and eventually came up with an address, although he was not certain whether it was correct.

After a few wrong turns, we arrived at the address, hesitated a few moments, then knocked on the door. A kindly looking old man answered: we said, "are you Mr. Tip McKinney of Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers?" He looked somewhat surprised but pleased and said, "come

right in." In the conversation that followed Mr. McKinney took us back in time, unfolding the fascinating story of his experiences, and charmed us with his wisdom and humor.

*Jim Olin*

*And you're Tip McKinney, is that right?*

**Tip McKinney**

Uh, huh. I'm the one they call Tip. That's a nickname. That's not really my name. My whole name is Lee Finis Cameron McKinney.

*Were you born in Searcy?*

No, I was born over here in Kentucky Township, close to Rosebud. I was raised, though, around here directly.

*How old were you when you made the records?*

Well, let me see. I was something 'round 28 years old. I'm 76 now.

*Who were the people in Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers?*

John Sparrow lived out here at Harmony, and John Chisolm and his son Wallace Chisolm and Lee Finis McKinney and Joseph Washington McKinney.

*Then, you and your brothers were in it.*

Me and my brother were in it; he picked the banjer. But he didn't sing any. Me and Sparrow and Chisolm (Wallace) sung.

*Who was playing fiddle in the band?*

John Chisolm, Old Man John Chisolm. He was getting to be a tolerable aged fella.

*Where were the Chisolms from?*

They were born and partly raised in Mississippi. I don't recollect when exactly they moved to Arkansas.

*You all just went over to Memphis to record that one time in 1928?*

Yea, just that one time. The boys come back here and messed themselves up. See Mr. Pope here, the music man up here -- he was the one that preferred us over there, you know. So that was the way it was.

We went over there and made those records and they give us so much for what time we was over there. We was over there something like nearly a half a day. They paid our way -our expenses and everything. They tried to get us to stay, but there's three of the fellers had wives... They wanted us to broadcast at the Peabody Hotel over there that night, but none of the three wanted to stay.

Well, it wouldn't a done no good if we all couldn't a been there, you know, to broadcast it. We put out six pieces over there and they paid us off over there. They said they didn't never pay a royalty for the first time. So that's the way it went off.

*When Pope got you all together for the first time did you audition for someone, like the guy from New Jersey? Before you went to Memphis.*

No, we never even seen him at all until we got to Memphis. He came from Camden, New Jersey to Memphis. Pope met him over there. Old man J. D. Pope, music man. He was in the music business.

*Did Mr. Pope go down to Memphis with you all?*

No, he didn't. He sent his nephew down there. Milton.

*What was it like making records?*

We was in a big room in that auditorium in Memphis, Tennessee. It covers nearly a block.

*What was the recording machine like?*

It had a big speaker over in one place in the room. It had cloth come down about so high above the ceiling, don't you see, heavy canvas. Had it all over

the floor, couldn't hear you pat your foot or nothin' like that. When a feller plays music he has to pat his foot, you know. That was to keep all of that sound and everything down.

I don't know how many different people were over there. I seen Jimmy Rodgers. He had a steel guitar with him. He said, "I'm supposed to play but somehow or other you fellers got ahead of me." He said, 'I thought I'd be the first man at the bat, but the man told me no you fellers are comin' on at one o'clock."

*Were there other people there to record?*

Yes there was a hundred of 'em to have records made. I remember talking to some of those people but I don't remember their names.

*When you were recording did they try to tell you how to play your music?*

No they never told us at all. What those recorders wanted to do was just to listen to the pieces. Of course we spoiled lots of records.

*You mean you had to record the pieces over several times?*

Oh yeah. We'd clear our throats up or some of them would say something. They wouldn't have it that way at all.

Were you all nervous?

Oh I wasn't nervous a bit, any more than I am right now.

*Well, they say you recorded eight sides, but only six of them were put on records.*

Yeh, that's right.

*What were the other two tunes that didn't get recorded?*

Well, they were speeches.

*Speeches?*

Speeches, that I made. Kinda comical speeches, you know.

*What gave you the idea to do that?*

Well, we didn't know if it would go over or not, you know, but the recorder said he would record them anyway and see, and, so he said it didn't go over. And all the rest of them went over.

*Had you heard those "Corn Licker Still In Georgia" records that the Skillet Lickers made?*

Yes, sir.

*Is that what gave you the idea to do it?*

No, it really didn't give me the idea to do that. You know, when I was going to school way back when I was a boy, why, we had speeches to say, you know, at school ever so often, especially at the last day of school.

Well, I got up some of these speeches myself, and they rhymed off good and everything. And so I thought they might be alright, don't you see. I made a little talk on some poetry that had been put out, don't you see, and they done had it copyrighted already, and after I made this one.

They recorded it alright and had it on record over there, but they said it wouldn't go, you know, and they never did put it out.

*What was it about?*

Oh, I don't know, it was about some kind of a man that was so tall, you know. Did you ever hear that one? Well, I can't quote it over now. I about quit for so long... I used to could tell how tall he was; he was fifteen foot tall, you know.

A great man, don't you see, and he was a man that could fight four hundred men before him and make 'em fly. All that stuff. I made it rhyme up good every way. A lot of people thought it might be a good piece, but it wasn't.

It was copyrighted, and I read it out of a magazine when I was just about sixteen years old. I just quoted it over like they did. We played it in waltz time, like to OVER THE WAVES and some other waltz.

*When did all of you musicians start playing together? How long did you play together before you made records?*

About seven or eight days, probably.

*Oh, I thought maybe you all had been playing together for years.*

No, no' no. We'd knowed one another for a long time, but we had never all played together as a band. We had played around, too, you know; maybe there'd be a different violin player, don't you see.

I had a cousin; his name was Horton, Johnny Horton. He died about three years ago, Johnny did, here in Searcy. He was a good violin player.

*Well, back around the time you were making records, were you and the band playing pretty much around this area?*

Yes sir, we played a lot of big openings here in Searcy and we played for the big dance hall down here this side of the old bridge over yonder. Well, we played down there and, oh, several places. We played down in Stuttgart. We was called to a big school closing down there to play.

Old man George Scooge, I believe it was; he run a place down here. He sent for us to come down there and play. He's going to have a big opening down there one day, selling a lot of stuff that he had. He give us \$15 dollars a piece, every one of us, and carried us over there to the cafeteria and bought our dinner

and set the cold drinks up to us any time we wanted 'em and all that.

*Did you usually get paid when you played somewhere?*

Oh yes, Robin Sanford up here paid us a big sum. And Louis & Hartzel over there at their store. Well, they had a store at that time and sent for us to come and play. We went down there and played. I forgot what they paid us -- it would be either twelve or fifteen dollars apiece and they paid our expenses all the way around.

*Did you play outside of Arkansas at all?*

No, we didn't play out of Arkansas only when we was playing over at Memphis

*Did you continue to make music after you made the records?*

No, I quit for a right smart while. I married and moved out to myself and bought me a farm and farmed a while. And so that's the way I done it,

Well, those records were pretty popular, weren't they?

Yeh. Those records sold real good, you know. This fellow said they sold well over the South. 'Bout a month, I guess it was, nearly a month after them records was made.

Well, I got a telegram from Kansas City, a victrola house up there -- wanted to know when Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers was going to make some more records. Said they was excellent.

*Well, that's what we thought.*

*After you made the records and came back, and the records were selling well, did all of you ever go around and play after that?*

No, no, no.

*Well, you had a good thing going.*

You see, they just all kind of busted up, don't you see. Some of them moved off. Some of them went to Arizona and California, some stayed here, some went over to Little Rock and Texas, around, you know, the families did, So that stopped the whole thing. My brother left here and went up to Batesville and bought him a place up there and lived up there awhile and then went to Kansas City.

*This is the brother that played in the band with you?*

Yes, sir. He's been dead a good long time, though. One of his sons, W.D., still has my brother Joe's banjo. It's one of these old style banjers, don't you see. It was a 36-bracket banjer -- thumb string up here, you know. He'd knock that thumb string with his thumb.

That's what made it sound good, and he was picking it all the time too, you know. And whenever he'd hit that thumb string, that there made it sound much better, don't you see...

*What were some of the other tunes that you all played that never made it on record?*

Well, I don't know just how many we played. We played... MAPLE ON THE HILL; that was a love song, you know. Then we played that RED RIVER VALLEY; that was another kind of a love song, and JUST BECAUSE SHE'S AN OLD SWEETHEART OF MINE -- we played that one, and I don't know just how many others. We played four or five.

Then we played these others: GEORGE WASHINGTON and JAWBONE, BIRMINGHAM and HOGEYE, CINDY and COTTON-EYED JOE. Three double records.

*You played the guitar and mandolin?*

Yeh, I picked the mandolin part of the time and part of the time the guitar.

*That guitar sounds pretty good on the records. What tuning did you use?*

We played in what they call 'Italian' tuning, you know, where they tune 'em up. It was an altogether different tuning from what I ever done before. Guitar, fiddle, banjer, everything; all the instruments were tuned like that. We all tuned 'em up with the violin.

And the feller that knowed about it, feller by the name of Sparrow. He knowed how it was tuned up. And my brother had quite a time tuning the banjo with it. Some way or other Sparrow showed him how to do that. And the way we played nearly all of the pieces was in that Italian tuning.

I used to call it cross-key but they said it wasn't exactly that. But it would sound out all right. That man that recorded those records said that was music like he had never heard. That's what he said.

*Where did you learn those tunes, like GEORGE WASHINGTON?*

Well, some of 'em, we made 'em up.

*Which ones did you make up?*

We made up GEORGE WASHINGTON and JAWBONE, and, well, not all of them. CINDY was an old time tune; it was played way back during the Civil War, and COTTON-EYED JOE was too. Them was old tunes. That HOG EYE is an old song 130 years or older.

*And you made up GEORGE WASHINGTON?*

Yes, I'll sing you a little verse of it.

**GEORGE WASHINGTON**

*"George Washington's a nice young man  
A lie he wouldn't tell,  
And when he hacked the cherry tree  
His father gave him ....*

*Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah,  
Got glory, in my soul.*

George's mother takes in washing  
She does it very well,  
And when they fail to pay her  
You bet she gives 'em ...

*CHORUS*

Oh, the engineerman whistled  
And the fireman rung the bell,  
And the 'ductor hollered "All aboard,"  
And away we go to ...

*CHORUS*

I take my girl a-walking  
down on the flowery dell,  
And when the old folks find it out  
you bet they give us...

*CHORUS*

I know four verses of this song  
And I can sing them well,  
And before I'd sing them verses again  
I'd see you all in ...

*CHORUS*

You know, when that feller recorded that record, he  
said, "That one'll go over, I know!"

Do you know which record sold the best?

No, I don't.

Well, who made up the words and the music?

Oh well, there was two or three of us that would put  
the verses in sometime you know, to make it rhyme up  
better than maybe the other one would. This fella  
Sparrow was a good singer. He'd taught singing school  
and he was a pretty good singer and a schoolteacher,  
too.

How did Mr. Pope get the idea to put you all together  
in a group and make a record?

Well, you see how this come up... I'll tell you folks  
how this come up. I 'was down here in town one day  
and of course we'd dealt with the Pope's a whole lot,  
you know, and my brother'd bought a victrola from  
him, J.D. Pope.

And so J.D. Pope told him, and he never paid no attention to it, you know -- told him there's a feller, 'scomin' now pretty soon from Camden, New Jersey over here to see if he could find some string band music here.

*Do you know what that guy's name was?*

No. I did know, but I can't think of his name at all.

*What label were these records on?*

They were on RCA Victory (Victor).

Well, he(Pope) spoke to me then and he said to me ... and I told him, I said, "I know an old man here in this town -- lives out here on the Robin Sanford farm just out of town." Robin Sanford ran a big mercantile company; they owned over a half a block here in Searcy. They sold everything.

Mr. Pope said, "Is he a pretty good violin player?"

I said, "Yeh."

"Well," he said, "Well, you got a brother that's a good banjo picker, ain't he?"

"Joe," I said, "Yeh, he is."

Well, I met John up there and I said, "Come here, John. John Chisolm, you know. "Come here, John," I said, "Let's go down here to Mr. Pope's store."

We went down there, you know.

So, Mr. Pope told us, he said, "I'd like for you fellers to get together -- a bunch of you fellers that play, sing and all. And I'm going to have some more musicians here, too, string bands," he said, "from around here."

He did have, too; he did have some fellers from over here across the river.

*Was that the Reaves White County Ramblers!*

No, the Reaves lived out here close to MacRay.

*Well, he got the Reaves to make records too, isn't that right?*

Yeh, but they was some kind of off-brand records; they was Brunsards (Brunswi or something. They wasn't Victory or Columbia or nothing like that. Well, he sent the Reaves up to Chicago, up there.

*Were there any other bands Pope got to make records?*

Well, no. No, he didn't get nobody else. He got the Reaves boys, though, after .... He was going to carry us up there, don't you see?

*To Chicago?*

Yes, to Chicago. He was going to send us to Chicago, don't you see? And this fells Sparrow -- his father lived out here on Desarc Creek and had a fine farm out here. And of course, he was a schoolteacher, too, you know. And he was kinda... a little bit smart, I guess you'd call it. He knowed more than anybody else, or something.

He got talking to this young Chisolm that went with us over yonder, you know. And they come down there and met me on the street and they said, "Hey, come go with us up here. We're going up here to Peoples Bank."

Well, Hicks Deaner was the banker there, you know. He was the president of that bank up there. Anyway, they said, "Listen. They paid us off over yonder. We going to find out how much Pope got out of this."

Sparrow said, "My daddy does business here. He's got money in this here bank." And he said, "I can get money any time I want it." He said, "Old man Deaner will tell me just exactly..."

I said, "Old man Deaner won't do no such a thing." "Why," I said, "You know better than that, John." I told him, "You know better than that. A banker don't

do that kind of business t'all." "No," I said, "You won't. That's Pope's business." That's what I told them. I wouldn't go with them up there.

"Well," he said, "I got this much to tell you Mr. McKinney." he said, "Go ahead on down the street. We going up there and find out."

Well he went up there and his feathers fell, don't you see. Deaner told him, he said, "No. That's my 'n Pope's business." Wouldn't let him know a thing in the world about it.

Well, see, Hicks Deaner told him (Pope) what they done. But Pope thought every one of us fellers went along, don't you see. If he'd a knowed that me and my brother Joe and old man John Chisolm didn't go along, he'd a just postponed these other two fellers and got two more fellers.

You see, he'd a sent us up to Chicago. Yeh, we would have rent. But he thought all of us was into that, don't you see.

Well, they done got us no chance in the world of goin up there, don't you see -- to make records up there. Well, you see, he was going to send us to Camden, New Jersey when we got back from up there. It's the home office over there where they's going to record some more records, don't you see.

That feller told him, he said, "Well, we're going to see how these things is going to sell and then we want them fellers over here."

So Pope wouldn't send us over there, don't you see. That's the way that went off. Well, Pope drawed royalties on it as long as he lived. Yeh.

Well, this feller said there was some royalty set aside for Popes Arkansas Mountaineers and so this David Freeman -- he sent me two or three, maybe four royalty checks. About one hundred dollars it was, all told.

*Were you surprised to receive the checks?*

Well, I was a little bit surprised at it. But it wasn't much because I knew when the old man died (Pope) the thing would all stop, don't you see. The royalty business would.

Well, I just stepped over my rights, don't you know, because I could a-went and got me some more fellers

Oh, I could a got in at Nashville, Tennessee and could a been one of them old Opry House stars -- at that time I could. 'Course, I couldn't now. No, I'm gettin' too old now.

*Did your folks play music?*

Nearly all of them played except about two.

*What kind of instruments did your parents play?*

Well, Mother could play a violin, and then she could play an organ and things like that. She'd play SOLDIER'S JOY, and the EIGHTH OF JANUARY and ARKANSAS TRAVELER and all such pieces as that. She was borned over in Kentucky, but she was raised here, you know.

Her father and mother brought her from Kentucky here just before the Civil War. Just awhile before the Civil War. And so she was a pretty good sized little girl during the Civil War. Her and her brother. There was just only two of them children at that time.

'Course, they been dead a long time. My grandmother lived to be an old lady. She lived to be 103 years old. She out-lived my grandpa by twenty some-odd years.

*What was your mother's maiden name?*

Her name was Nancy Elisabeth Cooper. They come over in Kentucky. You see, after old man Cooper died, my great-grandfather on my mother's side -- he died over there in North Carolina.

Well, old man Cooper died before the Civil War and old Granny Cooper, she didn't want to stay over

there. She said all her boys, let me see, she had seven and three girls and she sold everything they had over there, the farm and everything they had and they loaded up a wagon and drove through to Kentucky. And my grandpa was the oldest one of the children, my grandpa, Jerry Cooper.

Well, he fell in love with Minerva Elizabeth McKinney over therein Kentucky. They was originally from over there in North Carolina. They had come there, you know. So her mother was part Indian, you know. She was a Brery, That's an Indian name anyway, you know.

So Grandma, she took after the Indians a whole lot. That's the reason she lived so long. You know that song they used to sing about old Indians never dies. I heard that way on back, but) never did try to learn it.

But anyway, Grandpa married her and lived over) there. They all lived there in Kentucky several years. Closer it got an to the war, why, great-Granny said, "We're goin to Arkansas, and we're going just as far back as we can get in some of them mountains back there, to--try to save my children."

And she landed way over here on Brush Creek back in Cleburne County over yonder. Way over there where there wasn't nobody hardly lived at'all.

But, of course, Grandpa, he stopped up here on the mountain and he let her go on with the rest of them. And the war broke out and got 'em all. All the boys, Jerry, Jed, John, Elish, Henry, Jim, and Joe. Seven boys and three girls.

The war broke out and they mustered them out. Back them days, they mustered them out. All of them made it back. Some of them was in the Northern army and same was in the Southern army.

*Which side was your grandfather on?*

He was on the Southern side. He wouldn't a been, though, if a doctor hadn't discharged him. He'd taken a deep seige of cold up there close to Springfield,

Missouri. They was all up there in Springfield, Missouri at that time and they was a goin to the Northern army.

During that time that doctor told him, "Why, Jerry," he said, "Listen." His name was Jerry Cooper. "Jerry," he said, "You'd be worth more at home than you would in this here man's army. You're liable to die anyway." He said, "You think you can make it from here back home to Arkansas?" He had 40 acres of land out here close to Joy.

*So instead of joining the Northern side he joined the Confederate?*

No, he didn't. He didn't join the Confederate side. He never joined neither one of them. He never did draw no pension. So he came home.

He was a blacksmith and a good one, too. He shod the soldier's horses, and things like that and made his own shoes out of iron. That was my grandfather on my mother's side. My grandfather and several of the boys played violins.

They's musicians, the Coopers was. They played old-time music - the BONAPARTE'S RETREAT, BILLY IN THE LOWGROUND, DOWNFALLS OF JERICO, NATZHEZ UNDER THE HILL and all that kind of stuff. They played them, you know, back during the war.

*Did they play jig style or smooth?*

Oh, they played good and smooth. They never chopped up their pieces. They had good banjo players back them days, too. Dee Ferguson was the first banjer player I knowed of. That was back when I was just a boy.

He picked a second and could pick GREEN CORN and OLD CACKLIN' HEN and make it sound good on the banjer. He could play a lot of pieces. My brother Joe played in the band, you know. Well, he was just a second when he was over there but he could pick things like that, too, on the banjer. He could pick a lot of pieces.

*Did he learn from Dee Ferguson?*

Well, there was Roy Castile, Oscar and John Evans, and old man Joe Carson. They all played banjer back up there. My brother never was taught music. It was just in him to play. It was a gift.

I picked the mandolin and guitar mostly, but could play a few pieces on the banjo, and fiddle, and piano or organ. I went to a music teacher one time. He was teaching this vocal music. I learned the notes and things like that. But I knowed music and so I knowed how to play music before I ever knowed a note.

My grandfather was a good violin player. I had twin brothers, William Arlie and Theodore Charlie. They was about four years younger than me. They both played the violin. And brother Joe picked the banjer.

And one of my other brothers or sisters would second on the organ or guitar. I had a sister; she could play anything, my youngest sister. The first time she ever sat down at a piano she played DIXIE.

*Well, you sort of had a family group then.*

Oh, yes.

*What did you call yourselves when you went to play somewhere?*

Oh, they'd just say that the McKinney family was going to play. We just played everything mostly that come along. We played lots of songs and sung 'em, too, during the playing. We played a lot of religious songs, too, and sung 'em. Some sang tenor, some sang bass, some soprano lead, you know.

That's the way it went off. I had one sister; she could play the piano or organ. And she had a good voice for singing, sister Lyde.

*How many brothers and sisters did you have altogether?*

There were 10 of us -- six boys and four girls. We was raised at Sweet Springs out here.

*So when you played as a family group, you played around this area?*

Yes, we played all around this valley country here. Around Mt. Pisgah, Freetonia, and all out around Honey Hill and everyplace back around here. We played around Joy and all up and down Georgia Ridge over there.

You know, it's about seven, eight miles across that Georgia Ridge; all the people that settled on that ridge come from Georgia. Now, a lot of people don't know that. A lot of people couldn't tell you that.

But I can. I remember all those things.

My father came from Kentucky over here. His name was Guy Wilburn McKinney.

*Did he play music, too?*

No, he didn't play no music, but he was a good singer. My mother would play the organ and held sing. We had an organ way back. That's how come the biggest portion of us children was good singers.

*Your father was born in Kentucky?*

Yeh, he was borned over there. He lived in a little place called Mary, Kentucky. When he come over here, they had a big concert of some kind at a schoolhouse one night. Out here at Center Hill, a little place just nine miles out from here. And he went. And they had him up and he won the blue ribbon of singing that night.

I don't know just what it was that he sang. Back in the fall of 1870, my father came here from Kentucky, and that's when he won that blue ribbon.

*What kind of songs did your daddy sing?*

Well, he'd sing religious songs most of the time. But some of them would be kind of foolish. Well, we heard him sing, you know. But we didn't sing songs like he did, though. I'll sing one like he used to sing. He'd sing some of them to tell us how it was then.

GYPSON DAVY

*Go fetch out that little black horse  
The speediest one of any,  
And I'll ride down to the maple swamp  
And see if I can overtake her.*

*Swaddle loliddy liddy liddy  
Straddle I liddy lidee  
Straddle addle liddy, pretty all day  
She's gone with the Gypson Davy.*

*So I rode down to the maple swamp  
It looked so deep and muddy,  
And I looked o'er on the other side  
And there I spied my lady.*

**CHORUS**

*So I looked o'er that sheathing ridge  
It looked so bric and gaily,  
Enough to make the wildwood ring  
And charm the heart of a lady.*

**CHORUS**

*And you forsake your house carpenter  
And you forsake your baby,  
And you forsale your own lords son  
And go with the Gypson Davy*

**CHORUS**

*Oh, last night I lay in my warm bed  
With my arms on my sweet baby,  
Tonight I lay in these wild woods  
In the arms of the Gypson Davy.*

Now he could sing songs like that.

I just wanted to sing that one especially for you'uns because I've heard him get up of the mornin' early and he'd go to the barn, you know, to feed his horses, and we lived on a farm then, you'd know. And when he got up, why, he'd commence singing. And he'd sing first one kind of a song, then two, you know. But most of them was religious songs, don't you

see. But held sometimes get off on some of those songs that he knowed.

I expect that thing's a hundred and fifty years old at the least calculation. If my Daddy was livin', he'd been 130 some-odd years and, you know, he learned that when he was a boy.

*Do you know where your grandfather was born?*

Yeh, he was borned over in North Caroliner.

*How about your great-grandfather?*

Well, he died over there in North Caroliner, my great-grandfather on my father's side. But my Daddy's father and mother died in Kentucky. I never did see them.

*From North Carolina to Kentucky to Arkansas.*

Yeh, my Daddy came here back in 1870 and married my mother.

*When you were a boy, what's the first kind of music you remember?*

Well, it was violin music and banjo music mostly.

*Did guitars come in down here later?*

Yeh, I never heared a guitar 'til I was done and grown. They had these little madolins -- tater bugs, they called them.

A 'lot of fellers picked them. And they had a little thing looked like a guitar and had four strings -- they called it a 'Joe'. Back them days that's all I ever saw when I was growing up.

*Did the old banplayers pick and rap?*

Yes, they did. See, they'd have an old 'stomp-down,' they'd call it. That's an old square dance. Come by and holler, 'Are you all comin' out to the stomp-down tonight at so-and-so's house?'

That's the way it was. They'd go for miles and miles around, don't you see. It was kind of amazing to watch 'em when I was just a boy, but after I got to be pretty good-sized young young fella, I learned to call sets and things like that and I learned to dance.

I used to square dance a whole lot and call back when I was a younger feller, and I ragged and waltzed. Me and my brothers used to play out here at what used to be called the old Simmons Hotel. It's a Catholic institute now. He ran it for a long time, old man Simmons did.

He had a big dance hall made back of the hotel, and mostly in the summertime, they'd play pool in there, and they'd move them tables plum up to the back and they danced all down that long building, you know. The floor was just as slick, just as slick as it could be, you know. They powdered it, don't you see.

They had seats over there on one side over there, there was little seats all along. And the girls sat down over there, don't you see, most of them. 'Course some boys, men, sat down over there too.

Another old boy would say, "Tip, you want me to take that guitar for awhile so you can dance?"

I said, "I would care to." My older brother didn't care too much about dancing and the other boy that played the violin didn't care too much about it either.

Well, this boy'd tell 'em what to play, and they'd cut down on it good, don't you see. And there'd be no tellin' how many would be out there on that floor dancin'. It was a big, long building.

*What sorts of music did you all play?*

Oh, we'd play schottishes, one-step, waltzes, two-step.

And we'd play square dance pieces. You call them pieces like the FIGURE-EIGHT and the GRAPEVINE TWIST; you call CHANGE THE BIRD -- "The bird fly out and the crow fly in, three hands up and gone again" ... and all them pieces. I don't know how many more I could call over. "Chase a rabbit, chase a squirrel, chase a pretty girl round the world."

They'd have concerts at these school houses the last day of school. They had country schools them days. They wasn't solidated like they are today. Altogether different.

I went to school in the country, winter and summer - through the snow. All the children done that. Me and another fella named Hopper used to sing together. They sent for us to come way down here at Elmyra to a big school closing, seven or eight miles below Stuttgart. They closed the school, you know. And they wanted somebody to be there to entertain the people.

*Did Mr. Hopper play an instrument or just sing with you?*

Yeh, he played a guitar and I played a mandolin. John Hopper's dead. He died up here in Wichita, Kansas. John was a good singer. Yeh, I sung with him lots. Me and him went lots of places and played and sung.

I used to pull off a lot of these 'talkin'-off pieces at these concerts in these schoolhouses. They said I had the whole country beat at that time. I had all kinds of old stuff that I pulled off.

I used to know a lot of those old comically songs and 'talkin'-off' pieces way back yonder when I was a boy growing up. They'd get me out on a stump somewhere and I'd have a whole big bunch out there and, boy, I'm talkin' about they'd just die laughin'.

They plenty enjoyed themselves, you know, because I'd really entertain 'em. Even the old folks would git out and listen at me. I was very gifted that way. 'Course every man ain't talented the same, no way. Everybody in the world got a different talent.

*Did there used to be a lot of fiddle contests down here?*

Yes, there used to be a good many fiddle contests down here. My twin brothers, William Arlie and Theodore Charlie -- well, they both could play the violin. Charles was the best.

He played at Honey Hill out here one night. My brother played what you call the DOWNFALLS OF JERICO. That's an old piece, you know. My cousin Johnny Horton was a good violin player, but I don't think he could play that piece. He could play NATCHEZ UNDER THE HILL and BONAPARTE'S RETREAT, you know, and the EIGHTH OF JANUARY and SOLDIER'S JOY, all those pieces, and OVER THE WAVES -- waltzes, too.

My brother won several contests but then he married and commences raising a family and just stopped playing.

*Who were some of the other violin players in the area?*

Well, the feller that played with us was a good violin player. He was a smooth violin player. John Chisolm. He's dead. I don't know if the son that played with us -- played the guitar -- is alive or not, That's Wallace Chisolm. I guess I'm about the only one left that's a-livin'.

Some of the fiddlers was 'jig fiddlers,' you know. They cut their music up a whole lots. I call them 'jig' fiddlers.

Then they got some that's good smooth violin players. That's the kind of man that plays the violin right, like it ought to be played -- any tune.

If a man's going to cut his music up, just jerk it .... The best violin players that we had in this, here country could make a violin. They made their own violins. Make as good a fiddle as you ever looked at. There was a Teller by the name of Jim Maniss. He could play LEATHER BRITCHES and put four parts to it.

*"Leather britches, leather britches,  
Buckled on behind.  
Wife kicked me out of bed,  
Cause I had my leather britches on..."*

That's the way the old tune went, you know. Well, he was the only violin play-, I ever heard that could put four parts to that tune.

Every one of them Manis's could play the violin -- the girls, too. Them girls could rear down on a violin and make it talk. Every one of them's dead now. There were about seven or eight children in that family.

*Did they ever used to have traveling medicine shows?*

Oh yes. They had medicine shows way back. Fellers sold all kinds of medicines and things and sold soap -- soapsellers -- and everything peddled, you know.

They'd have some kind of show. Maybe they'd have a feller up there that looked like a Negro and sometimes have a Negro. And they'd go to talkin' off some big rigamarole, you know.

They'd say, "Where was you at, Rastis, last night?"

He'd say, "I was over here at a farmhouse way back over there."

They'd say, "What was you doin' over there?" or something like that. I don't know if they did that everywhere, but sometimes you'd hear things like that you know.

There were different other kinds of things they'd say, too, gettin' up things like that.

Say, "Well, what was you doin' over there?"

"Well, sir," he said, "I was over there takin' them chickens off the roost."

"What was you doin' takin' them chickens off the roost?"

He said, "I 'us just takin' 'em off."

"Well," he said, "Don't you know some man'll come around out there with a gun and kill ye?"

"Well," he said, "I'll tell you right now," he said, "I got them hens off that roost and just left the feathers a-cacklin'!"

All that kind of stuff, you know this, that, and t'other. They'd have theses medicine shows and soap shows.

*Did they used to have minstrel shows? .*

Oh yes, they used to have them Negro minstrels, don't you see. Oh, yeh, seen lots of Negro minstrel shows. Mostly they played some kind of bugle, or horn, you know.

Sometimes you'd see 'em pick a banjer and they'd sing hat there old song SUWANEE RIVER and other old songs like, DOWN IN THE FIELDS OF COTTON, They sung lots of songs.

*Did gypsies travel through this area?*

Oh, yes. They'd say, "I'll give you this for so much meal and so much flour," and so forth and so on. And they'd have a tent in their wagons, and they would go to where some spring was and camp there and they'd have plenty to eat, don't you see. Peopled just give 'em stuff for these little toys and things.

*Did they ever play music, these gypsies?*

I never heared a gypsy play anything. I never did.

*Those minstrel shows, sometimes they'd be black people and sometimes white men in blackface?*

Yeh, sometimes they'd black some white feller, you know.

*Did you ever learn any music from black folks around here?*

No, I never did.

*They played a different kind of music ....?*

Well, you know, I never did associate with very many black people. In my days, I never did.

'Course, I pass and repass with 'em; I pass and repass with all these black fellers around here, and I ain't never had no trouble with none of 'em.

*How did you get your nickname?*

Well, when I was a little boy, we lived up in Kentucky township, in the west part of this county. We lived in the vicinity of Hart schoolhouse settlement over there.

There's an old preacher by the name of Wardell lived back over there not very far back from where we lived. Maybe a mile, but in the same 'cinity, you see. And had to pass our house a-goin' to old man Bill Duncan's store, down there.

Old man Bill Duncan run a store, just down there under a mountain there. The land was more flat around there where old Bill Duncan had this store. We lived up on a hill like, you know. And so he passed by the house out there. And my mother, she's afraid for me to be out in the hot sun in the summer time. The sun's a-beamin' down hot, you know.

Way back yonder when children'd get out and stay in the sun a long time ... They cut their hair off right close, you know. Sometimes they'd just clip their hair off, you know, just shear it all off, you know, down. Well, nothing left up there hardly but the hide.

Well, you know what, that's the way they done me.

She said, "Every one of my boys that's here at home -- I'm going to get 'em all a hat so they won't take the brain fever."

A lot of 'em had the brain fever back them days died. I knowed a lot of 'em myself. Died by the brain fever. Hot sun shining right down on their heads, don't you see. That's brain fever.

That's what the old doctors called it. They couldn't cure it. They'd put ice packs on their head and everything. Do this, and that and t'other. But they couldn't cure it. They'd just die,

*I wonder what a doctor would call that today?*

I wouldn't know what a doctor would call that if a man would have brain fever. they'd have a different kind of a thing to call it altogether. Oh, you see, the young doctors don't call it things like that today like they die back them days.

Now, used to be, the first time I ever knowed people havin somethin' the matter with their sides, a-hurtin' in their sides, you know... Well, first they called it "bilious colic" way back when I was just a boy.

Then a little later down from that day, why, they got to callin' it "collinthanin". Well, from that, they got to callin' it "pendeceetis." And then later down, younger doctors come on, they got to callin' it 'pendicitis don't you see.

Different names for it altogether, don't you see. Just like generations and generations. Same thing -- no difference'd be in it, what a man would have (the matter with him).

*You never did finish telling us how you got your nickname.*

Well, this old man, this old preacher, old Preacher Wardell; I won't never forget him.

Mother bought a hat, and she said, "Now you go out there, Lee, and don't you go out in that sun without having that hat on."

Well, I wouldn't do it, you see. Maybe I'd start out the door, and if she seed me... Well, she whooped me several times fer a-goin-' out without my hat on.

Well, I'd go out there close to the gate, you know; the gate run not far from the road that went down to Duncan's store. And old Wardell'd go down there and get snuff or 'bacca or something. You know, some of them preachers'd dip snuff, probly chewed tabacca, too, back them days.

Anyway, he went down there to get somethin', you know, so he'd come by .... He knowed about my two brothers, William Arlie and Theodore Charlie; maybe they wouldn't be out there. Maybe they'd be somewhere else playin' theirselves with the neighbor boy around there. Lotta times they would.

I'uz out there, and every time he'd come by led tip my hat at him. He'd say, "You got some brothers, and they'r twins," the old man'd say, "and I want to know where William Arlie and Theodore Charlie is."

If I knowed where they was, I'd tell him where they was, you know. And led tip my hat at him when he left. And he got to callin' me Tip,- and people called me Tip from then on out. Lotta people had nicknames back them days.