

Lone Prairie

Traditional

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2
4

5

9

1. 13

17

21

2. 25

Wade Ward (1872-1971) of Grayson County, Virginia is one of the great legends of clawhammer banjo, but he was also a very accomplished old-time fiddler. He recorded this very crooked tune on solo fiddle for Folkways Records in 1961. His fiddle is cross-tuned, pitched somewhere between G and A; for this tab I have assumed the key of A. So the fiddle is tuned AEae, and the banjo is tuned dDGAD, with the capo on the second fret. Throughout the tune, Ward plays neutral, or quarter tones when he hits the 3rd degree of the scale, which in A would be a note somewhere between the C and the C#. When he is at the low end of the melody, he also plays the quarter tone between the natural 7th and the major 7th

(the G and the G#), but when he reaches for the same note an octave higher, he is just about on top of the natural 7th, the G. These neutral tones are pretty commonly found in Appalachian fiddling. What is a bit more unusual is that Ward hits the D note sharp as well, when he is ascending to the 5th degree of the scale, the E. I have dealt with these neutral tones in this setting generally by employing the major 3rd and the major 7th; I believe that's how it is generally played by fiddlers today, but I slide into the note from the minor interval when possible. Up the neck I choke or bend the minor 3rd, when I can. Fiddler Matt Brown, who recorded it in 2006, plays it generally with major intervals, and it still sounds haunting.

Ward's strange tune is crooked, in that it has 11 measures, or 22 beats, rather than the usual 16 or 24, and there is only the one part, or melody strain, not the usual two or three of most fiddle tunes. I suspect it is based on an old song, but certainly not the old cowboy song, Carry Me Back to the Lone Prairie, that we all remember. But Ward's recording is squirelly beyond that. When he is coming down from the phrase with the high G, he holds that note between the C and C# as if it were an eighth note, instead of a 16th. This adds an extra quarter beat to the strain. Claire Milliner and Walt Koken resolve this problem in their transcription, found in their landmark book The Milliner-Koken Collection of Old Time Fiddle Tunes, by turning the three 16th notes that precede it into a triplet. I have borrowed that for my fiddle transcription here. But I don't hear that in the actual recording; Ward plays those three notes straight. If you try and tap your foot along with his recording, you will have to pause at that point, or you get out of sync. Matt Brown resolves the problem by making a subtle adjustment to the melody, taking out the extra quarter beat, and I have done so also with my banjo setting, though I altered it differently.

Note the ghost hammer in measure 24, marked with a GH. A ghost hammer is a hammer onto a string that has not first been picked by the right hand. Since it is not already agitated, you have to smack it pretty good with the left hand finger, to make sure that it sounds loud enough.