very quickly grown to include a performance group that is now playing all over the state.

*Note: Quotations in this essay are taken from interview transcripts with Sarah Bryan of the North Carolina Folklife Institute for the African American Music Heritage Project.

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Bascom Lamar Lunsford

Leslie Burrell Smith, Program Coordinator, Liston B. Ramsey Center for Regional Studies, Mars Hill College

**BASCOM LAMAR LUNSFORD,** folklorist and musician, was born on March 21, 1882, in Mars Hill, NC, in the high mountains of rural Madison County. His parents were descendants of the area’s first pioneer settlers. His father, James Bassett Lunsford, was a teacher at Mars Hill College when Bascom was born. Madison County, a mere twenty miles from Asheville, was a hot-bed of folk traditions in the late 1800s. Around 1900, Madison County is where the famous collector, Cecil Sharp, made numerous ballad and folk song discoveries. Lunsford was raised in this culturally rich environment.

Long before Lunsford reached adulthood, he began his quest to preserve the folk heritage of his native region. He began playing the banjo and fiddle as well as performing for audiences at an early age. When he reached working age, he chose occupations that allowed him to continue his music interest and scour the southern Appalachian mountains in search of folk songs. Purportedly, it was said that Lunsford would cross hell on a rotten rail to get to a folk song.

In 1928 the Chamber of Commerce for the City of Asheville decided to hold the first Rhododendron Festival. As part of the grand festival, the chamber decided to ask Lunsford to present the wide variety of music and folk dances. The *Asheville Citizen* dubbed Lunsford’s portion of the festival “The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival.” Lunsford invited only the finest musicians and dancers to perform, many of whom he had met during his travels in Appalachia. He informed his performers that the show would begin around sundown, and he instructed them to wear their best. Hence the nation’s first folk festival was born.

In 1930 the festival separated from the Rhododendron Festival and officially became its own event, The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival. This festival was in its sixth year before America even had its own folk festival. Sarah Gertrude Knott began the first National Folk Festival in 1934, which was modeled after Asheville’s Mountain Dance and Folk Festival.

Lunsford did not stop there at the success of The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival. Later, along with fellow friend and co-founder Ed Howard, Lunsford began the only festival he allowed to carry his name, “The Bascom Lamar Lunsford Minstrel of the Appalachians Festival.” This...
festival, which began in 1967, continues today and takes place annually the first Saturday in October on the campus of Mars Hill College.

Tommy (“Tommy”) Jefferson Jarrell

Amy Snyder, Curator, Mount Airy Museum of Regional History

TOMMY JARRELL was born March 1, 1901, in the Round Peak community of Surry County, about ten miles west of Mount Airy. He grew up in a family where making liquor and making music were long-held traditions. When he was eight years old, he learned to play a banjo from Baugus Cockerham, a fieldhand on the Jarrell farm. Playing the fiddle, however, was his greatest love. By the time Jarrell was eighteen, he had stored in his memory a repertoire of more than one hundred old-time songs learned by ear from his father, uncle, and other musicians in the Round Peak area.

The roots of Round Peak music, one of several distinct regional styles of a genre called “old-time” music, can be traced to the fiddle playing of the earliest English and Scotch-Irish settlers mixed with the ringing tones of the banjo, brought to the area by African American slaves. The guitar was introduced to this mix of instruments when mail-order catalogs from Sears and Montgomery Ward made them readily available. The music speaks of the daily life of these ordinary people. Songs telling stories of love, romance, work, play, good times and bad were often included with Primitive Baptist hymns and ballads.

In 1923, Jarrell married Nina Frances Lowe at the courthouse in Hillsville, Virginia. His memorable proposal, a story he loved to tell, came on a day when they were hoeing corn. He said, “Nina, we’ll get married if you want to. But I’ll tell you now, I make whiskey, I play poker, and I go to dances and make music and I don’t know whether I’ll ever quit or not, but if you think we can get along now, we’ll get married and if you don’t think we can, right now’s the time to say something.” “Well,” Nina said, “I believe we’d get along all right.” Their marriage lasted forty-four years until her death in 1967.

During his marriage, Jarrell did “settle down” and rarely played his music. About a year after his wife’s death, his interest in playing the fiddle and singing the songs he learned in his youth was renewed. During this time, the national folk music movement was underway, and young people were eager to learn about early American culture. From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, Jarrell’s unpretentious home without a telephone became a mecca for young folk artists and other aspiring musicians. People young and old would just show up at Jarrell’s back door or front porch and were invited to stay and “play” for as long as they wanted. They were eager to learn from the man they called “the Master of Round Peak Music.”

Fame came late in life for Jarrell. In 1982, The National Endowment for the Arts awarded him one of its first fifteen National Heritage Fellowship Awards and honored him at the Smithsonian Institution’s Folklife Festival. Through grants made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts and the North Carolina Arts Council, a thirty-minute documentary, “Sprout Wings and Fly,” was made featuring Jarrell and his music in 1983. Two years later, he died in his sleep. His $10 fiddle is in National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Every year Tommy Jarrell’s birthday is celebrated in Mount Airy with concerts, workshops, competitions, and exhibits. Thanks in large part to Tommy Jarrell, Round Peak style of “old-time” music is still alive and well in Surry County, North Carolina.