



Tommy Jarrell. Photo by Robert Merritt.

festival, which began in 1967, continues today and takes place annually the first Saturday in October on the campus of Mars Hill College.



Thomas (“Tommy”) Jefferson Jarrell

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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 field-hand 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.