

TOTW, Old Blue Bonnet, 1/31/25

Certain fiddle tunes settle in my old-time soul. Old Blue Bonnet is one of them. Recorded by Alan Lomax in 1937 and placed in the Library of Congress collections, "Uncle" George Custer Nicholson (1854 – 1941) fiddled some iconic tunes at that session: check out ten of them [here](#). The tune was called Blue Bonnet. When Bruce Greene and others shared it, it's called Old Blue Bonnet. Bruce really captures the old-time flavor in [this recording](#), which is the one I arranged from. Another recording by [Roy Bennett](#) doesn't give me the same reaction, but is one of a multitude of iconic old tunes found on the Slippery Hill site under [Old Time Fiddling from the State of Kentucky](#).

The [Traditional Tune Archive](#) gives some information about the original recording: "George C. Nicholson was recorded in 1937 for the Library of Congress by Alan Lomax. The recording session took place in Providence, Laurel County, Ky., but Nicholson lived in Portersburg (now just a historical post office), on Marydell Road (Ky. 1803) in Clay County, a few miles from the border with Laurel County. His son Delbert, who lived in Oregon was a fiddler, and another son, Lee, played the banjo. Lomax also recorded Nicholson's sister and neighbor, Sally Garrison, that day. Nicholson recorded nine tunes for Lomax that day: "Old Blue Bonnet (2)," "Bonyparte's Retreat," "Callahan," "Old Joe Clark," "Old Mister Moore," "Ole Christmas," "The Prettiest Girl in the County-o," "Sally Goodin," and "Sourwood Mountain." The above link for the tune has interesting advice about fiddling it: "Drone liberally on the top strings, which makes the tune." You can also find musical notation there. BHO member Cyndy also has information about George Nicholson in this [archived discussion](#).

The tune title caused me to ask about blue bonnets at a living museum pioneer event in Forbestown, California a few years ago. The next time I came to the annual event, the lady had made me a custom hat and only charged \$10, but I never wore it until last year. I finally donned it years later to please a friend when we met for a recent lunch that happened to be on Halloween -- see below for a photo of my bonnet and her spider web hat.



But the real story of the blue bonnet is much different. Read about the history and manufacturing technique of the Scotsman's blue bonnet [here](#) and confirm that you recognize this well-known men's cap. The article tells us that the blue bonnet was frowned upon because it was worn by men from the "wilder side of life", while black bonnets were worn by the more respectable, genteel man. This old drawing from the link for selvedge.com is dated 1822.



Image: Sir David Wilkie, *An incident during the visit of George IV to Edinburgh (detail)*, 1822, pencil and watercolour on paper.

After learning that the blue bonnet was worn in Scotland, I wondered if George Nicholson had a Scottish background. I haven't found his biography or genealogy (perhaps someone here can), but learned some interesting facts. One article shares the [meaning of the surname](#), related to being victorious. A [site for researching one's past](#) has this interesting list based on a 1921 census discovered when I attempted to research the surname "Nicholson" to verify its English/Scottish roots. Interestingly, most of the men were listed as being miners, a common occupation also in Kentucky, George Nicholson's home, though the census was taken in Europe.

Common jobs for Nicholsons

Men and women often performed different types of jobs, so these are displayed by gender to maintain their historical accuracy.

Common female occupations for Nicholsons in 1921

Dressmaker

1,010

Domestic Servant

513

General Servant Domestic

470

Living On Own Means

447

House Servant

431

Common male occupations for Nicholsons in 1921

Coal Miner

1,448

Farmer

673

Tailor

622

General Labourer

614

Joiner

607

This has been an informative bit of research for me, one of the reasons I still so much enjoy our weekly TOTW discussions. Here's a list of the recording links I found for Old Blue Bonnet.

[George C. Nicholson](#)

[Bruce Greene](#)

[Roy Bennett](#)

[Nora Brown and Stephanie Coleman \(second half of video\)](#)

[Bruce Molsky and Darol Anger \(different melody\)](#)

[Ben Kiser](#)