

Story of the Arkansas Traveler

The Arkansas Traveler is a legend that has produced a song, a monologue, and a picture. It is thought to have begun in the mid-1800s and is often credited to Arkansas politician Sanford "Sandy" Faulkner. Faulkner was born in Scott County, Kentucky, March 3, 1803, and died in Little Rock on Aug. 4, 1874. He told the story as if it had happened to him.

The Monologue

One of the stories about the Arkansas Traveler's origin says during the 1840 election campaign, Faulkner was traveling through the Boston Mountains of northwest Arkansas with A.H. Sevier, Governor Fulton, Chester Ashley and future Governor Archibald Yell. Another story says Faulkner was somewhere in Yell County while touring the state with Captain Albert Pike, who was a lawyer and poet, an amateur baseball player, and later a supreme court judge and Confederate general.

Whoever the group was, they stopped at a squatter's cabin to ask for directions and perhaps a place to spend the night. According to the story, Faulkner, who was the group's spokesman and an excellent fiddler, spoke to the squatter. The squatter was playing a tune on a fiddle, but couldn't remember the second part, or the "turn" of the tune. After some banter between Faulkner and the squatter, Faulkner offered to play the second part of the tune.

Legend says that after Faulkner returned to Little Rock from this trip, he was asked to tell this story during a dinner. The tale spread, and years later he told it again during a banquet in New Orleans. The legend says the governor of Louisiana handed him a violin and asked him to entertain the banquet with music and a recitation of the story.

George E. Dodge of Little Rock, who as a child posed for one of the children in *The Arkansas Traveler* sketches, said the story was fiction. In an 1896 article, he said either Faulkner or his friends made up the tale; his friends enjoyed the recitation and tune, and Faulkner was the story's central figure more as a joke than anything else.

Faulkner, though, continued telling the story. It gained fame outside Little Rock, and in the late 1850s was printed for distribution. American popular entertainment adopted the story, including burlesque variations.

The Painting

Arkansas artist Edward P. Washbourne (1831-1860) enjoyed the story so much that he painted a picture capturing the meeting between the Traveler and the squatter. It is this painting on which the famous lithograph is based.

The son of a Presbyterian missionary, Washbourne was then living with the Dodge family in Little Rock. George E. Dodge was one of the family's children, all of whom Washbourne made pose for his sketches.

Dodge, who appears as the boy in the ash-hopper, said later that he was constantly in Washbourne's studio and felt that he was helping the artist paint.

At the time of Washbourne's death in 1860, he was working on a companion piece to *The Arkansas Traveler*. This piece, titled *The Turn of the Tune*, shows the squatter family dancing as the Traveler plays the turn, or second part of the tune. Famous lithographers Currier and Ives made a small lithograph of both paintings.

Several versions of the Washburn painting exist. The Arkansas History Commission holds what is considered to be the "original." This may be an early sketch; it is a crude piece of work in poor condition. But there are some indications that the Commission acquired a deteriorating picture and had it "restored" by an artist who ended up repainting – rather poorly – much of the picture. The Little Rock Museum of Discovery also has an early version more closely resembling the well-known lithograph. This piece is believed to be a copy designed for the Arkansas display at the 1876 Philadelphia Exhibition. Some rumors place the "real" original in private hands in western Arkansas, but those rumors may refer to the History Commission's picture. Of the reproductions that have been issued, the most famous are the small Currier and Ives lithographs and the larger, more detailed Grozellier edition.

The Song

The song *Arkansas Traveler* is probably the work of several people rather than one, although various individuals claimed the tune. It was known in its current form by at least the mid-19th century. A song by this name appeared in New York around 1850; in 1864 it was reprinted in *The Arkansas Traveler's Songster*, crediting Mose Case as author and composer. Four years later, *Century Magazine* credited then-famous fiddler Jose Tasso with the music. In 1949 a version of "Arkansas Traveler" was adopted as the state song. The occasion was a copyright dispute with the heirs of Eva Ware Barnett, the composer of "Arkansas," which had been considered the state song since 1917. A State Song Commission wrote lyrics sung to the first half of the "Traveler" tune. In 1963, "Arkansas" again became the state's official song and the "Traveler" was named our state's official *historic* song. Since then, two other songs have been adopted as the official state song: "Oh, Arkansas" and, most recently, "Arkansas, You Run Deep In Me."

The Certificate

The Arkansas Traveler also inspired a certificate honoring special visitors to Arkansas, presented by the Governor. House Concurrent Resolution #19 in 1941 created the honor of the Arkansas Traveler Certificate. This resolution was preceded by HCR#5 of 1937, which thanked President Franklin Roosevelt for his visit to Arkansas the previous year. A copy of the award created by the 1941 act was forwarded to the president, commemorating his earlier visit.

Then-Secretary of State C.G. "Crip" Hall and Armitage Harper, owner of the Democrat Printing and Lithograph Company, are believed to have collaborated on a design and text for the award, which

Harper's company printed. This design, which incorporated part of the Arkansas Traveler image made famous by the popular lithographs, was revised (probably in the late 1970s) by Mr. George Fisher, the well-known artist and political cartoonist.

President Roosevelt, of course, was the first recipient, according to The Arkansas Traveler register maintained by the Capitol historian. Other awardees through the years have included Thomas J. Watson, one of the founders of IBM, R.J. Reynolds, the tobacco magnate of Winston-Salem North Carolina, Chet Lauck and Norris Goff, better known as radio comic figures Lum and Abner, Dick Powell, Gene Autry, June Allyson, Arthur Ashe, Maya Angelou, Billy Graham, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, Muhammad Ali, Ronald Reagan, Steve Forbes and Bob Hope.

While there is still debate about the story's origins, folklorist and scholar Vance Randolph says Faulkner should get credit for the words and music. He frequently told the story at banquets and barrooms – so frequently that he himself became popularly known as the Arkansas Traveler. At least in Washbourne's original painting of the Arkansas Traveler, the man on horseback appears to be Faulkner, Randolph says. And, he says, the play *Kit, The Arkansas Traveler*, written by Edward Spencer of Baltimore, was first performed in New York in 1869. Despite its murky origins, the story and spirit of the Arkansas Traveler has become ingrained in our state's folklore and is a vital part of our culture.



The Arkansas Traveler:

A Fiddle, A Cabin and A Hard Road

The basic plot of the tale known as “The Arkansas Traveler” is simple: a wayfarer stops at the cabin of a squatter, wanting to pass the night. He finds no welcome there; he is put off with evasions and denials, accompanied by the squatter’s playing, over and over, the first part of a well-known melody. At last, the traveler asks the squatter why he doesn’t play the second half of the tune. The squatter cannot because he doesn’t know it, but when the stranger plays it, the squatter and his family open their home and hearts and larder to him.

The origins of the tune known as “Arkansas Traveler” are debated, but the story is generally credited to Colonel Sandford C. (Sandy) Faulkner, an early Arkansas notable, politician and raconteur. His tale, first printed between 1858 and 1860, and reprinted with additions and edition over the decades, goes like this:

Scene: A lost and bewildered Arkansas Traveler approaches the cabin of a Squatter, about forty years ago, in search of lodgings, and the following dialogue ensues:

Traveler: Halloo, stranger.

Squatter: Hello yourself. (Playing a tune on a scratchy fiddle, over and over)

T: Can I get to stay all night with you?

S: No sir, you cant get to--

T: Have you any spirits here?

S: Lots of ‘em. Sal seen one last night by that ole holler gum tree, and it nearly skeered her to death.

T: You mistake my meaning. Have you any liquor?

S: Had some yesterday, but Ole Bose he got in and lapped it all out of the pot.
(continues to play)

T: You don't understand—I don't mean pot liquor¹. I'm wet and I'm cold and I want some whiskey. Have you got any?

S: Oh yes—I drunk the last this morning.

T: I'm hungary; haven't had a thing to eat all morning; can't you give me something to eat?

S: Hain't a durned thing in the house, not a mouffull² of meat nor a dust of meal here.

T: Well, can't you give my horse something?

S: Got nothin to feed him on. (continues to play)

T: Well, how far is it to the next house?

S: Stranger! I don't know—I've never bin thar.

T: Well then, do you know who lives here?

S: Yes, zir!

T: As I'm so bold then, what might your name be?

S: Wal, it might be Tom, or it might be Dick, but it lacks right smart of it.

T: Sir! will you tell me where this road goes to?

S: Its never gone anywhere since I've lived here; its always thar when I get up in the morning.

T: Well, how far is it to where it forks?

S: It don't fork at all; but it splits up like the devil. (keeps playing)

T: As I'm not likely to reach any other house tonight, can't you let me sleep in yours? I'll tie my horse up to a tree, and do without anything, no eat or drink.

S: My house leaks, there's only one dry spot in it, and me and Sal sleeps on it. And

¹ Pot liquor: the liquid left in a pot after cooking greens, such as collards, high in minerals and other nutrients including vitamin C.

² Mouffull: mouthfull

that thar tree is the ole woman's persimmon; you can't tie to it, 'cause she don't want 'em shook off. she 'lows to make beer out of 'em.

T: Why don't you finish roofing your house and stopping the leaks?

S: It's been rainin all day.

T: Well, why don't you do it in dry weather, then?

S: It don't leak then.

T: As there seems to be nothing alive about your place but that pack of children, how do you do here, anyhow?

S: Purty well, thank ye; and how do you do yourself?

T: I mean, what do you do for a living here?

S: Keep tavern and sell whiskey (continues to play the same tune)

T: Well, I told you I wanted some whiskey.

S: Stranger, I bought a barrel more'n a week ago. Me and Sal went shares on it. After ge got it here, we only had a bit betweenst us, an' Sal she didn't want to use her'n fust, nor me mine. I had a spiggin³ in my eend, and she in t'other. So she takes a little drink out o' my end, and pays me the bit for it, and then I takes a drink out of her'n, and pay her the bit for it. Well, we was getting long first-rate till Dick, durned skulking⁴ skunk, he born a hole on the bottom to suck at, and the next time I went to buy a drink, they won't none there.

T: Well, I'm sorry that your whiskey's gone; but, my friend, why don't you play the balance of that tune?

S: Its got no balance to it.

T: I mean, why don't you play the whole of it?

S: Stranger, can you play the fiddle?

T: Yes, a little, sometimes.

S: Ye don't look like a fiddler, but ef you think you can play any more into that thar tune, you kin just try it.

³ Spiggin: spigot or tap

⁴ Skulking: Sneaky or secretive

(The Traveler takes the fiddle and plays the whole tune)

S: Stranger! take a half-dozen chairs and set down. Sal, stir yourself around like a six-horse team in a mud hole—Go ‘round in the hollar where I kilt that buck this mornin’, cut off the best pieces and cook it for me an’ this gentleman, directly! Then raise up that board under the head of the bed and get the ole black jug I hid from Dick, and gin us some whiskey; I know there’s some left yit. Till, drive ole Bose out’n the bread tray, then climb up in the loft and git the rag what’s got sugar tied up in it. Dick, carry this gennelman’s hoss ‘round under the shed, and give him some fodder and corn, as much as he kin eat.

Till: Dad, they ain’t knives enough for to set the table.

S: Where’s big butch, little butch⁵, ole case⁶, cob-handle, granny’s knife and the one I handled yesterday? That’s nuff to sot any gentleman’s table, outer ye lost ‘em! Durn me, stranger, if you can’t stay as long as ye please and I’ll give you plenty to eat and to drink. Will you have coffee for supper?

T: Yes, sir.

S: I’ll be hanged if you do, we don’t have nothing that way here but Grub Hyson⁷, but I reckon its mighty good with sweetnin’. Play away, stranger, you kin sleep on the dry spot tonight!

T: Thanks, friend. Can you tell me about the road I’m to travel tomorrow?

S: Tomorrow! Stranger, you won’t get out of these diggins for six weeks. But when it gets so you can start, you see that big slough over thar? Well, you have to git crost that, then you take the road up the bank, and in about a mile you’ll come to a two-acre-and-a-half corn patch. The corn’s mityly in the weeds, but you needn’t mind that; jist ride on. About a mile and a half or two miles from thar, you’ll cum to the damdest swamp you ever struck in all your travels; its boggy enouff to mire a saddle-blanket. Thar’s a first-rate road, about six feet under that.

T: But how am I to get at it?

S: You can’t get at it nary time, till the weather stiffens down some. Well, about a mile beyant⁸, you come to a place whar there’s no roads. You kin take the right-hand ef

⁵ Butch: butcher knife

⁶ This is usually assumed to refer to a knife made by the Case company which did not, however, exist before 1889. It may be a corruption of “cased” or may represent a latter-day addition to Faulkner’s text.

⁷ A familiar name for sassafras tea. Hyson tea is a Chinese green tea, sassafras a locally-growing substitute.

⁸ Beyant: beyond

you want to: you'll foller it a mile or so, and you'll find its run out; you'll then have to come back and try the left; when you git about two miles on that, you may know you're wrong, fur they ain't any road thar. You'll then think you're mighty lucky ef you kin find the way back to my house, where you kin set and play on thara'r tune as long as you please.