

The Ballad of Fiddling Tom Freeman: Music, Moonshine, & Murder in Bug Tussle, Alabama

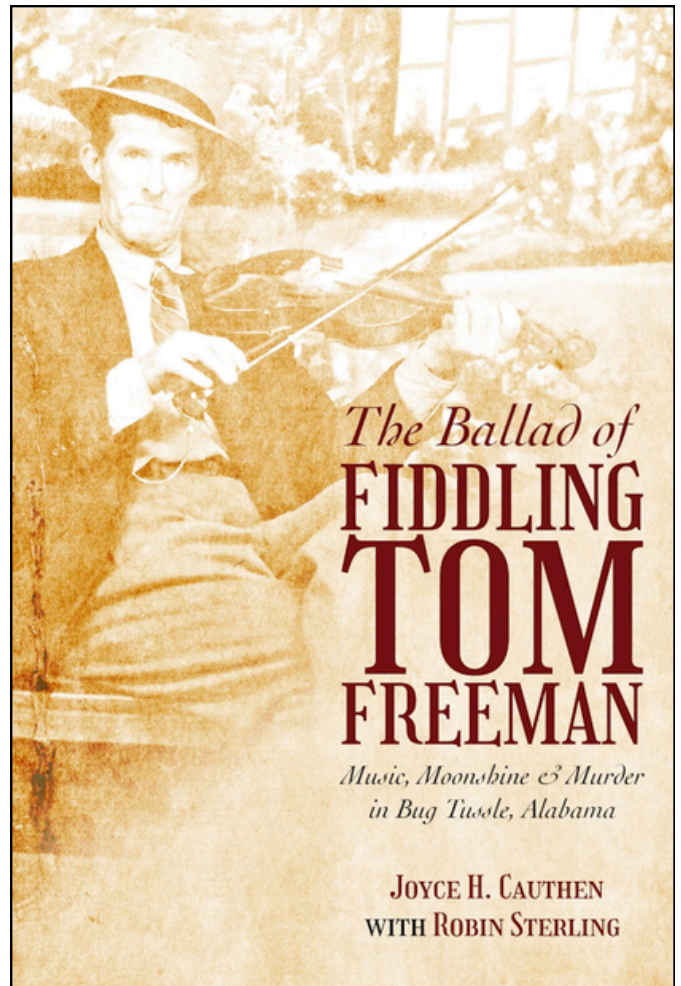
by Joyce H. Cauthen with Robin Sterling

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Reviewed by Edward Journey

“To my remembrance, up to date there’s been 13 killed & buried at Cold Springs & Antioch and in at least 9 out of 10, whiskey was the cause of the trouble,” writes “Fiddling Tom” Freeman (1883-1952) in his heretofore unpublished memoir about his eventful life in and around Bug Tussle, Alabama. Writing as a reformed “wildcatter” (bootlegger), Tom knows whereof he speaks in a rambling tale of vice and victory. Running through the narrative is his one true passion – playing the fiddle and entertaining any and everyone who is willing to listen. When he is sentenced to prison in 1927 for a crime he was framed for, Tom stops by to chat with Gov. Bibb Graves before turning himself in at Kilby Prison with fiddle in hand. Graves paroled him two years later. As Tom walked out of Kilby, a prison official calls him “the best fiddler that’s ever been in the prison.” After prison, Freeman went home to Bug Tussle, farmed fruit, fiddled constantly, hobnobbed with journalists and politicians, and engaged in shameless self-promotion.

Luckily for Fiddling Tom, and for us, folklorist and musician Joyce Cauthen, in her research about old-time fiddling in Alabama, ran across many articles about Fiddling Tom Freeman. In some, he touted the fact that he was in the process of writing a book about murders in the nebulous Cullman County community of Bug Tussle. Based on what she learned about Freeman, Cauthen was skeptical about the book’s existence; it had not been published when



Freeman died. When Cauthen met Tom’s granddaughter, Helen Freeman Sturgeon, she was pleasantly surprised to find that Helen possessed the handwritten manuscript. Starting in 1941, Tom wrote his book on 190 lined pages of two Nifty Pencil Tablets. Cauthen describes it as “one run-on sentence covering the events of an entire lifetime.” Cauthen began to research and tame the manuscript into publication shape, scouring and fact-checking in collaboration with Robin Sterling, who specializes in historical research pertaining to North Alabama.

The result of Cauthen’s diligence and exhaustive work is *The Ballad of Fiddling Tom Freeman: Music, Moonshine & Murder in Bug Tussle, Alabama*. To use musical jargon, Cauthen and Freeman “trade licks and fills” as Cauthen supplements Freeman’s daunting text with pertinent historical background and explicates passages.

The result is an anecdotal, accessible, and thoroughly entertaining book. Cauthen assures the reader that “every word written by Tom appears in this book, with the exception of topics covered more than once and narratives that are impossible to verify.” Tom himself boasted that “there ain’t 12 lies in the book.”

“Bug Tussle” is the nickname for the community of Wilburn in Cullman County. Over time, the nickname was used colloquially and by local papers to refer to Wilburn and surrounding areas of the Cullman County farm communities of Antioch, Bremen, Cold Springs, McKinley Chapel, and Sandlin Chapel. Cauthen suggests that Bug Tussle “was not a town as much as it was a state of mind.”

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Tom Freeman’s manuscript includes details about his family during the Civil War, giving a sense of the independent Bug Tussle state of mind. Tom’s father, John, “laid out” during the war, feeling no compulsion to fight in defense of slavery. North Alabama counties had resoundingly elected anti-secessionist candidates as representatives to the 1861 Secession Convention in Montgomery. At a “neutrality meeting” in Winston County, anti-secessionists passed a resolution imploring both the Confederacy and the Union to “leave us alone, unmolested.” Some chose to fight with the Confederacy after being rounded up by Confederate loyalists. Others managed to hide in the hills and caves. Others enlisted with the First Alabama Cavalry, USA – Alabama’s only officially recognized predominantly white Federal regiment. John Freeman joined the First Alabama but deserted after a couple of months to “lay out” to protect his family in Antioch from “harassment, terrorism, and starvation starvation caused by the Home Guard” of

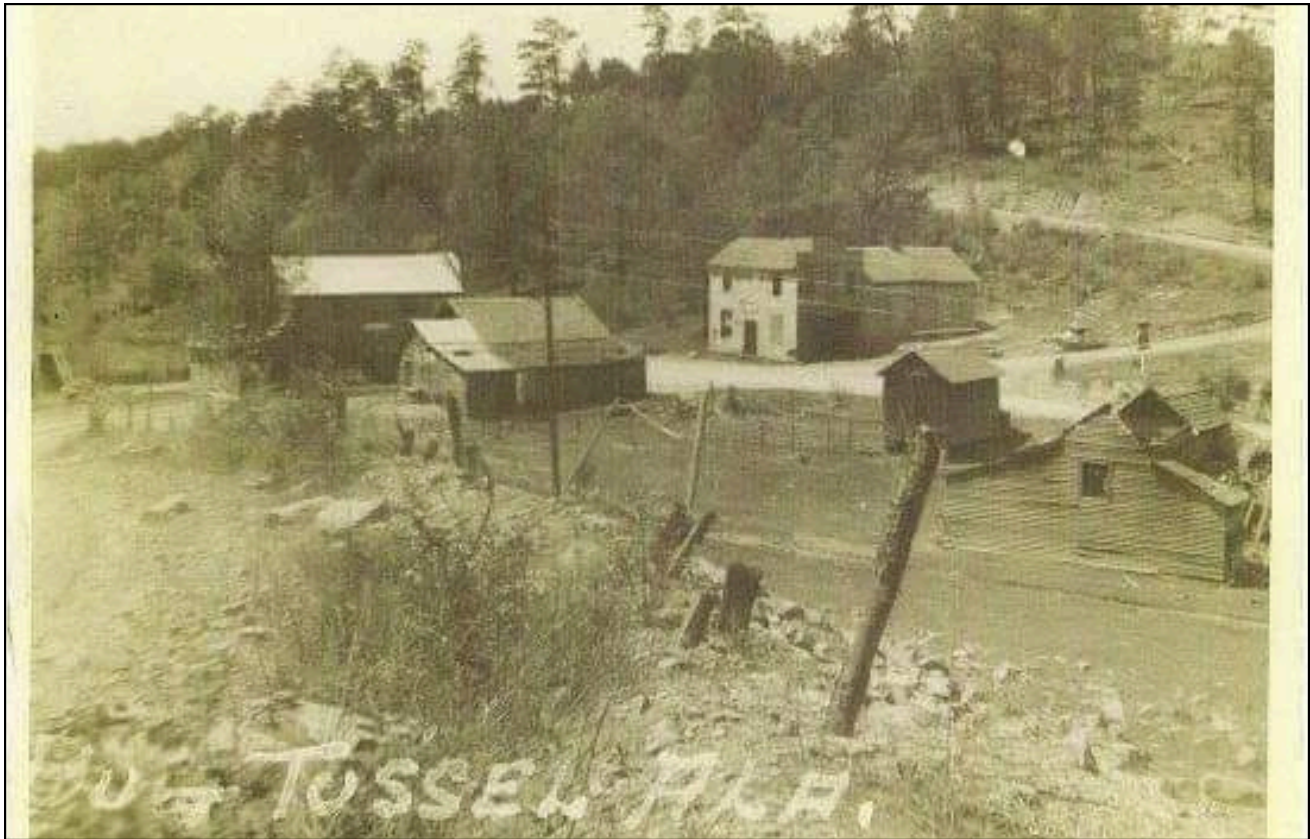
Confederate vigilantes.

Tom, the youngest son of John and Frances Freeman, was born in 1883 or 1884 and took an early interest in the fiddle. At age nine, Tom made his own fiddle out of a gourd and thread, made a bow out of a hickory stick and hair from a horse’s tail, and commenced teaching himself to play. Over time, young Tom acquired store-bought fiddles and became a life-long mainstay at fiddlers’ conventions, dances, community events, and private gatherings. Fiddlers’ convention guidelines restricted entrants to “authentic old-time fiddlers.” In 1907, a fiddlers’ convention organizer warned against classically trained entrants, saying “if any violinist attempts to

break into the convention, he will be fired out the window. His discordant so-called music will not be tolerated.”

Tom married Ida Williams in 1903 and the first of their seven children was born in 1904. In 1905, the young family moved to McKinley Chapel where Tom farmed, fiddled, and began his twenty years of “adventures in wildcat whiskey.” Ida served as an occasional accomplice in her husband’s wildcatting exploits. In one memorable story, a revenuer comes to the house looking for bootlegging evidence. When he gets to the flooded basement, Ida pushes him in but then must save him from drowning. That revenuer never returned.

While Tom calls moonshining “one of the miserablest lives a man ever went through” and repeatedly warns about the dangers of drinking and making whiskey, he also relishes the opportunity to recount his run-ins and evasions with the law during his twenty-year occupation in whiskey making.



Bug Tussle, in Cullman County, circa 1915

On one occasion, detectives from Montgomery show up at Tom's house with an arrest warrant; he treats them well, gets them drunk. No warrant is served and Tom gives them a quart of whiskey as they prepare to leave, "They went out rejoicing & invited me down sometime to see them. I don't think I ever met as nice men as they were." Cauthen explains how, for rural families, moonshining sometimes became a necessity to keep the family going on a limited farming income. The community knew who the moonshiners were but kept that knowledge to themselves since the bootleggers were often friends or family or attended the same church. The book includes a generous description of the whiskey making process.

Fiddling is Tom's main claim to fame, but much of his book is dedicated to his memories about crimes and criminals. In 1944, the *Birmingham News* reported that Fiddling Tom Freeman was writing a

book to be called *Bug Tussle Murder Crimes*. Indeed, Tom's manuscript includes murderers, and their victims, that he knew. Cauthen's research examines the murders Freeman references. In one particularly cruel murder, the victim was shot through his parlor window while "sitting around the fire reading the Bible" with his invalid wife, her sister, and a young Black charge (named "Oliver," "Grover," or "Arthur," depending on which newspaper one read). The most intriguing thing about the newspaper reports is the lack of objectivity by the reporters who refer to that alleged killer as a "whiskey crazed fiend," "this animal, more like beast than human," and simply "a pervert." The eighteen-year-old murderer, who was clearly guilty, is sentenced to death by hanging. Cauthen speculates that penalty might have been more lenient if the victim had been reading the *Old Farmer's Almanac* instead of the Bible.

For readers who want to dive deeper into Fiddling Tom Freeman and actually hear his fiddle music, Southern Music Research Center (southernmusicresearch.org), in association with Joyce Cauthen, has archives of Freeman's manuscripts and music available online. Southern Music Research Center founder, music historian Burgin Mathews, is the author of *Magic City: How the Birmingham Jazz Tradition Shaped the Sound of America* (2023), the definitive text about Birmingham's pivotal role in jazz history.



Fiddling Tom himself was sentenced and served “time at Kilby Prison from 1927 to 1929 on moonshine-related charges, despite a solid alibi. Tom was incarcerated at Kilby soon after the state began to use the garish yellow electric chair, called “Yellow Mama.” Tom was a “trustee” at Kilby on the day he was incarcerated, a status which afforded him special privileges. He got to know the staff and became friends with the wives of guards “who treated me like “a mother.” He was acquainted with the prison’s murderers and death row prisoners, including Earl Shaffer who, while incarcerated at Kilby Prison on a murder charge, proceeded to kill three more men. Despite Shaffer’s volatility, Tom notes that “I never met a man that treated me any better.” Tom is a firm believer in forgiving outlaws – once. He is less forgiving of repeat offenders. But when a friend got in trouble with the law, Tom was likely to assure them that he would “fiddle them out.”

Although Tom was raised a Republican, like many in the Southern Appalachian foothills of North Alabama after the Civil War, he was a great admirer of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Democrat, and helped “fiddle him into office” during all four of FDR’s presidential elections. He befriended and

fiddled for other Democrats running for state or national office and never took money for his political campaigning. He boasted that his chosen candidates always won and said that he was open to play for any candidate “except a Republican.” He took pride in his collection of letters from the politicians he had helped fiddle into office, including Roosevelt, Harry Truman, U.S. Sen. John Hollis Bankhead, and sundry local and state officials.

The Ballad of Fiddling Tom Freeman defies easy categories, with discussions of a town’s musical and social heritage, its unique character, and the factors that contributed to a culture in which shocking violence coexisted with shape-note singing. Cauthen identifies three factors that contributed to Bug Tussle becoming notorious for murder: prohibition laws, poverty, and terrain. She and Tom make a compelling case for each factor. Since Tom’s day, energy interests dammed the Sipsey River, and the area near Bug Tussle is dominated by the recreational presence of Lewis Smith Lake. *The Ballad of Fiddling Tom Freeman* captures the culture and pride of a remote and self-sufficient rural lifestyle that is disappearing, rapidly becoming the stuff for history books and, in Tom Freeman’s case, engrossing memoir.

Edward Journey, a retired university professor and theatre professional living in Birmingham, regularly shares his essays in the online journal “Professional Southerner” (professionalsoutherner.com). He was pleased to find that his great-grandparents, John Houston McCarn and Dura Evelyn Graves McCarn, are a part of Fiddling Tom’s story; he is quick to point out that they appear in the context of music – not moonshine and murder.