

Lum Martin (1847-1956) Old Time Fiddler

By Jerry Long

Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 21 February 1936, p.2:

Old Fiddlers Contest Held At Theatre In Drakesboro

Drakesboro, Ky , Feb. 21. – The Drakesboro P. T. A. and the management of the Moody theatre sponsored a very successful Old Fiddlers' contest, Monday night, February 17. Those participating in the contest were: Merl Travis, Drakesboro; Columbus (Lum) Martin, Rosewood, colored; Raymond Rich, and Ellis Riley, Bremen; Charles Everley, Central City. First prize of \$5 went to Lum Martin, and second prize to Merl Travis, whose band also took honors in the first division by defeating Riley's band, of Bremen; the Muhlenberg county band and Rosewood string band. Entries on the guitar included Ike and Leonard Everley and Carl Taylor, Central City, and Merl Travis, of Drakesboro. James Henry Newman, Drakesboro, won the prize for best on banjo. Despite the severe weather a capacity crowd attended.

[Note: Merle Travis (1917-1983), member of the Country Music Hall of Fame; and Ike Everly (1908-1975) father of the Don & Phil Everly, who are members of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and the Country Music Hall of Fame.]



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 12 November 1936, p.11:

Drakesboro Schools News

Drakesboro, Ky., Nov. 11. – A crowd of about 500 persons attended the program given by the Georgia Wildcats, with Clayton McMichens, Deford Baley and Honey Wiles, of the Honey and Lassies entertainers. A crowd of almost equal size attended the old fiddlers contest. Merl Travis won first on fiddling and guitar. Lum Martin, colored, took first with his string band and second in fiddling. William Crabtree, local school board member, acted as master of ceremonies.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 23 March 1952, p.4A:

Muhlenberg Man, Born A Slave, Will Be 105 Years Old Tuesday

By Rodney Ford



Uncle Lum Martin sits on his doorstep

GREENVILLE, Ky., March 22 – "A hundred and five years is a long time to live all right, but I've enjoyed every minute of it," says Christopher Columbus Martin, Greenville, who will observe his 105th birthday Tuesday.

Uncle Lum, as he is known by all who know or ever heard of him, was born in Muhlenberg County in 1847. Born and reared in slavery, his last name originally was Reynolds, but when a daughter of the Reynolds family was married, Uncle Lum was given to her and he took, her family name of Martin.

Uncle Lum was given his release from the Martins in 1867. Since then he has spent much of his time living with families in and around Greenville as a farm worker and general handyman.

But possibly the most interesting years of Uncle Lum's life were those during which he was a musician and showman. In his younger days he toured the South playing a violin with many prominent shows. Among those with which he traveled were the Nelson and Spears Show, the John Robinson Shows, Sell Brothers Show, and the original Barnum and Bailey.

And around home in Muhlenberg County, Uncle Lum used to be a "must" for all the parties and shindigs. More tunes have been sawed from his fiddle at pea hullings, ice cream suppers and other frolics than he could ever remember.

For those who might be skeptical of his age, there are several men around town who are now called "old" and who will tell you Uncle Lum was playing at parties long before they were old enough to attend them.

But the old fiddler has put aside his instruments now and leaves the music making to the younger folks.

"I can't, play anymore," Uncle Lum sighs. "My fingers just won't chord the instrument like they used to."

Another exceptional quality about the old fellow is that he has never developed any "bad" habits. He's never smoked, gambled, partaken of intoxicants, or used any other thing harmful to his well-being. As evidence of that. Uncle Lum still has all his teeth but two, has never worn glasses, can hear well, and gets around pretty well with the use of his cane.

Uncle Lum has been a bachelor all his life. However, some 70 years ago he did court a young woman of whom he was very fond. But he says the Almighty saw fit to carry her away – leaving him in great loneliness for many years.

"Somehow, I just never found another girl who meant so much to me," he says with a far-away look in his faded eyes.

It goes without saying that anyone who lived in War Between the States days would be asked questions about his activities during those times. But Uncle Lum regards that era with a rather matter-of-fact attitude, and he will tell you he went through it without mishap. He was nervous at times, but who wouldn't be who worked the fields within hearing distance of booming cannon?

"To tell you the truth, I didn't know enough of what was going on to be real scared," Uncle Lum laughs.

A talk with such an ancient personality wouldn't be complete without asking him what his secrets for living are and what his philosophies of life happen to be. But his formula for long life is simple, and he has no secrets in connection therewith. On the long-life question. Lum will thoughtfully stroke his chin whiskers and tell you it's all up to the will of the good Lord. By the way, he has worn a beard for the last 50 years.

"I don't have any idea how much longer I'll be here," he frankly states, "and when I get too far along to take care of myself I hope the Master calls me away."

The aged fiddler, a staunchly religious man, has never had one day of formal education. He learned to read with the use of the Bible and with some tutoring by his second owner.

Uncle Lum believes that the world nowadays is full of evil. And he goes on to say that some form of evil has crept into just about everything on the globe. He says that the greatest evil is the loss of neighborliness.

But even though neighborliness is lapsing here on earth. Uncle Lum says he feels a closer bondage between him and his Lord. He believes, like the poet Robert Browning, that as a man grows older he becomes closer spiritually to God.

Right now, Christopher Columbus Martin is living with his first cousin a little way from Greenville. He lives in a little shanty in the back yard – but it's home. He still manages to get to town now and then on Saturdays and other busy days.

"I'm gettin' up in years all right," grins the 105-year-old Lum, "but I sho like to get in town once in a while to talk to all the folks."



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 2 August 1953, p.14D:

Muhlenberg County's "Uncle Lum" Martin Active At 106

By Wallace Ward

CENTRAL CITY, Ky., Aug. 1 – Every county of Kentucky has its "grand old man" and looks on him with a great deal of respect and reverence. In Muhlenberg County he is an old former slave, "Uncle Lum" Martin, who is 106 years old and lives near Greenville.

The gates of the sixth annual Muhlenberg County Fair opened on Wednesday morning and the first man to hand the gatekeepers 50 cents for admission was Uncle Lum. He is an ardent supporter of the fair and is always one of the first there and one of the last to leave. But this year he got the No.1 ticket of which he was very proud.

When asked why he came so early, he replied, "I wanted to see all of it this year and the main thing is that I don't want to miss seeing Merle Travis. You see, I am the man that taught Merle the fundamentals of the guitar and also the violin. Why, that boy is so good that he soon got to be better than me and I had to tell him and his constant company companion in those days, Mose Rager, also of the Ebenezer section near Drakesboro, that they would have to go on their own that I could not teach them any more."

When questioned as to whether he would appear with his favorite student at a local theater, he replied: "I sure will be there and I will help him sing too, but you see, my voice is not what it was a few years ago and I don't know whether I will be much help to him or not. I sure am proud of Merle and proud that the lad thinks enough of me to ask me to be on the stage with him." ("Uncle Lum" refers to Merle as a "lad," but he is 35 years old.)

When this presentation of the lifetime pass to the fairgrounds and the special reserved seat was presented to Uncle Lum by Coursey, tears could be seen welling in the corners of his old eyes. But he still sees well and does not wear glasses and his hearing is apparently perfect.

Griff Head made a tape recording of a resume of the life of Uncle Lum as he mused back through the numerous years and it is very interesting to hear him tell about being a slave and about the pride; that he had in his students of folk music.

"Uncle Lum" was born in slavery on March 28, 1847. He was the property of Joe Reynolds of 1 near Rosewood, nine miles east of Greenville, and remained his property until 1861 at which time the daughter of Reynolds married a man by the name of Martin and, he and his sister were wedding gifts from Reynolds to the daughter and her new husband. He came to his freedom while the property of Mrs. Martin and that is where he got the name of Martin.

So, Uncle Lum only had two masters and both of them were so good to him that when he speaks of them now you can detect the light of a deep love in his eyes and in the tremor of his old voice.

As long as "Uncle Lum" lives he will be the guest of honor at the annual Muhlenberg County Fair and will sit in his choice permanently reserved seat with the "white folks."

He says, "This fair is improving all the time and is getting better each year and I sure do love the horses."



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 20 February 1955, p.8A:



CLAIMS TO BE 108 – Uncle Lum Martin, Greenville, born in slavery, tucks his fiddle under his chin to start making music for the opening of radio station WMTA in Central City Saturday. Frank Phillips, business manager of the station, standing with Uncle Lum, acted as master of ceremonies for the opening.



Believed to be Kentucky's oldest resident, Christopher C. Martin, of Greenville, was 107 years old last March. Picture from the Greenville Leader newspaper, 1954



Greenville, KY Newspaper, 1956:

109-Year-Old Negro Ex-Slave Dies

By Mrs.. Eugene Elliott

Greenville – Christopher Columbus (Uncle Lum) Martin, 109-year-old Negro, died after a two month illness at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Ezra Drake Friday afternoon, July 13.

Uncle Lum has lived most of his lifetime among the descendants and kinsmen of those who owned him during the period of Negro slavery in America. He often stated that he loved those with whom he lived because as far back as he could remember those who owned him and those with whom he chose to live after freedom were so very good to him.

He bore the honor and distinction of being the oldest man in Kentucky at the time of his death, and vied for the same honor in the nation.

He was born near Greenville in 1847 on the Martin farm.

In the category of a fiddler he had no peer. He had no knowledge of the technique of music but he was a “natural.” His endowment of music carried with it something deeply spiritual, melodious, rhythmic, harmonious, and skillful which caused his audiences over the years to stand in awe, whether in a picnic grove, on the stage, or around the home.

He was honored, loved and respected for his unusual “gift” of music, and became locally renowned for his talent as a fiddler.

In every crowd young and old stood almost breathless as he related incidents and occurrences of by gone days; rich in folklore and history.

After the infirmities of age began to prey upon him physically, he came to live among his friends and relatives of his race. Among them, he bore the same honor, respect and love; as his people were endeared to him for his very kind, congenial, and jovial disposition; as well as the fine life he lived and a Christian, coupled with his gift for music.

He was owned by Joe Reynolds, a farmer and land owner. In 1861 at the age of 14 he was sold to Charles and Nancy Reynolds Martin and at that time took the name of Martin. He belonged to the Martins until freed Aug, 8, 1865, but he chose to stay on with them and work for wages for a while.

After a few years, show business got into his blood and he got a job with the C. M. Nelson & Spears road show, playing the violin for \$25 a month and expenses. He stayed with the show about two years playing small towns throughout Kentucky.

From there he went to the John Robinson Shows playing through the South and West, the Sells Bros. Circus, then joined Barnum & Bailey Shows playing through the United States. Uncle Lum loved to tell the story of a trip by water to Pueblo, Col., when they had to cross a river by ferry – all but the elephants. The elephants had to swim but they would only swim when they took the notion. He played for side shows, then advanced to playing for the acts. When he quit Barnum & Bailey, he went back to the farm.

Uncle Lum was a__ with the guitar and bass violin. He taught Merle Travis to play a good violin. He used to visit Merle at his home in Beech Creek.

He was never married but was one engaged once when about 30. His girl friend passed away with “fever” in Greenville.

Uncle Lum had a full set of teeth and never wore glasses. He had been blind in his right eye for about nine years. He never drank in his life and only drank coffee in cold weather. He smoked a pipe occasionally.

He was a registered Republican but was “more for principle than party” and had no embarrassment about his votes. He said he voted for “app” Chandler and was proud of it. Uncle Lum remembered being very much impressed with Abe Lincoln. He was working at a sawmill when Governor Goebels was assassinated.

He never attended school in his life. He led a religious life and was a member of the Missionary Baptist Church.

He often said he didn’t get to dance because he was so busy fiddling. Uncle Lum won every old fiddler’s contest that he every entered and he had entered dozens. He has played all night many nights for dancers. His advice to young musicians was “it’s a great life, but show business is rough.”

Funeral services were held at Wesley Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church, Sunday, July 15 at 2:30 p.m. The Rev. H. J. Batsin, pastor of New Mt. Zion Baptist Church of Depoy, delivered the eulogy, assisted by the Rev. J. H. Dunlap, pastor, Wesley Chapel, A.M.E. Zion Church.

Surviving him are: Mrs. Margaret Dulin, Miss Odie Martin, nieces, Elmer Martin, nephew, Greenville; several great, and great0great nieces and nephews.

Casket bearers were: Henry Singletarrt, Ernest Coleman, Frank Hightowere, Shelby Saulsberry. Archie Reno, and Barnes Bibbs.

Interment was in the West End Cemetery.



Joseph Chatten Reynolds (1793-1868) in the Muhlenberg County, KY 1860 census slave schedule is listed as being the owner of 25 slaves. His daughter, Nancy Young Reynolds (1820-1902) married Charles Campbell Martin (1811-1892) on 2 February 1839 in Muhlenberg County, KY.

Christopher Columbus Martin, ‘Lum’, died 13 July 1956 near Greenville in Muhlenberg County, KY. His death certificate recorded that he was born in Muhlenberg County in 1847, was never married, and he was buried in the West End Cemetery in Greenville.

Margaret Dulin (1894-1967), Odie Martin (1884-) and Elmer Martin (1886-1966) listed as surviving nieces and nephew in Lum Martin’s obituary were children of Robert Martin & Lucinda Jones, who were married in Muhlenberg County, KY on 27 December 1877. His marriage record and the 1870 & 1880 censuses of Muhlenberg County suggests that Robert Martin was born about 1855 in KY. In the 1870 census Robert and Bell Martin (black, age 6, born KY) were listed in the household of Thomas Martin (white, age 30). They were enumerated only four households from the residence Charles C. & Nancy Y. (Reynolds) Martin, the former owners of Uncle Lum Martin.

