

## **Jarrell, Benjamin Franklin** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Jarrell, Benjamin Franklin**

by Cecelia Conway, 1988; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, July 2023

**14 May 1880–9 Dec. 1946**

**See also:** [Thomas Jefferson Jarrell](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, son.

Benjamin Franklin Jarrell, musician, was raised in [Surry County](#) <sup>[3]</sup> on the southern slope of the Blue Ridge, the son of [Rufus A.](#) <sup>[4]</sup> and Susan Turney Jarrell. According to his father, the Scot-Irish family had settled in present [Rockingham County](#) <sup>[5]</sup> in the eighteenth century. Rufus, the son of the colorful horsetrader Fountain Jarrell and his wife Fannie, was born in Surry County in 1848. He fought in the [Civil War](#) <sup>[6]</sup> and became a good tale teller, recounting stories of being hit by minié balls and of being close enough to have heard the shot that killed President Abraham Lincoln. After the war, Rufus became a farmer and was licensed by the government to make apple brandy; he was an expert with traditional recipes and practices. His sons acquired whiskey-making skills and worked with him until [Prohibition](#) <sup>[7]</sup> outlawed their time-honored and quality-controlled family occupation. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jarrell home was a social center for the self-sufficient community at Round Peak; it was well known for good stories and music.

Ben and his older brother Charlie apparently acquired their musical talent from their mother's side of the family. When she married Rufus in 1873, she was the widow Susan Turney and had two children, Dave and Mary, who were musical influences on the Jarrell children and grandchildren. Susan, a midwife, died in about 1906, after going out to deliver a baby in an ice storm.

When they were boys, Ben and his brother learned to play both banjo and fiddle from neighbors. Charlie brought an early version of "John Henry" into the area from [Alleghany County](#) <sup>[8]</sup>. Ben learned "The Drunken Hiccups" from a Civil War veteran, "Old Man Houston" Galyean. They frequently played for community dances and sometimes performed at the one-room schoolhouse, especially for the school breaking at the end of the year. They would walk at the head of a line of marching children with their father or another Civil War veteran. These men were innovative musicians; Ben and neighbors Tony and Charlie Lowe even changed and elaborated on some of the tunes. Some popular urban songs made their way into the mountain region by way of recordings or visiting singers. As early as 1910, Ben owned one of the first cylinder phonographs in Round Peak.

Ben Jarrell was one of the finest southern musicians documented for his time. In 1927, he traveled to Richmond, Ind., with patent medicine seller [Da Costa Woltz](#) <sup>[9]</sup> and banjo player Frank Jenkins to record for Gennett records. The eighteen performances completed at the session preserved significant and vital music from the time and region. Ben's incisive vocal and driving fiddle propelled the band and characterized the traditional style of the area. Even the band's recording of the song "Merry Girl" was cast into a traditional framework reflecting local taste.

Jarrell married Susan Letisha Amburn and had eleven children, many of whom became good musicians in their own right. Because Ben did not care for farming, he also played music, traveled to the Northwest, and ran a store in Round Peak until his father died about 1921. Then he moved the family to Mount Airy, where he opened another store and built a new house. Jarrell became a prominent retired farmer and merchant. In 1940, when he ran for Democratic representative of Surry County, his younger children campaigned for him in the schools as a family band. A member of the Round Peak [Masonic](#) <sup>[10]</sup> Lodge, Ben was buried at Ivy Green Baptist Church beside his wife.

#### **References:**

Cecelia Conway, Fieldtapes and interviews with Ben's son, Tommy Jarrell, 1974–85.

Tommy Jarrell, 33 1/3 rpm phonodiscs and notes, 1972 (County Records, P.O. Box 191, Floyd, Va. 24091). County Records: County 524, Richard Nevins, ed., *Da Costa Woltz's Southern Broadcasters, 1927* featuring Ben Jarrell and Frank Jenkins.

#### **Additional Resources:**

Malone, Bill C.. *Music from the true vine: Mike Seeger's life and musical journey*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/music-from-the-true-vine-mike-seegers-life-musical-journey/oclc/711043334> <sup>[11]</sup> (accessed June 2, 2014).

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Russell, Tony. *Country music originals: the legends & the los*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/country-music-originals-the-legends-the-lost/oclc/85822512> <sup>[13]</sup> (accessed June 2, 2014).

#### **Subjects:**

[Biographies](#) <sup>[14]</sup>

[Folklore and Legends](#) <sup>[15]</sup>

[Music](#) <sup>[16]</sup>

[Musicians](#) <sup>[17]</sup>

#### **Authors:**

[Conway, Cecelia](#) <sup>[18]</sup>

#### **Origin - location:**

Surry County <sup>[19]</sup>

**From:**

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1 January 1988 | Conway, Cecelia

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