

# LOST HISTORY

## Effort underway to preserve memory of John Martin Lusk

BY **MARGARET HOBBS**  
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(McMinnville, Tennessee)

When John Martin Lusk was born in 1886 in the Campaign area known as Turkey Scratch, it was never imagined he would become a virtuosic fiddle player. No one could possibly predict the grandson of a slave would have an impact on old-time music.

His story starts with his grandfather Jeff Lusk, who was sent to New Orleans by his owner to learn to play the fiddle. Upon his return, he taught his son Lewis, grandson John, and most likely his future son-in-law, Will Gribble to play.

John and fellow band members Murphy Gribble and Albert York were well known in the area, having been said to be the best square dance band in the Midstate. They were also street performers, playing about 30 years on the corner by First National Bank from 1920-1950.

Much of the history of Lusk, Gribble and York has been lost, but is being revived by Massachusetts resident Linda Henry. The retired nurse and fiddle player decided to research the group as she pursues her master's degree from the University of Massachusetts. Her research is titled "Some Real American Music: John Lusk, Murphy Gribble and Albert York."

"My focus is on Lusk because his family still lives here, and he was the fiddle player that drove the band," said Henry.

Grandchildren Charlie Lusk, Frances McKinley, Sylvia Lusk and Harold Lusk, along with other family members met with Henry to gather facts and learn about their ancestors.

"We are so thankful for her research because so much has been left out," said McKinley. "It's just wonderful to get this information about our family, because it was just not talked about."

Granddaughter Sylvia has her grandfather's fiddle in her possession, and is preserving it for future generations.

"It is very sentimental to us, and I just want to take care of it," said Sylvia.

John Lusk was married two times, had seven children and numerous grandchildren. He was a tenant farmer and lived in a 16 x 24-foot sharecropper shack. He later held employment with Walker Lumber Company. He loved music and sharing it with all who would listen.

"I remember going to hear him play," said grandson Harold. "I was young, but I remember them being very good. This is definitely an honor to remember him in this manner."

Henry recently visited the Warren County Genealogy Association meeting, sharing her early research information with the group.

She related to an argument by Tennessee poet and writer Emma Bell Miles having an argument with Czechoslovakian composer Antonin Dvorak.

In 1893, Dvorak was the director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, and in an interview with the *New York Herald* he advocated for the admission of black Americans to the Conservatory, because he believed "that the future of music of this country must be founded upon what called the negro melodies." Miles later followed with her rebuttal representing the belief that all mountain music is white.

"My project is not about Miles, but because of her being from Chattanooga, I researched black fiddlers who lived here around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century," said Henry. "I ran into multiple roadblocks, but remembered John Lusk was from Campaign. I've played his music, and decided to drive up to Magness Library."

Lusk fiddled with his son Duncan in the late 1950s before his death in 1969. Lusk, Gribble and York are all buried at Martin Charge Cemetery.

The Library of Congress has a collection of their music, and recordings of "Altamont," and "Deep River of Song Black Appalachia" can be ordered from Amazon. Video renditions can also be viewed on You Tube. The name given to them by the Library of Congress was Gribble, Lusk and York.

WC Genealogy president Cheryl Mingle said, "I'm so glad she is doing this research, because this is part of Warren County history that has been lost. With her hard work and dedication we can include it in our history, where it belongs."

Henry shared some of the group's music with the group, and closed with this thought.

"I feel like his music has been erased in history and from this town." Said Henry. "It's gone, and not many people even know about it. He spent his whole life making music, and was very talented, worked hard and was a good man."



Margaret Hobbs photo

**Researcher Linda Henry verifies information about John Martin Lusk from some of his family members. The Massachusetts resident is archiving facts about the historical black musician who was born in Warren County in 1886. Family members are, from left, Frances McKinley, Sylvia Lusk, Kurt Lusk, Katrina Lusk, Louise Lusk and Harold Lusk. Seated beside Henry is Charlie Lusk.**



Photo provided

**John Martin Lusk is shown in this 1968 photo, one year before his death, with granddaughters Frances, and grandson Robert Jr. There are no video recordings of Lusk's fiddle playing, and very few photographs.**




Photo provided

**This 1900s fiddle belonged to John Lusk, and is now treasured by family members.**




Margaret Hobbs photo

**Graduate student Linda Henry, at left, and genealogist Cheryl Mingle gather research information on John Martin Lusk for Henry's master's degree from the University of Massachusetts.**



## Kaimen Collins

You are missed more than you can imagine. It has been 4 horrible birthdays without you here on earth. We know you are in a better place but we sure do miss you! Happy 22nd Birthday, Son! We sure do love you beyond anyone's imagination!!



**Love,  
Mom, Steve,  
and Kaitom**

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## AUTISM AWARENESS 5K Roundup

RACING TO INFINITY AND BEYOND TO RAISE AWARENESS



**Saturday, April 21<sup>st</sup> @ 8:00 a.m.**  
**Downtown McMinnville**  
**Register online @**  
**[www.signmeup.com/124073](http://www.signmeup.com/124073)**

Paper forms available at USA Gym, Chamber of Commerce, Civic Center & WC Trustee's office.

Early Registration thru April 7th: Teams of 10 or more \$20 each; Individuals \$25  
Registration April 8-20<sup>th</sup>: \$30; Race Day Registration \$35  
Extra T-shirts available youth small- adult XL \$15; 2x-3x \$17

For more info contact: Darlene Bryant 808-0621, Kristy Cook 273-1441, Tanarra Grissom 273-3932, Anne Vance 607-9576, Kirby Williams 607-2769.

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