Breaking Up Christmas Resources

 4th Grade

<http://www.classbrain.com/artholiday/publish/printer_christmas_mountain_music.shtml>

<http://archive.mandolinsessions.com/dec08/Austen.html>

<http://www.banjohangout.org/archive/126168> discussion forum

The fiddle tune "Breaking Up Christmas" is one of my favorites. I just love to play this tune with a fiddle player. But most folks probably have no idea what the title of the tune is referring to.

At the urging of a Hangout member, I thought I might give you some background on a popular tradition in the mountains of southwest Virginia and northwest North Carolina.

To get a better understanding, I would also urge you to buy a CD from County Records called the "Breaking Up Christmas Story, a Blue Ridge Mountain Holiday." This excellent CD is a radio documentary produced in 1996 by Paul Brown, a reporter from National Public Radio but also a great old-time music fiddle and banjo player himself. Lots of good old-time music on this CD.

Some speculate the tradition of Breaking Up Christmas started in the mountains during the 1920s, while others believe it goes back to at least the mid-19th century.

William Norman of Surry County, NC wrote about it in his
memoir, A Portion of My Life, published in 1864. However, in Brown's report, the mother of North Carolina mountain musician Johnny
Vipperman claimed that "Breakin' Up Christmas" existed in local slave
communities, when slaves were given a lighter workload during the
holiday period.

The interruption of their routine continued as long as the backlog (a
large log at the back of a fireplace) burned; to keep the backlog
burning as long as possible, slaves would first soak it in water and mud.

Other stories tie the duration of the celebration to the 10-day
period between Christmas Day and Epiphany, or Old Christmas, on January 6. This theory holds that the gathering is a centuries-old tradition, dating back to the time when a calendar adjustment was made inserting leap year into our system of measurement, and causing the old dates suddenly to be adjusted by several weeks.

Many mountain people mistrusted the new system of date-keeping, and insisted on celebrating Christmas when they thought it should be observed-- thus about twelve days later than the rest of the world’s reckoning. Sounds like some mountain folk that I have met. LOL.

However the tradition began, the "Breakin' Up Christmas" gatherings were for many years typified by house parties filled with music, dance, food and drink. Furniture was moved out of the houses to make way for players and dancers, and the party sometimes moved from house to house for a week or two after Christmas.

Here's what the late Paul Sutphin, a guitar player, told an elementary school class back in 2001:

"They'd cook this big meal, and they'd take the beds down out of two rooms, and the music would get in the door. And everybody'd just go and eat when they'd want to and when they'd get done they'd dance, all the neighbors, they'd dance. And so the next day, they'd go to another neighbor's house and they'd do that."

Wow, now that's some partying. Pass me that bottle of corn, Grover.

While the "Breakin' Up Christmas" tradition waned during and after the days of World War II, it has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity during the 1970s and continues today in dance halls, civic buildings and homes throughout southwest Virginia and northwest North Carolina.

And now you know the rest of the story. (Or at least some of it.)

\*\*\*Breaking Up Christmas is in fact a continuation of the old Twelveth Night tradition which goes back further than the late 16th century when Shakespeare used it as the framework of a play.

<http://www.cybergrass.com/node/703>

<http://horinca.blogspot.com/2007/01/breaking-up-christmas.html>

<http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-a-2001-12-25-8-breaking-67542857/387327.html>

<http://www.unc.edu/learnnc/cmc/schools/cedarridge/activities.html> for teachers

<http://bigbluemag.com/magazine/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=26>

<http://archive.dulcimersessions.com/dec07/Hornbostel2.pdf>