

Luther Gorman “Pug” Allen

A Heritage of Mountain Music



Pug Allen playing a tune on one of his fiddles, 1985

mountain standards such as Soldier’s Joy, Barbara Allen, Redwing, and Turkey in the Straw. These types of infectious foot-stomping, hand clapping tunes were what barn dances were famous for. It was the poor man’s main source of entertainment after long hours of cutting timber and working the garden and fields. It’s where kids climbed up the ladder into the hayloft and watched as Mama traded her flour-dusted apron for a whirl around the dance floor on Papa’s arm. It transformed an ordinary barn into an evening of magic under the spell of the music and the soft glow of oil lamps hanging from the rafters. Shy, giggling young girls waited patiently against the walls while their male counterparts mustered up the courage to ask for a dance.

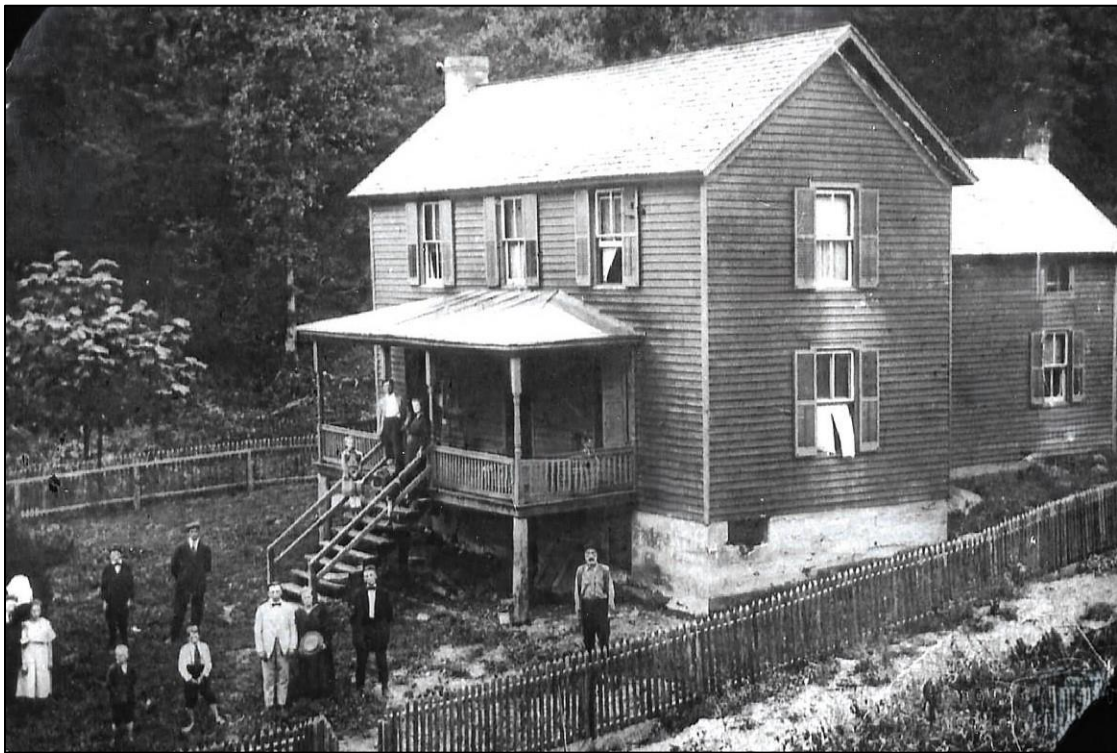
Older folks who played for these dances are slowly passing away and with them, their special music. Although he passed away in 1986, we were fortunate to have living in our area a consummate musician by the name of Luther Gorman Allen or “Pug” to all who knew him. During his lifetime, he carried on the rich tradition of music by his Scots/Irish descendants who made their homes in the Blue Ridge Mountains well over a hundred years ago.

Born February 1, 1901, on the north prong of the Tye River near Durham’s Run, Pug was one of eleven children born to Andrew Johnson Allen and Lucy Jane “Jenny” Hamilton Allen who grew up in a music-oriented family. Back then, most all of the mountain folk could play some type of instrument and making music was a way of life. He was ten or twelve years of age when he first picked up a guitar and started learning to play it. He more or less taught himself, watching the older folks play and then imitated their particular style. By mimicking the way they played, without realizing it, the music became ingrained in him. After he had mastered the guitar, he went on to the banjo and mandolin. About the mandolin, Pug said, “I sat up all night and never got nothin’ out of it.” He then tried the dobro which was nothing more than an old flat top guitar which he played with the back of an old Case knife he carried in his pocket.

It’s called old-time mountain music and to some it may sound a little ragged around the edges but for the ones who were raised around it, it’s literally music to their ears. Once a thriving sound in the hills of the Blue Ridge, genuine old-time music seems to be fading like so many of the traditional customs of our area.

Musical instruments such as the banjo, fiddle, mandolin and a few guitars, this type of music differs from Country-western and bluegrass in that there is not as much singing as there is playing.

It is a repetitious playing of old



Andy Allen homeplace near Durham's Run on the North Fork where Pug was born



**Andrew Jackson Allen
Hattie Agnus Allen**

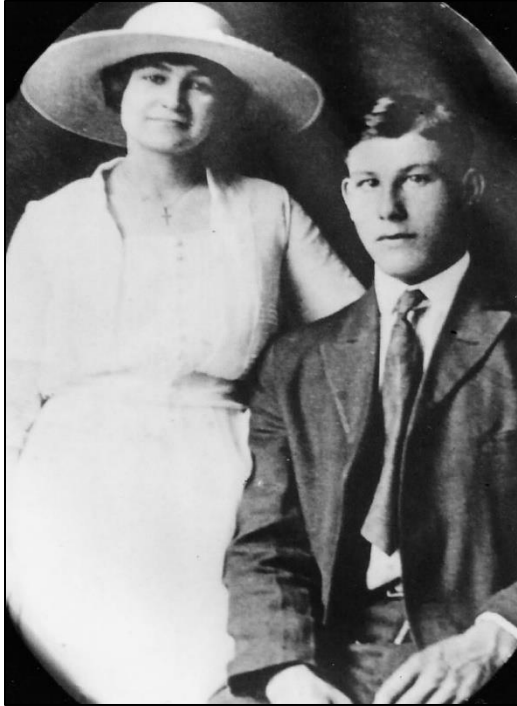
Andy and sister Hattie, 1929



Allen family with seven of their children. Pug on bottom left

In 1920, Pug married Mattie Hatter from Montebello and went to work in timber, cutting extract wood (dead, standing chestnut). He bought and sold large tracts of real estate and always made a job for himself so he wouldn't have to work for anybody else. The couple moved to Bedford for two years and returned to a farm in Greenville. Lastly, they moved to their home in Stuarts Draft.

Pug continued to play music and became very well known in music circles as one of the best. In 1948, he and several other family members were regulars on radio station WREL in Lexington,



Pug and Mattie on their wedding day

Virginia. The group was billed as “The Skyline Boys” and had an hour-long slot every Saturday afternoon sponsored by the Fitzgerald Lumber Company of Buena Vista. They also played at other broadcasting stations in the Harrisonburg and Lynchburg as well.

When Pug was around forty years old, he decided he needed a change from the banjo and decided to take up the fiddle. Pug’s brother Eugene “Hoot” Allen was already an established fiddle player and it didn’t take long for Pug to follow suite and fiddle duets became common in the Allen household. Johnny Coffey, one of my first neighbors in the Love community, told me one of the most beautiful fiddle music he ever heard was played by Hoot’s two sisters, Bess and Estelle, who played in harmony.

At the time of the original Backroads interview with Pug in 1985, he said he had been buying, selling and trading fiddles for around forty years and had quite a collection. He sold fiddles to every major musician in the country who was serious about learning the old style of playing. He had in his collection names such as Maggini, Joseph Canary, Paganini, and several Stradivarius copies. Pug always handled them with the tenderest care and played them reverently. The oldest fiddle in his collection is dated 1634 and bears the name Maggini. I found it hard to believe something that old could still be in good condition but Pug said, “The older the fiddle, the better the sound.”



Early pic of the Skyline Boys: l/r Neil Mace, Pug, Glenn, Hoot and George Allen

In 1979, Pug was invited to perform at the Festival of Traditional American Dance and Music in Massachusetts. The nationally known festival was sponsored by the Country Dance and Song Society of America and was held at the Pine Wood Camp. There, along with numerous other musicians who played the old-style music, Pug taught young people how to keep the flavor of traditional mountain music alive for future generations. He played for up to five and six dances a day so people could learn the art of clogging, flat footing and many other types of dancing that is still popular in our area. It was the highlight of a musically enriched life for Pug, whose music is preserved in the National Archives in Washington, D. C.



L/R: Agnes and Irene Allen, Eddie Dodd, George and Pug Allen, circa 1939

In addition to music, another big area of Pug's life has been the rugged sport of bear hunting. He has been out in the woods since the first hunting season that his daddy plunked him down at thirteen years of age, on a tree stand with a single-barrel shotgun. He recalls the very first bear he killed when he was twenty-five. "I killed it over on Spry Creek with a Winchester rifle. I threw it over my old horse and brought it out of the woods. It weighed in at two-hundred pounds." He also remembers the biggest bear that was ever taken to his knowledge. "There were about five or six men in the hunt and I had five dogs set out on the bear. Snow was about knee-deep and after a while we had to tie up the horses and walk. We tracked the bear over to the big de Priest Mountain in Nelson County and the paw prints were so big that a man's hat would not cover them. A man by the name of Herman Maddox finally killed the bear and we estimated it weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of seven-hundred pounds. The hide alone weighed in at fifty pounds. There was

six inches of fat over his whole body and his stomach nearly drug the ground when he walked.” A smile of memory creased Pug’s face as he picked up a banjo and started playing a lively rendition of Red Wing.

Luther Gorman “Pug” Allen died at his home on Sunday, June 8, 1986, at 85 years of age and was buried in the Calvary United Methodist Church Cemetery in Stuarts Draft. With his passing, one of the musical greats from our area, as well as his old-time music will always be missed.



Pug playing an old-time tune on one of his beloved fiddles