



BBC interview

Narrator and musician Mark Wilson interviews historian Bob Jarnagin O'Rourke and producer/sound man Karl Walker recording the interchange. and Scots Irish Festival promoter Mark Murray, with cameraman Mick (Staff photo – Steve Marion)

BBC film crew visits

Television crew includes Dandridge festival in Scots-Irish documentary

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Even the largest media organization in the world is fascinated by the influence Ulster Scot émigrés had on the history of America.

This was substantiated Monday when a television film crew from BBC of Northern Ireland (BBC NI) converged on Dandridge to interview county historian Bob Jarnagin, along with Mark Murray, promoter of the upcoming Main Street Music Celebration, the Scots Irish Festival.

Four enthusiastic Irish documentarists – director/producer Bob O'Brien, sound supervisor and producer Karl Walker, cameraman Mick O'Rourke, and narrator Mark Wilson – have been in the U.S. retracing the historical Great Philadelphia Wagon Road, as closely as possible, on a journey that “follows in the footsteps of our ancestors,” explained Wilson.

The Philadelphia Wagon Road was a natural course in eastern America made smooth by herds of buffalo, used by Native Americans as a trading path, and later a route taken by early Scots Irish immigrants on their way to settle wilderness areas in the south. It was known as the greatest interior migration in this nation's history.

Wilson, an award-winning musician (drums and percussion) was specially chosen to present this documentary because it focuses primarily on Appalachian music and the traditions of the Celtic people who represent the single most dynamic ethnic influence on that music.

Scots Irish settlers brought the fiddle to Appalachia. The instrument was widely popular in Celtic countries because it was easily carried and suited for playing dance music. The fiddle

became particularly treasured in Scotland when bagpipes were outlawed after the Scottish defeat at the battle of Culloden in 1746. The fiddle was not only good for playing jigs and reels, but could also reproduce the poignant resonance of old-time ballads.

Wilson, who recalled growing up listening to fiddle music played by both his grandparents, said he was happy to be participating in this exploratory program, which he called a musical heritage journey, because as a musician, he hopes to rediscover some of the cultural arts and traditions people in his country believed had vanished.

“The Scots Irish from Ulster got lost,” he said in a delightfully lyrical brogue.

Much of Ulster's vibrant ethos was indeed lost when thousands of Scots Irish Presbyterians fled religious and political persecution in their homeland to immigrate to the new world and enrich the American community with their colorful culture, customs and character.

The filmmaking Irishmen should be quite proud of what they are finding. Scots Irish settlers tamed the wilderness, they advanced literacy and education, they made indelible contributions to the cultural arts, providing us with artisans and famous politicians – including congressmen, military officers and at least seventeen presidents. Our own much-loved country and bluegrass music will always have a Celtic flavor mixed into its sound.

Folks in Jefferson County celebrate that proud heritage each year in Dandridge at the Scots Irish Festival. The fourth annual Scots Irish Festival, lively with Celtic music and dancing, will take place September 25 on the shores of Loch Douglas. These festivities honor

the earliest settlers who founded the western outpost of Dandridge, the second oldest town in Tennessee, circa 1783.

Many of those early settlers were Revolutionary War soldiers of Scots-Irish background who migrated to the region to claim war land grants. The rivers and roads that brought them to the area would also provide farm-to-market roads for the corn, wheat, and cattle these industrious pioneers produced. Scots Irish settlers also started the first church in Dandridge, which was and is Hopewell Presbyterian, and for part of the festivities, Hopewell will present a Kirking ceremony commemorating the Scottish clans and their tartans.

As it turns out, the four BBC documentarists were traveling in North Carolina, searching for the origins of Celtic music in this country, and when they interviewed a group called the Thistledown Tinkers, who have performed for the past three years at Dandridge's Scots Irish Festival. Members of that group referred the reporters to Dandridge.

Thanks to that bit of serendipity, this area will be featured in the BBC's television production. The program is to be called ‘Santer,’ an Irish (perhaps Gaelic) word meaning ‘A lot of Blather.’ It was the brainchild of Walker, who, along with his fellow Irishmen, is determined to revive interest in the Scots Irish culture and music that seems to have lost its magic at home in Ulster.

The reporters gathered lots of information on local history and on the Scots Irish Festival, which proves every year that there's plenty of interest in Celtic music, dance and culture right here in East Tennessee.