

The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina

"Uncle" China Poplin - banjo
Edna Poplin Elmore - guitar
David Jackson - guitar
Bill Poplin - mandolin

When Henry Washington Poplin arrived in Sumter, South Carolina in 1870 after having walked all the way from Anson County, North Carolina, he brought with him a wealth of songs and musical knowledge of the banjo and fiddle. His wife, Josephine, whom he met in Sumter, played the organ, and the two of them passed their gifts on to their eight children, including China and Edna, all of whom played music.

China picked up the banjo at the age of eight and has been playing now for fifty years, despite an accident in 1942 in which he lost the middle finger of his left hand at the first joint. As a result he has to chord with the first, third and fourth fingers. China took his style which he calls "old time country style banjo playing" from his father's playing. It is a two-finger style which stands out from most other two-finger banjo styles both in solidity and complexity.

The banjo China plays is an Epiphone which he bought second hand in 1942. This model, he recalls, sold for \$300 new at that time. It was originally gold plated, but the plating was inadvertently taken off by someone trying to clean it, leaving the brass underneath exposed. There is a gold dragon carved into the headstock, and the resonator is covered with ornate carving both on the back and sides, as is part of the neck. The tailpiece has tuners for each of the five strings similar to those often used on fiddles for fine adjustments in tuning.

Edna began playing the guitar when she was thirteen years old by secretly practicing with the guitar of her older brother, Felder, while he was away at work, as she was not allowed to touch it when he



The Poplins, playing for their own enjoyment.

was around. She went on to learn piano, banjo, mandolin, and autoharp as well, but she sticks to the guitar as her main instrument. Edna plays a Gibson of recent vintage, both flat pick style and a finger style of her own invention.

David, a friend of the Poplins, had a father who played the fiddle, but never thought about playing music himself until Felder Poplin sold him a guitar for 75¢ and showed him some chords on it. David played it for a year and then sold it back to Felder for \$1. David presently plays a new Gibson flat pick style, both lead and backup.

Bill, who is China's son, has played on and off with China, Edna, and David, ever since he took up the mandolin at the age of sixteen. He plays a Bell Tone mandolin, which has, in place of the usual f-hole or oval hole in the center common to most mandolins, numerous small round openings around the perimeter of the built-on resonator.



Left to right: Edna, China, David, and Bill



China's old Epiphone banjo

The music the Poplins play has grown quite directly out of what they learned from their parents. Though they were certainly influenced by the musicians they heard later, they never attempted to imitate other performers. Indeed, other musicians were rare around Sumter at the time the Poplins were learning to play. The only other group they knew was forty miles away in Columbia--Dyron Parker and the Hired Hands, which included Snuffy Jenkins, Grady Lindler, Pappy Sherrill, and Ira Demery. They heard such artists as Jimmy Rodgers, the Carter Family, and Gid Tanner and Riley Puckett on the radio, but never had a phonograph until they were grown, which discouraged the close imitation made possible by records. Thus left on their own, the Poplins achieved a style which preserved the traditional flavor which they had learned from their parents, but which was not quite like that of other string bands.

As the years went by and new kinds of music were heard on the radio, the Poplins reacted in a most unusual way. Instead of either changing their style to accommodate the new songs, as many musicians were doing throughout the country, or simply clinging to the music they had already mastered, the Poplins took the new material and adapted it to fit their style. When they played at local shows and square dances, requests for the newer songs kept the Poplins playing and singing tunes in addition to the older numbers. The end result is that today the Poplins' repertoire includes not only the traditional songs like, "Cindy Gal," "Old Sueben," and "The River of Jordan," but also songs popular in the 1920's such as "The Preacher and the Bear" and Sophie Tucker's "You Gotta See Your Mama Every Night" as well as such recent compositions as "Sit At Home," "Steel Guitar Rag," and "Just Because."

The Poplins have not been content with simply adapting existing material for their own use--they have also written words and music of their own. "Sit At Home," one of the Poplins' most modern, yet most strikingly beautiful pieces, is Edna's own composition. China wrote the banjo tune "Sumter Rag," and Edna made up two verses of both "Eyes Like Cherries" and "I Don't Want to Get Married" and three verses of "Hammer Ring."



China doesn't really feel comfortable in anything but his overalls. About them he says, "If I could wear 'em to church, I'd never miss a Sunday."

ABOUT THIS ALBUM:

In January 1962 while serving out the final month of a two year term of service with the U.S. Army at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, I was fortunate enough to meet China, Edna and David, who were to appear on a Columbia television station. I invited me to visit them in Sumter, which I was to do the following March. At that time I recorded a portion of the material which appears on this album using a Viking 76 tape deck and an Electrovo No. 623 microphone. As this was strictly a first get together with no thought of commercial record Bill Poplin played mandolin on certain selection and I played it on others. In September 1962 I returned to Sumter, at which time the rest of the songs on this album were recorded.

--Jack Tottle
Hanover, New Hampshire



Edna and China with two other lovers of old time music.

SIDE I

GOIN' BACK TO SUMMER

China says this song used to be "Goin' Back to 'Someplace Else'" but that he has always sung it "Goin' Back to Sumter."

China Poplin - Banjo and lead voice
 Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and tenor voice
 David Jackson - Guitar
 Jack Tottle - Mandolin

What you gwine to do, Love, when I am gone,
 When I am gone, when I am gone;
 What you gwine to do, Love, when I am gone,
 No man can stand my bond.

High sheriff and the police a-riding after me,
 Riding after me, love, riding after me;
 High sheriff and the police a-riding after me,
 No man can stand my bond.

Gwine back to Sumter to see my little love,
 See my little love, see my little love;
 Gwine back to Sumter to see my little love,
 No man can stand my bond.

HANNAMARIA

Edna and China picked this song up from their father.

China Poplin - Banjo and lead voice
 Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and tenor voice
 David Jackson - Guitar Jack Tottle - Mandolin

There used to be a gal in our town,
 She weighed five hundred and ninety pounds;
 A yaller gal with a wicked eye,
 The boys all called her Hannamaria.

CHORUS:
 Oh, me my, ain't I high,
 Sling 'em around and so will I;
 Look out boy, I'm gonna black your eye,
 If you start home with Hannamaria.

Oh, after supper them fellows got tight,
 Began to shoot and began to fight;
 One of 'em knocked me ten feet high,
 But I fell down 'cause Hannamaria.

CHORUS:
 Oh, me my, ain't I high,
 Sling 'em around and so will I;
 You missed your pie and your oyster fry,
 But I'm going home with Hannamaria.

SIT AT HOME

Edna wrote the words and music to this song, which she sings with her daughter, Laura.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and vocal
 Laura Elmore - Vocal
 David Jackson - Guitar

Sit at home, the telephone, don't ring any more,
 Why should I cry over you;
 Low and lonely, sad and blue,
 Sitting here baby just a-thinking of you,
 Oh now, why should I cry over you?

Gone it's true with someone new, I hope you get
along,
Oh as I sit and cry over you;
Misty eyes full of tears,
Trying to forget you, but it's gonna take years,
Oh now, why should I cry over you?

Sitting home, Baby, by the telephone,
Blue and lonely harling, waiting all alone,
I'm wondering, Baby, why, I ever cried over you.
Low and lonely, Baby, sad and blue,
Sittin' here, Baby, just thinking 'bout you,
Why'd you go away and leave me, Oh, so blue.

Went away and left me, found you someone new,
I hope you're satisfied and that she loves you,
too,
I'm still wondering why I ever cried over you;
My eyes are misty, my poor heart sears,
I'm trying to forget you, but it brings back tears,
Why'd you go away and leave me lonesome and blue?

THE RIVER OF JORDAN

Edna and David worked out their arrangement of this
song after hearing the Louvin Brothers sing it.

David Jackson - Guitar and lead voice
Edna Poplin Elmore - Lead guitar and tenor voice
China Poplin - Banjo
Jack Tottle - mandolin

To the River of Jordan our Saviour went one day,
And we read that John the Baptist met him there;
And when John Baptized Jesus in Jordan's rushing
waters,
The mighty power of God filled the air.

CHORUS:

I'm on my way (to the River of Jordan)
Gonna wade right in (in the rushing waters)
I'm going down (I'm going down) to the River of
Jordan,
And let the cool waters cleanse my soul.

King Naaman was stricken with dreaded leprosy,
And he sent for the man of God to pray;
But Elijah said to Naaman, "Go dip yourself in
Jordan,
"And let the cool waters wash your spots away."

CHORUS:

So he went right down (to the River of Jordan)
He went right in (in the rushing waters)
He dipped himself (he dipped himself) in the River
Jordan,
And the cool waters made him whole.

The River of Jordan is many miles away,
And this mighty river I may never see;
But I'll find myself an altar in an old-fashioned
church,
And my River of Jordan that will be.

CHORUS:

I'm on my way (to the River of Jordan)
Gonna wade right in (in the rushing waters)
I'm going down (I'm going down) to the River of
Jordan,
And let the cool waters cleanse my soul.

CATFISH

Also called "Banjo Sam" by some singers who sub-
stitute "Banjo Sam" for "banjo sound" in the chorus.

China Poplin - Banjo and vocal
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar
David Jackson - Guitar
Bill Poplin - Mandolin

Met that catfish gwine upstream
Asked that catfish what he mean;
Catch that catfish by his snout
Turn that catfish wrong side out.
My me banjo sound,
Baa-o-o-o-o, banjo sound.

Eighteen hundred forty-nine
Hang my banjo in a pine;
Pine break and that banjo fall
Pick that banjo far and all.
My me banjo sound,
Baa-o-o-o-o, banjo sound.

Met that catfish gwine upstream
Ask that catfish what he mean;
Catch that catfish in the gill
Chunk that catfish on the hill.
My me banjo sound,
Baa-o-o-o-o, banjo sound.

Eighteen hundred forty-nine
Hang my banjo in a pine;
Pine break and that banjo fall
Pick that banjo far and all.
My me banjo sound,
Baa-o-o-o-o, banjo sound.

I DON'T WANT TO GET MARRIED

A variant of "I Don't Love Nobody". Edna wrote the
last two verses of this version.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and vocal
China Poplin - Banjo
David Jackson - Guitar
Bill Poplin - Mandolin

I was born in Kentucky, lived there all of my life,
I was very lucky, never had a wife;
I once thought I'd get married, I asked a little
girl to wed,
But when I asked her to marry me, this is what she
said:

CHORUS:

I don't want to get married, I always want to be
free,
I don't love nobody, nobody loves me;
All they want is my money, then they don't care
for me,
I don't want to get married, I just want to be free

Then I started to ramble, stopped in Tennessee,
I met a pretty little maiden, I thought she cared
for me;
I built a cute little cottage and planned the day
to wed,
But when I asked her to marry me, this is what she
said:

CHORUS:

I don't want to get married, I don't want to settle
down,
Ramble all over this country, so from town to town
I don't love nobody, nobody loves me,
I don't want to get married, I just want to be free

Once again I traveled, this time headed West,
I found the life of a bachelor one I loved the best
I met a gal in Santa Fe who wanted me to wed,
But when she asked me to marry her, this is what I
said:

CHORUS:

I don't want to get married, I always want to be free,
I don't love nobody, nobody loves me;
All they want is my money, then they don't care for me,
I don't want to get married, I just want to be free.

CRAWDAD HOLE

The Poplins have heard this old favorite all their lives, but can't remember when they started singing it.

China Poplin - Banjo and lead voice
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and tenor voice
David Jackson - Guitar and baritone voice
Bill Poplin - Mandolin

CHORUS:

You get a line and I'll get a pole, honey,
You get a line and I'll get a pole, babe,
You get a line and I'll get a pole,
We'll go down to the crawdad hole,
Honey, baby mine.

Yonder comes a man with a sack on his back,
honey,
Yonder comes a man with a sack on his back,
babe,
Yonder comes a man with a sack on his back,
Got all the crawdads he can pack,
Honey, baby mine.

The man fell down and busted his sack,
honey,
The man fell down and busted his sack,
babe,
The man fell down and busted his sack,
Oughta seen them crawdads backin' back,
Honey, baby mine.

(CHORUS)

Wake up Sue you slept too late, honey,
Wake up Sue you slept too late, babe,
Wake up Sue you slept too late,
The crawdad man's done past your gate,
Honey, baby mine.

What you gonna do when the creek runs dry,
honey,
What you gonna do when the creek runs dry,
babe,
What you gonna do when the creek runs dry,
Sit on the bank and watch the crawdads die,
Honey, baby mine.

(CHORUS)

What did the duck say to the drake, honey,
What did the duck say to the drake, babe,
What did the duck say to the drake,
There ain't no crawdads in this lake,
Honey, baby mine.

THE PREACHER AND THE BEAR

This song was commercially recorded in the 1920's and became quite widely known.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and vocal
China Poplin - Banjo
David Jackson - Guitar
Bill Poplin - Mandolin

A preacher went out huntin', it was on one Sunday morn,
Of course it was against his religion, but he took his gun along
He shot himself some very fine quail and one little measley hen,
And on his way returning home, he met a great big grizzly bear.

The bear marched out in the middle of the road,
and he walked to the "coon" you see,
The "coon" got so excited, he climbed up a simmon tree.
The bear sat down upon the ground, and the "coon" climbed out on a limb.
He cast his eyes to the Lord in the skies, and this is what he said to Him:

CHORUS:

Oh Lord, didn't you deliver Daniel from the lions' den,
Also deliver Jonah from the belly of the whale and then
Three Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, so the Good Book do declare,
So Lord, if you can't help me, for goodness sakes don't you help that bear.

That "coon" stayed up in that tree, I think it was all night
He said, "Lord, if you help that bear, then you'll see one awful fight."
Then just about then the limb let and the "coon" came a-tumbling down.
You should have seen him get his razor out before he hit the ground.

Well, he hit the ground cutting right and left, it's true he put up a good fight,
The bear hugged that "coon", he hugged him with all his might,
The "coon" then lost his razor, but the bear held on with vim,
He cast his eyes to the Lord in the skies, and these words he said to Him:

(CHORUS)

JUST BECAUSE

China arranged this from the popular recorded version.

China Poplin - Banjo and lead voice
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and tenor voice
David Jackson - Guitar
Bill Poplin - Mandolin

Just because you think you're so pretty,
Just because you think you're so hot;
Just because you think you've got something
Nobody else has got;
Now you done made me spend all my money,
You laugh and call me old Santa Claus;
I'm telling you, Baby, I'm through with you,
Because, Honey, just because.

There'll come a time you'll be lonely,
There'll come a time when you'll be blue;
There won't be no Santa Claus near you
To pay all your bills for you.
Now you have made me drop all my girl friends,
You laugh and call me old Santa Claus;
I'm telling you, Baby, I'm through with you,
Because, honey, just because.

SIDE II

EYES LIKE CHERRIES

The song is traditional, but the last two verses are Edna's. The chorus was presumably inspired not by red cherries, but by the wild black variety.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and lead voice
(tenor on chorus)
China Poplin - Banjo and lead voice on chorus
David Jackson - Guitar
Jack Tuttle - Mandolin

I got a girl in Nashville waitin' for me,
A little girl in Nashville waitin' for me;
Got a girl in Nashville waitin' for me,
I'm gonna hurry there and bring her back with me.

CHORUS:

For she's got eyes like cherries, cheeks like a
rose.

Eyes like cherries, cheeks like a rose;
Eyes like cherries, cheeks like a rose,
How I like that pretty little girl, Lord only
knows.

She wrote me a letter and said she'd be mine,
Wrote me a letter and said she'd be mine;
Wrote me a letter and said she'd be mine,
I can hardly wait to love her all the time.

(CHORUS)

She knows I'm coming and bringing the ring,
She knows I'm coming and bringing the ring,
She knows I'm coming and bringing the ring,
To make her the Queen and I'll be the King.

(CHORUS)

THE BLUES DON'T MEAN A THING

Edna heard this on a phonograph record around 1949.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and vocal
Bill Poplin - Mandolin
China Poplin - Banjo
David Jackson - Guitar

The blues don't mean a thing in my young life,
Somehow, somewhere, I lose them;
The men don't mean a thing in my young life,
Somehow, somewhere, I lose them.

Never a tear, never a care,
Never a heartache, what I can't bear,
So, Sweetheart, please don't try to make me blue,
'Cause I can't love you like you want me to.

CINDY GAL

An unusual version of the popular fiddle and banjo
tune as Edna and China learned it from their father.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and lead voice
(tenor on chorus)
China Poplin - Banjo and lead voice on chorus
David Jackson - Guitar
Jack Tuttle - Mandolin

Cindy was a pretty girl, thought I'd take her in,
Shoo-fly on her upper lip, mustache on her chin.

CHORUS:

All right long, all night long;
All night long, Cindy Gal, marry you by and by.

Wish I was an apple hanging on a tree,
Every time Cindy passed, she'd take a bite of me.

(CHORUS)

If I had a needle as fine as I could sew,
Sew my gal to my side and down the road I'd go.

(CHORUS)

I went down to Richmond to get a drink of wine,
Tied me to the whipping post and gimme forty-nine.

(CHORUS)

I went back to Richmond to get a drink of gin,
Tied me to the whipping post and gimme hang again.

(CHORUS)

You oughta see my Cindy, she lives away down South,
She's so sweet the honey bees swarm around her
mouth.

I DON'T DRINKA YOUR WHISKEY

As sung by Henry Washington Poplin.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and vocal
China Poplin - Banjo
David Jackson - Guitar
Jack Tuttle - Mandolin

I don't drinka no whiskey, I don't drinka your
wine,
I don't let no gals worry my mind.

You take this, you take that, I'll take what I
can get;
Always standing in the rain, but I don't never
get wet,
I don't drinka your whiskey, I don't drinka
your wine,
I don't let no gals worry my mind.

HAMMER RING

Some time in 1940 a singer walked in to the
Columbia, South Carolina radio station where
China was playing with the first verse and
chorus of this song. China bought it from
him for five dollars, and Edna wrote three
more verses to it.

China Poplin - Banjo and lead voice
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and tenor voice
David Jackson - Guitar
Bill Poplin - Mandolin

Late last night when Willie came home
Knockin' and a-rappin' at my door,
Got up in my stocking feet,
Said "Willie, don't you rap no more."

CHORUS:

Hammer ring, banjo sing,
Hammer ringing in my soul;
Hammer ring, banjo sing,
Hammer ringing in my soul.

Halleluiah, gonna leave it up to you,
Make it up in your mind;
You told more lies than the stars in the skies,
And you ain't no more gal of mine.

You slipped around, was the talk of the town,
You drank, you cheated and you lied;
You had your fun, now you're on the run,
And I hope that you're satisfied.

Now that you're gone, Baby, I'll get along,
I've done my crying over you;
I'm flying around with the cutest gal in town,
And I feel like somebody new.

OLD REUBEN

China learned these verses from his father.

China Poplin - Banjo and vocal
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar
David Jackson - Guitar
Jack Tottle - Mandolin

Reuben must have been drunk
When he fingered in his trunk,
He pawded his gold watch and chain;
He pawded everything but his wife and child,
Gonna ride that great Eastern train,
Gonna ride that great Eastern train.

Reuben, Reuben, Reuben where you been so long?
Been shut up in the pen, with twelve months to spend,
Honey on account of you.

YOU GOTTA SEE YOUR MAMA EVERY NIGHT

This was a Sophie Tucker song of the 1920's.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and vocal
China Poplin - Banjo
David Jackson - Guitar
Jack Tottle - Mandolin

CHORUS:

You gotta see your mama every night or you can't
see mama at all,
You gotta love your mama, treat her right, she
won't be at home when you call,
'Cause your mama she don't love no man, wants to
do his lovin' on installment plan,
You gotta see your mama every night, or you can't
see mama at all.

Monday night I sat alone, Tuesday night you did
not phone.

Wednesday night you did not call, and Thursday
night it was the same old stall.

(CHORUS)

Friday night you dodged my path, Saturday night
you took a bath,
Sunday night you called on me, but I had three
guys keeping company.

MY HOME IS NOT IN SOUTH CAROLINA

Sung elsewhere as "My Home's Across the Smoky
Mountains" or "My Home's Across the Blue Ridge
Mountains" this song has been adapted to the
Poplins' part of South Carolina where there are
no mountains at all.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar and vocal
China Poplin - Banjo
David Jackson - Guitar
Bill Poplin - Mandolin

Where's that ring I gave you, Darling,
Where's that ring I gave you, Darling,
Where's that ring I gave you, darling,
little girl,
For I never expect to see you anymore.

How can I keep from crying
How can I keep from crying,
How can I keep from crying, little girl,
For I never expect to see you anymore.

My home is not in South Carolina,
My home is not in South Carolina,
My home is not in South Carolina,
little girl,
And I never expect to see you anymore.

INSTRUMENTALS

SUMMER RAG

A banjo tune of China's own composition.

China Poplin - Banjo
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar
David Jackson - Guitar
Bill Poplin - Mandolin

SOMEBODY'S BEEN BEATIN' MY TIME

Edna heard a vocal recording of this around 1950
from which she made her own guitar arrangement.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Lead guitar
David Jackson - Guitar

FINGERS ON FIRE

A commercially recorded guitar piece heard by
Edna around 1950.

Edna Poplin Elmore - Lead guitar
David Jackson - Guitar

STEEL GUITAR RAG

China's banjo version of the popular country
steel guitar tune.

China Poplin - Banjo
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar
David Jackson - Guitar
Bill Poplin - Mandolin

PANHANDLE RAG

David Jackson's arrangement of a tune heard around
1941 on Byron Parker's radio program in Columbia,
South Carolina.

David Jackson - Lead guitar
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar

BROWN'S FERRY BLUES

Usually humorous verses are sung to this tune, but
the Poplins have converted it to an instrumental.

China Poplin - Banjo
Bill Poplin - Mandolin
David Jackson - Lead guitar
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar

SWEET KISS WALTZ

Asked the name of this tune, China said, "I don't
know--I guess you could call it 'Wonder Waltz' as
I always did wonder what the name of it was."
David recalled that his father used to play it on
the fiddle and called it "Sweet Kiss Waltz".

China Poplin - Banjo
Edna Poplin Elmore - Guitar
David Jackson - Guitar
Jack Tottle - Mandolin

