

James Elbert Denney Story
(James Thomas⁴, William³, Benjamin B.², Benjamin¹)

was born July 14, 1894 in Smith Co., TN and died August 7, 1947 in between New Middleton and Brush Creek, TN. He married Nannie Ellen Paris, May 4, 1913 in Smith Co., TN. She was born January 11, 1893 in Paris Hollow near Boston Springs, Smith Co., TN, and died July 31, 1974 in Smith County Memorial Hospital, Carthage, TN.



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Yes sir, Smith County has a fiddle maker of her own. However, the scribes of the Carthage Courier did not know that we had a second Anotonin Stradivari within our midst until last Friday when we were over at Hickman with our friend, Fred Ashley, brought us in contact with one J.E. (Elbert) Denney of that city.

Upon request Mr. Denney gladly brought forth the second violin he has recently made with his hands. The instrument had just been finished and for this reason its make did not play it for us, he preferring to wait until the varnish had thoroughly set. But a pick on the strings revealed that this new fiddle is going to give forth most excellent and pleasing tones.

Upon questioning Mr. Denney stated that some time ago he made his first violin, which he is now using, and he says its tones are so pleasing to his ear that he does not want to give it up at all, not even at a price of six hundred dollars. He also stated that he had been offered \$35.00 for the second or new violin he has just completed, but has not yet agreed to accept that price for it.

When asked if he could build a fiddle as good as "Old Strad", Mr. Denney very promptly replied, "no", and stated that no other living man could build a violin that would sound as good as those made by the famous Stradivari. When asked why this was, Mr. Denney replied, "I don't know why but just seems like it is impossible for any one to make a violin that will compete with the old master fiddle maker in tone."

Mr. Denney is the efficient and accomodating manager of the Hickman telephone exchange, he being assisted in this work by members of his family. He builds these violins in spare time, just because he likes to do that kind of work and because he enjoys noting just how pleasing are the tones from the instruments made by his own hands. It requires the most technical skill and workmanship to construct a violin, and Mr. Denney does the carving with a poscket knife. The pieces of work must fit perfectly, all the seams air-tight and the construction such as there will be no rattle or anything to mar the natural tones.

When asked if he was a violinist, Mr. Denney replied, "no, I play a fiddle a little

using some of the old-time familiar tunes, such as Turkey in the Straw, Jennie Put the Kettle On, Leather Britches, Shake That Wooden LEg Sally Ann, and Pritty Little Gal with a Red Dress On.”

It is indeed a fine accomplishment for Mr. Denney that he is able to do so fine and technical piece of work as to make violins, and the Carthage Courier joins numerous others in extending him congratulations.

James Elbert Denney was quite an accomplished mechanic as well as instrument maker. As the manager of the local Home Telephone exchange for his community of Hickman he was responsible for the installation and maintenance of all the telephone lines and equipment. With his excellent craftsmanship, he made several telephones as well as fiddles. Though the whereabouts of his violins are unknown, several of his phones are still in existence. My grandfather made several fiddles over his lifetime. His second son, Dalton Denney of McMinnville says there were at least six that he can remember. At least a second generation musician (Elbert's father James Thomas Denney was also a fiddler), he was very modest when he told Sam Neal that he “play[s] a little.” He was an accomplished musician counting any stringed instrument, although especially the fiddle, banjo, and guitar as his domain. He was talented enough to be sought by Uncle Dave Macon (one of the first famous country musicians) to join his band in the 1920's. For some reason, he declined. Among the most vivid memories his children have, are seeing their father with the switchboard headset on playing the banjo or fiddle with his brother Tom Denney who ran the telephone exchange at Brush Creek and was also sitting at a switchboard. It seems that no phone call was too important to interrupt their music. Although the whereabouts of none of the violins that James Elbert Denney built are known today, the violin that Ellen Denney purchased for 75 cents from Sears and Roebuck for her husband after the devastating flood of 1928 ravaged their home in Hickman and took his instruments remains in the possession of his youngest son Donald Denney.

James Elbert Denney was born on July 14, 1894, and died on August 7, 1947. He was the son of James Thomas and Sarah Ann Agee Denney. Over the years, James Elbert Denney and his wife, Nannie Ellen Paris Denney, managed the telephone exchanges at Hickman, Liberty, and New Middleton. After Elbert's death in 1947, Ellen moved to Gordonsville where she managed and ran the switchboard for many years.

Steven Denney - http://www.rootsweb.com/~tnsmith/oldpics/denney_elbert.htm

*See: Chapter 4 - Benjamin & Barabra Denney
Chapter 5 - William & Lydia Ann (Kent) Denney
For Complete Family Listings