

# My Most Memorable AAS Meeting, or How Stephen Hawking's Chauffeur and Chubby Wise's Fiddle Are Related to the Hubble Deep Field (At Least In My Mind and Experience!)

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June 10, 1999

## **Abstract**

Sometimes, in the most extraordinary conditions and times, strange things happen which remind us of just how small a world we really inhabit, and how so many varied things may suddenly be juxtaposed in our lives, and in the lives of others. My most memorable AAS meeting involves not only the meeting but events while getting there. It was January 1996, and we had just finished our observations and initial data reduction of the Hubble Deep Field, the members of the HDF working group doggedly coming in to the STScI by various means over the December holidays and the New Year, in the midst of several blizzards which even closed STScI for a number of days. Not surprisingly, work on the HDF AAS presentations was ongoing until the last minute, until people left snowy Baltimore for sunny San Antonio. My street was plowed for the first time in a week a few hours before my 6AM flight, so after digging out my car, with no time for sleep, between 3AM and 6AM on the morning I left, I soon discovered my own surprising connections between Stephen Hawking's chauffeur, Chubby Wise's fiddle, and the Hubble Deep Field. I'll elaborate in this paper if you're curious!

# 1 Introduction:

Winter in Baltimore is highly variable. Some years there is hardly a dusting of snow, while other years may bring at least one knee-deep snowfall and in some instances, a number of them, sometimes falling one on top of the other so that they continue to pile up without melting as is often the case in places with colder climates. Baltimore's winter of 1995/96 was one of the latter. Though the earlier part of the winter had been nothing too much out of the ordinary, by the time of the weeks between Christmas and early January, the air had grown colder and the snow had begun to fall, and kept falling in a series of snow storms which left many roads and streets impassable, clogged with the snows of these several successive storms, causing the area to nearly shut down, and closing many businesses and the roads and streets leading to them. It was during this time that the Hubble Deep Field was observed, and for the members of the HDF Working Group, the weather only added to the sense of this being an extraordinary time, filled with lots of work and all kinds of interesting and exciting experiences and challenges, from the fantastic data on our computers to the snow filling our streets and transforming our everyday gray winter landscapes into a different world blanketed in ever-deepening layers of the white, thick frosting of snow, the falling snowflakes filling our skies day and night as the heretofore unseen galaxies appeared to fill our new deep image with their myriad of both numbers and variety. Though life went on day by day and work progressed bit by bit in some mundane fashion, it was nevertheless a remarkable time. The earliest moderately deep images taken in 1994 and 1995 with the new WFPC2 camera with its built-in corrective optics had inspired more talk of the desirability of deeper exposures and had inspired the STScI Director, Bob Williams, to commit a large number of orbits of his Director's Discretionary time to what he saw as an important problem in astronomy and astrophysics and to which the Hubble Space Telescope could make an invaluable contribution by using its new and superior technical capabilities to advance the field. With advice and backing in hand from a panel of experts from the astronomy community studying galaxy formation and evolution, the fairly informal discussions among some of us interested in the topic took on a more serious air, and we began to plan in earnest. The project became official and began to take on a life of its own as such things are wont to do, plans and various options discussed, test observations made to check the guide stars,

and finally the real program was designed and implemented in detail with the help of others involved in detailed planning and scheduling at STScI. We had ambitiously promised to make our initial reductions of the data public at the AAS meeting in San Antonio in January, 1996, releasing our processed versions of the images for others to analyze only a couple of weeks after the last observations were to be taken. So, between our own excitement and interest and the commitments we had so publicly made, there were probably few things which could have deterred the group from doing its best to meet this challenge. At such times, one lives on adrenalin, and the trip through piles of snow to a workplace officially closed for days by the weather only adds a bit to the sense of feeling one's self a kind of intrepid adventurer, albeit in one's own office. It was against this backdrop which my own series of small early-morning adventures occurred while on my way to the January 1996 AAS Meeting in San Antonio.

## 2 Interesting Chance Encounters

### 2.1 Stephen Hawking's Chauffeur

When first making my reservations weeks before the flight to San Antonio, I had blithely told the Institute's travel coordinator to just make mine for the earliest flight on the day I wished to leave, assuming that the time would probably be 7 or 8AM. The discovery that my flight was at 6AM was more a kind of amusement to me than anything I saw as a real problem. It seemed to me the just desserts of someone who had made a statement as free-wheeling as mine, completely uninformed and unthinking in my desire to get on with it. And since I am a person who tends to wake early and to get up soon afterwards on most days, it still seemed no particular hardship at the time. I would just have to be at the airport by between 5 and 5:30AM, perhaps an hour earlier than I would otherwise have awakened. Had I really considered the turn which the weather might take, I may have thought differently and asked for a later flight.

My own part in the data reduction part of the HDF work had been relatively minor, having spent more of my time and energy on the planning part of it at first, and dealing with the simpler flanking fields (fields adjacent to the deep field) data reductions for the most part. (The flanking fields of

the HDF-North were simpler in design and execution than those of the later HDF-South, mainly because they were something of an afterthought designed to please the various observers with the Keck and other northern hemisphere telescopes who needed other targets for their long-slit spectrographs, and were not given the same kind of attention by us initially as they were for the southern field.) Still, I had some work to do for the AAS, and also had to have my normal functional work at STScI caught up ahead of time for the time I would be away, so, along with all the many other last-minute projects being taken care of by various people in the HDF Working Group, I was there at work through the snowstorms, and in the office working most of the day before I was to leave, having ridden in on those days with another member of the group by meeting him at a larger street which had been plowed more frequently than my local streets. On arriving home for a dinner break, I discovered that my street was being plowed for the first time in a week. This meant that I might be able to call a taxi to pick me up at home, so, it being about 6PM and twelve hours before my flight was to leave, I decided to check with the local cab companies. My optimism soon proved unfounded, as I quickly learned that cab companies were still only going to hospitals and hotels. After calling a number of companies, I finally found one which would agree to at least pick me up at the Institute, provided I was there to be picked up by 3:30AM! So, realizing that I would still have to dig my car out from under the snow left both by nature and the plow, and that I still needed to go back to work to finish a few more things, I soon set to work digging with my snow shovel. A quick bite to eat, followed by a drive to work in which I verified that the car still worked fine after being buried in the snow for a week, and I was soon busily finishing off my last bits of work to be completed before leaving. This being done at about 2AM, I realized that I had just enough time for a quick trip to the all-night grocery store (which was open, thankfully!) to buy cat food to leave for my neighbor who would feed my cat while I was gone, and then to go home, grab my fiddle (since the same friend and fellow-HDFer with whom I had been riding had said he might bring his instrument as well, so we could play some while there), throw some clothes in a bag, and drive to the Institute in time to meet my taxi by 3:30AM. So, with no sleep, I proceeded through these tasks as if in a waking dream, again going on the natural adrenaline of the rush to meet a schedule, saying goodbye to my cat (a far smarter creature than me - he knows when to take a nap!), and just arriving in time to greet the cab driver who had

showed up early to meet me.

Settling into the taxi for the ride to the airport, I began to realize that I was very tired, but the taxi driver, knowing the nature of the place he had come to to pick me up, and knowing what we do there, had decided to make some conversation. He began to ask me about what work I did, where I was going, and what I thought about various points of philosophy and physics and astronomy, and he then began telling me about the interesting experiences he had had while chauffeuring the British physicist, Stephen Hawking, around between Washington and New York and other points in between, during a visit which Hawking had made to the U.S. I was very tired, and honestly can't remember all of the things which we discussed, but the thought that I was being driven to the airport by someone who said he had been Stephen Hawking's chauffeur seemed to me in my tired state a kind of blessing of some sort, as if I was in the good hands of someone who was both engaging in personality and good at what he did, and as if it were some kind of special favor to have been taken to the airport in the small hours of the morning by this person who had done similarly for someone such as Hawking. (I had also once met Hawking himself at a meeting in Ontario, Canada some years before, though incidentally, and not in such a way that he would remember me, but the connection seemed impressive to one such as me as tired as I was at 3:30AM!) The fact that I was on my way to the AAS for the presentation of our Hubble Deep Field image and data seemed to me to add even more significance to it. Eventually, going onward through the snow, we reached the airport, and we went our separate ways. Thinking that this was an interesting experience to have had on my way to this AAS meeting which was also so significant to me because of the HDF, I headed into the airport terminal. It was about 4:30AM. Little did I realize that my morning's adventures in meeting people with interesting connections was not over...

## 2.2 Chubby Wise's Fiddle

As I walked toward my check-in gate through the sparsely-populated terminal (I was somewhat amazed that there were any other passengers there at the time), my bag in one hand and my fiddle in the other, I was aware that there were a few other people walking at least vaguely in the same direction as me, and I heard one of them call from behind me in a deep voice with a southern (Texas?) accent, saying "Hey, d'you play that thing?". I turned around to

see a middle-aged gentleman in a big Texas hat with his wife beside him. He was carrying a bag and a non-descript wooden, rectangular box which I recognized might be a fiddle case. "Well," I answered, "I try to play it, and I've even been lucky enough to have people pay me for playing it every now and then, but I mostly just try and play for the fun of it." I proceeded to ask him if that was a fiddle which he was carrying in the box, and I asked him if he played too. He said he didn't play, but that he had just inherited the fiddle from his step-father who had just died a week or so before, in Maryland. (I believe that I have it correctly that his step-parent was his father and not his mother, but its possible that I've remembered incorrectly, and I extend my apologies if that is the case!) He went on to add that his step-father had owned two fiddles, one with a more ornate carved human head where the scroll work would have been, and the other one which he had inherited and was carrying in the case. This latter instrument, though more plain and well-worn looking, was the instrument he said that his step-father had used the most when playing and working, and he said that the other instrument had been more for show. Very modestly, he also stated that, though he didn't know what kind of music I played and/or liked, his step-father had been fairly well-known in the kind of music he had played, but still, he didn't know if I would have heard of him. Having also worked as an announcer and music programmer at a big 100,000 watt public radio station (WUNC-FM) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina at one point for a time in my past, I was now curious to know his step-father's identity. I had been fortunate to have the freedom of playing a very wide variety of music at WUNC-FM, from Mozart to Cajun, Indonesian gamelan to Sun Ra, Irish fiddling to Ghanian drummers. In other words (though I just love music and find labels to be sometimes frustrating) a variety, from western classical music, to jazz both traditional and avant garde, to international classical and traditional folk music, to American folk, traditional, and popular, including blues, bluegrass, country, western swing, pop and rock, etc., so I thought there was at least some chance that I may have heard of his step-father. He went on to say that his step-dad had played bluegrass, and was named Chubby Wise. I recognized the name immediately since I had indeed played some of Chubby Wise's recordings on the radio back in Chapel Hill. And being a fiddle player myself, I knew at least that Chubby Wise was not just any fiddle player - he was a legendary one, and one of the best and most original and influential in terms of style. And I then also remembered that

I had heard about Chubby Wise's death on National Public Radio about a week earlier, so the pieces of the puzzle now began to fit, and I was beginning to marvel at the connections of the people I was running into that morning!

The gentleman next asked me if I'd like to see the fiddle. Thinking that this would be a real treat, but not wanting to seem impolite or too forward, I hesitantly said that I would, if he didn't mind. He said that it was OK, and as we sat down and he opened up the case, he said that because he didn't play, maybe I could help him string it up and tune it again since the strings were all loose and/or unstrung. Again, I answered that I would, as long as he didn't mind. It began to dawn on me that I might be the first person to string and tune up this fiddle since Chubby Wise had done it himself sometime in the months before, and I was pondering how unlikely I would have thought this to be, along with that feeling one gets when picking up an instrument one knows was played by an acknowledged and recently departed master. "This", I was thinking to myself, "is a fiddle which could be in the Smithsonian or some place like that, so I'm very lucky to get to hold it, and I should be very careful when stringing and tuning it...!" I went on to tell him that an instrument such as this which had been played by one such as Chubby Wise needed to be played and should continue to be played and not left on a shelf to gather dust or to molder in a case since, given reasonable care, its much better for them to continue to be played, and I told him that he should either start learning to play it himself or else find someone he could trust who played and have them visit and play it from time to time, at least.

By this time, I had finished carefully stringing and tuning it for him, and looked at the fiddle, and began to hand it back to him to put back in his case. "Well, would you like to play it?" he asked. Taken aback despite my previous words to him, I yet again heard myself hesitantly say that I would, as long as he was sure that he didn't mind. Maybe you have to be a musician to feel this way, but from my own perspective of knowing about Chubby Wise's musicianship, I was somewhat in awe of what I held in my hands, not to even mention the feeling of playing someone's priceless family heirloom in front of them, with the added dimension of all the emotional and other psychological connections and symbolic associations a family member would have about something which had been so important in the life of a recently departed parent, and in particular, something which had touched the lives of so many others over the years, via the music, both live and recorded.

As I sat there wondering what to play, various things ran through my

mind... I had heard my grandfather play old-time North Carolina tunes on his fiddle when I was small, but I hadn't learned to play the fiddle from him since he had died when I was about 12, and being part of a large extended family, I had never really gotten the chance to spend the time learning from him by playing his fiddle myself, only learning some by watching and listening. I had just been inspired to want a fiddle and to learn to play it someday. When I finally found a fiddle I still couldn't afford but also couldn't bring myself to walk away from one day in a music shop (while there to buy cork grease for a wooden recorder my parents had given me for Christmas), I was about 26 years old, and I had become fascinated by Irish music, so though I learned a few old-time American tunes, once a nearby farmer told me how to tune it and play a scale, I soon was learning lots of Irish tunes by ear. (I learned them all the old-fashioned way, by ear, in fact!) But I also always tried to play anything that I could hear and remember, from bits of Bach, Vivaldi, and Mozart, to snippets from Stephane Grappelli, or Joe Venuti or Stuff Smith, or Johnny Gimble, or Bob Wills, or Bobby Hicks, or Mark O'Connor, or Tommy Jarrell, or Michael Coleman, John Doherty, Bobby Casey, Tommy Potts, Tommy Peoples, James Kelly, Kevin Burke, or Martin Hayes, or from any number of other fiddlers, or from other composers who wrote for the violin, or any melody I could hear or make up at all, since there was also always music of my own invention going through my head as well.

"So, what to play now?", I wondered... It was about 5AM by this time, and I was aware of a few more people making their way sleepily through the airport. It seemed to me that raucous fiddle tunes were out - not a good choice at this hour... I didn't want to jar anyone too much when they had already had to get up that early and struggle in through the cold and deep snow for an early flight! I thought of some quiet and majestic, soulful Irish airs that I might like, but then I thought that since this gentleman seemed obviously to be from Texas, and since he had been so nice as to let me play his step-dad's famous fiddle, it would be nice to play something that he might appreciate. I couldn't remember specific quiet tunes of this sort that Chubby Wise had recorded, though I knew he had recorded some. Even so, had I remembered, I don't think I would have had the nerve to play one that I knew was associated with his step-dad because I wouldn't have known whether it would make him happier or more sad, and I didn't want to inflict the latter emotion on him. Finally, I remembered the affection I had for some of the old tunes by Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys (my father even had lots of

old 78s by them!), and of one in particular which I particularly liked and thought was quiet in tone and sweet in nature, "A Maiden's Prayer". So, taking another respectful look at the fiddle, I tucked it under my chin and began to play it...

The fiddle, though it looked old and well-used, was still in good shape, and had a beautiful tone which projected well and sang out from the instrument's f-holes, even though I was playing quietly. It was a joy to play. A few people stopped to look and listen briefly, and I played the tune through several times, still quietly, but wanting to enjoy this unbelievable opportunity while I had it. Finally, I finished, and put the fiddle back down on my lap to look at it, turning it over this way and that, to look at it as one would look at a precious thing which might not be seen again, trying to remember and memorize the look of it and all that I saw. The gentleman had been silent all this time, but finally, after some time, he said "I wish my mother could have been here to hear that." And after another pause, he added with more emphasis, "I really wish my mother could have been here. She would have given anything to hear that tune come out of that fiddle again." I didn't know what to say for a few more seconds, except to say that it had been a pleasure to play the fiddle, that it sounded very nice, and that I had been privileged to play it, and I thanked him for it. I was now even more awed by the fact that I may have been the first person to play it since Chubby Wise had last played it.

The gentleman paused again for a few seconds and then said that he wanted me to have some things. As I put the fiddle back into the case, he went to his bags and dug out a few things, then walked back over to me and handed them to me, explaining that one was a paper with a color picture of Chubby Wise and some words of tribute and remembrance which had been put together by his family for each other at the service they had held for him, and that another was a commercial cassette tape recording of Chubby Wise playing the fiddle. The third thing was his business card, and he told me that if I was ever in Houston, I should give him a call. As it was now about time for us to go through the security gate and board the plane, I thanked him for the things he had given me and we all collected our things and headed for our seats. It was only after I had settled into my seat that I pulled the paper out and read it, and looked at the titles of the tunes on the cassette. To my great surprise, I saw that the first tune on the second side was "A Maiden's Prayer"! Despite the recordings I had played by him at the radio

station, I had never seen a copy of the recording I had been given, and I had never known that he had recorded it. So, my choice of tunes seemed quite an amazing one to me, and it had really been quite a morning, I thought... No sleep, lots of deep snow, meeting Stephen Hawking's one-time chauffeur, then Chubby Wise's relatives, getting to play Chubby Wise's fiddle, and even picking a tune which he had recorded, all between 3:30AM and 5:30AM between the Institute and the airport, while on my way to help present the Hubble Deep Field to the astronomical community and the world. "What next?!", I wondered! But I nodded off and on while enjoying the Appalachian scenery and clouds below during the flight to Dallas/Fort Worth, and just awoke more as we neared the Ozarks, then the Red River and Texas, finally waking up enough to change planes and enjoy the Texas scenery between Dallas/Fort Worth and San Antonio, flying over Austin and its hills and lakes on the way. It was bright and sunny, with a deep blue, clear sky and about 80 degrees Fahrenheit when we landed at San Antonio. Despite the fact that I am passionate about loving snow, I was very glad to be there and felt that I was definitely in the right place! I headed off to meet the couple who ran a nice but inexpensive Bed and Breakfast where I was staying, about a half-hour walk or a couple of miles from the meeting hotel, a few blocks north of the end of the River Walk, and to get some rest before starting to explore the meeting location and San Antonio.

### **2.3 The Hubble Deep Field and the AAS Meeting in San Antonio**

After all of the adventures just in getting there, it could be supposed that the meeting itself would be anti-climactic, but that was far from the case. It was all the more exciting, being the culmination of one of the major goals towards which we had been working for so long. It was great fun and very gratifying to see other astronomers and other colleagues and members of the press or other people attending the meeting walk up and stare for a long time at the Hubble Deep Field image and begin commenting on the various objects in it, and begin speculating on what it all might mean, both scientifically and philosophically, as well as on ideas for other science to do with it, etc. It was of course all very stimulating and a nice experience for us to share with others after the crunch of the planning, execution, and processing of the

observations and the data. There was even a film crew (headed by a NYC producer named Tom Lucas who I discovered may possibly be a very distant relative with some ancestors in common long ago and far away, back in North Carolina) continuing to film us and others while at the meeting, as they had been doing during the time we were planning the observations and reducing the data. Their film was later part of a series broadcast nationwide on PBS Television, so there is some other record of this time to help us all remember it in years to come. More than anything else, though, the reactions of those who saw the HDF data for the first time at the San Antonio meeting were evidence of the start of the many uses to which the HDF data have been put, and of the excitement which it has generated both within the astronomy community and among the public at large, as well as the impact it has had in helping to drive the plans for the Next Generation Space Telescope and other possible telescopes beyond it, and in discussions about the best way to do some large projects, as well as for me (as for all of us in that group), the personal impact it has had on my own life, time, and scientific interests. It was no less exciting than the other things I've discussed here. In fact it was still more so in the longer view, but I have discussed it less here since I know that astronomers are more familiar with the HDF and its impact. It was the central event of those weeks and months in some of our lives which made the other events I've described here seem all the more extraordinary to me, because they happened in what was already an extraordinary time for those of us in the HDF Working Group. Had I not been driven to the airport through piles of snow by Stephen Hawking's chauffeur or met Chubby Wise's step-son and played Chubby's fiddle, this would still have been my most memorable AAS meeting, although there are certainly a number of others which I enjoyed and will always remember happily for various reasons, as well.

### **3 Conclusions:**

That's how I looked at it all then. In May 1999, I learned even more while searching for more information on Chubby Wise for background on this paper for which I had submitted an abstract for the Chicago AAS. meeting. While looking, I was reminded that Chubby Wise had co-written the famous old bluegrass tune called "The Orange Blossom Special", about a train which

used to run to his native Florida. (He was originally from Gainesville, I believe.) And, though I couldn't have known the true and full extent of the significance of "A Maiden's Prayer" for Chubby Wise's family when I played it on his fiddle since I hadn't even realized that he had recorded it, I learned it in mid-May when I found some articles on the World Wide Web and also received a back issue of Fiddler Magazine which I had ordered because I had discovered that it had an article about or interview with Chubby Wise in it. His recording of the old Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys standard had been so popular at the time it was released (even in Texas, where "Bob Wills is still the king"!) that "A Maiden's Prayer" had earned a gold record for Chubby Wise.

Though its not inconceivable by any means, I didn't expect to meet Stephen Hawking's one-time chauffeur on my way to the airport in the early morning amidst the remains of a series of blizzards that were the biggest snowfalls which Baltimore had seen in a while. In fact, chances are that the same taxi driver has driven many other people who may know people whom I've met or know, since we're all interconnected somehow. And its not inconceivable that I could have met Chubby Wise's step-son that same morning, within minutes of leaving my taxi. But as for playing the tune which I played on Chubby Wise's fiddle, again, even though its not inconceivable that he recorded it, nor that I should know the tune, I certainly could never have planned to play a tune with such significance for his family when I didn't even know he had recorded it. All of which goes to show that truth often really is stranger than fiction, and that, in life, both literally and figuratively, enjoying and learning from the experience of the journey is just as important as reaching and enjoying the destination. They both have things to teach us and things we need to appreciate. Certainly, as I was surprised to be driven to the airport by Stephen Hawking's chauffeur, and to play Chubby Wise's fiddle and even more so to learn of his connection to "A Maiden's Prayer", the HDF itself has held surprises and is teaching us much, and so is a step in a journey for us to continue. All of these things helped make the January 1996 San Antonio AAS meeting my most memorable one.