

The Gandy Dancers.....

Gandy Dancers were a name for railroad section gangs in the days before modern mechanised track upkeep. The men were called dancers for their synchronised movements when repairing track under the direction of the



'caller' The name "gandy" supposedly came from a belief that their hand tools once came from the Gandy tool company in Chicago (though no researcher has ever turned up such a company that made railroad tools). More likely, name was derived from *gander* because the flat-footed steps of the workmen when lining track resembled the way that geese walk.

Each group of railroad workers, known as section gangs, typically maintained 10 to 15 miles of track. The men refilled the ballast between the railroad ties, replaced rotted cross-ties, and either turned or replaced worn rails, driving spikes to lock them to the cross-ties. Spike driving (A phrase that appears in several blues songs) required no group coordination, but the heavy rails had to be carried by teams of men. A caller coordinated the effort with so-called *dogging* calls. A good half of a typical workday was spent on the constant chore of straightening out the track (known as lining), and it was from this activity that ***gandy dancers*** earned their name. When levelling the track, workmen jacked up the track at its low spots and pushed ballast under the raised ties with square-ended picks, often leaning shoulder-to-shoulder in pairs while the caller marked time with a four-beat *tamping* song.

Gandy Dancers Raising a Rail In the South in general and Alabama specifically, at least, section gangs were made up of as few as four men but might include as many as 30, depending on the workload. Each workman carried a lining bar, a straight pry bar with a sharp end. The thicker bottom end was square-shafted



(to fit against the rail) and shaped to a chisel point (to dig down into the gravel underneath the rail); the lighter top end was rounded (for better gripping). When lining track, each man would face one of the rails and work the chisel end of his lining bar down at an angle into the ballast under it. Then all would take a step toward their rail

and pull up and forward on their pry bars to lever the track—rails, crossties and all—over and through the ballast.

Gandy Dancers Demonstration Lining track was difficult, tedious work, and the timing or coordination of the pull was more important than the brute force by any individual. It was the job of the caller to maintain this coordination. He simultaneously motivated and entertained the men and set the timing through work songs that derived distantly from sea shanties and more recently from cotton-chopping songs, blues, and African-American church music. Typical songs featured a two-line, four-beat couplet to which members of the gang would tap their lining bars against the rails, as in this example:



*1 2 3 4 - O joint ahead and quarter back
1 2 3 4 - That's the way we line this track*

When the liners were tapping in perfect time, he would call for a hearty pull on the third beat of a four-beat refrain:

*1 2 3 4 - Come on, move it! Huhn! (pause)
1 2 3 4 - Boys, can you move it! Ummm! (pause)*

..... And so on until the liner or foreman signalled that the track was properly aligned. A good caller could call all day and never repeat the same phrase twice. Veteran section gangs lining track, especially with an audience, often embellished their work with a one-handed flourish and with one foot stepping out and back on beats four, one, and two, between the two-armed pulls on the lining bars on beat three.



In a ceremony at the Smithsonian in 1996, John Henry Mealing (who had worked on the Western and then the Frisco lines) and Cornelius Wright (who had worked on U.S. Steel's 1,100 miles of track), two former callers of this kind of work song in central Alabama, received National Heritage Fellowship Awards as *Master Folk*

and Traditional Artists for their demonstrations of this form of African-American folk art.

Gandy dancer songs are traditional African American work songs and hollers sung by railroad track maintenance crews. The rhythm of these call-and-response songs helped labourers synchronise the heavy, dangerous work of laying and aligning railroad tracks.

These songs were vital to the physical labour of early railway construction, utilising a specific structure to coordinate swinging tools and shifting heavy track sections.

Many of the songs have become folk art, Call and response, Legends of incidents and stories of the legendary workers such as 'John Henry' – A selection of these songs are available from our website in the Myths & Legends section.

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