

Tributaries

ON THE NAME OF THE JOURNAL:

Alabama's waterways intersect its folkways at every level. Early settlement and cultural diffusion conformed to drainage patterns. The Coastal Plain, the Black Belt, the Foothills, and the Tennessee Valley remain distinct traditional as well as economic regions today. The state's cultural landscape, like its physical one, features a network of "tributaries" rather than a single dominant mainstream.

— JIM CARNES, *from the Premiere Issue*

Tributaries

Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association

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CONTENTS

Editors' Note.....	7
“A Mighty Man . . . A Great Man”: Preserving the Legend of John Henry in Leeds, Alabama.....	SUSAN THOMAS 9
Communal Living in the Heart of Dixie	THOMAS MICHAEL KERSEN 20
“For the Amusement of the Boys”: John Mealing, Railroad Caller.....	JIM BROWN 33
In Memoriam:	
Willie King, 1943–2009.....	56
Art Deason, 1909–2009.....	58
Al Thomas, 1930–2008.....	60
Nora Lee McKeown Ezell, 1919–2007.....	61
Book Reviews	
<i>Little Zion: A Church Baptized by Fire</i>	63
<i>Mobile Ghosts II: The Waterline</i>	65
<i>A Sacred Feast: Reflections on Sacred Harp Singing and Dinner on the Ground</i>	67
<i>Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz</i>	69
Notes on Contributors	73
AFA Membership and Products.....	75

Editors' Note

Volume 11 of *Tributaries* pays tribute to two John Henrys and looks back to the recent past on those who sought to build better communities within Alabama. We are delighted to present the work of two graduates of the Alabama Folklife Association's Community Scholars Institute—Dr. Thomas Kersen (class of 2006) and Susan Thomas (class of 2004). We also welcome back Dr. Jim Brown of Samford University, a frequent *Tributaries* contributor and a pioneer of public folklore in Alabama.

SUSAN THOMAS revisits the fascinating tale of Alabama's John Henry. Following in the footsteps of Peter Brannon, John Garst (see *Tributaries* 5) and others, she recounts the tales of the steel-driving man as they live in the residents of Leeds. TOM KERSEN explores the world of Intentional Communities, known sometimes as "communes" and their appearance in Alabama in the late 20th century. JIM BROWN revisits his early documentation of the late, great gandy dancer John Henry Mealing and how Mealing subsequently became an Alabama cultural icon.

During the past two years we have mourned the passing of several significant Alabama folk artists. We recently lost Gee's Bend quilter and matriarch Arlonzia Pettway, musician Cast King, and African American shape note singer Ed Snell, as well as Floridian John Etheridge who "keyed" many Alabama Sacred Harp singings. It is the policy of *Tributaries* to offer obituaries for those who have been recipients of the state and national heritage awards, so we include passages for Art Deason, Nora Ezell, and Willie King. We also include a short tribute to Al Thomas, the past president of the AFA who made this Association his avocation during the last years of his life.

We also want to note the loss of the "father" of public folklore and laborlore, Archie Green, a friend and encourager of folklore researchers in the state. Though not from Alabama, Archie took a personal interest in Alabama topics, urging Brenda McCallum, Joyce Cauthen, Joey Brackner and others to pursue

important cultural projects. He was a financial and scholarly contributor to the AFA, coming from his native San Francisco to speak at Association events, and offering an article for the first issue of this journal. He was one of a kind and is sorely missed.

Alabamafolklife.org has a new format offering an easy way to join the AFA and order current and past issues of *Tributaries* or other publications and products that will enhance your understanding of Alabama folk culture. The website also has updates on the AFA annual gathering, current projects and news about the Alabama Community Scholars Program. Data forms for fieldwork can be found under the “Resources” section of the website. For your convenience, we have also included information about the Alabama Folklife Association and its documentary products at the back of this issue. The AFA now has a page on Facebook as well, offering updates on folklife events around the state.

We appreciate the many suggestions by AFA members and others and wish to acknowledge the annual copyediting and design efforts of Randall Williams. Please send your suggestions, comments and contributions for future issues.

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“A Mighty Man . . . A Great Man”: Preserving the Legend of John Henry in Leeds, Alabama

Susan Thomas

For more than a hundred years, narratives, work songs and ballads featuring John Henry, the legendary “Steel Drivin’ Man,” have persisted in Southern folklore. Tradition describes John Henry as a black man of exceptional strength who worked constructing railroad sites through Southern mountainsides and eventually met his death in a spike-driving contest with a steam-powered drill. Whether or not John Henry was a real historic figure, or a legend created and passed down in the oral traditions and songs of railroad workers, has been a subject of much scholarly debate. Further controversy has centered on where—if John Henry did exist—he actually lived, worked, and died.

Two early John Henry scholars, Guy B. Johnson and Louis W. Chappell, writing in 1929 and 1933 respectively, both felt evidence pointed to a “real” John Henry who worked at the Big Bend Tunnel in Talcott, West Virginia. Traditions in that area, reinforced by aging informants interviewed independently by both researchers, seemed to support the thesis that a black tunnel construction worker, possibly named John Henry, drove steel in the construction of the Big Bend Tunnel, in the late 1880s, and competed with a steam-powered drill, consequently dropping dead from the exertion. Both scholars, however, admitted there was no solid documentary evidence to support the existence of John Henry at Talcott or anywhere else.¹

In the early twenty-first century, John Garst, a retired chemistry professor from the University of Georgia and scholar of Southern ballads and folk songs, began his own research into the John Henry legend. Skeptical of the findings of both Johnson and Chappell, he pursued leads recorded from some of Johnson’s informants that John Henry was a native Mississippian who



FIGURE 1

Dr. Jim Brown of Samford University examines the Oak Mountain tunnel in the Dunavant community where local legend places the contest between John Henry and the steam-powered drill. (Photo by Joey Brackner)

worked and died at a railroad tunnel construction site in the Leeds, Alabama, area southeast of Birmingham. Using a combination of railroad documents, internet searches, genealogical studies, and personal interviews, Garst was able to substantiate several of the place names and persons mentioned fifty years earlier by Johnson's informants. He found, for example, evidence that a "Cruzee" mountain, mentioned by one of Johnson's interviewees, C. C. Spencer, and a "Cursey" mountain mentioned by another Johnson informant, F. P. Barker, could in fact have been derivatives of the name "Coosa"—a mountain ridge just southeast of Leeds where a railroad line and two tunnels were located.² Spencer and Barker, along with a third Johnson informant, Glendora Cannon Cummings, all mentioned knowing or hearing of an exceptionally strong steel driver named John Henry in the general Birmingham/Leeds area. Garst felt their testimonies warranted further research than was afforded them in the

1929 study by Johnson. Garst's findings gave credence to persistent local oral tradition that John Henry was a historical figure in the Leeds area.³

Garst's findings were also bolstered by three earlier writings tying John Henry to Alabama. An article in a 1930 railroad publication, the *Central of Georgia Magazine*, referred to the popular John Henry ballad and identified the man behind the song lyrics as "one 'Jawn Henry,' a colored steel driver who helped build Oak Mountain Tunnel on our Columbus-Birmingham line in 1888." The article described "Jawn" Henry as "a mighty man" who was "no mere fiction hero," and claimed that the spike he drove into the mountainside when he died in the steam-drill contest was at the time still standing at the entrance of the Oak Mountain Tunnel near Leeds.⁴

Carl Carmer, a professor at the University of Alabama, described in his 1934 best-selling book, *Stars Fell on Alabama*, a conversation he had with a black convict about John Henry. The convict, while plucking a banjo and singing the John Henry ballad, described John Henry as working in Leeds in Jefferson County, where he dropped dead after beating a steam-powered drill. The drill Henry had used, the convict stated, was "still stickin' in the hole at the mouth o' the tunnel" near Leeds.⁵

A third written reference placing a real John Henry in the Leeds area appeared in a *Birmingham News* feature article written in 1955 by Warren Musgrove. Several residents from the area recalled stories for Musgrove that they had been told by their parents regarding John Henry. These stories included a belief that John Henry worked on the local tunnels in the 1880s, that he died following a contest with a steam-powered drill, and that he was buried under a large sandstone marker in the Dunavant area near Leeds.⁶

From 2006–2007 researchers with the Alabama Folklife Association interviewed fifteen people from the Leeds area who had grown up hearing stories of John Henry from their parents, grandparents, or other relatives. Although their descriptions of John Henry and his heroic exploits did not always neatly coincide, they were remarkably similar in their details. All agreed that the stories were presented to them as true--not as legend or lore or local tradition. Jerry Voyles, a Leeds resident whose grandfather, E. Voyles, worked for several railroads and kept a detailed journal of railroad stories, insisted that the legends about John Henry were based on true occurrences. He said the stories he heard

while growing up were very commonplace and were consistently presented as real events by the old railroad workers.⁷ This sentiment was also expressed by Revis Brasher, a late local artist quoted in a Leeds newspaper: “Ask any old-timer around here and they will tell you about John Henry, about how their father or grandfather worked with him or knew him.”⁸ Willie Davis grew up hearing John Henry stories from his grandmother, who helped cook for the railroad workers. These stories, he said, were presented very matter-of-factly, as first-hand accounts.⁹ All these individuals seemed to share the opinion expressed fifty years earlier by a woman interviewed in the Musgrove article, “That’s what my father said and I don’t think my father would have told a lie.”¹⁰

All the individuals interviewed either were born or grew up in the Leeds area, although some actually lived in nearby communities. Several lived around Dunavant, a small community near the Oak Mountain Tunnel site where many of the railroad workers camped while blasting the mountainside. Others lived near Sterrett or Calcis, other small towns further south of Leeds. Stories of John Henry were commonplace throughout these areas. Brian Arrowood, who grew up in another nearby town, Vandiver, remembered “everyone in the area” talking about John Henry. Rachel Clinkscale, whose father was a train aficionado, recalled hearing stories in Dunavant, Vandiver, and Sterrett. These stories were passed on to her father from his father, who lived in the area. Michael Laney, who lived in Leeds as a child in the 1960s, recalled hearing frequent stories of John Henry from his elementary school teacher.¹¹

Several people interviewed had heard stories of how John Henry happened to come to Leeds to work. Glenn Spruiell, whose father, uncle and grandfather had all worked for the railroads in and around Leeds, was told that the railroad had sent for workers from Talcott, West Virginia, after the completion of the Big Bend Tunnel there. John Henry was among the group of workers who came to Alabama when the West Virginia work was finished. Jerry Voyles’ grandfather, whose railroad journal covered the years 1912-1954, said that John Henry worked in Virginia and Georgia, as well as West Virginia, before coming to Alabama. According to Voyles, by the time John Henry came to Leeds he was already well-known for his steel-driving abilities. Carl Marbury, whose grandfather Cicero Davis drove supply wagons for the railroad camps, stated he felt John Henry was originally from Mississippi and that he may have

moved to Alabama to get closer to his Mississippi home. Willie Davis (no relation to Cicero) recalled his grandmother Maggie Davis indicating that John Henry had a Mississippi connection, but Willie Davis could not remember specifically what that connection was.¹²

Several of the interviewees had opinions on where John Henry might have lived, based on their relatives' stories. Glenn Spruiell thinks he probably lived in a railroad car; Lonnie Marbury, brother of Carl, thought he may have lived in the Mitchell Quarters, an area about a mile from the tunnel where many of the workers camped; and Leroy Alexander, who currently lives near the entrance of the Oak Mountain Tunnel, had heard stories that John Henry lived in the same neighborhood where Alexander's house is now located. Alexander recalled stories that John Henry had dug a well in the area. Carey Isbell stated that his grandmother lived next door to John Henry and his wife in the area near the tunnel. Jerry Voyles recalled hearing that John Henry and his wife lived in a tent in the Dunavant Camp area.¹³

Descriptions of John Henry's physical appearance vary among the informants. Dot Terry, who grew up in Dunavant and heard stories of John Henry from her great-grandmother and grandmother, was told he was short and stout, around 5'4", with a medium complexion. Willie Davis' uncle also indicated John Henry was not unusually tall, but that he was very muscular. Jerry Voyles' grandfather described him as around 5'9" and 200 pounds of "solid muscle."¹⁴

Dot Terry recalled hearing that John Henry's wife was named Pollyanna, and that she was tall and sometimes worked alongside of John Henry as his "shaker," or the person responsible for shaking the stone shavings off the drill. Jerry Voyles' grandfather also recalled John Henry's wife's name as Pollyanna, and that she was the camp cook and had traveled with him to Alabama from his other work locations. Carey Isbell, who heard stories of John Henry from his grandmother, recalled the wife's name as Roberta.¹⁵

John Henry's prowess as a steel driver was similarly described by all the informants. Glenn Spruiell recalled his relatives depicting John Henry as "one of the best steel drivers around" and as a "mighty man when it came to driving drills through rock." This reputation, according to Spruiell, was what prompted the railroad company to arrange the contest between John Henry and the steam

drill. Jerry Voyles' grandfather described John Henry as "king of the steel drivers" and remembered him as known for his accuracy and speed. Voyles' grandfather's journal stated that most steel drivers would start work with a heavy hammer and then switch to a lighter one after lunch; John Henry, however, would use a heavy hammer all day. Dot Terry recalled being told that John Henry would brag about his skill and that his wife worried that his boasting would get him into trouble. Lonnie Marbury remembered hearing that John Henry could swing a hammer faster than anyone. One informant, Carey Isbell, recalled that John Henry used two hammers at one time--one in each hand. He heard that the hammers had handles made of loops of rope. Carl Marbury also recalled hearing that John Henry could drive spikes with both hands, but, he added, "I don't quite believe that, but you know how stories grow." He also stated that John Henry "really knew how to drive a spike."¹⁶

According to two of the informants, Dot Terry and Willie Davis, people from town would come out to watch John Henry swing his hammer. They would also come on Sundays to see what work had been completed during the week. During these trips they would bring picnic lunches. Dot Terry was told that people often gave John Henry gifts, including money, liquor, clothes, pigs, and even a horse and buggy.¹⁷

That John Henry participated in a contest with a steam-powered drill was also well-accepted among the individuals interviewed. Only a few had not heard stories of the competition. Carl Marbury, who along with listening to stories from his grandparents had also researched railroad records, felt that a contest of sorts could have occurred on or around September 20, 1887. He believes the contest was set up as a "gimmick" by the drill salesman. The railroad journal of Jerry Voyles' grandfather indicated the contest was probably held on a Friday in 1887, and John Henry possibly agreed to participate in the contest because the salesman had said the drill could do the work of five men. Jerry Voyles remembered being told that John Henry was promised a new suit, money and a new hammer to participate in the contest.¹⁸

Dot Terry recalled her relatives as saying the drill salesman was bragging on how fast the drill could work but that John Henry challenged him, saying he could surely beat it. She felt John Henry was pushed into the contest by "his pride." Jerry Voyles, however, felt that John Henry was participating to help

save the jobs of his co-workers, since the salesman had asserted that one man using the powered-drill could do the work of five with sledgehammers.¹⁹

In all versions of the resulting contest, John Henry beats the steam-powered drill, but soon thereafter falls down and dies. According to Dot Terry's relatives, John Henry worked until he "dropped;" as he lay dying, he told his wife Pollyanna that he loved her and would see her in the hereafter. "By the time they had gotten him out [of the tunnel] he was dead," Terry said. Other interviewees gave similar accounts. Carey Isbell stated his grandmother said that John Henry died while trying "to beat the machine" and that he got sick while driving the steel and "just laid down his hammer and died." Glenn Spruiell also recalled that John Henry died "on the spot," stating that he "lied down, wiped the sweat from his brow and died." Rachel Clinkscale's father told her that his father often spoke of John Henry's contest with the steam drill and how he "fell over dead from the affects of it." She added that many people she knew who grew up in the area near Leeds and Dunavant recalled the same details of the contest. Bobbie Horsley recalled that whenever her mother would take her "down the mountain" in Dunavant, she would point out a certain place and say, "That's where John Henry died." Brian Arrowood, whose relatives lived near the original Tunnel Road where the competition is said to have occurred, recalled them often pointing to the road and saying that was "where John Henry had died."²⁰ Similarly, Ann Dorough Moore, who grew up in the Leeds area, stated her father, who would have been a contemporary of John Henry's, often took the family to Dunavant and pointed out the entrance to the tunnel where, he said, John Henry "made history."²¹

Carl Marbury had heard a slightly different version of John Henry's death. Based on stories of his grandparents, Marbury believes that John Henry actually died several weeks after the contest, probably of an illness exacerbated by the exertion of the competition. Willie Davis recalled his grandmother also giving an entirely different account of John Henry's death. She recalled hearing that John Henry was killed "by his bossman in Mississippi" for "running around with a white woman."²²

No one knows where John Henry was buried. The railroad journal of Jerry Voyles' grandfather indicated John Henry was buried "with honors" near the Oak Mountain Tunnel where he died. Dot Terry heard he was buried near

a black church in the area. Lonnie Marbury recalled hearing he was buried at the end of the Oak Mountain Tunnel, near the Dunavant Camp. Rachel Clinkscale's father never mentioned where John Henry was buried, but did say he was "buried with his shovel and pick in his hand."²³

Different accounts are told of what happened to John Henry's wife after his death. Dot Terry's grandmother told her that Pollyanna stayed on in the Leeds area to work out John Henry's contract, but that she then left and "went back home," although Dot Terry did not recall specifically where she was said to have gone. Jerry Voyles' grandfather indicated Pollyanna stayed in a house by the railroad track and that she gave birth to a son. Another version told to Jerry Voyles has Pollyanna living in a house in the Calcis community south of the tunnels for several years and then moving to Sylacauga, Alabama.²⁴

One controversial element of the John Henry story among Leeds residents is the role of the steel spike, or drill, that John Henry left in the tunnel rock when he died. The 1930 *Central of Georgia Magazine* article included a photograph supposedly taken of the spike standing in a mountainside near the east end of the Oak Mountain Tunnel. Carl Marbury remembered the spike was still in the mountain until the 1930s. He recalled his older sister's school taking a field trip to the area in the 1940s to look for the spike, which by then was apparently no longer in the rock. Glenn Spruiell remembered as a child going to see the spike that was embedded in smooth stone at the entrance to the tunnel.

Jerry Voyles recalled his grandfather seeing the spike in 1912; in his journal he described it as "the top section of a railroad-issued steel rod lodged into solid rock at the crest of the cut near the southeastern tunnel portal." Jerry Voyles remembered seeing the spike himself when he was a young child. Frank Little recalled his father, Ray Little, as saying that a railroad engineer had given him the spike in the 1920s or 30s. Frank Little, however, said no one in the family had ever been able to locate the spike in his late father's possessions.²⁵

Unfortunately for researchers trying to substantiate the John Henry stories, no verifiable documentation has yet been found related to John Henry, his family, his presence in Leeds (or Talcott, West Virginia, for that matter), his participation in a contest with a steam drill, his sudden death, or his burial. Local historians, folklorists and amateur sleuths have searched the rugged terrain

around the entrance to the Oak Mountain Tunnel for any shred of evidence of John Henry's life or death. No accounts of a contest between a steel driver and a steam drill have been found in local newspapers. There are no official death records of a John Henry or a Pollyanna. Whether or not John Henry was even the legendary steel driver's legal name cannot be verified. This dearth of written records is not surprising, considering that very little documentation was kept on nineteenth-century black railroad workers. Most of the workers were illiterate; subsequently there were very few surviving diaries, journals, or correspondence describing their exploits.²⁶

This lack of concrete evidence does not dissuade the local interviewees of the historic existence of John Henry. Jerry Voyles quoted his grandfather's journal: "I can't say whether this is a true story or not, but every Central of Georgia employee I spoke with told similar stories. And most agreed that there was a real contest held there in 1887 between John Henry and a rock drill." Glenn Spruiell agreed. "I believe that story just as much as I believe the sun is going to rise tomorrow morning. . . We don't need any further proof of the greatness of John Henry. He was a great man, one we should believe everything said of him."²⁷

Indeed, the town of Leeds felt strongly enough about their claim to John Henry that in 2006 the City Council declared the third Saturday in September to be "John Henry Day" in honor of "this icon and hero."²⁸ The first John Henry—Railroad Heritage Day was held September 11, 2007, and included music, scholarly presentations, and tours of the nearby tunnels featured in the local John Henry stories.²⁹

As indicated by the interviewees in the Alabama Folklife Association project, John Henry is widely embraced as a local hero, in both the white and black communities. Respondents were eager, even excited, to share the stories they had been told as children by their parents, grandparents, and other relatives. One elderly respondent, Glenn Spruiell, had taken great pains to write out by hand a three-page synopsis of his knowledge of John Henry for the interviewer, despite being quite ill at the time. All the respondents expressed a sense of pride in claiming John Henry as their own.

Historian and folklorist Charles Joyner has stated regarding oral history, "People neither remember nor forget without reason."³⁰ Whether or not the

stories of John Henry living, working, and dying in Leeds, Alabama, will ever be authenticated will have little influence on the people of Leeds' conviction that their hero was real. That so many people from diverse backgrounds recall similar stories handed down over generations from a variety of sources is testimony to the endurance of the legend and its uniting effect on a community. Hopefully, further historic inquiry will uncover the "missing link" in documenting the John Henry story. ■

Notes

1. See Guy B. Johnson, *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* (Chapel Hill: AMS Press, Inc., 1929) and Louis W. Chappell, *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1933). For a succinct summary of Johnson and Chappell's research, see John Garst, "Chasing John Henry in Alabama and Mississippi: A Personal Memoir of Work in Progress," *Tributaries*, Issue 5: 2002, 92-129.
2. Garst, 98-101.
3. Garst, 109-113.
4. "Old Negro Folk Song Commemorates Colored Spike-Driver on Our Line," *Central of Georgia Magazine*, October 1930.
5. Carl Carmer, *Stars Fell on Alabama* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1934), 225-227.
6. Warren Musgrove, "Alabama's John Henry Country," *Birmingham News Magazine*, 11 September 1955, 10-11.
7. Jerry Voyles, personal interview, Leeds, Alabama, 19 May 2007.
8. Revis Brasher, as quoted by Marie Cromer, "Did John Henry Drive Steel at Dunnavant?" *Birmingham News*, 19 December 1989, North/East Neighborhoods 3B.
9. Willie Davis, personal interview, Branchville, Alabama, 8 August 2007.
10. Musgrove, 11.
11. Brian Arrowood, telephone interview, Birmingham, Alabama, 9 August 2007; Rachel Clinkscale, e-mail interview, Vincent, Alabama, 26 August 2007; and Michael Laney, e-mail correspondence with Joyce Cauthen, Birmingham, Alabama, 1 December 2006; and Davis.
12. Glenn Spruiell, personal interview, Hueytown, Alabama, 17 May 2007; Voyles; Carl Marbury, interview with Joyce Cauthen, Leeds, Alabama, 1 December 2006; and Davis.
13. Spruiell; Lonnie Marbury, personal interview, Leeds, Alabama, 19 May 2007; Leroy Alexander, interview with Joyce Cauthen, Dunavant, Alabama, 9 August

- 2007; and Carey Isbell, interview with Joyce Cauthen, Birmingham, Alabama 7 December 2006.
14. Dot Terry, interview with Joyce Cauthen, Steele, Alabama, 7 December 2006; Davis; and Voyle.
 15. Terry; Voyles; and Isbell.
 16. Spruiell; Voyles; Terry; Lonnie Marbury; Isbell; and Carl Marbury.
 17. Terry; Davis.
 18. Carl Marbury; Voyles.
 19. Terry; Voyles.
 20. Terry; Isbell; Spruiell; Clinkscale; Bobbie Horsley, telephone interview, Birmingham, Alabama, 7 August 2007; and Arrowood.
 21. Anne Dorough Moore, letter to Marie Cromer, no date.
 22. Carl Marbury; Willie Davis.
 23. Voyles; Terry; Lonnie Marbury; and Clinkscale.
 24. Terry; Voyles.
 25. Carl Marbury; Spruiell; Voyles; Frank Little, telephone interview, Leeds, Alabama, 17 May 2007.
 26. Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, The Untold Story of an American Legend* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26-27.
 27. Voyles; Spruiell.
 28. "Resolution for a City of Leeds Alabama Proclamation on John Henry and Railroad Heritage Day," City of Leeds, 18 September 2006.
 29. Community pride in the John Henry legend is also rampant in Talcott, West Virginia, where the town features a monument to John Henry and an annual festival in his honor. In 2006 the Augusta Heritage Center (at Davis & Elkins College, Elkins, WV) sponsored a debate between John Garst and Ed Cabell, an organizer of Talcott's John Henry Days. According to Joyce Cauthen, who was present, Cabell expressed disbelief that anyone could challenge the fact that John Henry's race with a steam drill took place in West Virginia because the story had been embedded in local culture for so long.
 30. Charles Joyner, *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 4.

Communal Living in the Heart of Dixie¹

Thomas Michael Kersen

When I was a teenager, a caravan of folks, including my family, moved from El Paso, Texas, to a little eighty-acre homestead in the Ozarks in Arkansas. My father and mother, along with many others in the mid-1970s, were captivated by the ideas of self-sufficiency and natural living expressed in the *Whole Earth Catalog* and *Mother Earth News*. Other clusters of back-to-landers lived in the area where we settled (Weinstein-McShane 1996:8). At that time, none of us realized that what we were doing was part of a larger reaction to societal issues. This spirit of communal living existed in other states such as Alabama, where some intentional communities sprang up in various locations.

Intentional Communities

The more common word for intentional communities (IC) is communes. The word commune tends to create images and stereotypes that rarely fit with reality. According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1972:32), utopian communities are based on the “idealization of social life” and the perfectibility of man, specifically: harmony, unity, and peace. Timothy Miller’s more measurable definition of intentional communities is “. . . residentially-based groups whose members pool most or all of their assets and income and share a belief system or at least a commitment to important core concepts” (1999:xxi). Finally, Benjamin Zablocki (1980) suggested that ICs should have at least five people in them.

As a sociologist many years removed from communal life, I still have a deep interest in researching intentional communities. Often this topic is difficult to study because the accuracy of information on ICs is ambiguous or unavailable.² However, researchers have found that communal activity increases during

the surges of millennial sentiment such as the 1840s and again in the 1890s. Millennialism refers to religious beliefs about the end times. Oftentimes, millennialist surges are associated with downturns in the economy (Barkun 1985; Kitts 2000). The enormous growth of intentional communities in the 1960s to mid-1970s falls outside the pattern just described.

Very few ICs existed during the colonial and revolutionary periods in the United States. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, there were scores of such communities. In the 1840s–1850s, the number of ICs nearly doubled. During this time, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. The sciences, particularly sociology, were emerging as a means to describe and explain changes in the American society brought on by a shift from farming to a manufacturing-based economy. Parallel to scholarly interest in changes in American society, a number of people actually tested communal philosophies such as Fourierism³ by establishing intentional communities throughout the United States.

FAIRHOPE: From the 1890s to World War I, progressive and populist political movements were on the rise. One example was the emergence of single-tax colonies based on the ideas of Henry George. The idea behind single-tax colonies was that individuals would be leased plots of land by the community, and the leases would be the only form of taxation. Furthermore, the members of the colony shared in many production and distribution activities.

One such colony, the Fairhope Single-Tax Colony, was formed in southern Alabama in 1894 by Ernest B. Gaston and others. Fairhope's single-tax vision remains in existence to some extent today. However, sprawl and commercialization of the Mobile metropolitan area have diluted some of Fairhope's communal lifestyle (Fogarty 1995). Paul M. Gaston, a descendent of one of the founders, wrote two excellent narratives of the history of Fairhope, *Women of Fair Hope* (1984) and *Man and Mission: E. B. Gaston and the Origins of the Fairhope Single Tax Colony* (1993).

Intentional Communities of the 1960s–1970s

The largest number of ICs emerged in the United States during the 1960s to mid-1970s. Some of the ICs that formed in Alabama during this period were The People's Farm in Bogue Chitto; L' Arche Mobile and a colony from

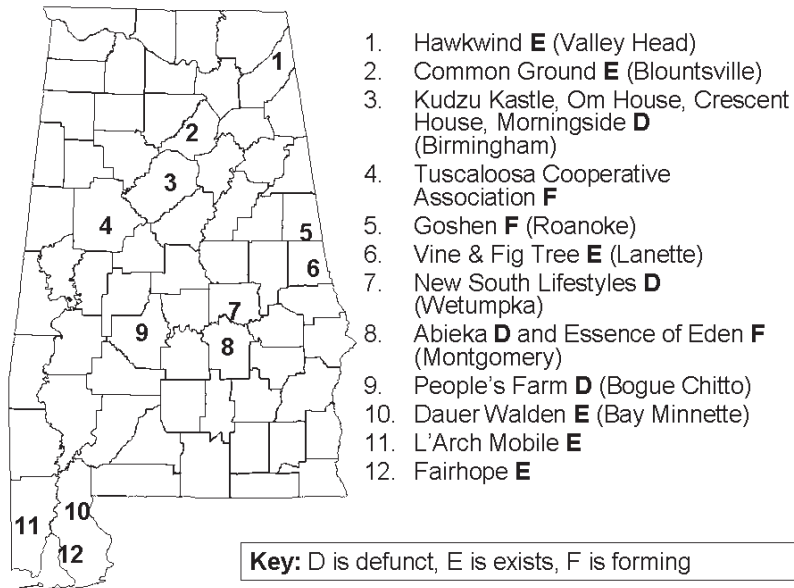


FIGURE 1.

Geography of Some Alabama Intentional Communities, 2007.

Tennessee's The Farm in Mobile; Abieka in Montgomery; and a number of communities in Birmingham. The People's Farm was formed as an answer to poverty and racism. L'Arche Mobile emerged as a community providing religiously centered care for the mentally challenged and is the only remaining IC from this period. Abieka, Morningside, Kudzu Kastle, and the Om House were communities that focused on practices commonly called cohousing, or co-ops. According to the Fellowship for Intentional Communities (FIC) (2005:14), cohousing "incorporates ideals of participation, cooperation, sharing, and knowing one's neighbors." Usually, cohousing participants have shared areas such as kitchen and dining spaces. Decision making is usually by consensus, and typically there are labor expectations.

BOGUE CHITTO: The People's Farm, also known as Resurrection Farm, arose out of efforts of the Poor People's March, a protest against poverty in the United States. Marchers and mule trains converged on the Mall in Washington, D.C., in May 1968. The marchers established Resurrection City along the length of

the Mall area. Among the participants were Ray and Cheryl Robinson. While there, Ray and others met with administration officials to voice their complaints. Life in Resurrection City descended into chaos and mud.

Eventually, the government forced the participants of the Poor People's March out of the remnants of Resurrection City. Many moved temporarily to a community in a rural area near Dunn Loring, Virginia, hoping to build a dream that would "create new, whole, confident people." This community would be based on "self-help" and "self-sufficiency." It would "eliminate money from the community," and "create an economy completely different from capitalism." (No Author 1968)

The People's Farm was made possible through a generous offer by Amelia Boynton, a Montgomery civil rights activist, who gave "Refugees of Resurrection City, U.S.A. for Human Rights 10 acres of good cropland located 16 miles from Selma." One document noted, "On this land a city of the future will be built."⁴ (No Author 1968) In 1968, The People's Farm was established.⁵

The reality of day-to-day life on The People's Farm was far from the lofty ideals noted above. Founding member Cheryl Buswell-Robinson (1972:48) wrote:

We've been here nearly four years now. We've had contact with hundreds, maybe thousands of people who have come here. We've been growing in awareness of how our lives are controlled and manipulated by the system we live under. We've been through some heavy changes ourselves and expect to go through more . . .

Community activities included planting, cultivating, and harvesting various types of vegetables, sorghum, and cane for sugar. "We make our own bread, grind our own flour, grow most of our vegetables and meats, can and freeze our surplus and also give some of our surplus to our poor brothers and sisters in the cities." If the members were lucky, a "work brigade" of about fifteen helpers from other areas would come for a week to help harvest and process food (Buswell-Robinson 1972:48).

Cheryl Buswell-Robinson (2005) recalled a conversation she had with fellow members who were reluctant to help with the more mundane aspects

of communal life such as cooking and cleaning clothes. “I went on strike. ‘Okay [she told the members] you cook, you wash the clothes,’ because I was washing clothes for like 20 people on a goddamn washboard and a number 10 tin tub.”

Work on the farm was already difficult, but the added burden of hostility from the local citizens made life a constant ordeal (Buswell-Robinson 2005). The ironically named Alabama Legislative Commission to Preserve the Peace (ALCPP) was an organization that frequently monitored The People’s Farm (Alabama Legislative Commission to Preserve the Peace 1971). The commission used KGB-like tactics to help maintain white power and segregation—their conception of “peace” in Alabama. In 1973, Ray Robinson and a few other members of The People’s Farm went to South Dakota to assist members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in their struggle at Wounded Knee. Apparently Robinson was not well received for a number of reasons including his race (African American), forceful personality, and his preference for peaceful means of protest. Stephen Hendricks (2006:348–349) suggests that Robinson and other activists were targeted by the FBI’s nefarious COINTELPRO espionage program to be “liquidated.” An easy way to liquidate Robinson would be to put forward information to AIM members that Robinson was an informant. Indeed, a number of accounts note that AIMers believed he was working for the government. One fact about his time at Wounded Knee is certain: “an AIMER shot Ray Robinson inside Wounded Knee, and he was never seen again” (Hendricks 2006:341). After Robinson’s death, The People’s Farm disbanded in 1975.

MOBILE: The L’Arche Mobile community started in 1974. The L’Arche model was conceived in France by Jean Vanier in the 1960s for two mentally challenged people he wanted to live within a Christian communal environment. L’Arche communities are similar to mainstream group homes in that the members are involved with workshop activities and assisted employment. L’Arche communities resemble ICs in their emphasis on mealtimes as a communal experience. Furthermore, L’Arche communities stress the importance of events such as birthdays and holidays to renew a sense of collective identity and purpose (Harris 1987).

According to its Fellowship for Intentional Communities (FIC) directory

description, L'Arche Mobile is a "Christian community that provides family like homes for people with a mental handicap and assistants who choose to live in our community homes" (Fellowship for Intentional Communities 2007). This community of forty-four members shares meals one to three times per month. Although members maintain finances independently, there is an expectation that members will contribute some labor to the community.

In the same year that L'Arche Mobile was formed, several members of The Farm in Tennessee moved to Mobile to establish a community. Forming ICs in other parts of the United States was a common practice among former members of The Farm. These communities were known as "satellites" and their members were called "astronauts" (Windolf 2007). Many of these communities were established to decrease The Farm's population, which grew quite large during the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, the Mobile community formed for a different reason, according to founding member Cliff Figallo: "Our mission in Mobile was to investigate The Farm buying a small freighter, but it proved too expensive" (Figallo 2007). In order to earn a living while in Mobile, many of the members worked in construction and painting. The community folded in 1976 (Figallo 2007).

MONTGOMERY: Termed by the members as "an alternative land development community," Abieka was a cohousing project in Montgomery in an antebellum mansion on Goldthwaite Street known as Winter Place. An entry in the 1975 issue of *Communities* shows that the community was involved in a number of activities around the area. One event worth mentioning was a visit to "Frog Town" where Abieka members worked as farmhands. A local television reporter covered their efforts on the farm (Fellowship for Intentional Communities 1975).

BIRMINGHAM: In the mid-1970s, a number of co-op communities, such as Morningside, the Om House, Crescent House, and the Kudzu Kastle arose on Birmingham's Southside (Hudson 2007). Rather than creating communities outside the system, as was often the case in the 1960s, many ICs of the 1970s chose to live and work within mainstream society. What arose was the "Co-op Model," which placed few restrictions on members and where the community was treated more as an institution than as a commune. Co-ops stressed practical, efficient, and often, specialized practices to enrich members' daily lives. In



FIGURE 2

Members of Kudzu Kastle, early 1970s. From front: Karandi Bilmes, Trevor Bilmes, Ann Adams, Karl Schaffer, and John Kellerman. (Photograph by Karl Schaffer)

urban locations, many cooperative activities revolved around sharing domestic chores such as acquiring and preparing food, recycling, and cleaning clothes and dishes. Finally, relations with nonmember neighbors were more open and amicable (French and French 1975).

The earliest intentional community in Birmingham, Kudzu Kastle, formed in 1972. The community was named after a nearby vacant lot that had become overgrown with Kudzu. Approximately fifty people lived there until its end in the mid-1970s (Hudson 2007; Schaffer 2007). Connections with other larger intentional communities were limited to a few field trips with scattered members who had lived briefly on The Farm. On the other hand, Kudzu was linked with other smaller ICs in the area. When renowned poet Allen Ginsberg came to the University of Alabama at Birmingham to help raise money for The People's Farm, he stayed with the folks at Kudzu (Schaffer 2007). Like residents of The People's Farm in Bogue Chitto, Kudzu members were frequently under

surveillance by authorities. According to member Karl Schaffer (2007):

When Tricia Nixon came to Birmingham in 1972 to campaign for her father, I was followed from Kudzu while riding my bike to work at UAB by two green government cars. One of the men got out of one of the cars and followed me into the building; the next year I believe I recognized his picture in the paper when he was arrested for his part in the Watergate break-in: E. Howard Hunt, who was part of the White House security detail at the time!

Some of the Kudzu members reestablished themselves in a nearby house they would call the Om House. The name arose when John Kellerman (2007), one of the original members, “. . . found some neon letters and a transformer discarded from a motel sign and hung them on the front porch. I turned them on whenever we had a party. We continued the Kudzu Kastle lifestyle, but it hardly counts as an ‘intentional’ community.”

Another community named Morningside formed in 1973 and folded around 1976 (Robinson 2007; Kellerman 2007). Peter Robinson, one of the founding members, reminisced on why Morningside was formed. “After I turned 30 in December of 1972 I wrote a legal-page vision of a land-based community that would be attuned to social needs rather than material possessions. I was inspired by three novels: *Walden Two* by



FIGURE 3

Keitha Hudson at Crescent House 1980. (Photo courtesy of Keitha Hudson)

Skinner, *Island* by Huxley, and *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Heinlein. And of course the spirit of the times” (Robinson 2007).

According to an entry in the Fellowship of Intentional Communities (FIC) directory (1975:31) written by Morningside members, the group was composed of six men and four women who had ties to The Farm in Tennessee and to some ICs in Virginia. According to the listing, some members worked for “their own paint company.” Some members of the group wanted to move to “a more rural setting.”

One of the longest-lived intentional communities in Birmingham was the Crescent House. One of the main concerns for Crescent House was sustainable living through efforts such as recycling, composting, and gardening (Hudson 2009). As to Crescent’s co-operative living arrangements, Keitha Hudson (2009) wrote:

We had a house account of \$100 a month I think it was, that covered everything; food, utilities and mortgage. We all had a similar philosophy about life and were part of a food coop and recycled. [...] There were eight of us, and we ate Monday through Thursday. Each person cooked once every two weeks. We each washed our own dishes and utensils and the cook washed the pots and pans.

Crescent House disbanded around 1988. Some members then went on to form Common Ground community near Blountsville.

Why did people choose to establish several intentional communities in Birmingham in the 1970s? “Because that’s where we lived. Rents on the Southside [for Kudzu Kastle] were cheap. Living was easy” (Kellerman 2007).

More Recent Intentional Communities

There were a number of intentional communities established in the 1980s or more recently. These include the defunct New South Lifestyles in Wetumpka as well as the Vine and Fig Tree and Common Ground communities, which are still active. Vine and Fig Tree and Common Ground formed to explore alternative living arrangements based on sustainability and environmental ideals.

WETUMPKA: Established in 1983, New South Life Styles had a population of thirteen adults and six children. Decision-making was through consensus.

The community noted in an FIC listing, “Our purpose is to afford folks an environment in which to grow and become as fully human as possible in this life within a supportive communal environment.” There is no evidence that this community still exists (Fellowship for Intentional Communities 1983:72).

LANETT: A community in Lanett named Vine and Fig Tree suggests biblical origins, but the members did not adhere to a single spiritual path. This community formed in 1986 and disbanded in 2000. Located near Lanett, the members shared a vision of “loving Gandhian nonviolence among ourselves and all creation.” At its peak, the community had eleven adults and some children. Two remaining members are attempting to reorganize Vine and Fig Tree with an “emphasis on working toward a truly sustainable local economy, with both food and energy self-sufficiency” (Fellowship for Intentional Communities 2007).

BLOUNTSVILLE: Common Ground Community formed in 1980. Members in this community used some form of modified consensus to make group decisions. Members of Common Ground wrote in the 2007 FIC directory, “We dream of all being on the land full-time, and most of us are now. We live in owner-built structures heated with wood and solar, passively cooled. Power varies from solar to conventional to mixed, but conservation is the key in all.”

The goals of Vine and Fig Tree as well as Common Ground would be a harbinger of the ecovillage movement that would arise in the late 1980s and last to the present. The driving force behind ecovillages is an emphasis on sustainable technology and a harmonious relationship between humans and their living space with the environment. This is also known as permaculture.

The Future

IC’s in Alabama will continue to emerge and established communities will continue to encounter challenges and opportunities (see Figure 1). As of 2007, Essence of Eden is trying to form in either Mentone or Montgomery. Another community, the Tuscaloosa Cooperative Association, intends to create an “ecovillage development” modeled on established ecovillages elsewhere. Even some conservative evangelical ministries are getting involved in ICs. The Goshen community of Roanoke, is to be “designed as an intentional community for those who want to promote Christ’s Kingdom and God’s way of doing things”

(Fellowship for Intentional Communities 2007).

Because of interest in ecovillages, cohousing, and more mainstream Smart Growth philosophies, the future of intentional communities in the rest of the United States and Alabama seems assured. Therefore, some existing ICs have recently found a new audience to teach about permaculture, ecovillage design, and sustainable practices.

Each of the intentional communities described here emerged because people were motivated to strive toward a set of ideals through the practice of communal living. As is the case in the United States, these ideals varied from one community to another within Alabama. Some ICs were organized on the single-tax philosophy of Henry George. Other communities sought to repudiate what they saw as a race-based economy. More recently, the goal for many communities centers on cohousing and sustainable living.

Many intentional communities have not endured the test of time, and the continued existence for others is tenuous. The primary factors that explain why many ICs dissolve revolve around internal issues of power and leadership as well as loss of interest and saliency for individual members (Zablocki 1980:153). Those communities that recognized these hazards and adapted were able to survive. The prospects for ICs emerging in the future are assured as long as people will continue to seek ideals such as harmony, unity, and peace. ■

Notes

1. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Annual Reunion of the Alabama Community Scholars Institute (November 11, 2006) in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I would like to thank John Kellerman, Peter Robinson, Karl Schaffer, and especially Keitha Hudson for sharing their insights and experiences about intentional communities. I want to acknowledge the guidance and inspiration that Joey Brackner and Joyce Cauthen have given me during this project. Special thanks go to Lisa Kersen and Robert Ingram for their valuable critiques of this paper.
2. Some ICs are unable to report their existence because they do not have money to advertise, they may not be aware of available public forums, or they disband before they can effectively get their message disseminated. On the other hand, some ICs prefer to remain private to avoid large numbers of people.
3. Francois Charles Marie Fourier (1772-1837) conceived a plan for society that involved communal groups of 1,500 to 1,600. He also argued that marriage should be abolished (see Fourier 1851; Gide 1901).

4. The People's Farm was located near the very small town of Bogue Chitto, off Highway 80.
5. On a trip to the area where The People's Farm was, the author questioned local people about the exact location of the community. Rather than referring to The People's Farm by its actual name, the respondents remembered the community as "the love commune." See also Buswell-Robinson, Cheryl. 2005. Telephone interview with the author.

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“For the Amusement of the Boys”: John Mealing, Railroad Caller

Jim Brown

In 1982, when I'd been in Alabama a decade or so and had begun to recognize the social and historical lay of the land, I contracted with Birmingham—a short-lived, grant-supported venture then based at Birmingham-Southern College—to do some field research into music. The audio collected was supposed to accompany some community history presentations of the written and visual variety. I found some great union music—management has no music—from the 1930s and 1940s in and around Birmingham. Among other things, I got Eula McGill to tell me stories about Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union strikes around the first of the Depression, and heard her sing old Woody Guthrie songs like “Union Maid” and a haunting old classic about a mill worker who dreamed of heavenly work after death:

Oh, the mill was made of marble
The machines were made out of gold
And nobody ever got tired
And nobody ever grew old.

Railroad music, however, which I was sure was my guaranteed ace-in-the-hole, didn't pan out like I thought it would. Railroad workers seemed to know no more of the old railroad ballads—“Casey Jones,” “The Wreck of the Old 97,” and such—than the general public. On the other hand, some of the old-time section gang callers were only recently retired, and their work chants and songs were still in their memories if not in current practice. On the bigger railroad lines the callers began to be outmoded and replaced by

track maintenance equipment as early as the 1950s. This happened on the medium-sized lines a decade or so later, and a few callers may linger yet on the smallest and most isolated lines. To find them in and around the big cities of the South, judging by my experiences in Birmingham and peripherally in Atlanta and Greenville, you don't hang around railroad company retirement offices. You don't go to the railroad employees' reunion banquets. You don't visit the union halls. You learn not to spend a lot of time on the phone with secretaries and higher management. I've got two months' worth of things you don't do. What you do, simply enough, is find the oldest active or most recently retired roadmaster, as he is called on most lines—the man in charge of track maintenance and thus in direct contact with every section gang. He knows who the call men were, which of them are still alive, and where they were last heard to be living.

Before mechanization of track upkeep, a section gang on a line like the Frisco (after 1980, the Burlington-Northern) would typically take care of ten to fifteen miles of track. They had to “grass” it with shovels, slicing the weeds out by the roots. They had to keep the ballast straight-edged and full between the ties, using scoops to move the “chat” (coarse gravel) that was the commonly used ballast. They swapped out rotted crossties for new ones. They either turned or swapped worn rails. But a good half of a typical workday—blazing and breathless summer, or cold and windy winter—was keeping the track level and in line. Especially for the old steam locomotives with their rigid undercarriages, the track needed to be straight and level. With modern, more flexible undercarriages, it's not supposed to be so critical, though the frequency of wrecks on ill-maintained track seems to argue otherwise. An old section gang hand will just cluck and shake his head as a slow train passes, car tops rocking back and forth from the unevenness of the track.

The enormous weight of passing trains, then and now, works the track up and down and sideways through the ballast. The section gangs raised the low spots with a jack and pushed the coarse gravel under the raised ties with the square end of a square-ended pick. Mostly, though, they worked on side-to-side alignment, using five-foot-long, twenty-five-pound “lining bars”—giant, straight crowbars with a chisel end (for digging down into the gravel below the rail), a square-shafted bottom foot or so (likely to come in contact with

the rail itself when you were levering it over), the rest of the shaft round and finally coming to a point at top (for standing it up in the gravel when you weren't using it; laying it down in the summer sun would make it too hot to touch). Depending on the weight of the track and the urgency of the job, a gang might be as small as four or five men or number thirty or more. Facing the rail their lining bar was under, usually with left foot forward and lining bar on their right side, right hand well back on the top of the lining bar and left hand beside it with their left arm across their bodies, they would all pull up on their bars together to lever the track, cross-ties and all, over through the ballast.

It was long, boring work, and the timing or coordination of the pull was much more important than the brute force each man put into it and this is where the caller came in. He motivated, entertained, and set the timing all at the same time. This was a position of some prestige. In the South, on typical lines like the Frisco and the Seaboard (now CSX), management from the foreman of the section gang on up was pure white until the late 1950s. The section gangs themselves were almost altogether black, and the highest a black employee could move was assistant to the roadmaster; a close second was lead worker on the gangs, usually a caller.

IN PURSUIT OF THE work chants of these callers, I eventually ran down three in the greater Birmingham area who were reputed by fellow workers and roadmasters to have been the best around. Two of them refused to ever let me turn on a tape recorder, despite my openness and winsome character, and when those failed, my devious manipulation of their friends and former bosses. There was a generation gap or two between us, the old problems of black informants and white interviewers, and those of white-collar professors trying to query blue-collar labor. All that was missing was the gender gap to doom any interview to mediocrity. So the third, who not only let me tape from the first five minutes on but actually seemed to welcome it, was surely atypical. His lining songs are a good deal cleaner than the verses I heard repeated from the other callers' repertoires; he was a good Baptist Sunday School teacher who didn't drink—both unusual in the section gangs in itself, according to one of his old friends and fellow workers. Too, in other areas

of his life, including church and quartet singing, he was not just a regular performer but once a semi-professional entertainer.

He was John Mealing, born in 1908 in a little hamlet in Lowndes County named White Hall. Lowndes County, classic Alabama Black Belt, is famous for some of the finest surviving antebellum homes in the state, and as such is a popular tourist drive. John Mealing described society there from the bottom looking up; from his early childhood he remembered “gallowses, and they wasn’t for no white people.” He told me that his mother had been cooking for the foreman of a work gang on the Western Railroad that ran through White Hall between Selma and Montgomery. She couldn’t get free railroad housing without a man in the family working on the railroad, so in 1926 the foreman slipped John, underage but the biggest of eight children, onto the section gang as water boy. The railroad forms required a middle name, and John, born and raised within sight of the tracks, signed them “John Henry Mealing.”¹

“Toting the bucket” wasn’t all that easy. He had to walk to the closest spring or well, sometimes a matter of miles, and by the time he got back the water in the bucket might be lukewarm. Workmen would get a dipper and after a couple of sips throw the warm water on the ground, so that all too soon it was walking time again. John, anxious to be a real worker, got off the bucket by an interesting stratagem. In exchange for putting an engineer in touch with a moonshine source, he got the engineer to stop the train around a curve from the work gang while John, using a pair of tie tongs in place of ice tongs, wrestled a three hundred-pound block of ice out of a refrigerator car. He buried it in the cinders beside the track so it would last all day, and all afternoon brought iced-down creek water to the workmen. They all got stomach cramps and fell out, and the foreman thereupon fired John from the bucket and set him to following the jack—working on the small crew that carried the tool that jacked up low spots in the track. Soon he was a regular hand on the gang, taking his turn at the lining of the track.

In the summer of 1928 the Alabama River rose up and washed out a section of track embankment about thirty yards from a small trestle. I went down there once with Mr. Mealing, and you could tell by his emotion it had been a bit of a traumatic and exciting time for him, the sort that usually makes for clearer memories and better oral history. As he remembered it, the rails and

crosssties hung like a string over the gap with water rushing under it at what looked to the workmen like “seventy-five miles an hour.” One workman tried to go across on a railroad handcart, but it tipped and dropped into the rapids. He couldn’t swim, and they only found his body four days later when the flood went down. The foreman couldn’t understand when all the section gang workers took the rest of the day off.

But most important for the subject at hand, a special gang was brought in from Atlanta to help with track repair. It included “a boy named Eddie, about forty years old,” the first real caller John Mealing ever heard. John was fascinated, and kept right at his heels. They were lining track before the water even fully uncovered the rails, and were working from before dawn to long after sunset. In Mr. Mealing’s memory:

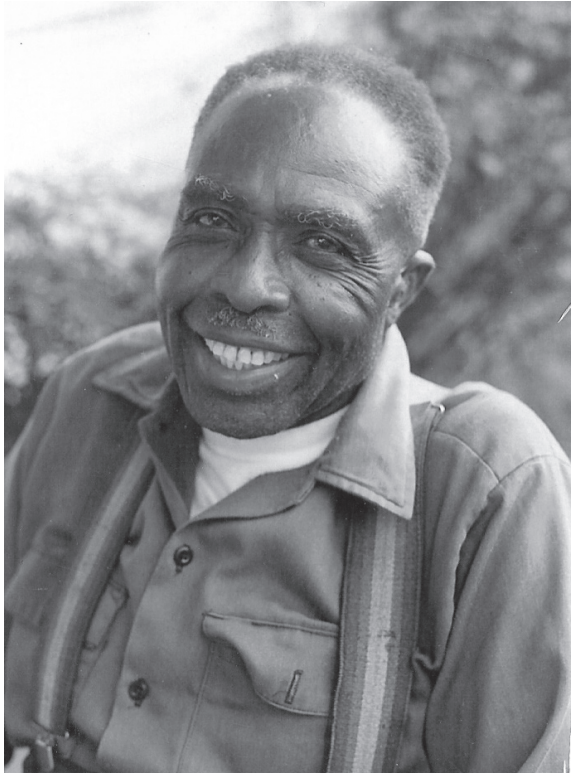


FIGURE 1

John Henry Mealing. (Photo by Linda Nelson)

Well, it done me so much good I was laughing at him, you know, keeping up with him, laughing, because I liked it. But now, everybody had been working all night, and they was done got exhausted, done give down. They was tired. But you see, by him went to singing, that made it better. And everybody got uplifted and they all went to work and forgot they was tired. That was in 1928; oh, it was in the summertime long about this time of year [June 30], because the corn was

up high as I got out there, and the water was all over it. And you know it must have been somewheres along right now, 'cause them peoples in the country had them laid by [the last plowing done, just waiting on crops to finish ripening]. But I never would have thought that I'd ever be a man to catch that off of that boy—and went all up and down the Frisco, all on the mainline in here.

Some of the verses of the Atlanta caller—“a heap of them old bad ones”—John Mealing never did as a call man; but a few he kept up all his working career. The lining verse he especially associated with that first caller goes:

Way down yonder in Durant Bend²
 Heard my hammer come a-whistlin' through the wind

To know exactly what the caller was doing, it helps to visualize the whole scene. The white foreman was hunkered down one hundred feet or more from the work gang, sighting along one of the rails. If close enough, he could have called out what needed doing, but distance and long practice made hand signals easier. The section gang would usually line in a leapfrog method—at the joint of the thirty-nine foot rails and then the halfway point, then back to the quarter point and on to three-quarters, then mid-rail again and then the next joint. Apparently this resulted in a straighter track than if you simply did joint, quarter, half, three-quarter, next joint, as the track just behind where you had lined in that manner got marginally out of line again. If the foreman wanted to change the routine, he would point either to his elbow (“joint”) or the middle of his forearm (“midpoint”) and then to his rear (“behind”) or his head (“ahead”).

The caller was watching the foreman, and the rest of the gang gathered in close to the caller, on either side of him on his rail and in a matching file on the opposite rail, all facing the way the rail needed to go. The caller gave them time to jab their lining bars in under the rail and get a purchase on the gravel, and then commenced singing a couplet of two four-beat lines, or on rare occasions a double couplet of four lines, like so (the downbeat of 4/4 time in numbers over the syllable):

1 2 3 4
 Oh, my wife needs a hat and my baby needs shoes
 1 2 3 4
 Come on, dice, and gimme two twos

As he sang, the workers clicked their lining bars against the rail, ragged time in the first line of the couplet as they fell into the rhythm and got their feet set, and good time in the second line, sounding like a single lining bar hitting the rails by the end of the couplet. Then came the refrain that went on indefinitely, until the foreman signaled that the point had come in line:

1 2 3 4
 Come on, move it! Huhn! [pause]
 1 2 3 4
 Boys, can you move it! Uhhh! [pause]

The lining bars tapped on the first two beats of each line of the refrain, and the heavy hauling took place on the third beat as everybody put their backs into it, torsos moving forward towards the rail they were working, arms straight back and down on their right hand side, hands on the very end of the lining bar for maximum leverage. The fourth beat, the silent one, was for repositioning themselves. Sometimes the verse and refrain called for an especially good pull, or an especially light one:

Shake it to the east, shake it to the west
 Shake it to the one that I love the best
 Shake it lightly! [pause]
 Just lightly! [pause]

The first time John Mealing patiently explained it to me went like this, with special emphasis on each of his four uses of the word “time:”

But see, here’s what that is. It’s a time. You carry the time with it. You don’t just jump and go on; you carry a time. ’Cause see, when the man’s calling, he

started the time: 'Hey, hey—' Then everybody else answers him, when he calls, 'Hey, hey,—' [caller]; 'Yeah' [gang]. Then I start:

Oh, come on, boys, let's go round the wall
 Don't want to stumble and I don't want to fall
 That suits me . . .

And then all of them's lining', see? It'd go on over, when I'd say that—'hey, hey'—and then all of them—'hey, hey,'—and it'd go on over, when they'd say it.

Print is a poor substitute for the original audio, but the following six verses are from the first tape recording I did with Mr. Mealing. It was June 17, 1982, and after having spent thirty minutes trying to record and talk over the air conditioner and his wife washing dishes (clashing them with what I thought was the energy of suspicion of this stranger in their parlor) I'd gotten him to move out to the porch of his house at Pratt City, right back of the old East Thomas yard of the Frisco. You can hear songbirds and kids way in the background, and some occasional wind noise in the mike, but it is still far and away the best taped interview I ever did:

Woke up this morning 'bout half past four
 Somebody knockin' on my door
 Boys, move it
 Hey, move it
 Hey, move it

Me and my wife had a fallin' out
 Now stop, let me tell you what it was about
 She jumped at me, and I give her a load
 She wanted me to work on the Southern Railroad
 Can you move it? (etc.)

I got my learnin' on Number Four

Boy, I'm tellin' you, and I'm a-ready to go

Oh, joint ahead and quarter back
Now that's the way we line this track

I got a gal, her name is Kate
She movin' in her hip like a Cadillac Eight

Oh, a handful of nickels and a pocketful of dimes
A house full of chillen, ain't nary of 'em mine

JOHN MEALING WORKED on the Western until laid off in the Depression in July 1932. Most of the 1930s he did construction work in Montgomery. In 1939 he moved to Birmingham, and in 1940 got a job on the Frisco, where he stayed until he retired in 1976. It was on the Western, making a dollar a day, that he first did any calling of his own. "Oh, well, I called some down in the country, but it was after '28, long about '30." On a lunch break near Benton (Lowndes County), he carved this verse on a crosstie with his pocketknife:

Bury me between the railroad ties
Where I can see the train pass by
When I'm gone
Hey, boys, when I'm gone

The way he gradually learned to sing—practicing to himself, then trying it out with a small critical audience on the Western, and later on to calling three or four hours of lining at a time on the Frisco—reminds me somewhat of Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, a study of the stages in which mainly illiterate Yugoslav epic singers of the early twentieth century learned their epics. Even the formulaic composition Lord identifies as the key to how a singer put a song together fits: it's not by rote memory of the whole, but the memorization of a collection of thousands of phrases that fit the meter of the traditional performance, and the performer puts them together on the fly. In this kind of calling on the railroad, of course, it's four-by-four-beat couplets. Some of the

more successful verses even became the base for a series of four-line songs:

Oh, ain't no need in me workin' so hard
I got a gal in the white folks yard

And then:

She kills the chicken, saves me his head
Thinks I'm a-workin', I'm at home in the bed

Or:

She kills the chicken, saves me his wing
Thinks I'm a-workin', I'm not doing a thing

Or:

She kills the chicken, saves me his feet,
Thinks I'm a-workin', I'm just loafin' the street

According to Clyde Terrell, a good friend of Mr. Mealing's and a fellow worker for some thirty-five years, he wouldn't sing the same verse twice in a whole day of lining track. A few verses he would make up on the spot topically; most of them were in his head. As Mr. Mealing put it very seriously to me in our first interview, "I had to satisfy sixty to seventy men on the job. Now **you** worried me when you called . . ." because he hadn't done any calling in a half-dozen years and now he was going to have to "satisfy" me with it.

The verses do different sorts of things. One set expressed work gang feeling about the white foreman, just out of earshot:

Well, look at the foreman, how he stands
Standing more like a farmer than he do a railroad man
Can you move him?

A lot of verses call the foreman the captain, from a tradition earlier than railroad work:

Well, my cap'n can't read, my cap'n can't write,
My cap'n can't tell when the track is right

One of these is a broad hint that it's time to quit, and foreman's watch must not be a real jewelled railroad watch at all, but a cheap imitation called a Waterbury:

Well, the cap'n got a Waterbury just like mine
Wind it up, it won't keep no time

Even more direct was:

Oh, you can work me soon and work me late
But when dinnertime³ comes, don't hesitate

And:

Oh, I sang this song, gonna sing no more
Get your hat and let's us go

One way the section gang could strike back at a foreman they disliked—and the likes and dislikes of years ago were still passionately remembered by John Mealing and his friends—was to “hump” the track. The foreman could judge side-to-side alignment better from his vantage point than up and down, so the gang could raise the track in a spot or two and the foreman be none the wiser until an inspector ran a vehicle over the tracks and then made him redo it.

In other verses the caller would call maverick members of the work gang to account. Sometimes they'd go out to work on a wreck and take perhaps a week to build track around it, tear out the mess, and then re-lay the original track. Camped out, some of the men wouldn't wash or shave, and Mr. Mealing would work such morality as this into the day's calling:

Oh, eat him up, crab lice, he won't bathe
 Eat him up, hair dogs, he won't shave

There were verses of hard times and visions of good times:

Oh, holes in my pockets and patches on my pants
 Behind in the house rent and they want it in advance

Oh, when I die, bury me deep
 Jug of molasses at my feet
 Thousand biscuits in my hand
 Gonna sop my way to the promised land

Some were from crapshooting:

Shoot my dice, the point was nine
 Six come a-runnin' and the trey come to flyin'

Many had to do, logically enough, with the lining process and trains:

Joint ahead and quarter back
 That's the way we line this track

Hey, the hotter the sunshine, the better I feel
 Workin' on the railroad and gettin' no meal

Well, the freight train is a-runnin' and the passengers a-flyin'
 The old people's a-fussin' and the babies are a-cryin'

Some had to do with wives in particular and women who weren't:

I love my wife, I love my baby
 Like my flapjacks swimmin' in gravy

Well, a nickel is a nickel and a dime is a dime
A woman gets tired of one man all the time

And as close to risqué as Mr. Mealing ever got:

My Uncle Jack is the jelly roll king
Got a hump in his back from shakin' that thing

Apparently by the time John Mealing had spent a year or so on the Frisco, he had already achieved some local repute as a caller. This occasioned an event he was as proud of as anything that he ever did on the railroad. It was 1941, and a section gang was lining some track between Fifteenth and Seventeenth streets north in Birmingham, and got stuck. They didn't have a real caller, said John Mealing and Clyde Terrell, who was also there, just a workman who sang out, rather ineffectively, "Joe! Joe!" "Well," said John Mealing, "'Joe' had done give out." So the foreman took John Mealing off another gang, took his lining bar away and just gave him a pick handle to drag along the rail for the foreman to sight on. John remembered him saying:

'That's all you need; just touch the rail where I want you to get down.' And that's what I done. And I started to singing—'cause he told me, 'Talk your Latin!,' just like that. Then I started. **He** was there [pointing to Clyde Terrell, who nodded] and that track just moved, just went on over there. The fellows got uplifted. That's what that song was for, to make a man feel good. 'Cause if he gives out, you just as well to sit down and let him rest. But if he's down and out and somebody can really talk it, he'll get uplifted. And I have did that a-many a time. I've went on a wreck, and folks were so close to the track we couldn't move—following us, every which way we'd go. Every time us'd move down, they'd move down, women and men, children, white and black, just keeping right up with us, just right jammed up, and they'd make them get back. They'd listen at me, and everybody would answer.

A second kind of calling done regularly by John Mealing was the dogging



FIGURE 2

Retired railroad callers demonstrating calls and work technique at the Dixie Railroad Club, Calera, Alabama, December 10, 1988. (Photo by Joey Brackner)

call. These were the instructions by the caller for carrying or jumping rails. A heavier set of tongs than tie tongs, called “rail dogs,” worked on the same general principle, two pieces of metal pivoted on a bolt so that the raising of the handles caused the wide flanged clamp to close on the ball, or bole, of the rail. The handles are solid steel about an inch in diameter, and it’s a heavy tool just by itself (section gang hands will joke that all the tools on the railroad are too heavy to begin with, and then they want you to *do* something with them).

Before the days of continuously welded track, rail came in standard 39-foot lengths. When John Mealing began working, most were ninety-pound rails—ninety pounds to the yard, that is—and by the end of his career most track was 132-pound rail. At a hundred pounds or more to the yard, to strike an average, a rail weighed more than thirteen hundred pounds. A gang of twelve men picking it up would be heaving upwards of one hundred pounds each if they all were carrying exactly their share, and no man alone could hope to hold it up if it was dropping or stop it if it was moving. If you thought the rail was

going from you and stepped toward it, and the rest of the gang thought it was coming towards your side, you were going to get thirteen hundred pounds dropped on your leg, guaranteed to break it.

Here a lead worker as caller was a must; in fact, it got written into the rule books of at least one major railroad. Even though old-time section gang hands will tell you the rule book was not to work you by—only to fire you by—it’s significant the view management took of calling. The following rules of the CSX system are quoted from page 32 of *Seaboard System Railroad; Safety Rules for Engineering and Maintenance of Way Department* (effective July 1984; 129 pp., no other publishing data):

Section 210. When two or more employees are handling a heavy or cumbersome object, have a definite understanding as to the way it is to be handled and observe the following precautions:

- a. Remove slipping and tripping hazards if practical. If not practical, exercise care to prevent slipping or tripping.
- b. Designate one employee to act as “call man” to give commands for all movements (lifting, walking, lowering or throwing). When practical, the “call man” should be at one end of the object being handled.
- c. Employees other than the “call man” must not give commands or do any unnecessary talking.
- d. Move only on command.

One other interesting rule in the book, under Section 216, says that employees must not “jump” rail (that is, jerk it suddenly about a yard at a time). As you’ll see, however, that was the ordinary way of moving rail when John Mealing was an active caller.

Another point of pride Mr. Mealing felt is that he never got anyone hurt while he was a caller. The key, in his mind, was in making sure everyone knew what was going to happen:

But the first thing you got to do is get people to know what you want done. Where you get a man hurt is when he don’t know. Because you got a greenhorn in the bunch. There’s somebody in there that’s hard to catch on to what you’re gonna do. Yeah, and you got to watch out for him.

Here's some transcription of Mr. Mealing pretending to call, first, with a loose, worn-out rail in its bed on the ties: it has to be shifted to the center of the crossties, then over the other rail to the end of the ties (called the "head" of the ties), then down into the ditch. Then he demonstrates the reverse process, setting a rail from the ditch up onto the end of the ties, then jumping it into the bed (where it is to run), and finally sliding it up to butt against the end of the last rail so the two can be bolted together.

"Hey, listen at me now, boys" [caller]

"Yeah" [response]

"Dog your rail, son"

Well, if I'm over this way [on the side towards which the rail is to be moved],
go:

"Set't on me"

And all of 'em gonna come to me; and I want to go further:

"Set't on me"

And all of 'em come to me:

"That's all right; move on down the line"

Get down there:

"Hey, boys—what you gonna do down there, man?"

"Yeah" [gang response]

"I want you to set't on me"

"Oh, set't on me"

"Alright . . ."

"So, man"

got it in here [loose rail still in its place on the crossties]

"Look a here, now, boys"

"I want you to set it in the center—whoomp!"

“Alright, I want you to set it over rail—whoomp!”

“Then I want to set it in the ditch—yeah”

You put it in there.

“Come on, boys, and go with me”

Everybody come and go with me, get the other one:

“Alright now, dog him, now, now, boys”

“Yeah” [response]

“Alright, set’t over the rail”

“Set it in the ditch one time”

“Alright, now come on, follow me”

“Oh, boys, dog him now, man”

“Yeah” [response]

“Oh, look a here, can you do what I want you to do now, boys?”

“Look a here:”

“Set it on the head, man”

“Yeah” [response]

“Set it in the bed, man”

“Join iron on me, son—whoom!”

“Alright, move on down the line”

Just tell ’em which away to go. See, that was the way when you was laying it.

There seems to have been a lot of other work on the railroad that didn’t lend itself to music or chanting—two-man teams driving spikes with the heads of their sixteen-inch spike mauls just a blur, for example. But there was a third and last kind of calling Mr. Mealing did, a tamping song. It is completely unnecessary for safety or even timing, and for that reason most fascinating to me; it seems to have been done out of sheer exuberance. Men in pairs with tamping picks leaned shoulder-to-shoulder, so much that they wore holes in their shirts where they leaned against one another, and swung their square-ended tamping picks together to crunch the ballast up under the ties. Again, here is some transcription of John Mealing’s singing. This too is 4/4 time, with

a “chunk” put in where the tamping picks hit the gravel:

4
 I got a
 1-2 3 4
 mule (chunk) on the

1 2 3 4
 mountain (chunk) Bring him

1 2 3 4
 down, boys, (chunk) Bring him

1-2 3
 down (chunk)

I got a mule on the mountain
 Bring him down, boys, bring him down
 Who in the world gonna ride him
 But bring him down, boys, bring him down

Mechanization of track upkeep ended John Mealing’s daily calling the way it ended it for callers all over the South. By the early 1960s the Frisco in and around Birmingham where he worked had “bump tamp” machines—a vehicle that clamped to the rails with an internal side-to-side hydraulic bumper that knocked machine, track and all to either side. About the same time ballast regulators appeared, mechanically pulling the ballast in full under the ties, in the hands of a single skilled operator. In the mid-1970s, the Frisco got torsion-beam tampers that lined and surfaced at the same time. Now only an occasional odd job needs the call man’s old art.

LIKE FOLK ART EVERYWHERE, it seems to be appreciated only when it’s dying out. I’ve seen a videotape done by Alan Lomax of a section gang lining track in Mississippi; it was shown at an Alabama Folklife Association meeting, though

I'm not sure it ever became commercially available. There's a short article and transcript by William Ferris on the caller of a railroad bridge gang ("Railroad Chants: Form and Function," pp. 1-14, in the *Mississippi Folklore Register*, vol. 4, 1970). Both scholars agree that these railroad work chants are an aspect of African American folklore. This they obviously are, at least in the South, though other norms apparently hold up North and out West. In 1982, the same year I first met John Mealing, I had a roadmaster on the Southern—in the process of explaining the westward growth of many Georgia lines in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries across Alabama and on west—tell me that this sort of calling was popularly known to the white management of his line as "Georgia n_____ calling," using the n-word I can no longer even type without cringing. He said that it was used "east and south of Kansas." Ferris in his article further noted that despite the accessibility of the last of these black callers, they had received little study by folklorists and others interested in African American music. This seems curious to me as well, especially in light of the scholarship devoted to black spirituals and rural and urban blues.

There's a clear connection in the words of John Mealing's lining chants and the traditional blues on the one hand and African American church music on the other. He grew up hearing cotton chopped to work chants in the fields in Lowndes County. He sang in church from age four on, and did so in choirs and as soloist right down to when I met him. He was in his first quartet as a teenager, and he sang quartet gospel in Birmingham for thirty-seven years, mainly with Willie McKinstry and the Evangelist Singers, and later with the Gospel Southernaires. This included weekly television appearances on Channel 6 in 1950 and 1951, which, unfortunately for the folklorist, were before things were regularly videotaped there; it was all evanescent live performance. John Mealing was never much into singing the blues himself, but could sing lots of the spirituals both the way he grew up with them and the jazzed-up way the quartets did them. He had a very clear idea which folksongs on the railroad were based on some historical happening ("Casey Jones, he was an engineer on the Frisco") and which weren't ("There never was but one John Henry on the railroad, and that was me"). He spoke of the strong influence of traditional black church music on the blues, and even thought that was some of the inspiration for his own railroad calling:

Well now, all of that *tune* comes from the same song. Now, you can believe it or not, but in what I was saying on the railroad, the same tune come from the other song, and that came right out of the Bible. You take, well, you don't know nothing about it, and I don't know nothing about it, but in the time of slaves—I got a Baptist hymnbook in there, a Baptist songbook—every song in there was sung by slaves, folks was enslaved. But they was depressed; and a person get depressed, the Lord'll give him something to say.

When Ed Bradley of *60 Minutes* fame died, CBS and even the other networks ran all sorts of old footage of him. One was of an interviewer asking him which of his news stories he was most proud of, of all the things he ever had done. He replied that if St. Peter ever inquired of him what he thought he had done that entitled him to admission to Heaven, he would say to St. Peter, “Did you see my interview with Lena Horne?” On a smaller scale I suppose one of the things I'm proudest of is having “discovered” John Mealing, though I wonder if it wasn't something of a mixed blessing for him. His life in retirement had fallen into a fairly established and comfortable pattern—Sunday church activity, two days a week light yard work for a wealthy white family in the Mountain Brook area of Birmingham, and the rest of the time spent around home or with relatives and friends. Then in 1982, I popped up for a tape-recorded interview and came back for three more. And I brought friends and photographers, and then got Mr. Mealing to give a half-hour performance to a luncheon audience in one of downtown Birmingham's fanciest new buildings. Joyce Cauthen, who for years has been the real dynamo that makes the Alabama Folklife Association run, featured Mr. Mealing in an Elderhostel program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham; other college appearances followed. Joyce was the heart and soul behind the “Talking Tent,” the folklife narrative tent, for years at Birmingham's annual City Stages festival, and for years she got John Mealing and friends to perform there. A segment of audio tape of his calling made it onto National Public Radio. A local newspaper columnist gave John a half-page of the Sunday paper, anchored by a color photo of him standing on the tracks. *Guideposts*, the national Methodist magazine, sent an interviewer down to feature him in an article on work, and when that article

appeared, Mr. Mealing's phone began to ring as people from all over the area called wanting him to come to their civic club or church group, or to sing at some folk music get-together at the new stage at Sloss Furnace. In 1991 he performed at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, in Washington, D.C. In 1994 he was one of half-a-dozen area call men featured in the documentary *Gandy Dancers*,⁴ mostly filmed at the Heart of Dixie railroad yard in Calera. In 1996, he and Cornelius Wright, Jr., a former call man from the U.S. Steel tracks, received National Heritage Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts,.

But the performance gradually changed, too. The cadence of the lining chants lost its strict timing, and there was a lot more flowery hand motion and ad-libbing on the refrains. Going back through my tapes it seems to me that the second half of that first session and some of the second session a week or so later were the best in terms of that elusive goal, authentic recording of folk art. He was sitting on his porch with me and sometimes Clyde Terrell too, slapping his hands and tapping his heel, trying to think back into the old lining verses. The only way to have done a good audio or videotape with him later on, as much as his delivery had changed, would have been to get him out on some track with his old buddies from the Frisco, lining bars in hand, and actually try to move some track. Doing the real job with his natural audience listening would have straightened things out in a hurry.

One occupational tendency of the folklorist, in addition to manipulating people and changing their lifestyles whether they want it or not, is to romanticize the past. I've probably done this with Mr. Mealing in the paragraph above and my search for "authenticity" in the folk arts. I may be fascinated by the old ways, but I'm pretty sure Mr. Mealing wasn't quite as fascinated—he was doing better in the present.

MAYBE THE BEST way to close would be with his "honey in the rock" metaphor for the changing South. The "honey in the rock" phrase is from the Bible, Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 13. The whole book of Deuteronomy up to chapter 32 seems to be rules—short chapters on how to dress, eat, punish criminals, etc.—spliced with historical occurrences such as the Golden Calf that help explain the rules. And then comes this long chapter 32, the "can-

title” of Moses, a song that some conjecture was old when Deuteronomy was composed and it was included therein. The “honey in the rock” phrase comes in the verses describing the ways God will provide for a loyal Israel:

In the desert he finds him,
in the howling expanses of the wastelands.
He protects him, rears him, guards him
as the pupil of his eye.

Like an eagle watching its nest,
hovering over its young,
he spreads out his wings to hold him,
he supports him on his pinions.

Yahweh alone is his guide;
no alien god for him!
He gives him the heights of the land to ride,
he feeds him on the yield of the mountains,
he gives him honey from the rock to taste,
and oil from the flinty crag . . .

Perhaps because getting honey from stone so succinctly and magically summed up what African American Christians especially in the South hoped could happen to them, the “honey in the rock” phrase became a staple of folk song and folk preaching. John Mealing obviously felt it to be such a common metaphor as to need no explaining to me:

It’s honey in the rock in the South. This is one of the best places in the world for a man to want to live, in the South. And my granddaddy lived to get ninety years of age pecking in this rock trying to find honey. But he died, he didn’t get it. My daddy lived to get up in age, but not as old as my granddaddy, pecking in the rock trying to find honey. But he couldn’t get any. All of the old peoples on my momma’s side died pecking in that rock hunting honey. But they couldn’t find it. But I knowed it was honey in this rock in the South.

My brother was living in Detroit and he tried to get me to come to Detroit in '50 to live. But I told him this, I said, "Boy," I said, "I don't want to stay up here"; I said, "But there's honey in the rock in the South." I say, "But somebody gonna find it," I say, "and I want to be there when they find it. I may not be able to sop none of it, but I can see somebody else soppin' it."

Now there's the mayor of great big old Birmingham, and he's a black mayor in the South. And that's some of that honey. Now I can't do that, but he's soppin' it. And if you go to the city hall to pay off a traffic ticket, you're gonna have to pass the black. Now that's true, because I done been down there. And if you go to the county courthouse to buy a driving license, you got to go past the black. You go on around there to get your tag, you got to pass the black. Everywhere you go, you're passing the black. Now that's some of that honey.

My daughter works for the telephone company, and she's got a high-paid job. That's some of that honey. Now I ain't got sense enough; I'm too old now to sop that honey, but she's sopping it. But I'm here seeing it, and it's a blessing to me to be here seeing it. And I told them, I'd rather be here hungry in the South than to be in the North with a pocket of money. And I will. I don't want no part of nothing but the South. It's honey in the rock in the South; you've just got to live to get it. ■

Notes

1. In those first interviews Mr. Mealing told me he was fifteen years old when he began work on the Western in 1926, which would have had him born in or around 1911. The official documents apparently say he was born in 1908. Usually written documents are more accurate than memory, especially decades after the events, although this 1908 birth year would not have made him underage for railroad employment in 1926.
2. A bend in the Alabama River near Mealing's hometown of White Hall.
3. The midday meal.
4. This film made by Barry Dornfeld and Maggie Holtzberg can be viewed free at www.folkstreams.net.

In Memoriam

Willie King, 1943–2009

Ever since he first heard a blues musician play at his grandmother's juke joint, Willie King was consumed by the blues. "It got all over me," he said, "and wouldn't let me go." From that time until his death on March 8, 2009,, he mined a deep groove and never stopped practicing, performing, writing, and developing the blues according to Willie King.

In recognition of a musical career that started on a plantation with a one-string, homemade diddly-bo and led to a national and international reputation, the state of Alabama awarded King the Alabama Folk Heritage Award for 2009.

King was born in 1943 in Prairie Point, Mississippi. At age six he moved with his family to Pickens County, Alabama, to work on a farm, and apart from a brief sojourn in Chicago, King spent the rest of his life in Alabama.

Music was important to the King family—his father was an amateur blues guitar player, and according to Willie, his grandfather "played both sides," singing both gospel and blues, while his grandmother Sue ran a juke joint and was well known for being an entertainer, a comedian of the ilk of "Moms" Mabley. Willie was thirteen before he owned his first guitar, an acoustic Gibson, which was purchased for him by Mr. W. P. Morgan, the plantation owner who owned the land on which his family lived. King paid off the \$60 price tag for the guitar by working with Morgan and helping out on the plantation. W. P. Morgan became a close friend and mentor to Willie King, an unusually close relationship at a time when segregation was the norm.

Willie studied guitar and blues with local musicians like Po' Andrew Harris, the Brook Brothers, Jessie Daniels and "Birmingham" George Conner. His music was influenced by contact with these regional blues musicians and by listening to his favorite recordings, especially Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins, and John Lee Hooker.

By age twenty he was regularly performing solo acoustic country blues at

house parties and juke joints in West Alabama and East Mississippi. Willie put his first group together when he was twenty-three, playing electric blues with bluesman Jessie Daniels, who still performs at local events. By 1965 Willie was farming, playing the blues, and making moonshine.

Moved by the many injustices he saw around him, King soon joined the Civil Rights movement and later worked with the Highlander Center, where he met and shared a stage with the legendary Pete Seeger. Spurred by his interest in civil rights and encouraged by his friend and fellow civil rights activist David Gespass, King started writing original songs that reflected the struggles of the times, which he called “struggling blues.” His songs told a story of direct experience which many could relate to. As King explained, “through the music I could reach more people, get ’em to listen.”

In 1989 he founded the Rural Members Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to passing on the traditional survival skills of his community to the next generation. Willie and the Rural Members Association sponsored classes in blues music, farming, woodworking, food preservation, and other rural African-American traditions. They also provided transportation, legal assistance, and other services for the needy of Pickens County over the past two decades. Willie also partnered with the Alabama Blues Project to provide blues education programs throughout Alabama and beyond.

Starting in 1997, Willie organized an annual festival in Pickens County, called the Freedom Creek Festival. The Freedom Creek Festival showcases many unrecorded and unrecognized regional back-woods blues musicians, more recently alongside such



Willie King. (Photo by Joel Beeson)

internationally renowned artists as Birmingham native Sam Lay, T-Model Ford and David “Honeyboy” Edwards.

King’s first recording was in 1999 with local blues star “Birmingham” George Conner. It was an independently produced CD titled *Walkin’ The Walk, Talkin’ The Talk*. In 2000 he released the self-produced *I am the Blues* with all original songs. In the same year, Jim O’Neal recorded *Freedom Creek* for his Rooster Blues label, capturing many of Willie’s “struggling blues” songs. This CD was recorded live at Bettie’s Place, a small juke joint in Noxubee County, Mississippi, just over the border from Willie’s home in Alabama and won *Living Blues* magazine’s best contemporary blues album award. This was followed by the 2002 studio recording *Living in a New World*. Willie again recorded at Bettie’s Place, both for Martin Scorsese’s movie *Feel Like Going Home* and for his first self-produced title, *Jukin’ At Bettie’s*. His latest recording is the self-produced album *One Love*.

Willie’s priorities were always split between playing the blues and working diligently to serve his deprived community in the heart of the poverty-stricken Black Belt region of West Alabama. To him, they were two sides of the same coin and his commitment to authenticity greatly enriched Alabama’s cultural heritage to all of our betterment and great enjoyment. — RICK ASHERSON ■

Art Deason, 1909–2009

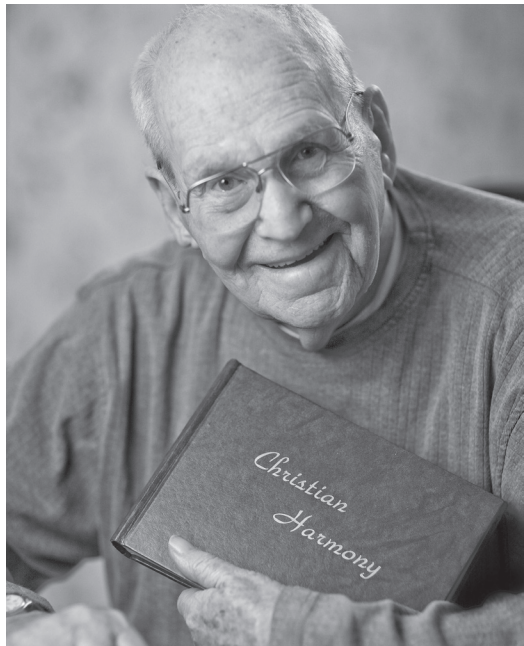
Arthur L. Deason of the well-known Christian Harmony singing family of Bibb County died February 17, 2009, just a few months shy of his one hundredth birthday. Fellow singer Tim Cook posted the following tribute to the “fasola singings” discussion list:

Anyone who has sung Christian Harmony probably knows the name Art Deason. We found out that he passed away peacefully Tuesday evening. He was 99, hoping maybe he could enjoy his 100th birthday party, but entirely at ease with whatever the Lord had planned. After his cousin, John Deason, died in the

1970s, Art became the one everyone looked to as leader of the Christian Harmony in Alabama. He was raised in the little community associated with the Deasons, near Little Hope Primitive Baptist Church in western Bibb County. Most of his adult life was spent in the county seat of Centreville, although for the past several years had been in assisted living in Madison, near family in Decatur and Huntsville, Alabama. For several years after he moved there, I sent him emails about singings, which many of you will recall. Not too many nonagenarians are up to speed with computers, but it was his connection to the world and he gleaned on every word I had to write. Some of us had the privilege of singing at his 99th birthday party last July. His big smile reached wide across his face the whole time we were there.

Art Deason was a revered singing-school master, composer and dedicated promoter of his family's tradition of Christian Harmony singing, the oldest of the active seven-shape traditions in the South. The *Christian Harmony* songbook, originally published in 1866 by South Carolinian William Walker, is now published in Alabama (1958 and 1994 revisions) largely through the efforts of Art Deason and his family. In fact, Deason chaired the 1994 revision committee and obtained a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to fund this worthy project.

Art Deason was recognized by the Alabama State Council on the Arts' (ASCA) Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program as a master artist, which helped him expand his singing-school activities to at least nine counties in west central and northwest Alabama, the heart



Art Deason. (Photo by Mark Gooch)

of Christian Harmony territory. As such, he was featured recently in the book and exhibit *Carry On: Celebrating Twenty Years of the Alabama Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program*. He also worked with ASCA on the annual Capitol City Shape Note Singing (an event that he conceived and helped to organize) where singers have gathered every summer in Montgomery for more than twenty years now to sing from the four shape-note hymnals published in Alabama: the *Christian Harmony*, the *Sacred Harp* (Denson Revision), the *Sacred Harp* (Cooper Revision), and the *Colored Sacred Harp*. ■

Al Thomas, 1930–2008

Alan R. Thomas, who served three terms as president of the Alabama Folklife Association, as well as holding other offices over the years, died on June 4, 2008 after suffering from leukemia and related health problems for several years. He was 78.

Al was the most enthusiastic and evangelistic of AFA members and continually recruited new members. Despite chronic health problems, he greatly enjoyed working in the AFA booth that we set up at various festivals and presiding



Al Thomas. (Photo by Joyce Cauthen)

over the annual gatherings held in small cities across the state. As expressed in his obituary, he had a life-long passion for all types of music, with a special affinity for old-time music and Sacred Harp. His wife Gypsy, who has also been

a strong supporter of the AFA, requested that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the Vestavia Hills Methodist Church or to the AFA. We appreciate the memorial donations we received in his name and greatly miss Al Thomas, under whose leadership the AFA grew in size and mission. — JOYCE CAUTHEN ■

Nora Lee McKeown Ezell, 1919–2007

Nora Ezell of Mantua (Greene County) was one of Alabama's most-honored African American quilters, receiving the Alabama Folk Heritage Award from the Alabama State Council on the Arts in 1990 and a 1992 National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She participated as a master artist in ASCA's Alabama Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program for many years, teaching a number of students. She was also a published author.

One of ten children, Nora Ezell was born in Brooksville, Mississippi, and moved with her family to Alabama when still a child. She learned to sew in a home economics class and taught herself to quilt by watching her mother and aunt. "My aunt had all kinds of quilt patterns. All the old ones. I guess it never came to her to do her own, but I'm a little bit jealous, and I wanted to do something no one else had done, so from the beginning I thought of 'doing my own thing,'" she recalled in her memoir. "I wanted my quilts to be different."

Throughout her life, Ezell made a wide range of traditional pieced and appliquéd designs, to which she added her own flair, such as the donkey pattern, grandmother's flower garden, and her "star puzzle" quilts. But she was primarily known for her "storytelling" quilts, which included depictions of the histories of the University of Alabama and Stillman College, the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and "A Tribute to the Civil Righters of Alabama." According to Ezell, "creating both traditional and original design quilts, I work hard to tell a story with needle and thread."

When she quilted Ezell kept a detailed journal logging the cost of materials and the hundreds of hours spent on her projects as well as reflections on her



Nora Ezell. (Photo courtesy of
Alabama State Council on the Arts)

art and daily life. This journal became the basis for her book *My Quilts and Me: The Diary of an American Quilter* (Black Belt Press, 1999).

Her work was exhibited in one-woman shows at Stillman College, the Birmingham Public Library, and the Alabama Artists' Gallery in Montgomery. And her quilts were included in several regional and national exhibitions showcasing African American quilt making.

Ezell was a confident artist with a strong sense of color and a vibrant aesthetic. The hundreds of distinctive quilts she made in her lifetime will communicate her vision for years to come.

As Ezell said in a 1990 interview, "I like to put a little bit of me in my quilts, because I think this is one thing that lives after us. Maybe you've forgotten my name, but you'll remember that I always used certain colors that went together so well." — ANNE KIMZEY ■

Book Reviews

Little Zion: A Church Baptized by Fire. By Shelly O’Foran.
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

REVIEWED BY JIM CARNES

Heard through the grapevine or read in the newspaper, the phrase is as charged with emotional, historical and spiritual shock value as the scar on the landscape itself—*church burning*. Before and during the Civil Rights Movement, acts of arson upon African American churches played a supporting role to lynchings in the epic horror of white supremacy. The relative infrequency of such events in the decades following legal segregation only seems to compound their message when they do occur: Progress is more fragile than we like to think.

Shelly O’Foran’s *Little Zion: A Church Baptized by Fire* uses a 1996 church burning as a lens for examining community values, theological legacy and race relations in one rural Alabama county. The evidence she offers—in the voices of church members—provides both a caution against simplistic assumptions and a testimony to the power of radical love. On a technical and structural level, the editorial choices that shape this volume demonstrate the unique partnership between listener and informant that lifts the best oral history beyond documentation to collaborative art.

O’Foran, a Maryland Quaker, was at church herself when she first learned of the fire that destroyed Little Zion Baptist Church in Boligee in Greene County. The incident was one of a “rash” of church burnings that drew media attention and an outpouring of volunteer rebuilders from across the country. O’Foran and her husband and young daughter joined a two-week work camp

at Little Zion in midsummer. As O'Foran describes the motivation,

For two African American churches in this small town to catch fire mysteriously in the same night, after another had been similarly destroyed a few weeks earlier, strongly suggested racially motivated arson to us. We came to Little Zion as part of an effort to right that perceived wrong. We came as activists, attempting to change on some level the culture we found here.

For O'Foran's spiritual self, and her spiritual community, the Boligege fires were a call to action. She and her fellow Quakers came to put their hands and their hearts to work at mending what they saw as cultural and historical wounds. What she didn't foresee was that her professional self, as a Ph.D. candidate in folklife studies, would be called to action as well. Working, visiting and worshipping with Little Zion parishioners, witnessing their dignity, endurance and forgiveness of any possible human agent in the unsolved crimes, awakened O'Foran to a challenge she had not envisioned while planning the trip. As she began conducting interviews and conceiving a narrative project about the ordeal, she set a goal of "tracing the outlines of a structure that exists beyond the physically tangible building, built solid of another kind of material—vulnerable perhaps to the passage of time and the process of forgetting, but certainly not to fire."

The structure O'Foran sketches is, by turns, both stately and humble, sacred and down-to-earth. The personal narratives that constitute nearly half the book offer epic conversion experiences alongside the struggles of work and domestic life. The vividness of these contrasting dimensions attests to both O'Foran's skill as an interviewer and editor and her subjects' skill as historians and narrators. Striking details sustain a strong sensory and emotional connection throughout. An elder recalls learning as a child that newly opened cotton gives better weight per row than later, drier bolls. A widow describes despairing at her husband's death to the point of piling all her favorite china in the middle of the dining room floor. Only then, she says, did she hear the Lord tell her "He was too holy and righteous to make a mistake. I started back to living."

While the physical church evolved over the decades from brush arbor to log cabin to frame building to the brick building that burned and the one that

replaced it, its spiritual counterpart has also changed over time. A number of elders describe a decline in the emotional intensity of worship, a relaxing of expectations for children's behavior, and a movement toward more equitable gender roles. But the centrality of the church in community life has remained constant, as has the rigorous faith that both anchors and energizes individual lives.

It's a mark of O'Foran's success that so little of her book dwells on her own "reeducation" about rural Southern African American life. While this sense of discovery no doubt provided ample motivation to a well-educated, liberal-minded Northerner, it takes a back seat here to the voices of the Little Zion flock, in whom the old Sunday School adage "The church is not a building" has met the ultimate test. ■

Mobile Ghosts II: The Waterline. By Elizabeth Parker. (Mobile, Alabama: Apparition Publishing, 2004)

REVIEWED BY ALAN BROWN

In 2000, Elizabeth Parker published her collection of ghost stories from Alabama's largest port city, *Mobile Ghosts*. Written for a general audience, the fourteen tales combine the history of the sites with testimonies from eyewitnesses to the hauntings. In my review of *Mobile Ghosts*, published in Issue No. 7, 2004 edition of *Tributaries*, this reviewer wrote, "Lovers of 'true' ghost stories should be glad that Elizabeth Parker was not too intimidated by Kathryn Tucker Windham's enduring legacy to make her own contribution to Alabama's ghostlore." Like its predecessor, *Mobile Ghosts II: The Waterline* builds on the popularity of Alabama's ghost stories while posing no threat to Mrs. Windham's reputation as the State's premier "ghost" writer.

Mobile Ghosts II: The Waterline is divided into three sections: "Haunted Houses," "Haunted Buildings," and "Haunted Updates." The largest sec-

tion, "Haunted Houses," focuses on private residences located in Mobile's historic district. To protect the privacy of her informants, Parker omits their addresses and, in several cases, changes their names. Most of her subjects, who know little of the history of their homes, assume that the phenomena they are experiencing are supernatural in origin. Parker too seems eager to offer paranormal theories as logical explanations, such as her assertion that a cottage on Dauphin Island might truly be haunted because "any ghost hunter will tell you all that water is highly conducive to spirits." Still, Parker's reliance on the testimony of actual witnesses to the unexplained disturbances adds an element of verisimilitude to the tales that compels the reader to continue to the next chapter. The most dramatic story in this section, entitled "A Houseful of Spirits," concerns a young woman's inability to move or breathe in a room inhabited by a supposedly malignant spirit until she is pulled into the hallway by her friends. Folklorists will recognize the phenomena experienced by the harried homeowners—strange odors, nocturnal knockings, flickering lights, full-bodied spectral sightings—as motifs commonly found in oral ghost narratives.

The second section, "Haunted Buildings," is, for the historical enthusiast, alternately fascinating and frustrating. The first tale, "The Strong Scent of Roses," is a thoroughly-researched account of the haunting of the Bay Minette Public Library by Anne Gilmer, the founder of the library and its first director. In the second story, "The Hospital Morgue Ghost," Parker does a fine job describing the appearances of several full-bodied apparitions but seems to assume that the reader is already familiar with the history and location of the West Mobile facility. The most disappointing story, "The Prell Shampoo Ghost," suffers from the omission of the name of the office where the strange smells were detected.

In the final section, "Haunted Updates," Parker provides the most recent paranormal occurrences from three of the most haunted locations from her previous book: Laughing Owl Publishing, a private residence on Government Street, and the Bragg-Mitchell Mansion. The best of these stories, "Hello, Mrs. Mitchell," substitutes historical fact for the speculation permeating most of the other tales. Parker's account of the staff's eerie encounters with the "Grey Man" in the Bragg-Mitchell Mansion comes closest to reproducing the chills

this reviewer felt when reading Windham's *Thirteen Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey* for the first time.

Granted, Parker's decision to write for an audience who is already familiar with Mobile and *Mobile Ghosts: Alabama's Haunted Port City* diminishes its appeal somewhat for the rest of us. Despite its shortcomings, however, *Mobile Ghosts II* is still an important addition to the ghostlore of Alabama. At the very least, *Mobile Ghosts* and *Mobile Ghosts II* should not only revive interest in the city's storied past but should also help establish Mobile as Alabama's most haunted city. ■

A Sacred Feast: Reflections on Sacred Harp Singing and Dinner on the Ground. By Kathryn Eastburn. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008)

REVIEWED BY JOYCE CAUTHEN

Alabama figures prominently in the history of Sacred Harp singing. In large numbers, Alabamians have kept this form of shape note music alive by singing it and periodically revising the book from which it draws its name. Two Alabama natives, Buell Cobb and John Bealle, have written excellent books detailing the history, music theory, and cultural traditions associated with *The Sacred Harp*.

Now a new book is available to those who seek an introduction to this archaic form of music and an understanding of its strong and deep appeal to those who sing it. Written by Kathryn Eastburn, a journalist from Colorado, the book features Liberty Baptist Church of Henagar on its cover and has at its center traditional singings held in Alabama as well as singings in southwest Texas, Seattle, Boulder, Colorado Springs, and Hoboken, Georgia.

A Sacred Feast: Reflections on Sacred Harp Singing and Dinner on the Ground was published as part of the University of Nebraska's "At Table" series and is

ostensibly about food. In her description of the first singing she attended, Eastburn writes of the noon meal: “Rows of dishes—fried chicken, baked beans, deviled eggs, three varieties of green beans and at least as many versions of potato salad—were lined up on long tables in the crowded church kitchen, flanked by smaller tables filled with sweating cups of iced tea. At the end of the table, women who reminded me of my great-aunts with their pillowed bosoms and downy cheeks, fussed over a banquet of pies and cakes.”

She includes a number of recipes for dishes served at each of the singings featured in the book. Thus we are told how to make “Mr. Freeman’s Wife’s Best Pumpkin Pie” (Birmingham), Louise Ivey’s “Homegrown Cornbread” (Henagar), Ericka Wilson’s “Dijon Potato Salad” (Seattle), “Bozo Willis’s Dollar Store Dressing” (Hoboken) and “Aunt Annie’s Old-fashioned Cobbler Pies” (as furnished by Amanda Denson Brady of Birmingham).

However, *A Sacred Feast* is really about a different kind of hunger and a different kind of food. Eastburn describes how as an adult she longed to sing as she had sung growing up in Southern Baptist churches in Kentucky and Tennessee. In Colorado City, however, she had been unable to find churches with the spirited congregational singing she remembered. While doing an Internet research on old-fashioned hymns, she discovered the topic of Sacred Harp singing. Intrigued, she decided to learn more by writing a magazine article about it. Thus she attended her first singing as a reporter but after a very short time, she “felt the spirit of a shared song enter my sleeping heart. I picked up a songbook and began to sing along, the lump in my throat melting, warmth spreading to the tips of my fingers and toes as the day passed.” Besides filling her need to sing with others, she tells how the lyrics of the songs and shared experiences with her ever-growing circle of Sacred Harp friends helped her deal with her worries about her son, a soldier in Iraq fighting a war she did not support.

Kathryn Eastburn writes beautifully. Into her narrative about attending singings and becoming an experienced singer she weaves information about the history of *The Sacred Harp*, describes how the music is sung, tells what happens at a singing and refers to other writings and videos and websites. The reader can come away from *A Sacred Feast* with a solid understanding of Sacred Harp singing.

I have a problem with one statement in the book, however. In the epilogue she repeats an idea shared by many Sacred Harp singers that shape-note singing is “America’s earliest music.” Even if they mean “the earliest non-native form of music in America,” they are forgetting that the first book published in the North American colonies was the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640) which contained lyrics to be sung in church but no musical notation. Instead it had meter markings to indicate popular tunes to which the psalms could be sung. Benjamin Lloyd’s *Primitive Hymns* (published in Alabama in 1841), also indicates tunes by meter markings rather than notes and represents an earlier form of music sung in America than *The Sacred Harp* (1844) does.

I also am surprised that the book has no index. When I decide to make “Karen Ivey’s Sweet Potato Cobbler,” I’ll have to remember that it’s a Henagar recipe and go to that section. The appendix does contain a list of essential books, CDs, websites, etc. as well as a small bibliography, however.

Small problems aside, it is a fine book that I highly recommend to people new to Sacred Harp singing as well as those firmly entrenched in the tradition. The latter will find many friends on the pages of *A Sacred Feast*. ■

Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz. By Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff. (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007)

REVIEWED BY STEVE GRAUBERGER

Abbott and Seroff have produced another detailed tome of reference material for scholars and amateur historians alike. *Ragged But Right* is ultimately an expansion from their previous publication *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music 1889–1995*. For aficionados of black American history focusing on performance arts, this book is a required read.

It is packed full of era references, playbills and advertisements that are taken primarily from African American newsprint publications such as the *Freeman* (Indianapolis) and the *Chicago Defender* in addition to *Billboard* and various other resources such as local newspapers, subject-related publications and interviews. The quotations and edited summaries of published materials are informative, interesting, and give valuable insight into the life and times of the many itinerant entertainers, band directors, promoters and producers of this historic era. The timeline ranges from the turn of the twentieth century ragtime era up to the waning of this fascinating period of minstrelsy, traveling tent, and annex shows at mid-century.

Early African American touring theater groups featured interlocutors, soubrettes, hoop roller manipulators, comedians, sketch acts with costumed revues, “coon song shouters” and blues singers, buck and wing dancers, contortionists and acrobats, dancers and instrumentalists, wire artists, barrel mystifiers, and dog and pony acts, in addition to elaborate stage productions with olio. These olio were a collection of various artistic or literary works or musical pieces, vaudeville or musical entertainment were presented between the acts of a burlesque or minstrel show productions. Ethnic sketches using Hawaiian, Cuban, Spanish and Chinese characters were staples along with obligatory vamps, dancers, and other sensuous enticements that helped to draw large crowds.

This book is valuable in showing the importance of this performance heritage to the evolution of blues and jazz, and its relation to vaudeville by detailing some of the era’s important personages such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Jelly Roll Morton, and many other performers who were famous during their time but never made a commercial recording and thus are rarely mentioned in musical histories. Many may not realize the depth of sophistication exhibited by some of the early theater groups like Tolliver’s Smart Set and its incarnations in the Big Show genre of stagecraft.

Band leaders and arrangers played an important part in gaining status and drawing crowds for the various companies. Many band members would also double as baseball players that would play hometown teams when the troupes came into town. The importance of the bandleaders and star musicians was shown in the section on annex bands. These were the bands that

accompanied large traveling circuses and wild west shows. The annexes were, it appeared, meant to segregate races, but were an important feature to draw large crowds.

Theatrical bands played a wide variety of musical styles, satisfying the shimmy shakers as well as the classically initiated listeners of marches, overtures, and popular melodies and waltzes. Trick instrumentalization like imitating animals, freak sounds, and moaning blues were promoted features in advertisements and in newspaper reviews. Multi-talented musicians could each play a variety of instruments. Companies relied heavily upon band leaders and musicians to parade through towns or do pre-concerts to promote upcoming tent shows and theatrical revues. This book is a serious resource for scholars of the evolution of early blues and jazz. It is interesting to note the relationship of rural “coon shouting” performance to that of commercial blues in America.

When reading through the book one can picture the trials and tribulations of black entertainers who plied their trade in staid theaters as well as with traveling troupes, tent shows and as annex performers in wild west shows and large circuses illustrating the class struggle taking place during the era. While many productions were controlled by the white hegemony, a handful of very successful black producers became wealthy through minstrelsy and later traveling tent show productions. It must be noted that while traveling tent shows and similar performance revues were wildly popular with African American populations there was always very strong white audience participation as well. Tours in the South were fraught with contradictions of prejudice and acclaim. It was interesting to me how many of the private train cars were burned during the life of various touring companies and how hard it was for blacks to be accommodated in the areas they performed, thus necessitating private means of transportation.

Ragged but Right, similar to *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music 1889–1995*, is organized in parts with each section covering specific subject matter in a basically chronological order. The time-line returns to the beginning in each of the four sections so there is some overlap in the subject matter, yet this format seems to work well. Each sectional part has a separate appendix listing various band leaders and band members of

each particular performance company covered. In addition, the footnoted references are extensive and thorough.

Co-author Lynn Abbott now works at the William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University. He has published extensively on the history of African-American music, often with co-author Doug Seroff who is an independent research/writer and vintage record collector. ■

Notes on Contributors

JIM BROWN is a professor of history (and occasionally folklore) at Samford University. He edited *Up Before Daylight: Life Histories of the Alabama Writers' Project*, and sustains an active interest in folk music, craft and literature. His principal research relates to the folk consciousness behind the emergence of the modern nation-state, the theme of a modern world history text he has in the works. Most recently he worked with Bhutan's "National Storytelling Conference: Recognizing and Reviving Oral Traditions," part of the little Himalayan kingdom's quest for Gross National Happiness.

THOMAS KERSEN is an assistant professor of sociology at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. His research interests include community, demography, sociology of religion, and research methodology. He has presented at regional and national professional conferences and has coauthored several articles in academic journals. Currently, Tom is studying sermons and other documents associated with a Unitarian minister who was at the forefront of the civil rights movement in Birmingham in the 1950s–1960s. Tom is married and has one child.

SUSAN THOMAS is a freelance writer, researcher, archivist and social worker living in Mobile. She holds a master's degree in communication from the University of South Alabama, where she currently teaches as an adjunct instructor in communication. She also serves as archivist for Springhill Avenue Temple, the oldest Jewish congregation in Alabama. Her research and professional interests include oral history, foodways, Southern culture, historic preservation, and disability issues. She has worked on several projects with the Alabama Folklife Association.

Reviewers

ALAN BROWN is a professor of English at the University of West Alabama. Since 1990, Dr. Brown has presented many lectures on Alabama folklore, including “Alabama’s Legendary Outlaws,” “Alabama Deathlore,” and “Alabama’s Haunted Places.” Dr. Brown’s publications include *The Face in the Window and Other Alabama Deathlore* (1996), *Shadows and Cypress* (2000), and *Haunted Places in the American South* (2002).

JIM CARNES, a former editor of *Tributaries*, directed the documentary video *Sweet Is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait* (2001). When not pursuing labors of love in folklife, he works as communications director at Alabama Arise.

JOYCE CAUTHEN is executive director of the Alabama Folklife Association and one of Alabama’s foremost scholars of traditional folk music. Best known for her book, *With Fiddle and Well-Rosined Bow: Old-Time Fiddling in Alabama*, she also produced the documentary CDs *Possum Up a Gum Stump: Home, Field & Commercial Recordings of Alabama Fiddlers*, *John Alexander’s Sterling Jubilee Singers of Bessemer, Alabama* and edited the book and CD *Benjamin Lloyd’s Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition*. Her most recent production is the CD *Bullfrog Jumped: Children’s Folksongs from the Byron Arnold Collection*, with its accompanying booklet and online teacher’s guide.

STEVE GRAUBERGER is a folklife specialist working for the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, a division of the Alabama State Council on the Arts. He graduated from the University of Hawaii at Manoa with a master’s degree in ethnomusicology. He did thesis research on a student Fulbright Scholarship in the Philippines concerning the organology of Filipino diatonic harp. He currently produces the Traditional Musics of Alabama Millenium CD Series and produces the weekly Alabama Arts Radio Series program heard on two local radio stations.



www.alabamafolklife.org

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Include your name and address information with a check, payable to AFA, and mail to the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, 201 Monroe Street, Suite 110, Montgomery, AL 36104. Members receive *Tributaries*, newsletters, and notice of the AFA Annual Meeting. Contributions to the AFA are tax-deductible.

The publications and recordings below have been produced with the support of the AFA. To order, list the items and quantities desired, include shipping and handling (a flat fee of \$2.50 for any number of items), and send a check (payable to AFA; may be combined with membership dues) for the total to the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, 201 Monroe Street, Suite 110, Montgomery, AL 36104. You can also order the following directly from our website at www.alabamafolklife.org.

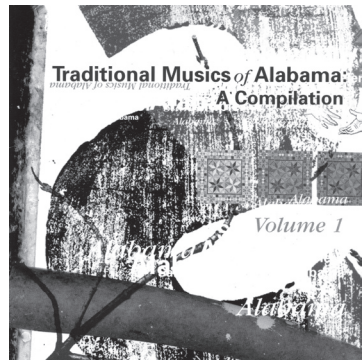
- Bullfrog Jumped!* (\$17) is a collection of songs sung by mothers, grandmothers, school teachers, babysitters, and children across Alabama. During the summer of 1947 they sat at their kitchen tables and on their front porches

in front of a portable disc recorder and enthusiastically shared their favorite folksongs with Professor Byron Arnold, a “songcatcher.” They wanted children to learn them and sing them for many years to come. Forty-two of these folksongs and games are on this CD along with a 72-page booklet that contains the words to all of the songs and gives information about the singers.

- *Sweet Is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait* (\$20 DVD or VHS, please specify) produced by Erin Kellen and directed by Jim Carnes. In this hour-long video members of Wootten family of Sand Mountain speak of their long and deep involvement with shape-note singing and sing more than a dozen hymns from *The Sacred Harp*. An accompanying booklet provides historical information and further explanation of shape-note traditions.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 1 (\$8). Contains essays on the shoal fish trap, Mobile Bay jubilees, quilting, occupational folklore, and more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 2 (\$8). Contains essays on Hank Williams, revival of interest in Indian tribal ancestry, Alabama’s outlaws, cultural roles of African-American women in the Wiregrass, and more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 3 (\$8). Contains essays on graveshelters, the Skyline Farms, the Piney Woods Regional Folklife Project, geophagy, and more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 4 (\$8). Contains essays on contemporary Christmas curb lights in Birmingham, Creek Indian migration narratives, the Ballad of John Catchings, and more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 5 (\$10). This special thematic issue contains essays on Alabama’s blues topics such as Butler “String Beans” May, Ed Bell, “Jaybird” Coleman, Willie King, Vera Ward Hall, and “John Henry.”
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 6 (\$8). Contains essays on Alabama’s first folklife celebration, “FolkCenter South,” family reunions, pre-Columbian highways, and more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 7 (\$8). Contains essays on picking

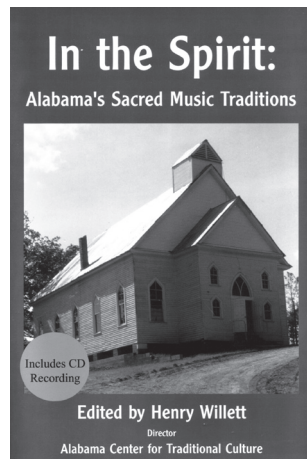
mayhaws, the literature of Ruby Pickens Tartt, Mobile's Mardi Gras, and more.

- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 8 (\$8). Contains essays on Mobile foodways, Sacred Harp singing, women blues singers, Birmingham's Mexican population, and more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 9 (\$8). Essays on river redhorse snaring, heritage gardening, Pineywoods cattle, and the MOWA Choctaw of Alabama.
- *The Traditional Musics of Alabama: A Compilation, Volume 1* (\$12.50). This CD is the first in the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture's Millennium Series, produced by Steve Grauberger. It presents a delightful and well-recorded variety of children's games, work songs, sacred music, fiddle tunes, blues and other forms of music traditional to Alabama collected by musicologists and folklorists over the last 50 years.
- *Traditional Musics of Alabama: Volume 3, 2002 National Sacred Harp Singing Convention* (\$12.50) This CD is the third in the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture's Millennium Series, produced by Steve Grauberger. Recorded June 14th 2002 at the National Sacred Harp Convention at Trinity United Methodist Church, Birmingham, Alabama. Program notes were written by John Bealle.
- *Traditional Musics of Alabama: Volume 4, Wiregrass Notes* (\$12.50) This CD is the fourth in the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture's Millennium Series, produced by Steve Grauberger. Recorded in 1980 in Ozark Alabama, by Brenda and Steve McCallum, this is a newly digitized and revised release originally produced by Hank Willett and Doris Dyen as the LP *Wiregrass Notes: Black Sacred Harp Singing From Southeast Alabama*. Included are the songs in the original release plus 13 additional songs taken from original event recordings.
- Forthcoming in fall 2009—*The Traditional Musics of Alabama: Volume 5, "New-Book" Gospel Shape-Note Singing*. (\$17) This is the fifth CD in



the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture's Millennium Series, produced by Steve Grauberger. Most tracks were recorded at annual Alabama State Gospel Singing Conventions or other associated gospel singing events. A primary focus of the CD highlights Alabama songwriters who submit their work to the various "New-Book" publications.

- *John Alexander's Sterling Jubilee Singers of Bessemer, Alabama*, (\$10). This cassette recording features Jefferson County's oldest African American *a cappella* gospel group.
- *Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb*, (\$16). CD version of the Sterling Jubilee cassette described above.
- *Cornbread Crumbled in Gravy: Historical Alabama Field Recordings from the Byron Arnold Collection of Traditional Tunes* (\$12.50). This box set includes a 64-page booklet and a cassette featuring field recordings of folk, gospel, and parlor tunes recorded in 1947.
- *Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass* (\$10). A CD capturing bluegrass, gospel, blues, and Sacred Harp singing as done in Southeast Alabama.
- *The Alabama Sampler* (\$12). A CD featuring live performances at Birmingham's City Stages festival of the state's blues, bluegrass, Sacred Harp, gospel, railroad calls, etc.
- *Benjamin Lloyd's Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition* (\$29.95 hardcover). A book of essays exploring Alabama's oldest hymnal, published in 1841, and enclosed CD with twenty songs.
- *In the Spirit, Alabama's Sacred Music Traditions* (paperback book/CD, \$15): A dozen essays about such forms of religious music as "Dr. Watts singing," bluegrass gospel, gospel quartet singing, African-American Covenanters, shape-note and more. CD features examples of each.
- *Judge Jackson and the Colored Sacred Harp* (Book/CD, \$29.95) This 160-page hard-



bound book and CD by Joe Dan Boyd with an introduction by John Bealle tells the story of Judge Jackson of Ozark, Alabama, who in 1934 published *The Colored Sacred Harp*. It also describes the formation and rise to prominence of the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers, led by Dewey Williams and Japheth Jackson. The enclosed CD contains 2 historic recordings in which Judge Jackson participated and 23 others from *The Colored Sacred Harp* as well as the Cooper version of *The Sacred Harp*.

NON-AFA PRODUCTS OF RELATED INTEREST:

- Rich Amerson* (\$7 for cassette, \$10 for CD). Folk tales and songs recorded in Livingston, Alabama, in 1961.
- Possum Up a Gum Stump: Home, Field and Commercial Recordings of Alabama Fiddlers* (\$9 for cassette, \$15 for CD). Contains rare recordings of nineteenth-century fiddlers and field recordings of twentieth-century fiddlers who played in older styles. Twenty-four-page liner notes.
- White Spirituals from the Sacred Harp: The Alabama Sacred Harp Convention* (\$10 for cassette, \$15 for CD). Alan Lomax recorded these shape-note songs from the Sacred Harp in 1959 in Fyffe, Alabama.
- The Colored Sacred Harp* (CD, \$16). The Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers of Ozark, Alabama, sing from Judge Jackson's 1934 compilation of shape-note songs.
- Desire for Piety* (CD, \$16). A rare example of black Sacred Harp singing from rural southeast Alabama as sung by the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers.
- With Fiddle and Well-Rosined Bow* (paperback book, \$19.95) A social history of old-time fiddling written by Joyce Cauthen.
- Allison's Sacred Harp Singers* (CD, \$13.50) Re-mastered selections of rare Sacred Harp recordings made in 1927-28 by singers from Birmingham.
- Religion Is a Fortune* (CD, \$13.50): Remastered commercial recordings of various Sacred Harp groups recorded in 1920s and '30s.
- Lookout Mountain Convention* (CD, \$15) More than 30 songs from the 1960 edition of *The Original Sacred Harp* recorded at the Lookout

Mountain Convention in August 1968.

- In Sweetest Union Join* (2 CDs, \$25) 1999 recording commemorates 40th anniversary of Alan Lomax's historic Sacred Harp recording made in 1959.
- The Sacred Harp Hour*, WCPC Sessions (CD, \$15) Selections from Sunday morning radio show in Houston, Mississippi, on air since 1959.
- Spiritualaires of Hurtsboro, Alabama: Singing Songs of Praise* (CD, \$15) 16 songs by one of the last active gospel quartets with origins in Gospel's golden age of the 1950s.