

# Tributaries

Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association



## SUMMER 1994

Survival of the Great Shoal Fishtrap  
*Jim Brown*

New Strings on the "Old Harp"  
*John Bealle*

Songs of Work and Songs of Worship  
*Brenda McCallum*

Miracle of the Fishes: Mobile Bay Jubilees  
*Anne Kimzey*

A Quilter's Diary  
*Nora Ezell*

Popsicle Man, Popsicle Union  
*Archie Green*

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Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association

Jim Carnes

EDITOR

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## Editor's Note

In his "benediction" at the annual meeting of the Alabama Folklife Association last November, Archie Green called folklore in the United States an endangered discipline. Crises of funding are nothing new to either public or academic programs. No province is immune to infighting and philosophical rifts. But Archie cited a threat more basic than either of these: the decline of American traditional culture.

Few current fields of study face the possibility of losing their object. The wells of history and art and science never run dry. There will always be politicians to dissect and galaxies to fathom. Until recently, folklore has appeared similarly inexhaustible. Like psychology or genetics or certain modes of criticism, it has remained fluid by interpreting the present as cumulative—as *legacy*.

Archie Green sees that legacy wearing thin. America's global media, mass marketing, and conglomerate industry have radically diminished two essential features of our folklife: historical continuity and local expressiveness. (Free-floating contemporary phenomena such as New Age ritual and e-mail may lend themselves to folkloric analysis, but they substitute a brainstormy jaggedness for the contours of sustained experience.) Around the country, sense of place is vanishing under a Pop sheen.

The conservatism implied in Archie's warning is the "enlightened parochialism" of folklore itself. He issued his diagnosis as a call to activism. Only by combining forces with the complementary fields of conservation and historic preservation, he urged, can folklore studies thrive.

The triple alliance has a beautiful symmetry: An environment that supports local livelihoods commands local respect. Locally grounded communities foster deep culture. Structures older than living memory have their own covenant with the natural world.

We've named our journal with these thoughts in mind. 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.

Arguably, these two maps are inseparable. As two of the following articles demonstrate quite literally, the life in our waters and the folklife it inspires comprise a fragile heritage.

*Tributaries* aims to afford its readers a palpable sense of this place. Here are the hands and voices, rivers and shores of an endangered Alabama. With the inaugural issue of this journal, the Alabama Folklife Association says to Archie Green: A-men!

JIM CARNES



*In Memoriam*  
Brenda McCallum (1948-1992)

The folklore community lost an important scholar and beloved friend with the death of Brenda McCallum, who served as Head Librarian of the Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green (Ohio) State University from 1985 until her passing.

A native of Kentucky, Brenda received her B.A. from Rutgers, where she was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and earned her M.A. in Folk Studies from the Cooperstown program of the State University of New York. She began her distinguished career in 1977 as an intern with the Center for Southern Folklore. There she assisted Peggy Bulger and Dwight DeVane with fieldwork that led to the double LP *Drop on Down in Florida*.

From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, Brenda worked in the Special Collections at the University of Alabama. Her recordings of black gospel music in the Birmingham area and extensive interviews with quartet members led to the release of an LP entitled *Birmingham Boys: Jubilee Gospel Quartets of Jefferson County, Alabama* (1982).

At Alabama, Brenda established the Archive of American Minority Cultures in 1979. Her own extensive field recordings form the bulk of this collection, which is the largest single body of Alabama folklore materials in existence. Much of the material was included in the acclaimed radio series "Working Lives" (1985). This 13-part documentary, chronicling the influx of workers into Birmingham's industrial corridor, was broadcast on more than 40 public radio stations nationwide. The archive also contains the field tapes for the six-part radio series "In the Spirit" (1986), a profile of Alabama's black religious music.

Brenda McCallum was a leader among archivists who sought to document and preserve the culture of working Americans, particularly those of the Birmingham area. Her exceptional folklore scholarship has provided a legacy that continues to serve the students of Alabama folk culture, occupational lore, women's studies, traditional music, and popular culture. She will be greatly missed.

JOEY BRACKNER

*Alabama State Council on the Arts*

## Survival of the Great Shoal Fishtrap

*Jim Brown*

**T**he two pictures accompanying this article show a stationary fishtrap in some rapids on the Mulberry Fork of the Warrior River near Arkadelphia, Alabama. They were taken in August 1981, within months of the trap's having last been run. State Game and Fish officers had apparently modified it somewhat in the interval, blowing small holes in each of the wing dams and pushing one wooden side of the trap over. There is still enough of the set-up to see clearly how the trap worked.<sup>1</sup>

The trap is made to catch fish that are swimming downstream, usually after a rain when the river colors and rises. The wing dams (in the shape of a "V" with the open end upstream) are designed to funnel most of the river flow into the mouth of the wooden part of the trap. The mouth of this particular trap is six feet wide, and the whole downstream section of the trap maintains this same width. Inside the mouth, the river pours through wooden slats called "fingers," which obstruct the passage of any sizable objects—preferably fish, although, as the picture shows, leaves and limbs also accumulate.

Sweet gum and oak are the predominant construction materials. The first set of fingers shown here are made of 2" x 2" lumber; the sections further downstream are of 1" x 3" and 1" x 4" planking, less desirable because too wide to let water through easily and too thin for a fisherman to walk on them. Each set of fingers is four feet long, with the downstream end of each set inclined upward at an angle of approximately 20 degrees. Six-inch boards nailed at the downstream end of each section of fingers without gapping form a succession of steps holding any fish pushed over into them by the water, thus giving the interior of the trap a staircase profile. Finally, the ungapped lateral



FIGURE 1.

*Two views of stationary fishtrap and wing dam, Warrior River near Arkadelphia, Alabama. (Photos: Dr. Robert Stiles, Dept. of Biology, Samford University.)*



planking of two-and-a-half feet in height keeps any fish on the trap from falling off the sides and enables the trap to work effectively despite fluctuations in river elevation. When the water rises enough to pour over the end of the trap without being strained by the fingers, the trap ceases to function. Wooden mudsills below the mouth of the trap are buried under the converging, downstream ends of the dam wings, anchoring the trap during high water, so that it requires minimal rebuilding each season.

The Mulberry is not a big river, and around the region the stationary traps seem to have been more or less proportional to river size. Fishtraps as large as 15 feet across the mouth are remembered by older fishermen on the Coosa River near Pell City. Sometimes formations in the river bottom itself would naturally funnel the current into a shallow and swift chute; these may be the oldest of all the fishtrap sites, since they required the least construction. More often wing dams were built in swift shallows without ledges or other bottom structures. More sophisticated wing dams than the loose rock ones shown here, ones that worked better in deeper water, were made by framing. Two logs were pinned together perhaps a foot or two apart with wooden stakes, and the whole was weighted with rocks piled between the logs. Several courses built up and tied together made a wing dam that reputedly could survive floods until the logs rotted out.

The locations of the traps correspond to Indian wing dams that considerably predate the sawn lumber technology of the Europeans. John Swanton's map illustrating "certain natural resources" of Southeastern Indians shows an arc of fisheries down the eastern seaboard and up the east side of the Mississippi Valley coinciding roughly with the fall line.<sup>2</sup> The best runs of fish *up* the rivers could be intercepted here first. The runs *down* could be intercepted here or at any upstream shoals, with the potential gradually diminishing toward the headwaters. Some rivers in the eastern U.S. seem to have had fishtraps at every major shoal; George Washington reported prior to 1785, for example, that there were "many, probably 30 or more V-shaped 'fish pots' in the [Potomac] river."<sup>3</sup> *Lolokalka*, to give an example closer to home, was a Creek placename in Talladega County, Alabama, that is said to have meant "sequential fish traps."<sup>4</sup>

At the time of the first European incursions, weirs and traps were more widely used by the Indians of what is now the U.S. and Canada



than were nets, spears, fishhooks, poisons or any other fishing method, probably because they were more efficient.<sup>5</sup> Weirs predominated in coastal shallows and slow-moving fresh water; they consisted either of lines of poles shoved into the bottom or sometimes of wickerwork baffles for channeling fish into narrower and narrower keeps.<sup>6</sup> The fishtraps or fishdams, by contrast, were located at the fall line or above, where there was considerable current. The Indians used V-shaped dams of piled rock exactly as shown in the photographs of the Mulberry River trap, but the means of capture was a loosely-woven cone-shaped basket with mouth upstream. Fish that entered were kept there by simple pressure of the current. James Adair said that such baskets in use by the Choctaw could be six feet in diameter at the mouth and 15 feet in length.<sup>7</sup>

A former fisherman on the Coosa River in central Alabama, interviewed in 1976, spoke of seeing an uncle run "a set of these traps" south of Pell City. There were three other traps in the vicinity, and this particular one was called the old Harman trap. The informant remembers standing on the wing dam of his uncle's trap near the trap's mouth during a fish run back in the 1930s. Sometimes a big fish would sense something wrong and turn and fight back upstream—"just like a salmon trying to jump these falls," he said, and occasionally one would make it. Most of the time, though, "they done waited too late." The fishermen would sit up all night at such times and run the traps every hour, throwing fish off the trap into the boat. These were mainly rough fish: drum, buffalo, some catfish, and "tons and tons of shad." When asked if he ate the shad, the former fisherman replied with some disgust:

No, you just threw them all right back in. My uncle tried raising some hogs on them, and when he killed the hogs you couldn't eat them. He threw the meat away [*laughter*]. He fed them on nothing but shad; you know, if he'd used his head a little bit and maybe a month before he got ready to kill them, put them on grain or something, it would have been all right. But he was throwing all that shad away, and he just put a pen full of hogs down there and said, "Okay, I'm just gonna raise me some free meat." And he did. The hogs got to where they would eat them. But they done nothing but eat shad. That was their whole diet. They didn't get a bit of nothing else their whole life, so they tasted like shad.

For most of the summer the water was too low for the traps, and for most of the winter they were covered by high water. The traps did not work if the water was clear; the fish could spot them too easily and avoid them. Only when the water got dingy or muddy and picked up some speed did fish swim into the mouth, and "come shooting in there on the fingers." These Coosa River fishermen remembered that usually on a summer rise they would get drum and lots of shad, and on toward fall, buffalo, and then, at first frost, eel. When the eel ran, the fisherman would mesh the traps with one-inch wire mesh, because otherwise even the biggest eel would get its tail down in the space between two slats and spring them. The eels survived in boxes in the water all winter without perceptible weight loss and could thus be sold off gradually to those locals with no dietary prejudice against them. Occasionally big catfish entered the trap, but the biggest fish my informants ever saw caught on the trap was a sturgeon weighing upwards of a hundred pounds.<sup>8</sup>

Lower down on the Coosa, some 17 miles upstream from Childersburg, Alabama—before Lay Lake was raised to cover them—were two fishtraps known locally by the singular "Willingham's fishtrap," from Cecil and Albert Willingham, owners of the land. They consisted of V-shaped rock and log dams about four feet high, with the typical configuration of wooden fingers followed by stepdowns. In July and August 1949, Professor Donald Scott of the University of Georgia's biology department collected fish in the area by fish basket, hoop net, and rotenone and incidentally kept a record of the catch on the fishtraps. In a 39-day period the traps produced 108 pounds of buffalo, 97 of blue catfish, 46 of drum, seven of channel catfish, seven of blue sucker, and four of blacktail redhorse.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that this was late summer—after most of the spawning runs, during the period of least flow, and before the quickening pace of fish movement that comes to a southeastern river with fall weather.

Such traps are in evidence early in Alabama's history, judging by laws and legal records. An 1833 state law, echoing a provision in the Magna Carta more than 600 years earlier, declares: "If any person or persons shall erect any fishdam on any such water courses, he or they shall open in the deepest channel . . . one-third of said water course."<sup>10</sup> That original law relating to fishtraps was probably aimed at keeping rivers open to small-craft transportation. Just after the Civil War, however, the first signs of a conservation ethic appear, reflecting an effort to

preserve the rapidly declining fish resources. The first laws against poisoning streams came in 1865-66, for example.<sup>11</sup> In 1879 a state act called for fining anyone who prevented the passage of fish up the waters of any river or creek. With the continued decline of fish as well as game populations in the state, more drastic measures were called for, and in 1907 a State Game and Fish division was created along with a spate of new fishing regulations.<sup>12</sup> Meshing the traps was forbidden first. Then, as the older fishermen remember it, the minimum space allowed between the fingers of the fishtrap was widened until finally fish of three and four pounds were slipping through, and the fishtrap was not worth the trouble it took to maintain.

Fishtraps and fish taken on them were clearly recognized as private property as early as 1876 by the *Code of Alabama*:

Any person who takes, in any manner, fish from a private artificial fish pond or lake, or fish trap, without the consent of the owner of such fish pond or lake, or fish trap, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and shall on conviction, be fined not less than five, nor more than fifty dollars.<sup>13</sup>

A hundred-plus years later, however, the fishtraps have disappeared. Most of the larger rivers in Alabama, as in the rest of the South, have been dammed for flood control, power generation, water storage or recreation. Large impoundments limited sites for fishtraps. Smith Lake, for example, flooded several fishtrap sites on the Sipsey known to older fishermen. Aerial surveying of the future Lake Harris on the Tallapoosa during a drought showed the remains of some 60 wing dams in a 10-mile stretch.<sup>14</sup> The dams also cut off from the ocean the runs of all anadromous species, including the eel, the great sturgeon, some species of shad, and perhaps even saltwater striped bass.

In parts of the state, industrial pollution destroyed fish populations in those rivers left running. In 1902, according to the 1905 issue of the journal *Southern Reporter* that printed all the Alabama Supreme Court decisions, a part-time farmer and fisherman named Nichols launched a suit alleging this against Tutwiler Coal, Coke & Iron Company. Nichols's farm was situated on the Little Warrior River not far from Birmingham, and here he had a permanent fishtrap. Unfortunately for Nichols, 15 coal washers with a daily capacity of 7500 tons were built between 1893 and 1900 on two upstream tributaries, Village Creek and Five Mile

Creek. His suit claimed that fish had been killed and that "refuse and poisonous matter" had been deposited on his land. The lower courts found in his favor, the siltation and fish kills being apparently beyond dispute and obviously traceable to the coal washers. But in 1905 the Alabama Supreme Court dismissed the suit against Tutwiler Coal on the rather technical grounds that the farmer should have sued all the coal companies that owned washers. The end result seems to be that the farmer lost the fishing component of his livelihood, while the coal and iron companies, including Tutwiler, went merrily on their way.<sup>15</sup> The progress of large-scale industrial corporations in this day and age, at least, was desirable enough to make acceptable the loss of livelihood of mere individuals downstream.

Despite the progress of game and fish laws, however, and the more troubling course of impoundment, channelization, and pollution, the rural culture over much of the state still preserves the memory of this classic means of catching fish. The author first heard of the Mulberry River trap when students in his folklore class interviewed a Cullman County game warden in January 1977. This long-time warden lamented:

Yeah, we'd blow the whole thing up, but they could put it back about as fast as we could blow it up. Get a bunch of boys out there stacking rock, doesn't take long to put them back. [The stream is,] I'd say, close to waist-deep down there where the trap is. They'll get any fish that comes on it, just about. Now a bass, they'll pretty well get off of it. But a catfish or a non-game fish, they'll stay up there. We have just about everything they've got anywhere in that river. Got drum, lots of drum; that's what they like to fish for, you know. They'd rather have the catfish, but they get more drum. And of course drum are real good eating, you know, when they're fresh. After they're out of the water awhile they're not so good; but if you cook them fresh they're just as good as anything. When you first get them out, just throw them in the pan. That's what they do mostly down there, just big picnics and all. Well, he does sell them. Customers out of Birmingham would line up there and get them whenever they was catching them real good. He denies it, but I know about it.<sup>16</sup>

According to a telephone conversation with the warden some four

years later, the fishtrap was still being blown up yearly. The owner had been arrested by game wardens from three surrounding counties, but apparently the longtime judge who had just retired the year before thought the practice harmless: He merely fined the offender five dollars and he was usually back at work on the fishtrap the next day. The Cullman County warden thought that the new judge, however, might really “stick it to him” on any future conviction. The warden described the fishtrap owner as a likeable farmer about 70 years old whose sons were grown and gone from home, and he provided the man’s name and phone number.<sup>17</sup>

A few days later I called the owner of the fishtrap, Mr. Albert Cates, a little concerned about how he would view a stranger inquiring into this illegal operation. Even over the phone he was quite friendly, saying I should come and see it: “Everybody else up here has, and most of them have taken home a sack of fish off it.” With that encouragement I drove up to interview him, taking along a colleague who is a professional ichthyologist and near-professional photographer. I took a tape recorder; my colleague took his camera. Mr. Cates was kind enough to spend most of an afternoon with us, walking us down to the river and showing us the trap. The photographs accompanying this article were made that afternoon.

Cates candidly admitted that “this fishtrap business is agin the law” but said he could never stay away from it, from the time he first helped run one as a young man. “A fishtrap is the most fascinating thing I’ve ever fooled with,” he said, and he may have bought this particular farm back in 1960 partly because it had this old trap site on it. According to oral history in the community, that fishtrap site had been in continuous operation for at least a century, in successive ownership by three families; it is still called by the name of the first of those families, the old Stacks fishtrap, to distinguish it from other fishtrap sites up- and downriver (there were three trap sites below this, two of them within a mile, and one or two on the shoals upstream). “Old Man Stacks” used to peddle trapped fish from a wagon in Empire and surrounding towns back when the old were young, according to Mr. Cates. Joe Boyd owned it for 50 years after that. Mr. Cates speculated that it was Indian in origin, though he had never heard or read anything specifically about that.

It became obvious during this interview that what made a fishtrap

worthwhile were the after-spawning runs of various species of fish. Mr. Cates talked about two small species of sucker that ran first in late winter or early spring. One of these, the redfin sucker, in a good run would come on the trap "at a thousand pounds an hour." Cates likened the sight to that of a coal washer shaking coal out on the screen and said that if you didn't want your trap broken down by the weight of the fish, you had better take the sets of fingers out and let the water run straight through. Again he speculated about Indians, that they must have used this kind of small sucker to fertilize their corn hills: No other small fish was that numerous, or at least as easily available around corn-planting time. Hard on the heels of the redfin sucker came the annual run of what he called white sucker, averaging a pound apiece or less and also in impressive numbers. Then in late April came the big river redhorse, largest of the suckers, averaging several pounds apiece.

But what he waited for every year—the highlight of his whole year on the fishtrap and maybe of life in general—was the drum run in the last couple weeks of May or the first week of June. According to Mr. Cates, the drum in the river would have all worked their way upstream to "lay out," and with the first good rain after spawning they would come down the river in great numbers. I asked him what signs there were, and he said that you needed a change in the water, some good rains upstream, and the best time was the first good rain after an extended dry period:

I'm going to tell you just like it is. I've sat there on that river bank and watched that trap and it looked like the river was just perfect, like everything was ready and the time of year was just right. And I'd get to thinking somebody had a net across the river and had them blocked coming down [*laughs*]. And they'd start a-running, and you'd wonder where they was all coming from.

These drum runs on the Mulberry were as short as four hours or as long as 24 hours, but no longer. In one recent year, he had watched the trap on a likely day until ten at night, and nothing had happened, so he went to bed leaving one of his sons to watch. At 1:30 his son shook him awake, asking him if he wanted to come see them run—"because he knew I did"—and in four hours they caught enough fish "to have filled a short wheelbase pickup truck level-bed full" of drum from one to five pounds, throwing back all the bigger fish, which were less tasty. They

cleaned some of the fish while standing out on the trap and then brought them to the bank and rolled the fish in meal and salt to batter them. Two or three gallons of cooking oil in a wash pot over a wood fire were heated until a match would strike in the oil, and then the fish were thrown in to cook. Mr. Cates would eat his on a piece of bread to keep from burning his fingers.<sup>18</sup>

Everybody I spoke with about Albert Cates, including the game warden, said that except for "this fishtrap business" he was a model citizen. He is known locally, only half-jokingly, as "mayor of Arkadelphia" for his lobbying efforts in Montgomery on behalf of this unincorporated town. His fascination with the fishtrap may not have been matched but was certainly widely shared over the years in the community. When the fish were running, word would spread rapidly along the grapevine, and often 15 or 20 men were on or near the trap on a promising night. The drum run and fish fry could attract 50 or 100. Said Mr. Cates: "People all over the country know when you're catching fish." It seems to have been a democratic gathering, with an occasional State legislator or big businessman coming to rub shoulders with local farmers. Mr. Cates attributes his light sentencing at the hand of the former judge to the fact that the judge was raised further up the Mulberry and fished a trap as a boy; he knew that rough fish were being caught, not game fish, and "would have liked to have fished with us." In the last years of the fishtrap all Mr. Cates had to do was get on the phone and tell a few that he was going to rebuild the trap. They would build the sets of fingers up in the chicken house, where there was electricity to run the saws, and then load them on a truck and carry them to the river prefabricated. A log skidder could apparently rake up rocks for the wing dams in short order in this late mechanized phase. In Mr. Cates's words, "everybody wanted in on it," right up to volunteering to pay for the \$300 worth of lumber involved.

The fascination may be an atavistic one, stirred by one of the few migrations still intact in the region. The elk and buffalo that used to migrate seasonally through Alabama are long gone. The passenger pigeons that stormed through in flocks of hundreds of thousands, breaking tree limbs by their weight like ice storms, fell to market gunners by the turn of the century. The great runs of all the anadromous fish to and from the ocean were ended by dams during this century. On small, free-flowing rivers, however, a seasonal migration still goes on

under muddy water, and its full scope is seen only by the watchers on the fishtrap. Their feeling for it is obviously akin to the passion of birdwatchers and duck hunters spellbound by other surviving fragments of the great seasonal migrations of Indian and pioneer days.

The new judge indeed ended the yearly running of the old Stacks trap. The trap has never been rebuilt since these photographs were taken a dozen years ago, and nothing much is left of the trap or even the rock wing dams now. For a time Mr. Cates toyed with the idea of trying to get it legalized for historical reasons: "I know it's older than any covered bridge in the state," he said. He also thought about donating the trap site and a few acres around it to the State of Alabama for a park, if the State would operate it and let schoolchildren learn about the river and its fish by seeing it and studying it. What a nice idea. The author personally knows at least one ichthyologist who would like to see it rebuilt under special permit and run for scientific studies of populations of river fish and measurement of spawning runs. Purely scientific, of course, but he wants to be there himself when the drum run is on.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>The nucleus of this article was first presented as keynote address to Alabama's Audubon Mountain Workshop, at invitation of Dr. Dan Holliman, Chair, Dept. of Biology, Birmingham Southern College.

<sup>2</sup>See John Swanton, *The Indians of the Southeastern United States* (Bureau of American Ethnology *Bulletin* 137, Washington, U.S. Govt. Print. off., 1946), p. 255, map 13: "Map to illustrate the distribution of certain natural resources in the Southeast drawn on by the Indians."

<sup>3</sup>See Carl H. Strandberg & Ray Tomlinson, "Photoarchaeological Analysis of Potomac River Fish Traps," in *American Antiquity*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1969), p. 312.

<sup>4</sup>See Albert S. Gatschet, *Towns and Villages of the Creek Confederacy*, 1901, under "Lolokalka."

<sup>5</sup>Erhard Rostlund, *Freshwater Fish and Fishing in Native North America* (Berkeley & L.A.: University of California Press, 1952), p. 102.

<sup>6</sup>See good visual illustrations in Fundaburk & Foreman, *Sun Circles and Human Hands: The Southeastern Indians—Art and Industry* (Luverne, AL: Emma Lila Fundaburk, 1957), p. 188, and in Fred Breummer, "Fishing Weirs of the St. Lawrence," *Canadian Geographic Journal* No. 71 (July 1965), pp. 14-19.

<sup>7</sup>See James Adair, *History of the American Indians* (New York: Promontory Press, 1973), pp. 432-3.

<sup>8</sup>Taped interview of November 18, 1976, by author with Claude Hayes, commercial fisherman on the Coosa south of Pell City, and Claude's old friend Harold Daffron, who



fished with him when they were young men; transcript in Samford University Oral History collection.

<sup>9</sup>See Donald C. Scott, "Sampling Fish Populations in the Coosa River, Alabama," in *Transactions of the American Fisheries Society*, vol. 80 (1950), 1951, pp. 28 & 38.

<sup>10</sup>See John G. Aikin (compiler), *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Alabama Containing All the Statutes of a Public and General Nature in Force at the Close of the Session of the General Assembly, in January 1833* (Philadelphia: Alexander Towar, 1833), p. 442.

<sup>11</sup>In *The Revised Code of Alabama*, prepared by A. J. Walker (Montgomery: Reid & Screws, State Printers, 1867), p. 712, sec. 3753, "Poisoning stream for fish," the fine is set "at not less than ten nor more than one hundred dollars."

<sup>12</sup>See *The Code of Alabama July 27, 1907*, Vol. III, *Criminal*, prepared by James J. Mayfield (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1907), p. 544, sec. 6901: "Seines, nets, traps or other devices for catching fish prohibited."

<sup>13</sup>*The Code of Alabama 1876*. Prepared by Wade Keyes and Fern M. Wood (Montgomery: Barrett & Brown, Printers for the State, 1877).

<sup>14</sup>From notes on 1982 conversation between author and personnel from Geological Survey of Alabama. Most of the rock dams were thought to be Indian in origin, or of some antiquity: a paleolithic point was found at one site. An article on the subject was apparently planned, but may not have as yet been published.

<sup>15</sup>*The Southern Reporter*, vol. 39 ("Containing all the decisions of the Supreme Courts of Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Mississippi, September 2, 1905—March 10, 1906;" St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1906), pp. 762-65, on "Tutwiler Coal, Coke & Iron Co. vs. Nichols," Supreme Court of Alabama December 21, 1905.

<sup>16</sup>Taped interview of Mansell Goodwin by Joel Alvis & Gary Uhrig, January 11, 1977; tape and transcript in possession of author.

<sup>17</sup>From notes of telephone interview of Mansell Goodwin by author, August 1, 1981. Mr. Cates remembers the fine usually being \$11; see "Trick trap yields kettles of fish," an article on Albert Cates by Clarke Stallworth, *Birmingham News*, March 23, 1983, pp. 1C-2C.

<sup>18</sup>Taped interview with Albert Cates at his home near Arkadelphia in Cullman County; Jim Brown and Bob Stiles, interviewers. Tape and transcript in Samford University Oral History Collection. See also shorter interview with Mr. Cates done August 15, 1984, by Bill Gullett; transcript in author's collection.

## New Strings on the “Old Harp”: The 1991 Revision of *The Sacred Harp*

*John Bealle*

On December 15, 1990, a group of several hundred singers met at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, to perform and record sacred vocal music. Most had never seen the music they were to sing. Indeed, the music unveiled that day consisted of new songs to be added to a book now in its 150th year in active publication and use—*The Sacred Harp*. Honored among those in attendance were 21 contemporary composers and authors of the new songs. Over the course of only four hours, the singers—trained in the “shape-note” system of Sacred Harp singing—recorded the complete catalog of 60 new songs!

In keeping with traditional practice, the audience was small and the chorus large. The singers sat in the customary “hollow square”—with tenors, trebles, altos, and basses facing one another as on the four sides of a square. Each song was recorded by first singing the tune using the names of the shapes—*fa*, *sol*, *la*, and *mi*—and then proceeding to the lyrics. Although ordinarily an “arranging committee” would see that all singers present had a chance to lead the song of his or her choice, this occasion featured the invited composers, called upon one by one to lead the new songs from the center of the square. From this vantage, amidst the unrestrained, emotionally vivid, and sometimes austere sound—produced by the best of the tradition’s singers—leaders experienced the highest aesthetic and spiritual quality the music had to offer.

The significance of this music in Alabama is difficult to overstate. First published in 1844, *The Sacred Harp* was one of several hundred 19th-century songbooks to feature shape-notes, a notation system in which note heads were given different geometrical shapes according to their degree of the scale. Compilers such as *The Sacred Harp*’s B. F.

White (1800–79), a Hamilton, Georgia, newspaper publisher and later elected mayor of that town, adopted shape-note systems for their ease of learning. Some designed and patented their own unique notation systems and then vigorously promoted them as singing teachers. White worked primarily from his home, printing his arrangements in his newspaper so that the public could enjoy them.

Largely through community singing schools, shape-note books became the mainstay of a vibrant popular American vocal music movement that spread throughout regions populated by Europeans. Early singing schools, sometimes taught by itinerant music teachers promoting their own books, were at one time important community events and social affairs. B. F. White himself was a tireless music teacher; consequently *The Sacred Harp* achieved immediate success in his region of Georgia. Although compilers such as White were talented composers, their books relied as heavily on a stock repertoire of popular colonial American and English songs as they did on original material. By the close of the 19th century, however, “better music” crusaders advocating European styles and pedagogical methods—as well as the familiar “round-note” system of notation—successfully displaced shape-note music from the American musical mainstream. Indeed, the absence of Sacred Harp music or shape-note pedagogy in Alabama school and college curricula is likely the result of this “better music” movement. It is a tragic irony that music for which Alabama is internationally esteemed is given so little attention by our public institutions of learning.

The significance for Alabama lies in the fact that this round-note campaign was least successful in the South. Shape-note books, with the spiritual candor of their songs, followed the spread of evangelical religion in the South. Consequently Alabama and Georgia, especially their rural independent churches, have played pivotal roles in a somewhat systematic disregard of the better music boosters, serving ultimately as custodians of this once-national tradition. Through the work of a series of energetic and culturally astute innovators—along with numerous devoted followers of the tradition—*The Sacred Harp* has remained in continuous use here while elsewhere in America the vast majority of other books have long since dropped out of use and out of print. In fact, of only a handful of books nationwide that enjoy active popularity today, three are published and regularly used in Alabama.



FIGURE 2.

Shape-Notes. Noteheads that are variously shaped rather than exclusively round are the basic materials of the traditional musical instruction system used in 19th-century tunebooks. Assigned unique names, shapes correspond to the degrees of the seven-tone or diatonic scale—most people are familiar with the Italian-based solmization, “do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti.” The Sacred Harp uses a four-shape system based on the one introduced in the fourth edition of Little and Smith’s *The Easy Instructor* in 1803. Singers customarily sing through the tune using the names of the shapes before singing the poetry. During the 19th century, advocates of “better music” won renewed acceptance for the now ubiquitous round-note system in music conservatories, federated music clubs, and church choirs. So central are the note shapes to the “fasola” tradition that singers sometimes display them as the visible symbol of their affiliation—on bumper stickers, embroidered jackets for the Sacred Harp book, and baseball caps. Pictured above is a design on a T-shirt. (Photo: Anne Kimzey.)

### Revision and “Re-Vision”: *The Sacred Harp* in Transition

The story of this tradition has been eloquently chronicled in George Pullen Jackson’s *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (1933) and more recently in Buell Cobb’s *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (1978). Both are indispensable references for any study of this music. As

these works have shown, pivotal moments in the development of the tradition have occurred when the design and contents of the books were changed. These “revisions” provided the opportunity for a resolute and enduring stance regarding competing styles, the inclusion of groups of participating singers, the character of previous revisions, and other books of sacred music.

As the centerpiece of the tradition, the book was always intended to focus the most profound spiritual feelings of its users. As 1911 reviser Joe S. James said, “when sung to the honor and praise of God, [the book] will open the door to the soul.” Because of this enduring relationship between singers and the book, a revision ran the risk of alienating those most invested in its particular character. Well aware of this danger, B. F. White warned that future custodians of the tradition could “scarcely...do better than abide by the advice—‘Ask for the old paths, and walk therein.’” Consequently, these highly charged moments have been infrequent—only two major (and six minor) revisions have preceded the current one. It is no accident, then, that histories of the tradition are treated largely as histories of the revisions of its texts. Previous major revisions were completed in 1911 and 1936 when in both cases the book changed legal ownership. Each had its particular significance and purpose.

For the 1911 edition, a music committee chaired by Georgia lawyer Joe S. James (d. 1931) took a staunchly conservative approach to the music. Disdaining popular gospel styles that had infused other books, the “James Revision” reclaimed the austere character of the 1844 B. F. White book. The committee added *Original* to the title *Sacred Harp*, intending to declare the book heir to the purest strain of the tradition. James himself wrote a “Brief History of the Sacred Harp” in 1904, as well as footnotes in the revision indicating, where known, the sources and biographies of each tune and composer. New compositions by Southerners claimed a more important role; effort was made to include those representing the growing popularity of the book in Alabama.

The 1936 edition was largely the result of the tireless work of members of the Denson family of Winston County, Alabama. In fact, the contributions of this family, which span nearly the entire history of the book (James M. Denson composed “Christmas Anthem” for the 1844 edition), surely earn them recognition as Alabama’s most influential Sacred Harp family. Brothers Seaborn M. (1854–1936) and Thomas

J. Denson (1863–1935), who initiated the work on the 1936 revision, are said to have taught over 10,000 pupils in singing schools, many in Winston, Fayette, Walker, Cullman, and Cleburne counties; they are to be credited with the strength of singing that remains there today. Their stature in the tradition surely ranks them among Alabama's most accomplished musicians. Both died before the revision was finished, and it was left to Thomas's son Paine Denson of Birmingham to finish the work. Editors of the "Denson Revision" removed an ample 176 of the less popular tunes to make room for new Southern composers and to reduce the physical dimensions of the book—which had reached a size some deemed unmanageable.

It should not go without saying that the tradition that includes these books has been deliberately nurtured as a tradition. In retrospect, the revisions appear self-evident and self-assured. Yet, in truth, they can be moments of precarious exposure. When the James Revision was published in 1911, two other books vied for singers' attention. A 1902 edition by W. M. Cooper of Dothan (the "Cooper Revision"—still the book of choice in Southern Alabama—and a 1909 edition by J. L. White of Atlanta both laid claim as true successors to the 1844 book. The Cooper committee even filed suit, although unsuccessfully, claiming that the James edition's added alto lines were plagiarized. In 1913, in an attempt to win support from singers, *both* James and J. L. White were recorded as having donated books to the singing convention of the Alabama Sacred Harp Musical Association in Birmingham. Despite this generosity, one singer spoke in praise of the "old-time Sacred Harp" of 1869. In 1936, because of a single song among the 176 removed, an influential Georgia leader led a boycott of the new book that continued until only recently.

It has been the particular good fortune of the Denson/James lineage, however, to have extended its popularity by protecting the traditional character of the work. In naming the work *Original*, in preserving much of the content and style of the earlier editions, and in claiming the Denson Revision as "the true successor of the James Revision of 1911," the revisers of *The Sacred Harp* held fast to the vision that some eternal quality, infused into the original work, should be protected. Thus they also established for the tradition as a whole a discernibly anti-modernist place in the cultural landscape. At the same time, the revisions have been able to incorporate scores of new composers, lyricists, teachers, and

singers into the visible center of the tradition. This has been the genius of the tradition's leaders and the legacy that the current revisers have sought to duplicate.

### The 1991 Revision

In keeping with these previous revisions, editors of the new edition have sought that delicate balance between tradition and innovation. For the past several years, the 1991 revision has been an ongoing concern of a music committee consisting of Alabama and Georgia singers and chaired by Hugh McGraw of Bremen, Georgia. To make room for the new songs, 45 of the less popular songs—as determined by their frequency of appearance in the published minutes of singings—have been removed from the old book. All pages have been reset so that they can be more easily read, and the biographical footnotes that formerly appeared below many songs have been removed. A companion volume of more complete biographies is in progress.

On the surface, the collection of new songs has that customary conservative appearance that affiliates it with the “old paths” of the B. F. White tradition. Nearly half of the 60 lyrics were borrowed from the poetry of Issac Watts (1647–1748), the prolific English hymnist whose texts dominated many of the 19th-century shape-note books. The editors added or restored from earlier editions of *The Sacred Harp* selections by popular colonial American composers—William Billings (1746–1800) of Boston (“Africa” and “Jordan”), Daniel Read (1757–1836) of New Haven, Connecticut (“Amity” and “Mortality”), and Timothy Swan (1758–1842) of Northfield, Massachusetts (“China,” “Rainbow,” “Poland,” and “Bristol”).

Yet, as with the previous revisions, this edition was designed to breathe new life into the music. “If you leave anything alone,” says Hugh McGraw, “it will die—I don’t care how good it is.” Well within the realm of the “old paths,” the practice of routinely revising the book to introduce the work of living authors has been instrumental in preserving the active practice of Sacred Harp singing. Thus by including 21 contemporary composers and lyricists, the editors of the 1991 edition have sought to draw from those to whom the mantle of the tradition will ultimately pass. It is the interest and energy of these authors, of their friends and families, and of those with whom they sing



FIGURE 3.

Alabama's Singing Families. *Throughout its history, the Sacred Harp tradition has been nourished by the enthusiasm and skill of a number of influential singing families. For most of this century, in fact, the Densons of Winston County and elsewhere played key roles as authors, singing-school teachers, and revisers—family members have had compositions in every edition of the book. Today, the Ballingers of Fayette County, the Woottens of DeKalb County, and the Creels of Blount and Walker Counties are among those Alabama families with strong singing contingents. Pictured above is the Wootten family from their recording, Music from the Sacred Harp by the Wootten Family from Sand Mountain, Alabama. The Creels are featured on The Singing Creel Family (from Old County Line Church, Corner, Alabama). In 1905, Creel patriarch James Harris Reid helped organize and draft the constitution for the Mulberry River Convention excerpted elsewhere in this article. (Photo courtesy of Sacred Harp Publishing Co.)*

that will keep the tradition alive.

Although this revision, like others, has a subtle style of its own, it is most striking in the degree to which contemporary writers have adhered to the salient traditional components of Sacred Harp music. The six lyrics by contemporary authors employ the same poetic style and express much the same humility and devotion to God as hymns from earlier editions. The 36 new musical compositions were carefully selected for their allegiance to “true dispersed harmony”—that quality of



Sacred Harp music that draws upon the wide dispersal of voice parts (at or beyond two octaves), the crossing of voices, the frequent appearance of open chords (lacking the third), and the sense of melodic autonomy of the four parts. In most every aspect, the new songs draw upon the best features of the old ones.

Again, Alabama (six authors, six songs) and Georgia (eight authors, sixteen songs) writers predominate. Alabamians include John Hocutt, a retired Jasper farmer/carpenter and veteran singing-school teacher who has three songs in the previous *Sacred Harp* edition, contributing "A Thankful Heart." Jim Carnes, a writer and editor living in Montgomery, composed "Rockport." Retired barber Toney Smith of Tuscaloosa, who has sung on a number of Sacred Harp recordings and has taught singing schools and performed nationwide, authored "Love Shall Never Die." Terry Wootten of Ider, DeKalb County, who operates a farm supply business, contributed "Shining Star." Also among the new compositions by Alabamians are "Easter Morn," by mathematician David Ivey of Huntsville, and "Heavenly Land," by Jeff Sheppard, who lives in Glencoe (Etowah County) and operates a moving and storage business.

The most striking change in the book is the inclusion of authors from elsewhere in the country. Seven authors from Illinois, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York contributed songs. Included are Middletown, Connecticut, resident and Wesleyan University music professor Neely Bruce, author of "Heavenly Union." Bruce had discovered *The Sacred Harp* while researching Early American music at the University of Illinois and founded a performing ensemble that sang and recorded from the book. Dan Brittain, now a choir director in Cazenovia, New York, composed "Cobb," "McGraw," "Akin," and "Novakoski." He first encountered Sacred Harp while stationed in the Army in Georgia. Three Chicagoans are represented: Textbook editor Ted Johnson wrote "New Agatite" and real-estate broker Ted Mercer "O'Leary" and "Sheppard," while Judy Hauff contributed four songs—"Granville," "Wood Street," "Ainslie," and "Stony Point." From Massachusetts, Bruce Randall of Boston submitted "Mount Desert" and Glen Wright wrote "Natick."

To grasp the significance of this geographical range, consider that in the 1911 and 1936 editions, *no* added songs were written by contemporary authors from states other than Alabama and Georgia. In 1960 and

1966, when a number of songs were added as appendices, only Florida and Tennessee were added to the list of states represented. Thus the 1991 edition both reflects and facilitates a change in the role of Southern singers as sole custodians of the tradition. To some extent, this change is an inevitable response to a growing interest in Sacred Harp elsewhere in the country over the past two decades. But, much as in the widespread expansion into Alabama from Georgia earlier, this enthusiasm has been nurtured and enjoyed by Southern singers in a way that is in keeping with the most basic sentiments singers hold for the tradition. This affirming posture is the heart and soul of the new *Sacred Harp* revision.

### *The Sacred Harp as Folk Music*

In her 1987 thesis on "The Sacred Harp Revival in New England," Wesleyan University music student Susan Garber submitted questionnaires to various New England singers to determine, among other things, their introduction to the music. A New York singer responded that she "...first heard 'Wondrous Love' in Israel, soon after reading George Pullen Jackson's book in a U.S.I.S. library in India." This response was not as uncharacteristic as it might seem, for singers across the country who were not exposed to the tradition directly will attest repeatedly to having discovered it through recordings, folk festivals, and written works that address the tradition as American religious folk music.

The Sacred Harp singing tradition, of course, long preceded its own label as folk music. Although this identification was probably inevitable, two individuals whose work reflected the emerging regionalist mindset of the 1920s and 1930s had considerable influence on the character of the discovery. One of these was Carl Carmer (1893–1976), the seemingly inveterate New Yorker who taught English at the University of Alabama during the 1920s. Fascinated by the South, Carmer made copious although sometimes unflattering notes on its culture. In 1926, Carmer spoke on the campus on "Harp' Songs as Folk Music" nearly a decade before his portrait of Alabama culture, *Stars Fell on Alabama* (1934), included a chapter on the subject. As faculty sponsor of the Glee Club he noted that "it is not an unusual occurrence at the University of Alabama for an aspirant to membership in the Glee Club to announce

ALABAMA, C.M.D.  
 "Make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise" - Ps. 93:4.

F Minor Southern Harmony, 1835. Southern Harmony, 1835.

Angels in shining order stand, Around the Savior's throne; They bow with reverence at His feet, And make His glories known. Those happy spirits sing His

Angels in shining order stand, Around the Savior's throne; They bow with reverence at His feet, And make His glories known. Those happy spirits sing His praise To all

praise,..... To all e-ter-ni-ty, But I can sing re-deem-ing grace, For Je-sus died for me.

Those hap-py spir-its sing His praise, To all e-ter-ni-ty, But I can sing re-deem-ing grace, For Je-sus died for me.

Those hap-py spir-its sing His praise, To all e-ter-ni-ty, But I can sing re-deem-ing grace, For Je-sus died for me.....

ter-ni-ty..... But I can sing re-deem-ing grace, For Je-sus died for me.....

FIGURE 4.

The 1991 Sacred Harp. *Pages of the 1991 edition of The Sacred Harp have been reset to correct errors and facilitate reading. As before, each of the four parts—treble, alto, tenor (melody), and bass—is set on a separate musical staff. Biographical footnotes, added in 1911 in the James revision, have been removed; appropriate verses of scripture have been chosen for each new title and for all titles where omitted in previous editions. The page pictured above features the tune “Alabama,” probably composed in the early 19th century. (Photo: Anne Kimzey.)*

that he can sing only by shaped notes.”

It was Vanderbilt German professor George Pullen Jackson (1874–1953), however, who devoted his life to the study of the music. His family moved from Maine to Birmingham most likely during the 1880s and for some time operated a bakery business there. Apparently unaware of traditional music during his youth, Jackson earned school and college expenses playing in concert bands. His 1895 Birmingham High School graduation oration—“Imaginary Address to the Board of Education Upon the Value of Vocal Music in the Public Schools”—undoubtedly charted much of his life’s course. Thus it was somewhat in spite of his Birmingham upbringing and musical interests that Jackson discovered the shape-note tradition in 1920 on the recommendation of

a teaching colleague. Jackson's urban musical affiliations led him throughout his career to write of the "strange notation...and music theory, singing schools, teachers, and songs books"—as culture alien to his own.

Jackson published numerous books and articles on the subject, endeavoring to advance the neglected "white spirituals" within the canon of American national music. His most genuine interest was in that species of tunebook songs that were religious song texts set to orally transmitted secular melodies and then rendered in shape-notes by book compilers. His performing troupe of "Old Harp Singers" toured from 1932–38 and performed at the first National Folk Festival in St. Louis. Jackson worked closely with singers to promote the music in the South. He helped organize a week-long centennial celebration attended by 1,295 singers in Double Springs in 1944 and served on the committee to honor the Denson brothers by erecting a granite monument that still stands on the courthouse lawn there. Observations in his centennial treatise, "The Story of the Sacred Harp, 1844–1944," have become a part of the historical record of the tradition, particularly through the writings of singer Ruth Denson Edwards (1893–1978). His work has been decisive in establishing the significance of 19th-century shape-note songbooks and of contemporary practitioners of the tradition within the context of American musical culture.

Although such published material has been available for some time now (Jackson's book was first published in 1933), its impact on singing has been most strongly felt in the past two decades. At least until recently, those outside the tradition commonly have "discovered" the music through concert or festival performances, workshops, or, like the questionnaire respondent above, through written and recorded material. Some have attended "folk camps" where Sacred Harp is featured among courses in a variety of canonized traditional genres. The difference in recent decades is that many have taken up singing—and this has led to a network of energetic groups centered in New England, the Midwest, and the West Coast that meet regularly to sing. Although there is some use of other books such as the *Christian Harmony* or the recently published *Northern Harmony*, the most commonly used book nationwide is *The Sacred Harp*. So vigorous has this singing become, that National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" and ABC News have done feature stories on the Midwest Sacred Harp Convention that meets in Chicago. In 1990, the prestigious United Sacred Harp Musical

Association held its 87th annual convention in Chicago—the first time it had been held outside the South.

Perhaps in spite of this, as Buell Cobb notes, the idea that Sacred Harp is folk music receives mixed reviews by singers. Revisers of the book, after all, had acquired some measure of cultural savvy in locating the “old paths” within the treacherous maze of evolving American musical taxonomy. As the demise of other books indicated, this came at no small risk. Furthermore, Joe S. James’s 1904 history had established an historical consciousness that cited spiritual authority mediated by the movement’s venerable leaders, not cultural authority, as the source of power for the music. Thus the attention brought to the music after the 1930s by regional writers, folklorists, and music collectors came well after an entrenched identity had already been established.

Some aspects of the tradition that gave rise to the label “religious folk music” were indeed in congruence with that identity. Its self-proclaimed ties to antiquity, its affinity for anonymous tunes and texts, its anti-modernism, its association with independent churches, even its perennially reputed decline—these were features of the tradition captured in the popular sense of that term. Other aspects suggested, however, were not so popular. Folk-oriented writers at times focused so exclusively on the antique, unfamiliar, or rural appearance of the tradition (even Jackson referred to singers as a “lost tonal tribe”) as to neglect the spiritual foundation, the prestige and astuteness of its leaders, and the hard work by which it was established.

When in 1954 a *Birmingham News* feature writer predicted that Alabama’s “disappearing singers” would be gone within a decade, an annoyed singer took exception, describing in a letter the complex organization of singings, the sometimes extraordinary distances traveled, the intensity of the music, and the depth of commitment of singers. Even so recently as 1986 the Georgia-based *National Sacred Harp Newsletter* reported a request to assemble a group of Sacred Harp singers for a “hootenanny” and admonished its readers to distinguish “when you should and when you shouldn’t.” “Many people,” the writer continued, “insist that the mountain should come to Mahomet, but in the natural order of things the reverse is true and Mahomet should come to the mountain—he’ll be welcomed gladly.”

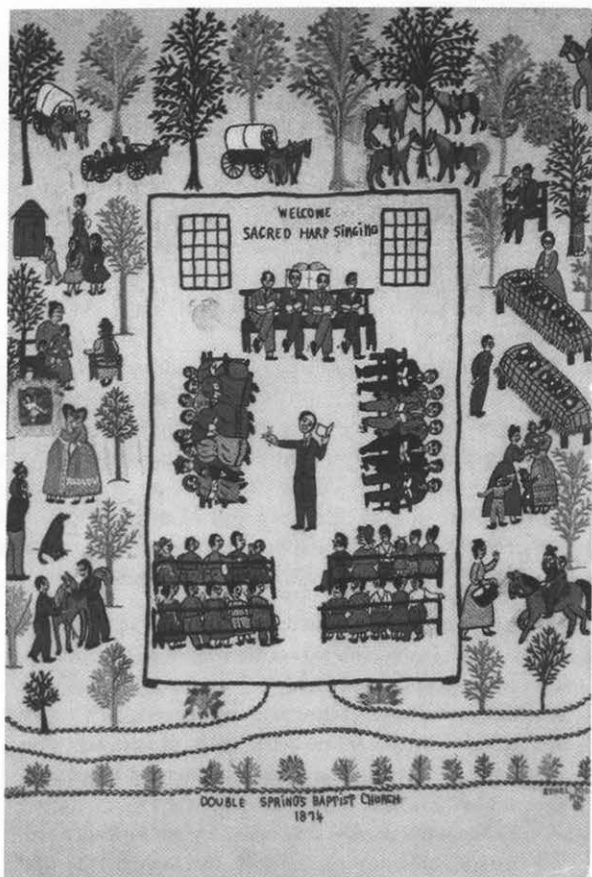


FIGURE 5.

The "Hollow Square." By tradition, singers sit on four sides of a "hollow square," thus singing for themselves and not for an audience. The preferred seats are "up front where the racket is" and the height of the experience is standing in the center of the square while leading. The seating arrangement also reflects the abundant democracy of the music—all parts are of relatively equal melodic interest and all singers are given the opportunity to lead. Pictured above is an embroidery by Ethel Mohamed of Belzoni, Mississippi, indicating the significance of the seating arrangement. (Photo: By permission of The Smithsonian Institution.)

## The Northward Spread

Mahomet, it seems, has come to the mountain. This example—apparently alluding to the secular orientation of some folk music presentations—is in numerous other cases replaced by not only a sincere deference to traditional practice but also a high regard for the potential for spiritual fulfillment provided by the Southern tradition. In a society where packaged cultural experiences situate consumers as detached observers, Sacred Harp singing is energetic, emotionally engaging, democratic, and fully participatory. Those who discover Sacred Harp as religious folk music, in fact, find that as a tradition it has much to offer on its own terms.

Chicago composer Ted Johnson reasons that singers in his area turned “toward Southern tradition because that seemed to offer so much satisfaction in so many ways that we didn’t predict—it’s just changed our lives in many ways.” Indeed, “going South” has become a rite of passage for singers outside the tradition—an event recounted in lengthy testimonials in New England and Midwest regional Sacred Harp newsletters. For example, Stephen O’Leary wrote of his 1988 trip to Sand Mountain in the *Chicago Sacred Harp Newsletter*:

When we arrived at Antioch Baptist Church, I slid into a back pew in the bass section, only to have Mr. Hugh McGraw invite me up to sit next to him in the front row....Behind and around me were more than twenty barrel-chested deep-voiced patriarchs (Oh for a bass section of that power here in Chicago!). All told, there were somewhere over a hundred, at times perhaps a hundred and fifty, singers. Now, I’ve been singing this music for a year now, and we’ve had some fine singings in that time. But *nothing* that I’d ever heard before could have prepared me for what happened when the books were opened and we began to sing.

Unlike earlier regionalist writing, accounts such as these have as their object not the literary product, but the experience of singing.

Much of the spirited quality attained at singings in Chicago and elsewhere is due to increasing interaction with Southern singers. Outsiders have provided a talented and enthusiastic population; traditional singers have provided proven models of how to conduct singings efficiently and in such a way that extracts the deepest sentiments from

the music. Undoubtedly Stephen O'Leary left Sand Mountain with expectations raised. This dialogue with an energetic new singing population has at times been movingly ironic, as if something were really being "discovered," and at times self-evident, a union of those whose spiritual interests coincide. Through this dialogue, the tradition as a whole has moved into new cultural territory—at times uncertain—but with exciting results. This is the territory mapped by the 1991 revision.

There have been numerous moments when the synthesis of these two forces has been profoundly felt. Certainly the revelation of the new compositions in December 1990 was one of those. But one event is said to have been more pivotal than others in foreshadowing what has emerged—this was in 1976 when the Word of Mouth Chorus, from Vermont, toured the South by bus and attended the Georgia State Sacred Harp Convention. Under the direction of Larry Gordon, the Word of Mouth Chorus was founded in 1972 as a madrigal group based at a Vermont commune. Sacred Harp music—initially included experimentally on the recommendation of a friend—became increasingly important in the group's repertoire. But, as Gordon reports in the notes to the recording the group made in 1978 (*Rivers of Delight*, Nonesuch H-71360), they were unprepared for what they experienced in the South:

We were moved by the deep fellowship among the participants, a fellowship that reached out to include us, bridging vast boundaries of age, culture, politics, and religion. Moreover, the singing itself—the rhythmic drive, the unrestrained quality of the voices, the sheer power of the sound—permanently altered our approach to Sacred Harp music.

Returning to Vermont, Gordon's group made its influential recording, which, largely because of its wide distribution, inexpensive price, and accommodation of mainstream musical tastes, set the tone of the stylistic presentation of the music outside the South for years to come.

Yet most significant was not the mere copresence of the groups. Gordon mentioned to Hugh McGraw that the New England singers were planning a performance at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, co-organized by Neely Bruce. As Susan Garber reports, "He [McGraw] in turn announced that the singing in Middletown would be a first annual regional *convention*, and on the spot, according to



Neely Bruce, some 40 Southerners agreed to travel to Connecticut to attend it." As would happen repeatedly during the ensuing years, Southern singers *did* travel to the "convention," and they provided considerable direction and focus regarding the manner by which this and other singings would be conducted. Singers nationwide who attended or heard of this singing remember it as an event of great significance.

What time has proved incorrect is the idea that the cultural differences were that vast. Whereas the back-to-the-land Vermont commune dwellers were apprehensive about the religious character of the music, in truth, it turns out, the music was always meant as pandenominational.

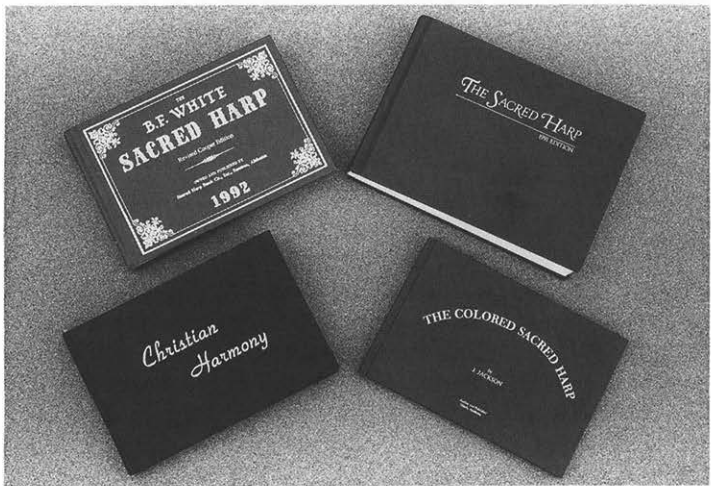


FIGURE 6.

Alabama's Four Shape-Note Books.

*Compiled by William Walker of Spartanburg, S.C., and published in 1866, Christian Harmony adopted the seven-shape notation system introduced previously in 1832. For Walker, the book was intended as an improvement of the earlier Southern Harmony, which used a four-shape system. Undoubtedly bolstered by Walker's prior popularity, the Christian Harmony was immediately successful, attaining sales of 750,000 throughout the South in its first decade. Though earlier use is certain, the first Alabama convention to adopt the book was the Warrior River Christian Harmony Musical Association in 1885. Nowadays, the book has*

*a dedicated following in central Alabama and other areas of the Southeast; the 1991 minutes of the Alabama Christian Harmony Music Association lists 18 scheduled singings.*

*The B. F. White Sacred Harp—commonly called the “Cooper Book”—was compiled by W.M. Cooper of Dothan and first published in 1902, some 33 years after the previous new edition of The Sacred Harp. Cooper is credited with introducing into the tradition the conventional inclusion of the alto part, a practice adopted in subsequent revisions of the book. The Cooper revision did not enjoy universal acceptance, particularly among pupils and followers of B. F. White; nor was Cooper’s legal claim to exclusive right to titles and songs supported by the courts. The book’s influence was strongest in southern Alabama, where it is still predominant today. It is also used by singers in Texas. A new edition adding recent compositions was issued in 1992 under the editorial leadership of Stanley Smith of Ozark, Alabama.*

*In the southeastern “Wiregrass Region” of Alabama and neighboring areas of Florida, a vibrant four-shape tradition among African American singers has existed since the late 19th century. As did other singers in this region of the state, they adopted the “Cooper Revision” of The Sacred Harp. In order to publish a collection of African American compositions, however, delegates of the Dale County Colored Musical Institute and the Alabama and Florida Union State Convention convened during the 1930s to plan a publication of their own. The book was to be written in four shapes, titled The Colored Sacred Harp, and authored by Judge Jackson of Dale County. In 1934 the book was published, containing 77 songs—all but one of which were new compositions by the singers. The book was revised in 1973 with support from the Alabama State Council on the Arts and Humanities.*

*In 1970, the visibility of the black tradition was boosted with the formation of a performing group, the “Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers.” Led by veteran singer Dewey Williams, the group has appeared at concerts and festivals internationally, including the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. Williams also has overseen the 1973 reprinting of The Colored Sacred Harp, has produced recordings of the group, and organizes regional television and radio programs featuring singers from the tradition. In 1983, Williams was awarded the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship, becoming the first Alabamian to receive the award. Hugh McGraw was a 1982 recipient.*

*At one time singers’ affiliation with each book—according to geography, family loyalty, or race—was more exclusive than now. Today’s singers are far more cosmopolitan, extending loyalty to the 19th-century shape-note tradition as a whole and enjoying the vitality of the different books used in Alabama and neighboring states. Sacred Harp newsletters, published by local groups throughout the country, often list dates and locations of singings from these and other books based on the 19th-century tradition. Largely the work of Christian Harmony singer Art Deason, an annual “Capital City Sing,” featuring the four Alabama books, is held in Montgomery each third Thursday in July—on a weekday so as not to compete with an established singing from any of the four books. (Photo: Anne Kimzey.)*

In the first edition (1844) of the book, B. F. White indicated that “being necessarily thrown among churches of various denominations,” his ambitions were “to supply that deficiency which heretofore existed, by placing all church music within his reach, in one book.” This is one reason *The Sacred Harp* was seldom adopted for use in church services—church denominations compiled their own hymnals. White also sought the attention of singing societies, private groups, and families. Thus even in the 19th century, Sacred Harp music appealed to the most independent-minded segment of the population. When contemporary Boston author Bruce Randall describes the experience as “spiritual” rather than “religious,” and when singers from all regions remember deceased friends or family members with the traditional “memorial lesson,” the music has reached into the most private and most vulnerable recesses of contemporary life in a way that, as originally intended, bypasses sectarian differences.

Other underlying similarities central to the traditions include the extraordinary effort singers make in traveling to singings. Recorded “minutes” taken at singings as far back as they go report singers coming from great distances. Nor was travel always easy: the Fourth-of-July convention at Helicon, Winston County, Alabama, established in 1891, was 25 miles from the nearest railroad. For singings near Villa Rica, Georgia, railroads would once put on an extra train from Birmingham and Heflin. Today, the low-airfare “Sacred Harp Shuttle,” as the *Chicago Sacred Harp Newsletter* has called it, transports singers both directions between Birmingham and Chicago. Bus tours organized by Oxford resident Ruth Brown have carried Alabama singers to such places as Denver and Chicago and to various New England conventions. The Sixth Annual Midwest Convention in Chicago drew singers from 23 states, the largest number coming from the host state, Illinois. The second largest number came from Alabama.

The sharing of food is much the same in the traditional “dinner-on-the-grounds” as in the contemporary “potluck dinner.” In both cases, prepared food is not only an individual creative expression but also a stunning visual display of the communal fruits of labor. Furthermore, in scheduling the old-time conventions, leaders had what George Pullen Jackson called “a fraternal consideration for the calendar rights of their neighboring singing groups,” indicating a kind of cosmopolitan sensibility necessary in any context where competing interests might intrude

upon one another. Singers from all regions seek and enjoy social institutions that are democratic, as singings are, in that all participants are invited to lead and each musical part is of relatively equal melodic interest. Perhaps most important, many singers hold the view that spiritual and social experiences are to be sought as a direct consequence of music.

### **The Vision of Hugh McGraw**

There is little doubt, singers will confirm, that in the manner of B. F. White, Joe James, and the Denson brothers before him, Hugh McGraw has been at the center of much of this extraordinary change. Manager of a Temple, Georgia, clothing manufacturing plant, McGraw comes from a family with deep roots in Sacred Harp music. Exposed to Sacred Harp as a small child, he did not take up singing himself until 1954 after he had married. One night during that year, he happened to hear some singing while out walking, and it "just petrified him." Later, when the 1960 book was being revised, the committee held meetings in McGraw's house. This, he says, is where he got his training.

His exposure to singing outside the South came partly in his capacity as executive secretary of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company. Over the course of the 1960s and '70s, McGraw began to receive correspondence and book orders from faraway places:

For instance, I would get a letter from a girl, say, in Seattle, Washington. And she says, "I studied Sacred Harp under Neely Bruce in Champaign, Illinois, years ago and I've been living out here singing from sheet music. And I think I deserve my own book. And I'm getting a group started—I want 10 books." Then another group would order 20 books. Eventually, I would go out to some of these places and teach singing schools . . . Then I really started expanding, going out to colleges and speaking, demonstrating the book, doing concerts, taking groups to Washington.

It was from these trips—including important appearances at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C., and the Canadian Festival of Music in Montreal—that McGraw observed directly the magnitude and degree of sincerity of interest in singing outside the South. Bringing this to bear on his experiences within the creative core

of the tradition, he has been uniquely positioned to direct the energies of so diverse a population as has recently come to Sacred Harp singing.

Yet more was involved than merely promoting the music. With little tradition to draw upon, new groups customarily met in one another's homes. Crafting social practices out of prior experience in recreational group singing and vocal performing ensembles, new groups would endeavor to balance the competing aesthetic ambitions of various members with values favoring democratic participation and fellowship. Often, eight or so singers might struggle through no more than two dozen songs before dismissing. Gradually, by venturing South or studying with McGraw or others, new groups would learn that at a traditional "all-day singing," more than a hundred songs might be sung! At larger singings, even the more difficult pieces—anthems such as "Heavenly Vision" or "Easter Anthem"—would be managed without the kind of fussiness that attends new groups. Later, when locales such as Chicago, San Diego, and several New England cities hosted conventions attended by Southern singers, much of the splendor of traditional singings could be experienced at home.

Under such circumstances, Southern tradition served both as a prestigious heritage and a model for spiritual fulfillment. As the primary point of contact, McGraw's role in linking the old and the new was pivotal. His enduring leadership during the decades leading up to this revision is widely recognized as important both in the advancement of Sacred Harp singing nationwide and in the steadfast attention to its Southern heritage. Recognizing these contributions, singers at the "new songs" singing in 1990 unanimously approved a motion that the new book bear the subtitle "McGraw Revision"—but he declined the honor.

Singers undoubtedly experience the revision—as well as the changing tradition it represents—in diverse ways. The excitement of a collection of new songs and new authors is rightfully balanced by an intensified devotion to those reliable old songs that comprise the bulk of the book. This devotion points not only to the proven excellence of these old songs, but also to their capacity to bear the accumulated sentiments of repeated singing—memories of cherished friends and relations who have held them as favorites. It is because of these profound attachments that the music committee has taken extraordinary and perhaps unprecedented care to assure that all changes to the book have the endorse-

ment of the widest span of active singers. Thus, of the book's 551 songs, 386 will have been included continuously since 1911, and 171 will have appeared on the same page of each edition since 1844!

Overall, however, the sesquicentennial of *The Sacred Harp* marks a time of heightened confidence for the tradition. Little evidence is apparent of the contentious atmosphere that the community has experienced in previous years. The excitement of singings that draw participants from new and distant states affirms the importance of the music and, perhaps, recalls the excitement of the grand conventions of yesteryear. Yet the 1991 revision looks for its grounding beyond these circumstances to what is truly eternal about the music. The book's revisers have intuitively grasped that newcomers to the music are discovering what has been discovered by others repeatedly over the course of the book's history—that even where other means fail, music is a bridge by which singers can share common spiritual sentiments. Though this seems uniquely relevant today, for Sacred Harp singers, it is another walk within those hallowed “old paths.”

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## Songs of Work and Songs of Worship: Sanctifying Black Unionism in the Southern City of Steel

*Brenda McCallum*

Set within the historical context of New South industrialization and the resurgence of black unionism in the New Deal era and against the background of racial and social stratification in Birmingham, Alabama, this paper examines expressive culture as an agent for social change. Many members of Birmingham's black workforce during this period had rich associational lives as gospel singers, and their interconnected contexts for alliance—at the workplace, in company towns and industrial communities, in the union hall, and in the church—provided alternative arenas, modes, and levels of communication and expression. The discourse, narratives, and songs that emerged from this complex matrix of overlapping social networks served as analogous channels for black workers' heightened response to the inequities of the industrializing environment and, in particular, to the prospects for profound economic and social reform brought about by black unionism.

By drawing on and reinterpreting traditional religious speech and song, black miners and industrial workers in Birmingham helped give unionism "an extraordinary cultural and ideological vitality" (Grossberg 1986:54-55). This paper investigates the practice, among some Birmingham black workers and gospel singers, of transforming religious songs to union songs which commemorated and canonized labor leaders, sanctified labor organization, and praised the gospel of black unionism. Performed in a quasi-sacred style and empowered by the

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unifying ideologies of evangelical Protestantism and democratic unionism, these pro-labor songs provided an active mode in which black industrial workers could articulate an emerging consciousness and a new collective identity.

### **Historical Background**

Established in 1871, because of its proximity to iron-ore, coal, and limestone deposits, Birmingham became the New South's leading industrial city, with an economy based on mining and heavy industries such as iron and steel manufacture. By 1900, Birmingham's phenomenal growth made it a commercial-industrial center second only to Atlanta in the region, with some 3,398 manufacturing establishments, including hundreds of iron-ore and coal mines, limestone and dolomite quarries, coke ovens, foundries, furnaces, mills, and factories (Taft 1981:95). In the 1910s, boosters' literature promoted Birmingham as "The Magic City" and "The Pittsburgh of the South" (Brownell 1972:48, Northrup 1943:27). Production continued to boom in the World War I decade, in the 1920s, and again during World War II, when the Birmingham District was the region's largest source of primary steel (White 1981:95).<sup>1</sup>

By 1890, rural black migrants had generally displaced eastern and southern European immigrants as the majority of the Birmingham District's industrial common laborers. By 1900, more than three-quarters of the iron and steel workers and half of the coal and iron-ore miners in the state were black. From 1900 to 1910, Birmingham reported the largest increase in Negro population (215.6 percent) of any city in the United States. By 1920, blacks made up some 40 percent of Birmingham's population, the highest proportion of blacks to the total population of any major American city. Through the 1930s, black laborers dominated Alabama's workforce in coal and iron-ore mining as well as in iron and steel production. Many of the black miners and industrial workers in the Birmingham District came from rural areas in south Alabama, or the adjacent states of Florida and Georgia. The migration of blacks from the rural Deep South—which had begun in the Reconstruction era, peaked in Alabama from the 1910s to 1930s, and continued through World War II—has been likened to a refugee movement, or an exodus. In addition to many conditions that pushed

people out of sharecropping and tenant farming, urban life and industrial work had considerable appeal for southern blacks. Production boomed in the companies of the Birmingham District, and the industrial labor agents who recruited black workers promised superior housing, schools, and health care, and, most of all, a regular paycheck.

In 1926 the Birmingham Jubilee Singers—the first of scores of black all-male vocal ensembles called “jubilee and gospel quartets” to develop within the District’s black industrial communities and to go on to record commercially and achieve widespread recognition outside of the area—released a 78-rpm recording, entitled “Birmingham Boys.”<sup>2</sup> The text of this song provides a cultural frame of reference for this critical era—when blacks uprooted themselves from the country to secure wage work and the material prosperity promised by the city. The migration from an agrarian to an urban environment voiced in the song “Birmingham Boys” represented the early experiences of many local black workers, who viewed jobs in the District’s mines and mills “as a means to another way of life” (Gutman 1968:97; 1977:173). Musically, “Birmingham Boys” typified the widely-imitated early Birmingham gospel quartet style—an egalitarian blend of four or more *a cappella* voices in close and complex harmony. Although approached in a light-hearted secular manner, much in the idiom of 19th-century minstrel and medicine-show songs, a new urban male collective identity is the cause for jubilee:

Birmingham boys are we,  
 Jolly as can be.  
 Rolly, jolly, Birmingham boys are we.  
 You can tell without a doubt,  
 Rolly, jolly, Birmingham boys are we.  
 I was tired of living in the country,  
 So I moved my wife to town,  
 And there I bought a cottage,  
 And then I settled down . . . .  
 Birmingham, Birmingham, Birmingham boys are we.  
 If you could hear those Birmingham boys,  
 How happy you would be (oh, you would be).<sup>3</sup>

While the city lured rural blacks and wage labor offered black men

a point of entry into the industrial world, their subordinate status continued in the New South, as in the old, and their progress was severely restricted. Despite the optimism expressed in the song's lyrics, before the 1950s, settling down in Birmingham for a black worker and his family seldom meant being able to buy a house. Nor was migration to the city, in the early years, a move toward unlimited occupational mobility and economic advancement. Birmingham's black workers were bound between the legacies of slavery, their memories of sharecropping, and the realities of black working-class life in the city's mines and mills. Barriers of racial and social stratification continued to defend the American dream against any inroads made by southern black industrial workers.

By the 1880s, segregated company housing—built by the District's coal, iron, and steel companies for their workers—became the usual pattern of geographic development in the Birmingham District, and welfare capitalism became the dominant means of maintaining social and economic relations. Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (TCI), the District's largest employer, alone once operated some 22 separate company towns—ranging in size from a few hundred to 3500 families. By the early 20th century, many of the local companies had begun to provide a variety of social welfare programs, in addition to company housing and commissaries, for their employees. At one end of the spectrum, after it became a subsidiary of U.S. Steel Corporation in 1907, TCI "implemented one of the most elaborate systems of welfare capitalism of any industrial concern in the United States" (Rikard 1983: 37). TCI established "model" company "villages," with well-built houses, schools, churches, social halls, transportation systems, bathhouses, clinics, parks, and ball fields. Following TCI's example in the District, some local companies, like Republic Steel and ACIPCO (American Cast Iron Pipe Company), also began in the 1910s to upgrade their workers' housing and sanitation facilities, to provide medical care, and to sponsor a wide range of welfare programs for employees and their families. Still others continued to supply little more than rudimentary company housing and a commissary (Fitch 1912).

The effect on black workers and their families of such corporate paternalism was not entirely beneficial, however. Life in the District's industrial company towns was incompatible with the tenets of self-determination and self-governance. The extensive authority and influ-

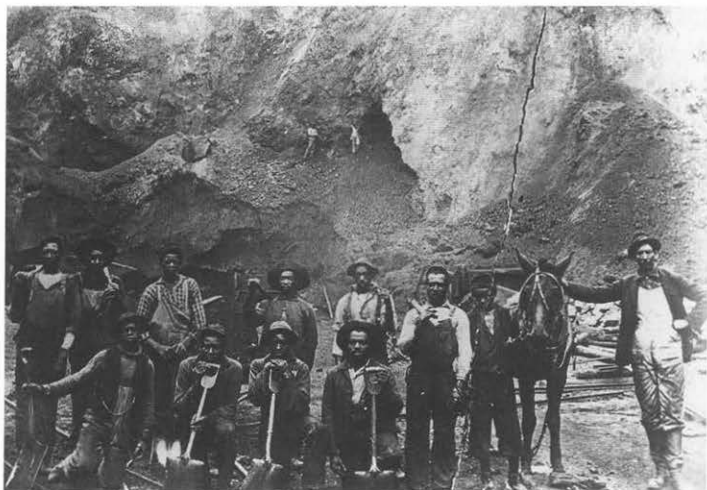


FIGURE 7.

*TCI miners in front of Red Mountain ore outcrop, Birmingham, Alabama, ca. 1900s.* (Courtesy Harper Collections, Special Collections, Samford University Library.)

ence on the employer extended even to non-work life (Gutman 1977: 172). In fact, those aspects of culture that Raymond Williams has termed “‘reserved’ or ‘resigned’ areas of experience and practice and meaning”—like religion and recreation and entertainment—were often appropriated and exploited by the employers as a means of social control (Williams 1977: 126). Companies like TCI employed social workers and “colored community supervisors” to conduct dramatic, dance, art, music, athletic, and other recreational programs for their workforce, and built churches for black residents in their company towns (Rikard 1983: 263). Industrial employers, through such extensive social welfare activities, attempted to thwart unionization and to tie their black workforce to the company town and to company models of appropriate working-class behavior. While some Birmingham industrialists did provide relatively progressive social welfare programs, they also implemented “a system of political, social, and economic segregation” and strictly controlled and regulated their company towns and their black

workforce (Jaynes 1986: 314). Armed guards, company police and sheriffs, fences, and locked gates often accompanied the amenities of the company towns. A severe and manifold system of both customary and legally codified restrictions and controls, which included vagrancy laws, poll taxes, violent anti-unionism, and vigilante terrorism by the Ku Klux Klan and other groups, firmly maintained the old order of social and racial relations (Harris 1977; Brownell 1975; Lewis 1987).

In the mines and mills, as in the company towns, Birmingham's industrialists perpetuated the South's long-standing racial hierarchy by relying on the influx of black migrants as low-paid, untrained, mostly unskilled laborers (Figure 7). A surplus labor pool and paternalistic employment relations were created that intensified competition for employment, obviated the need for modern labor-saving machinery and improved work conditions, exacerbated racial divisions among workers, facilitated on-the-job discrimination, kept wages low, and suppressed unionization activities (Norrell 1986). Rigidly segregated, the local iron and steel industry strictly segmented labor into "white" and "black" jobs (Cayton and Mitchell 1939: 331; Northrup 1943: 38, and see Figure 8). Blacks were the "last hired and first fired," given only the less desirable, lower-paying, menial jobs—where they worked as "helpers" under whites who often had less experience. In industrial tasks in the iron and steel industry, black workers were organized into labor gangs or "pit crews" reminiscent of slavery, where they did extremely hard manual work—breaking apart and loading pig iron, stoking the blast furnace, loading coke ovens, or pouring molten metal (Kulik 1981). The oral tradition of black workers contains many references to employers' practices of racism and discrimination, to white workers' protection of their control over the workplace, and to whites' lack of regard for black men's intelligence, or ability to do any but the most menial common labor. "Good, old, dumb common labor" was the term one retired white supervisor used to describe what he looked for when he hired a black man to work in his iron furnace.<sup>4</sup> Retired iron worker George Brown remarks, "I was hired from my shoulders and [the white worker] was hired from the tip of his toes to the top of his head."<sup>5</sup> Particularly in the Depression years, industrial employers also used the threat of unemployment—the warning of job hunters at the factory gates—to intensify workers' fear and insecurity and to mitigate complaint or protest. Frank Sykes, a retired ACIPCO pipe shop worker and

gospel quartet singer, relates one version of this warning:

Well now, if you worked there, you had to be pretty good because they didn't mind showing you that gate . . . I've heard them tell fellows, "I see a whole lot of those barefooted niggers coming to that fence out there. If you want your job, you'd better straighten up."<sup>6</sup>

A racially based job hierarchy also existed in the District's iron-ore and coal mines, but black and white miners worked together more closely and on a more egalitarian basis than in other Birmingham industries (Northrup 1943: 38). Nevertheless, Birmingham operatives also manipulated black and white miners and exploited the prevailing segregationist sentiment in an attempt to curtail District blacks' persistent union activism.

Set apart from white workers, black co-workers in the mines and industrial plants of the Birmingham District often developed a special camaraderie. In part, this inward-orientation was a constraining, defen-

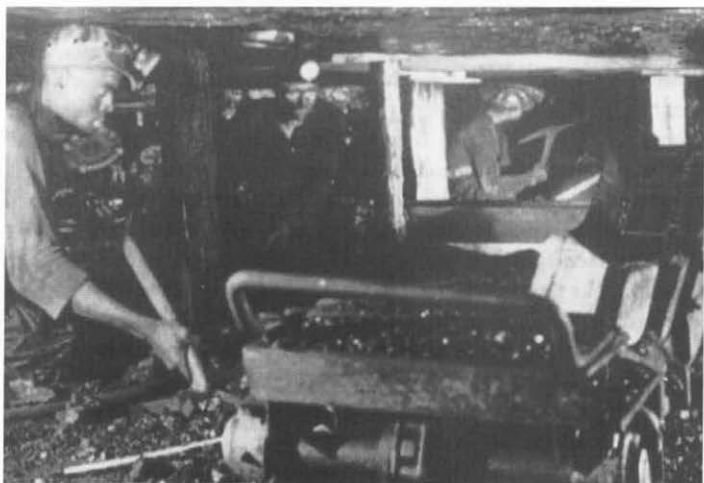


FIGURE 8.

*Miners in a U.S. Steel coal mine, Birmingham, Alabama, 1937. (Courtesy Archive of American Minority Cultures, William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama.)*

sive reaction to racism and inequalities on the job and to the intricate web of legal and customary power and authority that regulated blacks in Birmingham in the era of segregation. However, it was also an assertive action—a “positive desire for independent cultural expression” and a means of attaining collective strength and expressing allegiance to one another (Genovese 1976: 235, Williams 1958: 334-335). Black workers’ expressive culture in Birmingham developed within and grew out of what Archie Green has described as a “traditionalizing circle” and was demonstrated through a complex of oral narratives about associational life—camaraderie on the job, solidarity in the union, and fellowship in the church (Green 1978: 76). Black workers’ expressive culture in the Birmingham District was also propagated through music—songs of work and songs of worship.

### **Birmingham’s Black Workers and Jubilee Gospel Quartets**

Birmingham served, in the first half of the 20th century, as a center for the development and diffusion of jubilee gospel quartet music, both a style and a form that evolved from indigenous traditions within the District’s black industrial communities. During the early years, only Norfolk and the Virginia Tidewater region became a similar cultural hearth for black quartet singing.<sup>7</sup> The formative period of the jubilee gospel quartet tradition in Birmingham coincided with the period of greatest industrialization and unionization and the largest migration of rural blacks to the District. From the 1910s through the 1930s each black industrial community in Birmingham seemed to have one or more quartets associated with it. New groups formed with ever-changing personnel; as new quartets were established, they drew singers from veterans of earlier groups as well as recruits from churches in the District’s company towns and industrial neighborhoods. Birmingham’s black gospel tradition is significant in the number of quartet groups that have been organized at or composed of co-workers from a particular mine site, industrial plant, company town, or union hall.<sup>8</sup>

Company towns and corporate welfare programs—especially company-built churches and schools and company-sponsored social affairs—also affected the evolution of the black gospel quartet tradition in the Birmingham District. While literally hundreds of area quartet groups developed and performed autonomously within black industrial

communities, local companies often appropriated indigenous musical traditions for their own purposes. The L&N (Louisville and Nashville) Railroad, for example, sponsored the Old Reliable Choral group, one of the city's most popular (Atkins 1981: 139). ACIPCO sponsored segregated bands and vocal groups to entertain employees at holiday picnics and baseball games and on founder's day. The segregated "welfare societies" of the Alabama Fuel and Iron Company and the DeBardeleben Coal Company organized many social affairs featuring programs by the company quartets and male choruses. These segregated musical groups—made up entirely of employees and often taught and directed by trained musical instructors hired by the company—performed for entertainment at special company holiday events, and served as advertising and public relations vehicles for the industrial employers. TCI's social welfare programs for its workers included musical instruction and the encouragement and sponsorship of performing groups. King Chandler, Jr., bass singer with the Shelby County Big Four, earlier with the Missionary Four and the Five Silver Kings quartets, says that he first received musical training—in pitches, scales, arrangement of notes, and the "minor, major, and off chords"—at the age of 15 at the TCI company school in the Muscoda, Alabama, mining camp where his father was employed as an iron-ore miner.<sup>9</sup> He organized his first group, the TCI Youth Quartet, at the company-sponsored school. Charles Bridges, from Pratt City, Alabama, also recalls training an early quartet group from the TCI mining district, but its personnel and activities are unknown. The Docena Four and the Dolomite Jubilee Singers, who sang together briefly in the early 1920s, may have also been organized by TCI miners in these company towns. Three black *a cappella* musical ensembles—the TCI Sacred Singers, TCI Women's Four, and TCI Section Crew—recorded for Paramount in 1927 in Chicago and probably included employees from TCI's Birmingham enterprises, possibly under the company's sponsorship.<sup>10</sup>

In the New Deal era, as well, other gospel quartet groups began their musical activities because of their associations at the industrial workplace. In 1936 a group of singers from the Southern Coal and Coke Company mining camp in Boothton, just southeast of Birmingham, organized the Shelby County Big Four. Jobie Thomas, of the Bessemer Big Four and the Shelby County Big Four quartets, and George Bestor and Cleveland Smith of the Bessemer Big Four and the Sterling Jubilee/



CIO Singers, worked together at U.S. Pipe and Foundry Company in Bessemer. Freeman Farris of the Blue Eagles Quartet and the Four Eagle Gospel Singers, and Henry Holston, of the Sterling Jubilee/CIO Singers, describe the “bathhouse singing” at the workplace that led to their membership in gospel quartets:

*Farris:* The Blue Eagles was already singing when I got with them. One of the fellows heard me singing in the bathhouse on the job [at U.S. Steel’s Fairfield, Alabama, Sheet Mill] one day and had me to meet them, and that’s how I got with them.<sup>11</sup>

*Holston:* They’d just hum on the job [at the U.S. Pipe Shop in Bessemer] and when they’d get to the washhouse a bunch of them would be in there and maybe a guy would hit a tune over here and you’d join in with him and like that, you know, and it’s sound pretty good and, well, sometimes they’d form a group right there.<sup>12</sup>

Alfred Rutledge, Jr., a member of the Delta-Aires gospel quartet, who for many years worked as an iron-ore miner at TCI’s Muscoda mining camp, also recalls the power of song in the workplace, and how he, too, first learned to harmonize in the quartet style. For a brief period Rutledge worked at the U.S. Steel plant with Tom Lacey, of the Sterling Jubilee/CIO Singers, and Rufus Beavers, of the Dunham Jubilee Singers:

We used to be sitting down there [in the rail fastening department at the steel plant], I would be working with them, and we’d just go to singing. That was really an inspiration. Looks like work would just pass by much faster if you sang. Time would just move fast, see, and you know the shift is almost over, when you . . . just sing and go on like that. We used to do it for many days. Somebody would be always wanting to hit a song. You know, we’d be sitting around and when you love singing—and me, I was just a boy considered to them—and they would go to singing, and I’d find me a tune too, and we’d just go to singing.<sup>13</sup>

The Birmingham black gospel quartets, while they often took the name of their company because of their associations at the workplace and sometimes performed at semi-official functions such as company social events, were usually recruited and paid on a temporary basis, if

receiving any monetary compensation at all. They were rarely accorded any special status by their employers during the regular work day, although quartet singers have always been highly regarded within the black community. As Heilbut states, they functioned as “an institution of black working-class life akin . . . to athletic teams or fraternal lodges’ (1982: 105). The close relationship of the gospel quartets to the District’s mines and mills was well-founded: A group of men who worked together decided to form their own group and often selected its name from their primary associations together. Sharing in hard daily work, often members of the same union local and the same church, frequently living in the same community, these men interacted regularly on a number of levels. Together these factors made for a strong group identity, a bond that grew out of shared life experiences, and their music expressed deeply felt emotions about their common condition.

The early period of the development of jubilee gospel quartet music coincided with a major transfiguration of southern black culture—migration from the country to the city in search of industrial wage work. The quartet songs expressed religious faith and other-worldly emphasis in “a society filled with inequities and in the midst of a profound economic and social transformation” (Gutman 1968: 89, 1977:164).<sup>14</sup> Through their music, Birmingham’s quartet singers kept alive a continuity with the religious traditions of the rural South; their music was a resource of their faith and helped fulfill their needs for spiritual solace in a time of social stress. Although the gospel quartet songs commented only implicitly on secular life in the city and in the workplace and rarely overtly protested or criticized it, the mines and the mills of the Birmingham District were invisible yet ever-present backdrops. The jubilee quartet groups (also called “families,” “fellowships,” and “clubs”) also provided an important social network for the singers, an adjunct to the community, the church, the workplace, and the union, yet autonomous and self-controlled. The quartets, like black fraternal organizations, provided a surrogate setting for black men to vote, hold office, administer funds, wield power, and gain status and prestige—options withheld by white society in the segregated South (Levine 1979:268). In many cases, the quartet group was, simultaneously, an extended social and familial network, a brotherhood or fraternal organization, a benevolent society and mutual aid association, and a convocation for spiritual fellowship.

Szwed has discussed African American religious song as an “adaptive strategy,” a group phenomenon paralleling the organizational structure of church and community and functioning to symbolize and reinforce social behavior (1969:113).<sup>15</sup> The classic pre-World War II period of jubilee gospel quartet music that developed in Birmingham was characterized by a stylistically distinctive school of singing—an egalitarian style of broad, extended chords of deep four-part harmony. Rather than spotlighting the individualistic lead singer, as modern gospel music usually does, jubilee style emphasized the evenness and equality of all voices collectively striving for a cohesive, blended sound. Tom Lacey, a retired steelworker who has been singing with area quartet groups for more than 50 years, describes the aesthetic of equal participation in jubilee gospel music: “When you’re keyed up right, nobody’s off chord. You’re all working right in a solid chord just like one big voice . . . .”<sup>16</sup> Harmony—as both a spiritual and a musical concept—was the credo of the quartets. Freeman Farris, bass singer with the Four Eagle Gospel Singers, comments:

Peace and harmonizing kind of holds you together. If you’re harmonizing, why, it sounds like one. When you make close music, you can’t tell who’s singing what voice. You can get so close ‘til you don’t know who’s singing lead, or who’s singing bass, or who’s singing baritone, and that helps keep you together.<sup>17</sup>

Jubilee gospel song, as a collective artistic expression, functioned, in part, to articulate a major social value of the group—that of social equality and spiritual concord. The Sterling Jubilee Singers’ tenor, Henry Holston, also describes this sense of companionship: “Our fellowship is so close, that sometimes when the group doesn’t get together for a few weeks we get lonesome for each other.”<sup>18</sup> L. T. Smoot, of the Four Eagle Gospel Singers, agrees that to be a successful quartet, its members must have a special relationship: “Harmony and love amongst the group, that’s the main object. If you get that to work, then you can hold on, with God to help.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Black Unionism in the Birmingham District**

Membership in an overlapping circle of association was shared by many of the jubilee gospel quartet singers in the Birmingham District,

especially after the advent of federal sanctions for labor organization and the massive union reorganization campaigns that occurred during the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> The Great Depression had forced most industrial employers in the Birmingham District to drastically reduce or abandon the welfare capitalism programs that had begun the 1900s and had begun to break down the long-standing paternalistic system of control and regulation of the black workforce (Brody 1980: 103-104, 134). The upsurge of New Deal era unionization provided an analogous context for black workers' collective response to the discontinuities of the urban-industrial milieu. While the gospel quartet groups were essentially spiritual, normative, and conservative in their orientation, the labor unions were materialistic, oppositional, and radical. The gospel of unionism served as a legally and culturally sanctioned basis for social action and reform and provided relatively safe and noncombative strategies and modes of protest that were particularly effective in the Jim Crow South. It was within the image of the Christian and democratic mission of unionism that the seemingly dichotomous values of spiritual fellowship and hope for material gain could be merged. Southern black workers' narratives and songs began to address social problems as well as spiritual problems; they were used to praise the gospel of unionism, with an implicit message of social protest. Pro-labor gospel songs thus served, concurrently, functions that were both oppositional and conservative.

A sense of the dual function, as both belief and strategy, of the ideologies of Christianity, egalitarianism, unionism, and social reform is especially critical in a study of the expressive culture of Birmingham black workers in the New Deal era (Gutman 1968, 58; 1977:131). Many Birmingham blacks carried over the ideas and values of evangelical Christianity in their belief that labor organizations like the United Mine Workers (UMW) were a "secular church" (Gutman 1977:131). Using religious metaphors common to older black workers in the Birmingham District, Jobie Thomas, member of the Bessemer Big Four and Shelby County Big Four gospel quartets and former coal miner and steelworker, places equality for black and white workers within the Biblical context. Thomas draws on both Old Testament and antebellum history to sanctify black unionism—as a means for the collective deliverance and emancipation of the black wage slave:

All the rest of the time [before unionization] we were the little horses that was following the white horse across the pastures, across the hills. We was grazing on what was left, and that would be a penny. . . . We sing a song that a way, "Tell Old Man Pharaoh To Let My People Go." We had been bound down and didn't have a chance and [the union] opened up the way.<sup>21</sup>

Particularly after passage of Section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in 1933—which UMW-CIO leader John L. Lewis called "the emancipation proclamation" of the union movement—collective bargaining and the "religion of brotherhood" seemed to offer hope for a new order of social, and racial, relations (Sitkoff 1978: 175; Gutman 1968:76; 1977:150). Organizing drives were often promoted as a holy cause (Cowley 1980:212). Southern black workers drew from traditional and ritually powerful elements from the Bible and religious song and, perceiving the union as a "collective democratic institution," saw a means for "equality and brotherhood among men on earth" (Williams 1958:346; Gutman 1977:90). Legendary narrative of southern blacks beatified both black union activists and certain white labor leaders. Among others, Cleveland Perry, of the Capstone mining camp in the Birmingham District, sang praises to John L. Lewis, who was well-supported by black miners (Lewis 1987:176-177):

John L. Lewis is our leader,  
 He's a mighty man.  
 He made the NRA contract,  
 Union people going to let it stand.<sup>22</sup>

The gospel of unionism and social reform also spread to the area's black iron and steel workers because of the national leadership of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), an early CIO affiliate that entered the District in 1936. UMW vice-president Philip Murray headed the SWOC and personally "brought to the union movement a concern for civil rights rooted in the religious teachings of his faith" (Sitkoff 1978:181). Murray's widely publicized activities on behalf of racial equality endeared him to southern black industrial workers, and his powerful progressive image provided an effective medium through which the gospel of industrial unionism could be spread to black

workers in the Jim Crow South. Borrowing from Biblical texts and the language of the black Christian church, the discourse and narratives of black workers in Birmingham contain “a common and deeply felt set of images, analogies, and metaphors” to express their belief in the role of unionism in social reform (Gutman 1977:164). Herman Taylor, a retired steelworker who continues to be active in union committee work, speaks of the emancipatory function of organized labor and its sacred importance to black workers in the Birmingham District:

The greatest thing that happened to me, it was the union. That's true. Because if it hadn't been for the union, I'd have been gone a long time ago. And that is—ought to be—the salvation of any man, the union.<sup>23</sup>

### **Black Labor Songs in the Birmingham District**

The coal mines of the Birmingham District have been known since the United Mine Workers' campaigns of the 1890s for both biracialism and for the pro-union songsters among their workers. Labor songs from the area that date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries have been documented in the *Birmingham Labor Advocate*, *United Mineworkers Journal*, and other labor publications of the time.<sup>24</sup> From 1928 to 1941, under the sponsorship of the UMW, George Korson toured the bituminous coal regions of the United States, including Alabama and other southern states (Tierney 1973:4; Gillespie 1980:75). In 1940 he recorded Uncle George Jones, “the Negro bard and folk minstrel” of the Trafford, Alabama, coal camp, just northeast of Birmingham, who laid his life “on the altar of the union” in 1894 and who “throughout his career . . . sang church hymns and Negro spirituals. He sang in church choirs, down in the mines, and on the picket line.” The UMW commissioned many of his ballads, like “This What The Union Done,” which honors President Franklin D. Roosevelt and white labor leaders as it chronicles the passage of the NIRA:

[Verse 1:]

In nineteen hundred an' thirty-three  
 When Mr. Roosevelt took his seat  
 He said to President John L. Lewis,

"In union we must be.  
 Come, let us work together,  
 Ask God to lead the plan,  
 By this time another year  
 We'll have the union back again."

[*Chorus:*]

Hooray! Hooray!  
 For the union we must stan',  
 It's the only organization  
 Protect the living man.  
 Boys, it makes the women happy;  
 Our children clap their hands,  
 To see the beefsteak an' the good po'k chops,  
 Steamin' in those fryin' pans.

[*Verse II:*]

When the President and John L. Lewis  
 Had signed their decree  
 They called for Mitch an' Raney—  
 Dalrymple make the three:  
 "Go down in Alabama,  
 Organize ev'ry living man,  
 Spread the news all over the lan':  
 We got the union back again!"<sup>25</sup>

George Korson recorded Charles Langford and the Marvel Quartet from Alabama singing "Union Boys Are We" in Columbus, Ohio, in 1940, at the "golden-anniversary convention" of the UMW (Korson 1943:46). "Union Boys Are We" was an unmistakable reworking of the 1926 song, "Birmingham Boys," which conveyed the aspirations of black migrants during the period of early settlement in the Birmingham District. The text of this musical transformation more than a decade later reflected the developing consciousness of black industrial workers as they rejected their subordinate role and redefined their collective identity as independent workers and union members, joined in struggle against the company and its agents:

Union boys are we, happy as can be,  
 Rolly, roly, jolly, jolly,  
 Union boys are we.  
 Progressives in de valley go  
 bow-wow-wow,  
 Scabs in de pen go wee-wee-wee,  
 An' snitchers in de barn go hee-haw-hee,  
 Popsicles on de fence go  
 Cock-cockle-do-do-do . . .  
 Union boys, union boys are we.  
 If you could live a union life,  
 How happy you would be.<sup>26</sup>

Other, little-known Birmingham gospel quartet singers also demonstrated their union affiliations and propagated their political beliefs through the medium of labor-oriented, semi-religious song. In 1940, for example, at the SWOC's second International Wage and Policy Convention, held in Chicago, a black "quartette" from Bessemer accompanied southern region directors William Mitch and Noel Beddow and performed before the assembled delegates (Foner and Lewis 1983, 7:109). Anderson Underwood, Bessemer iron-ore miner and bass singer with the Volunteer Four quartet, recalls the singers' role as proselytizers for the unionization movement in the region:

We belonged to [the International Union of] Mine, Mill and Smelter workers. "Mine, Mill," that's what we are . . . . Lawyer Lipscomb—his name was Jim Lipscomb—he'd get up in a truck somewhere out there and about five or six hundred folks [would be] there and he'd be just like a preacher up there, talking about the working conditions. And folks went to joining the union just like everything . . . we'd sing at the union meetings, we'd just be singing for the union. There's just be a crowd of folks there, and we'd just sing and have a big time . . . . I was singing in a quartet then, the Volunteer Four . . . . And we'd sing and the folks would be out there by the hundreds . . . . We kept that club [quartet] for twenty-three years. All of us working in the mine.<sup>27</sup>

The Bessemer Big Four Quartet, organized from a 1920s youth quartet, the West Highland Jubilee Singers, was recorded for the



Library of Congress in 1941 and is one of two known local groups that sang in advocacy of the CIO. Jobie Thomas, who is the only living member of the group, describes the early organization of the Bessemer Big Four out of family and occupational associations:

Way back there in '28 or '29 we started right out here [in the Pleasant Grove community just west of Birmingham] as just little bitty boys singing . . . . Four of us first cousins that was reared in the same house by my auntie. Some of us was in the mines then. We started in the mines on Thanksgiving Day 1928. I was thirteen years old . . . . About dark we'd gather back by an oak tree—it's still sitting in the yard there—and sing half the night. There wasn't nothing else to do. We'd practice . . . that's the way we started off.<sup>28</sup>

The group was later reorganized by George Bestor and renamed the Bessemer Big Four Quartet. The group was affiliated with the SWOC and the CIO during their early organizing drives in the Birmingham District in the late 1930s and early '40s. One of the two extant recordings of the group vocalizes their union affiliation and was used as a theme song on local radio broadcasts for the CIO. This recording of “Good Evening Everybody” features lead Jesse Thompson, first announcing the group and their employer, the U.S. Pipe Shop in Bessemer, then introducing, in song, each group member and their quartet voice part in a variant of the “come-all-ye” greeting of earlier labor ballads. The song confirms and celebrates their new membership in the CIO:

*[Spoken introduction:]*

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. We are the Big Four Singers of Bessemer, Alabama, employed by the big Pipe Shop, U.S. Coming to you, doing a number about “Good Evening Everybody.”

*[Refrain:]*

Good evening everybody, how are you?

(Lord, how are you?)

Now is there anything that we can do for you?

(Do for you?)

I said, we want you to know we belong to the CIO

Great God, good evening everybody, how are you?

(Lord, how are you?)<sup>29</sup>

In 1940 George Korson also recorded Cleveland Perry, who had earlier been “drafted by his company to sing spirituals at company union brotherhood meetings.” His UMW song, “Got My Name on De Record,” attests to the kind of solemn rite that signing one’s name was for southern blacks, and its opening line echoes the Bessemer Big Four’s CIO song:

Good evenin’, ev’ry body,  
 Do you belong to dis union?  
 I’m a thoroughbred union [man]  
 Yes, Lord, I done went to dat office  
 An’ I sho’ done signed,  
 Got my name on de record  
 An’ sho’ have jined . . . .  
 Oh, we thank Walter Jones,  
 Oh, we thank Mr. Mitch,  
 Day have put us on de main line.  
 Yes, Lord, den we went to dat office  
 An’ we sho’ done signed,  
 Got our name on de record,  
 An’ we sho’ have jined . . . .<sup>30</sup>

In 1929 local quartet master Charles Bridges first organized and trained the Sterling Jubilee Singers of Bessemer. The group included several employees of the U.S. Pipe Shop in Bessemer, in addition to workers from TCI and the L & N Railroad. In the 1940s the group was managed by ex-prize fighter and local WJLD radio disc jockey Perry L. “Tiger” Thompson, who worked at the Pullman-Standard Plant in Bessemer, was an early black CIO organizer, vice president of USWA Local 1476 for 23 years, and vice president of the Bessemer CIO Council. The group appears to have been renamed the CIO Singers by Thompson, when they began appearing weekly under that name on his CIO-sponsored Sunday morning radio program, singing during break time after he talked about union affairs. During this period the group also sang for other CIO functions—at banquets, meetings, and conven-

tions in Gadsden, Montgomery, and elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> Thompson promoted the group until the early 1950s and issued a recording by them on a local private label in 1952. Two topical gospel-union ballads, “The Spirit of Phil Murray” and “Satisfied,” composed by lead Roscoe MacDonald as memorials to the late union leader, were recorded at WJLD radio studios and released as Tiger 100 at a USWA-CIO convention in Montgomery in 1952.<sup>32</sup> Henry Holston, a former member of the CIO Singers, reflects on the strong sacred foundation of these songs:

Roscoe MacDonald made that in the form of a spiritual song . . . to where we could sing it for the CIO because he [Murray] was a great labor leader and he did so much for the CIO, for the working people, that we made it up in a song for him.<sup>33</sup>

“The Spirit of Phil Murray” eulogizes the labor leader and lends an “aura of sacredness, thus further legitimizing the authority” of his leadership and “the sanctity of his cause” (Denisoff 1972: 56-57):

[*Chorus:*]

Let the spirit of Phil Murray live (on and on)  
just let his spirit (live right on)  
Let the spirit of Phil Murray live (on and on)  
God has called Mr. Murray home.

[*Verse I:*]

Well, in nineteen-hundred and forty-two  
Labor leaders didn't know exactly what to do  
Mr. Murray smiled, said I'll be your friend,  
I'll fight for the rights of the working men.

[*Verse III:*]

Well, in nineteen-hundred and fifty-two  
God called Mr. Murray, say, “Your work is through.  
Your labor on earth have been so hard,  
Come up high and get your reward.”

[*Verse V:*]

The Congress Industrial Organization assembled.  
The whole world began to tremble.

Men, women, and children cried,  
When they heard the sad news Mr. Murray had died.

[Verse VI:]

He was the CIO's loss, but he's Heaven's gain.  
In the Day of Resurrection we'll see him again.  
Good God Almighty our best friend is gone.  
I want you boys to help me, just sing this song.<sup>34</sup>

"Satisfied," the reverse side, makes an extended statement on the origins of unionism in Biblical scripture and on salvation through union solidarity:

[Chorus:]

Satisfied, satisfied with Jesus  
Satisfied, my soul's been satisfied.  
God said he would be my compass,  
God said he would be my guide,

[Verses II-IV:]

Well you read in the Bible,  
You read it well.  
Listen to the story,  
That I'm bound to tell.  
Christ's last Passover,  
He had his Communion.  
He told his disciples,  
Stay in union.  
Together you stand,  
Divided you fall.  
Stay in union,  
I'll save you all.  
Ever since that wonderful day my soul's been satisfied.<sup>35</sup>

The importance of the unions to black industrial workers in the Birmingham District was expressed through the medium of gospel music, which, like some earlier British and American labor song traditions, had a strong ideological commitment to unionism that was

grounded in Christian theology and proclaimed unionism as a holy cause. Empowered by evangelical principles, and performed in a quasi-religious style, these area labor songs were couched in terms of Biblical scripture, transferring the roles of union leaders like John L. Lewis, Philip Murray, and others to those of Old Testament redeemers. While the labor movement's ultimate aims were secular, its ideologies—affirmation of the dignity of working people and their right to economic freedom, advocacy for black and white workers as the children of God together in a collective struggle, and commitment to social justice—assumed sacred meaning to Birmingham's black workers, and to those singers who celebrated it in song.

Culturally, such songs are complex phenomena, which developed within an historically evolving social matrix of associations of work and worship, as expressions of praise and protest. These songs united black workers' belief in the Bible as "the ultimate authority for social change" and God as "the primary agent of liberation" with their perception of NIRA Section 7a as a civil sanction for political and economic reform and unionism as a correlative strategy for emancipation (Wiggins 1987: 89-90). As a medium of expressive culture, gospel music in Birmingham functioned to negotiate a balance between continuity with the past, the discontinuities of the present, and prospects for the future. Structurally and musically, these pro-labor gospel songs were rooted in the traditions of southern black sacred music, while the texts articulated black workers' new collective identity and heightened response to the industrializing secular world. They provide us with aesthetic and ideological documents of the emergence of southern black workers' new political consciousness and resurgence of unionism as a powerful social movement, offering potential solutions to both economic and social inequities.

The advance of democracy for southern blacks—emancipation first by the Union Army, then by the United Mine Workers and other labor unions—was frequently proclaimed in late-19th-century songs and in the press as a "jubilee" (Foner 1975: 95-96, 165-166, 178, *et passim*). The theme of union emancipation was continued by black Birmingham jubilee gospel quartet singers, within whose tradition it coalesced with the "jubilee" celebrations of antebellum work-related festivals and with the "jubilee spirituals" of Emancipation Day (Foner 1975:88, 146; Wiggins 1987:86-92). The coming of unionization in the New Deal era

to the Birmingham District's black industrial workers was sanctified in their songs, expressing anticipation of a new day of material prosperity, social dignity, and spiritual fulfillment, the promise of freedom and enfranchisement prophesied in *Leviticus 27:24*:

... In the day of atonement shall ye make the trumpet sound throughout all your land. And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possessions, and ye shall return every man unto his family . . . . For it is the jubile; it shall be holy unto you: ye shall eat the increase thereof out of the field.

## NOTES

Primary data for this paper are drawn from over 300 hours of tape-recorded interviews conducted in 1980 to 1984 in Jefferson County, Alabama, with more than 150 black first and second generation iron-ore and coal miners and iron and steel workers, as well as union activists, ministers, gospel singers, and others. The author would like to acknowledge partial support for this field research from the National Endowment for the Arts, Folk Arts Program, to tape-record interviews and musical performances in preparation of the LP phonograph record and accompanying booklet, *"Birmingham Boys": Jubilee Gospel Quartets from Jefferson County, Alabama* (1982), and the documentary radio series, "In The Spirit" (1986); and from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Humanities Projects in Media, to tape-record interviews for production of the 13-part documentary radio series "Working Lives" (1985). I particularly wish to thank my colleague on the "Working Lives" project, Cliff Kuhn, who constructed critical historical bibliographies, compiled background material, and conducted many of the interviews excerpted herein. Unless otherwise noted, all unpublished interview quotations have been excerpted from the original field recordings which are on deposit at the Archive of American Minority Cultures, William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

<sup>1</sup>The term "Birmingham District" has been used since the 19th century to include Jefferson, Walker, Bibb, and portions of Tuscaloosa and Shelby counties, the location of Alabama's richest coal and iron-ore deposits and most extensive mining operations, as well as the highest concentration of iron and steel manufacturing in the state. In this study, the "District" includes the metropolitan city of Birmingham, the neighboring industrial towns of Bessemer, Ensley, and others, several separately, incorporated industrial satellites, like Fairfield, and many smaller outlying communities that originated as company towns, like Westfield, Pratt City, Dolomite, Docena, and Muscoda.

<sup>2</sup>"Birmingham Boys" and other recordings by area jubilee gospel quartets have been reissued on *Birmingham Quartet Anthology* (Clanka Lanka, CL-144, 001/002, *All Of My Appointed Time* (New World, NW224), *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (John Edwards Memorial Foundation, JEMF-108), and *Jubilee to Gospel* (Library of Congress, Folk Music in America, Volume 8, LBC-8). Recordings made by the author of

contemporary area gospel quartets can be heard on "*Birmingham Boys*": *Jubilee Gospel Quartets from Jefferson County, Alabama* (Alabama Traditions 101).

<sup>2</sup>This transcription of "Birmingham Boys" is taken from Doug Seroff's jacket notes for *Birmingham Quartet Anthology*. Attributed to the Birmingham Jubilee Singers' lead singer and one of the area's best-known quartet trainers, Charles Bridges, this was the quartet's theme or introduction song and was also performed in Birmingham by many other quartet groups. Its popularity became widespread outside the area after the release of the 1926 recording (Columbia, 14547-D), and other gospel quartets, both locally and outside the area, frequently substituted their name or their location in variants of the song. The opening greeting of "Birmingham Boys" is textually similar to the first lines of traditional Anglo-American miners' songs with late-19th-century popular music-hall origins, such as "Down In A Coal Mine" ("I am a jovial collier lad, as blithe as blithe can be") and "Six Jolly Miners" ("Six jolly wee miners, and miners lads are we"). See Korson 1938:277-278; Lloyd [1952] 1978:36-37, 126-127, 347; Green 1972: 48, 447.

<sup>3</sup>J. B. Oliver, interview with author, Birmingham, Alabama, 11 May 1983.

<sup>4</sup>George Brown, interview with author, Birmingham, Alabama, 11 May 1983.

<sup>5</sup>Frank Sykes, interview with Cliff Kuhn, Birmingham, Alabama, 3 August 1984. See also Norrell (1986: 676) and Charles Stephenson's discussion of the threat of unemployment in "There's Plenty Waitin' at the Gates': Mobility, Opportunity, and the American Worker" (Stephenson and Asher 1986: 72-91).

<sup>6</sup>Doug Seroff estimates that from 1890 to 1960, "approximately 10,000 sides" of black gospel quartet songs were recorded in the United States, and by 1946 strong quartet traditions had developed in "New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, all through the Carolinas, Florida, Texas, and California" (Program in Black American Culture, 1981: 9, 14-16). Birmingham's distinctive quartet style dominated in the Deep South, Southeast, and Midwest, while Virginia's dominated on the East Coast. Scholars have only recently recognized that the early jubilee quartet style and repertoire had a national influence on the development of later genres of black gospel music.

<sup>7</sup>In the jacket notes to *Birmingham Quartet Anthology*, Doug Seroff has exhaustively surveyed the histories and personnel of many early Birmingham jubilee gospel quartet groups. The author also traces the work histories and workplace connections of many of the District's quartet groups in the booklet that accompanied the LP phonograph record "*Birmingham Boys*": *Jubilee Gospel Quartets from Jefferson County, Alabama*.

<sup>8</sup>King Chandler, Jr., interview with author, Bessemer, Alabama, 19 October 1981.

<sup>9</sup>Norm Cohen, in *Long Steel Rail*, discusses these TCI groups and the 1927 Paramount recordings, which may have been re-creations arranged by black musicologist Willis Laurence James (1981:646-647). The author also relies on information from telephone conversations with Joe Wilson, 26 January 1981, and Richard K. Spottswood, 2 July 1981. For discographic details, see Godrich and Dixon 1969: 175,680.

<sup>10</sup>Freeman Farris, interview with Brenda McCallum and Doug Seroff, Birmingham, Alabama, 11 October 1980. The Four Eagle Gospel Singers were first named the Blue Eagle Singers, in part, after the official emblem of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), the federal agency created in 1933 to establish and enforce codes of fair competition and labor in trade and industry. In addition to the quartet's symbolic association with the bird that carried the United States out of the Great Depression, the

name probably made reference to a highly popular Birmingham gospel group that recorded commercially, the Famous Blue Jay Singers.

<sup>12</sup>Henry Holston, interview with Brenda McCallum and Mike Williams, Bessemer, Alabama, 16 August 1981.

<sup>13</sup>Alfred Rutledge, Jr., interview with author, Bessemer, Alabama, 2 February 1983.

<sup>14</sup>The jubilee gospel quartets' sacred repertoire included adaptations of spirituals ("Steal Away [To Jesus]," "Ezekial Saw The Wheel," "The Old Ship of Zion"), jubilees ("When They Ring Them Golden Bells," "Low Down Chariot," "Roll, Jordan, Roll"), hymns ("Shine On Me," "Just As I Am," "Come to Jesus"), religious ballads ("[Brother] Jonah," "Blind Barnabus," "Noah"), and composed gospel songs ("We'll Understand It Better By and By," "[Just A] Little Talk With Jesus," "When Folks Around You Prosper").

<sup>15</sup>Following Szwed's analysis, gospel quartets exhibit a particular adaptational strategy because of the community of black Christians' group-sacred-conservative orientation (1969:113). This particular strategy has been opposed to but has co-existed in the same time and place with those of other members of the community—such as blues singers—with an individual-secular-reactionary orientation. (See also Keil 1966). Levine also discusses the cultural complexity of the historical development of these musical forms (1979:223). On the concept of the musical, religious, and cultural community of black gospel quartet singers, see also the booklet notes by Kip Lornell accompanying the LP phonograph record, *Happy in the Service of the Lord: Memphis Gospel Quartet Heritage—The 1980's* (High Water, 1002).

<sup>16</sup>Tom Lacey, interview with author, Bessemer, Alabama, 13 March 1981.

<sup>17</sup>Freeman Farris, interview with Brenda McCallum and Doug Seroff, Birmingham, Alabama, 11 October 1980.

<sup>18</sup>Henry Holston, interview with author, Bessemer, Alabama, 13 March 1981.

<sup>19</sup>L. T. Smoot, interview with author, Birmingham, Alabama, 7 December, 1980.

<sup>20</sup>I do not mean to attribute either cultural or political homogeneity to black industrial workers in the Birmingham District. As Raymond Williams states, "a common culture is not, at any level, an equal culture" (1958:336). Nor do I mean to imply historical constancy. Certainly not all black workers were performers, or even audiences of black gospel quartet music; nor did black unionism, particularly in the early years, win their unanimous support. Rather, both sacred gospel quartet and sacralized pro-union songs were key aspects of a larger "conditional expressive repertoire" that derived from parallel associational networks within a complex social field, and from which a variety of individual responses were articulated to meet the demands of changing conditions (Limon 1983: 40). See also Williams 1958: 343; Bauman 1972: 38, Shils 1981: 26-27.

<sup>21</sup>Jobie Thomas, videotape-recorded interview with Judy Stone for University [of Alabama] Television Services, Bessemer, Alabama, October 1981.

<sup>22</sup>Korson 1943: 309.

<sup>23</sup>Herman Taylor, interview with Cliff Kuhn, Birmingham, Alabama, 17 July 1984.

<sup>24</sup>See, for example, Foner 1975: 212-213; Foner and Lewis 1980: 174-175.

<sup>25</sup>Korson's 1940 recording of Uncle George Jones singing "Dis [This] What the Union Done" was included in *Coal Dust on the Fiddle* (1943: 301, 445-446) and was also



issued in 1965 on *Songs and Ballads of the Bituminous Miners* (Library of Congress, AFS-L60). This transcription of the song's lyrics is taken from the album notes (pp. 10-12). In June 1933, after the passage of Section 7a of the NIRA, William A. Mitch—who had been an officer of the Indiana District of the United Mine Workers since 1915—was sent to the Birmingham District by John L. Lewis to begin reorganizing miners in the state. An appeal to miners to join the union and help reorganize UMW's District 20 (Alabama) was published in the Birmingham *Labor Advocate* on June 10, 1933, and was signed by William Mitch and William Dalrymple. Another labor official, Sherman H. Dalrymple, was president of the United Rubber Workers of America (URW), and was also active in the mid-1930s in Alabama on behalf of the URW and the CIO. (Taft 1981: 84-85, 116-117, 195). Mitch was president of UMW District 20 (Alabama) from 1933 to 1946 and was appointed director of the southern region of the SWOC in 1936. (See Foner and Lewis 1983, 7:625; Taft 1981: 103; Mitch 1960: 16; Painter 1979: 377-378; Norrell 1987: 673). In an interview with William E. Mitch, Jr. by Cliff Kuhn (Birmingham, Alabama, 29 September 1985), Mitch states that William Rainey [Raney] was an international UMW representative who worked in the coal miners' reorganizing campaign in the Birmingham District in the mid-1930s. (See also Taft 1981: 90). Jones's ballad is related in narrative technique and structure to earlier Anglo-American broadsides and occupational ballads as well as to African American disaster "ballets" and topical gospel songs. (See also note 34 below.) The emphasis on food in this song's chorus and in other songs excerpted in this paper suggests continuity with 19th-century black minstrel, medicine show, and vaudeville songs like "The Sounds of Chicken Fryin' In The Pan" and lines like "Ham fat, ham fat, frying in de pan." (See Dennison 1982: 275, 364 and Oliver 1984: 51, 99).

<sup>26</sup>Korson 1943: 46, 307-308. A reference tape of "Union Boys Are We" was furnished by the George Korson Folklore Archive at King's College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, courtesy of Rae (Mrs. George) Korson. The common barnyard animals—dogs, cats, pigs, and roosters—of the final verses of "Birmingham Boys" have become, in this transfiguration, the antagonists of the labor movement: "progressives" refers to corporate social reformers; "scabs" is an epithet for company-hired strike-breakers, "snitchers" are company-planted and paid informants; "popsicles" are bogus company-sponsored unions.

<sup>27</sup>Anderson Underwood, interview with Cliff Kuhn, Bessemer, Alabama, 23 May 1984. According to Horace Huntley (1977: 48), Jim Lipscomb was a former miner who had been blacklisted in the 1920s, but returned to Birmingham after passage of the NIRA in 1933 to practice law and assist in launching the organizing drive of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers.

<sup>28</sup>Jobie Thomas, interview with Brenda McCallum and Mike Williams, Bessemer, Alabama, 23 August 1981.

<sup>29</sup>Recorded 3 July 1941 in Bessemer, Alabama. Reference tape (LC-5042-A and B) furnished by the Library of Congress, Archive of American Folk Culture.

<sup>30</sup>Korson 1943: 306-307. Hired and sent to Alabama by the national UMW office (Lewis 1987: 103), Walter W. Jones was one of the most widely respected black UMW organizers in the Birmingham District from the 1910s until his untimely death in the 1930s. His bravery, evangelical spirit, and oratorical skills are well-remembered by older black workers in the District. See note 25 above on William A. Mitch.

<sup>31</sup>Henry Holston, Bessemer, Alabama, interview with author, 13 March 1981, with

Brenda McCallum and Mike Williams, 16 August 1981, and with Brenda McCallum and Cliff Kuhn, 26 April 1983. I am grateful to Archie Green for providing photocopies of two articles about Tiger Thompson published in *Steel Labor* (October 1972, p. 16 and September 1973, n.p.).

<sup>32</sup>"The Spirit of Phil Murray" has been reissued on *Songs of Steel & Struggle* (United Steelworkers of America, no issue number; Collector 1930), *Songs of Labor & Livelihood* (Library of Congress, Folk Music in America, Volume 8, LBC-8), and *Birmingham Quartet Anthology* (Clanka Lanka, CL-144, 001/002).

<sup>33</sup>Henry Holston, interview with Brenda McCallum and Mike Williams, Bessemer, Alabama, 16 August 1981.

<sup>34</sup>Four verses and the chorus have been excerpted from "The Spirit of Phil Murray" as reissued on *Birmingham Quartet Anthology* and transcribed in the jacket notes by Doug Seroff. Such gospel-labor songs are textually and generically related to other topical gospel songs of the period, like Otis Jackson's ballads ("Why I Like Roosevelt," in particular) popularized by the Soul Stirrers, Dixie Hummingbirds, and other groups (Reagon 1974: 170-184 and Hayes 1973: 14, 52). They also share a stock of formulaic phrases and floating lines with both these topical gospel songs, as well as with black religious and disaster ballads ("The Wreck of the Titanic" and "The 1927 Flood," for example), circulated on broadsides beginning in the late 19th century and on blues recordings since the 1920s (Courlander 1963: 75-79; Levine 1979: 171-174, 258-259; Oliver 1984: 174, 195, 222-223, 226-227).

<sup>35</sup>"Satisfied" has been excerpted from Doug Seroff's transcription in the jacket notes to *Birmingham Quartet Anthology*. For other examples of the celebration of emancipation through song, see Lloyd [1952] 1978; Greenway 1953; Denisoff 1972; Foner 1975; Dennison 1982; and Wiggins 1987.

## Miracle of the Fishes: Mobile Bay Jubilees

*Anne Kimzey*

**D**rive east from Mobile, Alabama, across Mobile Bay and take the Jubilee Parkway to reach the Eastern Shore. Turn right onto the four-lane highway and enter “Daphne—the Jubilee Town.” Further down the road to your right, at the sign of the flounder, Jubilee Landscaping comes into view. Across the highway a sign for Jubilee Carwash, featuring a giant crab logo, looms over the Texaco station. Proceed to downtown Fairhope, where a rendering of a shrimp playing the saxophone adorns the storefront of Jubilee Music. For entertainment, you have your choice of dancing with the Jubilee Squares in Fairhope or attending a performance by the Jubilee Fish Theatre Company in Point Clear. The message begins to sink in, you’re in jubilee country.

According to *Recipe Jubilee*, a cookbook published by the Junior League of Mobile,

A unique phenomenon occurs on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay. Natives of the area know the signs to watch for—in the moon, the tide, and the winds. Shrimps, crabs, and fish race to the water’s edge and the cry of JUBILEE! rings up and down the beach. With buckets, baskets and nets in tow, visitors and natives alike gather a bounty of fresh seafood.

“Jubilee” is the local term for this natural phenomenon reported in scientific literature as “sporadic mass shoreward migrations of demersal fish and crustaceans in Mobile Bay, Alabama” (Loesch 1960:292). This event usually occurs several nights per year during the late summer and early fall. A mixture of sea life, including flounder, eels, crab, and

shrimp, show up in great numbers along the shore in a dazed or groggy condition. They are easy prey for anyone who happens along, and it is not uncommon for jubilee harvesters to haul away seafood by the tub full.

It is obvious that the jubilee is a source of pride and identity to the inhabitants of the Eastern Shore. Despite the existence of an annual, summer Jubilee Festival, the jubilee is not just another Chamber of Commerce promotion but an authentic expression of the culture of the small communities along the shore.

Jubilees have been occurring along the Eastern Shore for as long as anyone can remember. One of the earliest written descriptions appeared July 17, 1867, in the *Mobile Daily Advertiser*. The item, titled "Excitement Among the Fish," indicates that the event was nothing new to the Eastern Shore even then, more than 120 years ago:

Yesterday all the fish in the bay seemed to be making for the Eastern Shore. Large numbers of crabs, flounders and other fish were found at the water's edge, and taken in out of the wet. They were counted by the bushel. Annually this phenomenon occurs with the fish along the Eastern Shore of the bay. They all appear to forsake deep water, and swim and cluster in immense numbers to the shore.

Except for the absence of the term "jubilee," the account could have been written today. The precise origin of the name remains uncertain, although the connotations of rejoicing are obvious. Many observers compare the scene along the beach to Mardi Gras, another festive tradition in the Mobile area that is, at times, characterized by throngs of revelers competing for free goodies. Incidentally, there is a Mardi Gras parading society on the Eastern Shore named "Maids of Jubilee."

Most people I interviewed had heard the term "jubilee" all their lives and couldn't imagine any other. One woman, however, said she grew up calling it a "rush," in reference to the rush of sea life to the beach, and didn't hear the term "jubilee" until she was an adult. By contrast, her husband, who grew up five miles away in a different community, first encountered the name "rush" only after meeting his wife and her family (Millers 1989). On the basis of preferred use today, it appears that the designation reflecting the cultural response to the natural phenomenon has displaced the one describing the phenomenon itself.

## TRIBUTARIES

Part of the lore of jubilees concerns knowing the "signs," consisting primarily of weather conditions and other factors believed either to portend the events or to cause them. While informants disagree on several issues, such as the influence of the moon or of rainfall, some fairly consistent observations emerge. I compiled the following generally accepted characteristics of jubilees from written sources and personal interviews. The Mississippi-Alabama Seagrant Consortium printed a pamphlet offering similar generalizations (MASGP-87-011), so I am borrowing their readable format, while adding my own findings.

1) Jubilees occur in the summer and early fall.

2) They usually occur in the early hours of the morning prior to sunrise.

3) The bay is reported to have a calm glasslike surface. This calmness has been attributed to a gentle easterly or northeasterly overland breeze that "lays the water down" (Joyner 1989). A change in wind direction during a jubilee is said to stop a jubilee.

4) There is usually a rising tide during the jubilee. A change to a falling tide can stop a jubilee.

5) Jubilees can occur on isolated stretches of beach anywhere along the 12-mile coastline between Daphne and Point Clear. They can cover a few hundred feet or they can extend for several miles. The smaller jubilees are much more common (and harder to locate).

6) Jubilees last an average of two hours. They can be of shorter or much longer duration, and some have been known to last all night.

7) The varieties of sea life most commonly associated with jubilees are: eels, shrimp, crab, flounder, and stingrays, as well as mullet and catfish. Most of these are considered bottom-dwellers. Observers sometimes refer to specific types of jubilees, such as a "crab jubilee," when one species predominates. A "people jubilee" occurs when crowds gather in anticipation of a jubilee but no fish arrive (Gallalee 1983).

8) The fish move toward shore during a jubilee. Sometimes people report that a jubilee "sets up" in a predictable order, the eels coming in first and the flounders last.

9) The fish concentrate along the water's edge. Crabs sometimes crawl out of the water and cling to logs and pilings. The creatures are sluggish and sometimes appear to gasp for breath. But they do not

die, except for those harvested by jubileers. It is reported, though, that crabs held captive in traps at the end of piers often do die during a jubilee (Gallalee 1983 and Walsh 1989), presumably because they are not able to follow the migration to shore and are killed by the adverse water conditions that the others are escaping.

10) When a jubilee ends, the fish suddenly revive and go swimming back into the deeper waters of the bay.

The most widely accepted scientific explanation of this phenomenon is that the fish are driven shoreward by an incoming layer of oxygen-poor water (Loesch 1960:297 and Mississippi-Alabama Seagrant Consortium MASGP-87-011). Water conditions in the bay are constantly in transition, as salt water comes in from the Gulf of Mexico and fresh water pours in from the rivers. Factors such as tides and amount of rainfall upriver influence the make-up of water in the bay on any given day. Using observations of this ecosystem by marine researchers, the Mississippi-Alabama Seagrant Consortium has published a pamphlet postulating the causes of jubilees. It offers this description of heavy, stagnant salt water (from the Gulf) that accumulates in the deepest parts of the bay and is overlain by a layer of lighter fresh water (from the rivers): "This stratification is similar to what happens when you pour grenadine into a tequila sunrise—the heavier grenadine sinks to the bottom." An additional theory proposes that vegetation washing into the bay collects and decays in these stagnant pockets and is fed on by organisms that further consume oxygen and create byproducts that absorb oxygen.

During certain conditions, such as when an east wind pushes the surface oxygenated water out into the bay and the heavy bottom water moves shoreward during a rising tide, organisms that can't manage to swim above the oxygen-poor layer are driven in front of it until they are trapped at the shoreline and must cope with the water conditions. In order to survive, these oxygen-starved creatures often exhibit behavior that appears abnormal, as when crabs leave the water and eels and fish gulp air. According to Sea Grant:

The limited availability of oxygen forces many organisms to employ alternative methods of producing the metabolic energy needed to survive. However, these anaerobic (without oxygen) biochemical means of energy production only produce 1/30 the

energy that the aerobic (with oxygen) produces. Also, the anaerobic biochemical pathway produces lactic acid as a byproduct which tends to accumulate in their tissues and impair muscular activity (MASGP-87-011).

Jubilees end when the water is reoxygenated either by sunrise (producing photosynthesis in ocean plant life, of which oxygen is a byproduct), by a wind that produces sufficient wave action, or by a turning tide in which the oxygen-poor water retreats (Sea Grant). Some observers also claim that the churning that occurs when hundreds of jubileers go splashing after fish will also stir the water sufficiently to end a jubilee, or else make the water too muddy to see the quarry.

The people I interviewed were acquainted with the official explanations, although they mentioned salinity as a factor more than oxygen content. Some subscribed to the salinity theory in the belief that salt water contains less oxygen than fresh water (or vice versa, depending on the informant). A few people interviewed spoke of acquaintances who wouldn't eat jubilee fish because they believed the fish must be sick to behave so abnormally. But all interviewed insisted that the fish are not diseased, but rather, under stress. Battle's Wharf resident Dean Wendland's explanation is typical:

Some people say there's something wrong with the fish. There's nothing wrong with the fish, except they don't have any air. The clear, fresh water's pushing it out and pushing the salt water right up to the beach.

Richard Scardamalia of Daphne theorized:

I feel that the fish are probably quite accustomed to that very fresh water. And then the summer wears on, salt water moves in from the Gulf and the salinity is increased tremendously. And there's a shift. I believe there's a shift quickly. And I think that burst of salt water has a tendency to somehow, well, it affects them almost like a drug. It stuns them. They get lethargic. You even see them with their mouths out of the water. They're just there for the taking. And that's what's so interesting about it all, is that you can just about pick 'em up.

The inherent mysteriousness of jubilees has made the observation

and interpretation of the above-mentioned conditions a significant pursuit on the Eastern Shore. Occasionally local businesses will capitalize on this natural preoccupation by sponsoring jubilee prediction contests. In June 1975 the *Eastern Shore Courier* advertised a prize of \$100 to the entrant who came closest to guessing the first jubilee of the summer. Not to be outdone, Eastern Shore National Bank offered to double the prize if the money was deposited in one of its accounts.

Such contests, of course, require pure guesswork, since accurate jubilee forecasting cannot occur days in advance. True jubileers assess the weather signs each day and, under favorable conditions, will actually go search the beaches at night for jubilee activity. As Dean Wendland explained,

When it's a real quiet night and there's not a breath of air, not a ripple in the bay, and it's shallow and calm, people will start riding down to the beach about twelve or one o'clock, just to look. They used to come down here and park and leave all their lights on to guide them down to the beach. And they'd come down here [Battle's Wharf] and look, and they'd go down by Fairhope or they'd go around Point Clear or Mullet Point, or Montrose or Daphne—any of these areas where you *have* jubilees.

Patsy Miller, who lives on the waterfront in Fairhope, fishes daily and has a lifelong knowledge of the bay. She describes an intuitive sense of the "right" conditions for a jubilee:

Well, a lot of times, you know, you kind of feel like, "Well this is going to be it." Because the tides are coming in right, the winds are right, you've had some rain. And usually there's a north, northeast or east wind. Then you sort of check the water. You see indications like trash fish, your small fish, on top of the water. Eels. Eels is a real good indication. And so you just sort of keep a check to see if the flounders are coming ashore. Sometimes you sit up on the pier and just wait.

Mrs. Miller described childhood memories of waiting quietly on the pier in the dark to the sound of the gently lapping water and then gradually being able to hear the gathering commotion of fish swimming into the shallows. That was the signal to turn on the floundering light and get to work.



Marie Jadrich of Fairhope boasts of discovering 17 jubilees in one summer. She follows a very specific method based on her theory that jubilees are caused, in part, by an interaction of salt and fresh water in the bay:

I watch the weather and the moon and tides. And on a full moon or a new moon, I go down to the beach when the tide's about halfway in. I taste the water. If it's real salty, I go up the bay to where it's fresher until it gets brackish. And then I work two or three miles up and down the beach 'til I see some eels or crabs or flounders showing up. And I stay in the general area.

Her nephew, William Joyner, doesn't believe that the moon is a factor in causing jubilees. He said he reached this conclusion after keeping records for years of the phase of the moon each night a jubilee occurred, presumably as an aid in prediction. He finally gave up the exercise when he decided there was no pattern of correlation.

Once a jubilee is detected, the chain of response is swift and predictable. The process of getting the word out is amazingly structured, extending along well-defined social networks. It is customary to keep a specific list of people to notify in case of a jubilee. There is an exclusivity to the lists, which usually consist of close friends and family. Outsiders (like me) have been known to beg to be placed on them. Craig Sheldon, Jr., even spoke of the term "jubilee friend," which he defined:

A jubilee friend is a person you will tell about a jubilee. A non-jubilee person is somebody that might be an acquaintance, but you won't. Sort of like the difference between close cousins and distant cousins. Kissing relatives and non-kissing relatives.

Claiborne Walsh of Montrose described the notification process:

If you have friends, like down at Point Clear or Fairhope, or they have friends up in Montrose, you'll call each other. Everybody has a list, you know. And somebody always gets the short straw and has to go to the phone. Nobody wants to do it. Everybody wants to be down there where all the action is.

Word of a jubilee spreads quickly through the established network—with threat of serious consequences for failure to notify—and within minutes the numbers along the shore increase geometrically. As

Dean Wendland said, "Everybody loves a jubilee. Just say the word and they're in the car and on the way down. It's better than the volunteer fire department—they go faster than that." H. J. Miller described a time when he and his wife, Patsy, were gigging flounder at a jubilee and tossing them on the beach. They had not yet reported the event to anyone, "and here come this guy down there. And he seen what was going on. And he started hollering 'Jubilee!' and in 10 minutes time there was standing room only."

To experienced jubileers, the size and behavior of jubilee crowds can be a problem. I've detected a real insider/outsider dichotomy where jubilees are concerned. Insiders tend to want to limit the numbers and types of people who amass on the beach. There is an etiquette observed by veterans, and they regard outsiders who violate this with some scorn. In their view, it is the newcomers who become frenzied and greedy, gigging everything in sight and wasting the smaller fish that are too small to be eaten and should be allowed to return to the bay to mature and reproduce. Also, many of the property owners don't enjoy hordes of people parking indiscriminately and tramping through yards and gardens. Craig Sheldon, Jr., remembered watching landowners "looking askance" at the zealous mob on "their" beach.

On the other hand, Eastern Shore natives not fortunate enough to own waterfront property complain that development along the shoreline has drastically reduced public access to the waterfront in the last 10 years. (Often the new beachfront property is inhabited by newcomers.) The areas that natives can monitor for jubilees without trespassing have become much more limited. Fairhope was the only community with the foresight to protect its entire bay front as a public park.

The call to a jubilee appears irresistible to many, especially those who have never seen one and would like to. Newcomers who don't know the signs, or those who don't live close enough to keep watch, must rely on the willingness of friends to alert them to the spectacle. According to Richard Scardamalia:

People get so excited about jubilees they always ask me, "Just call us. You never call us up when there's a jubilee." And I tell them, "Look, I don't want to call you because you live so far away, by the time you get here it'll be over anyhow." Of course you can call anybody up anytime you want and get 'em to show up for a jubilee.

And as long as you've got pretty good evidence that the jubilee was happening, they won't get too mad. But if there's no evidence at all and they know you just put 'em on, they can get a little bit angry with you.

As one might expect, people's willingness to spring out of bed in the middle of the night to catch a jubilee has been exploited by pranksters. Particularly vulnerable as victims are those whom Scardamalia described, people who have yearned to see a jubilee, but, as outsiders, must depend on insiders to relay information. This gives insiders a degree of power. William Joyner and his boyhood friends found it particularly delightful to trick people from Mobile by notifying a local radio that a jubilee was in progress when the weather conditions were absolutely wrong and insiders would know better:

We used to call the radio station, and call them and say there's a jubilee happening in Fairhope. And then we'd go down to the beach and just watch all the people from Mobile come over. [laughs] If you ever hear there's a jubilee going on the radio, don't even bother going because it's a crank.

More typically, bogus jubilees are created as harmless local pranks, rather than as schemes to get people to drive in from miles away under false pretenses. Marie Jadrich described a common occurrence:

They'll call and they say "jubilee" or they drive through town and blow the horn and yell "jubilee." And they love to see everybody get up and the lights go on and people drive down and look and there's NOTHING. That's happened quite a bit. And I'm not sure it's always kids either.

Kids are the most likely suspects, however. Adults interviewed often referred to the pranks as something they did as teenagers. As Craig Sheldon, Jr., explained, jubilees were a particularly enjoyable social occasion for teenagers, since it was a time when the regular rules of conduct were suspended. During a jubilee teenagers could be out on the beach all night with their friends. He recalled flirtatious moments such as chasing girls while brandishing an eel, threatening to stuff the wriggly creature down their shirts.

Apparently, by at least one account, if a jubilee meant license to be

out all night with friends, it was worthwhile to create a few extra jubilees for that purpose. "If you wanted to get a girl out in the middle of the night, you'd just go by her house or call her on the phone and tell her dad there was a jubilee going on. And lots of times you'd get 'em out that way," recalled Richard Scardamalia.

Jubilee pranks have even made their way into literature. Alabama author Mark Childress set his novel *V for Victor* on Mobile Bay, circa 1942. In a pivotal scene, a character named Butch helps his buddies break out of jail by creating a false jubilee as a diversion. Once the jailbreak is successful, Butch boasts:

I been in that jail a few times myself. I knew that old cop ain't got but about half sense. I thought now, what's one thing a fat old bastard can't resist. Food. So I went down on one of them piers and set up yelling jubilee, and before you know it the whole place was runnin wild. Like a bunch of damn ants. [1989:221]

All obstacles and false reports aside, the usual procedure during a jubilee is to race down to the beach with the proper equipment. A floundering light, gig, scoop net, and a washtub or bucket are standard, although those caught unprepared have been known to gig flounders with pocket knives, broken-off car antennas (Borom 1989), or even grandfather's Confederate sword (Gallalee 1983) in order to get in on the action. Improvisation is common. One story tells of a father's car battery "borrowed" to power a makeshift lantern and then just as surreptitiously replaced. No one confessed to any knowledge of why the car wouldn't run in the morning (Walsh).

Jubileers typically move through the shallow water shining the light and gigging flounder or scooping crab and shrimp. The washtub holds the catch. Often a jubileer will tie the washtub to his or her waist with a piece of rope and allow it to float behind.

Attire at these outings markedly reflects their impromptu nature. Observers have reported seeing people out in the water in everything from formal evening wear to a nun's habit (Gallalee 1983). Several stories describe women in soggy, revealing nightgowns who were so intent on their harvest that they were oblivious to the sunrise.

Regardless of the choice of garments, nearly everyone recommends wearing shoes. Primarily serving as protection against stingrays and crabs, shoes also reduce the danger of having one's foot speared in all the

excitement. First-timers also quickly learn the “jubilee shuffle,” a way of walking that prevents one from stepping on the sea life.

Jubilees often bring together people who may not have seen each other in a while. In the words of Craig Sheldon, Jr., “It was a time of great social interaction. Lots of times the jubilee would go away. The fish would withdraw into the water. And people would continue to talk.” Marie Jadrich described the afterglow this way:

People stand around and talk. Or then they run by their house and have coffee. Or they meet uptown at the coffee shop and talk about what we did last night. How many flounder you got and what are you going to do with them. “How many crabs did you get?” Or, “I’ve got a bunch—if you want ‘em, come get ‘em.” It’s just fun.

This description hints at the biggest part of the aftermath of a jubilee—dealing with all the fish. Many veteran participants don’t overdo the harvesting, because they know from experience that the more fish gathered, the more fish there are to be cleaned and in some way disposed of. After the work of a jubilee (and people emphasize that it *is* work, complaining of the soreness that results from hours of giggering, bending and scooping) comes the work of cleaning the fish. Some may delay the task for a few hours by placing the catch in tubs (including bathtubs) of ice, but procrastination brings the risk of a wasted harvest.

Sometimes the excess seafood is sold to local fish markets. More often, surplus fish are distributed informally among friends and family. Craig Sheldon remembers, as a boy, pedaling back and forth on his bicycle delivering flounder and crabs to his mother’s friends. Those lucky enough to experience the bounty firsthand pass it along to those less fortunate, and then those friends will probably return the favor when they have an abundance. Through this system of reciprocity jubilees create an exchange that distributes the wealth and cements social bonds. Surplus fish are also handy as bribes when the all-nighter disrupts one’s routine in the workplace the morning after. Claiborne Walsh explained:

I have been known to call in late. I have been known to call in and say, “Hey, if you’ll forgive me for coming in late, I will bring you all the flounder you can stand.” [*laughs*] And amazingly enough,

it's always worked! People understand around here. I mean, it's like Mardi Gras. It's part of the woodwork. There are things people understand and jubilees are one of them.

Of course, after cleaning the fish, many people choose to store them at home in chest freezers. William Joyner mentioned that when the Eastern Shore lost electric power as a result of Hurricane Frederick in 1979, hundreds of flounder stacked "like record albums" in his freezer spoiled as a result.

Another way of managing the oversupply of seafood is to cook it in large quantities. The generous amount and variety of free seafood makes it possible to prepare certain regional recipes for entertaining. Marie Jadrich claims you need a jubilee to make a good seafood gumbo. Meme's restaurant of Bon Secour published a cookbook in 1965 that described jubilees and included jubilee recipes, "which use two or even three kinds of seafood. The catch in a jubilee is so lavish that people can be extravagant for once, and all good bayshore cooks have what they call their jubilee recipes. Some of these are: Stuffed Flounder, Fish Casserole, Jubilee Shrimp, and Shrimp and Crabmeat Cocktail" (120-121).

The abundance of seafood and the ease in obtaining it often give stories about jubilees a mythic dimension. Claiborne Walsh's account of one that occurred in front of her house is a good example:

We were out on the wharf entertaining. It was around the Fourth of July. And I happened to look down and notice that there were, like, 12 or 13 crabs on the piling. And I said something. And it was really funny because there was a party going on the next pier. And one of the people over there, we used to call her "crab crazy," she loves crabs. She overheard me saying that. Well, by the time we got up to the house to check out the equipment and back down to the beach, she had gone up to the house, grabbed her net and come down and scooped every crab off the piling. And it just got bigger as that night went along. And it went on all night. We had some friends that got, like, 600 flounder. We had some friends that got 300 flounder. And it just got to be a big party atmosphere. So at, like, 5:30 or six o'clock in the morning, when it's first light, I had gone inside and made omelettes and coffee and was bringing everything out on a tray. And it was really funny because I still had on these earrings and this necklace and a bikini. So it was really

strange looking. And I'm, like, entertaining the troops on the front lawn. It was fun, it was a lot of fun.

Walsh's story contains many of the classic jubilee narrative elements: a time frame, location, the discovery and description of jubilee sea life, a humorous example of greediness, strange attire, indication of the social nature of the event, and a fish "body count." Less complex accounts usually focus on the quantitative aspects, as in statements such as, "One time at a jubilee in Fairhope, I gighed 123 flounder."

Since jubilees themselves are so elusive and the tales associated with them often fantastic, natives have a difficult time providing proof of the phenomenon to skeptical outsiders. Marie Jadrich explained the credibility problem:

They think you're telling a tall tale. And then they really want to see one to prove you wrong, if there is such a thing. Then when they do see one they're surprised. But they don't believe you. People won't. Well it *does* sound ridiculous, doesn't it? "And the fish just come up to the edge of the beach, you can pick 'em up. And the crabs are on the logs and, you know, shrimp here." It *does* sound like an untruth.

Except for their veracity, jubilee stories are identical in many respects to the customary "lies" and tall tales concerning bountiful fishing or hunting expeditions. In particular, the more vivid examples build credibility by means of mundane detail before broaching the seemingly unnatural and exaggerated aspects of the event. Because outsiders also recognize themselves as likely targets of such tales, they remain skeptical and determined not to be taken in. The headline of an article Ed Lee wrote for the *Mobile Register* in 1958 emphasized this point: "Tales of Jubilee Greeted by Winks from Outsiders."

Fortunately for frustrated jubileers, verification in the form of photos and news stories turn up frequently in the local papers. But what people apparently yearn for is national coverage (befitting the uniqueness of the event) to validate what they've been claiming for years. Several tales have circulated about how a major news organization was lured to the Eastern Shore for the big story, only to leave empty-handed and unconvinced. In other words, this cycle bemoans "the big-time journalists who got away."

The following item appeared in a special Jubilee section of the *Eastern Shore Courier* in June 1975:

Rumar [sic] has it that a few years ago, Charles Karault's [sic] "On the Road," a CBS feature spotlight of the most unusual events in America, heard of Daphne and this funny business when fish take to the beaches.

After some research the outfit came.

Unfortunately, Jubilees are as finicky as hurricanes, but more frequent. The Karault [sic] people sat in Daphne, waiting for several weeks for a Jubilee—but in vain.

They finally just left.

They probably decided that Jubilees occur only after wild parties, and that the only witnesses are those who can't hold their cranberry juice (p. 8).

Richard Scardamalia, a professional photographer, tells a similar story:

*National Geographic* came down and they stayed at the Grand Hotel for two weeks. They came down here with their photographic staff and editorial staff and they waited and waited and waited. Of course they had to pack up, and they left. And the night that they boarded the plane was the biggest jubilee of the year.

A longtime resident of Battle's Wharf, Dean Wendland told what she'd heard: "*Time* magazine was down here for many, many years and they never saw one."

Another variety of jubilee lore is the belief that jubilees occur on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay and "one other place in the world." Although there is no consensus as to where this other place is, it is always located far from Alabama. My informants named Japan, India, the Philippines, South Africa, China and Australia. One patron of Mancini's Antique Club (a local bar) ventured that if you drove a rod through a model of the earth, at the opposite point on the globe at the same latitude as Daphne, Alabama, you would find the other spot where jubilees happen. William Joyner mentioned another interesting parallel: "I've always heard there was another place. There was only two places they had 'em. One was here on the Eastern Shore and the other place they had them there was a bay there. And it was on the eastern shore of that bay, too."



The belief that jubilees occur one other place in the world probably has several functions. First of all, in an odd way it adds credibility to the tale without diluting the near uniqueness of the event. If one were to claim that it happens *only* here, as some people do, then if someone produced another example the claimant might appear ignorant or at least a little provincial. In addition to being almost impossible to prove or disprove, the assertion that an analogous event occurs in a distant land contributes to the exoticism of the local version. The fact that some people cite India and others Japan doesn't really matter to most, because distance and unfamiliarity render most countries "over there" somewhat interchangeable anyway. Of course, there really may be instances of jubilee-type phenomena in, say, Japan or Australia, that have been reported and then gotten garbled in oral transmission. To my knowledge, no one has yet presented written or photographic evidence to reinforce the claim, however.

The remoteness of the legendary second location of jubilees also reinforces the absence of nearby competition for such a distinguishing aspect of coastal life. Jack Gallalee threatened this distinction when he wrote of two jubilee-like incidents on the Gulf Coast that did not occur in Mobile Bay. One allegedly happened September 13, 1960, in Appalachicola, Florida. Schoolchildren waiting for their bus noticed flounders near the beach and were able to catch them with their hands. The other event reportedly occurred in 1876 during a camp meeting at the Methodist Shore Campground in Biloxi, Mississippi. Gallalee quoted the president's report in the Minute Book of the Trustees:

A most remarkable circumstance, worthy of note as a matter of recorded history, is the visit to the Camp Ground of a multitude of fishes, large and small, of various kinds and qualities, on the morning and forenoon of the day on which the camp meeting opened. Hundreds of thousands of fishes filled the waters in front of the encampment, so gentle and tame as to be caught with the naked hand and thrown upon the shores, and approaching even to the water's edge so that many were caught by persons standing on the shore. Large quantities of the finest fish the waters could afford were caught for the use of the people encamped, and after all were supplied to their highest satisfaction, several loads were hauled away to prevent decay upon the shore. If not a miracle wrought to

supply the wants of the people congregated, it was at least a wonderful phenomenon, the like of which was never known to happen in these quarters before.

I have not run across these accounts in oral tradition. Perhaps these were one-time occurrences, which would mean that the locations don't qualify as true jubilee spots. Perhaps, for reasons stated above, sharing a phenomenon with an exotic location is a more compelling concept than sharing it with a nearby coastal town.

People who live on the Eastern Shore share and cultivate the belief that the remarkable jubilees make their communities extraordinary. According to Fairhope resident John Sledge, the jubilee phenomenon has begun attracting "New Age" celebrants to Fairhope (which was founded a century ago as a Utopian community) because it is considered a "power spot," one particularly blessed by Nature.

However, these newcomers are not alone in appreciating the mystical qualities of a jubilee. Even veterans of jubilees marvel at the sheer spectacle and surreal quality of it all and speak with awe of the first time they witnessed the masses of fish congregating in the darkness. Richard Scardamalia remarked:

I think that kids particularly have a special appreciation for the jubilee, because it is so mysterious and marvelous and almost secretive. And it verges on being like fairy tales. Of course, no matter how old you get, if you have any kind of enjoyment of the water and the sea life, you know, you're going to get a thrill out of seeing something like this.

Despite and probably because of their elusiveness and spectacular attributes, jubilees continue to be a source of pride and identity for the communities on the Eastern Shore, setting them apart from any other. As Claiborne Walsh explained, "the name [jubilee] would be synonymous with being on *this* side of the bay. That's why you have things like Jubilee Carwash and Jubilee Music. Because it *is* unique. It does happen *only* here."

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## A Quilter's Diary: The Making of the Civil Righters Quilt

*Nora McKeown Ezell*

414 hours & 30 minutes—to piece  
121 hours & 55 minutes—to quilt  
14 hours & 30 minutes—to hem & finish  
\$107.54—worth of materials  
580 hours & 55 minutes—total hours to complete

This done—June 12th, 1989

I started this quilt Monday January 23rd, 1989. Beautiful day, a little cold, me and my *ulcers* having a bad time. Determine to get started I do not find it easy to work on this quilt, somehow the *burt* is still there.

Name of the quilt—"A Tribute to The Civil Righters of Alabama" (during the years 1954 to 1985). Trying to work, no *spirit*, which makes it hard to do. I'm really concerned about my girls. One sick, the other with child problems. Been having lots of dreams about my husband and daughter (both dead). I'm deeply religious but not a fanatic. I can (always) feel when something is not quite well with them—as I love my grandchildren very much.

Well a rainy Sunday and I'm kind of down in the dumps. Funny dream at two this morning. Read a portion of the scriptures but fail to get an understanding. Have to pray another way I guess.

*January 21st:* Started on the 16th Street Baptist Church block. Hope I can concentrate. Trying to give my granddaughter a hand with her

*(Excerpted by permission from My Quilts and Me: Diary of An African American Artist by Nora McKeown Ezell, forthcoming from Black Belt Press, Montgomery.)*

baby son. Put him in school at Eatmon 2-8-89. He is almost as nervous as I am. Hope I can help him, God's plans must be carried out. I wonder if I am always destined to help somebody? God please help me to do the best I can!

*February 5th:* Started the Woodlawn School (such a *sad day*—on this day a few years ago—on my way home from work, I saw the poor people especially the children being drenched with water hoses, I thought, “My God where art thou?”). When I started on this block I remembered that. After a visit to my doctor, I felt a little better, no recurrence of my old ailment. That was good news.

*February 8th:* I started the Brown Chapel block. I'm up bright and early—feeling not too good. Got a good mind to do the jail cell block, along with Bull Connor. Trying hard to get started—very nervous today. Worked on the quilt awhile, quilted on another quilt I have in frame. Ended up going to bed. Wondering again why I can't do what I want to do without outside *interference*. To do all in my mind and carry out God's plan—I like King's “*can't afford to wait*,” I just have to keep going—not feeling good, but very excited about Brown Chapel block. Monday I worked 3 hours and 10 minutes on the stain glass window. So do you think I could teach someone else to have this kind of patience? I never plan on making a pattern, I do whatever comes off the top of my head. (Smile) So you don't believe it? “I'm sorry.” Could I, or would I do this again? Yes, but not for the same money!

*February 15th:* Still not feeling very good. Don't seem to be able to shake this cold, aches and pain, trying to work anyway. Finally finish Brown Chapel Church. Almost finish the coordinator wallhanging. Got back to the 16th Street Church yesterday very cold, hand and arm almost too painful to work. Skipping about on lots of things. Hope to do something worthwhile today. The weather is about to get me, still I'm pushing on.

*February 20th:* Pretty good ideas on the 16th Street Church! Finished with a rush! Decided on Bethel which is really a push. Besides sinus, my mouth and jawtooth has been where I couldn't eat again. Oh! I'm so hungry! (smile)

*February 23rd:* Well today, I'm still suffering along don't feel like doing nothing just pushing. This church is something else—I like my idea, no pattern, nothing, just as it comes; I do it—crazy or creative, you be the judge.

*February 27th:* I have been very nervous for several weeks, just going through the motion, no energy. So many problems—Gosh! Where is the end? Still want to live somewhere else.

*March 4th:* Today is Saturday, about one-third done on quilt. Still very nervous and tense, trying to work, doing a very poor job, not at all satisfied with some things I have done trying to do many things at the same time. Grandchildren still getting on my crazy mind.

*March 6th:* Today I'm very tired, so you don't have a garden? I do flowers and vegetables. Kind of nervous but getting the Gaston block started. Coming pretty good.

*March 25th:* Finished Gaston block today! Just three more blocks to go. One large Woodlawn school, two small, very hot so quick! Hope to finish by the end of May. Hope it goes well, some things I like, some I don't. Can't seem to do tedious things as well as I like.

*April 10th:* Ann and the group didn't come yet. Don't know what happened. They called and said they were coming to make pictures and all. Nearing the end of this job. Not bad but not as good as I would like. Have house cleaning on my mind. Plan to finish all projects by June 15th.

*April 25th:* Vacation? I have saved money but not sure where I will go or *if I will go* any place.

*May 1st:* Not going to Massachusetts, did not like the write-up, think it could have been better. I gave a long interview, hope they do better with this project. Finished Woodlawn school block. Lost most of my ideas worrying about family problems. Said over and over that I would not, but I can. School will soon be out and *I will* be through with that. Don't know about David, just want to throw him from me! I want to do my thing (which is odd and pretty quilts) without so much *interference*.

*May 4th:* Starting the last block "a pray vigil" with King, Abernathy and Shuttlesworth. Beginning the last strip. Hope to finish this real soon.

*May 7th:* A few miserable days ago I finished the quilt!

*May 8th:* Put in frame, hope to finish by June 15th. Really feeling bad, legs and feet hurt so bad. Sinus continue to be very worrisome. So much rain and wet weather. Lately I don't seem to be able to concentrate. Went to church Sunday and on a plain flat road drove my car off into a ditch, nobody coming or going near me. It really shook me up, don't even remember how it happened.

*May 15th:* Today it's raining again, will quilt some later. Going to bed now, very nervous. Worked pretty good on quilting today, not much, but good work. Praying for the end (smile). I have worked so hard, been sick so much, just pushing and praying. Well I see the end, and I am glad.

*May 20th:* Quilting on civil rights quilt. Finished the pattern for "Broken Star" for a class I hope to start at West Alabama College.

*May 21st:* Not one person showed up at the college, so I will do this Broken Star at home. There is no way to keep a person that is as determined as I am "down."

*May 23rd:* Not doing the best with my work but pleased with my quilting. See so many things I missed, some will have to do. Didn't realize I missed so much, but when you work from the top of your head, I guess you will do that.

But after all "*a job is a job*" thank God for that.

*May 27th:* Well working hard to finish. Quilting every minute I can. Legs and feet stiff, so much sitting I guess, but I still don't understand. Lady called last night from California Mrs. C. Gardner wants lots of quilt tops straighten out. Some I know, most I don't. As I said earlier, can't seem to concentrate. Will try to do them, I'm sure she will pay well, she seems to be so honest. She said like others "I wish you would come out here." Plenty of money to go, but no time. Can't find time to go to Massachusetts either. I got a lot of *brochures* and write ups. Much better this time around. My good friend and quilt buyer Dr. Robert Cargo went, he told me the quilts really *stole* the show. So much for that. Would love to go someplace, and relax, wish my church had a retreat.

Planning a trip to Birmingham on the 17th, trying to finish so I can take it with me. Need tires for my car, also a tuneup. I have put so many miles on it this year. Had to finish the "Ohio Star Quilt," that's another project that didn't work out. I don't seem to be able to get help, I think they find my style too complicated. So I think you have to be able to do something different. Got to I think "be able to do your own thing."

*June 1st:* Today I crossed another milestone in my working career. This has been both a joy and a hurt. I worked hard to make this program a success. I tried to do things would appeal to everybody, but somehow it didn't go over. Almost everybody like the ideas or things I made but nobody wanted to try them. Very disappointing. I planned to try ten projects, I made quilts, rugs, pillows, towel holders, tissue holders, bill



holders, coverlets, soap holders, embroidered and hemstitched pillowcases, Christmas tablecloths, hemstitched, tatted and lace edged handkerchiefs, covered umbrellas, gowns, slippers and panties, Mexican embroidered aprons, and pillows, oystershell ashtrays and soap dishes—pantset made from upholstery scraps, crochet edged washcloths on holder—knitting socks and afghans. It is good for me to believe that so many people like *my work*, but so few wanted to actual work with me. Anything anybody asked me about I tried to set up a project. I spent money buying materials for projects but found that no one would show. (In Greene County)

This has been both a joy and a hurt. A joy to make so many people happy to see this world current events brought to life in a quilt. I try very hard to live up to the name—“an artist with *needle* and *thread*.” (smile) A hurt because it brings back so many unpleasant memories. I have enjoyed working indirectly with others, it wasn't too hard to do with so much help.

*June 15th:* Finished quilting and hemming this quilt on the 9th. Like most of it but some, I wish I could have done better. This credit I would like to give to my mother and father. They were just the opposite. My mother an old school teacher, who taught her children that it was as easy to make an “A” as a “B.” My father with little or no schooling taught us to use our hands and mind. My oldest sister Edna, taught me beauty in work.

My second oldest sister, Etoil, taught me how to do domestic.

My third sister, Birdnell, taught me to stand on my own feet.

The fourth sister is me.

My fifth sister, Bernice, taught me how to read and understand what I read.

My sixth sister, Bessie, taught me independence.

My only brother, the seventh child, Cecil, taught me to live whatever I did.

My eighth sister, Waltzena, taught me courage.

My ninth sister, Christine, taught me to live wherever I stayed.

And last but not least, Jettie the baby, taught me possession and cleanliness.

So I gained something from each of them.

*June 21st:* Well my mind is on the “Christmas Story Quilt.” So I guess I better get going.

Oh Lord! These quilt tops came today from California—oh no! A Dahlia, the hardest top I know, but with a little bit of everybody, I'll do it.

Pretty soon I'll be another year—June 24th.

Do you like this quilt?

Thanks—

Nora McKeown Ezell

June 22nd, 1989.



FIGURE 9.

*"A Tribute to Civil Righters of Alabama," a picture quilt by Nora Ezell, hangs in the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. (Photo: Joey Brackner.)*

## Popsicle Man, Popsicle Union

*Archie Green*

**P**rovocative words spin dramatic etymologies. After a speaker voices a novel term, sound and setting demand explication. Listeners ask: What does it mean? Who coined it? How can we add your new word to our repertoires? Scholars follow speakers with additional queries: When and where did the neologism originate? How long has it lived in tradition?

Among the many pejorative labels used by trade unionists to distinguish themselves from laggards or naysayers, we find *popsicle*, *popsicle union*, *popsicle deacon*, and *popsicle man*. Such intertwined locutions reveal how some workers took pleasure in wordplay as they fell back on facile explanations to cloak sexual innuendo. Here, I trace the word *popsicle* from culinary treat to labor epithet.

The first commercial incarnation of the familiar frozen fruit juice on a stick was the Hokey-Pokey, which appeared in 1872. Hucksters at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair sold a cold, chocolate-coated confection known as the Cannonball. In 1922, this item found a national market as the patented Eskimo Pie, chocolate-dipped ice cream in a metallic paper wrapper.

Impressed by the Eskimo Pie's appeal, Frank W. Epperson (1894–1983) of San Francisco recalled an experiment he had conducted as a boy back in 1905. The 11-year-old Epperson used a small stick to mix soda-water powders in a tapered glass. Leaving the lemonade-like concoction on the back porch overnight, he found it frozen the next morning. When the glass warmed in his hand, the frozen-soda-on-a-stick came free. Nearly 20 years later, the burgeoning popularity of portable iced treats inspired him to bring his creation before the public at a firemen's ball in Alameda, California.

Initially, Epperson named it the Epsicle, combining his surname with *icicle*. Faced with Depression losses, 1929–30, he sold his invention to the Joe Lowe Corporation (re-named Popsicle Industries). No one seems to know precisely when Epperson introduced the name Popsicle. He had applied for an Epsicle patent on May 23, 1923; his patent dates to August 19, 1924 (number 1505592). Looking back at the word shift from Epsicle to Popsicle, he offered two associations for the latter coinage: To ballyhoo (publicize) the new treat in the mid-1920s, he emphasized its closeness to *soda pop/lollipop*. Alternatively, he noted having heard a “pop” when he pulled the frozen shape from its glass mold. Clearly, Epperson wore dual hats as imaginative inventor and wordsmith in his ability to freeze a pop sound.

The ice-mix-on-a-stick caught on widely in America, giving rise to metaphoric usages. Three citations suffice to reveal erotic connections: A *Time* report memorialized Vladimir Nabokov—“the delectable nymphet Lolita has a cruel, popsicle heart” (Sheppard). A *Village Voice* correspondent described an appearance on the NBC “Gong Show”—“two giggling, freckled teenage girls licking orange Popsicles as one imagines Linda Lovelace might” (Shea). A *Newsweek* critic reviewed Joe Orton’s “Entertaining Mr. Sloane”—the film opens “on a funeral, then cuts quickly to Beryl Reed as she enjoys the internment by making oral love to a popsicle” (Zimmerman).

In the mid-1930s, Horace Cayton and George Mitchell undertook a major study, “Black Workers and the New Unions,” prompted by concern for the continued hostility to Negroes as America struggled out of the Great Depression’s abyss. The researchers interviewed workers buoyed by favorable New Deal legislation and energized by John L. Lewis’s committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). In Birmingham, Alabama, Mitchell talked to coal and iron-ore miners, as well as to smelter and steel-mill workers employed by the Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company (TCI), a subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation.

Marjorie White sums up Birmingham’s industrial history; Brenda McCallum, the expressive culture of its working people; Marlene Ricard, corporate efforts in welfare capitalism and industrial social work. Drawing upon their respective studies, I set labor’s *popsicle* and its cognates in several frames: President Franklin Roosevelt’s inauguration, in 1933, lifted workers’ spirits. Alabama blacks in mine and mill, long repressed,

saw emerging unions as liberating agencies. White workers, who faced a tide of African American expectation, were divided in their strategies—some condemned race hatred, others held fast to terror's voice.

With the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933, "Blue Eagle" unions initiated Alabama drives—the United Mines Workers of America in coal; the International Union of Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers in red iron ore. TCI, familiar with paternalistic company unions and employee-representation plans, formed a supine Brotherhood of Captive Miners throughout the Birmingham district. UMWA and IUMMSW partisans countered with Labor Board legal briefs, vigor, cunning, and invective. Mitchell noted:

The story is currently told [1934] in the district that when the Brotherhood organization was launched, mine officials who were present gave out as refreshments the popular popsicle, from which event, possibly mythical, the name 'popsicle union' is derived (330).

George Mitchell, trained in economics, heard a new tag describing a company union while it was fresh in speech. Perhaps he had noted a speaker's name and work site in field notes. The term might have reached print in 1933–34 in an ephemeral leaflet or proclamation. Despite the omission of a precise citation, Mitchell scored heavily with his etymology for *popsicle union* and its suggestion that the natal event might have been apocryphal.

In February 1940, folksong collector George Korson garnered a rich harvest at the United Mine Workers' "golden anniversary convention" at Columbus, Ohio. Among many fine performers, delegate Charles Langford and the Marvel (Alabama) Quartet sang "Union Boys Are We." Korson recorded the song and transcribed its full text in *Coal Dust on the Fiddle* (307). I cite but one stanza to illustrate popsicle usage:

Progressives in de Valley go bow-wow-wow,  
 Scabs in de pen go wee-wee-wee,  
 An' snitchers in de barn go hee-haw-hee,  
 Popsicles on de fence go cock-cockle-do-do-do.

In the 1980s, Brenda McCallum undertook an extensive study of folk expression among Birmingham's black workers. She traced the derivation of "Union Boys Are We" from "Birmingham Boys," a 1926 gospel

quartet hit recorded on 78-rpm disc by the Birmingham Jubilee Singers (Columbia 14154-D). The older song celebrates migration from country to city and the promise of urban life. The key lines read:

I was tired of livin' in the country,  
 So I moved my wife to town,  
 And there I bought a cottage,  
 And then I settled down.  
 Where the dogs in the valley they go bow-wow-wow,  
 And the pigs in the pen go wee-wee-wee,  
 And the cat joins in with a meow,  
 And the rooster on the fence goes cock-cock-a-doodle-do-do.

The 1926 text revealed uncertainty as to whether dogs, pigs, cats, and roosters saluted a family still in the country or relocated in the city. McCallum noted that when composer Langford transformed "Birmingham Boys" into "Union Boys," he touched new concerns of organized urban blue-collar workers. Thus, he converted barnyard animals into labor's enemies by invoking four linked epithets: *progressives* (TCI corporate social reformers); *scabs* (company strikebreakers); *snitchers* (company-planted and paid informers); *popsicles* (company-sponsored bogus unions).

In *Coal Dust on the Fiddle*, Korson expanded Mitchell's explanation for BCM dupes by writing that *popsicle man* denoted a worker attending coal company union meetings, where "entertainments were staged and ice cream, cake, and popsicles were served" (326). We can believe that TCI officials supplied confections, but documentation of events during which unionists verbally extended *popsicle* to describe a contemptible wretch, a creature so lacking in manhood as to bend to company bosses, has not appeared.

In elaboration, Korson recalled a ballad couplet learned from an elderly Pennsylvania miner. This native of Durham (England) reported that when imported Cornishmen broke a big strike in the 1880s, the unionists sang:

Hush, hush, hush, here comes the candy men  
 To try to break our union and turn us out again.

We need not establish a direct link between British blackleg candy men and Alabama popsicle men enticed to Brotherhood of Captive Miners meetings in 1933–34. However, *candy man* in some blues songs, such as Mississippi John Hurt’s “Candy Man,” signified sexual attraction.

In 1979, Nell Irvin Painter edited Hosea Hudson’s memoir of his life as an iron molder and black communist. Hudson added *popsicle deacon* to labor’s lexicon by detailing church sermons in Birmingham district’s company towns attacking John L. Lewis and Philip Murray for their 1936 CIO drive in steel. Hudson named Reverend Williams, pastor of Fairfield’s First Baptist Church, as a “popsicle deacon” who railed against “Moscow gold” labor agitators (252–53).

Henry Mayfield, in 1964, complemented previous usages of *popsicle union* by noting that “when they started the organizing, they told the Birmingham families they would be served popsicles and watermelons” (52). Seemingly, no one ever called a company unionist a “watermelon man.” In 1972, several civil-rights activists charged the American Cast Iron Pipe Company (Bessemer, Alabama) with discrimination against black workers. Carl Braden, reporting on the federal case, quoted Edward Gardner’s comment on the pipe company’s “popsicle union”: It “cools you off but doesn’t give you any nourishment.”

Asbury Howard, an iron-ore miner at Muscoda, joined Mine-Mill during its initial efforts in Alabama in 1933. Active in the ranks, he rose in office, serving as a representative for the United Steelworkers of America after it absorbed the IUMMSW.

Upon retirement in 1972, he recalled early days and the fight to displace company unions. In a *Steel Labor* feature story by Bill Edwards, Howard observed that metal miners had branded the company union “popsicle” because “those who joined it had ‘popped.’” Who can decode Howard’s “popped”? Does it refer to weaklings who popped off (all mouth and no action), or to cowards who pooped out in challenging times?

In citations above, speakers or writers used *popsicle* to distinguish company-dominated from independent unions, suggesting pure economic conflict. However, Alabama unionists did not have the luxury to move solely upon the market’s chessboard. Each job action played out in the maelstrom of race. Many black workers saw unionism as a vehicle for leaving the shadows of slavery; others, as a tool of subversion. White workers shared similar tensions. Some hailed unions as providing relief

from feudal poverty; others derided them for destroying Southern mores. In 1963, Birmingham's struggle moved laterally from mine pit and mill hearth to civic park, with "Bull" Connor's police dogs and firehoses replacing industrial plant-gate guards' guns and clubs.

Throughout this century, Birmingham's stark polarities surface politically in acts by the Ku Klux Klan, the Communist Party, and many groups in between. The KKK, flaunting antebellum banners and the rhetoric of purity, exploited white fear of race mingling; the party hailed a soviet-inspired utopia in which class replaced race as life's marker. Within such rival visions of human identity, poor blacks and iconoclastic whites devised creative forms of dealing with corporate power. Historian Robin Kelley has limned how workers at the bottom of the industrial ladder deployed folk customs by masking speech, by signifying, and by treating vernacular song and story as shield and sword.

TCI popsicle squads tried to trick workers with icy treats and sweet talk. Miners and mill hands of both races, while turning the word *popsicle* into a badge of subservience, also engaged in preaching the doctrine of labor solidarity, of black-white unity in common cause. Sadly, not all of Birmingham's workers could accept trade unionism's egalitarian role.

Historian Horace Huntley, in a somber case study of the death of Mine-Mill in Alabama, noted a 1949 editorial in *Iron Ore Miner* that touched upon the ugly confluence of race hatred and red-baiting in its reference to white dissidents breaking away from the "nigger union" (IUMMSW). Behind this Cold War fight sustained by white terror lay bitter differences on the place of reds in unions and the deep allegiance of partisans to their respective ideological platforms.

Ultimately, the anti-IUMMSW "popsicle gang" obtained a rival charter from the United Steelworkers of America, shifting the constant battle for sane race relations from one union center to another. Huntley reproduced a 1949 campaign poster used by Mine-Mill in its intra-CIO dispute with the Steelworkers; one printed line proclaimed "The Popsicles Are Desperate" (11). In this setting of jurisdictional battle between brother unionists, *popsicle* took on an ironic tone in that both sets of rivals had previously hurled it at company men.

Curious about folk speech and symbols, Horace Huntley, after extensive interviews with iron-ore mine veterans, circled back to George Mitchell's colloquial find in 1934. Both the historian and the economist glossed *popsicle* with explanations by metal miners—TCI had offered



refreshments at early company meetings.

No one can doubt that captive-union officers in the mid-1930s plied prospective members with food and drink. Nevertheless, I have long felt that *popsicle man* connoted more than a humorous comment on company generosity. Not until March 10, 1973, was I able to confirm my belief. In Birmingham to trace the story of a rare 78-rpm disc, "The Spirit of Phil Murray"/"Satisfied," I visited Henry Holsten, George Bester, Perry "Tiger" Thompson, A. C. Burttram, and Bill Edwards. (Seroff and McCallum reissued the Tiger-label "Spirit of Phil Murray" on separate LP albums. Edwards covered Southern union news for *Steel Labor* in Pittsburgh.)

"Acey" Burttram began work in 1922 as a coal-mine spragger; too young to go underground, he spragged (stopped) loaded cars at the tipple—thrusting a short steel bar into wheel spokes. In 1929, he rose to crane operator at the Fairfield sheet mill. Bester, who began work in 1922 as a foundry laborer at United States Pipe, also advanced to crane operator. He sang constantly in his Missionary Baptist church, pipe company quartet, and the Sterling Jubilee Singers and joined in recording "Spirit..." and "Satisfied" in 1952.

Bester and Burttram, one black, the other white, resisted popsicle unionism in 1933. The former remained active in Steelworkers Local 2140; the latter, in Local 1131 and subsequently as a district staff representative. Each laughed when I inquired about the put-down *popsicle*; they suggested that *popsicle man* had a vulgar meaning similar to that of *company suck*.

In folkloric exploration (1972, 1993) I have trod lightly in obscenity's den. Serving in the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Navy, as well as toiling on the waterfront and in "uptown" construction, I heard enough bawdy talk to last three lifetimes. Coarse speech came with the territory—inclement weather, casual work, time and money deadlines, danger.

Turning from the shipwright and carpenter's trade to the academy, I felt no special need to explicate sexual humor, yet *popsicle man* seemed to cast light on word growth at the boundary between job site and union hall, as well as between parlor and alley speech. To understand occupational culture in all its dimensions, we delve into laborlore as it flows across the lines of formal affiliation, institutional membership, and semantic domain.

I reiterate that company unions routinely gave out popsicles, ice cream, soda pop, candy, cookies, cake, watermelons, and untold other culinary delights and stimulating beverages. Did any laborite call a laggard a Good Humor man, Eskimo Pie man, or Dr. Pepper man? The word *popsicle* resonated on the battlefield for workers' loyalties in that it conjured a cameo of a scab, fink, or scissorbill "sucking a big pink one." In short, of all the company goodies, popsicles carried a web of associations embedded in prior notions of male sexuality.

In our CCC camp on the Klamath River, enrollees still in their teens salted talk with *brownnose*, *suckass*, *dicklicker*, *cunteater*, *cocksucker*. Surely Alabama miners and mill hands knew such pejorative terms carrying undertones of deviance. We need draw no diagram of a company suck relishing a free popsicle on a summer day. We might ask why workers—in fashioning their job-floor etymologies—did not reveal to outside scholars the mixture of loathing, laughter, ambiguity, and anxiety frozen into *popsicle man* and *popsicle union*.

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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Honey in the Rock: The Ruby Pickens Tartt Collection of Religious Folk Songs from Sumter County, Alabama.**

Edited and with preface, introduction, and bibliographic essays by Olivia and Jack Solomon. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1991. Pp. 212)

BEVERLY PATTERSON

*North Carolina Arts Council, Folklife Section*

This publication of 120 song texts (plus a few variants) introduces readers to the documentation of a rich tradition of African American religious song in Sumter County, Alabama, during the 1930s. It features the work of an Alabama collector, Ruby Pickens Tartt (1880-1974), who is little-known outside of Alabama. The editors clearly intend this volume as a tribute to the creativity and artistry of the African American community, and to "Miss Ruby" whom they have come to know and admire through her legacy of archival materials, largely unpublished.

Nevertheless, readers will catch only a brief glimpse of Ruby Pickens Tartt in the editors' introductory and bibliographic essays that frame the collection. Even though she lived a remarkably active, productive, and long life, the details of that life remain sketchy. Clearly she had a passion for collecting African American folklore in Sumter County, but what prompted that interest is not clear. Her education included studies at the Livingston Female Academy under Julia Tutwiler, a year at Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans, and another year studying art in New York City with portrait painter William Merritt Chase. The editors describe her as a woman of diverse interests and abilities—"a short story writer, painter, librarian, wife, mother, and [above all] a lover and collector of Afro-American folklore, life, and song." Her interests brought her into contact with folklorists John and Alan Lomax,

Benjamin Botkin, and Harold Courlander. Under the auspices of the Folklore Division of the WPA Federal Writers' Project, she documented the narratives, life histories, songs, and lore of ex-slaves and other African Americans in Sumter County.

It is her collection of religious folksongs, part of that early project, that forms the focus of this volume. Here readers will find versions of widely known texts ("Rock My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," "Free at Last," "Wade in the Water," "I Want to be Ready," "The Old Ark's A-Moving") alongside many that are less familiar ("I Ain't No Stranger Here," "Some Say Give Me Father," "How Long, Watch-a-man, How Long?"). The editors introduce each song with their own interpretive comments regarding content. Perceptive readers, however, will undoubtedly see alternative ways to approach meaning in many of these texts.

For those accustomed to present standards of folklore field research, publication of this collection raises issues about methods of transcription and research. Tartt's phonetic transcription of song texts results in lines such as "You don't b'lieve I'm er chile uv God" and "I come ter yo' house lac er train on de track"—clearly unacceptable by today's standards. Also revealing is the complete absence of contextual information. Current research methods require documenting a wide range of basic kinds of information related to collected items such as songs. Researchers today would automatically record information about who sang the song, where and when the song was recorded, the singer's own interpretation and comments about the song, how the singer learned the song, and any general observations or information about performance style, events, or ritual uses that might help others understand what role the songs played in the life of the singer and the singer's community.

Another omission that dates this song collection is its lack of tunes. Here the editors have compensated by offering outside references to tune sources. Where possible, their introductory notes to each song guide readers to Alabama field recordings and song publications that include tunes. Helpful also is the third of a series of three bibliographical essays (the first concerns general studies in African American folklore; the second, bibliography specifically related to Ruby Pickens Tartt). This essay discusses Alabama field recordings of African American songs. Although Ruby Pickens Tartt did not make such recordings herself, she was instrumental in introducing John Lomax to the singers

he recorded for the Library of Congress during his 1937, 1939, and 1940 field trips to Sumter County. A decade later, Harold Courlander also benefited from Mrs. Tartt's knowledge and assistance in making the field recordings that Folkways Records subsequently issued in a six-volume anthology, *Negro Folk Music of Alabama*.

One of the most interesting questions, and one that the editors raised but were not in a position to explore fully, concerns Ruby Pickens Tartt herself. This book succeeds in drawing attention to Mrs. Tartt and to the significant role she played in documenting and encouraging the preservation of African American music in Sumter County, where she lived. The editors convince that she deserves a closer look. Those wishing to know more about Ruby Pickens Tartt may consult the Virginia Pounds Brown/Laurella Owens book, *Toting the Lead Row: Ruby Pickens Tartt, Alabama Folklorist*, published in 1981 by the University of Alabama Press, or Howell Raines's article, "The 'Strange Country,'" [*Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Spring 1990): 294-305.].

## SOUND RECORDING REVIEW

**Cornbread Crumbled in Gravy: Historical Alabama Field Recordings from the Byron Arnold Collection of Traditional Tunes.** Joy D. Baklanoff, Project Director and Co-Author; John Bealle, Co-Author. Alabama Traditions 104 (cassette with insert booklet).

JOYCE CAUTHEN

ALABAMA FOLKLIFE ASSOCIATION

In June 1947, Byron Arnold, a professor of music at the University of Alabama, set off on a two-month recording trip. He had been collecting the folk music of Alabama for two years, transcribing the music and words by hand as his informants sang them. The recording equipment he had ordered at the beginning of the project did not arrive before his long-planned fieldwork was set to commence, so he borrowed equipment from the Speech Department. The fact that several of the singers he had hoped to record had already died lent the project a special urgency.

The 1947 recordings and Arnold's hand-written transcriptions became the basis of *Folksongs of Alabama*, published by the University of Alabama Press in 1950. By that time, Arnold was in Los Angeles, working on a Ph.D. in Musicology at UCLA. Though he intended to complete a series of books on Alabama's folk music and to issue the recordings when he finished his degree, this never came to pass. After his death in 1971, UCLA shipped Arnold's papers and recordings to the University of Alabama, where they were housed in the W.S. Hoole Special Collections of the Gorgas Library.

Efforts were made to organize and catalog the materials; but the voices on the disks remained silent until 1988, when Dr. Joy Baklanoff received funding from the Alabama Folklife Association and the Ala-

bama State Council on the Arts to produce a record album from the materials. She took the 73 Bakelite disks to the Country Music Foundation in Nashville, where they were cleaned and recorded on reel-to-reel tape. Baklanoff then began the arduous process of selecting representative songs that were both pleasingly sung and successfully recorded. Though current technology permits the removal of crackles, pops, and static from old recordings, the process is far too expensive for such projects as this, and Baklanoff writes in the introduction to the liner notes that "listening to these songs without electronic enhancement was like hearing a solo voice penetrate a rain forest." Some of the selections on the finished product retain more static than we are used to hearing today, but this in no way spoils the listener's pleasure in the music.

Baklanoff's perseverance paid off in early 1993, when some of the wonderful voices recorded by Arnold finally reached our ears. The cassette tape, accompanied by a 64-page booklet, contains the following selections: "Frog Went A-Courting" and "Paper of Pins," Emma S. Craig, Florence; "Tall Angel at the Bar," Rev. Alex Fountain, Florence; "Song for Tamping Ties," Stence Crozier, Gadsden; "Valley-O," Mrs. Janie Barnard Couch, Guntersville; "Low Down, Death, Right Easy" and "In That Land," Vera Hall Ward and Dock Reed, Livingston; "Go To Sleepy," Mrs. Laurie Cater Carleton, Grove Hill; "My Southern Home," Venetia Danner McClure, Mobile; "Got on My Traveling Shoes" and "I Want My Crown," Hixon Harmony Five, Atmore Prison; "Marching Around the Levee," Pansy S. Richardson, Pensacola (originally Mobile); "I Got Shoes," Mrs. Theckla Jones and members of the Greater Mt. Triumph Baptist Church Choir, Atmore; and "Mockingbird Song," Mrs. Isabel Tipton, Birmingham.

Though Arnold appears not to have discovered many rare, archaic songs that had not been previously collected or published, he was enormously successful in locating exceptional singers. Also, as the liner notes point out, Arnold established a ready rapport with his informants, which is apparent in the ease and joy with which they sang in front of his recording machine.

Baklanoff has done an excellent job of selecting and presenting these singers on *Cornbread Crumbled in Gravy*. Each singer has a distinctive voice and sure sense of melody and rhythm. When harmony notes are involved, they are always just right. The sequence of the selections holds the listener's attention throughout. Mrs. Emma Craig's delicate war-



bling of an English ballad and play-party song is followed by the strong, deep voice of Rev. Alex Fountain leading a group of singers in "Tall Angel at the Bar," an African American "ring shout." Venetia Danner McClure renders a sentimental Civil War parlor song in a genteel whisper, followed by the Hixon Harmony Five singing in the dynamic African American male quartet style of the 1930s.

The tape gives listeners another opportunity to hear the outstanding Vera Hall and Dock Reed of Livingston, whose singing first appeared commercially on Harold Courlander's Folkways recordings of *Negro Folk Music of Alabama* (1951, 1953). Perhaps the most memorable cut on the cassette is a haunting lullaby sung by Mrs. Laurie Cater Carleton in a clear, flute-like voice. Her "Go to Sleepy" provides the title of the anthology ("Go to sleepy little baby / When you wake up / I'll make you chicken pie / Corn bread crumbled in gravy").

The extensive liner notes were prepared by folk-song scholar John Bealle, who provides a biography of Byron Arnold, a fascinating history of his work on the folk-song project, and a thoughtful discussion of Arnold's approach to folklore and its place in the evolution of folkloric studies. The notes also provide the lyrics, a thorough discussion of the musical traditions represented by each song, and photographs of the singers. Bealle's listing of references and intelligent discussion of Arnold's methodology will be invaluable to those doing research and fieldwork in Alabama folklore.

Regrettably, the layout and design of the project's text and packaging are not up to the standards of its music and scholarship. There is no complete listing of songs and performers, even on the back of the package where one expects such things. To see whether a particular song is represented in the anthology, one must either flip through the text or look at the list printed on each side of the cassette. In the case of the singers, the text provides the only reference. To someone who has already purchased the tape, this is a mere annoyance, but to the potential buyer in a store it is a major obstacle. The uninformative tan vinyl exterior of the package does little to encourage further investigation. The rich, vibrant voices inside call out for festive colors that celebrate their release, after 46 years, on this otherwise excellent folk-song anthology.

## Contributors' Notes

JOHN BEALLE earned his Ph.D. in folklore at Indiana University and has written on folksong revival, bluegrass performance, and printed folktale collections. He is currently working on a book on the revival of Sacred Harp singing entitled *Public Worship, Private Faith*. He has taught at Indiana University, Miami University, and the University of Alabama. He currently resides in Cincinnati.

JIM BROWN is Professor of History (and occasionally Folklore) at Samford University. He edited *Up Before Daylight: Life Histories of the Alabama Writers' Project* and was faculty sponsor for a National Endowment for the Humanities Youth Grant project on folk crafts for Samford students during the 1970s. He sustains an active interest in Alabama folklife, including shape-note singing and old-time food-fishing techniques. His principal academic research relates to the folk consciousness behind the emergence of the modern nation-state.

NORA EZELL is an outstanding Alabama quilter, nationally recognized for her appliqued story quilts. Born in Mississippi, she lived for many years in the Northeast, where she worked in the textile industry. Following retirement, she made her home in rural Greene County, Alabama, and, more recently, in Tuscaloosa. She received a National Heritage Fellowship from the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1992.

ARCHIE GREEN is professor emeritus of folklore at the University of Texas. A former San Francisco shipwright and union shop steward, he has published extensively in the areas of occupational folklore, labor history, folksong, and public folklore. He lobbied for nearly a decade for the creation of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Con-

gress. Green received his Ph.D. in folklore and folklife from the University of Pennsylvania.

ANNE KIMZEY is a folklife specialist at the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture. Her article on jubilees was drawn from her ongoing thesis research for her M.A. in folklore from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she completed her coursework. Kimzey has also produced a radio program about jubilees.

BRENDA MCCALLUM (1948-1992) was a leader among archivists who sought to document and preserve the culture of working Americans. (See *In Memoriam*, p. 9.)

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*In Memoriam*  
Brenda McCallum (1948-1992)

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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.

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