

University of Mississippi
American Music Archive Field School

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Location: Circuit Clerk's Office, Calhoun County Courthouse, Pittsboro,
Mississippi

Begin Date: May 18, 2009

End Date: May 18, 2009

Informant/Event: Interview with Deborah Dunn

Elapsed Time: Approximately 4 hours

Today Kevin Dyess and I traveled to the Calhoun County Courthouse in Pittsboro, Mississippi, to interview Deborah Dunn, the Calhoun County circuit clerk. We had met her the previous day at the Sacred Harp singing at Concord Baptist Church in nearby Ellard, Mississippi, and she had agreed to sit down and talk to us about her musical life, especially her experiences as a Sacred Harp singer. Kevin and I departed from Oxford at approximately 1:10 p.m.; it was a bright, cloudless day, with temperatures in the 70s. We arrived at the courthouse just before 2 o'clock. We located her office and were shown in; Mrs. Dunn was expecting us and greeted us pleasantly. Kevin served as my recordist (Edirol R-09), and set up the equipment at a side desk in her office. We exchanged pleasantries with Mrs. Dunn while checking the equipment to make sure everything was working correctly, and when we were ready invited her to sit by the mike so that we could begin.

The interview began at approximately 2:20 p.m., and lasted for almost two hours without interruption; none of Mrs. Dunn's associates disturbed her while she was with us. There is present on the recording the occasional noise of Kevin turning pages in his notebook and of vehicles passing by outside.

Mrs. Dunn was very eager to talk to us and proved to be a fountain of information and interesting stories. She has lived in Calhoun County all her life; her maiden name is Turner, and she has several brothers and sisters. Her family is naturally gifted with musical talent; Mrs. Dunn taught herself to play piano, guitar, autoharp, and dulcimer. All of her siblings sing, but her brothers don't care to. She and her sisters, on the other hand, love to sing and play gospel music together, especially at family functions. She prefers old-time gospel music to contemporary gospel.

Music is a part of her heritage, she tells us. She had a grandfather who was a fiddler, and while researching her genealogy discovered that there were several generations of Sacred Harp singers in her family; this is one reason why she loves it so much. She is very proud of her heritage – she is of Irish and Native American ancestry, and is a member of the Order of the Confederate Rose. Mrs. Dunn is the only person in her family who is interested in researching the heritage and traditions of her family; she is also the only member of Concord

Baptist Church who sings Sacred Harp music.

When she was young, there were three or four churches within walking distance of her home that conducted singing schools. They didn't sing Sacred Harp music in these schools, however – they sang something she called “new work music” (?). When asked, she says that it was shape-note music similar to Sacred Harp in that various geometric shapes were used to differentiate the notes from one another, but that it was not Sacred Harp music. She brought her copy of *The Sacred Harp* (1971 edition) with her to our interview; it was the first copy she ever owned, and it was given to her by Hugh Bill McGuire. It was he who taught her how to sing Sacred Harp music; she tells us that he “raised” her. She highlights her favorites and writes notes in her book so that she can find them easily when she sings; she has many highlighted in case someone else picks the song she wanted to lead. She tells us that she has her grandmother's Sacred Harp book sealed in plastic, as it is so old she is afraid of damaging it; she would love, however, to open it and see if her grandmother similarly made notes about her favorite songs. She talks about a particular song she led at the singing the day before, and tells us again why she chose it. I ask her about one song in particular she led that I loved - #341, “The Lone Pilgrim.” She looks as if she might cry as she tells us again why she picked it, and turning to the song in her book she recites the Bible verse that goes with it as well as the lines of the poetry.

She feels that Sacred Harp is a dying art; there was a question at one point whether or not the singings would continue at Concord, but her pastor promised that they would as long as Concord was there. Her daughter (her only child) doesn't sing, but Mrs. Dunn's granddaughter does. As we conclude our interview, Kevin asks her about a particular song that he was curious about. At first, she can't remember it and has difficulty locating it in the book. A few minutes later, as we were talking about something else, she turned right to it - #348 (bottom of the page), “Fleeting Days.” She continued to flip through the book talking about some more of her favorites, such as #37, “Liverpool,” and #68, “Ortonville.” The latter has beautiful harmonies, she says; she especially enjoys songs that are written in such a way so that you can really hear and appreciate the harmonic structure the voices create together.

We conclude our interview around 4:00. As Kevin puts the recording equipment away, I ask her if I may make a couple of portraits of her. She hesitates a bit, and I tell her she doesn't have to if she doesn't want to. She allows me to, though, and I take them while she is sitting at her desk. We continue talking for a short while before we leave; among the topics of discussion include mentioning that her granddaughter, who is, like Mrs. Dunn, interested in genealogy, could someday come to the American Music Archive if she would like and access her grandmother's interview. I ask her in particular about the price of autoharps, as I wouldn't mind having one; she says the one she has cost around \$100, and she encourages me to teach myself. She then mentions another instrument she owns – a Wurlitzer accordion, but says she cannot play it by herself; she has to put it on her granddaughter and play the keys while her granddaughter works the bellows. As we prepare to take our leave, she

mentions that she may never see us again; we tell her that we very well may encounter one another at a future singing.

I really enjoyed my interview with Mrs. Dunn; she is a lovely, interesting lady. I would have liked to have conducted a follow-up interview with her this week, but neither of our schedules would allow it. She gave me her business card before we left, so perhaps there is the possibility of doing one at a later date. I also had not considered asking her for other contacts, such as her sisters or any other singers she might know, but I plan to email her and ask her this before the week is up. Kevin and I arrived back in Oxford at approximately 5:00 p.m.

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