

University of Mississippi
American Music Archive Field School

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Location: The home of Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Bill McGuire, Banner, Mississippi

Begin Date: May 20, 2009

End Date: May 20, 2009

Informant/Event: Interview with Hugh Bill McGuire

Elapsed time: Approximately 4 ½ hours

Kevin Dyess and I departed Oxford at approximately 1 p.m. en route to Banner, Mississippi, to interview Mr. Hugh Bill McGuire. Mr. McGuire, 79, has been singing Sacred Harp music all of his life, and we were eager for him to discuss the subject with us. It was a beautiful, bright, partly cloudy day, a bit warmer than it has been of late (high 70s-low 80s). We arrived at the McGuire residence at approximately 1:40. It is out in the country, wonderfully serene, with stands of trees directly next door, behind, and across the street from the circa 1950s (?) white wood-frame, tin-roofed house. Fields can be seen beyond the stand of trees in the backyard, and there is a freshly tilled garden plot to the left of the house. A small portable shed is on our right immediately as we pull in to their yard, where we park right behind their open, covered carport. There are two vehicles underneath it – a small 4-door sedan and a small single-cab pickup truck. The car's license plate reads DO RAMI, the truck's DOMISOL.

We encountered Mr. McGuire in his front yard. Wearing new, crisp, dark denim overalls and an Ole Miss baseball cap, he greeted us and escorted us inside. He mentioned that Mrs. McGuire was taking a nap; when we asked if our interview would disturb her, his good-natured response was, "Oh, it's all right; she can take another one later."

We decided to hold the interview in their living room. Mr. McGuire sat in his favorite light tan leather chair, expressing a desire not to be too far away from his breathing machine, which was set up on a TV tray directly next to his chair. Kevin served as the interviewer and I as his recordist. Kevin sat on Mr. McGuire's right-hand side in a loveseat. Mr. McGuire retrieved two chairs from their kitchen, one for me to set up the microphone in front of him and for me to sit in right next to it. I positioned the mic as close to him as I could get it, and adjusted the volume and input, as Mr. McGuire's voice can be both gruff and softspoken. I may have raised the settings a little too much, though; I noticed over the course of the interview that I could hear even little sounds almost too clearly, such as my notebook paper rustling and Mr. McGuire fidgeting in his chair (he did this a lot, though he seemed to be fairly comfortable talking to us).

Kevin began the interview almost right at 2 o'clock; right as he began his introductory remarks, their clock struck two; the sound of it rattled both Kevin and me. It sounded again at every half-hour. Mr. McGuire told us that he had lived in Calhoun County all his life, and had been born just 3 miles away from his current

home on June 20, 1930. He is the oldest of his siblings, with one brother and one sister; his brother owns land just up the road from him. Mr. McGuire's home is no longer a working farm; besides farming, Mr. McGuire worked in Bruce at a garment factory and at Mirkwood Furniture. His brother owns land just up the road from their home.

He tells us he's been singing for over 60 years; his first memory reaches back "a lot longer than that!" He has been around it all of his life; his mother was a Sacred Harp singer, and there were two or three sings close by that they would go to. At first he didn't like it; mostly he objected to the heat, as they were usually held at warm times of the year, but he said he got over that. When he was around 15 years old, a local man loaned him a book and taught him about Sacred Harp. When asked, he says the music now is better than it was then – there are less people singing it, but those that sing it are more knowledgeable about it. He mentions Mark Davis, another Sacred Harp singer who I have encountered this past Sunday and at other sings I've been to, and says that Mr. Davis is from around here and is also a band leader.

He talks about two local churches that used to host singings, but don't anymore; one church was the victim of arson. He says that one function of Sacred Harp singings was as a social outlet, and talks briefly about the "courting aspect" of it. He confirms Deborah Dunn's assessment from my interview that she is the only Sacred Harp singer at Concord Baptist Church; he says that two reasons Sacred Harp singing is dying out are "laziness" and the fact that other social outlets exist now that didn't then.

His wife, Alice, is from Arkansas; they met in Memphis. She and her sisters sang before they met, but she didn't sing Sacred Harp until after she met Mr. McGuire. They have been married for 52 years.

He talks briefly about the difference between Primitive Baptists and Missionary Baptists (the former does not believe that the Bible commands its followers to do mission work).

He talks about state Sacred Harp conventions; they used to last for 3 days and moved around the state. He mentions the Christian Harmony songbook, which he says was more "gospel"-type music and was used primarily in Newton County, Mississippi. He says it "doesn't hold a candle to Sacred Harp," and that since *The Sacred Harp* has been reprinted they don't need the Christian Harmony book now. He also mentions that he's had a stroke, and can't read as well as he used to; because of this, and that his voice gives out, he had to give up teaching the singing schools.

The singing schools taught the rudiments of music; they would last for two or three weeks. Mark Davis taught the last one around here, he tells us. They would be held in late summer, after the crops had been laid away and before school had started. They would teach "time, tune, and accent" – rhythm, duration, and downbeat; it keeps the rhythm right when you hear a hard accent on the first measure, he says. The schools would last all day; now they are generally held at night and for only a few hours, as people no longer have time to devote weeks, let alone a whole day, to this activity.

He talks about the difference in the singing style between Mississippi and

some of the other southern states. In Mississippi, they sing a full musical scale of seven syllables, as opposed to states like Georgia or Alabama who use the four shape “fa-sol-la” method. When asked why this was so, he says that he doesn’t know; the only reason he could think of was that in the early 1800s, people had moved here from other places and were singing from more than one book (such as the Christian Harmony).

At around the 34-minute mark, Mrs. Alice McGuire gets up from her nap and can be heard moving through the house; at 36 minutes she joins us in the living room. She spends the rest of the interview acting as a fact checker of sorts, correcting her husband at times, as well as chiming in at various points. Mr. McGuire continues the above line of inquiry by saying that his grandfather (b. 1862) had sung this way.

Mrs. McGuire enters our conversation, saying that Mr. McGuire had started singing when he was two; his grandfather had walked with him and taught him. He says, “It’s a gift that I can do what I can”; the left side of his throat is dead, a result of the stroke. If he can see it, he can sing it; Mrs. McGuire says she can’t, but that anyone who can read music can. He mentions the sing over in Cullman, Alabama, and that someone there told Mr. McGuire that his son, who now lives in San Francisco, could sing without reading. “Now you probably know why,” said Mr. McGuire to this person; Mr. McGuire can do the same. Mrs. McGuire also offers that their son is talented and worked at it.

Mr. McGuire talks about ornamentation, specifically trills and slurs, and how the 6th note in minor key is raised, as well as the different syllables that are sung in Mississippi (like “fi”), though they sing the tone rather than the actual syllable. They don’t play with the rhythm much; Alabama singers sing slower than they used to, he says, but they still sing faster than Mississippians.

When asked, he says when he sings, he thinks about what comes next as well as worship. At a singing at Enon he was asked, “Why don’t you sing some [songs] that aren’t sad?” Mr. McGuire’s response was that they’re only sad if you look for them to be.

He says that the reason to study the music is to sing the words more perfectly. In Mississippi, they have carried on the tradition of singing the notes first before the words, while others have stopped doing this. He mentions that the treble part is his favorite; he says this part “is what makes the singing.” He is not optimistic about the future of Sacred Harp singing; he said years ago that it would not be prominent, he tells us, though he does mention that his 19-year-old grandson sings.

They have been parental figures to some singers, they say. Deborah Dunn can’t read music, and doesn’t sing anywhere but at Concord. When asked about Mrs. Dunn’s assertion that they “raised” her, they say that they were only “neighbors across the creek.” She has only been in their home politically; Mr. McGuire and her father played in school. They did acquiesce to being a strong influence on her musically, though he doesn’t remember giving her her first Sacred Harp book. I also ask Mr. McGuire the name of the man who schooled him in Sacred Harp – Billy Davis – and what was his motivation behind singing to begin with. He says he was told to lead, and he did it – he did what adults told

him to do.

As our interview concludes, Mrs. McGuire inquires as to what we will be doing with the interview. After Kevin explains it to her, she tells us of a northern filmmaker who came to the area in the late '60s-early '70s to make a film about Sacred Harp singing. This person had filmed their son eating and sped the film up to make it look like he was eating faster than he was; they didn't appreciate that it made their son look like "a pig" and were dissatisfied with the film in general. They could not remember the name of the film, but said that it was shown on campus for years. Mr. McGuire also talked to us about the "new work" singing that Mrs. Dunn had described to us; he said it was also called "Stamps-Baxter" and used 7 syllables. He had an uncle who died in World War II who sang this, and his widow (Mr. McGuire's aunt) taught him how to sing it. When asked why The Sacred Harp has survived while other books have died out, he offers that it was "the Lord's will." He also mentions that the footnotes detailing the stories behind the songs present in *The Sacred Harp* have been retained, while others eliminated them. He also further talks about the difference between Primitive and Missionary Baptist; he elaborates on the term "Arminian," a man who in the 1500s advanced the idea of salvation by works, according to Mr. McGuire. Those who believe this are called "Arminians."

After we finish our interview, we remain with the McGuires for another hour. They show us around their beautiful yard; Mrs. McGuire and Kevin talk much about the flowers she has, and she offers to give him a particular bulb (I believe it was called a "milk and wine" lily) whenever he would like it. We notice an old car in the woods on the right side of the house; they tell us it is a 1959 Chevrolet Biscayne. They had sold a '55 Chevrolet, their "courting car," just a few months before to someone who had paid them \$800 more for it than when they originally bought it; they also mention that they have three or four other cars that they hope to sell. Kevin remarks at one point about how serene it is there, and that he could just listen to the birds all day. Mr. McGuire responds by saying that they didn't get everything they have by sitting around listening to the birds. When asked, they tell us that they have 240 acres of land. Before we leave, they show us inside Mr. McGuire's "museum" – the portable storage shed we passed on the way in, full of farm implements, pictures, pieces of furniture, empty bottles, and the like. They also have some of their music books out there, and Mr. McGuire finds some "new work" books to show me. They are recent – late '90s, paperback, with what appear to be more modern hymns printed with shape notes. After saying our goodbyes, Kevin and I departed from their home and arrived back in Oxford at approximately 5:30 p.m.