

University of Mississippi
American Music Archive Field School

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The narrator is Deborah Dunn, the circuit clerk of Calhoun County, Mississippi. In this interview she discusses, among other things, her experiences as a Sacred Harp singer.

The interview was conducted on May 18, 2009, in her office in the Calhoun County Courthouse. Also present during the interview was Kevin Dyess, who served as recordist. The duration is approximately two hours.

The interview was recorded on an Edirol R-09 digital audio recorder. There is occasional extraneous noise such as cars passing by outside, the ringing of telephones, and the turning of pages in a book.

0:00:15.3 Introductory remarks.

0:00:36.8 Mrs. Dunn introduces herself and tells of her current occupation - circuit court clerk of Calhoun County, a position she has held since 1984. She is originally from Calhoun County. She loves living here; the people care about each other.

0:02:07.8 Mrs. Dunn describes her family. She is one of eight children; her parents were born in Calhoun County and they and her siblings are all still living. Her father is 81; her mother is 78. Her parents were not singers, though her mother's side of the family is very musical; her mother can play guitar and mandolin, and they would gather at her grandparents Clark's house and make music. Her grandfather was a very good fiddle player and taught people how to play; his favorite song was "The Great Speckled Bird." As children they would ask him to play it; it is also one of Mrs. Dunn's favorite songs.

0:04:25.1 They are all self-taught musicians. Mrs. Dunn plays piano, autoharp, dulcimer, guitar, the spoons - anything that makes music, they try to play it, she says. They sing together a lot, and have a great time at family gatherings. There are 54 members of their family currently.

0:05:11.9 Her father's name is William Thora Turner. He doesn't like that name, so everyone calls him Billy. His father was born in Pontotoc, and her line of Turners came from Alabama. He was one of ten children. Ira William Turner was the only one who left Alabama, and just until recently they have not known any of the Alabama Turners. They found them through DNA matching and have an annual Turner reunion, where as many as ten states have been represented.

0:06:33.8 Her mother's name is Wilma Pearl Clark Turner. In the South we have double names that we call each other by, she says, and lists her siblings - Johnnie Jean, Kathy Anne, Deborah Dee, Randy Bearon, Sandra Lynn, Wendy Dinette, and Timothy Scott [*unsure about name spellings*]. They all live close by and are a very close family. Harold and Cora Luttrell Turner, her father's parents, were the ones who would take them to singings. They would go to the singing schools at Antioch, Mount Comfort, and Lantrip.

0:08:06.6 Mrs. Dunn found her great-grandparents' Sacred Harp book in an old trunk. She took it to her grandfather and asked him what it was, and this was her first knowledge that Sacred Harp was a part of her heritage. In later years she found out she also had great uncles on her mother's side who sang Sacred Harp as well. She met them at Concord Baptist Church; she married and moved to that area, where she has been living for the past 40 years. She is the only Sacred Harp singer at Concord.

0:09:15.4 The younger ones don't seem to be interested in Sacred Harp, and the older people just like to sit and listen, she says. The all-day sings at Concord would start at 10 a.m. and break at noon for dinner on the grounds.

0:10:55.3 Her family is referred to as "clannish" by others.

0:11:23.1 She has been pianist, youth director, choir director, and children's choir director at Concord. Two of her sisters play piano, but they took lessons, she says. She also has a nursing home ministry in two local nursing homes; she has been doing this for over 25 years. They sing the songs they want to hear; many of the older Sacred Harp singers would be living there, and she would always try to do some Sacred Harp songs for them. They also have a devotional and do interactive activities with the residents. Her daughter, son-in-law, granddaughter, and grandson do this with her.

0:13:52.4 Mrs. Dunn also belongs to the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, the Lift Board for FEMA Funds, an officer in the State Circuit Clerk's Association, President of the Rotary Club, helped organize a Rotary Club in Houston, Mississippi. She's always involved in something, she says - whenever she goes somewhere, they put her to work. As long as she's doing something for

others and pleasing the Lord, she's happy. She considers all that she does, including her job, as a mission field.

0:16:51.5 This includes Sacred Harp singing. You have to learn to appreciate it, she says, and then it becomes sacred and precious to you. The songs are scripture, and you can think of a scripture or a song to go with any situation. This is the reason she loves some of the songs they sang yesterday - they tell the story just as the Bible tells the story. It comes from within; it's not just empty voice.

0:19:10.4 She considers it part of her heritage because she knows her ancestors sang it. She has inherited two books - their Sacred Harp songbook and a book that indexes the songs by the first line. They would sing in a lined-out fashion from this book; the leader would feed each line to the singers, who would then sing it [*demonstrates for us using "Amazing Grace"; her singing voice is pleasant and clear*]. Her great-grandmother carried this book in her hands, she says.

0:21:49.3 She and her siblings grew up singing in the cottonfields - that's why her voice is so loud, she tells us. They would work to help pay for clothes for school. Her mother was a great seamstress, and she and two of her sisters would wear each other's hand-me-downs. They would walk to the local sings at churches like Antioch, Lantrip, and Mt. Comfort just down their road. They were taught the notes - though it wasn't Sacred Harp, she says; when her youngest sister, Wendy, was 4 they stood her on a stool in front of everyone and she would sing the melody all by herself. The boys sing and have wonderful voices, she says, but they don't do it - it's not their thing. She and her sisters sing together at various family, church, and community functions and events. They get together four times a year - Mother's Day, Father's Day, and her parents' birthdays - and sing together as well. Her mother's birthday is April 26, and this year she wrote her a birthday song that she and her siblings sang to her while accompanied on autoharp. She thinks big families are wonderful, though she herself only has one child; they are demonstrative and tactile with their displays of affection.

0:29:05.5 When she and her sisters sing together, they generally sing country gospel music and religious songs. She doesn't like contemporary music, though she says occasionally on the 4th of July they might cut up on a song like "The Locomotion." The little children like to sing at family gatherings, too, and they encourage this; they'll also recite the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord's Prayer, as well as sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

0:30:31.6 She talks at length about an event coming up this Saturday for her family - a memorial marker dedication for her great-great-grandfather Thomas Gould Clark and his two sons, Albert Henry and Jonathan, who were killed at the battle of Gettysburg during the Civil War. This is being sponsored by the chapter

of the Order of the Confederate Rose that she and her mother are members of and which is named for her great-great-grandmother, Marjorie Brown Rogers Clark. Marjorie's letters from Thomas and her sons won a contest at Ole Miss, and are stored in the archives there.

0:39:16.0 When asked, she says that the music they sang in the singing school was called "new work singing." It was shape-note, but not Sacred Harp. On commencement night, they would sing different songs in different formations, such as quartet or solo. They were taught how to count, though she already knew how to count from Sacred Harp and from her church choir leader. Singing is a passion for her; she can remember the songs her mother sang that no one sings anymore, as well as the popular music they heard growing up that they no longer hear. People ask what kind of instrument a Sacred Harp is; there was a man not at the singing on Sunday, Mr. Curtis Bryant, who would keep time by stomping more than anything else. Some folks have rhythm and some don't, she says.

0:43:26.1 I ask her about the songs she led the day before, in particular #341, "The Lone Pilgrim." In a Monitor Herald newspaper article in 1953, she read about how this song was sung in memory of a Mr. Jenkins, who used to organize the singings at Concord. His great-granddaughter and great-great-granddaughter were present at the singing yesterday, and she led it for them as well as in memory of him. She opens up a book she's brought with her, the first Sacred Harp book that was truly hers (1971 Denson Revision), given to her by Mr. Boyd Adams of Vardaman, Mississippi. She reads the scripture to go with the song - I Thessalonians 4:14: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him" - and tells us that she explained the reason the people in the cemetery are buried facing east to her Sunday School class is so they can meet Christ when He comes from the eastern sky. She loves the poetry and reads both the short story about the composition of the song and then recites the lyrics themselves with great feeling.

0:52:05.6 She mentions Mr. Hugh Bill McGuire and says that he "raised" her; he would tell her what songs to sing and he also fussed at her for not coming to more sings. She says she had to remind him that she sang three songs that he didn't tell her to sing. She does practice and read, and has tapes of the 50th anniversary singing at Concord. In the past several weeks she's seen two movies on TV that feature Sacred Harp music, but she can't remember what movies they were.

0:53:46.5 She tells us her favorite song is the "Easter Anthem," which they sing at 2:00, and generally without singing the notes first. When asked why they do that, she says it's just a tradition, a "break" for the singers at that point during the singing.

0:54:52.4 She talks about a crash course in Sacred Harp singing that Mark Davis once taught at Ellard Church, right across from Concord. Both he and Warren Steel have an enthusiasm for it, and can lay down their books and sing without them. She can't do this - it's her prop, she tells us.

0:56:50.6 She highlights her favorites in her book, and talks about some of them - "Greenfields," which she sang in '83 in memory of Mr. Clark, "Heaven's My Home," "Coronation," "Holy Manna," "Let Us Sing," "Primose," "Great Britain," etc. If she liked then and wanted to lead them later, she'd mark them. She finds another, "Murillo's Lesson," that she led yesterday. She locates "Concord," which they like to sing because it's the name of their church, and says that the book they used yesterday only had one verse, while her book has three. Her great-grandmother's book is in such terrible shape that it's sealed in plastic, though she'd like to open it and see if her great-grandmother made notes in hers like she does. She has discovered in her research that "The Land of Beulah" is the same as "Angel Band," and has found more than one name for "New Britain"/"Amazing Grace," as well as ten verses. She found this out by looking through old songbooks.

1:04:42.6 When she started singing, they put her in the treble section because she could sing any part except bass, and so they would put her where they needed her. When asked why the soprano part is called treble, she says that she believes the tenor part is actually the soprano part, and that the treble part is high. She points out that "The Land of Beulah"/"Angel Band" is one of those with an extremely high treble part, though she loves the song.

1:07:05.9 She remarks on how beautiful yesterday was, and how she was able to cut the air conditioning off and open the doors; it was like being outside. The air conditioner blows right on the singers and dries out their throats, while the people in the back don't want to burn up; the singers don't care so much about burning up, she says. They used to have an attic fan, and they would raise the windows (before they were stained glass) and turn on the fan, and people would say that they could hear them singing all down through the valley. At dinner time, they would set up tables outside and eat. These are wonderful memories, she says, that her daughter and grandchildren do not have, and this is why every family needs a storyteller.

1:09:47.0 When asked if she has introduced Sacred Harp to her daughter and grandchildren, she says her daughter will not sing, but her granddaughter loves it. She usually sits beside her, but wasn't there yesterday; her mother had a migraine headache and had to go home.

1:11:10.3 I ask her about her relationship with Hugh Bill McGuire, as Kevin and I will be interviewing him later in the week and she had said he "raised" her. His father and her grandfather were wonderful friends, as well as her father, and their family has always thought the world of them. When she married, she was

16, and when she would go to the singing, she was bashful, and he would encourage her to get up and sing particular songs, like "Amazing Grace." She would sing the treble instead of the tenor melody, but no one said anything about it. They would save songs like that and "Coronation" for her, because they were the only songs she knew. He was a great encourager to her, which everyone needs, she says.

1:13:28.1 She mentions again that she is the only person at Concord who sings Sacred Harp; they would put her in charge of it, and then most would not even come to listen to it. She reiterates how it is a dying art, as the older singers pass away and others such as Mark Davis and the Jenkinses, who were originally from Calhoun County, moving away. She believes it's dying out because the younger people aren't interested in it; they prefer praise and worship-type music. When they get older, she says, they'll wish they had learned about it. The question was once asked whether or not Sacred Harp singing would continue at Concord, and her and the pastor's response was as long as there was a Concord Baptist Church, there would be a Sacred Harp singing.

1:19:17.2 When I tell her that yesterday was my first time to participate in a Sacred Harp singing, she is pleased. She was so happy that we students came. She thinks the singing went very well, and wishes she had taped it. She compliments my singing voice and says that that is the only way to learn. She mentions that a man the day before who had excused himself from leading but requested a certain song was the pastor of the church where she grew up. There were two Sacred Harp singers, one living and one deceased (Mrs. Bernice Embree and Mrs. Hawkins), that she mentioned the day before; they would sit by and near her and that's why she could hear everything they were saying. They went to every singing they could go to as long as they were able to, and she admires them for that. She tells the story again of how she got her first book from Mr. Adams; she was told to take it and use it, and she has always tried to live up to that, though she doesn't do it often enough for Mr. McGuire! She tells us that his wife (who wasn't there yesterday) also sings, as well as their sons. She says again that there are so many memories that are being missed out on because people don't appreciate the dying art of Sacred Harp.

1:25:33.0 She talks about the singing they used to have at the courtroom in the other building, and they would have a lot of African-American participants. It was a wonderful experience, she says, but she doesn't know if they even have a group of singers anymore. Politicians would come to these singings a lot during election time; she was there, too, though she belonged there, she says. Mr. Burt and his aunt, Virginia Carter [?] would come, and that was how they were introduced to the song "Willie." Returning to the question of why Sacred Harp is dying out, she talks about how it worries her how those who don't have a relationship with God or a church family deal with their trials and

tribulations. It's a joy for her to sing this music, and she repeats that as long as there is a Concord, there will be a singing there.

1:31:44.6 She mentions how Mark Davis made the comment about "morbid poetry" yesterday and quoted the song; she has her favorites and she likes to quote them, too; they're like scripture to her, and she believes them to be divinely inspired.

1:33:12.9 Kevin asks her about a particular song that they sang at his first sing, which was also at Concord 2 years ago; he says the lyrics talk about time being "like a falling" or "shooting star" or like "the speed of an Indian's shooting arrow." She is unable to locate it at first. He also asks her the year of Concord's establishment - August 1840. He mentions the cemetery that we were unable to visit; she tells us that we missed out. He also brings up Calhoun County, Alabama, and how that is a hotbed of Sacred Harp singing. She mentions the song Kevin asked about again, and how she wishes she could find it; Kevin says it's in the 300s, and she says it wouldn't be in this particular book. She loves to hear the particular parts being sung in the slow songs, and she thinks that's the beauty of it. She talks some more about her family history and genealogy, and again how proud she is of her heritage.

1:48:14.5 End of interview.