

Audiotape Log

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Researcher's Name: Kevin Dyess

Event: Interview with Hugh Bill McGuire

Place: 72 CR 273, Banner, Mississippi

Date: May 20, 2009

Co-worker present: Melanie Young

The following is a catalog of a tape-recorded interview with 79 year-old Hugh Bill McGuire, at his home at 72 CR 273, Banner Mississippi. The interview mainly concerns Mr. McGuire's long-time experience with the Sacred Harp singing tradition in Calhoun County and other parts of northern Mississippi.

Mr. McGuire tells us that we are actually in Banner, Mississippi. His date of birth is June 20, 1930. He says he was born about three miles up the creek; we actually passed this place on Hwy 9 W. on our way to visit him. He has one brother who is now deceased who lived in Merkle, Texas and one sister who resides in Oxford, Mississippi.

His parents were farmers. He himself has been a farmer also, though now his farm is not what you would call a running farm. In addition to farming, Mr. McGuire has worked at Williams Slacks (a garment manufacturing company) and also at Brookwood Furniture Company.

Mr. McGuire has been a Sacred Harp singer for over sixty years. He remembers that he first became aware of Sacred Harp it was when he was four or five years old. He says that he has been acquainted with Sacred Harp ever since he can remember. He thinks he was about fifteen when he actually started singing. It was a gentleman there in Banner he remembers who first loaned him a Sacred Harp book and "showed him how the notes ran."

He says that one difference in the singsings today as compared with those of the past is that those of today are better quality in the way that a greater number of singers are more knowledgeable of matters of music than they were formerly.

[Elapsed Time: 10 minutes]

Mr. McGuire talks about Mark Davis who is also a Sacred Harp singer and singing school teacher. He mentions that Mr. Davis grew up in the tradition also in Calhoun County and points to a picture on the wall where his mother, along with himself, is one of the Bruce High School senior class of 1947.

He says that in years past he attended a lot more singings than he does now because these events were more numerous than they are now. This is due mostly to people who were singers dying out and also because of lack of interest. He says that the reason people went to singings was that they were so close to home and this was just the thing to do back in the day. This was very much a social outlet. He tells that people just aren't interested in singings the way that they used to be and some reasons for this are lack of knowledge of singing, laziness, and modern day transportation that allows people to enlarge their social outlets. He says the social aspect of the singings is just a thing of the past.

Mr. McGuire mentions that he did not meet his wife at a Sacred Harp singing, though. She and her sister sang, but he said that it was not until he and she were married that she began to learn the shape-note singing tradition. They have been married almost 52 years.

Interested in the difference between Primitive Baptists and Missionary Baptists I ask him about this Mr. McGuire tells that the Missionary Baptists split away from the Baptists early in the 1800s and a big difference is, as the name implies, missionary work is incorporated into their religious practice.

One of the more memorable Sacred Harp experiences that Mr. McGuire recalls in years past are the multiple-day singing conventions where people came from considerable distances to attend. Some of the conventions were in Calhoun County and in the neighboring counties of Webster and Chickasaw. In addition to these, Mr. McGuire also mentions the Mississippi State Sacred Harp singing convention. No longer do these singing conventions last the duration of three days that was usual in the past. Most have been shortened to one day or cease to exist.

[Elapsed Time: 20:30]

Mr. McGuire speaks of singing from another book other than the Sacred Harp book – the Christian Harmony. He's been doing this since the 1950s. He says that William Walker, incorporated some newer type songs into this song book, namely, gospel-type songs.

Mention is made of singing schools and how purpose of the institutions was to teach the rudiments or basic rules of music so that everyday people could increase their music literacy. In years past these singing schools would occur in late summer after the crops were laid by, meaning that this was a time that farmers could take a break from the fields before the harvest in the fall. He tells that the teaching of the shape note notation is the basis of instructional content in these schools. A big difference in singing schools of the past and those of today is the

time frame in which these occur. Those of the past would last anywhere from two to three weeks and would go all day. Modern day singing schools last for only a few hours.

[Elapsed Time: 30:12]

Mr. McGuire speaks of using the seven solfège syllables of the diatonic scale with the four shapes as opposed to using the older system of only using four syllables that correspond to the four shape notes as is the more traditional way of intoning the sounds of the music before the actual words are sung. This has been done differently in Mississippi as opposed to the way it is practiced in Georgia and Alabama. It has been going on this way since the early 1800s he claims.

Mrs. McGuire wakes up from her nap and joins us in the living room.

Mr. McGuire speaks about his ability to read music and sing even unfamiliar songs correctly as long as his eyesight will allow him to do so. Also, mention is made by both Mr. and Mrs. McGuire about their son's ability to read music notation.

[Elapsed Time: 41:00]

Mr. McGuire speaks of other instances of things that occur in the music as it is sounded that are not necessarily written in the notation. Of these mention is made of ornamentation and the way that the sixth scale degree is raised in songs written in minor keys.

Mention is made of differences in tempo now and in the past, and Mrs. McGuire compares the way Mississippi singers and Alabama singers approach tempo.

Mr. McGuire says that the whole basis for singing these songs is about worshipping God, and he claims that the song texts are "pretty stout stuff."

He talks about the theme of death in some of the songs to be found in the Sacred Harp book.

Mr. McGuire says that the purpose for studying the music is in order to sing the words as perfectly as possible This is the reason for intoning the solfège syllables and singing the sounds before singing the words.

[Elapsed Time: 51:00]

Again, Mr. McGuire talks about the main changes that have occurred in the Sacred Harp singing tradition.

Both Mr. and Mrs. McGuire speak of the continuation of this singing tradition in Calhoun County.

Mention is made of their close relationship to Mark Davis.

Mr. and Mrs. McGuire speak of their relationship with Deborah Dunn who is a singer at Concord Baptist Church.

[Elapsed Time: 59: 10]

Mrs. McGuire voices her concern about our intentions.

[Elapsed Time: 01:03:09]

In response to Melanie's question, Mr. McGuire responds to the reason that he started singing Sacred Harp was that some of the older folks wanted (encouraged) him to enter the hollow square and be a leader.

Mr. and Mrs. McGuire talk about New Work singing.

Mr. McGuire makes the comment that shape notes were a great invention.

Mrs. McGuire talks about her sister, Ona, and tells how they each would sing harmony to songs and then argue about which one was doing it right.

She admits to never having heard of Sacred Harp music until she met Mr. McGuire.

[Elapsed Time: 01:11:55]

Mr. McGuire thinks that the singing of the seven solfège syllables is a tradition that is practiced only in northern Mississippi (really, only in this vicinity), whereas the use of the four syllable system is practiced in the remainder of the state, although he has heard that there is a place in east Texas where the people there follow the seven syllable practice as well

Mrs. McGuire comments that in order to sing the seven syllables one has to know a little about the structure of a scale itself, but to sing the four syllables one only has to know the shapes. Mr. McGuire here says that one sings two different sounds to one shape (in the four shape system) and in the seven note system one sings a different sound to each of the seven shapes. Here Mrs. McGuire comments that most people say that sing the four shape system is easier.

Mr. McGuire attests to the reason for the longevity of the Sacred Harp book by saying that it is God's will that the book is still in use today. Here, he mentions the importance of the song texts that are true to the scriptures found in the Bible.

Mr. and Mrs. McGuire talk about several of the revisions of the Sacred Harp book.

[Elapsed Time: 01:20:52]

Mr. McGuire clarifies the meaning of a word that he used earlier – "Arminian" (? Spelling)

Mrs. McGuire comments that her husband has a store of knowledge of their community. The conversation steers toward interesting Mississippi place names.

[Elapsed Time: 01:28:18]
