

University of Mississippi
American Music Archive Field School

Document Type: Field Note

Field Worker: Tyler Keith

Coworker: Mary Amelia Taylor

Location: Oxford Middle School, Anne Steele's Classroom

Begin Date: May 21, 2010

End Date: May 21, 2010

Event: Anne Steele Interviewed by Mary Amelia Taylor

Elapsed Time: 1 hour, approximately

The interview of Anne Steele was set for 8 am. at the Oxford Middle School. I arrived at the middle school at about 7:45. It was raining heavily, and I had to run to the front entrance. The middle school was bustling with kids and teachers going to their first classes of the day. Right after Mary Amelia showed up Mrs. Steele came to greet us at the front desk. She was very friendly and eager to talk to us.

Her room was right around the corner from the front desk. The room was small. Her desk sat in the far left hand corner. It was a large, metal desk covered with family pictures and a few books. Behind her desk was a bulletin board with various school papers and cards tacked up on it. In the corner, behind the desk, were two or three file cabinets with plants on top of them. In the front of the room there was a large chalk board and another bulletin board with birthday cards tacked up on it.

There were six rows of school desks, four deep, facing the chalk board. Mrs. Steele invited us in, and we pulled two desks together facing each other. Mary Amelia sat in one and Mrs. Steele sat in the other. I sat in another desk beside Mary Amelia.

Mrs. Steele was wearing a blue and black silk shirt with white birds and palm trees on it. She had short black and grey hair, and long, dangling turquoise earrings. She is the Latin teacher and has a special fondness for mythology. She talked about trying to teach kids creative thinking. Mythology helped in teaching this. We were there to talk about her experience with Sacred Harp singing. She talked at first about her early musical activity, which wasn't much. She grew up in Detroit, Michigan, and heard about Sacred Harp there.

She sang a bit in the choir, but did not get into Sacred Harp till much later. She talked about going to her first big singing in Chicago. She went to this even by herself. I could see her excitement and love for the music by her body language. Her face seemed to brighten when she talked about it. She talked about hearing several hundred people singing Sacred Harp together.

She talked about her love for the texts of Sacred Harp. The texts talked about nature, politics, death, and human failings. This seemed to me to be related to the mythology that she teaches. She likes the "vividness" of the text.

Mrs. Steele talked about singing and looking people in the eye when you sing. She thought it was interesting and important how a room sounds. She liked being drenched in sound. She talked about the community atmosphere involved in Sacred Harp. She loves the dinner on the grounds and the ritual of performance. Mrs. Steele

talked about the willingness to give up your time to take part in a sing. This was an important aspect for her.

When she met her second husband, Dr. Warren Steele, she went full force into Sacred Harp. He is an expert and a local leader in North Mississippi Sacred Harp. There seemed to be a genuine sweetness when she talked about him. She talked about the singing tradition being a bit on the wane in the South, but it has become more popular outside the South.

Although she is more interested in the tradition and the method than the religious aspect of Sacred Harp, she finds the music moving and comforting. After the interview, Mrs. Steele walked us to the door and said goodbye. Her interview can serve as a testimony of a true Sacred Harp devotee, and her knowledge of the craft is valuable.