

University of Mississippi
American Music Archive Field School

Document Type: Field Notes for Interview with Anne Steel
Field Worker: Mary Amelia Taylor, interviewer
Coworker: Tyler Keith, recordist
Location: Latin classroom, Oxford Middle School, Oxford, Mississippi
Begin Date: 8:00 a.m. May 21, 2010
End Date: 9:00 a.m. May 21, 2010
Time Elapsed: Approximately 1 hour

I arrived at Oxford Middle School at 7:48 a.m. to meet Mrs. Anne Steel for our 8:00 interview. We entered the front door of the school building and found the office on the right, where Tyler was waiting already. As we waited to approach the desk to get visitors' passes, Mrs. Steel came through another door into the office and greeted us warmly. Mrs. Steel is a white woman with very short gray hair, dark blue-rimmed glasses, and a gaze that seemed interested in everything, especially us, as she asked us how we were doing. She wore a long dark blue and purple shirt with white birds and palm trees on it, and she wore matching blue slacks and loafer-style shoes. She wore several pieces of turquoise jewelry, a necklace, bracelet, and long dangling earrings. She ushered us out of the office and down two white, undecorated halls to her classroom. I didn't see any students, but Mrs. Steel explained that today is the last day of finals week, so some students who had maintained A averages were exempt and therefore absent from the halls. She left us in her classroom momentarily, and we discussed how best to set up the recording equipment. The classroom was fairly large, containing at 6 rows of 4 desks each, a small desk against one wall, several low bookshelves, and Mrs. Steel's large desk and chair. The long front wall was covered by a large white board occupied with Latin phrases and a bulletin board covered with homemade birthday cards (Mrs. Steel later explained that her birthday was several days ago and that her students had made the cards she displayed). On the floor along the front wall was a series of "Latin Proverb Projects" that students had made—one said in English, "Look to the past, the present, the future" and featured three dolls with heads made of balloons covered with yarn hair that faced in the appropriate directions.

Tyler and I turned two desks to face each other and set up the recording equipment on one. When Mrs. Steel returned, she and I sat in these two desks facing each other, and Tyler turned one desk parallel to mine. We began the interview a few minutes before 8:00.

I began by asking Mrs. Steel about her personal history (when and where she was born, and how she came to live in Mississippi). She seemed to consider her life as a seamless narrative, and she seemed conscious of fitting each event she told us about neatly into that narrative. She hardly needed any prompting to give detailed, descriptive answers about her experiences as she introduced herself to and became more deeply involved in singing sacred harp music. She seemed very *close* to those experiences; many times she placed her hand over her heart, leaning slightly forward with open face and using emotional-sounding inflections while she told stories, especially about the first sacred harp singing she attended. I found myself transported to the hall in Chicago as she opened the door and the sound of singing engulfed her.

Mrs. Steel spoke candidly about her avoidance of leading songs that are expressly religious, stating that she has “become less and less doctrinaire the older I’ve got” and has tried to avoid leading songs that mention “cross and Jesus dying for our sins.” She mentioned one song that she loves, though, called “Redemption,” whose chorus reads, “Oh, His blood was shed that we might live with him when life is o’er, and upon the clouds of glory ride safe to that peaceful shore.” However, she said she loves the song for its music and beat, which, for her, “overpower the words.” She also mentioned at one point that “just because you sing something doesn’t mean it’s tattooed on your heart,” and this view seems not uncommon among many sacred harp singers I’ve met. For many, it seems, as with Mrs. Steel, sacred harp is about tradition, community, and the music itself, rather than the messages contained in the song lyrics.

Just before I ended the interview, I remembered to look at Tyler to see if he had any other questions for Mrs. Steel, and, fortunately, he did. He asked a question I had on my topics list in my notebook but had completely overlooked—what her favorite, or least favorite, songs were, and why. I was glad Tyler thought to ask this, because Mrs. Steel’s feelings about the religious aspects of sacred harp music surfaced most clearly in her answers to those questions.

During the interview, I noticed some activity in the hall beyond the closed classroom door—loud talking and running that sounded like students celebrating after a final, but it was not very disruptive and did not seem to bother Mrs. Steel, who faced the door (which had a window in it). Sometimes as I asked questions, her brow would furrow as if she were concentrating on my question, but it took a few questions for me to feel comfortable that the furrowed brow was not a frown. She was amiable throughout the interview, though, and seemed very willing to talk about her experiences. We finished the interview at 8:48, and afterwards she said that she wasn’t sure why we wanted to interview *her* because she had not grown up singing sacred harp and because she did not consider herself an “expert” on sacred harp music in the north Mississippi area. When I again assured her that we *did* want accounts of *her* experiences, with or without scholarly expertise, she smiled what seemed a contented and appreciative smile.

Mrs. Steel walked with Tyler and me to the outside door of the school, through which we, braving a violent flash flood, darted to our cars to return to the Ole Miss campus.