

OLD HARP

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The
New Harp of Columbia
Newsletter



What is Tradition?



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By Ann Strange

I was not born in East Tennessee and my ancestors did not sing Old Harp. I joined this tradition about 23 years ago when we still sang every Sunday at Helen Hutchinson's and Larry Olszewski started making the tradition his life's work. After helping him with the Old Harp newsletter almost since the beginning, I now am putting some of my own thoughts into it.

The Book

The most remarkable thing about our tradition is that our book has been in print and the songs have been sung in East Tennessee ever since it was first printed in 1848 as "The Harp of Columbia" and now "The New Harp of Columbia." The "Sacred Harp" tradition has been revived and there are many groups across the nation that sing the four shapes. And "Christian Harmony" is our closest neighbor, also seven shapes, and also sung in the South. But Old Harp, as our tradition is known, is only sung in East Tennessee. Larry helped keep the book in print and added in the old songs to enhance our tradition.

The History

I never knew any of the old Singing School teachers and don't know how they taught the Old Harp tradition. Larry O. tried to maintain the tradition and also moved it forward in his way. He wanted to honor the tradition and the elders and many appreciated his efforts. I have his archives which document his research and I wish that someday we can pay someone to go through and catalog that knowledge. There is a gap developing in our understanding as the oral history passes out of living memory. It makes it difficult for us to agree upon what exactly our tradition is.

Rural counties in East Tennessee were the places that kept the singing going. I know that John McCutcheon "discovered" it in Wears Valley and introduced Old Harp singing to a bunch of hippies at the Laurel Theatre in Knoxville. A small group began meeting weekly to sing at Helen's house in Fort Sanders. I don't know how the Knoxville folks integrated the Sevier and Blount County singings, but I believe they were warmly welcomed. I know when I first went to Headrick Chapel when Luke and Lena Headrick and Burl Adams were still alive, I felt I was part of a very special tradition. And when Larry was chosen as moderator of the Headrick Chapel singing, it was a very big deal to him.

The People

I don't know if I made this up or if it was something Larry used to say, but whoever shows up at an Old Harp singing and sings is an Old Harp singer. Everyone is welcome and encouraged to participate. Ours is an oral tradition and most of us learned the songs by sitting in the square and hearing them sung. This is how the tradition has been handed on. The elders have always had a respected role because of their years of singing

knowledge. Our tradition is diminished every time someone passes away but our tradition is also enhanced every time a new singer joins us. A recent convert was amazed that a group of people get together just to enjoy being together. There is usually no money involved, the only formal organizing is notices of singings, and yet when a singing is called, people show up. The people are what make the tradition.

The Songs

After even a few visits to a singing, one notices that some songs get sung a lot more than others. We all have our favorites and even some we don't like much. If the same group of people keep singing the same songs, the tradition is not going to change much. But if a new song is selected, there is certainly room for disagreement about if and how that will fit into our tradition.

The Music

I don't read music and that fact kept me from singing for most of my life. The shapes have taught me a lot so that now I can figure out a new shaped-note tune and I have also expanded recently to voice lessons, singing in a church choir, and singing with a jazz band and a Balkan group. Shaped-note singing opened up the world of singing for me and I will be forever grateful.

The Singing

One of the great things about our tradition is that we don't demand a certain vocal quality. You don't even have to be very good. The music is not meant to be pretty. I like the fact our singing is less strident than Sacred Harp singings and that sometimes we don't sing them the way they are written because we like it the way we sing it. But it can make it hard for visitors to sing along with us. Good, strong voices are appreciated but not necessary. Some like to belt it out, some like melodious tunes, but all stay for the stirring harmonies. It's heartfelt singing and that's what matters.

What's going on now

After Larry died, we created "The Friends of The New Harp of Columbia," a non-profit Board of Directors to oversee things that Larry used to do by himself. We keep track of the money, keep the book in print, promote singings and the tradition, and I have done the newsletter for many years now (before and after Alan and Sharon Hjerpe). From Larry's typewriter, to a 12-page graphic production, to a web page and listserve, things have changed. This year, after seeing some singings falter and thinking about the future, I have chosen to reduce and simplify the newsletter. Someone else will take it over one day and probably won't be using Quark Xpress on a Macintosh computer. I have asked the "Contacts" of each singing to give me their annual and monthly schedules and that is what is reflected here today. I am hopeful that the Board will continue to try to "herd the cats" of unique Old Harp singers and continue to promote this tradition, even as we agree to disagree about what that is.

Some of the Old Harp singers also love Sacred Harp and Christian Harmony singing. Some of us have attended Camp Do Re Mi with its instruction about how to lead, how to sing, how to organize a singing, and more. Those ideas have trickled back into town and have caused some to think we're messing with the Old Harp tradition.

Opening up our Tradition

Larry O went to Sacred Harp singings, invited them to our singings, welcomed Village Harmony and Northern Harmony, and would have been proud of our singing with the Boston Camerata. He loved it when the young people went right to the back of our book and led the harder songs. He promoted all the local singings and offered rides or did whatever he could to get everyone to attend. We had papers with "extra words" from other books and they got put in the restored edition. So I believe it is true that East Tennessee has been open to other traditions and not been just an insular group.

I posit

We have a 1951 recording of Old Harp singers with notes about the tradition. Larry made several recordings of singings. We have recent recordings but again, no one has written the definitive book about how to sing our songs. Any song in the book that isn't well known is open to interpretation. And because there are standard musical conventions, a good shaped-note singer should be able to sing it "as written." How to learn the shapes and sing the songs is in the Rudiments in front of the book.

Tradition is dynamic, not stagnant. We are brothers and sisters in the shaped-note tradition and we need each other. I can't sing harmony by myself so I love to go to singings. I would like to be a better singer and learn how to sing the song "correctly." I put that in quotes because although we can tell many things about a song by what is on the page, when we sing it, we make it our own. A humorous "tradition" among Old Harp singers is not to follow the leader. That's not very funny to some people and a good argument can be made that it's important to follow the leader. (It helps if the leader knows how to lead!) Also, if we do something we can't or don't want to explain, we say that it is "local tradition" which stops the conversation. Some don't like any change and some can't wait for change. I believe there is strength in our differences. If we all sang bass, it wouldn't work. Old Harp singers are quite unique individuals. It is that which makes us a great group of people and the people I consider among my closest friends. When we gather for a special event such as a wedding or a funeral, it is often the feelings of comfort and connectedness that we most treasure and remember.

Our tradition is that someone calls for a singing, people show up, and the Old Harp tradition continues.

Note from the President of the Board, Friends of the New Harp of Columbia:

You may be looking at the heading for this column and thinking -- Well, we really haven't heard much from that Board. And that's as it should be. Our job is to keep things running smoothly -- getting out the word about singings, working with UT Press to keep the book in print, arranging for special events and singing schools -- all the while keeping in the background. The current board members are Kathleen Mavournin, President; Robin Goddard, Vice President; Ann Strange, Secretary; Joe Sarten, Treasurer; Charles Barber; David Sarten; and Claudia Dean. We meet quarterly for an hour or two. Food is often involved, as well as fun.

It's time again to think about adding new members to the Board. Terms are for two years, beginning with the Annual Meeting in June. If you would like to disappear into the background while working a little to keep the Old Harp tradition going, enjoying good company and good food, get in touch with me at 865-691-9506 or kmav@icx.net.

Happy New Year, Kathleen Mavournin

Web Sites of Interest

www.oldharp.org

<http://oldharp.wetpaint.com/>

www.christianharmony.org

www.campdoremi.com

www.oldfieldssingers.com

www.fasola.org

<http://mywebpages.comcast.net/david.l.carlton/harpeth/index.htm>

To be added to the Old Harp listserve, send an email request to chris.stoddart@gmail.com

We Mourn the Loss of:

John Wright Dunn, 1921-2009; Townsend Postmaster and faithful Old Harp singer.

Rev. Dr. Marion J. Hatchett, 1927-2009; Author of "A Companion to the New Harp of Columbia."

We Welcome into the Square:

Elizabeth Violet Shipp, daughter of Jeremy and Sarah, born December 6, 2009.

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Please make contributions to help defray expenses via Pay Pal at oldharp.org or send check to Old Harp, 307 Lake Forest Drive, Knoxville, TN 37920.

OLD HARP SINGING CALENDAR FOR 2010

Date	Day	Time	Potluck?	The Singing
March 14	Sunday	10:00	Yes	Epworth Annual Singing during the Jubilee Festival, Laurel Theatre, Knoxville. Contact: Tina Becker.
April 4	Sunday	5:30	Yes	Easter Singing at Bill Gooch and Meg Mabbs home, 4401 Alta Visa Way, Knoxville.
April 11	Sunday	2:00	No	Oldhams Creek Missionary Baptist Church, 3629 Boogertown Road, Sevier County. Contact: Veta King or Hal Wilson.
April 25	Sunday	2:00	No	Tuckaleechee Untied Methodist Church, Townsend. Contact: Tom Taylor.
May 2	Sunday (1)	2:00	No	Middle Creek United Methodist Church, Sevierville. Contact: David Sarten
May 11	Tuesday	10:30	No	Corryton Community Building, 9331 Davis Dr., Corryton, TN. Lunch served at noon, Contact: Linda Gass.
May 16	Sunday (3)	2:30	No	Old College Singing at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Athens, TN. Contact: Cora Sweatt.
June 5	Saturday	10:00	Yes	Franklin singing at New Bethel Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Greeneville, TN. Contact: Jeff Farr.
June 13	Sunday	5:30	Yes	Annual Meeting of the Friends of The New Harp of Columbia and regular Second Sunday Singing. Contact: Kathleen Mavournin or Tina Becker.
June 27	Sunday (4)	12:00	Yes	Beech Grove Primitive Baptist Church, Sevier County, Contact: Sharee Green
Aug. 12-14				Camp Do-Re-Mi, Wildacres Resort, Little Switzerland, NC. www.campdoremi.com
Aug. 15	Sunday(3)	2:30	No	Cades Cove Primitive Baptist Church, Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Contact Robin Goddard or Tom Taylor.
Sept. 4	Saturday	10:00	Yes	Etowah United Methodist Church, Etowah, NC. Three-book singing. Contact: Scott Swanton.
Sept. TBA			Yes	Music of Appalachia class joins us from the University of Tennessee at the Laurel Theatre, Knoxville. Perhaps combined with Sept. 12 Second Sunday. Contact: Tina Becker.
Sept. 26	Sunday (4)	10:00	Yes	Headrick Chapel, Wears Valley, Sevier County. Contact David Sarten or Bruce Wheeler.
Oct. 3	Sunday (1)	2:00	No	Valley View Baptist Church, Wears Valley, Sevier County. Contact: Bruce Wheeler
Oct. 9	Saturday (2)	TBA	No	Pumpkin Town Festival, Athens, TN. Contact: Cora Sweatt.
Oct. 17	Sunday	2:00	No	Dollywood Singing, Pigeon Forge, Contact: David Sarten or Veta King.
Oct. 24	Sunday (4)	2:00	No	Maryville College, Center for Campus Ministry, reception afterwards. Contact: Tom or Nan Taylor and Nancy Olsen.
Nov. 6	Saturday	10:00	Yes	Sycamore Shoals State Park, Elizabethton, TN, The Old Fields singers host a two-book singing. Contact: Don Wiley.
Nov. 24	Wednesday	6:30	Yes	Larry Olszewski Memorial Singing during the traditional Thanksgiving Eve potluck and Old Harp singing. Contact: Tina Becker.
Dec. 11	Saturday	TBA	No	Sugarlands Visitors Center, National Park, Contact Paul Clabo.
Jan. 9, 2011	Sunday	2:30	No	Wilderness Wildlife Week, Pigeon Force, Contact: David Sarten or Veta King.

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 Hal Wilson: (865) 436-2590

Knox County Monthly Singings at the Laurel Theatre, Knoxville at 6:30 p.m. (Second Sundays)

Feb. 14, May 9, June 13, July 11, Aug. 8, Sept. 12, Oct. 10, Nov. 14, Dec. 12.

Sevier County Monthly Singings at Middle Creek United Methodist Church, Pigeon Forge, 7:00 p.m. (Third Tuesdays)

Jan. 19, Feb. 16, March 16, April 20, May 18, June 15, July 20, Aug. 17, Sept. 21, Oct. 19, Nov. 16.

Greene County Monthly Singings at Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Greeneville at 3:00 p.m. (Last Sunday of the month)

Jan. 31, Feb. 28, March 28, April 25, May 30, June 27, July 25, Aug. 29, Oct. 31, Nov. 28.

Old College Monthly Singings at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Athens at 6:00 p.m. (Third Tuesdays)

Jan. 19, Feb. 16, March 16, April 20, May 18, June 15, July 20, Aug. 17, Sept. 21, Oct. 19, Nov. 16.