



OLD HARP

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The *New Harp of Columbia*
Newsletter

Singers Lost and Singers Gained

By: Andrew Whaley

This past year we have mourned the passing of several beloved singers including Bruce Wheeler, Cora (Beasley) Sweatt Jones, Mary Grace Walrath, Reba (Whaley) Clabo Harmon, Scott Swanton and others.

Many thanks to those singers who were able to help sing at Bruce's funeral and at the memorial singing at Cora's home in Athens.

As we grieve their loss and reflect on the memories we've shared over the years, the words of No. 99 PARTING HAND come to mind.

My Christian friends, in bonds of love, Whose hearts in sweetest join, Your friendship's like a drawing band, Yet we must take the parting hand.

Your comp'ny's sweet, your union dear, Your words delightful to my ear; Yet, when I see that we must part, You draw like cords around my heart.

Oh! glorious day, oh! blessed hope, My soul leaps forward at the thought! When, on that happy, happy land, We'll no more take the parting hand.

But with our blessed, holy Lord, We'll shout and sing with one accord; And there we'll all with Jesus dwell, so loving Christians, fare you well!

In direct contrast to lamenting those who've passed, we can now rejoice for a new singer who's joined the square.

Congratulations to Mandy Askins on the birth of her daughter, Ada Elizabeth Askins! Ada was born January 18th, 2024. Mandy hopes Ada will become a reliable alto someday soon. She's already chosen No. 30 SION'S SECURITY as Ada's lullaby song.



Cora (Beasley) Sweatt Jones leads at Valley View



Mandy Askins and daughter Ada Askins

Cora Beasley Sweatt Jones

By: Jeremy Shipp

Many shapenote singers from outside the *NHoC* tradition have visited East Tennessee and some have even stayed, but I only know of one who took up and truly championed our native old harp tradition. And she was a gem.

Cora was a daughter of the famed Sacred Harp-singing Beasley family of Winfield, Alabama. She and Kirby Sweatt, her first husband, moved to Athens, seat of McMinn County, Tennessee, some eighteen years before the revival† of harp singing in that county. At my urging, she wrote an account of her harp singing heritage and activity for the [2022 Old Harp Newsletter](#).

Rereading it, I'm struck that Cora does not credit herself as the longtime leader of the Old College Harp Singers. But ever since I've known her (*i.e.* the early 2000s), she was the

organizing force of old harp in McMinn County. And I'm struck that while McMinn Co. old harp singing got started through the influence of the Knoxville folk scene, McMinn Co.'s old harp longevity (1992-2023) was due to the leadership of a born-and-bred harp singer from another state.*

Cora was also a strong supporter of old harp throughout East Tennessee. Her second husband, Mr. Richard Jones, like her first before his passing, kindly drove her to many annual singings and even some practice singings in other counties.

As the Old College Singers' numbers waned in later years, I recall when Cora regretfully discontinued the annual Athens singings. Yet she continued with the monthly practice singings, hosting them in her own home up until the summer before her passing, a measure of hospitality that reminds me of the accounts of Helen Hutchison in Knoxville. Cora continued to recruit singers, organize demonstration singings, plan singing schools, and attend singings in other counties until her passing on September 26, 2023.

And Cora was a godly woman. Always cheerful and gentle, she was also wont to state a Bible truth with solemnity and conviction. She was one of those singers who regard the music not as a mere amusement, but as the matter of praise to the living God. Primitive Baptist in her youth, she was always a faithful Baptist church member in Athens, which is how I met her—and she befriended me—even before I'd heard of old harp singing.

At her funeral service, we learned that her favorite verse was Psalm 19:14: "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer."



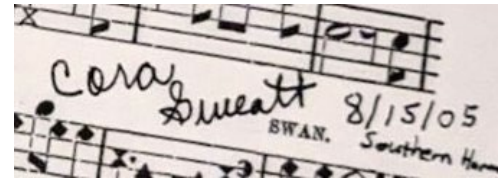
Cora (Beasley) Sweatt Jones at Headrick Chapel

† One of the two East Tennessee shapenote tunebooks that came before the *Harp of Columbia* was published by an Athens luminary in 1838/40, but I'm unaware of any harp tradition continuing in McMinn County in living memory, prior to Judge Carroll Ross's 1992 inception of old harp singing.

* To my eye, it appears the two forces of long tradition and new discovery make a happy alliance to keep old harp going.

There being no singing at the funeral in October, in November her widower and her son kindly accommodated one last practice singing at Cora's house, on the third Tuesday as always, in her honor. Two remaining active Athens harp singers, JoAnn Love and Dolores Reynolds, were joined by a number of singers ranging from Knox County to northwest Georgia, about twenty in all. Although Cora always led a variety of tunes, No. 99 MORNING TRUMPET was a clear favorite; and she had chosen No. 97A ATHENS when I asked her to sign her favorite song some twenty years ago. We made sure to sing a number of Cora's favorites and took time to recollect much of what is written above and many other things beside.

We would do well to remember Cora's good example to us and, following that example, remember the Redeemer whom she now serves in acceptable worship forever.



Dr. W. Bruce Wheeler

By: Andrew Whaley

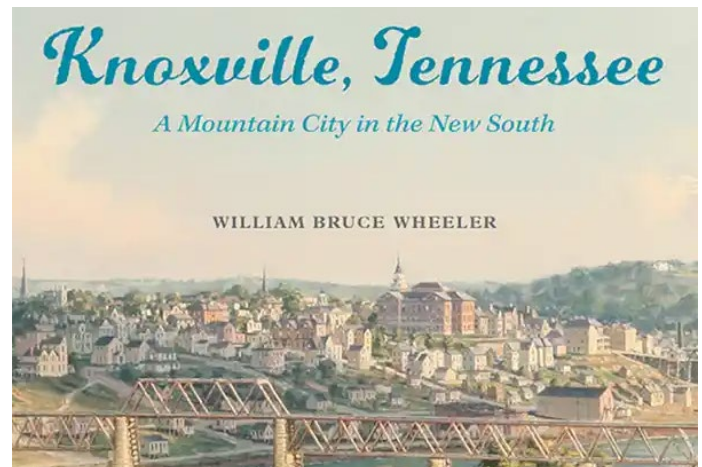
Dr. Wheeler came to Knoxville in 1970 to join the University of Tennessee's History department as a professor, a position he would hold for the remainder of his life, serving as Professor Emeritus upon his retirement in 2003.

He was the author of several books including *TVA and the Tellico Dam: A Bureaucratic Crisis in Post-Industrial America* and *Knoxville, Tennessee: Continuity and Change in an Appalachian City*.

Below are excerpts from the UT History Department and Bruce's obituary:

For a generation of UT students, Wheeler will be best remembered as a devoted and creative teacher. As one of his former students noted upon his retirement, he "epitomizes the teacher we all had at some point in our lives who had such a profound effect on us that he or she shaped the way we view the world."

Bruce particularly loved his students and always included stories of them in his presentations. One favorite was an evaluation written by a history student that read, "He's a pretty good teacher, but he talks too much about the past!"



The cover of the third edition of Dr. Wheeler's book about Knoxville, Tennessee



Dr. Bruce Wheeler leads at the Caney Creek singing at Beech Grove Primitive Baptist Church in 1999

Bruce was an instrumental figure in harp singing over the past 50 years. His friendship and partnership with Larry Olszewski, Burl Adams and other singers, particularly in Wear's Valley, made him a key component to the preservation of the tradition.

After Larry's death, Bruce served as moderator of the singings at Headrick's Chapel, Valley View Baptist, and his beloved home church, Wears Valley United Methodist.

As a moderator, Bruce was perfect at holding order and arranging leaders. He always kept the attention of the class with his professorial air and an extremely quick wit. He was unrivaled in his enthusiasm while leading a song. He didn't have time to be technical, he was too busy enjoying it!

If you'll turn to page 227 in your harp book you'll see where he helped author the foreword to the restored edition, which is inarguably the most important edition of the *New Harp of Columbia* since its publication in 1867.



Dr. Bruce Wheeler leads in his familiar enthusiastic style

In the foreword Bruce writes,

As modernity intruded into East Tennessee, there were cries that the old ways would be lost in a plethora of traffic and shopping malls. And, to be sure, harp singings have changed, as more and more newcomers sit side-by-side with long-time singers. Even so, harp singing is a tradition that has stubbornly hung on, a rock that a changing and modernizing world cannot move.

Below is an original composition by Jeremy Shipp. A tune to honor the memory of Cora Beasley Sweatt Jones with a text to honor her favorite verse of scripture.

CORA.

Jeremy Shipp, 2024

Psalm 19:14

Authorized Version

Old Harp Tradition

By: Elizabeth Shipp (Age 14)

Why do we take the effort to commit to the art of old harp?

We do it because we love to sing. We commit time and effort and funds because the music is spectacular, because we love to socialize and talk to long-time friends, and because every church or community center we meet in is invariably a beautiful spot in the country.

I love going to each singing because we always see the beautiful mountains, the old countryside that is the heart of East Tennessee; we pass by the beautiful creeks and old cantilever barns that are only in these mountains. I enjoy seeing people I have known since before I can remember. I always look forward to fellowshiping with friends and mentors. And, of course, we come to sing. My dad says that this singing is at the heart of great music. But there is also another reason we devote energy to singing. It is because Old Harp singing is a tradition.

A tradition, a custom preserved by the people, is vital to a community. Tradition provides identity. It brings together people from similar backgrounds. As a common practice by different people groups, it transforms a common populace into an integrated community.

Old Harp singing is a tradition, a fragile custom that is kept alive by the people who sing. The tradition of singing has been passed down for generations; it was stronger decades ago but it is still alive today. Singings have been going on so long only because there were people to carry them forward. Without people to sing there is no music. It's so important to keep going to singings, because our book is a tradition. It is a root of the past.

Old Harp is full of history and heritage. Every song we sing has some meaning to us. People have gone before us and sang those same songs, and now we sing them. We meet new people, make friends, and learn about our past, from singing in this book. The music is from long ago, and as a very wise man once said, a tradition that is strong enough to continue hundreds of years is valuable and should be kept alive. It is our privilege to carry on this tradition. Keep singing!



Odie Abbott holding baby Elizabeth Shipp with Jeremy Shipp at Laurel Theater



Scott Swanton, who passed away earlier this year, pictured left, singing with fellow Christian Harmony singer, Larry Beveridge, at Valley View



Scott Swanton, Martha Graham and Larry Beveridge at Headrick's Chapel

The following article is excerpted from “Holy Manna: How Old Harp Singing in East Tennessee is Surviving in a New Wilderness” (August 2021) by Amanda Rogers Askins

Keepers of the Spirit

By: Mandy Askins

There are a lot of elements of old harp singing, but perhaps the key element, of officially entering the “inner circle” of the square, so to speak, is about the communal element that springs from a deeply personal place. This is manifested in what I have come to call songs of ownership.

Here is a list of ownership phrases I happened to catch over a six-month period:

“This was Larry’s song.”

“This was Bruce’s song”

“That one was Martha’s song.”

“Can we sing Christine’s song?”

“She leads that one so well, I’m going to have to find myself a new song.”

“This one used to be another lady’s song, but she passed away, you should take it—you have a high voice like she did.”

“I thought this was her song, but I’ll lead it.”

“I’m not surprised he called that one—it’s always been his.”

“This one was my Grandma’s.”

“I’ve never led this one before, but it was one of Larry’s so I’m gonna try it tonight.”

“Well, it used to be one of mine, but I gave it up. Haven’t led it in a while.”

“Let’s sing this for Gideon, it was his song.”

“Let’s all remember Larry when we sing this one. It was his.”

“Jeremy, this one is yours as you’re the only one I’ve ever known to lead it.”

“Tony this one’s your song, I’ve never heard anyone call it but you.”

“This one’s becoming yours Elizabeth, you lead it every single time.”

“He oughta know this one—it’s his momma’s song.”

“That was mine at one time...”

“This one was one of Myrtle’s songs.”

Singing tunes that recall a former member as a way of preserving that member’s memory and presence in the square is a hallmark of old harp singing.



Reba (Whaley) Clabo Harmon singing at Caney Creek



Claire White leads at Headrick’s Chapel

Keepers of the Spirit (cont'd.)

At the Caney Creek Singing in June of 2021, David and Joe Sarten thanked Andrew Whaley for leading No. 72 MY MOTHER'S BIBLE that day in honor of their family. They remembered their grandmother and aunts singing it while doing dishes and working around the house and garden. Whaley's response piqued my interest: "I'd never really heard it. It was pretty much gone since whoever had sang it had stopped leading it...and we didn't know it...and no one was around who remembered it, so we had to guess and sing it how it is written in the book." I questioned his statement of a song being "gone" when it was clearly right there in the tunebook. The little group began citing example after example of songs that were gone because the people who sang them were gone.



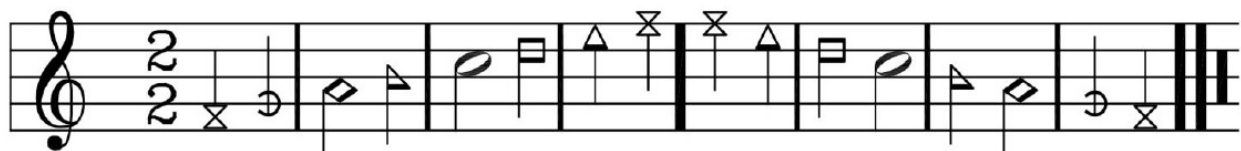
The alto section at the Maryville College singing in October 2023

That day the center of the square crystallized as a sacred space in my mind—a place both of resilience and of fragility. Without an owner to ensure survival each tune was an endangered species. The center of the square was a bridge between history and modernity, a cross section of realities, into which leaders stepped to offer their lesson to the class. A lesson that, at its core, bore the one and same message for all: do not forget. A lesson that if all entered, a sound could be produced that, as David Sarten puts it, "you can stand up and walk on it."

Old harp singers use song ownership as a living, active preservation of a singing tradition and the community it created, and it comes from a place of love and devotion to the music itself. Participation in the past through song ownership creates a meaningful present to carry into the future—the holy triad of old harp singing that exists only and briefly in the center of the square. What makes someone an old harp singer? The answer is found in finding your own song within the pages and past of *New Harp of Columbia* and using it in resilient building of a community, not untouched by time, but made better by it. Perhaps Larry Olszewski's most insightful comment into the making of a harp singer came in 1999: "There are no good singers, there are no bad singers, there are only keepers of the spirit."

The rudiments and singing the tunes are the gate, the poetry is the connective path, and the journey ends at the center of the square where there, bridging time, history, and memory, the spirit is kept and passed from one singer to the next as all in "perpetual covenant join, I am bound for the promised land."

NOTE: Pictures were obtained from the collections of Larry Olszewski, Sara Melton, Larry Beveridge, Jonathon Smith and others.



Name: Do Ra Mi Fa Sol La Si Do Do Si La Sol Fa Mi Ra Do
Pronounced: Do Ray Mee Faw Sole Law See Do Do See Law Sole Faw Mee Ray Do

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Editor: Andrew Whaley

OLD HARP ANNUAL SINGINGS 2024

Visit www.oldharp.org or follow Old Harp Singing in East Tennessee on Facebook

Date	Day	Time	Singing Location & Contact
Mar. 15	Friday	6:00 PM	Jubilee Festival- Laurel Theater- Knoxville, TN <i>Tina Becker & Jeremy Shipp</i>
Mar. 24	Sunday	2:00	Boogertown Singing- Oldham's Creek Missionary Baptist Church- Sevier County, TN- <i>Hal Wilson & Andrew Whaley</i>
TBD			Great Smoky Mountains Heritage Center- Townsend, TN <i>Robin Goddard</i>
Apr. 14	Sunday	2:00	Tuckaleechee United Methodist Church- Townsend, TN <i>Tom & Nan Taylor</i>
May 5	Sunday (1 st)	2:00	Middle Creek United Methodist Church- Pigeon Forge, TN <i>David Sarten</i>
June 1	Saturday	†10:00	Franklin Singing- New Bethel Cumberland Presbyterian Church- Greeneville, TN- <i>Jeff Farr</i>
June 23	Sunday (4 th)	2:00	Caney Creek Singing- Beech Grove Primitive Baptist Church- Pigeon Forge, TN- <i>Sharee Green</i>
July 21	Sunday (3 rd)	2:00	Little Greenbrier Schoolhouse- Great Smoky Mountains National Park- <i>Robin Goddard</i>
Aug. 18	Sunday (3 rd)	2:00	Cades Cove Primitive Baptist Church Great Smoky Mountains National Park- <i>Robin Goddard</i>
Sep. 21	Saturday	†10:00	Wears Valley Convention- Valley View Baptist Church (Saturday) & Headrick's Chapel (Sunday) <i>David Sarten and Andrew Whaley</i>
Sep. 22	Sunday (4 th)	†10:00	
Oct. 27	Sunday (4 th)	2:00	Maryville College- Center for Campus Ministry <i>Tom & Nan Taylor & Nancy Olsen</i>
Nov. 27	Wed.	*6:30	Larry Olszewski Memorial- Laurel Theater, Knoxville <i>Tina Becker</i>
Jan. 4 (2024)	Saturday (1 st)	†10:00	New Year's All Day Singing- Claxton Community Center- Anderson County, TN <i>Jeremy Shipp, Phillip Pardue, Sara Melton</i>

*Dinner on the ground followed by singing

†Dinner on the ground in between singing sessions

Monthly Singings: (Please, contact to confirm as some monthly singings are subject to cancellation)

KNOX COUNTY, TN- As announced (Contact Jeremy Shipp)

SEVIER COUNTY, TN- Middle Creek United Methodist Church- 3rd Tuesdays at 7:00 PM (David Sarten)

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SINGING LOCATIONS

Laurel Theater- 1538 Laurel Ave. Knoxville, TN 37916
Oldham's Creek Missionary Baptist Church- 3629 Boogertown Rd. Sevierville, TN 37876
Tuckaleechee United Methodist Church- 7322 Old Tuckaleechee Rd. Townsend, TN 37882
Middle Creek United Methodist Church- 1828 Middle Creek Rd, Pigeon Forge, TN 37863
New Bethel Cumberland Presbyterian Church- 90 Cox Rd, Greeneville, TN 37745
Beech Grove Primitive Baptist Church- 625 Caney Creek Rd, Pigeon Forge, TN 37863
Little Greenbrier Schoolhouse- Turn off Wear Cove Gap Rd. onto Little Greenbriar Rd. (The schoolhouse is at the end of the road on the right)
Cades Cove Primitive Baptist Church- Cades Cove Loop Rd, Townsend, TN 37882 (Turn off Cades Cove Loop Rd left onto a gravel road, if you get to the Methodist or Missionary Baptist Churches you've gone too far)
Valley View Baptist Church- 2219 Little Cove Rd, Sevierville, TN 37862
Headrick's Chapel- 4317 Wears Valley Rd, Sevierville, TN 37862
Maryville College Center for Campus Ministry- 211 Maryville College, Circle Dr, Maryville, TN 37804
Great Smoky Mountains Heritage Center- 123 Cromwell Dr, Townsend, TN 37888
Greeneville Cumberland Presbyterian Church- 201 N Main St, Greeneville, TN 37745
Claxton Community Center- 1071 Edgemoor Rd. Clinton, TN 37716