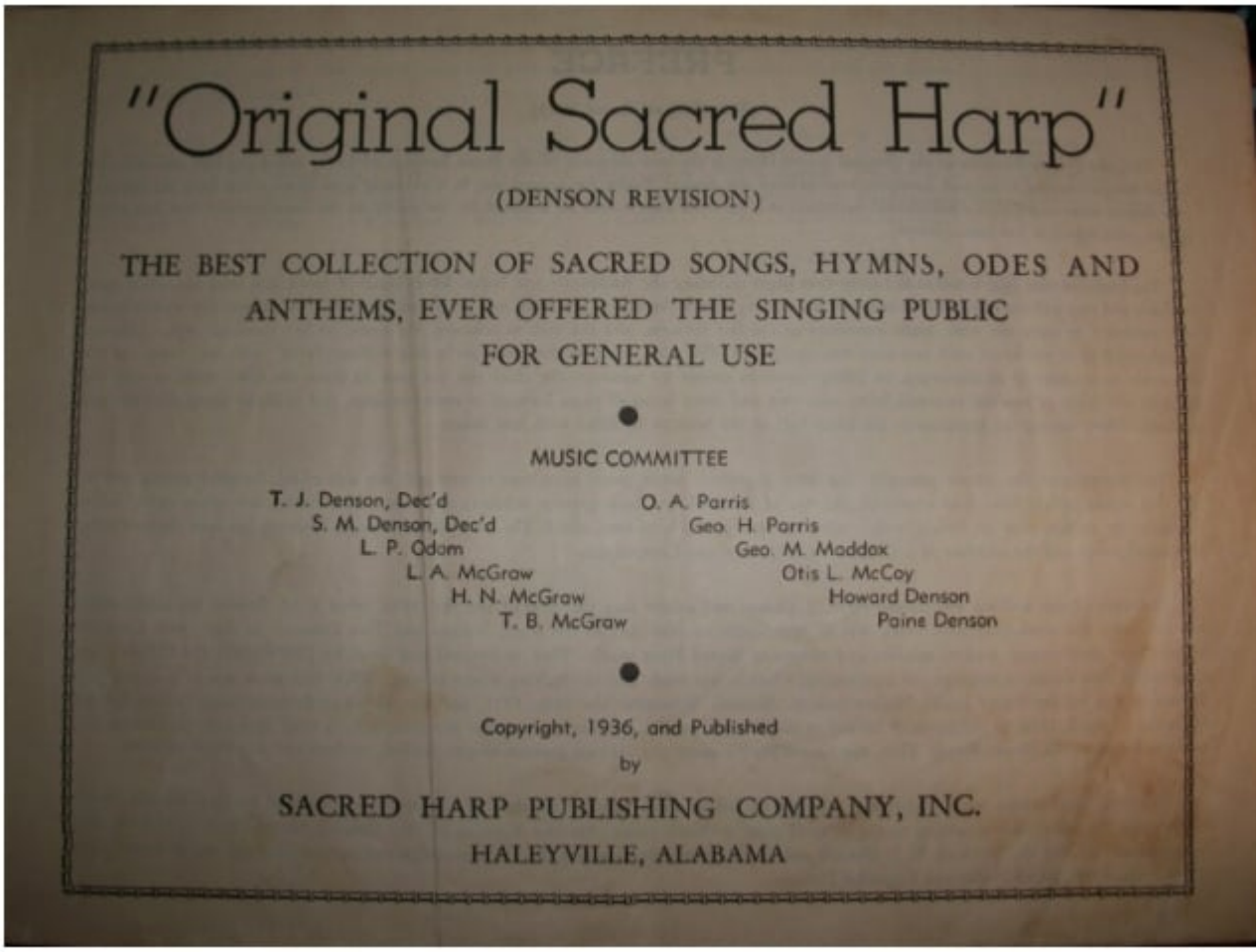
A Neglected American Classic

By Geoffrey Clarfield

Until the reelection of President Donald Trump, the conservative intellectual movement has been fighting a rearguard action—justly exposing the negative dynamics of wokeness, "diversity, equity, and inclusion," and Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions—and advocating for a return to the Great Books and liberal education.

Given the pending shutdown of the nefarious federal Department of Education, there is hope that the Anglosphere—starting in the U.S.—will begin the return to educational sanity.



It is in that spirit, as a practical ethnomusicologist, that I would like to bring to the wider reading public a group of sung hymns that were first composed here. Because of secular

and leftist bias, none of them are ever thought of as American poetry—but they are.

You can read all about this remarkable spiritual and poetic tradition, which is also a living folk and religious tradition in the South and now across the country as an "affinity group" (hobby), in the uniquely American book of hymns called *The Sacred Harp*. (Here is a link to the book of hymns and here is a scholarly study on their evolution.)

But since this is a living tradition, and I am spending this month in North Carolina, I thought I would engage in some participant observation—for that is the job of both anthropologists and ethnomusicologists.

When mostly English-speaking British Protestants came to the thirteen colonies before independence, they brought with them the songs, dances, and fiddle music of the Anglo-Irish world from which they hailed.

These musical practices, once widely spread, survived largely unscathed in Appalachia, though they evolved over time, partly due to interaction with African American musicians—both enslaved and free—who added a bluesy feel to a tradition that now forms the living roots of what we call Country and Western.

Through the modern miracle of broadcasting and records, this once very local and remote musical tradition is now famous around the world.

These hardy pioneers also brought with them a different musical tradition that was once widespread across the thirteen colonies. It survived in the South after the Civil War in a reduced capacity, as modern media introduced the processed and homogenized hymns of Northern Protestants to the region following World War II. These newer hymns had stylistically diverged from the older hymn-singing tradition.

This indigenous tradition of hymn writing and performance is known as shape note singing, and it is preserved in a hymnal called *The Sacred Harp*. It is distinguished by a unique notation system that differs from standard musical notation: notes are represented by shapes, and their position on the scale is mirrored in hand motions. This makes it easy for both beginners and established singers to join in at a moment's notice.

For those interested in Renaissance musical notation, the shape note system echoes—or at least parallels—that of Elizabethan notation.

The Sacred Harp is a deeply communal form of prayer in the churches where it has been, and in some cases still is, practiced. It is also kept alive by a growing number of affinity groups who sing it for the sheer joy of the art. Singers are arranged in four quadrants, facing one another, with each quadrant representing a different vocal range—from bass to higher registers. Although the hymns number in the hundreds, each participant is allowed to "call out" the number of a hymn and then stand in the center of the square to lead the group using the appropriate hand movements. Afterward, the leader sits down, and someone else—typically someone adjacent—calls the next tune.

It is an egalitarian form of worship and performance, and in a word that has nearly lost its original meaning, it is *inclusive*.

Folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax was one of the first secular outsiders to record Sacred Harp singing in the remote churches of the South just after World War II. In fact, he did so in stereo.

In 2012, Lomax's non-governmental organization, the Association for Cultural Equity at the Alan Lomax Archive in New York, released a newly curated version of these field

recordings. (I must disclose my bias, as I worked for the Archive for several years and continue to follow its website closely.)

The recordings are a delight and a time capsule of music from the Old South before the South was industrialized during and after WWII.

Lomax also opined in his scholarly writings that this form of folk polyphony is dramatically different in harmonic structure from what we associate with later British hymn singing—just think of *All Things Bright and Beautiful*—and the classical harmonies so influenced by Opera, German, and Italian harmonic theory and practice.

Lomax believed that the structure of Sacred Harp harmony partook of a tradition of folk European polyphony that had little or nothing to do with the "great tradition" which we now call classical music.

As a "Sound Traveller" based in North Carolina for a month this spring, I was committed to finding a Sacred Harp singing group and showing up for what they call a "sing." And so, on the internet, I found a group of Sacred Harp singers from the North Carolina Shape Note website that meet regularly at Warren Wilson College just outside of Swananoa, near the city of Asheville.

After a leisurely drive west across Highway 40, I arrived at our destination in a high-ceilinged recital hall located in the music department of that wooded college on a hillside.

I was welcomed by Sarah, a young-looking music teacher who explained the rudiments of the system, asked about my singing background, lent us two hymn books, and encouraged us to follow the notes and sing when and if we got it right. My wife and I then sat in two chairs just behind the four quadrants.

As it says on the website:

Many people are self-conscious or intimidated by singing mostly due to a lack of confidence in their voice. Either they've been told they couldn't sing, sounded bad, or generally have not received good education or feedback concerning their voices. If this sounds like you, but you still enjoy community singing, or making a "joyful noise," then shape note is your answer! Many shape note singers are untrained, and some have even learned to sing through the tradition. Not confident you'll be singing the right notes? Due to the full-voiced nature of shape note singing, your wrong note will never stick out in the crowd, and you will most likely have singers, on either side of you, belting the correct note, making it easier for you to find.

Shape note singing is a tradition that welcomes people from all backgrounds, genders, races, and creeds. We strive to make the hollow square a welcoming and safe place to learn, experiment, and make mistakes. No matter what you sound like, all voices are welcome!

I found all of this to be true. My wife and I felt welcome, and although I explained to Sarah that I had once been a boy soprano at the Canadian National Opera centuries ago, I would probably not sing. Well, that soon proved to be incorrect as the custom is to "sol fa" through the entire melodic line of the hymn once before you begin singing the melodies with words. And so here and there, I had enough pattern recognition not to sing out of tune.

Nevertheless, I stayed respectfully silent on those hymns which had those wonderful, peculiar, and archaic melodic and harmonic lines that for me send a shiver up my spine as they were a sonic blast from the past—a past when all Americans were devout, had "God on their side," and thought themselves as "New Israelites" in a promised land across the water, away from Pharaoh, the King in Britain.

During the two hours of this singing, I did not detect any

African American influences in the harmonies or melodies or in the delivery of the singing. It was full-throated and open—as open as the ballad singing of Appalachia is closed, high-pitched and tight-throated, what Alan Lomax famously labelled “that high and lonesome sound.”

An ethnomusicologist might opine that the groupy, open-throated, faith-based hymns of the Sacred Harp are the emotional and spiritual counterpart to the earthy, sexual, individualistic, and hedonistic music of the region’s banjo players and fiddlers—such as the great North Carolinian Bascom Lamar Lunsford or fiddler Tommy Jarrell, whom Lomax recorded here in the 1980s—men who were not averse to supplementing their family incomes with illegal moonshine production and sales.

I marveled at the nonlinear nature of singing Sacred Harp. Although all the hymns are numbered, they comprise more than three hundred compositions, ranging from the 1700s and 1800s—some having been rearranged as recently as 1991, which is the latest edition of this remarkable hymnbook.

The lyrics of these hymns are notably absent from collections of American poetry, betraying the northern and secular bias of the literary elites of America’s academic and publishing world. These are the kinds of hymns that evangelist Billy Graham no doubt heard as a young man when he was an anthropology and theology student here in pre-WWII North Carolina, his home state.

Sacred Harp lyrics speak of wonder, gratitude, sin, and salvation and recount episodes from both the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, each hymn has a relevant quote from either testament below the title and number of the hymn to put the reader in the correct spiritual mood.

If you bring an academic approach to things sacred and profane from your modern college education, you will miss the

worldview behind the hymns. The creators of these hymns believed that Americans were on a sacred journey—or a pilgrim's progress—to create a New Jerusalem on this side of the Atlantic.

Here are the lyrics of one such hymn, written by John McCreery in 1850 and which we would now—and ethnocentrically—call "patriotic."

Hymn Number 36- The spirits of Washington, Warren, Montgomery

The spirits of Washington, Warren, Montgomery,
Look down from the clouds with bright aspect serene.
Come, soldiers, a tear and a toast to their mem'ry,
Rejoicing they'll see us as they once have been.
To us the high boon, by the gods have been granted,
Te spread the glad tidings of liberty far.
Let millions invade us, we'll meet them undaunted,
and conquer or die by the American Star.

Before I knew it, our two hours were up. Sarah, the coordinator, announced when and where the next singing would be and in deference to people's denominational inclinations, explained that they would not be singing hymns on soon-to-be-celebrated Easter Sunday—in deference to full-blown 21st-century American religious pluralism.

Aside from that slight bow to modernity, during those two hours, I was sonically and poetically catapulted into preindustrial America—a time when profound faith touched the lives of almost every citizen and was celebrated with unique American harmonies and literary creations of lasting quality.

I will soon be back for another "sing."

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