

COMMENTARY

'Tune book' tradition fades

■ All-day gatherings to eat, socialize and sing fall victim to changing times.

For many years, at least from 1920 through the 1950s, there were gatherings of singers who brought with them their often tattered copies of an 1856 edition of the "American Tune Book" by Dr. Lowell Mason.

The singers, most of them men and few of them young, would gather at a country church or school for a day of singing and picnicking.

The roots of the event were in what old-timers called a "singing school." There are references to groups meeting for "all-day singing" as far back as the early 1800s. The first songbook that was appropriate for such singings was "Southern Harmony" by William Walker, published in 1835. In 1844 Walker's brother-in-law,

B.F. White, published "Sacred Harp." These books, alongside the later "American Tune Book," were used for as long as the bindings held together.

In 1919 singers formed the York County Tune Book Association. There was a similar organization in Gaston County and another in Mecklenburg County. Members of any one county group were likely to show up in the neighboring counties.

The singers came from all over — Columbia and Charlotte always had good representation at the annual events. E. Meek Dickson directed York County's singing for many years. L.L. Henderson of Union Church in Gaston County and R.C. Freeman of Steele Creek in Mecklenburg County were other noted leaders.

There were others who never missed an

annual meeting and not just annual meetings. Often groups got together to practice before the major event. I.P. Boyd of Mount Holly near Rock Hill had perfect attendance. The usual time to meet was "lay-by" time, or "slack time," for the farmer — the period in late August when the cotton had been chopped and was not yet ready to be picked.

In 1934 the American Tune Book Sing was at Kings Mountain Chapel. About 150 joined in the singing. The audience came from four or five counties. Candidates for political office were usually present. They didn't sing, but they did "work" the crowd.

Typically, the singing began at 10 a.m. Soup simmered in giant kettles ready for a break around noon when the picnic baskets were opened and people got ready for "dinner on the grounds." After lunch, singing continued until 5 p.m., when people departed in an assortment of vehicles including wagons, buggies and Model-T cars.

Elizabeth Reed, writing about the 1950 Tune Book Sing at Beth-Shiloh Presbyterian Church near York, described the singing in this fashion: "Many of the songs are in a strange and unusual minor key. Often the director dispenses with the piano and the voices of the singers rise and fall in a slow cadence of unusual beauty. . . . Above the song is the meter, S.M. for short meter, C.M. for common meter, L.M. for long meter and P.M. for peculiar meter."

Ms. Reed added that the songs didn't really have titles, or at least didn't have titles with any meaning. At the head of the page were terms such as "Beloath," "Perez," "Otto" and "Ovio." Some people called it "round-note music."

About 350 people attended the 1950 meeting. The major event was the distribution of a newly published reprint of the 1856 songbook.

Kelly Robinson of Gastonia had found that J.E. Lindsay, a York County native then living in Gastonia, had a perfect copy of the old book. Robinson was instrumental in getting the reprint published in Charlotte.

Frances Glenn wrote of the 1952 annual meeting at Allison Creek Presbyterian Church: "Just as in the old-time singing school, the tenors, altos, basses and sopranos sat in sections to provide harmony to the singing. Differing from modern-day singing, the congregation sang 'do-re-mi's' for the length of the tune, substituting the words on the second stanza."

In 1953 the Annual York County Tune Book Association singing was held at Olivet Presbyterian Church at McConnells. Several hundred were present. N. Blair Dulin of Bowling Green was the leader of the 1953 group.

In 1958 the 38th annual all-day singing meeting was held at Beersheba Presbyterian Church. It was a joint meeting with the singing led by York County's N. Blair Dulin of Bowling Green, Gaston County's Roy Lineberger and Claude Davis and Eddie Meek Williams of Columbia.

We don't know when the last meeting of the York County Tune Book Association occurred, but we suspect it died out along with some of the old-time leaders. One factor undoubtedly would have been the vanishing of old patterns of rural life, particularly the disappearance of cotton farming. (now being revived but along different lines).

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Nearby history

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