

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS Colloquy

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Singing School, Cades Cove Primitive Baptist Church, 1901 (COURTESY OF THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK LIBRARY)

“Union Harmony” SINGING SCHOOLS AND SHAPE NOTE SINGING IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

Early Euro-American settlers arrived in the Smokies with existing sacred song traditions. Their music, like the music of their American contemporaries, was typically sung from memory, unaccompanied by instruments, and was monophonic with everyone singing only the melody. In the early nineteenth century, shape note hymnals and singing schools began to be introduced into the region. Singing schools were developed in New England in the early eighteenth century to improve congregational part singing by teaching traditional music notation. Shape note hymnals that replaced the head of the note used in traditional music notation with a shape that represented a scale degree and a “fa, sol, la” syllable were created as singing school manuals. Some systems used four shapes with four corresponding syllables to represent the seven scale degrees while others used seven distinct shapes and syllables. The singing schools and the shape note tradition were successful and slowly migrated across the country.

(continued on page 2)



Views in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park: Images from Thompson Brothers Photo Albums now available online

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Singing Schools and Shape Note Singing, continued

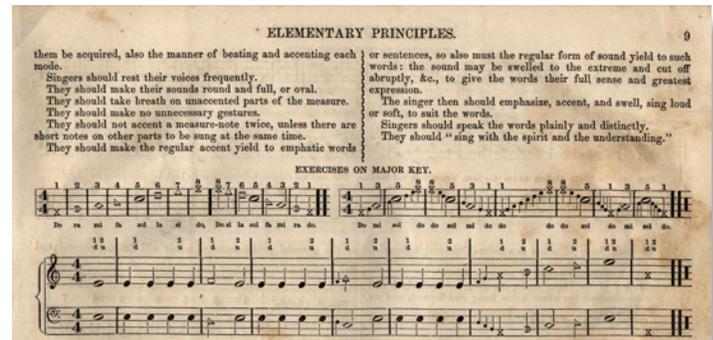
Margaret Elisabeth Gamble's thesis, *The Heritage and Folk Music of Cades Cove, Tennessee* (1947, University of Southern California) quotes former Cades Cove resident John McCauley's recollection of singing schools once held in the Cove:

People in the community collected the money for the school teacher to come. When the school started everyone was welcome.... It started at eight in the morning and went to three in the afternoon.... The teacher had a black board with a staff. The teacher would write the notes on the staff and would use the shaped notes, and then came the Harp song book, and later the Gospel Hymnal.

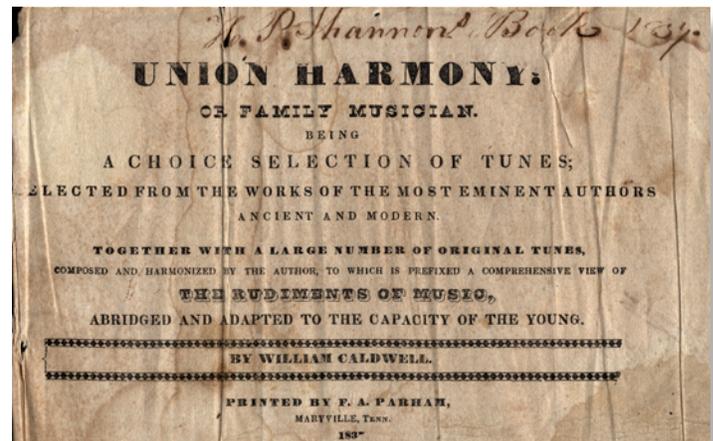
The teacher sang through the song showing the rise and fall of the voice—the holds and half note and quarter note and sixteenth note. The teacher was teaching the shaped notes—what they meant. At the same time teaching the correct pitch on the staff. The teacher sang over and over the hard places until everyone got it correctly.... He had a long pointer which beat out the time as they sang. The teacher had a tuning fork to get the proper pitch.

After a song was learned the teacher would choose someone to lead the song, and would teach him how to beat time. In this way he trained leaders to carry on after his departure. The teacher would also pick small groups to sing. All the men, women, and children of the community would come to the singing school whether they paid or not.

Singing school teachers frequently sold the hymnals used in the schools. Another Gamble informant, Mrs. Anthony, lists some shape note hymnals used in the Cove including *Perennial Songs* (Dalton, GA: A.J. Showalter, 1891), *Work and Worship* (Dalton, GA: A.J. Showalter, 1886), *The Crowning Day* (Dayton, VA: Ruebush-Kieffer, Co., 1894), and *New Life* (Nashville, TN: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1884). At least three shape note hymnals were printed in towns local to the Smokies. William Caldwell's *Union Harmony or Family Musician* was first printed in Maryville, TN, in 1837; John B. Jackson's *Knoxville Harmony of Music Made Easy* was first printed in Madisonville, TN, in 1838; and W.H. and M.L. Swan's *Harp of Columbia* was first printed in Knoxville, TN in 1849. These contained songs borrowed from earlier works as well as songs written by the editor of the respective editions. *Union Harmony or Family Musician* and *Harp of Columbia* were particularly well known. *Harp of Columbia*, revised and reissued first in 1867 as *The New Harp of Columbia*, remains in print to this day and is so famous in the region that singers using any shape note hymnal on the Tennessee side of the mountains are frequently called "harp singers."



Elementary principles of shape note notation from the 1849 edition of Harp of Columbia (UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)



Title page of the 1837 edition of Union Harmony or Family Musician printed in Maryville, TN (UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)

Communities in the Smokies largely quit hosting singing schools in the early twentieth century, but local groups continue to hold "singings" from shape note hymnals, perhaps most famously in Wears Valley. These events are very similar to the one witnessed by Gamble in August 1946 at the Antioch Baptist Church. After describing the small, coal-oil lamp-lit church where the traditionally notated *Broadman Hymnal* was used during regular church services, Ms. Gamble tells of singers arriving with their own Harp books and sitting according to their vocal part facing the song leader in the center of the group.

The leader would ask what they would like to sing. Someone would call out number 33, etc. They never called it by name. Immediately the leader would know what the song was that had been called. He did not have to look to see. This was true throughout the congregation I observed as the afternoon progressed. They knew the book so well that the pages were even memorized.

The leader would give the pitch, or sometime he'd say, 'Brother Joe, you give the pitch.' The leader would hold his hand out and they would give the chord first. Then they would sing the syllables, and followed with the words.... After one leader finished, they would say, 'We're goin' to have the next lesson by Mr. McCarter. We want to give everyone a chance.'

Singing Schools and Shape Note Singing, continued

Margaret Gamble, a formally educated music teacher, remarked, “How amazed I was at the accuracy of the syllable work. How easy it seemed for them, and how hard we work in school to teach syllables! ...It is hard to put into words the singing of those songs. Instead of a smooth blending of voices as we try to have in our church and in choirs—these rugged folk enthusiastically poured heart and soul into their singing.” Obviously, the original aims of the singing schools and the shape note hymnals took root and continue to resonate in the Smokies.

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Thompson Photos of the Smokies Now Available on the Internet

The Smokies Project and the University of Tennessee Digital Library have released the first phase of the Thompson Brothers Digital Photograph Collection. The digital rendering of the photograph albums held by Harvard University and Colorado College can be viewed at <http://dlc.lib.utk.edu/thompson>. The single image collection which includes photographs from the Calvin H. McClung Collection of the Knox County Library and from the University of Tennessee Special Collections as well as unique images from the photograph albums will be added in the second phase, expected to be released in the next couple of months. For more on the Harvard and Colorado albums, see a previous issue of the *Colloquy*: <http://www.lib.utk.edu/smokies/images/colloquy.8.2.pdf>.



TOP: Making baskets and magazine rack stands
ABOVE: A panoramic view of Mt. LeConte in winter

Smoky Mountain Mystery THE HOT PIT ON GUARDHOUSE MOUNTAIN

During the Cherokee Removal of the 1830s, federal troops built a guardhouse or stockade fort named Fort Lindsay at the foot of an insignificant Smoky Mountain peak later known by the local mountaineers as Guardhouse Mountain. Accounts from Smoky Mountain old-timers claim that Guardhouse Mountain is a sawtooth peak lying just west of Monteith Creek. However, the name does not appear on any map.

Somewhere on Guardhouse Mountain is a big rock that juts out of the ground about three feet and leans at a right angle. The interesting oddity about this jutting rock is that down under it is a hole or pit from which smoke and heat boil out continuously. In the days before Guardhouse Mountain was part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, hunters out in wintertime would often stop by the hot pit to warm their hands and feet. Others remember as children being taken for a visit to the hot pit and sitting around the edge dangling their feet over the warm hole.

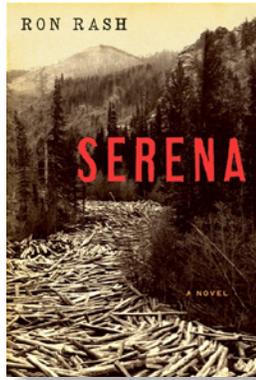
Guardhouse Mountain was once owned by Bart Welch, and he was always afraid that somebody would go up there and fall in the hole. Children were never allowed to play there and later, when the hole got bigger, Welch put up a wire net and cleared the ground around the hole so no one would accidentally stumble upon it and fall in.

The most recent information the *Colloquy* editors have been able to locate about the hot pit on Guardhouse Mountain is a second-hand account in a newspaper article written by John Parris in 1986 (*Asheville Citizen-Times*, March 23). The Smoky mountaineers who once sat around the hot pit dangling their legs over the edge were told by their forebears that the hole had once been much smaller, about the size of a large pumpkin, thus leading Parris to suggest that the heat and smoke boiling up through the mountain is “some mysterious caldron of the world underneath the earth’s crust.”

In his newspaper article Parris identifies Guardhouse Mountain no more precisely than as lying west of Monteith Creek and nothing on the specific location of the hot pit. If readers of the *Colloquy* have any information on the location of this mysterious hot pit or about Guardhouse Mountain in general, please contact us at smokies@utk.edu. We will certainly pass on any information we receive in our next issue.

New on the Smokies Bookshelf

Ron Rash. *Serena*.
New York: Harper Collins, 2008.



“Jobs or a pretty view” is the choice that mountaineers face according to George Pemberton, head of the Boston Lumber Company in 1929. This succinct phrase summarizes the back drop for a story of greed and obsession set in the lumber camps of Western North Carolina. Serena Pemberton, who had recently joined new husband George, soon proves she is equal to any man in her understanding of the lumber industry and her work intensity. In her desire to wring every cent from the land, she takes ruthless management to a new level, as workers die accidentally every day from snakebites to misdirected falling trees.

While the lumber executives are greedy and selfish, the local people are generally portrayed as hard-working, superstitious, and fatalistic, caught in a system that is designed to eventually make their efforts obsolete as the timber stands disappear. Some align themselves closely with the Pembertons to curry favor while others remain outside of their influence. *Serena* is rich in details about mountain life, both folk and traditional medicine, the hazards of the lumbering profession, and the world view of the workers.

Peppered throughout the book are characters based on real people who were prominent in the national park movement, including National Park Service Director Horace Albright, writer Horace Kephart, and *Asheville Citizen* editor George Webb. They lend an aura of authenticity to the struggle between the proponents of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the lumber barons who are determined to cut every last tree on their land.

Toward the end of book, two of the local men, Henryson and Ross, realize that in their culpability with the lumber companies, they have poisoned the creeks and dispersed the wildlife, destroying their very homes:

“There was game too,” Ross said, “deer and rabbit and coons.”

“Squirrels and bear and beaver and bobcats,” Henryson added.

“And panthers,” Ross said. “I seen one ten year ago on this very creek, but I’ll not see ever a one on it again.”

Ross paused and lit his cigarette. He took a deep draw and let the smoke slowly wispy from his mouth.

“And I had my part in the doing of it.”

“We had to feed our families,” Henryson said.

“Yes, we did,” Ross agreed. “What I’m wondering is how we’ll feed them once all the trees is cut and the jobs leave.”

They conclude their conversation by observing that the animals can move to the new national park but there will be no such option for the people who are losing their homes.



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