

I began my Berea College Appalachian Music Fellowship during the summer after my first year as master's student in Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University, where I have been researching and writing a thesis on the evolution of rural hymnody in Watauga County, North Carolina, focusing in particular on the persistence of seven-shape gospel music in independent, rural churches. My family's association with shape-note music¹ dates to the early twentieth century, when my great-grandfather sang out of *The Sacred Harp* in Coffeerville, Mississippi. My great-grandfather's *Sacred Harp* has been passed down through the generations and is now one of my prized possessions. In the 1940s and 50s, my maternal grandfather attended seven-shape gospel singing schools in rural Arkansas and he and my grandmother regularly attended shape-note singings at local churches, including Hickory Valley Methodist Church founded by my great, great, great grandfather and home of the annual Hickory Valley Singing.



¹ Shape-note traditions are both a style and practice of rural hymnody. Known best as a rural tradition and practice, shape notes are rooted in the nuance of music theory and instruction. The shapes themselves, sometimes referred to as character or patent notes, are visual cues that act as points of reference, creating a unique notational style comprised of geometric figures. Defined by this archaic notation printed in either four or seven shapes, shape-note hymnody is perhaps best known for its unique tunebooks and hymnals, such as *The Sacred Harp* and *The Christian Harmony*. While many consider these tomes representative of a monolithic, southern shape-note tradition, they actually represent two divergent notation styles, indicating a diversity frequently obscured by the popularity of specific tunebooks. The history of shape-note traditions encompasses the four and seven-shape notations, as well as the seven-shape gospel tradition that emerged in the late nineteenth century.

Growing up, my mother sang with my grandfather and other church members in a seven-shape gospel quartet at Jamestown Missionary Baptist Church in Jamestown, Arkansas. And now I, a fourth-generation shape-note singer, am exploring my deep roots in rural hymnody in the academic arena.

My academic exploration has taken a somewhat circuitous route: from my own personal interests and life history, to the W. L. Eury Collection at Appalachian State's Belk Library where I delved into scholarship on shape-note traditions, to a number of independent missionary Baptist churches in Watauga County where I spent over a year as a participant observer, to the sound archives at Berea College where I took a very close look at regional surveys that explored Appalachian religion and its traditions, to the national conference of the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada where I had the opportunity to meet and work with shape-note scholar and Baptist hymnologist Dr. Harry Eskew, and to Cleveland, Tennessee, where I spent time in the archives of the Church of God Publishing Company.

When I initially began this project, I understood the seven-shape gospel tradition as both a style and practice of rural hymnody. Scholars have identified three main strands of rural hymnody; the lining-out tradition, the early four and seven shape-note traditions, as well as seven-shape gospel music. While each of these genres originally emerged in the urban North, they persisted most prominently in the rural South, thus earning them their primary designation as rural hymn traditions. Together, these traditions highlight the trajectory of rural hymnody. The first three of the following recordings were made at the 1979 Rural Hymnody Symposium held at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, as part of a concert series intended to give scholars the opportunity to hear live examples of rural hymn traditions that had largely disappeared

elsewhere.² The Mt. Olivet Regular Baptist Church choir sang in the unaccompanied, lining-out tradition, the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers performed out of four and seven-shape tunebooks of the nineteenth century, and the Phipps Family sang popular gospel repertoire, in the Carter Family style.

Mt. Olivet Old Regular Baptist Church: Blackey, Kentucky
Symposium on Rural Hymnody, Berea College Archives
“On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand”
AC OR 066 007-06

Members of the Mt. Olivet Regular Baptist Church sang from the *Sweet Songster* and the *Thomas Hymnal*, text-only hymnals with selections dating back to the eighteenth century. The primary use of two eighteenth century hymnals created a tradition comprised of a set repertoire, consisting of songs and texts contained in the two preferred books. The lining-out tradition of the Primitive and Old-Regular Baptists was one of the first forms of sacred music in the early colonies and therefore considered by some to be the “purest form” of American folk music. It also functioned as an important precursor to the shape-note traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³

² In April of 1979, Berea College hosted a three-day symposium, bringing together scholars and hymn enthusiasts from across the country to study and examine the persistence of sacred music in rural communities. As an institution founded in rural Kentucky to nurture regional culture while providing educational opportunities for young people, Berea College was a logical site for an academic exploration of hymn traditions that persisted prominently within Appalachia. The symposium featured paper presentations as well as three performances of rural singing traditions. According to the project description, the symposium served therefore a two-fold purpose; to bring hymn scholars together for the specific review of rural singing traditions, and to offer those same scholars the opportunity to “test their research and beliefs against the actual performance of rural hymnody by rural singers.” Loyal Jones, “Project Description,” Rural Hymnody Symposium, Berea College Archives, Berea, Kentucky.

³ Mount Olivet Regular Baptist Church Concert, transcription by author. For more information about the singing traditions of Primitive Baptists in Appalachia, refer to Beverly Patterson, *The Sound of the Dove: Singing in Appalachian Primitive Baptist Churches* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

The Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers
Symposium on Rural Hymnody, Berea College Archives
“Wandering To and Fro”
AC 066-004-04

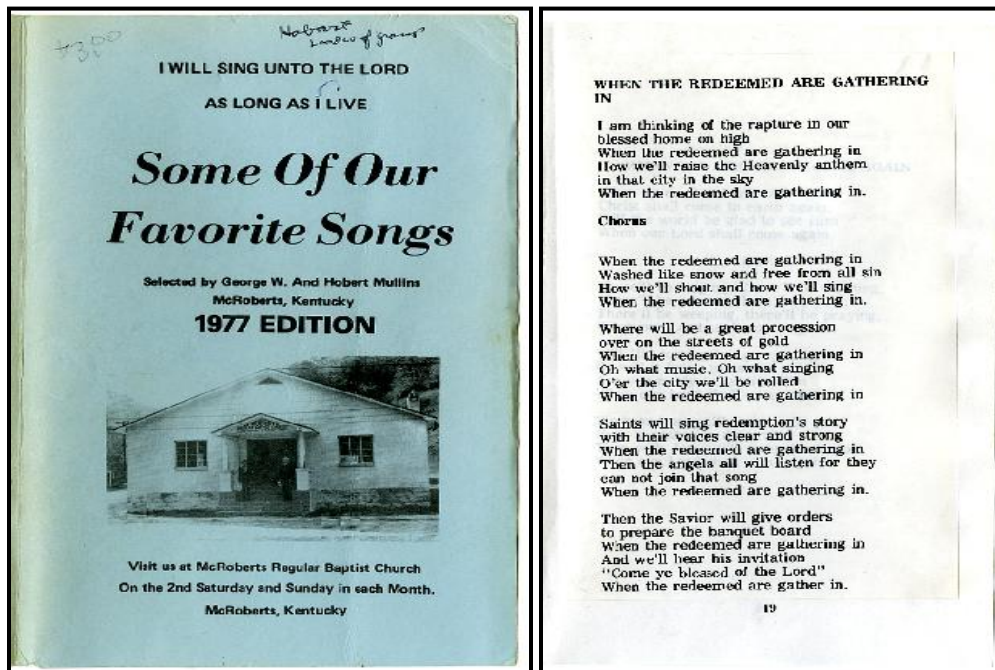
The Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers sang out of *The Sacred Harp* and *The Southern Harmony*, two four-shape tunebooks from the nineteenth century that quickly replaced earlier text-only hymnals in many communities, transforming the ornate, but monophonic hymnody of the lining-out tradition into complex, four-part polyphony.⁴ The transition from text-only hymnals of the lining-out tradition to shape-note tunebooks that printed both text and music necessitated musical instruction that was to become a hallmark of shape-note music. As such, singing schools educated early American settlers in rudimentary music theory, thereby changing the substance and quality of congregational song. The theory and practice taught in early singing schools was initially based on the four-shape system and was later replaced by seven-shape notation.



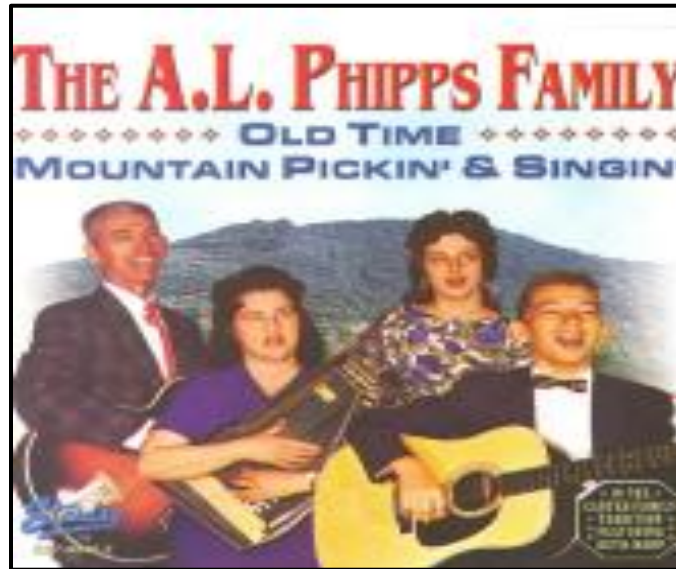
⁴ Monophony is defined as a single, melodic line without harmonization, while polyphony refers to music with at least two melodic lines, implying harmonization.

McRoberts Regular Baptist Church: Letcher County, KY, October 7, 1977
William H. Tallmadge Collection, Southern Appalachian Archives
"When the Redeemed are Gathered In"
WT 126 A-02

This next recording is part of William Tallmadge's extensive field recordings of Baptist singing in Kentucky. This collection, housed in the Southern Appalachian Archives at Berea College includes correspondence, sound recordings, notebooks, church association minutes, and hymnbooks that Tallmadge compiled during the 1960s and 1970s while studying Old Regular, Primitive, and United Baptist hymnody in eastern Kentucky, western North Carolina, and western Virginia. Interestingly, this is the only recording in the extensive Tallmadge collection that relates to the transition between the unaccompanied song traditions and the emergent seven-shape gospel tradition.



The A. L. Phipps Family
Rural Hymnody Symposium, Berea College Archives
"On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand"
AC 066-009-03



The Phipps Family concert at the Rural Hymn Symposium documented the gospel hymn tradition that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Gospel music was published primarily in the seven-shape note system and was therefore frequently referred to as seven-shape gospel music, differentiating it from earlier music written in seven-shape notation. Singing a repertoire published in shape-note convention books made popular by publishers like James D. Vaughan and Stamps-Baxter, the gospel music movement capitalized on a burgeoning consumer society, printing annual or semi-annual convention books that contained the newest gospel music songs. The emphasis on new repertoire provided a stark contrast to earlier forms of rural hymnody that sang from a fixed repertoire published in rarely updated tunebooks.

Defined as “a genre that exists outside the formal hymnals published by denominational presses of most Protestant churches,”⁵ this new style of music was published in paperback gospel songbooks, frequently referred to as convention books, which were published on an annual, if not semi-annual basis, focusing on new songs and repertoire. This style of publication, described as “taller than wide, thinner, and generally of slightly smaller dimensions than the full-sized hymnals” provided a marked visual difference from the oblong tunebooks of the early four and seven-shape traditions.⁶ The non-denominational status of most convention books rendered them popular among many different types of churches, thus increasing their overall visibility, popularity and sales. As new books were published at least annually, gospel music flooded the sacred music market. As early as 1891, Basil Manly, Jr. described the widespread appeal and dominance of seven-shape convention books that quickly outsold older tunebooks such as *The Sacred Harp* and *The Christian Harmony*.

For some years it has been apparent that the rage for novelties in singing, especially in Sunday schools, has been driving out of use the old, precious standard hymns. They are not even contained in the undenominational songbooks which in many churches have usurped the place of our old hymn books.⁷

Thus, the early four and seven-shape traditions gave way to the new, “modern” sound and by the late nineteenth century, “to sing seven shape was to sing gospel.”⁸

Combining an archaic method of notation with a steady stream of annually published materials, seven-shape gospel music exists as a hybrid genre that celebrates both old and new in sacred song. Successor to early shape-note music of the oblong tunebook traditions and

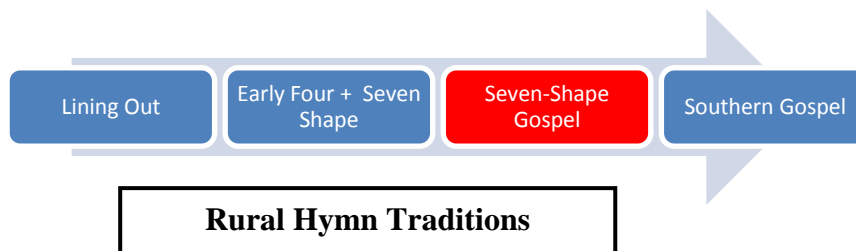
⁵ William Montell, *Singing the Glory Down: Amateur Gospel Music in South Central Kentucky 1900-1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 2.

⁶ Harry Eskew, David Music, and Paul Richardson, *Singing Baptists: Studies in Baptist Hymnody in America* (Nashville: Church Street Press, 1994) 185.

⁷ Eskew, Music, and Richardson, *Singing Baptists*, 190.

⁸ Gavin Campbell, “Old Can be Used Instead of New: Shape-Note Singing and the Crisis of Modernity in the New South, 1880-1920,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 110 (1997: 436), 172.

precursor to the commercial southern gospel empire, seven-shape gospel music plays a transitional role within the evolution of American rural hymnody. As such, its impact is often obscured by both the traditions out of which seven-shape gospel music emerged and those into which it evolved. Less celebrated than its sister hymn traditions at present, seven-shape gospel music once dominated rural hymnody, spreading from the nineteenth century urban revival movement to the South. By the turn of the twentieth century, gospel music had largely displaced its predecessors, the early four and seven-shape note traditions. Over time, the genre evolved to accommodate a growing consumer society and seven-shape gospel music transformed from a participatory singing tradition into the popular, performance-based entity now known as professional southern gospel. This transformation resulted in the simultaneous commercialization and marginalization of the genre, a dichotomy that has obscured the persistence of seven-shape gospel music as a vital component of rural worship today.

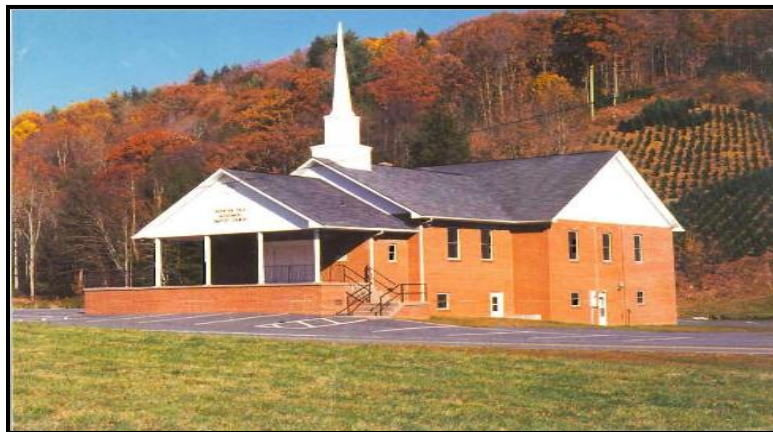


It was within the context of rural hymn traditions that I began exploring seven-shape gospel music, presuming initially that I was dealing with an obscure singing tradition unique to a small number of rural churches. Therefore, I focused my attention on two congregations, Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist churches, whose singing practices have been and continue to be defined by seven-shape gospel music.

Mount Lebanon Baptist Church: Vilas, North Carolina



Mountain Dale Baptist Church: Vilas, North Carolina



In January 2009, I began observing and researching the singing traditions of these two churches, attending Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening services, having selected these specific congregations for their different interpretations of a shared shape-note heritage. In addition to participant observation, I also conducted interviews with several members of each congregation, focusing in particular on the two choir directors.

As I continued my research through the spring, summer, and fall of 2009, my participant observation led me to several other independent churches in the county whose singing practices and traditions were similar, if not identical, to those at Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale Baptist. I attended a weeklong revival at Green Valley Baptist in the Bethel community, recognizing both the order of worship and the *Church Hymnal* (Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee, 1951) that I now associate as important identifiers of both the rural independent Baptist church and the seven-shape gospel tradition. I regularly participated in the monthly gospel singing, hosted alternately by either Mountain Dale or Mabel Baptist churches. At Mabel Baptist in the Zionville community, I took note of the similarity in the physical layout of the independent Baptist churches, whose choir loft is uniquely situated facing the pulpit, and not the congregation. My ongoing interviews corroborated that Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale were not the sole remnants of a dying, seven-shape gospel tradition, but rather two examples of an enduring regional practice that persists within the independent Baptist churches in the tri-state area of western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, and southwest Virginia.

As I delved deeper into the history and roots of seven-shape gospel music in Watauga County, I uncovered an entrenched regional singing tradition characterized by monthly and annual singing conventions, indicating a popularity that confounded my initial perception of the movement as an isolated, rural phenomenon. This past February, I sat down with Clint Cornett, choir director at Mountain Dale Baptist Church, to review a list of churches in Watauga County, North Carolina.⁹ As Cornett taught singing-schools in many of the churches in Watauga and neighboring counties, he was intimately familiar with local congregations and thus uniquely suited to categorize churches by their singing traditions. The list was organized by both

⁹ Susan Keefe, and two students Mark Vickrey, and Karen Dunlay, Appalachian State University, 1984. Available in the clippings files in the W. L. Eury Collection of Belk Library at Appalachian State University, search "Religion-Appalachia."

denomination and location and as I read the name of each Baptist church, Cornett identified which congregations used seven-shape gospel hymnals and songbooks. Out of a list of seventy-two Baptist congregations, Cornett associated thirty-three with the seven-shape gospel tradition, almost half of the Baptist churches in the county, documenting a widespread tradition with a strong correlation with independent, Baptist denominations.

While in substantial decline in comparison to the tradition's heyday of the 1960s and 70s, this widespread practice of the seven-shape tradition within independent, Baptist churches in the county shifted the focus of my research; I was no longer investigating two churches whose singing tradition rendered them unique and unusual. Rather, the singing tradition itself became the focal point of my study, as its persistence within a large majority of independent Baptist churches in the county indicated something more substantial and pervasive than I originally envisioned.

My revelation of the seven-shape tradition as a widespread practice was followed by a more puzzling discovery. While academic literature pointed to the emergence and subsequent prevalence of seven-shape gospel music from the late nineteenth to mid twentieth century, it provided little indication of the genre's persistence and practice at present. This lacuna required further exploration, as the popularity of the tradition seemed disproportionate to its documentation and representation. My research indicated that the relative obscurity of the seven-shape gospel tradition within rural communities was the result of multiple historical phenomena that were recorded and documented across a variety of academic fields and disciplines. As a shape-note tradition, seven-shape gospel music was initially perceived of as a popular, modern genre and was not counted among the folk hymn traditions that later received the attention of revivalists and academics, leading to an entrenched misrepresentation of the

diversity of rural hymnody. As a singing practice, the commercial identity of seven-shape gospel music that emerged in the mid twentieth century quickly became representative of the genre as a whole, resulting in the marginalization of its rural, church-based equivalent. Finally, as a tradition that persisted prominently in the Appalachian region, seven-shape gospel music was further obscured by its popularity within the missionary Baptist denomination whose history and contributions have been largely overlooked in favor of older sects. The intersection of these divergent academic lenses demonstrated clearly that seven-shape gospel music remains a widely misunderstood genre of American sacred song.

Thus, my case study of Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale shifted into an exploration of the representation of the seven-shape gospel tradition in academia, as well as the representation of the denomination that constitutes the largest remnant of seven-shape gospel singers, the rural missionary Baptists. To a certain extent, I hated to deviate from my original game plan, as the comparison of these two churches provided compelling insight into worship habits commonly associated with Appalachian religion, including communal or concert altar prayers, annual homecoming services, and a congregation comprised of upwards of four generations. However, while a discussion of the unique and unusual worship habits that I discovered in these two churches was indeed compelling, it was not the story that needed to be told.

Instead, the more thoughtful conclusion emerging out of my field work and research is the limitation of Appalachian religion historiography and its definition of regional religion as both exceptional and unique. A cursory review of Appalachian religion historiography highlights the persistent duality that posits Appalachian or mountain religion in direct comparison with mainstream, conventional practices.

“Appalachian mountain religion is one of the very few **uniquely** American regional religious traditions to which Protestantism in the United States can lay claim. It is made up of church traditions found almost entirely in the region’s mountains and small valleys. Generally, they do not exist beyond Appalachia, except through out-migration. These church traditions, nearly **invisible** to the outside world and to much of the Protestant mainstream even within Appalachia, make up what is **exclusive** to religious life in Appalachia.”

Deborah McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 2.

This comparative paradigm is a logical extension of the long history of defining the Appalachian region as an “other,” in relation to national norms and perceptions.¹⁰ The combined scholarship of Henry Shapiro, Alan Batteau, and David Whisnant, has explored the problems of the paradigm of exceptionalism, resulting in enduring academic debate that continues to shape Appalachian historiography. However, that critical self-reflective eye has not yet turned to the study of Appalachian religion which continues to rely heavily on a comparative paradigm that emphasizes the most unique and anomalous religious practices.

This emphasis, while celebrating the unique contributions of sometimes truly unusual sects, has historically ignored other traditional churches of Appalachia, whose worship practices are unique, but not necessarily exclusive to the region. Significantly, this perspective has contributed to an enduring fascination with the Old Regulars and Primitive Baptists and their singing traditions, thereby obscuring the contributions of more representative shape-note

¹⁰ In Henry Shapiro’s seminal study of the region’s complex role within national consciousness, he posits that Appalachia functions as both a “symptom and symbol” of American society and culture. Describing the region as an “idea” or “myth” of the American psyche, Shapiro argues that perception has historically superseded regional reality, underlining the symbiotic relationship between Appalachian identity and a national understanding thereof. Henry Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870 – 1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

communities, such as the missionary Baptists, who represent both the largest traditional religious body in Watauga County and the remnant of the seven-shape gospel tradition.

Watauga County provides an interesting case study into regional religious scholarship. Home to retired Appalachian State University professor and religion scholar Howard Dorgan, who spent over thirty years in the field in the tri-state area of western North Carolina, east Tennessee and southwest Virginia, Watauga County and its churches have been studied and found wanting. In 2004, Dorgan published a series in the local newspaper, the *Watauga Democrat*, titled “Appalachian Religion: It’s Novelty, Spirit, and Diversity.” Dorgan published one to two articles per month, describing the region as “one of the most religiously diverse areas of the nation.” Dorgan clearly loved the unique and exceptional nature of Appalachian religion, characterized by a “rich variety of Protestant subdenominations not found elsewhere [with] colorful collections of worship traditions, again seldom seen in other regions of the country.”¹¹ While Dorgan praised the variety of denominations in the region, he focused primarily on the religious communities and worship habits of the Old Regulars and Primitive Baptists and ignored more representative factions. As such, Dorgan concentrated on the old-time Baptist denominations, such as the Primitives and Old Regulars, and devoted eleven out of twelve articles to their “unique” and “colorful” worship traditions.¹²

However, almost twenty years earlier, in his 1987 study *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia*, Dorgan had characterized the region as “heavily Baptist, with the strongest tradition—at least among the small mountain churches—being missionary Baptist.”¹³ Nonetheless, he examined this particular group the least, highlighting the curious inverse

¹¹ Howard Dorgan, “Appalachian Religion: Its Novelty, Spirit and Diversity,” *Watauga Democrat*, 09 January 2004.

¹² Howard Dorgan, “Appalachian Religion,” 09 January 2004.

¹³ Howard Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), xvi.

relationship between the region's most popular denomination and singing tradition and its representation in scholarship. In Dorgan's own schematic diagram of Baptist denominations in Appalachia, the missionary churches occupy a liminal position, too modern for the "Old-Baptists," but also too traditional for the mainline denominations that function as an important benchmark for all things non-Appalachian. Within his examination of rural Baptist traditions, this focus on Old Baptist practices led Dorgan to summarize his experiences studying religion in Watauga County, North Carolina as follows: "Even in the thirty or so years of study that I have put into examining Appalachian religious traditions, I have found Watauga County to be less and less of a treasure chest of bygone traditions."¹⁴ Dorgan summarily discredited religious tradition within Watauga County due to the lack of "Old-Time" Baptist sects and their specific worship practices, and he encouraged readers to seek out "original cultures"¹⁵ in neighboring counties instead. Despite lack of scholarly representation, the independent missionary Baptists of the tri-state area contribute significantly to regional religious identity and their strong connections to seven-shape gospel music function as an important designator of the "native" traditions that Dorgan sought. The enduring emphasis on rare and exceptional practices contributes significantly to the complexity of the presentation and representation of Appalachian religion, drawing academic attention away from a more real and relevant comprehension of Appalachian worship, a comprehension based on identifiers that relate to the "treasure chest" of reality and not those of bygone traditions.

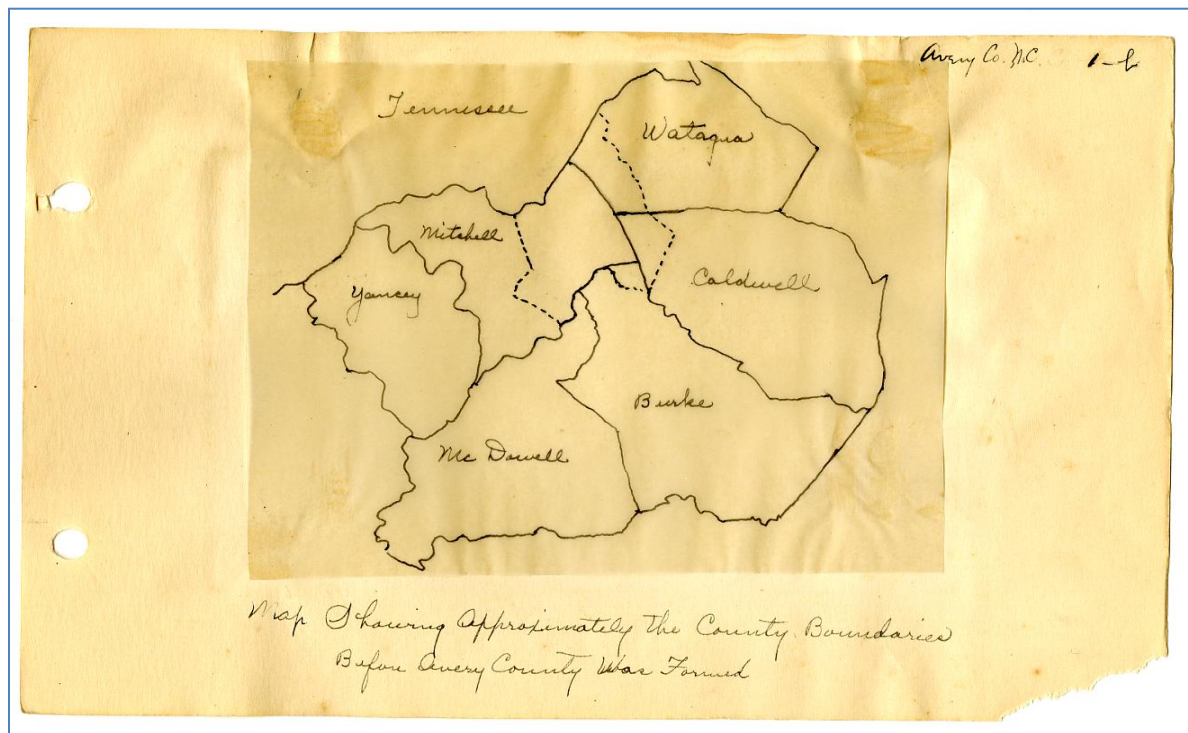
Within Watauga County, the reality of Appalachian religion is largely defined by rural, independent Baptist congregations. Thus, the story of Mount Lebanon and Mountain Dale as unique and exceptional churches that have sustained an archaic singing tradition has become

¹⁴ Howard Dorgan, "Appalachian Religion," 27 February 2004.

¹⁵ Dorgan, "Appalachian Religion," 27 February 2004.

secondary to the story of these two congregations as representatives of a significant denomination whose singing tradition should be included as one of the many traits of indigenous, Appalachian religion. Data from the 1931-1933 Appalachian Religion Survey, which included neighboring Avery County in its sample, underscored the pivotal role of the seven-shape gospel tradition within rural, independent churches that worked together to create a regional singing community.¹⁶

Appalachian Religion Survey 1931-1933: Map of Avery and Surrounding Counties



Map of Watauga and Surrounding Counties.

"Map Showing Approximately the County Boundaries Before Avery County Was Formed," Appalachian Religion Survey 1931-1933, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College.

¹⁶ From 1931 to 1933, The Institute of Social and Religious Research funded an extensive survey of the Appalachian region, selecting seventeen counties across West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky. Over the course of two years, field workers collected data from over one thousand churches. This study of Appalachian religion was coordinated with the United States Department of Agriculture's economic and social study of the region. While Watauga was not selected as a sample county, neighboring Avery County was included, thus providing insight into regional worship practices in western North Carolina in the 1930s.

Survey records documented an “entirely rural church situation,”¹⁷ highlighting difficulties in transportation and noting the relative isolation of mountain communities and the small size of churches.

The churches are, almost without exception, small. Most of the people even now seem to prefer this situation. Weak organizations were inevitable when means of communication were poor, and the people, used to this for several generations, have come to regard it as the natural or even best situation. In the past it has been the general rule that when a church reached any size, has a hundred members, a group living near each other would separate from this main church and set up an independent one nearer their homes.¹⁸

The survey also described music and worship styles, recording evidence of a widespread singing tradition. According to survey data, in the 1930s rural western North Carolina churches hosted all-day singings, revivals, and singing conventions. Survey notes primarily described seven-shape gospel music, although one example of a “lined-off” tradition was included. The following description of an all-day singing convention in neighboring Tennessee highlighted identifiers of the seven-shape gospel tradition, such as the use of popular shape-note convention books, the format of the singing itself, and the inclusion of quartet singing.

In Webb’s Creek, five miles about Pitman Center, Sevier County, Tennessee, singing classes from several miles around had gathered for an all-day singing. I was there in the morning. Seventy-five singers about were there, and more were expected in the afternoon ... The whole time was spent in singing, with but short pauses in between. Three different leaders conducted the singing, three numbers each. They used a tuning fork to get the pitch. A few numbers were sung with do re mi before the words were used, but most were not. The leaders were teachers of the local groups ... The book used [was] “Victory Voices,” published by James D. Vaughn, music publisher, Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, 1931. They get new books each year. The numbers were all hymns. They were not the best harmonically, but better than a good deal of revival music. Each had a chorus. And most of the choruses gave bits to one or more different parts. The time and pitch were carefully observed, and it was nearly always possible to get the words. Rests scrupulously observed. Some beat time. Quality not so good, best in bass. The soprano had voices that had that thin, shrill note. Very little of the old slurring. I noticed this only in one or two quarters. Too loud. Noise evidently thought desirable rather than

¹⁷ “Church Situation in Avery County,” Appalachian Religion Survey Records.

¹⁸ “Church Situation in Avery County,” Appalachian Religion Survey Records.

quality. Sometimes a singsong effect, especially in one of the quartettes. It must be hard to sing so many hours without spoiling the voices.¹⁹

In addition to providing background information about regional patterns and traditions, this particular survey also highlighted both the inherently rural and predominantly Baptist identity of the singing traditions it described. The comprehensive survey required a site visit to each church in Avery County and between July 9 to July 15, 1930, Ms. Jean Adams and Ms. Elizabeth Hooker visited seventy-three churches. While twelve different denominations were surveyed, Baptist churches accounted for thirty-eight of the congregations, more than half of the churches in the county. The survey categorized the county churches into three sizes based on population numbers: small village (250-500 people), hamlet (25-250 people), and open country. Of the seventy-three churches surveyed, twenty-four indicated an active singing tradition.²⁰ Of those, nineteen were located in the open country and only four were reported in a hamlet. No singing traditions were mentioned from the churches located in a small village, thus supporting the premise of the seven-shape gospel tradition as a primarily rural phenomenon. Of the twenty-four reports that described singing traditions, twenty were from Baptist congregations, underscoring the correlation between rural Baptist churches and seven-shape gospel.

The descriptions of the singing at the various rural churches highlighted identifiers of the seven-shape gospel movement, including singing schools, classes, and conventions, unequivocally linking regional singing with the seven-shape gospel tradition. Descriptions of the singing ranged from short phrases specific to a church's music program to lengthier statements indicating a regional tradition. The notation for Chestnut Dale Baptist Church between Hughes and Minneapolis, North Carolina, for example, read "singing school of about twenty,"²¹ while

¹⁹ "Notes, Avery County," Appalachian Religion Survey Records.

²⁰ "Avery County Churches," Appalachian Religion Survey Records.

²¹ "Chestnut Dale Baptist Church," Appalachian Religion Survey Records, 13July1931.

the entry on Oak Grove Baptist Church, located near Millers Gap, highlighted their bi-weekly singing class, “Singing every Sunday and Wednesday nights—attend thirty-five.”²² The description of the singing at Belview Baptist Church, near Cranberry, on the other hand, listed a singing class, a convention, and travel to other churches for fellowship through song. “Singing class meets for a week before every convention on fifth Sunday—about eighteen in class—Singing class usually visits other churches eight or ten times during a year.”²³

Rural churches in western North Carolina were the most active participants in the flourishing seven-shape gospel community up to the 1930s, teaching singing schools and participating in the popular conventions. While rural churches continued to congregated and sing together informally, a clear divide was emerging between the participatory and performative identities of the seven-shape gospel tradition. This shift was emphasized in the 1959 Southern Appalachian Studies Survey that included an extensive review of Appalachian churches and religion.²⁴ While Watauga was not selected as a sample county for this survey, three neighboring counties were chosen, offering insight into a regional understanding of singing traditions in rural mountain communities in the late 1950s. Of the counties selected for the survey, the three most relevant to this study are Grayson County in southwest Virginia, Carter County in northeast Tennessee, and Burke County in North Carolina.

²² “Oak Grove Baptist Church,” Appalachian Religion Survey Records, 01 July 1931.

²³ “Belview Baptist Church,” Appalachian Religion Survey Records, 10 July 1931.

²⁴ As one of fourteen areas of study, the review of church life and religious practice was intended to assess the “religious conditions in mountain areas; church growth or decay; types of religious experiences; emotionalism; fatalism; predestinarianism; fundamentalism; and possible steps toward better conditions.” Seeking to identify changes in the Appalachian region since the 1930s survey, the Southern Appalachian Studies project examined twenty-seven counties and three cities during the summer of 1959. In each county, an area supervisor and a team of field workers selected a geographic focus within which they compiled a comprehensive list of all churches they could find. Of these, ten were randomly selected to form a sample out of which three churches were chosen for in-depth review. This review entailed interviews with the pastor, several leaders in the congregation, church members, and also with non-members in the surrounding community. Additionally, the field workers recorded at least one worship service at each of the churches selected for in-depth review, and also an informal focus group with church members. For more information about the survey procedure, see “Notes,” Southern Appalachian Studies, 1959, Berea College Archives.



Map of Watauga and Surrounding Counties

“The Southern Appalachians,” *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), ii, shading by author.

Mirroring data from the 1931-1933 Appalachian Religion Survey, field notes maintained by survey area supervisors described the region as rural and mountainous with a predominantly Baptist population. Fieldworker Neil McGlamery counted twenty churches in the study area within Burke County, North Carolina, out of which only one was Methodist; the remaining nine were different Baptist subdenominations.²⁵ The list of churches compiled for each county documented a large number of independent, free will and missionary Baptist congregations. Despite the overwhelmingly rural nature of the region, the survey highlighted tensions surrounding urban influences that were emerging in the 1950s and which mirrored the growing

²⁵ Neil McGlamery, “Field Worker’s Notebook, Sample Area 43, Week One,” *Southern Appalachian Studies*.

divide between participatory and performative worship styles, the latter growing out of urban centers and spreading to rural areas.²⁶

In addition to their personal observations and notes, the fieldworkers interviewed key members of each church selected for in-depth study, working from an interview guide comprised of open-ended questions about faith and belief systems. In addition, interviewers included a substantial section of “provocative statements” which the interview subjects rated on a scale of one to five, one indicating a “strong agreement” with the statement, and five indicating a “strong disagreement.” Several statements referred specifically to music within the church, highlighting its vital role within church identity. Of the thirty-two statements read to each interview subject, three addressed music traditions specifically, while two referenced them indirectly.

The first of the three direct statements read “In church, I think it is better for everybody to join in singing hymns than to listen to the choir sing,” exploring the shift from participatory to performative singing traditions. Within the three selected counties, an overwhelming 57 percent “agreed” that congregational singing is more valuable than the choir, with an additional 11 percent agreeing “strongly.”²⁷ While 20 percent were undecided, only 12 percent disagreed. This overwhelming support for congregational song provided a stark contrast with the sharp decline thereof as the seven-shape gospel movement evolved into an increasingly performative genre. As the seven-shape gospel tradition moved toward an increasingly commercial role, the

²⁶ The correlation between increased performative function of sacred music and urban environments can be traced to the nineteenth century Better Music Movement that spread from urban centers to rural congregations, eventually displacing homegrown musical traditions with professional musical styles.

²⁷ These percentages are based on the author’s data compilation from the six Baptist churches surveyed in Grayson County, Virginia (Mt Zion Union Baptist Church and Chestnut Hill Baptist Church), Carter County, Tennessee (Watauga Valley Freewill Baptist Church and Poplar Grove Baptist Church), and Burke County, North Carolina (Zion Hill Missionary Baptist Church and Pleasant Hill Baptist Church). All six churches were identified as rural congregations. In an effort to better understand rural Baptist traditions and practices in the 1950s, these calculations do not include responses from other denominations represented in the survey.

rural church choir emerged as both choral group and congregational singing entity, transcending the distinction between participation and performance.

The second direct statement about music traditions emphasized the enduring tension between old and new in sacred song: “I like to sing the old gospel songs, rather than the new hymns.” Given the history of sacred music in the region, which defined four-shape music as old at the turn of the twentieth century, the juxtaposition of “old” gospel songs and “new” hymns in the 1950s highlighted the shifting definitions of traditional and contemporary. While the survey provided no definition for either gospel song or hymn, 62 percent of interview subjects agreed that the older gospel repertoire was superior to new hymnody, with an additional 9 percent agreeing strongly.

The final direct statement about music, “I prefer a church where the choir members wear robes,” addressed the formality of worship and underscored a sharp divide along racial lines. While 52 percent of the entire sample disagreed with this statement, members of the African American churches included in the survey overwhelmingly supported it.²⁸ African American choirs have historically worn robes, creating a visibly distinct group of singers that, by nature of a shared “uniform,” might appear more formal or professional than their un-robed counterparts. White members of the rural communities surveyed almost unanimously disagreed strongly with this statement, likely viewing robes as a visible sign of the professionalization of worship—the very antithesis of their definition of rural, Spirit-led religion. Fieldworker Garland Hendricks described an interview with a rural mail carrier and church leader in Carter County, Tennessee, highlighting the tension between rural communities and their urban counterparts. Paraphrasing

²⁸It is not clear whether this statement was included to provide an additional identifier for African American churches whose agreement with this statement provided a stark counterpoint to the almost unanimous opinion of rural white churches.

his interview subject's thoughts, Hendricks described the informal approach to religion that defined rural worship habits: "He [interview subject] believes we need more informality at church. People are getting too formal and are losing their spirituality. There are fundamental differences in the needs of rural and urban people with respect to church, work."²⁹

Two indirect statements also shed light on attitudes about rural worship habits in western North Carolina in the late 1950s. Seventy-five percent of the interview subjects agreed with the following statement, with an additional 8 percent agreeing strongly: "I think churches should have more revivals." Rural revivals were opportunities for corporate worship and fellowship and frequently included extended periods of singing. Over time, churches also used revivals as opportunities for choirs and quartets to sing for other congregations. Given the prominent role of music within rural revivals, a strong agreement with the statement could indicate an underlying interest in more musical fellowship. The final indirect statement addressed traditional worship practices and beliefs. Sixty-nine percent of the interview subjects agreed with the statement, "I like the 'old time religion'," with an additional 24 percent agreeing strongly, indicating a preference for traditional worship habits. Although the survey tool did not define the term "old time religion," scholarship and personal accounts of Appalachian worship frequently correlated "old time" ways with music and singing traditions, implying an enduring preference for older musical practices.³⁰

²⁹ Garland Hendricks, "Field Worker's Notebook, Sample Area 54, Week One," Southern Appalachian Studies.

³⁰ The old-fashioned or old-timey worship style within independent Appalachian churches has been studied and portrayed as both an antiquated anachronism and as a traditional worship style worthy of cultural study and preservation. Many descriptions of the "old time way" emphasize music and singing traditions. Larry Morgan emphasized the role of music in his family's Baptist worship experience in the Nantahala area of western North Carolina. "The service began with two 'whole note' songs by the home church singers. The old mountain churches did not have pianos or organs until the late 1940s and early 1950s. They didn't have a 'choir director,' or robes, or a choir loft. The elected 'singing leader' softly sang the musical scale and stopped on the note he wished the gathered singers to sing in. As he held this note, the singers would hum in unison that same pitch until all were in harmony

A review of singing traditions in Watauga County throughout the twentieth century highlights the evolution of shape-note music in western North Carolina. By the 1930s, as documented in the 1931-1933 Appalachian Religion Survey, rural churches in western North Carolina had established singing classes and conventions, documenting strong ties to the seven-shape gospel tradition. By the 1950s, churches in the same region maintained rural, traditional worship habits, but were grappling with issues of progressive, urban encroachment that manifested itself in increasingly performative singing practices. The survey tools of the 1959 Southern Appalachian Studies Survey in particular highlighted shifts in singing practices, gauging responses to the increased role of the church choir and the development of new hymnody that competed with the old gospel songs.

This contextualization of my research within both the Appalachian region and the scholarship of its religion should not serve to diminish the heritage of the two churches I have been exploring for the past year and a half—on the contrary; this serves to question their previous exclusion from the larger body of regional scholarship. My case study of two rural churches has necessarily shifted to accommodate the vibrant history of rural hymnody in the United States and its controversial representation and preservation in Appalachia, raising

and together. Then, with the leader's voice slightly louder than the others, they sang the selection. Later, a pitch pipe was used to set the pitch. Unlike choir directors in modern churches who direct their choirs with broad gestures, old mountain religion folk did not use such gestures, and frowned on them. The idea was that those gestures brought too much attention to the director, and any singing leader who employed them was thought to be seeking self-aggrandizement. Only occasionally, when the mountain singers were not in accord, would the singing leader use just the palm of his hand to bring everything right.' Morgan stressed the lay person's participation in the choir and a distrust of professional music, drawing a direct comparison between his parents' indigenous singing tradition and the "choir directors in modern churches." The distinction between old-fashioned and modern worship practices became an important identifier of Appalachian and non-Appalachian churches, with music and song playing a large role in distinguishing between the two. Larry Morgan, *Old Time Religion in the Southern Appalachians* (Boone, North Carolina: Parkway Publishers, 2005), 34.

important questions about the validity of enduring identifiers of “Appalachian” religion and their role in obscuring the seven-shape gospel tradition.³¹

³¹ As of summer 2010, a copy of the author’s full thesis titled “The Evolution of Sacred Music and its Rituals in Watauga County, North Carolina: A Comparison of Congregational Song in Two Independent Missionary Baptist Churches” will be on file in the Special Collections and Archives at Berea College.