

**Berea College Appalachian Music Fellowship
Final Activity Report**

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I have approached my Music Fellowship project from the perspective of what some have termed "Community History," a term that is used to differentiate the work of non specialist, community residents from that of outside academically trained historians or folklorists. I am a performing musician, my main instrument being the fiddle. I began learning early in life from several older fiddlers as I grew up in Whitley County, Kentucky. I am a recent graduate of the University of Kentucky with degrees in Biology and Agricultural Biotechnology. Since the end of my Fellowship supported study in August 2008, I have begun work on a Masters degree in Microbiology at Johns-Hopkins University in Baltimore.

In addition to tunes, ballads and songs, I learned much community history from these older teacher-musicians who I came to realize were largely untapped wells of information. They helped me to understand why things are as they are in my community, in terms of the larger picture of work, education, religion, and social life as well as music. My Fellowship project was directed toward achieving a better understanding of my musical heritage and documenting the musical and life histories that were residing only in the memories of my aging mentors.

A search of the American Folklife Center's online database of early documentary recordings revealed that there was nothing from Whitley or adjacent McCreary, Knox, or Laurel Counties. The closest that 1930s era folk music collectors such as Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle came to Whitley County was Clay and Bell Counties respectively.

Searching Berea's sound archives and print material such as the *JEMF Quarterly*, I found that although early scholarly documentation hadn't occurred, several Whitley County area traditional musicians had sought out commercial recording opportunities, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. Among these were John V. Walker and his string band, the Corbin Ramblers and Alex Hood and his Railroad Boys. All were able musicians but the possibility of commercial success presented by their recordings was not sufficient to lure them away from family and regular work at home.

Additional review of the Berea audio collections also revealed that later collectors who began work in the late 1950s had barely skimmed the surface in documenting Whitley County traditional musicians. For instance, folklorist, Leonard Roberts teaching at nearby Union College, recorded a few ballads and other songs from four people in the Corbin and Williamsburg area in about 1957. In the Ed Ward Collection there are thirteen home recorded performances of the fiddle - banjo duo, [John V. Walker and Raymond Perry](#) dating probably from the 1950s or 1960s. There were also broadcast recordings from evangelist [Ernest Martin](#) of his gospel music radio programs from the 1950s and later. And in about 1972, Loyal Jones, of Berea College's Appalachian Center, extensively recorded the playing and story-telling of Whitley County fiddler, [Wilse Reynolds](#).



Homer Lee and the Kentucky Hillbillies left to right: Paul Tensley, Ed Hart (Harp), Homer Lee Jackson, Morris Frederick, Jimmy Johnson. (Photo Courtesy of Homer Lee Jackson)

From discussions with local musicians and search of newspaper microfilm, it became clear that during this same twenty year period, local musicians had again turned to commercial technology to communicate their talents to wider audiences. This time it was the first radio station in the Whitley, Knox, Laurel County area, WCTT, which began operation in 1947. Owned by the *Corbin Times Tribune*, the station's program listings and related newspaper stories make clear that musicians of many persuasions were welcomed to be put on the air. Among several old-time and country groups being heard were future Knox County Judge, Homer Lee Jackson and his Kentucky

Hillbillies and the same John Walker and Alex Hood of earlier commercial recordings who had continued working for the L&N railroad in Corbin after their brief commercial recording careers had ended. Particularly impressive among the local talent on the air was the large number of gospel music quartets that appeared regularly. The most popular was the all male, Friendly Four, who appeared several days each week usually in the early evening. Other groups included Willie Littrell's Southern Sacred Singers and the [Heidrick Four](#) from nearby Knox County. Also, gospel groups from nearby communities and many miles away gathered monthly on Sunday afternoons at the Corbin YMCA auditorium for community wide singings, portions of which were broadcast on WCTT.

In addition to programs featuring individual musical groups, both sacred and secular, the station aired its own Saturday night barn dance type program called the *Moonbow Minstrels* from 1947 to sometime in the mid 1950s. From the beginning, the invitation to local talent for the program was wide ("all bands, gospel singers, popular, and semi-classical music makers") and there was an acknowledgement of varying audience tastes with there being separate 15 minute segments for "ballads," "hillbilly songs," "western music," and "hymns and sacred music."



Corbin area musicians who appeared on the Moonbow Minstrels Radio Program. Front row from left, Betty Taylor Wyatt and Meriel Taylor. Standing Joe Tuggle, Archie Wyatt, Dean Huddleston, R.H. Perkins, Homer Lee Jackson, Raymond Perly and Bob Huddleston. (Photo Courtesy of Don Estep)

From 1947 to sometime in 1951 the show was a studio production. Then it moved to the Lynn Theater in the nearby Woodbine community where it became a popular community event as well as radio program, for several years more. The show served as a showcase for many local

performers at least two of whom, [Claude Harmon](#) and [Marion Pridemore](#), are documented on the much later home video recordings I collected as part of my fellowship work.

The establishment of radio stations in Williamsburg and Barbourville beginning in the 1950s, provided outlets for yet another generation of able amateur performers. One such group was the [Prichard Quartet](#) which was heard weekly in the late 1950s and early 1960s on WBVL in Barbourville. M.T. "Pap" Jones, an L&N Railroad agent in Williamsburg was a musician and promoter who played in several bands during the late 1940s and into the 1950s, including the Pine Mountain Rhythm Boys heard on WCTT and his own "Pap and his Youngins" on WEZJ in Williamsburg. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, also on WEZJ, Jones produced the [Country Music Express](#) program which featured several able amateur musicians of varying ages who represented a wide spectrum of musical interests from old time fiddle and banjo tunes to the current country hits of the day. The program was staged at various times from movie theaters in nearby Jellico, Tennessee, and Pine Knott and Stearns, Kentucky in adjoining McCreary County.



Prichard Quartet/Melody Five (Photo Courtesy of Jaola Siler)



Pap and the Youngins, left to right: Red Harrison, Charlie Collins, M.T. "Pap" Jones, Monroe Queener, Dean Huddleston. (Photo Courtesy of Patricia Jones)

Documentation

The documentation aspect of my project involved collecting existing home audio and video recordings and making new recordings of older musicians who are still performing, all for inclusion in Berea's Appalachian Sound Archives. I learned that the music I was recording had been the pass-time of country boys from an earlier generation who were working away from home in Harlan County coal mines, the Civilian Conservation Corps in Idaho, or fighting in war-torn exotic places. From another perspective, I came to see that this music has served as familial glue - a common language that can transcend diverging opinions or hurt feelings. The treasured home recordings people have shared



Pine Mountain Rhythm Boys, left to right: M. T. "Pap" Jones, DeMarcus Brothers, George "Junior" Fuson (seated), Tom Moss, Jr., Clyde "Curly" Harris. (Photo Courtesy of Patricia Jones)

with me provide a way to experience loved ones' music beyond the grave. Collectively, these recordings illustrate how tradition can both stay unchanged and evolve as new ideas and impulses come along.

The existing home video and audio recordings I collected from various family members date mostly from the 1950s to the middle 1980s. The musicians they document include most notably, fiddlers [Marion Pridemore](#) and [Claude Harmon](#), and guitarist, Xerxes Bowlin. The audio recordings made for radio use document the singing of the [Prichard Quartet and Melody Five](#) Gospel groups led by John Miles and Chester Prichard (1950s) and the [Country Music Express](#)



From left to right: John Walker, Bobby Nelson, Rowe Underwood, Carl Cunningham, Raymond Perry, and Frank "Bear" Bryant. (Photo Courtesy of Don Estep)

program produced by M.T. "Pap" Jones (1970s) which featured numerous local musicians. Darlene Carr provided home and radio recordings, photographs, a written memoir and a recorded interview that provide useful descriptions of gospel and string band music activities in the county, especially from the late 1940s to the 1990s.

Video recordings that I made include interview and performance documentation of the following musicians:

- [Junior McKeehan](#), retired coal trucker, age 75 who is of particular interest for his two finger banjo style learned from his father.
- [Claude Harmon](#), retired railroad conductor, age 75, a fiddler, mandolin, and guitar player.
- [J.L. Burke](#), retired teacher and minister, age 85, a fiddler, guitar player, and singer. He is of particular interest for his dual repertoire of Kentucky tunes and western swing that he learned during military related travels.
- [Margarette Bowlin](#), an elementary school music teacher, age 60, a singer and dulcimer/guitar player. She is of particular interest for her large song repertoire, many of which were current at home and at church during her Whitley County childhood.
- [Ulysses Grant "Dick" Taylor](#), age 76, a fiddler from nearby McCreary County.
- [Jessie Martin](#), an elderly fiddler from McCreary County who learned to fiddle from her father.

Additional Work to Be Completed

I am continuing to work on transferring my video recordings of Junior McKeehan, Claude Harmon, and Dick Taylor to DVD format for the Berea Archives. I am also preparing a detailed account of Marion Pridemore's musical beginnings, fiddle style and repertoire for inclusion on the Music Fellowship web pages by the end of 2008.

Conclusion

The audio video material that I have provided help fill what was a significant gap in the Berea Archives with regard to traditional music documentation for Whitley County, Kentucky. These recordings preserve the memories and performances of particular musicians. The recordings of get-to-gathers in people's homes provide a window for seeing the role that music plays in community experience. Overall they provide data that can be helpful to future researchers in analyzing the interplay of old forms - the tradition of a certain time period - and newer forms such as bluegrass, which seems to have become the traditional form for the present day in my home community.