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## ILLUSTRATIONS

*The Sacred Harp* songbook xxiv

Example of Sacred Harp hymn xxv

*following p. 76*

Mr. Uel Freeman

Ann Beasley Ballard and her  
homemade banana pudding

Volunteers organized and provided  
food for hundreds during national  
convention

Singers fill their plates after a long  
morning of singing

Volunteers uncover the dishes  
before the crowd converges for  
dinner

Longtime friends and Sacred Harp  
singers Shelbie Sheppard and  
Charlene Wallace

Shelbie and Charlene's layered  
salad and a pan of golden corn  
muffins

Deviled eggs, sliced tomatoes,  
pickles, and various relishes

Visitors to the national convention  
dig into dinner on the ground

The dessert table

Burning hickory will smoke  
hundreds of chickens and pork butts

Smoked chickens and pork roasts

Children first experience singing  
shape notes at conventions

Ham, green beans, turnip greens,  
and fried okra with pickled pepper  
sauce

Vegetables and casseroles lining the  
table at Hoboken

Mount Vernon Primitive Baptist  
Church, near Natural Bridge,  
Alabama

Miss Willadeen leads a song

Wakefield family members lay  
out their dishes for dinner on the  
ground

A baked version of the traditional  
fried pie, with fruit fillings

Heading out to play after a big  
dinner

Many youngsters learn the shapes  
and the tunes on their grandmothers'  
laps

The grounds of the Shiloh Living  
History Museum in Springdale,  
Arkansas

The old apothecary store where the  
Arkansas singers practice

Lifelong singer Sydney Caldwell  
leads the Southwest Arkansas group

## INTRODUCTION

I came to Sacred Harp singing through the back door of journalistic inquiry, but didn't stay in the back row for long.

Notebook in hand, I was to be a reporter, an observer taking notes, listening and collecting names, learning what I could about this very old, traditional form of American religious music. It took about half of one day, sitting shoulder to shoulder in a tiny Texas church among men and women whose voices grew stronger over six hours of singing together, to join in the four-part harmony and become one of them. The community of Sacred Harp singers is a welcoming group, patient with the uninitiated and willing to take in complete strangers.

That is just one of the things I have come to love about the tradition and those who practice it.

I grew up in the Southern Baptist church in Kentucky and Tennessee, and adored, as a child, the spirited congregational singing in my grandfather's small church where I was the piano player. I loved the quiet legato of "Just As I Am," the invitational hymn we sang over and over, as I rolled chords and crested tinkling glissandos until someone finally walked up

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front to rededicate his life to Jesus, or better yet, to be saved. Even more, I loved the dramatic ballad we sang on Easter Sunday, with its rolling bass and soaring melody:

Up from the grave he arose  
With a mighty triumph o'er his foes . . .  
He arose, he arose  
Hallelujah! Christ arose.

This was music that told a story. It was dramatic; the harmonies were strong. Anyone with a lick of musical appreciation couldn't just sit and listen to it; it demanded singing along.

I grew up, married, had a family, left the South and fell away from the church until, finally, I attended services only occasionally in my adopted home, Colorado Springs.

When I did go to church, whether Methodist or Episcopal, singing was largely relegated to the choir, or to a visiting rock band or solo performer, and was more a breast-beating performance than the act of harmonious group praise I remembered. The congregation was invited to sing along only on the most familiar and mundane of hymns, procedurals really, like the offertory or the benediction.

Moreover, in the town where I lived, headquarters of James Dobson's Focus on the Family and ground zero for that group's and many other religious organizations' political activities, going to church began to feel less like an act of praise and more like a battleground of ideas. Many evangelical ministers didn't hesitate to instruct their Sunday morning flock on how to vote at the polls. Even the staid Episcopalians in my town were constantly embroiled in one political issue or another, usually railing against any group outside of their mainstream.

This rubbed me wrong both as a journalist and as a Christian. I hesitated to call myself a Christian, though many of the lessons I had learned as a child had stayed with me, and the songs of the Baptist hymnal still rang strong in my ears. I didn't want to be associated with a brand of Christianity that I felt had little to do with loving thy neighbor and everything to do with condemning anyone who believed differently. Visiting a church was like crossing a potential minefield, but visiting the church music of my childhood, when and if I could find it, continued to be a happy retreat.

I still had the little spinet I had learned to play as a young girl. Occasionally, I would pull out the hymnal and play "Shall We Gather at the River," "Sweet Hour of Prayer," or "In the Garden." I gravitated toward tunes that were my grandfather's favorites when he was still alive, songs I'd played for him during the last months of his life. Beyond the delight he got from my four children, who were very young when Granddaddy lived with us, there was little I could give him to brighten his life except for banana pudding three meals a day and a recital of hymns played in the afternoons while the babies slept.

Granddaddy died, the children grew up, we moved to Colorado, and I became a newspaper columnist. One week, I decided to write about those days playing and singing hymns at the Victory Baptist Chapel in Bowling Green, Kentucky. As I researched Baptist hymns, Internet searches kept turning up the name of prolific eighteenth-century British lyricist Isaac Watts, and just as frequently, the mysterious and lovely title "Sacred Harp" appeared on the screen.

Searching a bit more, I came across a Web site, [www.fasola.org](http://www.fasola.org), that introduced me to shape-note singing, a method of musical notation applied to traditional hymns brought over from England and taught to rural American church congre-

gations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During the early 1900s, New England tunesmiths turned out volumes of tunes written in shape notes, and itinerant teachers spread across the eastern seaboard to the Deep South to teach the music to rural congregations. Shape-note singing's most famous songbook was *The Sacred Harp*, first published in Georgia in the 1840s and continually updated and published in new editions till 2003, the year I first began learning about it. The subtitle of *The Sacred Harp* enthusiastically heralds it as "The Best Collection of Sacred Songs, Hymns, Odes, and Anthems Ever Offered the Singing Public for General Use."

I wrote my column in praise of hymns and group singing, and continued reading about shape-note singing. Though the peculiar musical notation was unfamiliar to me, some of the lyrics and some of the melodies were not. It was like reading an account of another person's trip to a place I had once visited but had nearly forgotten. I read accounts of singings that hinted at the same uplifting power of the hymns of my childhood.

Then I heard that Sacred Harp singing would be included as part of the musical soundtrack, produced by T-Bone Burnett, for the film *Cold Mountain*, due to be released that same year. Armed with the journalistic hook I needed, timeliness, I sought a writing assignment that would get me a look (and a listen) at this thing called Sacred Harp singing, up close and in person.

*Texas Highways* magazine answered my call and gave me an assignment.

In the spring of 2003, I attended my first Sacred Harp singing at Bethel Primitive Baptist Church in McMahan, Texas, a rural crossroads so small it doesn't even appear on

the Texas map. I maintained a degree of journalistic hands-off objectivity through the first few songs, then felt the spirit of shared song enter my sleeping heart. I picked up a songbook and began to sing along, the lump in my throat melting, warmth spreading to the tips of my fingers and toes as the day passed.

It was difficult at first, because these singers called the notes by their shapes the first time they sang a melody—triangles were *fa*; circles, *sol*; squares, *la*; and diamonds, *mi*. As the song was sung in shapes, it sounded like confused jibber-jabber. Each of the four harmonic sections—trebles, altos, tenors, and basses—sang from a different line on the printed page. Trained to sight-read music, I could follow the tune on the tenor line but couldn't easily call out the names of the shape notes. My eyes jumped from the tenor line to the lyrics, losing their place again and again, crossing over in confusion.

We sat in what is called the hollow square, the tenors facing the altos, the trebles facing the basses, with an open space in the center where a volunteer leader called out the number of a song, then quickly began singing, waving one arm up and down to keep time. There were no breaks between songs, just a quick announcement of the page number; my beginner's mind was overly stimulated.

Some tunes were easier than others, written in 4/4 time, slow and straightforward. Others were raucous, with incredibly quick turns and odd harmonies that left us breathless. But the sound that emerged in this small church, every square inch crammed with warm bodies, was magnificent, unlike anything I'd ever heard. One moment it sounded as plaintive as a winter storm; the next moment it mimicked a whirlwind in the desert. Sometimes it sounded like child's play and other times it sounded like the gravest of funeral marches.

It didn't sound angelic and unearthly like formal, classical choir music. It was distinctly of this Earth, and as human as blood, sweat, and tears. Once the song had been sung through in shapes, the lyrics were added to the melody—lyrics rightfully called poetry by many traditional singers.

The singers' faces radiated concentration, shared amusement, and frequently reflected joy. The collective experience was of a group successfully completing a difficult joint effort, an experience that had become rare to me in everyday life.

I was hooked. And to cement my interest, lunchtime rolled around with a feast as grand as any I could recall, including those served at family reunions on Aunt Erma's farm when I was a girl. Rows of dishes—fried chicken, baked beans, deviled eggs, three varieties of green beans, and at least as many versions of potato salad—were lined up on long tables in the crowded church kitchen, flanked by smaller tables filled with sweating cups of iced tea. At the end of the table, women who reminded me of my great-aunts with their pillowed bosoms and downy cheeks, fussed over a banquet of pies and cakes.

Effortlessly, the line of at least a couple hundred hungry souls rolled past the long table, filling plates and rattling the close air with small talk. The food had appeared as if by magic at noon, and was warm and tantalizing. I crunched down on the stuff of memory.

Arriving at a Sacred Harp singing, then, and participating in the American tradition of all-day singing and dinner on the ground was down-home glory for me.

Back home in Colorado, I set about learning more. I came across folk historian Alan Lomax's recollection of dinner on the ground at a 1959 singing in Fyffe, Alabama, where he and a sound crew recorded the singing for posterity: "all adjourned to the long picnic tables set up under the post-oak

trees. Lunch was fried chicken, ham, potato salad, hot biscuits and corn pone, and every kind of cake and pie known to cooks of northern Alabama. I think the congregation enjoyed seeing us stuff ourselves almost as much as they did our struggles to make their lively triple-forte choralizing.” My experience forty-four years later had been precisely the same. My Texas hosts took pleasure in seeing the extreme pleasure they had given me with their offerings of home-cooked food and the challenge of untethered, multi-tonal, complex harmonic singing. The Sacred Harp tradition appeared to be one that hadn’t changed much over the years.

Since my first singing experience in 2003, I’ve traveled to many other Sacred Harp singings, bringing along my journalist’s curiosity, and more, my heart’s hunger to do it again, to feel the rush of joining in song with a room full of like-minded spirits. I’ve read scholarly articles and meticulous histories of the music. I’ve learned about the revisions of the *Sacred Harp* songbook over two centuries, and about those pioneers who composed tunes and taught Sacred Harp to others.

The twenty-first century singing community, I’ve found, comprises singers with choral backgrounds, folk music aficionados, musicologists, and those who were lucky enough to grow up in the tradition, who learned it at their parents’ and grandparents’ knees. Singers range from Seattle to Minneapolis; St. Louis to western Massachusetts; to deep Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. The Sacred Harp community is a relatively small but formidable group, alive despite changing times and tastes, and relatively untouched by musical fashion and trends.

Novelist Lee Smith has said that, for her, religion is “an avenue to a kind of intensity I’m always after—in love, in my

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writing. I feel like we go through the world with blinders on, or earmuffs, most of the time—I want to get down to the real thing, to plug into the main socket.”

Singing Sacred Harp, I feel as if I’ve plugged into a 220-volt socket and the lights have come on blazing. My experience of it is distinctly religious, but free of the constraints of doctrine, judgment, and dogma. It is wholehearted and unabashed, filled with joy and despair, humbling and exalting. Indeed, though many singers don’t like to see it described as such, it is undeniably loud. Experienced choir leaders will tell you it is “open-throat” or “full-voice” singing.

And it comes dressed in plain clothes. In the “Rudiments of Music” section that opens *The Sacred Harp*, under “Mechanics of Singing,” one will find this bit of advice: “The voice should be natural and unpretentious. The ideals of popular, art, concert and opera singing do not apply to the Sacred Harp.”

It is a fiercely egalitarian tradition that welcomes everyone into its ranks, all voices great and small into its melodic mix. Musician and Sacred Harp singing teacher Tim Eriksen, who brought Sacred Harp and its contemporary practitioners to the attention of the *Cold Mountain* production team, and who performed much of the solo singing on the soundtrack, believes the tradition’s democratic creed is part of its greatness.

“Nothing has all the symmetry and opportunity that the Sacred Harp tradition offers,” says Eriksen, referring to the full participation of all involved and the balance of the four parts. “And the fact is, it just simply sounds better when you have a bunch of regular people doing it. A singer friend from Georgia once said to me, ‘There’s a fellow in the community who just can’t hold his pitch, but it wouldn’t be a singing

without him.” Eriksen is quick to add that among Sacred Harp singers, he has met some of the most skilled vocalists he has ever known.

Lomax reflected similarly on the 1959 Fyffe, Alabama, singing:

[T]here were no stars, just as there was no prettifying up of the voice. The atmosphere was totally democratic, all participants displaying confidence in their natural voices, each adding his own embellishments and variations to the written part. This combination of musical skill and passionate individualism creates a thrilling choral texture, far from the studied polish of a classically admired blend, but nonetheless an original and fascinating way of performing counterpoint.

Beyond the profound musical experience and the democratic nature of the tradition, the Sacred Harp community of singers offers a unique fellowship and kinship, based on common experience within the hollow square but extending into everyday life. Minneapolis singer Keith Willard established the [fasola.org](http://fasola.org) Web site and developed an e-mail list designed to accommodate announcements of upcoming singings around the country and to answer questions about Sacred Harp. The list also links wired singers instantly in the event of a family crisis, illness, or death. Frequently, a message goes out from a lifelong singer needing prayers; or a surviving friend or family member of a newly deceased singer will post a call for singers to gather at the funeral home, the memorial service, or graveside to sing a few tunes.

In the short time that I've been singing, I've met numerous singers who've lost loved ones and asked for support over the

e-mail list. Most recently, an Iowa singer's ninety-four-year-old mother died in her home, and she sent out her thanks to singers for their support over the years as she took care of her aged parent. Along with probably hundreds of others, I sent my condolences by e-mail. She responded, "It was a privilege to spend the time with her and to walk with her to the edge of the river, and she set a good example for me when it's my turn to make that journey.

"This singing family of ours is a wonderful comfort, and I thank you for writing."

A few weeks after her mother's death, that same singer posted an announcement of a new online service for Sacred Harp singers, a Web site (<http://partinghand.pbwiki.com/>) where singers can post the names and numbers of the songs they'd like to be sung at their memorials. Some of the posts give specific instructions on which verses, or how fast or slow they'd like their memorial songs to be sung.

To arrive as an outsider and be accepted as part of this rich, caring community is a gift unlike any other I've known as a career-driven, overworked parent of four children in a tough, ambitious world that often values things over people. The community of singers and the act of singing have become both a musical refuge and a call to humanity.

For these and many other reasons, Sacred Harp singing has become my church.

Amanda Denson, an Alabama singer with a rich family tradition in Sacred Harp, reminds me and others that this music is more than a singing exercise: It is worship and it is a rich inheritance to be honored and perpetuated. She points out that in the opening pages of the songbook, these words from Jeremiah are inscribed: "Seek the old paths and walk therein."

All of us, says Amanda, fourth-generation singers like her as well as neophytes like me, are links in a chain that connects us with a tradition far bigger than ourselves. And if the religiosity of Sacred Harp singing seems out of reach to an occasional churchgoer, all she has to do is listen and sing with an open heart. “Our music can’t draw you in unless God touches your heart in some way,” she says, “and that’s the Holy Ghost.”

To that I say, “Amen.”