

FOLK HYMNS: THE CANE RIDGE LEGACY

Richard Hulan

HOLY MANNA. 8, ~ More. Baptist Harmony, p. 1 103

Brethren, we have met to wor-ship, And a-dore the Lord our God; All is vain, unless the Spirit Of the Holy One come down; Brethren, pray, and Will you pray with all your power, While we try to preach the word.

ho-ly man-na Will be shower'd all around

2 Brethren, see poor sinners round you,
Trembling on the brink of woe;
Death is coming, hell is moving;
Can you bear to let them go?
See our fathers—see our mothers,
And our children sinking down;
Brethren, pray, and holy manna
Will be shower'd all around.

3 Sisters, will you join and help us?
Moses' sisters aided him;
Will you help the trembling mourners,
Who are struggling hard with sin?
Tell them all about the Saviour,
Tell them that he will be found;
Sisters, pray, and holy manna
Will be shower'd all around.

4 Is there here a trembling jailer,
Seeking grace, and fill'd with fears.
Is there here a weeping Mary,
Pouring forth a flood of tears?
Brethren, join your cries to help them;
Sisters, let your prayers abound;
Pray, O' pray, that holy manna
May be scatter'd all around.

5 Let us love our God supremely,
Let us love each other too;
Let us love and pray for sinners,
Till our God makes all things new
Then he'll call us home to heaven.
At his table we'll sit down.
Christ will gird himself, and serve us
With sweet manna all around.

"Holy Manna" is the theme song with which the annual Southern Harmony singing is opened. The words are by George Askins, a Methodist circuit rider of the early nineteenth century; the tune first appeared in William Moore's Columbian Harmony (1825).

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There is one genre of traditional music in America which, more than any other, is both widespread and healthy in the 1970's. That genre is folk hymnody. The cradle of the American folk hymn was Kentucky, which at the start of the nineteenth century witnessed a truly remarkable phenomenon we now call the Great Revival in the West. In 1800 and for a few years thereafter the western settlements experienced a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, religious enthusiasm, or group hysteria—as various reporters have described it. A combination of factors including sparseness of population, difficulty of travel, and a dearth of large buildings called into existence a new context for Christian worship: the camp-meeting.

Very early, camp-meeting worshippers showed a preference for a particular type of song, then (as now) usually called a spiritual. This is because it isn't a psalm, and it isn't a hymn (technically, a hymn must praise God—which many spirituals never get around to doing). Happily, the New Testament had left the door open for pious effusions called "spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16). There were spiritual songs—whole books of them, in fact—before the Great Revival in the West; but few were of American authorship, and they were rarely admitted to public worship. The previous height of popularity for the spiritual song had been the Great Awakening, a mid-eighteenth century event during which the Calvinists on the east coast yawned, founded Princeton, and went back to bed. In about 1820 they woke once more to find that the trans-Appalachian country had been settled, largely by Presbyterians, who had soon gotten religion (at camp-meetings) and were now Methodists—or worse.

The greatest camp-meeting of all was held at Cane Ridge, in Bourbon County, Kentucky, in August of 1801. Here some twenty thousand souls, over ten percent of the young state's population, met for a week of preaching, praying, shouting, and singing. The Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian preachers who participated took turns in the single indoor pulpit; they preached outdoors from stumps and wagon beds, within earshot of each other; they tied themselves in trees, which swayed as they described the joys of heaven and the discomforts of its alternative.

Because it was the largest of all the early camp-meetings, Cane Ridge has long stood as the symbol of the entire camp-meeting movement; as such, it marks one of the major watersheds of American cultural history. Its influence is widely evident in the life style, let alone the singing style, of Americans of no denominational affiliation whatever. This influence on the national character is as deep and as widespread as the "Puritan work ethic," a better known religious phenomenon more honored for economic

than for moral effects on American life.

One theme united the frontier evangelists who came together at Cane Ridge; a theme dear to the Methodist, untried but appealing to the Baptist, heretical but magnetic to the Presbyterian. It was the novel preaching that personal, individual salvation was not some eternally ordained page in the plan of God, but a function of faith, repentance, and true belief. This was not a new idea; what was new was the existence of a society in which this idea found ready acceptance by the majority, and no opposition from the civil government.

A person who was not rather self-sufficient and tough should not have been in Kentucky in 1800, and probably wasn't. Typically, the pioneer was a combination of grit and cussedness; the appeal of the new preaching to such a person was immense. What he heard from the rough-hewn pulpit was, in effect, "You have crossed the biggest mountains you ever saw; you have tamed the only wilderness you ever saw; with your own two hands you have built an earthly home, and you can make yourself a home in Glory." This pioneer sang,

"A few more days, or years, at most,
My troubles will be o'er;
I hope to join that glorious host
On Canaan's happy shore."

And he didn't just hope; he fully expected to join that glorious host. Furthermore, he was going to make it if he had to go alone:

"But if you will refuse Him,
We'll bid you all farewell;
We're on our way to Canaan,
And you, the way to Hell."

The legacy of Cane Ridge is not so much doctrinal as conceptual; it is the peculiarly American (and most visibly rural-southern) conception that personal salvation is a kind of spiritual commodity. Religion is something that one goes out and gets—frequently, during the second week of August. Those denominations which maintain this conception of salvation are, by and large, the ones which preserve the old spiritual songs or some modern manifestation thereof:

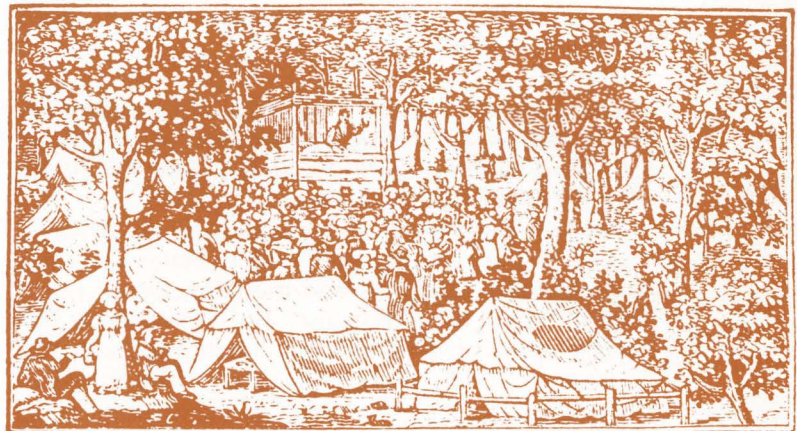
"How lost was my condition,"
"Plunged in a gulf of dark despair,"
"Love lifted me,"
"I saw the light,"
"I am on my way to Heaven."

Kentucky was the birthplace of the camp-meeting spiritual. It was the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, too; they moved away (in opposite directions) to meet destiny, but the folk hymn

took root and flourished there as perhaps nowhere else. The 1973 Festival of American Folklife will bring together a wide variety of the spiritual or folk hymn traditions which thrive today in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Probably the closest approximation to the congregational singing of British Colonial America now extant is found among the Old Regular Baptists of Kentucky. Among Black people, the historical equivalent is the Primitive Baptist "long meter" hymn. The typical colonial hymn book contained words only (no musical notes), and was used in worship services by the preacher or another adult male. The leader of a given hymn would "line it out"—recite or chant it, usually two lines at a time; pause for the congregation to sing these lines; and then proceed with the next couplet. This manner of singing was gradually displaced as literacy increased and more hymn books could be afforded, so that by 1840 it was becoming an archaic style. It is still a strong tradition, however, among a few denominations which choose to adhere to the old way.

"Lining out" became archaic for a number of reasons. The music itself was no longer considered fashionable. While the northeast contented itself with such imitators of stylish European music as Lowell Mason (look for his name in the hymnal of your church), the southwest—Kentucky, for instance—went off in two conservative directions at once. Southern and western singing-school books from about 1815-65 retained much of the colonial hymn repertoire, including the earliest American efforts



View of Haverstraw Camp Meeting, Sept. 1830. Engraved for Rev. T. Mason's Zion's Songster



A contemporary Gospel choir adds to the worship service at the St. Paul A.M.E. Church, Woodburn, Kentucky. Photo by David Sutherland.

at artistic church music. At the same time, these tune books captured in musical notation a vast body of the camp-meeting spirituals (often sung to fiddle tunes or other folk melodies).

The two singing-school books having the greatest musical impact on the southwestern states were the 1835 *Southern Harmony* and the 1844 *Sacred Harp*, both of which are still in use. The *Sacred Harp* has been regularly revised, twice in the past decade, and flourishes throughout the Deep South. The *Southern Harmony*, last revised in 1854, survives only in an annual singing held the last Sunday in May in the courthouse at Benton, Kentucky.

The frontier evangelist and the singing-school teacher both realized that the traditional and popular

tunes of a group were powerful stimuli upon members of that group. For the evangelist, this musical stimulation reinforced his appeal to sinners to repent and seek salvation. For the singing-school teacher, it sold books. This last factor cannot be overlooked as a key to the continuing creation and diffusion of the gospel song, modern successor to the camp-meeting spiritual.

Such groups as the Spiritual Way Quartet and John Edmonds' Gospel Truth represent the mainstream of the Cane Ridge legacy as it stands in the 1970's. While singing a predominantly twentieth century repertoire based on identifiable (usually copyrighted) compositions, they perform in a folk style to their respective traditional audiences. Other participants this year include composers and publishers of gospel songs, tent-meeting evangelists, and song leaders. Each partakes in the maintenance and renewal of this Kentucky heritage.