

RETHINKIN'
OUR THINKIN'



THOUGHTS
ON
SACRED HARP
MYTHS

BY
R. L. VAUGHN
Mount Enterprise, Texas
2012

Waymark Publications
Mount Enterprise, Texas
© 2012
All rights reserved
Printed in the U. S. A.

Second printing w/corrections, April 2013

Dewey Decimal Classification:
Subject Heading: 782

Cataloging Data

Vaughn, Robert Lee 1957—

Rethinkin' our thinkin': thoughts on Sacred Harp
'myths'/ R. L. Vaughn

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index

ISBN: 978-0-578-12240-3 65 pp. \$5.99

1. Shape note singing. 2. Hymns, English – Southern States – History and criticism. 3. Church music – Southern States.

782
ML3111

PREFACE

Before I was ever more than a listener of Sacred Harp, I would thumb through the slick pages of my grandfather's old 1927 song book with childish wonder. I beheld with pride the "Vaughn" name on page 521, corresponding with a larger than life persona whose large portrait hung on Granddaddy's wall in an ornate oval frame. I was a married adult before I knew there was more than one Sacred Harp book. A visit to an older cousin who knew of my interest in Sacred Harp meant she must proudly display her old family treasures. Among these treasures was her grandfather's James book. It was indeed a relic of the past that was unknown to me, but "just a Sacred Harp book that Grandpa owned" to her. Around 1980 Donald Ross introduced me to the Denson book. It would take several more years to discover that there was yet another book – the J. L. White revision. With each gradual step, I embraced all of these as part of my history—our history—but none can ever surpass the thrill I still feel holding "Granddaddy's book." Please understand that my thoughts in this booklet derive from this underlying bias. I believe it is this bias that enables me to see how others approach the history of *The Sacred Harp* from their own biases, which are understandably different than mine. It is in this context that I write.

This is written with the assumption that the major appeal will be to those who know of Sacred Harp and its history. Though I hope the booklet will be beneficial to a wider audience, I have directed my thoughts mostly to the Sacred Harp community; to those who already have a working knowledge of many of the elements discussed.

We must understand that our Sacred Harp forebears were folks like us with their flaws and their foibles. We can remember that, while revering their memory and remembering their lives and their accomplishments. Some of what I have written will be controversial. But it is not written for the sake of controversy. It is written for the sake of needed clarity, restored history and ultimate unity.

This booklet is not written to provide all the answers. It is written *to cause the questions to be asked*. If this book meets its goal, future research will be conducted in areas of Sacred Harp that have been neglected. The Cooper & J. L. White books and communities will be searched for the roles they played in creating the history of Sacred Harp in the 20th century (and beyond). Some of my theories may be validated and some may be disproven. It does not matter to me, as long as the truth eventually shines clearer.

The thoughts contained herein are about the **history** of Sacred Harp, and are not a reflection on the quality of any of the books in current use; I love to sing from all of them.

To the end of the discussion of Sacred Harp myths I have added six appendices. Three of them are more directly related to the “Thoughts on Sacred Harp Myths” and the other three are more generally historical. I hope these will add to the utility and benefit of this production.

Acknowledgements

This booklet is a collection of various items conceived for blog posts, Fasola list discussions and other media, as well as material gathered for preservation. The differences in time and purpose of writing makes this a haphazard collection that I have tried to forge into a unified whole. A number of people have contributed toward this goal, and have greatly benefitted the consistency of the volume. Any failure in this achievement I claim as my own.

I would like to thank all those who have read drafts of this booklet for advice, proofreading and critique. This cadre includes John Bealle, Wade Kotter, Karen Willard and Stanley Smith. I also thank my wife Kim and daughter Charity, who read early & late drafts and provided needed proofing. I appreciate those who provided pictures: Esther Huckaby for A. J. and Loduska Crawford; Larry Martin for John W. Miller; Linda Davenport for Elias and Cynthia King; Mary Keith Copeland for C. G. and Mary Keith; The Sacred Harp Book Company for the standard picture of W. M. Cooper; Charles Wells for the J. L. White singing school; and John Garst for electronic enhancement of the King photo. Thank you all!

Finally, in a work such as this I hope I do not perpetuate any myths of my own. If so, I hope they will be exposed and uprooted as well as others.

R. L. Vaughn
Mount Enterprise, TX
July 28, 2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	1
Acknowledgements	3
Table of contents	4
Introduction	5
The interloper	6
Somewhat late spreading	16
Only dispersed harmony	21
No more books	24
Strict separation	26
The better book boys (and girls)	27
The way it's always been	33
Conclusion	39
Appendix A	41
Appendix B	42
Appendix C	47
Appendix D	49
Appendix E	51
Appendix F	55
References	58
Index	61
Notes	64
<i>Pictures</i>	
Andrew and Loduska Crawford	15
C. G. and Mary Keith	20
John W. Miller	23
Elias and Cynthia King	32
W. M. Cooper	40
J. L. White singing school	57

Introduction

Winston Churchill said that history is written by the victors. Most of Sacred Harp history has been written by the "victors" – that is, the majority; the followers of the James-Denson tradition of Sacred Harp – beginning with Joe S. James and his *Brief History* to the present. Those within and without the tradition have mostly followed that lead and most of the wealth of Sacred Harp historical and sociological writings lean in that direction. James wrote in uncertain musical times, and at least part of his purpose was partisan or polemic in nature—especially so in his *Explanation of the Sacred Harp*—and even careful historians have not always fully taken that into account when going to James as a source (or going to those who have gone to James as a source). Myths have grown up around Sacred Harp and its history that have not been challenged, reevaluated, proven or disproven. This is changing.

"Myths" is a loaded term. A myth is an unproven, invented or imaginary belief, idea or story. Probably too strong a term for much of the subject, it is deliberately chosen to catch the attention of those who perpetuate Sacred Harp "myths" as established fact, whether intentionally or unintentionally. It is not that every "myth" has absolutely no aspect of truth. But there are items that need to be studied, rethought and tweaked to bring them closer to the accuracy of the whole truth. In this work I suggest that roughly two-thirds of Sacred Harp history (ideologically) has been slighted or neglected, and offer some suggestions to correct that.

The interloper

Myth # 1. W. M. Cooper was an interloper, somehow outside the Sacred Harp establishment.

It is not uncommon to read that W. M. Cooper and his revision of 1902 were not in the tradition of the *Sacred Harp* of B. F. White, that "... it must appear regrettable that the first revision after White's death did not emerge under the auspices of those who had been taught by the founder of the tradition. Those who considered themselves to have received the mantle White had passed down – though they admitted revision was needed – could never sanction such an interloper."¹ Richard J. Stanislaw lists the Cooper edition of *The Sacred Harp* as "corrected and modernized" and therefore "no longer in the tradition of the 1844 edition."² Those who follow this line of thought may support it with two main reasons: (1) Cooper added some songs in a musical style outside the tradition [e.g. church songs like "Rock of Ages" (p. 107)³ or gospel songs like "Are You Ready" (p. 378)]; (2) Cooper was neither part of White's "inner circle" of Sacred Harp singers, nor from the "Sacred Harp territory".⁴ Some anachronistic glasses are being worn here – the future is read back into the past, and some

¹ *The Sacred Harp*, Cobb, p. 90

² *A Checklist*, Stanislaw, p. 40; Cf. also *The Story of The Sacred Harp, 1844-1944*, George Pullen Jackson, p. 18.

³ In my opinion, "Rock of Ages" is no more out of the tradition than "Martin" or "Shawmut".

⁴ This has the effect of what Doris J. Dyen describes as giving "a stamp of approval to one branch of the tradition, while assigning a secondary status to all others." – *Folk Music and Modern Sound*, Ferris, p. 74

conclusions are founded on things that have not been sufficiently investigated.

The Sacred Harp of B. F. White was not static in style, but a progressive work that grew over 25 years. Compiled and published in 1844, the book was enlarged in 1850 and 1859, and then revised in 1870.⁵ Songs in the pre-20th century versions of the Sacred Harp can be studied to develop a frame of reference to determine the musical "loyalty" of the Cooper, James and White books to their predecessors. Most songs in the older books fit the modern concept of "dispersed harmony" – though defining that in itself is problematic.⁶ There are some songs I consider suspect.⁷

A thorough study of 1870 revision would be helpful. Such a study would undertake to compile information about all the songs that were deleted and all the songs

⁵ I have chosen for consistency and simplicity to refer to this as the 1870 book, though there was an 1869 printing by B. F. White & the Southern Musical Convention, and an 1870 printing by B. F. White and D. P. White. This was the last printing under B. F. White's directorship. For these same reasons, I will use "Denson books" to refer to all editions of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company from 1936 through 1991. The 1991 edition is not self-described as a "Denson Edition" but is often referred to as such within the Sacred Harp community.

⁶ My working definition of dispersed harmony is "harmony with open chords and freely moving parts (i.e., parts not merely following and complimenting the melody)." J. S. James defines it as harmony in which "the notes forming the various chords [are] separated from each other by wide intervals." – *Explanation*, James, pp. 10-11

⁷ I will touch on that in Myth # 3. I don't have sufficient musical expertise to debate it with experts; I don't have enough sense to leave it alone!

that were added – things like style (e.g. camp meeting songs, hymn tunes, fusing tunes) and makeup (e.g. 3-part or 4-part, major or minor, dispersed or close harmony), etc.⁸ This compiled data could be analyzed to determine trends in the 1870 book – e.g., reflecting only the original style or tending to move away from the style of the original compilation. In so doing, we might learn whether the 1870 edition showed a move toward what Cooper would introduce into the book in 1902.⁹

It has been said that the gospel music influence in the revisions by W. M. Cooper and J. L. White “greatly changed the musical character of Sacred Harp singing in the areas where these books were adopted.”¹⁰ If conventions were already singing these songs before 1902, it does not follow that the addition of these songs to these books “changed the character” of the singing. What was the actual practice of the conventions? In the late 19th century, many other shape note tune books were being compiled and

⁸ In 1870 the Sacred Harp revision committee removed 47 tunes, of which 41 (87%) were 3-part. They added 126 tunes, of which 90 (only 71%) were 3-part. In 1850, the associates of B. F. White added two 4-part tunes to the book. In 1859, they added three 4-part tunes to the book. But in 1870 the associates of B. F. White were responsible for 35 four-part tunes! (See *Appendix A.*) One other, by L. Mason, also had four parts, for a total of 36 four-part tunes added to the 4th edition of *The Sacred Harp*. Though other explanations might be plausible, the influence of gospel music could explain why 34% of the songs removed in 1870 were minor tunes, while minor tunes were added at a rate of only 17%.

⁹ In my opinion, songs like "Loving Jesus" and "Let Us Sing" prefigure the call and response of some gospel songs. The spike in composition of 4-part harmonies by the friends of B. F. White paves the way for the adding of alto by Cooper. Cf. footnote 24.

¹⁰ *Makers*, Steel, p. 53

conventions were singing from these books in addition to *The Sacred Harp*. Even if gospel songs are of a different character than most songs in the older editions of *The Sacred Harp*, it does not mean that “gospel songs” changed the character of the singing in the areas where these books (Cooper & J. L. White) were adopted. Many of the older conventions – such as Southern, Chattahoochee and East Texas – allowed use of books other than *The Sacred Harp*. If singing conventions were already singing these songs, then the real change brought by Cooper’s and J. L. White’s revisions was to enclose the songs in the lids of a single book rather than using several books to sing them. This would be a practical move as much as or more so than a musical one. The first convention founded by B. F. White – the Southern Musical Convention – succumbed to the trend of other books and eventually moved away from *The Sacred Harp*. Chattahoochee, East Texas and other older conventions used other books without making that fatal mistake. For example, Campbell states, “Similarly, Georgia’s most influential Sacred Harp convention, the Chattahoochee Musical Convention, had a long and flirtatious relationship with other tunebooks...by the 1880s the Chattahoochee, although continuing to use *The Sacred Harp*, experimented with at least four different seven-shape books as well.”¹¹ We study the songs in the book on one hand; on the other hand we must understand that the songs in *The Sacred Harp* were not the only songs

¹¹ *Old Can Be Used Instead of New*, Campbell, p. 179; His statements imply that the Warrior River Convention also used other books. The East Texas Convention (2nd oldest surviving after the Chattahoochee) used some of the A. S. Kieffer books, and considered compiling their own book. See *Approaching 150*, Vaughn, pp. 7-9, 16-17.

Sacred Harpers were singing. Sacred Harp did not exist in a musical vacuum. The entire Sacred Harp movement was in a state of flux between 1870 and 1902, probably even earlier. The seven-shape note system and gospel songs garnered popularity in the Sacred Harp regions. Most new music was being written with four-part harmonies. Most Sacred Harp songs were in three-part harmonies. "Should we accept the new shapes or reject them?" "Should we sing the new songs or ignore them?" Some Sacred Harpers were not happy with the changes; some embraced them. Some Sacred Harp singers moved in both circles. We should not read future developments back into the past record to determine who were "real" Sacred Harp singers based on our desired outcome. What happened with the revisions of W. M. Cooper, J. L. White and J. S. James reflects not that some parties were pure and some were not, but rather that different groups of *real Sacred Harp singers* responded in different ways to the changing musical world in which they lived.¹²

The second evidence against Cooper is based partly on incorrect interpretation and partly on lack of information. It is incorrect to declare from our side of history that W. M. Cooper and south Alabamians were not part of the "inner circle" and outside the foundational territory.¹³ On a map it appears that south

¹² Interestingly, Cooper, James and J. L. White were all "second generation" Sacred Harpers, born within three years of one another.

¹³ J. S. James' *Brief History* is the first known attempt to record Sacred Harp history. His lack of knowledge of what happened to certain Sacred Harpers indicates his "inner circle armor" had a chink in it. Oft untouched is the apparent fact that some of White's "inner circle" *defected*. For example, Earl Thurman said

Alabama is about as close to Harris County, Georgia (where White lived when he published *The Sacred Harp*) as north Alabama is.¹⁴ There may be a grain of truth about the territory.¹⁵ The fact remains that up until recent years little research has been done on the south Alabama connections to White's movement.¹⁶

Some early conventions mentioned in B. F. White's newspaper, *The Organ*, met geographically toward southeast Alabama from Harris County rather than toward north Georgia or north Alabama. In September 1855 the Alabama Musical Convention met in Russell County, Alabama. The Southern Musical Convention semi-annual session and the Southwestern Musical Convention both met in Marion County, Georgia in 1854 and Southwestern in Stewart County in 1856.¹⁷

There is evidence that B. F. White taught singing schools in south Alabama.¹⁸ It is not outside the realm

that "one of the most competent and best-informed singers in the early life of the [Chattahoochee] convention was M. Mark Wynn. Wynn was active in both the Southern and Chattahoochee from 1845 to 1867. He was one of the leaders in promoting the Sacred Harp type of song in the early life of the book." (Miller, pp. 40-41) Research in A.S. Kieffer's *Musical Million* indicates Wynn(e) moving in 7-shape circles, composing and teaching, though that does not mean he abandoned Sacred Harp altogether.

¹⁴ Dothan (south AL) and Anniston (north AL) are almost the same distance from Hamilton, Georgia.

¹⁵ Considering that B. F. White moved north to Atlanta before his death.

¹⁶ Wilson S. Cooper, W. M.'s father, was an agent for Wm. Hauser's *Hesperian Harp* and would likely be involved in Sacred Harp as well.

¹⁷ *The Organ*, May 17, 1854, April 25, 1855, October 24, 1855.

¹⁸ *Makers*, p. 92. Cf. *The Alabama Historical Quarterly, Volumes 10-14*, Alabama State Dept. of Archives and History, 1948, p. 127

of possibility that W. M. Cooper was taught by B. F. White or one of his students. Some of the Georgia crew drifted into south Alabama – Reuben E. Brown, Reuben Brown, Jr., and David P. White (B. F. White's son and a music teacher) lived in the very area from whence the Cooper book arose.¹⁹ J. L. White's fourth edition preface indicates he had a working relationship with Southeast Alabama and Florida Conventions. Composer and music teacher John Stringer Terry lived in southeast Alabama some 30 years before moving to Texas around 1875.²⁰ Terry's co-composer Dr. Robert Henry Davis lived in Pike County at the time of his marriage in 1846 and until his death in 1890.²¹ "W. M. Cooper the interloper"²² is a myth that needs to be laid to rest. By 1902 south Alabama had a long and well-established relationship with *The Sacred Harp* and its conventions. Further study should be conducted on this relationship.²³

¹⁹ Reuben E. Brown, Sr. (333 Family Circle) and Reuben E. Brown, Jr. (392 Converting Grace, 230 in the 1991 Revision) are in Barbour County, Alabama in the 1850 U.S. Federal Census, listed as minister and music teacher, respectively. David Patillo White was in Henry County, Alabama by 1856 (*The Organ*, April 5, 1856) and is in its Federal Census in 1860.

²⁰ In the 1860 Covington County, Alabama census he is listed as a "teacher of vocal music."

²¹ *Makers*, Steel, pages 104 & 158

²² But there is a sense in which I would consider both W. M. Cooper and J. S. James "interlopers" – it seems that the White family would have had the right to revise the book rather than others. Apparently the Sacred Harp community as a whole did not view it that way.

²³ Buell Cobb lists about seven Sacred Harp conventions formed in southeast Alabama between 1855 and 1889, and the 2006 Minutes of Cooper Book Conventions (published by the Sacred Harp Book Company) lists singings of at least nine southeast Alabama and west Florida conventions that are over 100 years

Cooper's addition of alto parts to existing three-part Sacred Harp songs indicates he was familiar with the style of the old songs.²⁴ Wallace McKenzie's *The Alto Parts in the "True Dispersed Harmony" of The Sacred Harp Revisions* demonstrates that Cooper had as good or better record in maintaining the "dispersed harmony" while adding an alto part to the three-part harmonies.²⁵ Specifically, McKenzie notes that "no changes were made in the existing parts to reduce the parallel intervals or fill in incomplete triads" and that "the added alto parts actually increase the total number of parallels..." Further he noted that "Cooper's altos maintain some features of the contrapuntal-harmonic style...more closely than do those of Denson" though "many of the Denson altos make more interesting melodies...",²⁶ concluding that "the alto melodies are consistent with the contrapuntal-harmonic style of the three-part pieces."²⁷ McKenzie

old. The Southeast Convention (org. ca 1858) is "the oldest Alabama singing assembly still in existence." (Cobb, p. 139) Evidently it is the third oldest continuing Sacred Harp Convention in existence in the U.S., after Chattahoochee and East Texas.

²⁴ There was precedent within the Sacred Harp community for adding alto to existing three-part tunes. About 2 dozen songs which appeared in *The Sacred Harp* without alto parts appear in *The New Sacred Harp* by J. L. White and B. F. White, Jr. with alto parts added (as well as other changes).

²⁵ Interestingly, in *Anthems of the Sacred Harp Tunesmiths*, McKenzie indicates the anthems added to the Cooper book compare favorably to better than the anthems added to the Denson book, when considering maintaining the folk tradition of its predecessors (pp. 257-261). He describes Cooper's "Mother, the Dearest Friend" as "filled with open fifths (thirty-one), open fourths (eighteen), and parallel perfect intervals (forty-three)."

²⁶ See pages 28-29 for more discussion of the alto.

²⁷ *Alto Parts*, McKenzie, p. 10 (pagination from online pdf).
<http://pacificnewsacredharp singers.org/altoarticle.pdf>