



David Ivey
Sacred Harp Singing
Henagar, Alabama

Date: September 12, 2019
Location: Mr. Ivey's home, Huntsville, AL
Interviewer: Michelle Little
Transcription: Shelley M. Chance, Prodocs
Length: One hour and two minutes
Project: Faith and Foodways

[Begin Interview]

00:00:00

Michelle Little: Okay; today is September 12, 2019 and I'm interviewing David Ivey at his home in Huntsville, Alabama and this is Michelle Little and this is for the Southern Foodways Alliance project.

00:00:15

And David to start out with, would you tell me your name and date of birth for the record?

00:00:20

David Ivey: Yes; David Ivey, August 15, 1955.

00:00:23

Michelle Little: And where did you grow up, David?

00:00:26

David Ivey: I grew up in Henagar, Alabama on Sand Mountain and that's Northeast Alabama.

00:00:32

Michelle Little: All right and can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

00:00:37

David Ivey: Yes; my parents are both from— they're from Henagar and Ider which at that time there were no city limits. They each have their own little city limits area now, so they're— they grew up probably four or five miles apart. My dad loves— always loved to farm and grew up on a farm and so did I. But he was also a well driller, water wells for his— that's what he did for money. And he's still living; he's a Sacred Harp Singer by the way and I know we're going to talk about that.

00:01:12

And my mother was a stay-at-home mom and took care of us. She had four kids to deal with and was just— she was just a wonderful mom.

00:01:24

Michelle Little: And tell me a little bit about your siblings.

00:01:27

David Ivey: Yeah; I have three siblings and I'm the oldest and then Rod is my next in line brother. He's a Sacred Harp Singer. My sister Pam and my brother, Mike, Rod and Mike both live there on the property on my dad's property/farm. They each have their own place there. And my sister is a physical therapist and lives in Tifton, Georgia.

00:01:54

Michelle Little: Okay and so you all— you grew up singing the Sacred Harp— ?

00:01:59

David Ivey: We did. I— I tell people and they say when did you start singing? And I said well, probably before I was born. I mean I was— so it was— would have been the first live music I would have been exposed to because it was singing in our church. So it's sang in church services but then I don't know when I went— was taken to my first Sacred Harp Singing, all day singing but I'm sure it happened sometime in my first year.

00:02:27

Michelle Little: And— I'm sorry; go ahead.

00:02:29

David Ivey: No; even though I don't remember it of course but I can remember some of my first memories I can remember sitting by my dad at a singing in church and he was— he loves singing and still goes and he would— he would point the notes out to me on the page and reach down and says sing so I can hear you. In other words, he wanted me to sing out. So it's one of the first things I can remember.

00:02:57

Michelle Little: And what church was that?

00:02:59

David Ivey: Grew up in Liberty Baptist Church there at Henagar.

00:03:04

Michelle Little: Okay; so what— I mean what about— when did you start to realize that this type of singing or this type of event was maybe different from maybe some of your friends' churches or— ?

00:03:20

David Ivey: Well I don't know. I think probably you know during my elementary school years I knew it was different. In those days— so I was growing up in elementary school in the [19]60s and in those times, at least there on Sand Mountain, people referred to Sacred Harp Singing as old book singing. People usually didn't call it Sacred Harp. And so you were— there were not many of us old book singers around compared to new book. New book singers were more the gospel-type singing where they use the piano and it's more of the southern gospel tradition, you know, which is also very important to Alabama.

00:04:08

And by that time most churches in the area had changed from using Sacred Harp in their church services to using piano and gospel things like the *Heavenly Highways Book* for example.

00:04:23

Whereas probably you know in the [19]30s, [19]40s, and [19]50s you know they— a lot of churches would have been using probably the Sacred Harp and type songs but they were able to get piano. But everybody always— they called us old book singers. And I and so that had I think— you know I can remember it had sort of a negative connotation like old timey or old fogey compared to— but I always loved it. I mean, when I was you know just again a kid in elementary school I would go if my dad didn't go to singings I would go with my grandparents. My Ivey grandparents Eules and Helen Ivey. And I can remember my dad might take me up to

their house and usually my grandfather would already be in the car and have it running waiting on my grandmother to get ready and I'd sit in between them on a bench seat and go to you know what seemed like exotic places like Cullman and things, you know things like— places like that you know that— because you know we didn't go very far.

00:05:33

In that time, it's hard to believe now but there was a weekly Sacred Harp Radio Program live at WFPA on Lookout Mountain up from Fort Payne. And it was— it ran from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings every week. And they would— I remember going to that radio; we'd go into the studio and we'd sort of— it's a small studio. Then I thought it was large. But we went up there a couple years ago and did this again, and I thought god, this is so small. It seemed big then but— and we would sing there for an hour and then leave from there and go to a Sacred Harp Singing somewhere you know in the area, very— and get there and we could get there by 10 o'clock and start singing you know for having all day singing.

00:06:21

So as I was— I always was interested and enjoyed the singing. And when I was in sixth grade my grandparents got this postcard inviting them to a Sacred Harp Singing down in Central Florida near Orlando. And that was unusual. And they, you know, they were I guess near retirement age or retired, and they thought— they got a couple who were friends of theirs who were singers and they decided to go. So they asked me if I would go with them, and I had never been to Florida, you know, had never been that far away.

00:07:00

In fact, I think it was the first time I ever stayed at a hotel, you know, on the way down there. But I can remember I was the only kid at this singing as a sixth grader. I led and you know

sang and all this and people just— they— then you could tell they didn't even. They were amazed that kids you know would do this because most of them were much older at that point.

00:07:23

So but throughout high school, college, you know I always was— I've been involved continuously.

00:07:31

Michelle Little: And where did you go to college?

00:07:33

David Ivey: So I went to college at Auburn University in the 1970s, [19]73 to [19]77.

00:07:38

Michelle Little: And so even during those years would you find singings to go to on the weekends?

00:07:45

David Ivey: Yes; I— well, I would go home you know, if we had big singing events. I remember one— I was probably a junior. And there was a church there having singing school on two consecutive weekends. Had Hugh McGraw from Georgia coming in to teach and I drove home both of those weekends to go to this— go to the singing school.

00:08:08

So yeah; so certainly, you know, the big singings and from my home church I would make a point and make sure I went home those weekends to be there for the singings.

00:08:19

Michelle Little: Hmm and so for anyone that listens to this in the future that does not know what shape note singing, what Sacred Harp Singing is could— how would you describe it to someone that's never heard it before?

00:08:32

David Ivey: I always tell folks you have to hear it to get it, and you've been to one so you understand that. So it's acapella singing; it's— it's the harmonies are very open and stark generally speaking. People sing with their full voices. They're not trying necessarily to sing loud but it's natural for humans to sing fairly loud if you— I mean, if you sing with your whole voice. You know, we don't sing like trained choirs you know. We just— if you listen to other folk groups and other cultures in other countries you know when you hear them--I've heard this before and heard some Eastern European folks who were just singing— folksingers. And then they sing like sort of— that sounds like us. You know because they're singing loud.

00:09:20

But so when you— and when you walk into a room and the singing is being done it— you know it— it is— people call it a wall of sound. It's you know— it's quite loud. Men and women both sing both the tenor, which is the melody, as well as the high part, the treble, so you have really a six-part harmony when you have to talk about the different voices in each one of those.

00:09:45

And we have— and then there are— there are things like we have a— you know a variety of types of songs. We had this type of tune called a fugging tune which is one in which the different parts come in at different times and all end at the same. And it's just a lot of fun to sing for one thing in that. But you know we talk sometimes, our Sacred Harp friends say we talk about whether someone has the gene or not. People can come in and hear this music and just be overtaken and overwhelmed by it and just fall in love with it.

00:10:18

And yet there are other people who come into it and just don't get it; you know, it's not something that appeals to them. I think some of that is that the music does not have a distinct melody for most of the songs. So and that, the reason for that is the melody is carried in a mid-range voice and what we— in tenor first. And both men and women sing it, but not in the highest voice. And what we're accustomed to and culturally, when we hear choirs sing the melody, it's in the highest voice. It comes through generally in most— mostly women. and so a lot of times people will say I can't hear the tune. And I think what they're— what they're trying to hear and trying to find is, you know, where is that melody? Where is that strong melody I can latch onto? Because that's what I think culturally, again, we're accustomed to hearing.

00:11:19

But if you can sort of take searching through that and again it's— it appeals to some people and not as much to others. Even in families. You know, so my brother and I both sing and have all of our lives and we have a brother and sister who don't go to singings. I mean, they come to our home singings there more as a family and social event, but they don't pursue this and go all over the place to sing.

00:11:46

Michelle Little: Hmm and would you say most of the people that are doing— I mean is it— is it a faith-based community or do you find there are people that are not, you know, members of a certain church that are just attracted to this type of singing, this you know— ?

00:12:07

David Ivey: So historically and traditionally, you know, it has been a faith-based practice. But not one owned by any particular church denomination or church. But over the last 30 years or so the Sacred Harp Singing has really expanded and grown popular outside of this— the South, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Florida where it was traditionally strongest for the last 100-years. And it's now being sung in cities and all over you know all over the country and then— and in fact in Europe and in other places as well.

00:12:50

So in that expansion, you know, it has reached lots of people who don't approach it first as from a faith-based perspective, right. I think people are generally attracted first by the music, by the sound, and they go to the Sacred Harp Singings and then they come back and get bound to this by the community of people. So we have you know— we have the dispersed community all over the place and we have friends; I mean throw a dart and hit the United States and you know, you know somebody there that sings, you know as well as in— now in the UK, Germany, Ireland, Poland, I'm sure I'm missing some so we even have friends who sing in Australia.

00:13:45

So it is really a— it really is a strong community of people who are really bound by the music. And maybe they may not approach this from a religious background, but I think most of them have some traction of this and feel something from a spiritual side of it. You know, but just left to each individual to determine what they get from a faith angle.

00:14:14

Michelle Little: Hmm; yeah I mean looking through the— I picked up the minutes book at the last singing I was at, and I mean, New York, I mean, just all major cities. I could tell there were— there were a lot of singings in Alabama and in the Southeast but it does certainly seem that it's—

00:14:32

David Ivey: It's in the large cities in the country. I mean it's— you know there's singings in San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Portland, Seattle— just thinking about the West as you said; Boston, New York, Washington, you know Philadelphia, the— Chicago, St. Louis, St. Paul, Minneapolis so yeah it's all over.

00:14:55

Michelle Little: And have you been to some you know that are in California or completely different—?

00:15:01

David Ivey: I've been to most of those places to singings over the years yeah. Yeah; it's great.

00:15:06

Michelle Little: And can you tell is there a difference in, you know, in Alabama singing— ?

00:15:10

David Ivey: Of course.

00:15:12

Michelle Little: Okay.

00:15:13

David Ivey: Well, we're really fortunate that Alabama has for the last, I would say, maybe 100 years, 50 years have had more singers living in the State of Alabama that it's just been preserved here so people have— I think people who have sung this who learned it from their parents, who learned it from their parents, you know, it's— we have some advantages in how we learn it maybe than folks who have come to this from other places.

00:15:46

So they're different. And the folks are in all of these places are wonderful singers and what's you know— so lots of times people in some of the cities they have other music backgrounds. So when they come to that they are generally better sight readers than I am. You know so they can learn it.

00:16:06

But I feel like— and I think most of the folks who live in these places would say that you know, they come to Alabama to see how this has been done historically and traditionally for a long time. And it's— so it's a little bit different. But if— but you know it's Sacred Harp Singing wherever it is. You know whether we're singing with— in the UK and of course, it's very interesting because if you're singing in a class of folks who are from England they have different— you can tell some different accents in the way they pronounce the words in even the singing. Or if we're singing in Poland, which you may have— and the singings I've been to there we have people there from Germany and England and Ireland, you know, and we're all singing together. And it's really pretty special to have people from all of these different places, faith backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, singing together just like we were 50 years ago here on— when all of us you know essentially went to the same churches and were singing it. It's still Sacred Harp.

00:17:24

Michelle Little: Great and so do you meet people frequently that are I mean learning it for the first time or if they're at the event do they usually already know the methodologies and—?

00:17:36

David Ivey: No; I mean people come to singings and for their first experience with this and the best way to learn is to jump in. We really learn music for the most part from with our ears. We learn it by hearing. Not many humans just learn it by sight and by looking at it and studying it. You really— how do folks— how have they learned music over this— you know, the thousands of years, the millennia? It's been through hearing it. So one of the best ways to learn is to come

in. But one of the things that we have been able to do now for about 17,18 years is we have summer camps where people come to learn the music and quite often, people will come to these camps having practically or maybe sometimes absolutely no experience or very little and come to camp to spend a week going to classes and singing at night and doing all the things to sort of immerse themselves in it to learn. But it still, it takes a little time to get you know— to have this, just sort of absorb it. But those who come and stick with it are rewarded.

00:18:51

Michelle Little: Hmm; so tell me about the singings, the all-day singing events. What could you expect from a day?

00:19:04

David Ivey: They're very much the same from place to place to place. Generally speaking, we gather in the morning and start singing at 9:30 or 10 o'clock. It just depends on where we are and how big the singing is. And the singing is opened by generally someone we call the Chairman. It's the person that's in charge of the event and then we have an opening prayer. And then we start singing. The leaders— everyone who sings Sacred Harp is a leader. Everyone is called in turn one after the other to come stand in the middle of the hollow square because all the parts are organized so that we're facing each other with the benches or chairs arranged in a square formation. And we sit by parts and this leader— they choose their song and we— someone will give the pitch of the song and we'll sing it and then the next leader is called and we sing and do that for about an hour. Have a recess— 10 minutes; come back and start singing again. Sing for another hour or so and then we have an hour for dinner on the grounds, spread, and that's very—

a very important part of the day. After that gather back in our hollow square and start singing again and sing for maybe two more one-hour sessions or so.

00:20:39

And at the end people are asked if they have announcements and people will stand up and say, “I have a singing at my church two weeks from this Sunday. We’d like for you to come and you go.” Everybody gets a chance to sort of talk about their— what they have upcoming, but the singings themselves are, I’ll say they’re very efficient in terms of we don’t do a lot of talking between the songs. You , once a leader is called they get, they call their number and they get in the square, they key it, and they sing it so that we can sing a lot in the amount of time we have.

00:21:12

Michelle Little: And can you describe the way— I mean when you sing each song how you go through the first time and then the second time?

00:21:21

David Ivey: Yeah; so we first sing the shaped notes. The Sacred Harp uses a four shape system, the four shapes are fa-so-la-me and the scale goes fa-so-la-fa-so-la-me-fa. And so our first singing through we sing the shapes, and this comes from the tradition that’s bound with Sacred Harp of the Singing School where again, over the last couple hundred years communities would hold Singing Schools to teach people how to sight read this and the shapes are a large— a big aid to help us learn it. Once you memorize that scale, and so that becomes a part of you. Then you understand when you see how to go from this fa to the sol you have those intervals or really sort of can become a part of you almost. It really helps.

00:22:18

So we sing the notes and then we go back and sing the words. And people say, “Well, you know the songs; why do you sing the notes every time if you already know them?” Well, one thing, not everybody might be familiar with them so it might help someone. But second, it sort of allows us just to— I think if we just start singing the words sometimes they don’t sound— it doesn’t sound quite as good as if we sort of work— sing through the notes.

00:22:49

And then the other part is just singing the notes is fun, too. You know it’s a lot of fun doing that, so.

00:22:53

Michelle Little: Hmm and the dinner on the grounds; so that’s usually— I mean do people bring dishes? Is it usually the church that is hosting the singing? Is it the women there and the men there or how does that usually come together?

00:23:11

David Ivey: Yeah; the dinner on the grounds is— that’s you know almost a big thing unto itself. And so it’s a— it is as you say Michelle, one of the big factors is the opportunity for the hosting folks to show their hospitality to people who come from wherever. A lot of times people will travel to our singings from an hour, two hours, three hours, and then of course, nowadays, when there may be people here from other states and they’re spending nights in hotels or with other singers and they come to this so they’re not expected to bring dinner. This is something that’s put on by the community that’s hosting the singing.

00:23:58

And you know people have a lot of pride in their dinner. We don't seek to have a dinner on the grounds where we just have enough food for the people there. We need to have at least twice as much food as is eaten, and the reason for that is you want people to see— look at that table, you want to them to see a bounty so that they feel comfortable getting as much as they want.

00:24:24

And but you know, sometimes one of the big contributors—a lot of people who don't sing Sacred Harp bring food from the community, so they're not people who are from the church and they may not get up and lead. They might sit toward the back out of the square but you know sing at their chair, at their seat, but actually not lead. But they're, you know, they're still a big part of Sacred Harp Singing because they're bringing dinner and being a part of that. Or, it might be a spouse of a singer. And my mother was not a Sacred Harp Singer. She did not stand up and lead and but she took dinner to hundreds of singings in her lifetime. So it's— and then, the other real great thing about this is that individuals have their specialties. And so you know, you know if you go to a particular singing to look— I know if I go to Liberty I'm looking for my Cousin Sandy's dumplings because they're the best in the world. Or, you know and so you— and then we sort of learn, the cooks learn what other people do so they don't— you know, Karen my wife would never take dumplings to Liberty because she could not compete with Sandy probably or wouldn't want to try.

00:25:59

So and then every--so you know that if you know you're going to see Rilla's coconut cake or Karen's sweet potato pie or whatever it is and when my mother was living and we'd be

preparing for the big singings at Liberty coming up on the weekends she would call us. She'd call Karen and say, "Okay let's talk about what you're going to bring and what I'm going to bring." So she wanted to make sure we had enough things that were different, so we wouldn't bring the same thing. But it's a big deal. It's very important, too.

00:26:38

Michelle Little: What was your mom's specialty?

00:26:42

David Ivey: Um well the thing that she made that I loved the most was potato salad. So, but I can remember when I was just a kid in particular she would always take potato salad. She would have baked beans. And then it would vary, what type of meat dish or what type of dessert, but you know she would usually carry those things. She and my dad ran a restaurant at Ider for oh about five years or so in the [19]80s, and during that time of course they had these very large pans, you know, that they would use to cook for you know a restaurant. So my dad loved to cook. And so his specialty, he started doing these huge pans of dressing, chicken and dressing. And he had all kinds of—I would say secrets; he would tell anybody about them that asked him, but you know he had all these interesting things he would put things like mayonnaise in his dressing and just all these things that I thought was unusual and wouldn't imagine.

00:27:50

And so that became one of their main dishes and then he would get up early on the mornings before the singings and he would fry chicken livers and have—I mean large—these large pans of chicken livers that were just wonderful. So folks you know then in those times

would come in and be looking for Coy's chicken livers and his dressing you know and nobody-- and he had enough for everybody. I mean he had enough of these things, these huge, huge pans.

00:28:23

When he got older he got just a little beyond where he could really handle doing all of that, so he decided he wouldn't do the chicken livers anymore. So but there was a restaurant, a different restaurant in Ider that was open that he knew and they— so he would get them to make the chicken livers for him, a big pan. And of course, he would buy them from them and pick them up and he would take them to the thing and then people would still say Coy we sure do like your chicken livers. And he'd say thank you. [*Laughter*] And that went on for you know a few years. And I think they had a change of ownership at that restaurant and he ordered the, you know, continued and got the chicken livers and got them and he took them to a singing and they didn't meet his standards. They weren't very good. So he just at that point he just quit taking chicken livers. They weren't good enough for him to take you know he was not going to mess with them.

00:29:31

Michelle Little: Right. You can't be known for a low-quality chicken—.

00:29:36

David Ivey: That's right. You can't have people, you know, when you have people coming to your singings you want them to be looking forward to the food, so it's a real point of pride for the singings. And you know you'd never want to run low of food. It just would be— you can't. That's unthinkable.

00:29:59

Michelle Little: Hmm and it seems like it's an enormous amount of work for these families in the churches.

00:30:04

David Ivey: It is a huge amount of work. It is a huge amount of work. And it's a challenge that we're facing in these days because the number of people supporting any one of these country singings that we have is really smaller than it was when I was a kid. My grandfather had I think he had 12 siblings who most of them went to this church— not all of them but most— lots. I remember you know it would be seven or eight so they would bring dinner and then some of their kids, my dad's cousins would bring dinner and others, and you know they didn't have to take huge amounts. And now we don't have those large families you know to support this.

00:30:47

So we do— you know nowadays we have to— we do some catering and whereas we have a little more of like my dad bought those chicken livers, you know we'll have some food supplied from the outside. So but we do that so we make sure we have enough.

00:31:05

Michelle Little: Right; so the church memberships maybe have declined some, but it seems like the singing, the numbers that are attending the singings maybe are increasing?

00:31:17

David Ivey: Yeah and that is true and again, 50 years ago the number of actual church singings in the State of Alabama was probably three or four times what it is now. So the individual communities would get the number of singers they had just got so small they couldn't sustain it. So now what we have, we have fewer of these singings in the state and the surrounding states but we have more people traveling longer distances to come to them. So we have maybe even larger singings than we did when I was a kid, or at least as large.

00:31:59

Michelle Little: Hmm.

00:32:00

David Ivey: So that means you have generally in terms of the dinner on the grounds you have fewer people preparing for more people that way so— but we just— you look at how to do it. When we started--we started Sacred Harp Singing in Huntsville here in 1985. We had been living here about five or six years and decided, hey, let's have a singing in Huntsville. There wasn't one until then.

00:32:23

And there were a number of people who lived in Huntsville who had grown up in Sacred Harp from other— in other places in Cleburne County and Winston County and Walker— and people, but they'd come here you know through careers and the like. And you know one of the big challenges, one of the things that I was most concerned about was we got to have— make sure we have enough dinner. So I remember the first year I decided, well, we'll buy 20 pounds of barbecue from a good barbecue place and we'll have bread and if nothing else we'll have

barbecue sandwiches you know. You can at least get by— of course, we had a lot more food come. But we— I stayed with that and we still have we have had barbecue every year at our Sacred Harp Singing since 1985. So at the head of the table, so that people can get— we get plenty.

00:33:10

Michelle Little: Yeah; I remember the Pine Grove singing a few years back and I remember driving up to the church and it— I mean it's a small church but then when it was time for dinner on the grounds just an enormous spread. And I don't— it didn't seem that any of that one was catered. I mean it—

00:33:28

David Ivey: It was not catered.

00:33:29

Michelle Little: Yeah [Laughter]; So I don't know if they've still got some magic going on.

00:33:33

David Ivey: Yeah; Pine Grove up from Collinsville is really an amazing dinner story and one of the things that stands out and about 1980— It might have been [19]80 or [19]81 at that time the table, dinner table they had was made by stretching a piece of— by stretching a roll of wire across these iron supports across and they would stretch that wire and then sort of— and boom it and tie it down so it was very tight because you know a lot of— and that was— I remember

those types of— a lot of churches had those types of tables back when I was a kid because, you know, they didn't have money to put up concrete tables and all these sorts of things.

00:34:24

So this], you know, they were putting this food out on their stretched wire table and they had so much food that the— it gave away and it just started— the wire support just went to the ground. I don't remember exactly how much food was lost. We still ate that day, of course.

00:34:46

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

00:34:46

David Ivey: And I remember Hugh McGraw from Georgia was there and he stood and says, "I'll give the first \$20 to make— get you guys to build a new table." So they built, sure enough, a new table that's concrete that would never fall. And it's long as you said. You remember being there. And that table, and for years and so many singings would be full of amazing food.

00:35:11

One of the supporters there that lived there near Pine Grove, his name is Bud Oliver, and he had been in the Army. He was a Retired Colonel and he had been in engineering in Vietnam and other places but he was very committed. He would do anything; he was a big promoter of their singing at Pine Grove. And he told me one time, he says you know, "I know some of my aunts up here don't really have enough money. They're on Social Security and they don't really have enough money to buy enough food so what I do is I go around and I just put cash in their mailbox." But they wouldn't— he says, "They wouldn't let me hand it to them because that

would be— you know, but I can go and if I put it in there then.” And he says, “They probably know where it comes from but you know.” And then they would use that and cook enough because he wanted that table loaded up. [Laughter]

00:36:13

But you— when you go to these singings you, as I said, you always look for certain things. Bud, I remember back in the [19]80s and [19]90s he lived on a farm there and he grew goats. So he would— he would prepare barbecued goat and bring it to the singing. And it was the first time I’d ever had ever any goat was there.

00:36:39

Michelle Little: [Laughter] I remember some fried apple pies.

00:36:43

David Ivey: Yes; yes. And so when you go to those things you go looking for those things that you know are there and the smart thing to do when you have that inside information, is you go get those first because they might disappear. And you want to be sure so there are places that— that where I go, I go and eat dessert first to make sure I get those wonderful desserts and then I’ll get the other stuff.

00:37:12

Michelle Little: So and obviously you and I know the answer to this, but what— how do you convey to people the importance of preserving this tradition?

00:37:25

David Ivey: You know, I think one way we try to teach that is through the singings themselves. We talk about it in the singing themselves. When we have rituals that satisfy people that help provide meaning to their lives that support, you know, support them in everyday living and whatever they're going through then— and we talk about those then it's hopefully, it's self-perpetuating and that you talk about them.

00:38:15

So one of the traditions in Sacred Harp Singing is something we call the memorial lesson. And it's a time in large singings especially where we have generally— we pretty much— it's one leader after another singing. We have a prayer at the beginning of the day. We have a prayer at the end of the day. And we have a prayer for the noon meal. But on one of those days, generally on Sunday we have a time where we stop and have— the spoken, people speak about and name the names of people who have died in the past year.

00:38:52

And it may be people we know; it might be just people that were special to someone else that we— someone— some other singers we know. And you know it sort— that one particular ritual which is a tradition with us— helps I think ground us in the— you know in the understanding that you know one of— like one of our songs says, we're living in fleeting days, swift as an Indian's arrow flies. And it really brings it home to people. And we also during this time remember people who are sick and shut in and can't go to singings. And again, these are— and when you hear the names called you, most singers know most of them, right. And then it's a time that folks are encouraged to reach out to them and contact them, call them, or send them a card and let you know that you're supporting them.

00:39:55

And again I think this type of ritual, this type of tradition, is one of those things that keeps people when they actually come into singing and they, you know, they just heard about it and you have a friend that says, “Hey, you ought to come to a Sacred Harp Singing with me.” And they don’t have any idea what it is. And they’ll walk in and they— you know maybe they’ll like it at first and it might take them a little time, but then when they get— they see these things that happen and that we are a sort of a band of people who are just meeting really to sing together, there’s— we have no— you know we’re not of any particular single religion or creed. You don’t have to believe any particular thing to sit down and sing in one of these gatherings. Then they— a lot of, that really is attractive to a lot of people. And I think especially people who don’t have other faith communities or— and to people who have been excluded from faith— other faith communities for various reasons or feel excluded.

00:41:05

So and again it’s one of the— you know it’s one of the few social groups— call it that who don’t have any particular— you know, we’re you know not of a particular age group, we’re not of a particular culture or type of— you know, money doesn’t matter. No one talks about— we don’t talk about religion or politics at singings. Our— the idea is come and sing and talk about the things that bind us, not the things that could separate us. Talk about food; talk about the dinner. Right or talk about the songs you’ve been singing. Or talk about your friends that you miss perhaps like I mentioned, so.

00:42:06

And then— so and then of course it’s always people who are extending things like the music we sing. I guess it’s up to the people.

00:42:22

Michelle Little: Hmm and so what does it take to keep it— I mean, I know you do a lot of behind the scenes sometimes things to keep this organized and [Laughter]

00:42:38

David Ivey: Well you know the number one thing that keeps a singing going in a particular community or a particular church is, it requires the people from that community, that church to go to other singings. It's visiting and that's always been the case, I think. Because I think if you go back 100 years, the radius of which people are able to travel was, of course, much smaller than it is, but I'm sure they still needed to go to the church five miles away which would have been difficult— a lot more difficult than as it maybe for us to go 100 miles today. But when you do that and you go visit and you say, "Oh, we want to be with you and we want you to come sing with us." Then that's why people come.

00:43:41

That's the number one reason why people come. And what you find is where I mentioned some of the singings have disappeared over time in certain places, that what generally happened is that the singers in that area just they died, and they didn't have people coming up behind them to take over and to go to these places and to ask people to come visit so they could—. So that's the number one thing; of course it's you know it's the other things. There are certainly, we want to sing well, you know. When we offer praises to God we want to— we want it to sound good and it's more— it's you know if we're able as a group, as a community, as a class as we call our gathering of singers, it's a lot more rewarding to us than— and we sing and we're singing to

each other— if it sounds good, if we know what we're doing. So we have I mentioned the singings tradition which has been really a big part of this singing since you know the late 18th century and through today. And today we do that through I mentioned earlier, my camps. That we have Camp Fa So La, so we have camps where we're trying to teach kids and adults what this is all about. Both the rudiments of the music, how to lead. We have a class at our camps on dinner on the grounds. We talk about— and people share their recipes. They share their— how they pack their food to take it and make sure it stays hot or stays cold because a lot of places we go don't have refrigeration and places to warm it up. So you know there are all these great tips, and I won't call them secrets, but tips about how people wrap them and put them on— put them on solid things so they won't turn over in the car. It's really a technology in and of itself it seems like. [Laughter]

00:45:46

So we have a class on that; we have a class on the memorial lesson that I talked about and why that's important. And we do these things through the day and you know we have— they're age oriented. So we have things that right for kids that are six to ten or twelve because they're going to learn differently than kids who are teenagers and then we have classes for adults. And then at night, after we've done this as well as having the classes, have fun and recreation so the kids can do great things that you know you get to do in summer camps. Then at night we come together and we all sing together so we have a singing just like we're you know a regular Sacred Harp Singing, sit in the square. And Sacred Harp is naturally intergenerational. You know, the only time we have this— any kind of separation as I talk about ages in the camp is really just by classes and then— and then people— we have adults going to the kids' classes even.

00:46:52

But then really it's all about us all getting together and singing together and pulling it. And practicing what we've learned and of course, a big part is giving the adults and the teachers and the counselors a chance to see what the kids are doing. That's the most rewarding part.

00:47:14

Michelle Little: Hmm; I can't believe there's a class on the dinner on the grounds.

00:47:18

David Ivey: There is and one of the aspects of it is that we have every one of them— they actually make— they make some dishes. They don't just talk about it. They bring the ingredients and they make dishes. And they demonstrate how easy it is to make some dishes whether they're savory or sweet that are really easy and quick to make but that people love because then we make them and then we eat them. You know [Laughter]So it's a lot of fun. We've had that class since— we've done camp, let's see for 17 years— I guess maybe they didn't have it the first couple of years, but we've probably had it for maybe 15 or 16 of those 17 years, yeah.

00:48:14

Why don't you have a class on cooking on the dinner on the grounds? What do— because at that— and really the idea came because we had people coming to camp who were from northern cities, places who had just started singing and they had come to these southern singings and walked up to this dinner on the grounds and looked at this table and said wow; how did they do this? And then— so they said you know we want Shelby to tell— teach us about how she, so Shelby Shepherd was one of the people who helped start the camp, she and her husband Jeff along with Karen and me. And she would— at some of the smaller singings they had down

in near where she grew up in Cleburne County, Alabama, she would— I remember talking about— I've made— took 12 dishes to this singing, and these folks— some of these ladies and people who come they're going how do you do that? Tell us about what you do.

00:49:12

So—

00:49:16

Michelle Little: [Laughter] And then so you helped create this camp.

00:49:20

David Ivey: Yeah; yeah.

00:49:21

Michelle Little: Wow. But then in addition to that, I think you mentioned on the phone the other day that you're also working on the hymnal, some revisions?

00:49:30

David Ivey: Yeah; we're presently working— we have a committee that's working on revising our songbook, so the Sacred Heart Songbook was first published in 1844. There were songs added to it in 1850 and 1859 and then in 1869, there were some songs removed that were— you know, had been in it. Plus, new songs added, so that was 1869. Then we went and the next revision of the book we sing from was 1911 and that was called *The James Book*. From there the next revision of the book was done in 1936, so 25 years later and then in— from 1960, [19]66,

and [19]71 there were other revisions made that really almost count as one, is the way I look at that, so that was about 30 years later.

00:50:40

And then in 1991 we came out with the version of the book we sing with now, so there from, you know say if you just count from [19]66 to [19]91 that would have been 25 years. So we've been using the book that you're familiar with now called *The 1991 Edition* since [19]91 and so what's that make it— 28 years, so we're working now to revise that book. And the— a lot of the— when we do this, we generally are only changing about 10 percent of the book. So this is a— the book we sing from now, the [19]91 it has lots of the songs in it from 1844 and 1911. A lot of these have been there.

00:51:27

But we try to make these changes again, that constitute about 10 percent to add in music that's— that's maybe written by contemporary writers. So we'll have music; we have music in our book now by people who are living as well as people from the 17th and 18th centuries and the 19th century. And it's been a formula sort of that's been followed and you have throughout this history of our book, you know, generally this has been done by a committee of singers who look at songs and decide what's good enough and what has the Sacred Harp sound? What fits this so that you know what we're looking for are songs that are written here in 2018, 2019; people have been even into next year. We want to hear— see if people can— we want to listen to songs and say do those sounds like something that could have been written in 1850? And if they have something and we sing it and we think oh that— that really grabs you then you know it'll have a chance of going into our book.

00:52:44

And then this book will probably have a life of 20 or 30 years you know and then it will be changed. But I'll give you an idea of the— we had about 50 songs added in the 1991. I think it was actually 60. We had 60 songs added in the 1991 edition that came in that were new. And I think 10 of those songs are now in the top 50 most popular used songs in the book.

00:53:16

Michelle Little: Wow.

00:53:16

David Ivey: Out of the 60. So of course, a lot of people who have just come to Sacred Harp, you know, in the cities, so we've talked about— they only know this one book so when they hear a song that I still consider new that came in [19]91 you know, they think well, that's just always been in the book. But it really adds interest; it gets people— it sort of gets, adds additional interest so when people see that oh, I've got something new to learn and new to sing and I know the lady that wrote that song. Isn't it cool that I can get her to sign my book?

00:53:56

Michelle Little: [Laughter] So how many new— how many composers is that submitted those 60 new songs?

00:54:04

David Ivey: I would have to guess, I don't have that number, but I would guess maybe 30?

00:54:14

Michelle Little: Wow.

00:54:15

David Ivey: Different songwriters, something like that 20 to 30 yeah.

00:54:17

Michelle Little: So 30 people out there writing new Sacred Harp— ?

00:54:21

David Ivey: Well some of these— so in the [19]91 revision and I think it will hold for this revision, we put both songs by contemporary, by modern composers, people who are living now, but we also put some songs in from— that were from the 19th century so we've— and even the 18th century. We've put some older songs in as well.

00:54:41

So people will find and they'll find these tunes and they'll think gosh, why was— maybe it was in the book before and was removed, but if it's judged to be high-quality and deserves to be sung, you know, it has a chance to get in.

00:54:56

Michelle Little: What causes a removal of a song?

00:54:59

David Ivey: So not any one factor, and it's always difficult to remove songs because just about every song is sung some. But there are songs in our book that are not sung lots. And so we actually know the number of times— we have data that's tabulated, and we know how many times songs have been lead in Sacred Harp Singing since 1995.

00:55:34

Michelle Little: And that's from the minutes, so—

00:55:38

David Ivey: That's compiled from the minutes book project that we have, a book is put out every year that has the proceedings, the minutes, which list who sang what song, so that has— we've had people working and they tabulate that and pull that information together every year and you can go and you can see it on the spreadsheet so you can find what is the song that's been sung the least since 1995? Or you can look at trends and see— has it trended up or down? So you know that's certainly a factor.

00:56:08

One of the things that's important is can a class of ordinary singers sing the song well? And if you have you know, a song and you have good singers there and you sing it and you think that was— they did— it was hard. That didn't really sound so good you know or— you know, then that's sort of a hint that maybe that song could be substituted for by a stronger song that people would really enjoy.

00:56:46

Michelle Little: That makes sense. Hmm; well, is there anything that I have not asked that you wish the world knew about Sacred Harp Singing?

00:56:59

David Ivey: [Laughter] Well, I think it's unfortunately common in our culture today that people— most people think they can't sing. And I think if we were to go back— if we could go back 150, 200 years in our communities in this country I think you would find that most people did sing. So I think unfortunately we've been conditioned and people, you know, I hear of cases where an elementary school teacher for a school project you know a kid wanted to sing and they didn't sound you know, really good, and the teacher said, "You can't sing." And that affected— you know, I hear people say, "I was told I couldn't sing when I was in the fifth grade." So they believe it.

00:58:00

And so people— but Sacred Harp is for common people; we are not trained musicians for the most part. Yeah; we have some trained musicians singing with us and that's wonderful. But for the most part this has been— this is a music that's always been for regular folks. The shaped note system was developed so that regular people, common people could be taught the notes and the shapes and the scales and how to keep time and could do it and could then— especially when they sat with others who did it and could sing and learn with their ear and could sing.

00:58:43

So you know I just want us to encourage our— especially our children and support them and say, you can sing, whatever that is, whatever that music is, if it's *Mary Had a Little Lamb* or singing in kids choirs in churches or in choirs in schools, whatever that is let's encourage them to

sing because it's— there's not an experience, there aren't many human experiences quite like singing with other humans.

00:59:18

What do we do as humans that make us close? What draws us? Stories; we're storytelling people, certainly that. We probably don't have enough people telling stories. And we talked about eating and having dinner on the grounds that you know certainly almost any time when people are going to have— and they have a need and they want to do something together they often are eating. And we— so we do both, singing and eating and we do a lot of it.

00:59:51

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

00:59:52

David Ivey: And you know and we have a little bit of storytelling; well, if you think about our memorial lessons. But being able to sing together is I think a very important part of being human. And this is one place where people— I say one place, Sacred Harp Singing is one place people can come and they're—we don't judge by how well we sing. We don't have a place there, but you know we're not first chair and second chair and all that. People are really valued by how much they love it. And so that's what I hope can continue in our community and you know it's— and we've really been blessed by— we've really been blessed that people all over the country outside of the Deep South have been drawn to this. And in other countries; I mean this is—and it's— Again, when I was a kid I can remember one time my grandfather, we had an all-day

singing and somebody drove up and had a foreign license plate. And I remember my grandfather went out and greeted him.

01:01:14

This was a person maybe from a college; I can't remember now who found our singing, and I think he was from Indiana or something like that. But this just— you know, he may as well have been from the moon or something. You know the people like that just didn't— you didn't see; you know you mostly saw the same people. And now I have friends all over the world because of singing— that I know real— pretty well.

01:01:44

Michelle Little: Yeah.

01:01:45

David Ivey: Now that you have a closeness with that you can— so it's a special thing we get to do, and of course, we owe all of the people that came before us that worked and took those dinners to singings and taught the singing schools and just went to those community events to keep this going so that we have it today.

01:02:11

Michelle Little: Thank you.

01:02:13

David Ivey: You're welcome.

01:02:14

[End David Ivey Interview]