

MORRISON'S CREEK CHURCH
AND OLD TIME SINGING SCHOOLS

By Robert "Bob" Rogers Chaffin

'Writer's Corner'

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My great uncle, Winters Gentry, usually led singing at the Morrison's Creek Church and he was a natural musician and he had been schooled in the use of shaped notes. The notes were geometrically shaped to indicate a different note of the scale for each shape. Rather than know the notes as C, D, E, F etc., according to their placement on the staff of five lines and four spaces; shape note singers recognized each note as Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti, Do by their unique shape and generally pitched the song and followed the melody using this method.

In an effort to improve the general ability of congregations to have worship-in-song which was not only pleasing to God but bearable by man, singing schools were often held throughout Middle Tennessee. I suppose they were held in other sections of the country also, but my knowledge comes from the personal recollections of my great aunt, John Robert's daughter Ada and my grandmother, Lola (Gentry) Maberry and so are limited to the local area. Their purpose was to teach shape note singing skills and promote the use of four part harmony, which when properly done dramatically improves the quality of acapella singing.

Singing schools were also a popular diversion among young people in the church until around the turn of the century and were often skillfully arranged to provide courting opportunities among young people who were of "like precious faith" but were living in different communities. The music teacher generally was as lacking in any real musical training as was his students, and his major qualifications were limited to the fact that he was skilled in the use of shape notes, had a booming voice, and was able to sing all the four parts or "voices" of several camp meeting or Stamps-Baxter songs. The enterprising teacher would "make up a school" often based in three different but geographically adjacent communities. Each school was designed to occupy the time between when corn was "laid by" and tobacco was ready to be cut in the summer or the time between which corn was gathered in early fall and tobacco stripping was commenced late in that same season. These schools generally lasted for six weeks and were each held two days per week.

Thereby, the teacher would travel from school to school holding a two day class every day but Sunday. Sunday was widely regarded as the "Christian Sabbath" by those in the churches of Christ, and therefore a day of rest in which only Bible study or quietly visiting with family was socially acceptable.

The scholars would arrive by eight o'clock in the morning with packed lunch in hand, and sing hard until 5 p.m. Generally the homemade benches in the church meeting house where the school was being held were moved into a square. Today we refer to the four

parts as Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass but in those days they were more generally called Tenor, Counter, Treble and Bass. The teacher would stand in the middle, keeping time with a long sweep of his right arm, and the students were expected to keep time in the same way. Since any student with the slightest sense of rhythm could not sing at one speed and beat time at another, the sweeping arms gave the teacher a visual of whether the students were in time or not. As the song progressed, the teacher would run from one side of the square to another, aiding whatever part was lagging by joining in to that part with his booming voice, and if any part began to lag in time, he would rush at that side and stomp one foot to the time of the music while even further exaggerating the motion of that sweeping right arm.

Any student enrolled in one school was entitled to attend any of the other two schools free of charge and it was not unusual to see a cavalcade of musical scholars, lead by their teacher, spent he entire six weeks riding from one school to another. It was a great social opportunity, since young people in the churches of Christ generally did not court or marry outside of their particular faith; and courting opportunities within one's own community were limited because a local congregation would often be relatives.

Arrangements to stay overnight at the home of another student were easily made in those days of more open hospitality. Perhaps the thing I remember the most and understood the least was the practice many of the men (who generally did not sit with the women) had of standing outside the building until Uncle Winters began the first song, and then trooping in after the song had begun and taking a seat. My Grandmother Maberry (MaMa) always called this the "doodling" song. I have always thought that "doodling" was probably taken from the ugly little bugs with pinchers, looking like miniature lobsters that resided in little holes an inch or two deep, generally in hard dusty ground. Little boys, including yours truly, liked to take a broom straw and stick down in the hole. When the little doodle bug tried to clean out his house and was pushing out the straw, if you were very quick and developed the right technique you could yank out the straw with the doodle bug still attached. I guess MaMa thought that first of yanking the men inside.

Many older church buildings which have survived the years have two doors by which to enter. Generally the men entered by one door and the women and children by the other. Each sat on the side of the building by which they entered and occasionally the center benches were divided by a shoulder high partition designed to keep each of the participant's mind on the worship with no interference or diversion of mind. If memory serves me right, an example of such a division can still be seen at the Owens Chapel Church on Franklin Road, south of Brentwood.

It was a rare country congregation which actually had preaching more than one Sunday a month, and Morrison's Creek was no exception. Three Sundays each month some man of the congregation would "make a talk" based on some verse of scripture and on one Sunday a "brought on preacher" would be paid a small sum to travel to the creek and deliver a sermon. Often these speakers were "preacher boys" from David Lipscomb College in Nashville. This was the common term by which the locals referred to young men training for the ministry. Willard Collins, former president of that institution, often

remembered that it was not uncommon for a car load of these “preacher boys” to leave Lipscomb early on Sunday morning, dropping off one of the aspiring preachers at numerous country congregations, each further from Lipscomb than the last. The young man with the most remote appointment ended up with the car. When morning services were finished, and the young man had been paid and given Sunday dinner (always a part of the deal), he made the long trip back, picking up his fellow aspiring ministers at the congregation where he had dropped each one off earlier that morning.

There are logs of stories about the predicaments these young men got into by not knowing the customs of the local congregations. One such story was told by D. J. White, my sister’s father-in-law. He was preaching at a rural congregation; his first appointment at that place. The weather was hot and the only air conditioning was provided by open doors and windows in the little white frame building. As he was in the middle of his sermon a big red bone coon hound ambled in the back door of the building and sniffed his way up the center isle checking out each row of pews. Finally he found the right spot and lay down under the communion table. D. J. said he was having trouble with remembering what came next in the lesson when one of the good deacons in the front row got up, picked up the hound by the loose skin on his back, and simply tossed him out the nearest open window. The hound let out a single yelp of protest but D. J. was unable to contain his laughter and broke up in the middle of the sermon. After the congregation had been dismissed one of the congregation’s elders informed him that if he was no more serious about the Lord’s work than to let a little thing like that bring him to laughter, his services would no longer be required.

The Morrison’s Creek Church of Christ still meets each Sunday but only a dozen or so regular congregants attend.

However, we do hold an annual homecoming each year that fills the little building with 150-170 or so worshipers. We sing for an hour have a worship service in which some preacher with ties to the local area speaks; then all enjoy “dinner on the ground.” You are of course invited on the third Sunday in May.

Have a blessed day.

*Read more stories by Robert “Bob” Rogers Chaffin at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>