

Final Narrative Report, Let Us Sing: Sacred Harp in Southeast Georgia
Folklife Contract #41-01-0234, Georgia Council for the Arts Folklife Program
Submitted by Dr. Laurie Kay Sommers, Valdosta State University, 2001

Overview:

The Okefenokee Heritage Center, in collaboration with the Hoboken Sacred Harp singing community and the south Georgia Folklife Project (Valdosta State University), used \$5885 from the Georgia Folklife Program to develop a permanent interpretive exhibition on the unique Sacred Harp traditions of Southeast Georgia, located at the Okefenokee Heritage Center in Waycross. Exhibit co-curators were folklorist Dr. Laurie Sommers and Sacred Harp singer and community scholar Mr. David I. Lee. Exhibit designer was Mr. Fred Sanchez of Great Impressions, Americus. "Let Us Sing" features six photo text panels with historic and contemporary images of the singing tradition. The panel topics are: What is Sacred Harp, Sacred Harp in Southeast Georgia, Singing Schools, All-Day Sings, Hoboken Style, and Why We Sing. The original plan for accompanying audio was replaced with a digital video unit with three excerpts: the song tradition and walking time, singing school, and the drone. Use of video better captures the visual aspects of the performance and also allows more local singers to be pictured in the exhibit. The video was made possible through donated services from the VSU Public Services Dept., especially videographer Bill Muntz.

Comments from the grant review panel initially raised the question, "Why do an exhibit rather than a video?" The answer is that the song leaders of this tradition wanted an exhibit in the community cultural center to draw attention to Sacred Harp. However, the video footage shot for the exhibit is the first step toward a future video documentary. The exhibit was designed for travel (after the GFP grant period), additional funds from the Georgia Folklife Project paid for a free standing kiosk for use in traveling the exhibit. The formal opening took place on Friday, August 17, 2001, at the Okefenokee Heritage Center and featured a community sing that drew over 250 people. Accompanying educational materials also were planned as part of the grant, but the project team plans to use an adapted version of the Oct. 2000 issue of *Smithsonian in Your Classroom* (A Shape-Note Singing Lesson) beginning in 2002. (**Note, this did not occur.)

1. What authentic aspects of Georgia folk art or folklife did this project involve?

Southeast Georgia is home to one of the nation's most distinctive regional Sacred Harp singing traditions, yet until the 1990s much of the world outside of southeast Georgia did not even know this particular tradition existed, or vice versa. Indeed, "Hoboken-style" Sacred Harp is one of the defining folk repertoires of southeast Georgia. Although some might argue that Sacred Harp is a written tradition and thus not "folk" music, this version of Sacred Harp is orally transmitted for the most part, passed on from generation to generation, firmly rooted in local family, religious, and community tradition, and reflecting a strong community aesthetic grounded in Primitive Baptist performance practice and belief.

2. What did this grant allow you to accomplish that you might not have been able to do otherwise?

This grant provided seed money to fulfill one of David Lee's dreams for his singing community: public recognition in the region's local heritage center. In fact, this is the first exhibit on any living tradition at the Okefenokee Heritage Center. The grant spurred the Heritage Center staff to upgrade and expand their exhibit space. This exhibit is now being viewed as a model for the revisions of other permanent exhibits at the OHC.

The exhibit provided the opportunity for considerable press in the local media regarding Sacred Harp. Given that the singing community is trying to attract more singers to the tradition, this was most valuable. It also was the impetus for digital videography of an all-day sing, a singing school, and selected short interviews which were edited for use in the exhibit and will be part of a planned future documentary on Sacred Harp.

All of these activities are part of the effort to document the tradition: photos and sound recordings made for the exhibit will be part of a permanent archival record.

3. Explain how this project contributed to the public's understanding of folk art/folklife?

By placing an exhibition in a local heritage center, the project brought greater attention to and understanding of the role and importance of Sacred Harp singing in southeast Georgia. The exhibit places the tradition in a historic context, but also stresses its role as a living tradition in the local community.

4. Describe how folk culture specialists were involved in the planning and implementation of the project?

The exhibit was curated by folklorist and ethnomusicologist Dr. Laurie Sommers and community scholar/Sacred Harp singer David I. Lee. This collaboration combined insider and outsider perspectives on the tradition, as well as academic/practitioner perspectives. Photo selection and text writing was all done jointly.

5. How was the project received?

"I was excited about the exhibit and it did not disappoint me. I think it was very well done and the grand opening reception turned out very well...For those of you with an interest in Sacred Harp, I encourage you to go and take a look. The exhibit mentions several Brantley County locations and is attractive and very well done." From "Here's the Deal" by Jason Deal, Brantley County Enterprise, August 22, 2001.

"We are very pleased with the Sacred Harp display you and David worked so hard on at the Waycross Heritage Center. The response to the grand opening was overwhelming. We have had some response from the display and expect to continue to have more responses in the future. Every time we meet someone who has seen the display they

comment on how well it was put together and how well it portrays the heritage of Sacred Harp Singing.” Clarke Lee, email to Laurie Sommers, 11-6-01

“The Exhibit is a good idea and we hope it will be a lasting thing for the generations to come.. Maybe the community around the Okefenokee will be glad of the display and hopefully it will touch some hearts and souls to want to sing with us and the coming children...sing on.” Tollie D. Lee, email to Laurie Sommers, 11-6-01.