

# COLEMAN DUKE NICHOLS AND BENTON'S BIG SINGING

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Benton journalist James R. Lemon did not originate Southern Harmony. That honor belongs to William Walker of Spartanburg, South Carolina, who published the first edition of what became a run away best seller in 1835, with sales of six hundred thousand prior to the War Between the States.

But Lemon and his newspaper must be given credit for saving Southern Harmony from oblivion and the dust bin of history. Through the columns of the Tribune-Democrat, a weekly which continues as the Tribune-Courier, Lemon was able to organize the first "Big Singing" Day on the fourth Sunday of May in 1884. Thus the 1989 renewal of that event was the 106th performance.

Lemon was born in Guilford County, North Carolina, April 10, 1848. In the summer of 1852, he came with his parents in a covered wagon across the Appalachians to Marshall County which had been carved out of north Calloway County ten years before .<sup>1</sup>

Among the household goods was a copy of Southern Harmony the remarkable tunebook of "Singing Billy" Walker. Like Walker, Lemon became a "singing master" who taught singing schools which were popular in the South for many years. He also taught at Benton High School, before becoming a druggist, then a "drummer" or traveling salesman before settling into his life calling of journalism. He later bought the Mayfield, Kentucky, Daily Messenger which he operated until his death in 1919. A son, Scot, became mayor of Mayfield. Lemon's father, Joseph G. Lemon, lived to see the first "Big Singing" at Benton in 1884, but died before the second on February 21, 1885.<sup>2</sup>

Many families including the Fields, the Hills, the Lovetts, and countless others helped it continue so that it remains today as the only representative of the "a cappella, 4-shape note song tradition" using Walker's Book. In 1976, the Bicentennial Commission of the United States granted a number of Landmarks of American Music. Kentucky received four and one bronze plaque for Southern Harmony is mounted on the west side of the Marshall County Courthouse in Benton.

By about 1938, nearly all the original books from the final edition of 1854, had disappeared and the Benton Young Men's Progress Club (later Rotary) helped the Federal Writer's Project of the WPA do a reprint in 1939.

Around the year 1964, this supply too had exhausted. The event was saved by Dr. and Mrs. Glenn C. Wilcox, who in 1966, edited and financed another reprint edition and this supply was sufficient until about 1985.<sup>3</sup> Through the efforts of Dr. Ray Mofield, the University of Kentucky was persuaded to attempt another reprint to save this bit of Kentucky culture if an editor and a sponsor could be found. Once again, Dr. Wilcox agreed to edit the newest edition and the Bank of Marshall County paid the \$2,500.00 sponsor fee.<sup>4</sup>

Of the families who helped James R. Lemon and his newspaper establish "Big Singing Day" and save Southern Harmony, perhaps the most noted is the Nichols family.

The first of the great Nichols singers active in the movement was W.W., born on October 23, 1869, in Marshall County. Reared on a farm, Mr. Nichols attended the common schools and later married Ollie Woodson Story, December 23, 1896.<sup>5</sup>

This couple reared seven children all of whom participated in the celebration of "Big Singing" every fourth Sunday in May and many sang from the old Southern Harmony book year around. The children were: Nina Myrlin, Cora Mae, Coleman Duke, Viola Jane, Raymond Lay, T.H., and Maxine.<sup>6</sup>

William W. moved his family to Paducah to work for the Illinois Central Railroad but after a few years returned in 1910, to Marshall County and again took up the life of a farmer. The farm was about two miles east of Sharpe. They worshipped regularly at Mr. Moriah Primitive Baptist Church.

William Nichols and his wife made it a family custom to spend Sunday afternoons singing in the fa so la style of Southern Harmony. In good weather, a half dozen or more of them would take their chairs into the shade of the trees in the front yard and sing for hours. They apparently felt the way William Walker did, as cited in his biographical statement in the early edition, "When I consider the divine nature and power of music on the affections, I am wrapped up in close admiration, love, and praise, and cannot but adore the Almighty Giver of so good and glorious a gift; and that it has pleased Him to bestow upon me and my fellow beings faculties to sing His praise. Most of the arts and employments of this life will accompany us no further than the grave; but this will continue an employment with the redeemed of God while eternal ages roll. It had its origin in God, and from God it was communicated to angels and men."<sup>7</sup>

William W. Nichols himself would often sit alone in the evening and sing straight through the tunebook. It may be his Carolina heritage had something to do with it. He was the oldest son of Coleman and Jane Harrison Nichols but his maternal grandparents were singers from Randolph County, North Carolina, Benjamin J. and Margaret Russell Harrison.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the singing was inspired by the Primitive Baptist Church although others in this period also clung to the original church position. These included James R. Lemon himself, a member of the Christian Church or Church of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

William Wilson Nichols' devotion to Southern Harmony singing was radiated to every one with whom he came in contact. His three sons all became respected leaders of the public performance of the songs on Big Singing and other days. Only fifteen years old, when the first Big Singing was held, he lived to September 9, 1956.

While all the sons were song leaders, C. D. or "Duke" as he was usually known has often been called the best. Dr. Glenn C. Wilcox, a distinguished musicologist with a Ph.D. in the field from the University of Southern California, once remarked that he thought "Duke Nichols was the best of the Southern Harmony Leaders."<sup>10</sup>

Duke was born in Paducah, January 30, 1903, where his father, W.W., had gone to work for the Illinois Central. The focus of this article is on him but his brothers and sisters were also fine singers. By tradition the girls did not lead, but they added their voices to these "part" songs with the best in the land.

Nina was one of the best. She taught school in the county after passing the teachers examination at Benton. She later continued her education in the college at Bowling Green, Kentucky, and then became a business teacher in the college at Akron, Ohio. Here she met Trigg County native Alfred Joyce and they were married and worked there until retirement. That meant coming home to Kentucky where they built a fine home on George Clark Road near Sharpe. Her "snicker doodle" cookies are still the talk of Marshall County.

Of the other children, Cora Mae was also gifted with a superior voice. She married Gus Fuqua. They lived in Marshall County and were blessed with two sons, Laverne and Joe. Viola Jane married B. K. Means; Raymond Lay married Neva Pell Norman; T. H. married Ruth Gipson; Maxine married Alma Ray Story and one child died in infancy.

Duke himself married Tula Kathleen Peck, daughter of John Milburn Peck and Lydia Florence English. The Pecks are also an old Marshall County family. Tula's great grandfather, John Peck, was born in 1880, in North Carolina. He married Elizabeth Polly Manley. Her grandfather was John Marion Peck who married Martha Jane Fields. Tula was born January 5, 1903, and still lives in Benton and still attends all Southern Harmony functions.

Duke and Tula's marriage was a fruitful one and the four children from this union are all living and playing a part in Southern Harmony activities. John Wilson Nichols married Mildred Sue Malone of Benton in 1945, and they have

four children: Sharon Sue, David Wilson, Joyce Carlette, and James Lynn. Frank Joyce married Joanne Lee Hiatt in 1955. Myrlin Marie married Leonard Thomas Cary in 1949. They have three sons: Steven Thomas, Frank Douglas, and Robert Mitchell, now deceased. Martha Jane married Ernie John Long in 1964, and they have Jennifer Lynn and John Kyle. Tula remembers many happy days with Duke and the children; although in later years the marriage was dissolved and Duke married Della King Phelps. Duke lived to December 16, 1970.<sup>11</sup>

Tula Nichols can remember a simpler time in Marshall County when her father and mother and all the children worked together on the eighty acre farm near Scale. They raised corn, dark fired tobacco, wheat, rye, watermelons, strawberries, picked blackberries free by the road side, went to school at Oak Valley, and killed hogs in the early winter.

Shortly after Duke Nichols married Tula Peck July 17, 1926, they moved to Akron, Ohio, where he was employed in the office of the East Ohio Gas Company. Three years later in 1929, Tula's Uncle Bill Peck secured a job for Duke at the Bank of Benton where he worked first as a teller and eventually moved up to cashier, a position which was then the chief executive officer.

Not only does Frank J. Nichols today continue to sing tenor in his father's fine voice, but he is a capable leader and has also followed him in the field of banking. While Frank's title is President, he is the CEO, in effect, the same position his father held.

In her interview, Tula recently said, "Coleman Duke Nichols' commitment to Big Singing Day evidently served as a good example to his family. All four children have taken an active role in Big Singing. John Wilson served as the first present of the Society for the Preservation of Southern Harmony Singing, Inc. Frank is a regular leader; Myrlin and Martha are regular singers each year."<sup>12</sup>

Tula also tells about the local observance and life in 1910 and 1911; "My father set tobacco the Saturday before Big Singing. We got up early Sunday morning to go to Southern Harmony Singing and spent the day. People had set up barrels of lemonade and tubs of ice cream to sell. My mother had brought along a big lot of food for dinner such as fried chicken. We then spread table cloths on the court lawn, put out the lunch and everyone was invited. That followed the morning session. About 1:00 pm, we went back to singing again and stayed until about 3:30, when it was time to go home with feet hurting and already talking about next year!"<sup>13</sup>

In the latter part of the interview she expresses a hope the Southern Harmony Singing will continue from now on. Particularly, she recalls how she enjoyed the Southern Harmony Week proclaimed in Benton and Marshall County July 20-26, 1973. Her description will evoke memories for the forty mostly Marshall

Countians who made the week long trip to sing for the Smithsonian's Seventh Annual Festival of America.

"The scene was the reflecting pool that runs between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial...The Southern Harmony Singers were the largest contingent from Kentucky. The Mall was set with growing tobacco plants, an authentic tobacco barn built by West Kentucky craftsmen, a condensed racetrack and show ring for horses, and Millie Wilson of Calvert City was there demonstrating her art in constructing corn shuck and hickory nut dolls, plus forty joyful representatives of Benton and Marshall County singing Southern Harmony.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps a million people had heard the most famous book of songs printed in John Connelley's fasola notation.<sup>15</sup>

So much interest was generated by this that an hour program was produced by National Public Radio, the 1983 Big Singing was video taped by CBS for Charles Kuralt's "On the Road" program, and in 1986, *The New Yorker* sent Wallace White to the festival and he wrote a very informative and interesting article on Big Singing.<sup>16</sup>

Today Big Singing is blessed with a good number of the Nichols clan that started their devotion to the old favorite hymns in the nineteenth century with William Wilson Nichols. Raymond Lay Nichols always leads the first song, "Holy Manna," to start the Big Singing Program. He is still one of the finest leaders and also as Dr. Ray Mofield has commented, "J.D. Sumner, Flatboat Utley and Raymond Lay Nichols are the best basses I have ever heard."

Frank J. Nichols, President of the Bank of Benton, inherited the fine tenor voice of his father, Duke Nichols, and continues in his father's footsteps not only in the promotion of Southern Harmony Singing but also in the field of banking. Duke instructed his own children in the art of shape note singing and taught singing schools in the region as well. His life was dedicated to the furtherance of this almost extinct form of musical praise. He did much to keep alive Southern Harmony and the Big Singing until his death December 16, 1970.

Mrs. Tula Nichols at age 86 still comes dressed in her spring frock just as she did as Duke Nichols' young bride. John Nichols, who runs J. Nichols Hideout, a boot and shoe store in Benton, still sings and was the first president of the Society for the Preservation of Southern Harmony. Kerry Nichols, son of Raymond Lay, is one of the youngest Nichols men to lead selections. Duke's daughters, Myrlin Cary and Martha Long, sit near their mother, Tula, and add their voices to the Big Singing Choir.

The Bank of Benton for many years has supplied the printed program. Because of his lasting contribution to Southern Harmony and to the Big Singing

Day, in particular, this year's edition of the Big Singing Day brochure was dedicated to Coleman Duke Nichols.<sup>17</sup>

## End Notes

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